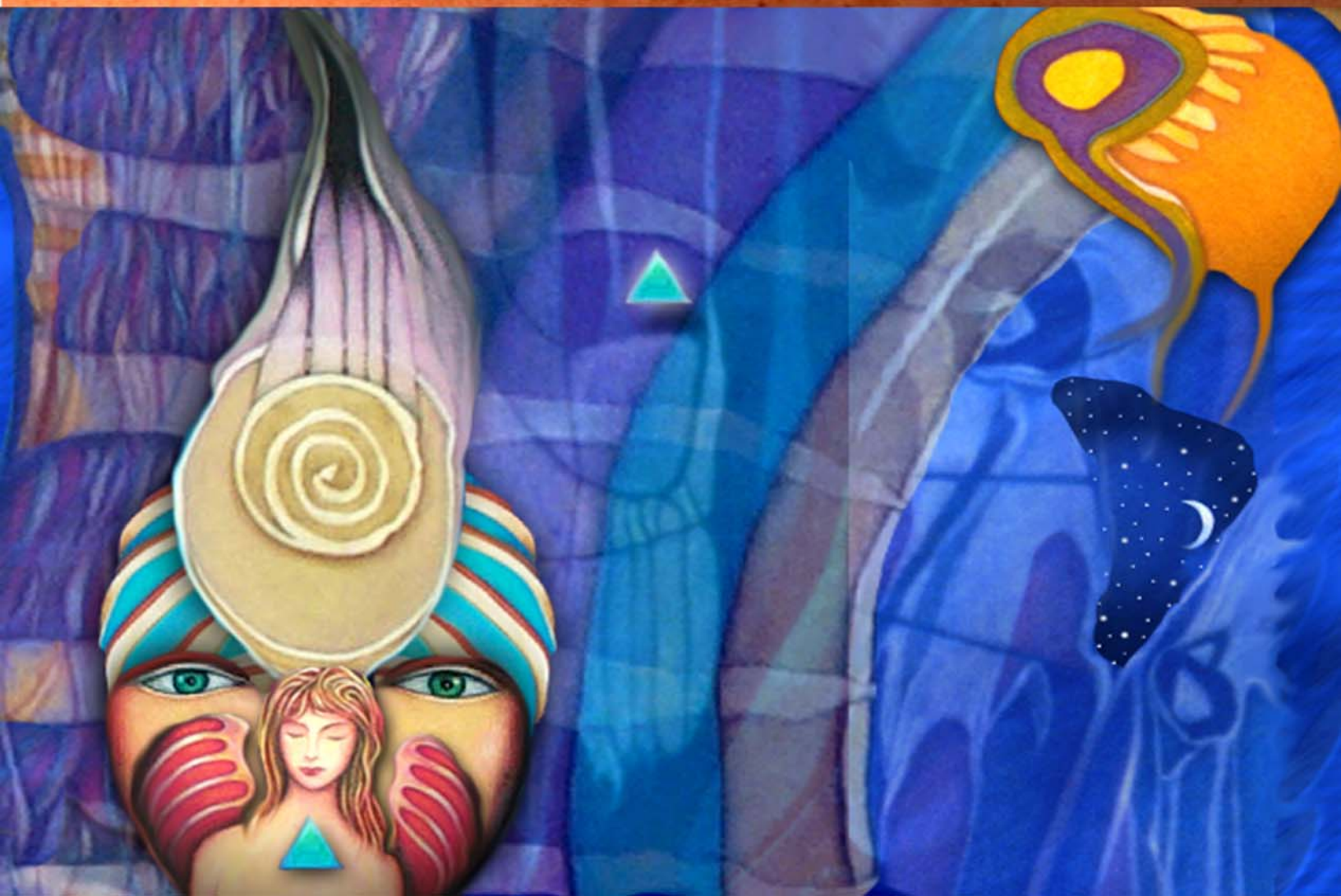


# WINGMAKERS



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.





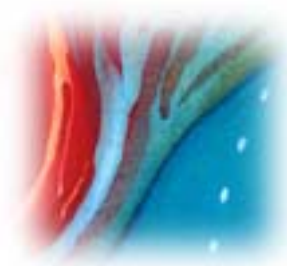
## Chapter One

### 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-Twelveers,” 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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."





## Chapter Nine

### LOOSE ENDS

*All human life is embedded with a Wholeness Navigator. It is the core wisdom. It draws the human instrument to perceive fragmentary existence as a passageway into wholeness and unity. The Wholeness Navigator pursues wholeness above all else, yet it is often blown off course by the energies of structure, polarity, linear time, and separatist cultures that dominate terra-earth. The Wholeness Navigator is the heart of the entity consciousness, and it knows that the secret root exists even though it may be intangible to the human senses. It is this very condition of accepting the interconnectedness of life that places spiritual growth as a priority in one's life.*

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

**WingMakers**



Fifteen studied the report that Li-Ching and Evans had put on his desk three hours earlier. The track lighting was dimmed, and the mood in his office subdued. He and Li-Ching were alone.

He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyelids. "You know what bothers me about this?" He said, holding up the report.

"Yes," she replied. "You have too soft a heart for your own good."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps yours is too hard," Fifteen said with a whisper.

"Octavio, I can assure you that both Evans and I are convinced this is the right thing to do. We're not anxious to take the lives of two youth, but these kids are potentially unstable, and in light of our ETC discovery, we think it's only prudent. There's too much at stake now."

"You don't have to sermonize to me," Fifteen said. "I know how serious the situation is." He put the report down, stared at his hands on the desk, and sighed deeply in resignation. "Maybe you're right and we should eliminate our risks, but then Stevens has already alerted the NSA. If these kids end up dead, McGavin will assume the worst."

"So what if he does?" Li-Ching replied. "He won't be able to prove anything."

“And what proof do we have that these kids are risks?” Fifteen asked, his voice sounding irritated.

“Because it’s not clear from your report.”

“First of all, Stevens has protected the students’ identity. He hasn’t told the NSA how he came by the artifact. But we know the students know that Stevens has gone to the NSA. We’re not sure if they know any details of what he told them, but we’ve got to assume he’s told them something.”

“And for this we should have them killed?” Fifteen asked.

“If Stevens wants these kids to remain anonymous to the NSA, he’s protecting them for some reason. Octavio, they’re just a loose end that could haunt us later. Why not make sure we don’t have to deal with that risk.”

“Both of you feel strongly about this?”

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation.

He looked directly at Li-Ching, his eyes intensely scrutinizing her face. “If we do nothing, how does it hurt us?”

“What if these kids go to the NSA, courtesy of Stevens, and show them where they discovered the artifact? Don’t you think McGavin would have his team

snooping around the ETC site? It's a risk we shouldn't take. All McGavin knows is that we've dispatched some reconnaissance to New Mexico. He doesn't know where. We made sure that the NSA satellites were out of range when our missions made ground."

Li-Ching adjusted her tone. "If we sanitize the situation, we can ensure the site remains our secret."

Fifteen sighed in resignation. "Okay, but I don't want to hear anything more about this, unless there's a problem. Okay?"

"Understood."

Fifteen's third extension light signaled a caller. "You know who this is," Fifteen said with an air of dread.

Fifteen flicked on his speakerphone. "Yes?"

"Hello, Octavio," McGavin said. "I was hoping you'd still be at your office."

"As you know, I practically live here—"

"I'm on your speakerphone, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are."

"Are you alone?" McGavin asked, suspicion showing in his voice.

"I'm just trying to keep my hands free so I can make some tea. Okay?"

"Where's my RePlay tape? I was expecting it yesterday."

"Oh, I wasn't aware of a proposed delivery time."

"I just want the tape. When can you send it?"

"Tomorrow."

"When tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Please overnight it. I want to review this ASAP.

Understood?"

"Anything else?"

"No, that's all."

"By the way," Fifteen said, "when you spoke with this professor... I think his name was Stevens... about the artifact he recovered, did he say anything about where he found it or how he obtained it?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"According to the good professor, an anonymous source sent it to him."

"In the mail?"

"No, it was delivered by messenger, I think," McGavin said. "Why?"

“One of our current theories we’re working on is that the object is a homing device. It’d be helpful to know where it was found. It could prove useful.”

“Well, if this anonymous source turns up, the good professor is supposed to contact us. If he does, we’ll find out what we can.”

“Thanks.”

“Other than that,” McGavin said, “any success in probing the damn thing?”

“No, but we’re still trying.”

“Good. Well, I’ve got to run,” McGavin said. “I look forward to seeing the RePlay tapes. Oh, and you do remember that Donavin starts tomorrow. You’ll be gentle with him I presume—”

“Of course. Of course.”

“Good. How’s the tea by the way?”

“What?”

“The tea,” McGavin said. “You said earlier that you were making tea—”

“It’s just fine. Just fine. I’ll let you go, Darius, I know you’ve got to run. Have a good weekend.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

Fifteen waited to hear the dial tone before he pushed the speaker button off. “Thoughts?”



“He’s a jerk,” Li-Ching replied. “Anything more I could say would be superfluous.”

“Actually, I was referring to his story about the anonymous source.”

“It corroborates that Stevens is protecting the students.”

“Yes,” Fifteen said, “but it also suggests that our professor is telling two different stories. He told us that the students were the source of the discovery. He told McGavin that an anonymous source delivered it to him.”

“So he’s trying to test whether McGavin would accept his different story,” Li-Ching interjected. “If his story was accepted by McGavin, then he knows that we—posing as the NSA—the people who took the artifact, weren’t affiliated with the NSA.”

“Exactly,” Fifteen nodded.

“He’s a clever man,” Li-Ching observed. “But this whole line of reasoning assumes McGavin is telling us the truth. That’s not easy to accept.”

“Perhaps not,” Fifteen replied. “But I’m sure of one thing, we need to do something about these two students.” He picked up the report off his desk and opened it to page four. “Why didn’t we do memory

restructures on each of them when we discovered this thing?”

“You know the answer,” Li-Ching replied calmly. “We didn’t think this was anything more than an isolated artifact—possibly a hoax. We didn’t think it warranted extreme measures. Besides, our hush documents work ninety-eight percent of the time.”

Fifteen scanned the report and turned to the last page of the document and signed his name. “Use scenario two. Alert Branson and keep this out of RV. I don’t want Samantha to know about this.”

“I understand,” Li-Ching said. “Are you ready for a back rub?”

“I think I’m going to make some phone calls and check on the Code Frensel project before I turn in. Thanks anyway.”

“What’s wrong?” Li-Ching asked, concern showing on her face.

“There are days when I think our mission objectives collide with morality so violently that every atom in my body recoils from the impact. This is one of those days.”

He rose from his desk. “I think I’ll have that cup of tea now. Damn, that McGavin.”

Li-Ching left his office in a diluted state of exuberance. She was elated that she had been able to convince Fifteen how to handle the students, but she was also disturbed by his lack of enthusiasm. His eyes seemed so tired and his mood so solemn. She thought about staying, but Fifteen almost ushered her out of his office, assuring her that he was fine. All she could do, as she walked down the hallway, was to wonder why his eyes glistened so clearly in the dimness of his office.

\* \* \* \*

"I hear that I'm not on the excavation team," Emily stated, her voice betraying mild indignation.

Neruda looked up from his papers. He looked tired. It was too early, at least for him, and he was still waiting for the caffeine to kick in. "Sorry, but I just thought your insights would be more valuable here than in the field," he replied casually.

"And what's more important here?" Emily asked.

"We have reams of new data that's being generated from the optical disc. I just thought you and Andrews should stay here and concentrate on that."

"Is Samantha or Collin going?"

“Samantha’s going, but Collin’s staying behind pretty much for the same reasons you and Andrews are.”

Emily tried to sound unperturbed at the news of Samantha’s appointment on the excavation team. “So how long will you be gone?”

“I think two days will be sufficient to excavate the artifacts from the site and pack them for shipment. We’ll send a restoration team a few days later and then do final photography of the chamber paintings in about a week.”

“Are you staying that whole period?”

Neruda glanced at his watch; he was already late for his meeting with Andrews. The ZEMI data was in, and he was anxious to see it. “No, I’ll shuttle back and forth depending on what’s happening with the optical disc and if we can open it.”

“What’s your impression? Can we open it?”

“I’m supposed to meet Andrews,” Neruda replied, looking at his watch again, “about ten minutes ago.”

“Mind if I tag along?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

When they arrived at the Computer Analysis Laboratory, Andrews was flipping through a stack of computer



printouts from the overnight testing. "I still haven't seen anything that would indicate an access point or any hint of a data stream that could be transmitted in any conventional means at our disposal. They've buttoned this up as tightly as the damn homing device."

"I'm updating Fifteen at 0900 hours," Neruda said. "Are you telling me there's nothing to go on?"

"Fuck, I don't see anything," Andrews complained. "I've been in here for two hours checking and cross-checking the data records. The access points for the index tracks are encrypted in something ZEMI hasn't seen before. David left the following message this morning at five o'clock, just a few minutes before I got here."

Andrews turned on the message screen, where the face of David, the ZEMI operator, began to materialize like a photograph in a processing tray. He hit the *Play* button and the face lurched into animation.

"Hi, Andrews. I just completed the tests per your specifications. It took us a little longer than I thought, mostly because the disc's in stealth mode. At least to our technology. I tried everything within our technical

specs and your parameters, and nothing's been effective. Sorry.

"You might take a look at the ten-second cycle time tests. Reference number, nineteen-zero-five, looks interesting. At least it stands out as producing a resonance to the disc itself.

"And when I say resonance, look at the way the disc's vibratory rate increases. The molecular scans show a speed increase of nearly five hundred forty-two percent. It's really quite unusual. According to ZEMI, the laser is somehow inciting the molecular change, but the data trail dead-ends before ZEMI can lock in on the causative factors.

"The only thing we're certain of is that cycle time and pitch angle aren't the relevant variables. It's the laser beam's diameter as it penetrates the index track that seems to be the key. Ordinarily, I'd say this is a quirk of the alloy this thing's made of, which, incidentally, we still don't have a fix on. But this thing is very sensitive to focused light energy, and it may be intentional. With the right focus of light it awakens something at a molecular level within the disc.

“To us, this is the only interesting finding, other than the fact that no access point can be found from which data can be retrieved.

“If the diameter of the laser is the key variable to eliciting the resonance of the disc, we recommend that you test different wave lengths and beam intensities using the same diameter. Let us know if you’d like us to run these tests. Hope this information is helpful. I’ll be back in around sixteen hundred hours. If you have any further requests for probe testing, we can look at it again then. Per Whitaker’s request, I’ve cleared my schedule to concentrate on this. Bye for now.”

Andrews flicked his knuckle on the pale-colored *Stop* button, punching the message screen back into blackness. “I love the way he says ‘us’ and ‘we’. I mean it’s fucking eerie how married these operators are to ZEMI. I wonder if the four of them ever get into cat fights about who’s on more intimate terms with the horseshit computer.”

Neruda couldn’t contain his laughter and Emily quickly followed like an echo.

“Have you had a chance to do any further analysis of the light resonance of the disc?” Neruda asked.

“No, do you think it’s that interesting?”

“Not really, but it’s all we’ve got.”

Emily sat down next to Andrews, picked up a stack of data records from the overnight tests, and flipped to the summary page. She seemed disinterested in the conversation between Neruda and Andrews.

“Here’s my problem,” Andrews said. “Even if the laser, focused at a certain diameter, incites a resonance within the disc itself, how does that move us one fucking micron closer to accessing the data on the disc?”

“I don’t know,” Neruda replied, “but as I’ve said before, this may not be a data disc as we think of data discs. So let’s not be tied to our definitions. Let’s just explore anything that looks unusual with a completely open mind as to how this thing might work. Make no assumptions that it’ll behave according to our preconceptions. Okay?”

“Got it,” Andrews replied.

Emily looked up from her reading. “Can I make a suggestion?”

“Of course,” Neruda replied.

“Isn’t it possible that the other artifacts might play a role in accessing this thing?”

“It’s possible.”



“And if it’s possible, then doesn’t it make sense that one of those artifacts could be the key... in other words it emits the signature light beam that activates the disc?”

“It’s also possible,” Andrews interjected, “that the other artifacts hold the data and this thing is just a fucking impostor.”

“Unfortunately I’m not finding much that I can use for my briefing with Fifteen,” Neruda lamented. “

“One thing I’d add,” Neruda continued, “is that we should test whether ZEMI can tune the resonance up or down, once it’s incited. In other words, can ZEMI affect the resonance and alter it independent of the laser.”

“Good idea, boss,” Andrews said. “That way we could manipulate the resonance and test an endless variety of activation sequences and access points—assuming resonance is the key.”

Neruda exchanged a few more words with Andrews and Emily and then excused himself to prepare for his briefing with Fifteen. For some reason, he couldn’t help but feel confident that the access was just a day or two from being discovered. He also couldn’t help feeling that it might not be data that was stored on the disc.

\* \* \* \*

Robert didn't even feel the tiny injection as the miniature tranquilizer dart found the back of his neck. He immediately fell asleep, as did his girlfriend, Linda. The TV's black-and-white flicker of Casablanca was the room's only source of light. A few empty beer bottles stood guard on the coffee table over a near-empty bowl of popcorn.

Two figures dressed in black body suits slipped out of the shadows behind the couch, each carrying a black cloth sack. The taller figure deposited the two sleeping bodies in front of the apartment door, placing them strategically on the floor. The students looked like actors being positioned for a crime scene. The darts were carefully removed from their necks.

One of the figures pulled a gun from his bag and attached a silencer. He aimed at the chest area of Robert and squeezed two rounds into his chest—one hitting his heart, the other purposely off target. He did the same thing to Linda from a different angle. They checked the bodies again. No pulse.

In less than five minutes, the apartment was methodically and silently trashed by the two black-

clothed figures. Books and clothing were strewn on the floor, and a planter was deftly tipped over.

One of the figures removed a leather pouch with four glass vials, and placed their contents in specific locations throughout the apartment. There was a clear purpose to the random trail of hair, fabric, dirt, and chewing tobacco.

The figures turned the television off and dragged it closer to a nearby window. The VCR was unplugged and placed at an odd angle on top of the television, its wires dangling in front of the TV screen.

The shorter of the two figures opened a window and skillfully broke its glass with hardly a sound. A laptop computer and some jewelry were placed inside one of the cloth sacks and lowered to the ground just outside the apartment window. The position of the broken glass was assembled just below the window on the cream-colored carpeting by the two figures as if they were constructing a jigsaw puzzle.

One of the figures climbed out the window and collected the bag of stolen goods, walking cautiously to a parked car. The other stayed behind like a sentry scanning the outside neighborhood for any signs of activity.

The figure silently slipped into the car and settled into the driver's seat. He removed his mask and body suit to reveal normal street clothes that did little to soften his hard, chiseled face and close-cropped, military style haircut. Taking a small transmitter from his shirt pocket, he whispered, "Everything clear?"

"Everything's a go on this end," his partner responded, also in a whisper, climbing out the window.

"You have twenty seconds," the driver said. "Go!"

The black-hooded figure placed a strange looking box on the window ledge. His thumb landed hard on a small, silver button, which he pushed four times in rapid succession.

Four loud, piercing gunshots echoed through the neighborhood. Seconds later, the black figure hurled himself into the waiting car, which sped away to the sound of tires screeching and loose gravel flying.

Lights in the apartment building came on as residents peeked through

curtains and blinds. After several blocks, the car lights snapped on as it climbed up a freeway onramp disappearing into Albuquerque's starlit night.



\* \* \* \*

Neruda knocked softly on the closed door. It was ten minutes after nine. He was late, but the briefing report took longer than he had expected, mostly because he was trying to invent some reasonable hypothesis that would satisfy Fifteen.

Early in his career with the AICO, Neruda had learned the hard way about the consequences of inadequate preparation when presenting to Fifteen. No one could pick apart presentations better than Fifteen if he sensed poor preparation was at the heart of a feeble presentation.

"Come on in, Jamisson," Fifteen said through the heavy metal doors.

Neruda opened the door, but stopped short of crossing the threshold. A stranger was inside, and he hesitated as to whether he should continue. "If you'd like, I can wait outside until you're finished."

"Nonsense," Fifteen exclaimed. "I want you to meet someone who'll be working with us for a week or so." His arms motioned Neruda inside. "Donavin McAlester, I'd like you to meet our Senior Project Analyst, Jamisson Neruda."

As the two men shook hands, Neruda asked, "I'm sorry, but have we met before?"

"Not that I can recall," Donavin replied. "But then my memory for faces isn't that good. Do you have any Seal or NSA work in your background?"

"No, afraid not. I just have a familiarity with your face I guess. Oh, well. Welcome to our little laboratory."

"I haven't seen everything yet, but *little* isn't exactly the word I'd use to describe this place," Donavin smiled disarmingly. "Until last Wednesday, I'd never even heard of this unit. And now, I think I understand why." He looked around Fifteen's office with wonderment showing in his eyes.

Fifteen cleared his throat. "Donavin's here as an attaché from the SPL—he's essentially here to spy on us," Fifteen flashed a mischievous, but friendly smile.

Donavin looked at his shoes in embarrassment. "It's not spying. I'm simply here for a few weeks to observe and make recommendations to our respective organizations on how we can better cooperate and communicate."

"Is this something you do with the NSA on a regular basis?" Neruda asked.

“Not exactly on a regular basis,” Donavin explained, “but often enough to keep me busy.”

Neruda turned to Fifteen with a questioning look. “Would you like to reschedule our briefing meeting for later this morning?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “Li-Ching will be taking Donavin on a little tour of our facility in a few minutes. I just wanted you two to meet since Donavin’s expressed a strong interest in the Ancient Arrow project. Since you’re leading the project, you’ll have some contact with him from time-to-time.”

Donavin went to his briefcase and retrieved a file folder, which he opened to a document. “Actually, I prepared something of a questionnaire for you,” he handed the papers to Neruda. “It’s just a few questions about the project and how you’d like to communicate with the SPL in reference to working hypotheses, project briefs, plan modifications, and the like. I’d really appreciate your help if you could take a look at the questions and return it in the next few days... maybe Wednesday if that would work with your schedule.”

Neruda looked up from the papers as Donavin stopped. His forehead was furrowed and his eyes slightly squinted. “Can I get back to you on that? My

week looks pretty busy right now. And by the way, I counted twenty-seven questions." He paused briefly. "A *few questions* isn't exactly how I'd describe this." He held up the papers and smiled.

"Touché," Donavin said, smiling back.

"I'm sure that Jamisson will do his best to comply," Fifteen offered. "We'll all do our best to make you feel comfortable and welcome here."

Li-Ching entered Fifteen's office in a splash of color and energy. Her straight black hair was untethered by her usual assortment of hairpins and barrettes. "Are you ready for your tour?"

"...Yes," Donavin said, obviously uneasy with her striking beauty.

"Okay, then, follow me... assuming you're done here," Li-Ching said turning to Fifteen for confirmation.

"We're done for now," Fifteen nodded. "We'll see you later for lunch, then. Have a great tour."

"Nice to meet you," Neruda offered as he shook Donavin's hand.

"Likewise," Donavin replied. "Bye for now."

Li-Ching gestured for him to walk in front of her and she turned to look back at Fifteen, disgust showing on her face, the kind a child might show to a parent for



having to walk the dog. Neruda thought the door closed a little louder than normal, perhaps another sign of her dissatisfaction with having to baby-sit the SPL spy.

"It's clean," Fifteen said as he sat down at his desk. "He came in squeaky clean. No bugs, somewhat to my surprise."

"So what's the disposition of this guy relative to the Ancient Arrow project? Do I give him access to anything?"

"He's already been assigned an SL-Two access code. Treat him accordingly. He knows nothing about the Ancient Arrow project except that we have an artifact that was recovered from Professor Stevens."

"Did you see this questionnaire?"

Fifteen smiled. "No, but he's obviously taking his job too seriously."

"What about the artifact?"

"How do you mean?" Fifteen asked.

"If the one thing Donavin knows about the Ancient Arrow project is that we have an artifact, we don't exactly have it anymore. Other than a burned out shell, the artifact is gone, vaporized."

"We gave him a file that included three-sixty photos in three light spectrums," Fifteen said. "So he knows

what the artifact looked like. Our cover is that the artifact destroyed itself under a UV scan and the shell is what's left of it. We'll show him the shell and convince him that the artifact and the whole project is a dead-end."

"Don't you think McGavin will want to launch his own investigation?" Neruda asked. "What's left of the artifact is not very similar to original pictures he's seen."

"Of course he will," Fifteen said. "But that was inevitable anyway. The fact that the artifact destroyed itself plays perfectly to our hand. The only nuance we can't control is whether McGavin will believe our story or if he'll assume we destroyed the artifact purposely."

"What about the RePlay tape?"

"It's being sent this afternoon," Fifteen replied.

"Has Donavin seen it yet?"

"No. I was thinking that you'd show it to him



tomorrow and maybe orally answer his *little* questionnaire. It'll save you the time to write formal responses."

"Okay, I can do that."

"Good. Now tell me about our latest problem child from M51." Fifteen asked.

“We’ve discovered a way to get into the structure at a molecular level, by using a specific diameter laser beam. We’ve incited a resonance—a significant resonance. It may be that these artifacts are like shape shifters. Molecularly, the substance that they’re made out of reconfigures itself when stimulated by specific light frequencies.”

Fifteen leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. He was staring at the ceiling as he often did. “What’s the resonant beam’s diameter?”

“.00475,” replied Neruda.

“And the light frequency?”

“UV seven-eighty-four.”

“I assume you’ll be trying a broad range of frequencies?”

“It’s all in place for tests this afternoon when David returns,” Neruda said.

“You think this object may transform in a similar way as the homing device?”

“Yes, I think it’s possible.”

“Tell David to have video on all tests—three frequencies, multiple angles... shit, he’ll need some help. Have Whitaker assign a team to get that set up this morning. Okay?”

“Understood.”

Fifteen looked at his watch. “I’m going to be in the sunroom the rest of the morning with our friends from Berne. I’ll continue to think about probable testing paths and I’ll find you should anything else occur to me, but for now I have to run. Anything else of an urgent nature?”

Neruda handed Fifteen a couple of documents.

“Here’s a progress report on the optical disc, aside from the resonance beam, nothing too exciting. Also, you’ll find my excavation team list, role definitions, project strategy, and preliminary supply list. You can look at these at your leisure.”

“Thanks,” Fifteen said. “I’ll do that later this afternoon. Anything else then?”

“No, that’s it,” Neruda replied.

Neruda wished he could join Fifteen in the sunroom. Of all the rooms in the complex, the sunroom was his favorite. It consisted of an array of floor to ceiling windows in an octagonal shaped structure that was two stories above the ground. It looked a little like an airport control tower.

A private elevator, just outside Fifteen's office, took passengers directly to the sunroom. It was the only way to access it.



"Hope your meeting goes well,"  
Neruda said.

"Thanks, I'm sure it will. They need us a lot more than we need them. It always makes for good odds. Stop up later if you can," Fifteen offered. "I'll be there for at least another two hours."

"Okay. Thanks."

Fifteen turned to his assistant who was sitting attentively at a reception area opposite the elevator. "Just send our guests up when they arrive. If they're more than ten minutes late, make them wait an equivalent time in the Signatory Room."

"Very well, sir," the assistant replied.

The elevator door opened, and Fifteen disappeared into the dark, rosewood interior. Neruda knew that he wouldn't have the time to join Fifteen. He also knew the meeting was with the Nereus Syndicate, one of the most powerful organizations in the world. Neruda had developed their encryption algorithms when he had first

started with the ACIO. He knew them well, and was all too glad to let Fifteen handle the meeting.





## Chapter Ten

### DISCLOSURES

*First Source is the ancestor of all beings and life forms, and in this truth, is the ground of unity upon which we all stand. The journey of unification—of creature finding its creator—is the very heart of the human soul, and in this journey, the unalterable feeling of wholeness is the reward. Every impulse of every electron is correlated to the whole of the universe in its eternal ascent Godward. There is no other direction we can go.*

An Excerpt from the *Habitat of Soul*, Chamber 21

**WingMakers**



“Did you see it? Did you see the way that fuckin’ thing reacted?”

Andrews bubbled.

“Unbelievable!” Collin said. “Neruda was right, it’s a shape-shifter just like the first one.”

The two men were looking at videotape recorded overnight by David, the ZEMI operator assigned to the Ancient Arrow project. The video showed the optical

disc separating into two discs, like a sandwich, with a cloud of light between them. The light was like a prism with thousands of tiny bead-like globes dancing between the two discs, in what appeared to be a random pattern.

“Doesn’t exactly look like anything we’ve seen before, does it?” Collin asked rhetorically.

“Just when you think you’ve met all the neighbors in the cosmohood,” Andrews said, laughing in his halted style. “Mother of pearl, wait until the bossman sees this.”

David’s head came back on the screen. “As you can see, Fifteen’s hypothesis was correct, except that it was twenty-three of the index tracks, not all twenty-four that constituted the magic number.”

“Okay, so now what do we do with it?” Andrews asked.

“That’s where it gets interesting,” David commented. “We managed to catalyze a molecular shift, but we have no more an idea on how to access the data on the tracks than we did yesterday. The data, assuming it exists, is in a format that ZEMI can’t read, or, for that matter, even analyze.”



“Could these lights—I mean between the discs—be reduced to binary code?”

“Negative,” David replied. “If you look in the data file I sent you, you’ll see a complete analysis of the light structure, but the best we can do is to provide frequency rates, spectrum analyses, and the standard baseline data.”

“So all we’ve managed to do is create a deeper mystery. Great.” Andrews lamented.

Collin slapped Andrews on the back. “Don’t despair my friend, we have Fifteen’s attention. If you can’t figure it out, he will.”

“Very funny, asshole,” Andrews whispered to Collin. He then turned back to the monitor. “So you’re telling me that we have absolute chaos in-between these discs? ZEMI can’t find anything resembling an ordered pattern?”

“That’s correct, at least in the context of our tests thus far.”

“How’s that possible? What’s the longest cycle time ZEMI’s analyzed?”

“About thirty minutes.”

“We should test longer cycle times.”

“We agree,” David replied. “ZEMI’s been doing that,” he looked down at his Rolex, “for the past three hours.”

“Good,” Andrews said. “Anything else you can show us?”

“One other thing, there’s an audio loop occurring between fifty-two and one hundred and ninety-five kilohertz during the time that the shape shift incidence was occurring. It’s an extremely complex loop, and we’re working on stepping it down to an audible frequency range.”

“Whoa, that could be very interesting,” Andrews commented. “It’s a continuous loop?”

“Yes, there’s a discernible pattern that repeats every two minutes, thirty-two seconds. Precisely.”

“Maybe this is the break we’ve been looking for. When will you have the audio file?”

David closed his eyes for a moment. “We’re close, maybe another thirty minutes.”

“Okay,” Andrews said, “just send it to my office when you have something. Oh, and by the way, did you think about testing the audio pattern to see if there’s any synchronicity with the light show?”

“We already concluded that there was no synchronicity. It’s completely independent in terms of

the pattern, but the light globules *are* generating the sound frequency.”

“How, then, could they be independent?” Collin asked.

“We don’t know.”

“Thanks, David. I have to run to another meeting. I assume you’ve forwarded this to Neruda.”

“Actually, I’m meeting with him in Fifteen’s office in about an hour.”

“Good luck. That’s a tough audience, even when you’re hooked to ZEMI,” Andrews said, laughing.

David smiled politely, his hand reached for something, and the screen went blank.

Andrews turned to Collin with a surge of energy. “This thing’s literally gonna sing!”

“We’ll see,” Collin said. “Don’t get your hopes too high. It may be something spurious from the light source.”

“Yeah, maybe, but I doubt it. The light is the source of the sound frequencies, and yet there’s no relational pattern. Something else is going on here, and it ain’t science.”

“A light source can’t generate audio frequencies independent of its change in frequency,” Collin said. “It’s not possible, you know that.”

“So what’re you saying, ZEMI’s wrong?” Andrews asked.

“I’m saying that physics is right. ZEMI’s another matter entirely, as is this artifact.”

“Maybe we’re gonna find something here that defies our laws of physics,” Andrews offered. “And if we do, it may explain how we deal with the other artifacts we found.”

“Perhaps,” Collin said, “but I have my doubts.”



The two colleagues left CAL and rode the elevator down to their offices in the Special Projects Department. They were excited about the new developments, and hopeful that they would soon know the optical disc’s purpose.

\* \* \* \*

As helicopters touched down, their dust clouds obscured the regal sunset. The excavation team poured out of the birds, fourteen members divided into three

subgroups. Handlers were responsible for the safe removal of the remaining twenty-two artifacts. Security was responsible for ensuring that the entire site was hidden behind a level twelve Security Fence. Research made up the third group, responsible for assessing the chamber paintings, glyphs, and architecture for any telltale signs that could help explain the origin and nature of the site.

The team had been delayed by five hours because some hikers had been spotted on satellite reconnaissance pictures and were deemed too close to the site. Subsequent satellite pictures confirmed that they were moving in a westerly direction that would take them eight miles north of the ETC site. Evans was comfortable with the buffer. From the high-resolution satellite pictures, he was also confident that the hikers were not NSA operatives.

Neruda called to his team. "Follow me. We have about a kilometer walk."

The dark gray, unmarked choppers flew off like giant locusts. The team gathered its gear and formed a line behind Neruda. They were going to make camp inside the first cavern in order to remain invisible to any NSA "eye-in-the-sky" searches.

Cold, dry desert winds blustered through the narrow canyons, but fortunately, everyone was dressed for such weather, well aware that the interior chambers of the site were only 42° Fahrenheit.

As they approached the cavern's entrance, Evans pulled out a small, flat box that looked like a remote control with numerous metallic buttons. After fidgeting with the device for a few moments, he pointed it directly at the wall of the canyon where the cavern entrance had been before, but was now completely disguised.

In a matter of seconds, the narrow slit began to open up. The red light from the setting sun cast an eerie glow on the face of the rock wall, and the black entrance of the cavern grew like a wound, as the slit gradually became visible.

The ACIO had developed a technology to cloak physical objects. It was an outgrowth of the Technology Transfer Program (TTP) initiated with the Corteum. The technology was known simply as RICH, or Reality Inference Coessential Hologram. It could be tuned to take on the texture, color, and all material qualities of a desired object—in this case, the sandstone wall of the canyon.

RICH was a perfect technology to hide objects and was used extensively in the ACIO headquarters for Labyrinth Group classified technologies. These pure-state technologies were heavily guarded, and RICH was one of them. Only personnel with SL-Seven clearances and above were allowed to observe the workings of the RICH technology, and most of the other pure-state technologies were reserved for only the Labyrinth Group.

The excavation team climbed inside the cavern, one at a time, and set up their camp. The entrance was again placed in RICH stealth mode, and the team was sealed safely inside the ETC site, completely isolated from the outside world.

\* \* \* \*

Donavin McAlester walked down the long hallway of the sixteenth floor to Li-Ching's office. He was in a bad mood. No one was around to talk with, and Neruda had ignored his questionnaire.

"Can you spare a few minutes," Donavin asked, as he knocked on the open door politely.

“Certainly, Mr. McAlester,” Li-Ching replied, looking up from her computer monitor. Her green silk dress was subdued in the modest light of her solitary desk lamp. She preferred low light when she was working on her computer.

“Where is everyone?” he asked. “I tried to talk with Evans and Neruda yesterday afternoon and again this morning, but no one can tell me where they are, let alone when they’ll be back.”

“They’re on assignment,” she answered calmly.

“I know that. When are they due back?”

“I believe Friday afternoon, or perhaps Saturday, I’m not sure. Is there something I can do for you in their stead?”

Donavin invited himself in her office and slumped in a blue leather chair in front of her desk. “I came here to improve communications between our respective organizations, but I can’t seem to find anyone who’s interested in talking about it. Everyone’s too damn busy. If I filed my report this morning to McGavin, I’m afraid you wouldn’t like my conclusions—”

“Mr. McAlester, we’re running the most technologically advanced organization on the planet with only a hundred scientists—peanuts compared to



any of the government or military labs. We're not as heavily funded as the NSA or any other intelligence organization, so our people are stretched thin. Very thin. No one's deliberately hiding from you. We're all extremely busy. That's all. Don't take it personally."

Donavin looked at Li-Ching with puzzlement. "They're too busy? You do realize the significance of my report?"

"Of course," Li-Ching replied. "But you, unfortunately, don't understand the significance of our work. If you have a problem with our conduct, then I'd advise you to talk directly with Fifteen."

"Hell, he's another one I can't track down. His assistant is the smoothest liar I've ever met in my life. And believe me I've met some good ones in my tenure with the NSA."

"I'm sure you have," she said, smiling.

"Listen, if my report casts a negative light on the ACIO, your funding may be in serious jeopardy, doesn't that make it a priority for your organization? Or am I missing something?"

"In light of the fact that Evans and Neruda are on assignment, what do you want me to do for you?"

Donavin flipped a file on Li-Ching's desk and pointed his finger. "This file has the original blueprints for this

structure. It says you have exactly seventy-one thousand, square feet of finished space. I'd say our tour provided me with perhaps twenty percent. I'd like to see more."

"And how is that going to improve our communications, Mr. McAlester?"

He looked her squarely in the eye. "Perhaps it will engender more trust."

"Okay, then, follow me, I'll give you a more thorough tour if that's what you want."

Li-Ching stood up and grabbed the file that he'd thrown on her desk. "You can have this back," she said offering it with her arm outstretched.

He took it without reply.

The two walked down the hallway to a metal door that looked like an elevator entrance. As they approached the door, it opened silently to reveal a narrow corridor with elaborate Turkish rugs laid on a parquet wood floor. It looked more like the interior of an expensive home than a government facility. The corridor was about 80 feet long with seven doors—three on each side and one at the end of the hallway. All the doors were closed.

"What's here?"

"This is *our* Special Projects Laboratory," Li-Ching said.

"I thought the lab was on the fourteenth floor," Donavin replied.

"Our main lab is there," Li-Ching explained, "but this is where our most secretive projects are based—what we call our pure-state technologies."

A voice came from overhead and startled Donavin. "Ms. Ching, good morning. Your guest, Mr. McAlester, is not registered for security clearance for this area of the building. Are you overriding Security in this matter?"

"Yes," she replied looking to the ceiling camera hidden in the track lighting fixtures. She touched her right ear with her left hand signaling to the camera that she authorized the clearance and was under no coercion.

"Thank you, have a good visit."

"How high up do you have to be to gain access to this area?" Donavin asked.

"Higher than you," she said deftly, and walked down the corridor to the first door, which immediately opened. She grabbed two surgeon's masks from the wall, shoe covers, and lab coats. "You need to wear these when we go inside. This is a biologically clean room. And don't touch anything, please."

Ahead of them was another door, marked "BioLab Level Seven".

Donavin donned the sterile, white clothes, eager to see what was on the other side. "So what's inside?" his head motioned towards the door, as he was preparing to place the cotton mask over his face.

"It's our laboratory for extraterrestrial studies—of a biological kind. It's one of our highlights on the tour. I think you'll like it."

"You mean you have aliens in there?"

"No, mostly we have parts of aliens in there," she said with a coy smile.

Donavin adjusted the mask and followed Li-Ching through the door. Inside was a row of stainless steel examining tables and what appeared to be a medical emergency room. Metal compartment doors filled one wall from floor to ceiling, and the opposite wall bore strange devices that looked like surgical equipment or examination tools, not unlike a dentist might use.

Li-Ching walked to a large, glass tank where something floated inside. She quickly donned rubber gloves, opened the top, and scooped it from the tank.

"This is something new we got in just a week ago from a remote area in the Gulf of Corinth, from a

trolling boat, only about eighty kilometers from Athens.”

She turned to face Donavin who had been patiently waiting. In her hands was a fetus, maybe two pounds, mostly brownish-red in color, with immense, blue veins surrounding a disproportionately large head.

Li-Ching checked the clock on the wall and then Donavin’s eyes. “Are you okay?”

Donavin was staring at the fetus in Li-Ching’s hands and his legs began to wobble. Before he could answer her, his knees collapsed and his body crumpled to the floor in complete surrender to gravity.

“I’ll need some help putting him up on the examining table,” Li-Ching said to a man in a white lab coat who rushed into the room as if on some predetermined cue.

“Get the mask off of him, now! I don’t want him out too long,” she ordered, as she replaced the fetus in the tank.

Donavin’s surgical mask had been coated in a mild neurotoxin that was odorless and tasteless, yet capable of rendering a man immobile and unconscious for twenty minutes. It had one other redeeming quality: it left no traces in the bloodstream or urine.

The two lifted Donavin to the examining table, laying him on his back. His head was carefully fitted into a concave depression at one end of the examining table. A metal sphere, about the size of an orange, silently fell from the ceiling like a spider descending from a silken thread. Red lights projected from the sphere moving slowly across Donavin's face, mapping his facial features.

The metal sphere retracted, and a long robotic arm positioned itself just above his head. A needle extended from the arm and entered Donavin's nasal cavity, where it implanted a tiny transmitter, no larger than a grain of sand.

Known as Personal Moles, or PMs, they had a dual purpose: a listening device that would transmit every word Donavin uttered for up to thirty miles, and a tracking device that could be monitored anywhere on the planet by the ACIO satellite network.



"Verify activation," Li-Ching said.

Her partner, now in a control room adjacent to the examination room, nodded. "We have activation."

"Good," Li-Ching whispered.

“I’ll have a keyword list to you within three hours,” she said in a louder voice. “You can deliver hard-copy transcripts twice daily, assuming he has something interesting to say. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Let’s finish up, then,” she said.

She took a small device from a table near the examining table and held it to the bridge of Donavin’s nose. She turned a dial and then pressed a small button on the back of the device. It made a small incision, which immediately began to bleed. She sterilized the cut and gently placed a bandage over it. Then Donavin was lifted off the examining table and repositioned on the floor where he had fainted only eight minutes earlier.

“Are you ready?” Li-Ching asked.

The man nodded, broke open a small packet of smelling salts, and waved it under Donavin’s nose.

His body convulsed. He curled up in the fetal position momentarily, and then, as if remembering where he was, struggled to sit up. “What the fuck happened?”

“You fainted,” Li-Ching replied.

Donavin shook his head and looked sheepishly to Li-Ching and then her partner. “Who’s this?”

“I’m sorry, this is Dr. Stevens. You went down pretty hard, so I asked him to take a look at your nose.”

Donavin’s hand instantly reached for his nose and felt the bandage. “It’s not broken, is it?” vanity showing in his voice.

“No, no,” Dr. Stevens assured. “Just a cut and bruise, but you might have some pain or discomfort for a few days. If you need anything, let Li-Ching know, and I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Thanks. How long was I out?” Donavin mumbled.

“Just a few minutes. Maybe you should get some fresh air,” Li-Ching suggested. “Do you want to go topside and get some refreshments?”

Donavin staggered to his feet, leaning against one of the examining tables for support. “Maybe that’d be a good idea.”

Li-Ching placed his arm in hers and together they walked out the door, Donavin gingerly testing his balance.

As they removed their lab coats and shoe covers in the anteroom, Donavin looked at Li-Ching like a suffering animal. “What was that thing?”



“An alien fetus—Zeta Reticuli, to be exact. It was jettisoned from one of their submersibles along with a variety of other experimental refuse.”

“So they’re not exactly pro-lifers then?”

“No, they’re more like pro-experimenters.”

“It looked part human to me—”

“Please, Mr. McAlester, keep this to yourself. What I showed you in there is highly classified, as high as it can get. I simply wanted you to get a sense of my trust and our willingness to cooperate with you. Let’s leave it at that.”

“So you won’t answer any more of my questions? Which incidentally, number in the thousands.”

“No.”

“Great,” he said bitterly. “You don’t really expect someone to see that thing and then clam up, do you?”

Li-Ching adjusted her dress, while Donavin watched discreetly out of the corner of his eye. Her figure was exquisite—petite, taut like a ballerina that Degas may have painted. Having disarmed her prey, she retorted coldly. “What I expect is compliance. I trust you, you trust me. Isn’t that what you want, Mr. McAlester? Or did I misjudge you?”

“Okay, okay, no more questions,” he agreed, “but at least tell me one thing, these Zeta’s, are they here?” he gestured with his arms.

Li-Ching shook her head and smiled. “Mr. McAlester, if they were here, do you think I’d show you a dead fetus?” She took his arm in hers. “I’ll escort you topside. How do you feel?”

“Just a little woozy,” he complained.

Her right breast settled directly on his left arm as they walked down the corridor, and Donavin began to lose interest in the tour, feeling more important things were beginning to take shape.

\* \* \* \*

“The satellite images are in, sir,” the voice over the intercom intoned.

“Have’em bring’em in, then,” McGavin said.

Holden was always scared of McGavin’s reaction to anything inconclusive, and the satellite photos certainly fell into that category. McGavin’s assistant motioned him in with a subtle nod toward the double, oak doors.

He walked into McGavin’s office, situated on the top floor of an obscure, five story, office building 30 miles

northeast of Richmond, Virginia. The NSA's Special Projects Laboratory was nestled in a cultivated pine forest behind a fortified, perimeter fence with sophisticated, motion-detection sensors above and beneath the ground. It was a beautiful, but isolated setting for a clandestine operation.

To any casual observer, the SPL was a company called *ConnecTech*. To any researcher or journalist, and according to its web site, ConnecTech was a private, tightly held corporation that developed specialized, missile guidance systems for the military. In reality, the SPL was owned and operated by the NSA and developed a wide variety of technologies for surveillance and counter-terrorism, many of which had been initially designed and developed by the ACIO and then transferred to the SPL for further development and modification.

Core technologies were often a result of the ACIO's Technology Transfer Program with either the Zeta Reticuli or Cor-teum. In other instances, an extraterrestrial technology might be recovered without knowledge of its source, and then reverse-engineered. Regardless of how these



technologies were acquired, the ACIO would develop them into pure-state technologies for applications related to the Labyrinth Group's agenda. These pure-state technologies would then be diluted for export to the SPL and other clandestine organizations throughout the world.

"So what do we know now that we didn't know yesterday?" McGavin snapped.

Holden sat straight as a board in his chair while his eyes darted around the room, never fixing on anything for more than a second. "We know that three, Q-Eleven choppers left the ACIO headquarters bearing in an east-south-easterly direction at approximately eighteen hundred hours."

"Destination?"

"We lost radar thirty-two miles from exit site—"

"Why can't we track these idiots?" McGavin screamed, his hairless head, like a chameleon, turning a shade of crimson to match the curtains behind his desk.

Holden began to say something, but McGavin leaned forward in his chair and silenced him with a wave of his hand. "Tell me we have flight path extrapolations."

“We do, sir,” Holden assured, his eyes nervously averting McGavin’s icy stare. “However, the choppers never returned to ACIO headquarters, so we can’t accurately extrapolate distance.”

“Just show me what you do have.”

Holden opened up a legal-sized file folder and pulled out three maps of the continental United States, each with several, dotted lines radiating from southern California going eastward, but at slightly different angles.

McGavin looked them over quickly. “So they went to southern New Mexico... maybe eighty, ninety miles south of Albuquerque—”

“Sir, we don’t know if they actually stopped, they may have continued east or stopped in Arizona even California—”

“I know you don’t know squat,” McGavin said gruffly. “What’s the legend indicate? I can’t read a damn thing; the print’s so small—”

“The red line represents the highest probability flight path,” Holden pointed out.

McGavin leaned back in his chair and stroked his clean-shaven chin. “What’s the passenger and cargo capacity of a Q-Eleven?”

“It seats six comfortably and can carry a four-and-half ton cargo load,” Holden responded, glad to be reciting facts he was familiar with.

“Why would they fly so many personnel to New Mexico unless they found something big?” McGavin wondered aloud.

Holden waited in silence, aware it was a rhetorical question.

McGavin hit an open phone line; instantly a dial tone filled the room. “Was there anything else?” he asked, looking to Holden.

“No, sir,” Holden acknowledged.

“Then you can go,” McGavin said, hitting a speed dial button. The staccato tones of a phone number being dialed interrupted the dial tone as Holden got up to leave. He heard McGavin say something about the number “fifteen” just before he closed the door behind him.

“Then find him, I’ll wait,” McGavin said in a restrained voice.

Silence filled his office as he went over to a secret cabinet door and opened it with a quick, but accurate kick. The door sprung open to reveal several bottles of

scotch. He poured himself a drink—straight up—and downed a large belt.

“Mr. McGavin,” a voice broke in, “we’ve located Fifteen and he’ll be with you momentarily. Thank you for your patience.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied sarcastically, the scotch beginning to work its magic.

He had just finished pouring his second drink when Fifteen’s voice came over the speakerphone. “Hi, Darius, sorry to keep you waiting, but I was in a meeting and I’m afraid my assistant didn’t know which conference room I was in. What can I do for you?”

McGavin set his drink down on his desk. “Why did three Q-Elevens leave yesterday for New Mexico?”

“We’re doing some reconnaissance with the Ancient Arrow project, looking for more artifacts—”

“Why three?”

“We broadened our search area, I thought we’d try a triangular search pattern.”

“And what’ve you found?”

“So far as I know, nothing,” Fifteen replied. “But they’ve only been there about eighteen hours—most of which was sleep and set up. The last time I had an

update was early this morning. I'll personally call you if anything turns up, though."

McGavin emptied his drink and set it down hard on the desk. It was already having the desired effect. "I don't want a call *after* the fact. I want to know your *plans*... then you can update me on the facts. All I'm getting on this project is some bullshit run-around. And I'm not buying it."

"So what do you recommend?"

"I want to know exactly what's happening," McGavin shouted. "The last report I saw showed the artifact had somehow managed to explode. Our lab confirmed it was alien technology, but to say it was the same artifact you showed me in the Ancient Arrow file... that's a stretch. Even you'd have to admit that."

He paused, wondering whether it made sense to get another drink. He decided it did and repeated his visit to the liquor cabinet. "You've sent three separate missions to the area, and I still don't know the precise location or the logistical plan of these missions. Let's start with that."

"I know you want us to improve our communication, but I can't hire a bigger staff just to perform this type



of sensitive communication. I only have Li-Ching, and she's stretched so thin—"

"We have the most sophisticated intranet in the fucking world, all you need to do is to copy me on your e-mails. I'm not asking for proprietary communication. Just copy me."

"You know we don't trust networks. We can't compromise our projects with communication protocols that are open to hackers, espionage, and sloppy receipt handling. It's not an option, Darius."

"Your lack of trust is ridiculous," McGavin said. "Our IT people say it's impossible to hack our system—"

"I'm not going to waste our valuable time arguing about it, Darius, I simply won't compromise our projects by using it. Nothing's unhackable at the right price and with the right motivation, and you know it. If you want proof, give me a day and I'll send you copies of every e-mail you have in your system."

McGavin sighed long and loud. "So we have an impasse," he observed, ignoring Fifteen's boast. "What do we do about it?"

"You need to trust me," Fifteen offered. "It's that simple. It's the only way this can work."

"Do I have a choice?" McGavin asked.

“Of course.”

“No I don’t,” McGavin complained, the scotch now well in control. “You flaunt your fucking power even in the suggestion that I need to trust you. You’re my subordinate, Goddamn it! I’ll decide who I trust and who I don’t. There’s something going on with the Ancient Arrow project that’s unusual—every bone in my body tells me that.”

“Darius?” Fifteen interrupted.

“What?”

“I need to go into another meeting, right now. Can we finish this discussion tomorrow?”

McGavin tipped his glass back, finishing his third drink. He let the question dangle in the air, hoping it would unnerve Fifteen. “Fine, I’m tired of this whole line of discussion. Just make sure you give Donavin full cooperation on this.”

“Thanks for your understanding,” Fifteen said, breaking the connection.

“You’re welcome,” McGavin returned, the dial tone interrupting his words.

“What a fucking jerk,” McGavin snarled as he clicked the speakerphone off. He looked once more at the flight path extrapolations and realized how little information

he had secured from Fifteen. His anger continued to rise the more he obsessed about it. He, the director of the NSA's Special Projects Laboratory, couldn't even get a straight answer on where the location of this supposed search site was. He poured his fourth drink hoping it would assuage his frustration. It didn't.





## Chapter Eleven

### THE CENTRAL RACE

*In your world, you are taught to believe that your body has a mind and spirit, when indeed, it is your spirit that has a mind and body. Your spirit is the architect, your mind is the builder, and your body is the material embodiment. The architect—your spirit—is only a thought away. Listen to its ancient voice. Perceive with its ancient eyes. Honor these gateways of intelligence as you would your Creator. They are your reality. They are the defining elements of your existence. It is time they yield the information that is the only true source of your liberation. You have only to command it, for we assure you, the teacher you have always sought is awake and waiting.*

An Excerpt from *Capacities of Self-Creation*, Chamber 17

**WingMakers**



Alone in the seventh chamber at the ETC site, Neruda was trying to decipher the glyphs in the chamber's paintings. Some of them had familiar structures such as the infinity sign and the spiral, but many were unlike anything he'd ever seen before. The technology artifacts had already been

carefully packed up and placed in the outermost cavern for removal to the ACIO laboratory for evaluation and analysis.

The excavation team had made camp in the outer cavern, and Neruda was dimly aware that he was the last one left in the chambers. He glanced at his wristwatch and sighed. Eleven o'clock. No wonder he was tired. He stood and stretched his legs and arms hoping to find new energy to continue his analysis of the glyphs.

"Anyone here?" he shouted, poking his head into the corridor and facing downward toward the entrance.

Silence rejoined the corridor and chambers, the halogen light-pods inside each chamber and at each chamber entrance being his only reassurance of humanity. Other than that, he might as well have been on some other planet in some other galaxy. He collected his notebook of sketches, returned to the center of Chamber Seven, and sat down, cross-legged.

"Jamisson, are you in here?" a faint voice drifted into the chamber.

Emily, he thought. "In here. Chamber Seven."

Emily had volunteered to accompany Neruda's team to help in the laborious cataloging process.

He listened for the approaching footsteps the way he imagined a blind person might focus on an unfamiliar soundscape. Voices revealed that Emily wasn't alone, or else she was talking to herself—something entirely possible, he reminded himself.

"Time for coffee and cookies," Emily's voice promised.

Neruda's heart gladdened at the prospects of coffee and some joy-food, not to mention, company. "You didn't," he exclaimed to the ceiling, knowing that the sound of his voice would find her ears.

"I did," she replied. "You said Chamber Seven, didn't you?"

"You heard right."

A moment later she appeared with Samantha in tow, both wearing blue jeans and carrying backpacks. Samantha had her hair up in a bun and was wearing a green turtleneck sweater that perfectly complemented her striking red hair. Emily wore a white cardigan sweater against the chill in the chambers, which made sweaters and long pants a necessity.

"It's good to have some company," Neruda said. "I was beginning to feel a little too isolated in here. These chambers can get creepy when no one else is around."

“Anything new?” Emily asked as she opened her pack and withdrew a thermos of hot coffee.

Neruda shook his head. “Not really.”

“What’re you working on tonight?” Samantha asked.

“We’re just beginning to analyze the glyphs in the context of the inscriptions. We’re looking for clues as to the spelling system and language structure.”

“The paintings are so luminous,” Samantha said, as if ignoring his explanation. “It’s so strange to be looking at paintings by beings from a different galaxy. It’s—”

“Unbelievable,” Emily added, completing her sentence.



Neruda smiled. “Their application technique defines the word *permanence*. That’s why the paintings are so luminous after some twelve hundred years.”

“Whatever it is,” Samantha remarked, “I’ve never seen such brilliant colors before. They literally glow as if they emit light, not merely reflect it.”

“I agree,” Emily said. “They’re almost eerie... in an uncomfortable way.”

Emily poured three cups of coffee from a vacuum flask and handed one each to Neruda and Samantha. Curls of steam rose up, filling the sterile atmosphere of

the chamber with the aroma of coffee. Neruda warmed his hands on his cup and thanked Emily. He leaned back on the floor on one side, propped up with his right elbow, his one leg bent up and the other straight out. He was dressed in khaki pants and a black sweater with a white T-shirt poking out around his neckline. "This'll keep me going for another hour or two. It is regular, isn't it?"

"Yes," Emily assured him.

"Good."

Samantha sat down next to Emily, still staring at the painting. "You know, the people they draw in these paintings don't look that alien. Some could pass as humans, others as angelic."

"They're a bit too abstract for me to judge that," Neruda replied. "Besides, they could represent the Anasazi Indians, and not necessarily themselves."

"What's the chance that a race from another galaxy would look like ourselves?" Samantha asked, turning from the wall painting to look into Neruda's eyes, her face as open and trusting as a child's.

"Excellent, actually."

"Excellent?" Emily returned in disbelief.



“Well, I’m not suggesting they’d be carbon-copies, but look at the Zetas and Corteum, they certainly bear a resemblance to us. The humanoid genotype varies, but the basic shape and structure is essentially the same.”

“Can you tell me something?” Samantha asked. “Why haven’t we been given the green light to RV the creators of this site?”

Neruda stared back with a blank expression as if her question completely surprised him. “I don’t know. I’ve been too involved with the optical disc and now the site itself to make it a priority.”

“So no one’s made a conscious decision *not* to RV the creators?” Samantha ventured.

“No.”

“Do you want to?”

“Now?” Neruda asked.

“Yes, now,” Samantha replied eagerly.

“I suppose we... we could,” he replied hesitantly, his mind calculating all the ramifications. He had monitored dozens of RV sessions in the recent past, so he knew the procedure well.

“I’ll need a pad of paper and a pen or pencil,” Samantha said.

“Right here? Now?” Emily questioned.

“Might as well,” Neruda said, offering his notebook and pen to Samantha.

“You’ve done this before?” Emily asked turning to Neruda.

“Many times.”

“Okay if I watch?” Emily asked. “I’ve never actually seen one of these sessions live and in person.”

Samantha straightened her back and crossed her legs Indian style. “It’s fine with me.”

“I assume you didn’t bring RePlay,” Neruda said.

“No, I wasn’t planning this. Am I outside protocol?”

“I haven’t officially established RV protocol, so we’ll make it up as we go. I’ll record your findings exactly as you relate them, don’t worry.”

Samantha closed her eyes. Her face went blank.

“Could you move the space heater a little closer? I always get cold when I do this.”

Neruda got up and adjusted the heater. “Anything else before we get started? Samantha, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like you to move to a L-2 survey of the ETC site. Point of creation time frame.”

“I’m there,” Samantha reported, her voice strangely distant sounding.

“Report.”

Samantha’s hand began to draw something on the notebook in her lap. “I’m detecting creatures of some kind, tall... no, very tall—”

“Are they corporeal?”

“Yes, but less dense than we, as if they’re only partly there,” Samantha replied. A rough sketch showed slender, humanoid creatures with long heads. “They seem like angels—”

“Why?” Neruda interrupted, “What makes you say that?”

“Their heads possess a light around them... like angels... or... or saints. Like I’ve seen in paintings. Their skin is almost translucent, as if light were being cast outward.”

“I’ll record angels as an analytic,” Neruda said. “What’re they doing?”

“They’re designing something... something of critical importance... to them and to us.”

“Okay, Samantha, look at the design,” Neruda suggested. “What do you see?”



“They’re blueprints that represent a massive construction project that they’re going to place on Earth—”

“Why Earth, Samantha?”

“They’re the original planners who genetically seeded Earth with higher life-forms like humans, apes, dolphins, whales, dinosaurs, and so on. They wanted to create a genetic library of DNA-related, interdependent life forms. They wanted a repository... or library in the galaxy that they could draw from for their future creations.”

She paused and took in a deep breath. “We’re like a genetic reference library to them.”

“Okay, cue on the design blueprints, but move forward in time one year,” Neruda said. “What do you see?”

“A... a huge three-dimensional sphere—maybe fifty meters in circumference. It’s suspended from a domed ceiling that’s equally vast—like a huge cathedral, but much larger than any cathedral I’ve ever seen.”

“What is this sphere?”

“I’m feeling that it’s Earth, but it doesn’t look like earth exactly. No, it’s earth... it’s primordial Earth. I’m looking at a model of Earth maybe a billion years ago.”

“Sketch what you see. Pay particular attention to the land masses and where they are.”

Neruda paused for a moment, catching Emily’s eyes, wide open in amazement. Samantha was busy drawing what she saw. Her eyes remained narrowed slits with an almost imperceptible tremor.

“Cue on the purpose of the sphere,” Neruda ordered.

“It’s a representation or model... no, it’s a holographic photograph of some kind. Wow, there’re other planets in this building—”

“For now, keep your focus on the sphere that represents Earth,” he said. “What’s the purpose? Why do they have this on display?”

Samantha was quiet for a few seconds as if she was observing something too immense to put into words. “It’s not a cathedral, it’s a... a warehouse of some kind... no, I’m getting the analytic that it’s a computer database, but that doesn’t make sense—”

“Stay in observation mode,” Neruda commanded. “Cue on the purpose of the sphere.”

“I get a strong sense that this sphere is in a database... like an information catalog of potential life-bearing planets. These beings are like genetic planners, and they’re assessing which genetics should go to

which planet. Yes, that's the purpose of this place. It's a repository of all life-bearing planets within our galaxy!"

"And what do these planners want to do with these planets?" Neruda asked, striving to maintain an even tone despite his rising excitement.

"They're selecting which planet will be the genetic library for our sector of the galaxy."

"Why?"

"I'm struggling here," Samantha whispered tensely. "Someone is approaching. He... or she... no, it's a he... he knows I'm here. They can sense RV observation. He's contacting me. He wants to know why I'm here."

"Do not respond," Neruda ordered. "Move to point of creation relative to the ETC site in New Mexico."



Samantha's face relaxed noticeably. "I'm in a building of some kind. It reminds me of a large monastery. Everything is quiet. Peaceful. The smell is somewhat salty like it's near an ocean. I can't see anything outside... but it's gotta be near an ocean."

"What do you see inside?"

“I’m in a room—fairly large, like a conference room. There’re at least twelve of these same beings. They speak telepathically. I can’t understand them, but I know they’re talking with one another. There’s a large table in the middle of the room, and in the middle of the table is a beam of light coming from some source... from above. It’s like a projector. The light is illuminating an image—no, it’s creating the image of a three-dimensional helix. It’s the ETC site. It’s a holographic cross-section of the site. I see it!”

“Good,” Neruda said. “Now, look closely at the image, what’s its purpose?”

Samantha’s face tensed up as furrows suddenly spread across her forehead like ripples in a pond. “Again they sense me. They’re trying to ask me something... I’m not sure what I should do, they’re probing me... they want to—”

“Do not respond, Samantha! Focus on my voice! What’s the purpose of the ETC site?”

“I can’t,” Samantha whispered. “I can’t ignore them. Their minds are too powerful—”

“Samantha, listen to my voice. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” her voice trailing off.

“Okay, go to point of first contact between these beings and humans.”

She remained silent.

“Samantha, can you hear me?”

Again, she didn’t respond, her face completely relaxed.

“Should we wake her?” Emily asked, concern showing in her voice.

Neruda ignored Emily’s question. “Samantha, if you can hear me, acknowledge. Now!”

Neruda stood and shook Samantha’s shoulders firmly. “Wake up!” Her eyes flew wide open and she shivered as if she were both cold and afraid.

“Are you okay?” Emily asked.

Neruda moved the space heater closer to Samantha.

“I’m okay,” she said, “just a little scared.”

“What happened?” Neruda asked.

“I’ve never done an RV session where my presence was detected. It’s a very uncomfortable feeling. These beings just wanted to know why I was there. They didn’t feel threatened. They just don’t like deception. I feel as though they scolded me.”

“Did you communicate with them?” Neruda asked.



“I’m ... I’m not sure,” Samantha stuttered, her voice quivering from body chills. “I felt their minds probing me, and then I heard your voice. That’s... that’s all I remember.”

“Do you remember anything else before that?” Neruda asked.

“I remember everything,” Samantha said. “It was one of the most vivid RV sessions I’ve ever had. I saw primordial Earth—or at least a holographic model of it. It was incredible! You realize what this means?”

“What?” Emily and Neruda asked in unison.

“It means that Earth was seeded by these beings. They’re the mythical Life Carriers.”

Neruda returned to his original position on the floor. “It’s possible, but I wouldn’t necessarily assume that that’s their identity.”

“What else could they be?” Samantha protested, shocked that Neruda could doubt her.

“The Corteum always portrayed Life Carriers as subspace beings. I doubt they exist in corporeal form. Also, your description infers they might be more related to the Shining Ones—also mythical beings—but less obscure.”

“Shining Ones?” Samantha thought aloud.

“They’re also known as the Virachoca, sometimes the Kukulcan, and more commonly as the Elohim. There are even a few, brave scholars that believe our angel mythology stems from their involvement in our planet’s prehistory.”

“And what do the Corteum say about the Shining Ones?” Samantha asked.

“Very powerful beings,” he replied, “who’ve mastered how to disguise their influence. They keep a low profile by being incomprehensible.”

“They keep a low profile by being incomprehensible?” Emily echoed in frustration. “What does that mean?”

“The Shining Ones, according to the Corteum, are the Central Race, the original race of beings that evolved in the centermost galaxy of the universe.

As the universe expanded and created ever-increasing space, energy and matter, these beings expanded into the other galaxies as the creator gods or galactic planners who exported the master DNA templates from the more evolved, ancient galaxies to those that were in development or incubation.”

“I’ve never heard of the Central Race—”



“It’s not exactly taught in school,” Neruda said, smiling. “They’re not unlike the Central Cell. This is the original cell that comes into existence when the father’s sperm unites with the mother’s egg. From this Central Cell, all of your other eighty trillion cells spring. Your other cells are differentiated; the Central Cell is not. It holds the master blueprint of your physical, emotional, and mental make-up. It lives in the pineal gland.

“In the case of the Central Race, they’re the original humanoid genotype, and everything of a humanoid existence stems from their DNA structure.”

“Are you implying these beings are the ancestors of every humanoid life form in the universe?” Emily asked slowly, weighing each word as she spoke.

“According to the Corteum, yes.” Neruda replied, “And they’re also our Gods.”

“Gods?” Emily mirrored.

“That’s not necessarily what they are,” he explained, “it’s what they’ve been dubbed by individuals who’ve somehow managed to come in contact with them.”

“Like who?” Emily asked.

“Like Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, to name a few.”

“So now you’re going to tell me that our spiritual leaders were fooled by these beings—our distant genetic forebearers—into thinking they were God?” Samantha looked distraught.

“I’m only relating the Corteum perspective. Their cosmology is much more developed than our own, and they don’t distinguish between spirituality and cosmology. To them, cosmology *is* spiritual study.”

“But fooled?” Samantha asked again.

“I’m not saying they were fooled by these beings,” Neruda replied. “It’s not like these beings masquerade as Gods. They make no such claims. According to the Corteum, the Central Race possesses what looks to us as God-like powers only because their evolutionary timeline is so vast.”

“So,” Emily ventured, “if these beings are the Shining Ones, the Central Race, as you put it, then all the religious references to God or... or Gods... are really about them?”

“Again, according to the Corteum, yes.”

Emily let out a long sigh. “So who created *them*?”

“As far as I know, no one knows,” he replied.

“It still doesn’t make sense to me,” Samantha blurted. “Why would such highly evolved beings

essentially be in the business of exporting DNA from galaxy to galaxy?”

“There’s nothing more important—physically speaking—than DNA structures. The Central Race is essentially charged with the administration of humanoid genotypes. The human genotype of today is dramatically different from that which dominated Earth a million years ago. The Corteum view is that this didn’t happen due to evolutionary development, but through the intervention of the Central Race—the Shining Ones.”

“So our Gods are geneticists?” Emily said. “It leaves me cold.” She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them.

Neruda shrugged. “I’m not stating this as the infallible truth. It’s the opinion of the Corteum. It’s their cosmology. Not mine.”

“So you don’t believe it?” Samantha asked.

“I try not to think about it too much. But I find it interesting and entirely plausible.”

“So you do believe it?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, picking at the heel of his hiking boot. “We know that the universe started with a relatively small number of galaxies, and has

expanded into about a hundred billion galaxies. It seems plausible that somewhere in the center of the universe, a race of humanoids could have evolved or been created. This race could be the progeny of God and the progenitors of humanity—here, everywhere.”

Neruda stood and stretched his legs. “It’s getting late; maybe we should go.”

“I can’t leave until you answer one more question,” Samantha stated. “If the Central Race constructed this site, then wouldn’t it be logical that it has something to do with genetics?”

“It’s completely logical,” Neruda replied. “I’ll update Fifteen tomorrow on our return. We’ll see what he thinks. We could be way off base on this. It’s too early to extrapolate anything more than alternative hypotheses.”

“Will we be doing additional RV sessions?” Samantha asked.

“That’ll be up to Fifteen. It’s worrisome that they can detect us, especially if they can probe us through our RV inquiry. It makes us vulnerable. We’ll see what Fifteen wants to do. Okay?”

“Why the concern about communication?” Emily asked. “I mean why not just ask them who they are,

what they want with us, and why they left this site behind?"

"Remember the timeline she was on?"

"Yeah," Emily answered.

"When you move into the past or future with an RV session, protocol dictates that the session remain in observation mode only," he said. Neruda squatted to organize his notebooks and return them to his backpack. "It's dangerous because our interaction could somehow change a past event, which could have a catastrophic impact in our time. So, until we know with some certainty that a change is in our best interest, it's better to remain incommunicado."

"I hope he approves further contact," Samantha said. "I think it's essential to understanding this site and all it contains."

"We'll see," Neruda said. "But don't get your hopes up too high. He's very skittish when it comes to alien communication, particularly if it's with a more advanced race. And I'm hard-pressed to imagine a race more advanced than the Central Race."

"Whatever happened to the notion that the more advanced a race is the more spiritually inclined they are?" Samantha asked.

“The fear has to do with manipulation,” Neruda explained. “An advanced race can manipulate the perceptions of a less advanced race. In other words, they could make themselves appear as the Central Race or another benign, spiritually advanced race of beings, and be something altogether different. And we couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Sounds a little paranoid to me,” Samantha said.

“There’s good reason to be paranoid, if that’s what you wish to call it. Especially when you’re dealing with timelines that stretch back a billion years—”



“But that’s just it,” Emily interrupted.

“If this race had holographic databases a billion years ago, wouldn’t that make them extremely advanced. Our evolutionary equivalent of a great, great, great grandfather? And if they were so advanced, wouldn’t that make them spiritual benefactors, and not potential adversaries?”

“Yes, but only assuming that RV technology is flawless and perfect. And I’m sorry to report, it isn’t. The mere fact that they could detect Samantha indicates that they could also be in a position to conceal



their identity. In effect, manipulate her perception for their own agenda.”

Neruda ran his hands through his hair. “I know this sounds paranoid, but trust me, there are good reasons for caution. Be patient. I’ll talk with Fifteen and we’ll see what he says. Can we go now?” he asked, with a hint of growing impatience. “I still need to draft a report before I turn in.”

They packed up and made their way back down the sloping corridor to the campsite in the outer cavern. The Handlers had already left earlier in the evening with all of the artifacts. Most of Security had also left, having finished securing the secrecy of the site. Only the Research team remained with one security attachment.

\* \* \* \*

Like a sleek cat, Li-Ching slid out of her car. As she closed the door, Donavin appeared, clothes disheveled, as if he’d dressed in a hurry. His normally neat hair was mussed, victim to the high winds following last night’s storm.

“Everything okay?” Li-Ching asked.

“Fine, just fine,” he said. “And you?”

“I’m doing well, thank you.”

“Thought we should talk,” he said. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee on the way down to the office?”

“I’m a little late for a meeting—”

“Please,” he pleaded, taking her hand.

Li-Ching quickly glanced around the parking lot, assuring herself that they were alone. “If this is about last night, don’t worry about it—”

“I didn’t mean to assume anything... I thought you were coming on to me. That’s all.”

“Trust me, Mr. McAlester, you’ll *know* if and when I ever come on to you,” she said, walking away.

Donavin stood motionless watching her walk away. Her short, blue skirt revealed her perfectly turned legs, and he momentarily forgot his rehearsed speech.

“Look, when you decide what you want, tell me. In the meantime, I’ll keep a professional distance.”

Li-Ching stopped, turned and walked back to him, stopping with her face just inches from his. “*If* I decide what I want, there’ll be no telling. I’ll show you. And if you intend to keep your professional distance, you’ll need regular cold showers. Do you understand, Mr. McAlester?”

Feeling her warm breath on his face, Donavin swallowed hard, and struggled to regain composure. "Fine, so what do you want me to do?" he asked meekly as Li-Ching spun and walked away.

"I think you can decide that on your own," she said, tossing the words over her shoulder, and continuing her path to the ACIO entrance.

Donavin adjusted his sunglasses and glanced at his watch, trying to look cool despite his discomfort. Why does she have to be so damn complicated, he thought? But he knew full well that this was exactly what attracted him.

\* \* \* \*

Neruda had met briefly with Fifteen the night before and updated him on the RV session at the ETC site. Fifteen had scheduled a priority interrupt meeting for Saturday at 0900 hours. Neruda was early for the meeting because of the location. The sunroom was his favorite, and today was a beautiful one in all respects, as large, billowy clouds waltzed across a royal blue sky. Dressed in navy blue slacks and a white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up casually, he relaxed

comfortably in a rattan rocking chair. As he scanned his notes in preparation for the meeting, the aroma of fresh coffee permeating the sunroom enhanced his already pleasant, well-rested mood.

Samantha and Branson had also been summoned, and she was the next to arrive. "I was surprised the elevator worked for me," she said, gingerly entering the room. "I've never been in here before."

Her eyes scanned around the room, eager to spy something unusual or secretive.



"You'll be disappointed if you expect to find anything extraordinary here," Neruda commented. "Fifteen was in

charge of the decorating and he's a minimalist at heart."

"Actually I like his taste in interior design," she replied. "Besides, the view outside is what counts."

"Did you see Branson or Fifteen downside?" Neruda asked.

"No. Do you think they'll want to do an RV session?"

Neruda put the cap back on his pen and returned it to his shirt pocket. "I met briefly with Fifteen last night and gave him a quick update. He was very interested in our session and asked some good questions—"

“Who does he think they are?” she asked in a flurry.

“Even if he drew any conclusions, he didn’t tell me anything.”

“Nothing?”

Neruda shook his head.

Samantha walked over to a set of shelves that housed a variety of beautiful and exotic shells and crystals. “He collects these things?”

“Yeah, he’ll collect anything as long as it’s organic, untouched by human hands, and conveys a uniquely beautiful energy.”

“So I shouldn’t touch these?”

“I meant *manufactured* by human hands,” Neruda laughed. “You can touch them.”

Samantha picked up a crystal and examined it with rapt interest. “These are the most unusual things I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s because they’re gifts from the Corteum,” Fifteen said as he came off the elevator with Branson. “When the Corteum built their underground cities, they found pockets of crystals that even they had never seen before. What you’re holding is completely uncut, they grow that way like organic fractals.”

“They’re remarkable,” she said.

“Pick one out that you like and it’s yours,” Fifteen offered.

His eyes held an uncommon brightness that attracted everyone who met him, and Samantha stared at him for a long moment, drawn into those eyes, as she searched for the right thing to say. “Thanks, but ... but I couldn’t.”

“No, I mean it, take one,” Fifteen said. “I might not offer again.” He winked and whispered something to Branson, who smiled in return.

Samantha bent over to examine the crystals more closely. She took one of the smallest, and cradled it in her hand like a child might do with a baby bird. “I’ll take this one. It’s perfect.”

“They literally are perfect,” Fifteen said. “I mean that in a mathematical sense.”

“Thank you so much,” Samantha said.

“You’re very welcome, but I should tell you one thing about these crystals, there’re none on Earth except what you see right here, so I need you to keep it in your office if you don’t mind.”

“I understand,” Samantha said.

Fifteen sat down in his favorite chair and stared out the windows at the high desert flora and gray canyon

walls that surrounded the east end of the ACIO compound. Branson and Samantha also sat down in the chairs that encircled a round marble coffee.

“Jamisson tells me you made a breakthrough,” Fifteen said, suddenly turning to Samantha, catching her off guard.

She fidgeted in her chair with embarrassment. “I’m not sure it was a breakthrough, sir, but we did find it extremely interesting.”

“Would you like to try again?” Fifteen asked.

“You mean another RV session on the ETC site?”

“Yes.”

Samantha’s eyebrows rose slightly and her eyes widened. “You mean communicate with them?”

“Perhaps,” Fifteen said, not wanting to get her hopes up too high.

“You’ll be the monitor?” she asked.

“Would you prefer someone else?” Fifteen replied.

“No, no,” Samantha answered, shaking her head vigorously. “It would be great to have you monitor, sir.”

“Good, then we’ve established our agenda for the morning.”

“So ... er ... you believe the creators of the ETC site are the Central Race?” Samantha asked hesitantly.

“I believe we’ll know more after our session,” Fifteen replied smoothly. “Perhaps we’ll be convinced, perhaps not. We’ll see.”

Fifteen hit a button on a console next to his chair. “We’ll have no interruptions from below. Now, are you ready to get started?”

“One thing before we start,” Neruda said. “In the last segment of our RV session, Samantha was probed by these beings. We don’t know to what degree, but they may already know something of our activities. Also, I couldn’t monitor Samantha during the probe. She was uncommunicative. I would assume she might—”

“We’ll handle it a little differently then,” Fifteen said. “Everyone ready?”

“Do you still want RePlay on?” Branson said, as he leaned over to open up his briefcase.

“Yes,” Fifteen replied, “unless you think it would hinder you in any way, Samantha.”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

Branson unpacked the device and handed it to Samantha. He plugged one of the leads into the console next to Fifteen.



“See if David’s ready,” Fifteen said, turning to Branson, who flicked a switch. An overhead, computer monitor crackled on. He flicked another switch and window shades silently covered the windows, bringing the room to a comfortable darkness.

“David, this is Branson, we’re ready on this end, are you live?”

David’s implacable face appeared on the overhead monitor, and nodded. “I’m good to go, sir.”

Fifteen turned his attention to Samantha, who looked increasingly uncomfortable. “Samantha, we’re going to have ZEMI monitor the RV session through David. It’ll prompt me if it sees something that I might miss. Think of it as insurance. Are you comfortable with that?”

“Of course, sir,” she replied, trying to sound indifferent.

“Good, let’s begin,” Fifteen said. “David, I’m going to put ZEMI on text scroll outputs. Bill, can you put the text scroll on the bottom third of the screen?”

The computer monitor went blank except for a thin, blue line, about two-thirds down.

“Samantha, whenever you’re ready, we’ll begin,” Fifteen said.

Samantha made final adjustments on the harness straps of the RePlay headgear, sat back in her chair, and folded her hands in her lap. With a fleeting look at Neruda, she closed her eyes. A minute passed. "I'm ready," she said with a whisper.

The top part of the monitor screen began to flicker as a hazy image began to form.

"Samantha, go to point of creation of the ETC site, L4 survey mode, and cue on the planetary database," Fifteen said. "Report your findings when you're ready."



Samantha's face was expressionless as she began to report what she saw. "I'm in a huge auditorium... its dimensions would measure in kilometers, not meters. Intricate patterns cover the walls, floors, and ceilings—more intricate than I can describe... the colors are browns, yellows, blues, and black.

"I see three beings... similar to the ones I saw before. They're walking inside this huge interior space like tiny ants in a huge field. One of them is carrying a device of some kind. He's pointing it at these spheres or... or what I believe are holographic representations of planets. There're thousands of these things... spheres I

mean, but I get the impression that there're many more rooms like this one. This building is unbelievably huge."

The monitor screen showed a blurry depiction of what Samantha saw. It looked like the first images of television, except there were color tones, albeit faint.

"Okay, good, now I want you to look around in this building, but do not stay in any POV for longer than about ten seconds. I'll remind you to switch POV. Report."

"The planets are holograms... I can see through them when I'm up close. From a distance they appear to be solid representations. I'm looking at one that's completely water, no... no there's a small landmass at its southernmost pole—"

"Change POV, Samantha," Fifteen ordered.

"This planet is large, it's also mostly water... I'm getting the analytic that it's a very young planet. It has no life, but it's being cultivated to have life. Its weather is very volatile—"

"Samantha, change POV. Cue on the device that the three beings are using. Report."

Her face showed some strain as she focused her attention on the object. "It appears to be an activation

device... yes, they use it to activate the database. As before, I get the strong impression that this entire structure is part of a three-dimensional, holographic database.”

“Go to the model representing Earth,” Fifteen ordered.

“I see it. It’s smaller than most of the other planets represented here. It’s also bluer in color...”

“Samantha, I want you to go inside the hologram of Earth,” he said. “Do you understand my directive?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I’m there. It’s an amazing mixture of colors and patterns.”

“Can you locate their source?”

Samantha’s face remained expressionless as she paused for a few seconds. “I see a cord of light... something inexplicable... it seems like an umbilical cord...”

“Follow it to its source,” Fifteen said.

“I’m inside something—maybe a room... maybe a... computer, I’m not sure. It feels like architecture. I see thousands, no, millions of these cords converging into something... it almost looks like a nebula. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“We can see it, too,” Fifteen reassured her. “Don’t worry about descriptions. Cue on the purpose of this room.”

“I’m getting the strong analytic that the room is non-physical. It only appears physical. It’s a generator of some kind. It’s like the central energy system for this building where the planets are represented. Perhaps it’s a holographic generator, but it seems more like an organic computer.”

“Good, Samantha,” Fifteen said. “Now, cue on the generator into which these cords of light converge. Report.”

“I’m not getting anything... oh, wait, these cords... they’re like miniature filaments that conduct something... energy or... or maybe a life-giving substance of some kind. I’m not sure—”

“Stay in observation mode,” Fifteen directed. “Can you locate their original source of energy?”

“No, everything here seems like a pattern that’s been replicated billions of times over. There’s no original structure that I can feel. Suddenly, I’m getting the analytic that this room *is* the planet. That I’m inside this planet in which the building is situated.”

On the bottom third of the monitor a message began to scroll from ZEMI.

PROBABLE HYPOTHESIS (10.0% CERTAINTY RANGE): THIS PLANET IS A CONSTRUCTED SATELLITE DESIGNED TO HOUSE A LIFE-BEARING PLANETARY DATABASE. INSUFFICIENT DATA TO DETERMINE PURPOSE OF THE DATABASE. PLEASE DIRECT RV TO ESTABLISH THIS PURPOSE. END.

"Samantha, return to the room where the earth hologram is represented. Exterior view. Hover above it ten meters. Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Good, can you see any of the beings you saw before?"

"Yes, there are three of them walking below me, perhaps five hundred meters away."

"Do you sense they have detected you?"

"No."

"Good, now move within several meters of these beings. I'd like to get a close view of them, but return to your present station on my cue. Okay?"

"Yes."

"Go," Fifteen commanded.

Samantha's forehead crinkled up and her closed eyes squinted as if some sand had been blown in her face. "They see me. They're asking me questions about my purpose—"

"Return to your station, now."

The image on the screen remained for a few more seconds. Three ghostly shapes in long, white robes could be seen. They were looking directly in Samantha's direction, so their faces could be seen. Large, oval heads with flowing white hair and beards. All three looked similar in appearance, and projected a diffuse but nonetheless bright light from the top of their heads that seemed to connect them. The image was slowly replaced by a distant view looking down on them from Samantha's previous position above the hologram of earth.

A new message from ZEMI scrolled across the monitor screen.

INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS: 65%+ PROBABILITY THAT THESE BEINGS ARE WHAT THE CORTEUM REFER TO AS THE CENTRAL RACE. FURTHERMORE, DATA FROM THE SAME ARCHIVE STRONGLY SUGGESTS THAT THE THREE BEINGS ARE ACTUALLY ONE PERSONALITY. THE CENTRAL RACE HAS EVOLVED INTO A TRIUNE

PERSONALITY WITH MIND, EMOTIONS, AND SPIRIT ESSENCE REPRESENTED EQUALLY IN APPEARANCE. THIS WOULD INDICATE THAT THE PLANETARY DATABASE IS CONNECTED WITH GENETIC ENGINEERING. END.

“Samantha, do you sense they can detect you from your current position?” Fifteen asked.

“Yes,” she replied like an automaton. “They know I’m still here. I can feel their minds probing me. They seem impatient to talk with me.”

“Samantha, resist their probes,” Fifteen ordered, his voice commanding and resolute. “I want you to remain at your present POV but to move your TOV into the future by the equivalent of one year of our time. Report.”

“No detectable change,” she said.

“Do you see the three beings?” Fifteen inquired.

“I don’t sense anyone in the room with me. I feel alone.”

“Examine the holographic model of Earth carefully. Report your findings.”

“The planet appears normal. All of the continents—geographically speaking—appear to be in order. I can see location markers on the continents—”



“Cue on the purpose of these markers,” Fifteen said.

“I get the sense that they’re construction sites—”

“How many?”

“I can’t tell, yet,” she replied.

“Samantha,” Fifteen said. “I need you to slowly circle the planet so we can record the site locations. You don’t need to describe anything; RePlay is providing a satisfactory image.”

The computer monitor showed North America and a red circle denoting the New Mexico ETC site. Another in South America, near Cusco, Peru. Next, the monitor displayed an area in north central Africa in the vicinity of Lake Chad. An area north of Helsinki, Finland was the next location marker. Another location marker could be seen in southern China, near Canton. The sixth marker could be seen in south central Australia.

All of the markers were the same color and size with one exception, the New Mexico site had a yellow dot, blinking in the center of the red location marker.

“Samantha, I need you to provide us with a top and bottom view of the planet as well.”

“Understood,” she replied.

The monitor picked up a blurry image of Antarctica in Wilkes Land where the final location marker could be seen near Vostok.

“That makes seven location markers,” Fifteen said.  
“Stop for a second, what’s that?”

The monitor showed a hieroglyphic string of symbols of some kind at the bottom of the sphere.



“Samantha, I’d like you to cue on this name. What is it?” Fifteen asked.

“I don’t have a sense of a name,” she answered.

“David, anything?” Fifteen asked.

The monitor began to scroll text.

INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS: THE HIEROGLYPHS ARE NUMERIC VALUES. THERE ARE THIRTEEN DIGITS, AND THE NUMBER IS THEREFORE BETWEEN 1,000,000,000,000 AND 9,999,999,999,999. IT IS HIGHLY PROBABLE THAT THE NUMBER REPRESENTS OUR PLANET’S SERIAL NUMBER IN THEIR DATABASE.  
END.

“Samantha, I’d like you to once again cue on the purpose of these location markers. Report.”

“They’re constructing a security system on the planet. They want to protect Earth.”

“From what?”

She paused. “From... its destruction.”

“By whom?”

“I’m... I’m not sure—”

“Human or alien?” Fifteen asked, “Concentrate, Samantha.”

“I feel these sites are part of a weapon of some kind. They want to protect their genetic library. They know that they must be vigilant and prepare for all eventualities. It’s happened before.”

“What’s happened before?”

“These beings have deposited their genetics on countless other planets, and something has come along bent on destroying these genetic libraries... it’s... it’s a very ancient enemy, but not human.”

“Okay, Samantha, return to the sunroom. You’ve done an exemplary job.”

Moments later, Samantha opened her eyes, blinking them to adjust to the light. She instinctively removed her RePlay headset.

Fifteen stood and helped her to her feet. “It’s good to walk right after an intense session like this. Gets you

grounded again." Fifteen held her by her arm, helping her get steadied. He walked her to the elevator, which opened up as they came near. "I think we'll stay awhile and chat about our next steps," he said. "Why don't you get some rest and relax for about twenty minutes and then rejoin us?"

Samantha could only mumble in agreement as she was escorted inside the elevator. The doors closed and Fifteen returned to his chair.

Neruda and Branson were already in a deep discussion. The full-screen version of David was on the computer monitor listening to the conversation.

Neruda leaned forward to pour some coffee as Fifteen sat down. "You stopped pretty abruptly," Neruda said. "Did you sense something was wrong?"

"No, I just wanted Samantha to rest," he replied. "I know how exhausting these sessions are, and when you're tired, you're easier to probe."

"What did you think?" Branson asked, eyeing Fifteen.

"I think we found the Central Race," Fifteen said. "To me, it feels authentic, which puts this discovery on a whole new playing field."

"I agree," Branson offered.

“Why’d you choose not to communicate with them?” Neruda asked.

“I think we did,” Fifteen replied. “They’ve clearly probed Samantha—at least twice. They know something of what we’re doing.”

Neruda leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Are you opposed to a more direct communication?”

“What do you know about the Central Race?” Fifteen asked, looking over his cup of coffee.

“I know they’re purported to be our ancestors,” Neruda replied, “at least according to the Corteum—”

“Correction, they’re everyone’s ancestors—at least those of the humanoid persuasion,” Fifteen interjected.

“Right, but doesn’t that make them friendly to our cause?”

Fifteen shook his head slowly from side to side. “Our cause is BST, the most powerful technology in the universe, and therefore, the most controlled. Guess who regulates such a technology?”

“The Central Race,” Neruda answered.

“Precisely,” Fifteen said. “They’re well aware that BST can be a powerful defensive weapon, as well as an indefensible offensive weapon if utilized with evil intent. They undoubtedly possess this technology, but they’d

never place it on our planet. Too risky. It would assuredly fall into the wrong hands. So, instead, they've installed these seven sites, which somehow constitute our defensive posture against an alien invasion."

"So you think the Central Race would prevent us from developing BST if they knew our agenda?" Neruda asked.

"I have no doubt of it," Fifteen responded. "And I have no doubt of their capability to prevent us should they learn of our agenda."

"How do we know their technology is inferior to BST?" Neruda asked. "If their goal is to protect Earth isn't it logical to assume they'd protect it with their best technology?"

"No," Fifteen answered. "It's logical to assume they'd use a benign defensive system like stealth technology. And how do we know this would be sufficient against this alien invasion? Because they say so from their safe perch in the central universe? This is their ancient enemy as Samantha put it. An enemy of the Central Race must be extremely sophisticated, or it would be vanquished. And how many genetic library planets have fallen prey to them, I wonder?"

Fifteen shifted in his chair searching for a comfortable position. "I don't mean to argue with you, Jamisson, but if you believe in the prophecies and our RV reconnaissance, it's hard to dispute that this invasion, if it should take place, will be a ruthless takeover of Earth. All we know is that the invading force is from M51—some thirty-seven million light years away, and without doubt, a primeval galaxy. HST pictures have revealed that this galaxy may have star systems that go back fourteen billion years. Do you really think these races will have primitive invasion technology?"

Neruda remained silent knowing the question was rhetorical.

"I don't believe we can afford to rely on anyone, even the Central Race, for our protection and survival." Fifteen set his coffee cup down, and smoothed his pants with his hands, as if signifying his need to remain calm and collected.

Branson hit a button on the console and the shades opened up again, allowing natural light to pour into the room. "Is it possible that the Central Race left behind these sites for more than just defensive purposes? Surely the paintings don't have any defensive purpose," Branson said.

“It’s another reason why I believe this defensive system is benign,” Fifteen replied. “The ETC structure seems to be the result of competing objectives. This would weaken it.”

“But isn’t it reasonable to assume that the Central Race would have the ability to protect their genetic warehouses?” Neruda asked.

Fifteen furrowed his brow for a moment and made a quick assessment of Neruda from the corner of his eyes. “The beautiful thing about our predicament,” he began, “is that we know so little of the facts. It provides us the luxury of speculation. Speculation and nothing more. As for me, when I find myself in this mode, I always prefer to create the solution rather than wait for some unknown benefactor to present it to me.”

“Why?” Neruda asked. “I mean why not evaluate the defensive quality of this system before we write it off as benign and ineffective?”

“I never suggested that we wouldn’t evaluate it! We absolutely must examine it and determine its usefulness. I only meant that we wouldn’t rely upon it. We won’t let it deter us from creating our own solution with BST. We’re only weeks away from our first round of preliminary tests of interactive time travel! It’s



conceivable, if everything goes well, that we'll be ahead of schedule by five to seven years."

Neruda stood up and walked to one of the large windows overlooking the juniper trees, wild flowers, and sagebrush in the garden beneath the sunroom. In order to concentrate, he had to avoid eye contact with Fifteen. "The blinking light inside the red, location marker of the New Mexico site, it could only mean the homing artifact. Right?"

"That's my interpretation," Fifteen said.

"So why aren't other homing devices identified? The homing device for the Chaco Canyon site blew up. We have no way of finding the other sites without a homing device, unless we choose to interact with the Central Race through an RV session."

"I understand," Fifteen said. "You want Samantha to interact with these beings so we can find the location of the other sites—"

"You agree that it's an interconnected system?" Neruda said. "That it'd only operate if all seven sites were online or activated?"

"It would be logical," Fifteen replied.

"So how else would we find the other sites to activate the system?"

Fifteen chuckled. "There may be location markers imbedded in the site, on the optical disc, in every chamber painting. They wanted us to find this site first. There's probably an activation sequence, which would make good sense if it were an integrated technology. Hear me well, Jamisson, I will not authorize any further RV inquiries, especially involving interaction with representatives of the Central Race."

Neruda stared at the landscape, his back the target of Fifteen's eyes. He could feel them. There was something strange about this sparse, desert flora. It reminded him of an alien world for reasons he couldn't sort out. He had vague recollections of his home in Bolivia, surrounded in lush tropical foliage, warm rains, and the smell of earth rising from each footstep he took. The two worlds were so settled in their differences.

Fifteen's voice stirred him from his reverie. "I understand your interest in this race. They're undoubtedly one of the most fascinating discoveries we've encountered, but also the most potentially dangerous to our mission. And there's nothing more important than the creation of BST."

"Then we'll concentrate our efforts on decoding the optical disc," Neruda said as he turned around to face Fifteen and Branson. "We'll keep our focus on trying to discover the other six sites and learning all we can about the purpose of the defensive system."

"Very well," Fifteen said. "And one more thing, Jamisson, this encounter will remain SL-Twelve only. He turned to Branson. "We'll need Samantha to submit to an MRP this morning. I'd like David to personally take care of the matter. Okay with you, David?"

"Of course, sir," David replied without a change in expression. "Did you want to specify time coordinates or event coordinates?"

"We'll use event coordinates," Fifteen answered. "Neruda can provide those."

Neruda looked to Branson, hoping for a more sympathetic audience. "Can we limit our MRP to this singular event, or do you want to erase both sessions?"

Branson opened his mouth, but it was Fifteen who answered. "We need to erase both sessions and any prior or subsequent dialogue related to the event coordinates," Fifteen said. I want the key word, *Central Race*, erased completely. The identity of these beings must be contained within the Labyrinth Group.

Understood?" Fifteen looked from Branson to Neruda, searching for compliance. Branson nodded, while Neruda sighed in restlessness.

"Is something wrong?" Fifteen asked, directing his full attention to Neruda.

"There's one thing I failed to mention to you last night. Emily Dorrian observed the first RV session. She's also aware of the identity of the site creators, or at least she's aware that I thought they might be the Central Race."

"Might?" Fifteen queried.

"I didn't say anything definitively, but I did mention the Central Race and some of the mythology that we've learned from the Corteum. I didn't go into any detail—"

"Emily is SL-Seven," Fifteen said, "she'll need to undergo the same procedure as Samantha. You need to handle the arrangements with David, and I'd like it completed this weekend—this morning if possible."

"I understand," Neruda said.

"I'll have project protocols on your desks Monday morning," Fifteen said, "especially with regard to RV inquiries. In the meantime, nothing, I repeat, nothing, of this project can be shared with anyone outside of the Labyrinth Group. Understood?"

David, Neruda, and Branson nodded in unison.

“Then we’re finished here,” Fifteen decreed, picking up the crystal that Samantha had selected from his collection, and placing it back on his display shelf. “She would have liked this crystal,” he said, mostly to himself.





## Chapter Twelve

### RESTRUCTURE

*You are in the infallible process of inward ascension—journeying from the outer reaches of creation to the inner sanctum of the One Creator who is First Source. We, the Central Race, your elder brother, remind you of the journey’s purpose so you may understand that the role of the human form is to embody that which unites us all. However, it is only within the centermost universe that the children of time may experience the spokes of identity and the supremacy of their convergence.*

An Excerpt from *The Central Race*, Chamber 13

**WingMakers**



“So what’s the emergency?” Emily asked as she walked into Neruda’s office. It was Saturday afternoon, and she was dressed in casual, cream-colored shorts and a sleeveless, cotton blouse with flower patterns in navy blue and beige. Her hair was tied back in a single ponytail, and she looked to all the world like a schoolgirl on summer vacation.

“Remember our RV session in the ETC site last Thursday night with the Central Race?”

“Yeah,” she replied.

“You need to submit to a single event MRP,” Neruda said, trying to sound casual.

“Why? What happened?”

“I wish I could tell you, but I’m not able to explain the exact circumstances. It’s in your own best interest to remain uninformed.”

“That’s an interesting way of putting it,” she said with a sigh. “What happened? Come’ on, tell me.”

“Emily, I can’t. Just trust me on this, it’s in your best interest. It’ll only take a few minutes, David’s all set-up and ready to go—”

“Does Samantha have to go through this as well?”

“She’s already had her MRP,” he replied.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And did everything turn out okay?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve heard that some don’t,” she said.

Neruda focused his full attention on Emily, turning off his computer monitor and sitting forward in his chair.

“In the last nine years, every MRP has been successful

and permanent. The fact is that almost seventy percent of personnel have had at least one MRP, they just don't remember it. The procedure is that good."

"What about me?"

"In what respect?" he asked.

"Have I had an MRP before?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"But you know?"

"Yes."

She sat down with a sudden thud. Her facial expression caught Neruda's attention as he watched for signs of her acceptance level. He knew from experience that this was one of the most difficult procedures to explain to personnel—regardless of their loyalty. It was exceedingly invasive, and he knew from personal experience that it was unpleasant to willingly submit to such an invasion of one's private world of memories.

"Don't take this personally," she said, "but how do I know that the only memory that's being extracted is the RV session?"

"Emily, I'll be there, Neruda reassured her. I've already determined the event coordinates, the missing time will be explained with our standard illness



scenario, and you'll feel absolutely no ill effects. I'll personally see to it."

"Okay, okay," she said. "But isn't there a way to insert a different scenario other than an illness memory? Something like good sex?" she smiled seductively.

Neruda stood from his chair with a chuckle. "I'll see what I can do."

As they walked together to the Memory Restructure Procedure lab, Neruda had a strange sense of déjà vu. He knew this was Emily's third MRP. He wasn't sure how many he had had, but he assumed at least a half dozen. He handed Emily's file to David when they entered the prep room. Emily was immediately escorted to a private room and asked to sit in a comfortable chair with the back tilted at a 45° angle. Neruda watched from a glass window in the control room while David carried out the preparations. Emily seemed at ease and was joking with David, something Neruda marveled at, since David wasn't known for his sense of humor. After a few minutes of adjustments to the MRP headset, David joined Neruda in the control room. "What are the margin key words for today?" he asked.

“Central Race,” Neruda replied.

“And the time marks?”

“1420 hours and whenever you start the MRP,”  
Neruda said.

David donned his ZEMI interface and flicked the intercom switch. “Emily, we’re just about ready. Any questions?”

“Just be gentle,” she said with a snicker.

“One more minute,” David announced, closing his eyes to mentally access the command structure of the MRP program.

“You still there?” Emily called.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Neruda replied. “Don’t worry, David’s the best MRP operator we have.”

“I’m really very calm,” Emily said. “I’m surprised.”

Neruda knew that part of the prep was to release a relaxation inhalant in the room called Paratodolin. It was so subtle that most never suspected their state of



relaxation was artificially induced.

David opened his eyes for a moment reading all of the various monitoring data. “We’re good to go,” he said, turning to Neruda. His hand flicked the

intercom switch one last time. "Emily, we're ready to start. *Central Race*."

Emily immediately fell into an unconscious state. Her eyes moved wildly beneath closed eyelids, but otherwise her body seemed relaxed and comfortable.

"We're done," David said moments later.

Neruda flicked on a different intercom switch. "We have about five minutes to move her in position. Let's go."

Within ten seconds, two assistants entered the MRP room, removing Emily's headgear and easing her onto a sleek, stainless steel gurney. David looked on, his face unperturbed. "The seamless activation phrase is, 'Emily, are you okay?'"

"Thanks for everything, David. I really appreciate your help," Neruda said.

"It's no problem."

The assistants wheeled Emily to an examining room inside the health office through a secret hallway that connected the two departments. Neruda followed.

Once inside the examining room, Emily was moved to an examining table, and Dr. Stevens appeared. "This is scenario seven, correct?"

"Correct," Neruda said, shaking his hand.

"And she's never had this scenario before?"

"Correct."

"All the watches have been set back twenty minutes?"

"Shit, I forgot my own," Neruda said. He quickly set his watch back accordingly.

"Are you ready, then?" Dr. Stevens asked.

"I'm ready."

"On your word."

Neruda took Emily's hand in his and looked down at her expressionless face. "Emily, are you okay?"

Her eyes opened, blinking in rapid succession. "What happened?"

"You fainted," Neruda replied.

"How... why... why did I faint?"

Dr. Stevens stepped forward, peering over Neruda's right shoulder. "Emily, your blood sugar level is alarmingly low. I think it's why you fainted. How's your diet been the past few weeks?"

"My diet?"

"Yes?"

"Normal... I think," she said, trying to get up. Neruda helped her sit up. She rubbed her eyes. "I feel so groggy... like I need about another two hours of sleep."

“That’s normal for your condition,” Stevens said.  
“Have you ever suffered from hypoglycemia before?”  
“I don’t think I’ve ever fainted before in my life,” she said.

“No, I mean have you ever been diagnosed with hypoglycemia? It doesn’t show up in your medical records.”

“No,” she replied, still trying to regain her composure.

“Emily, can you try standing?” Dr. Stevens asked. “It may help to move around a bit.”

Neruda helped her off the examining table, and she leaned against him for stability for a few moments, then walked around the room on her own for a few seconds, returning to the table next to Neruda. “I feel better.” She glanced at her watch, “How long was I out?”

“A short time, but you were really out cold,” Neruda said. “We were just lucky that Dr. Stevens was in on a Saturday.”

“Thank you,” Emily said, looking to Stevens.

“You’re very welcome, Emily,” he replied. “I’d like you to take a few of these tablets twice daily over the next four days. They’ll help you to stabilize your blood sugar

levels. Also, eat lots of fruit—apples, pears, grapes, that sort of thing. Okay?”

“You got it,” she said, taking the small plastic container of pills.

She and Neruda walked slowly out of the health office. “I vaguely remember you called me into the office, on some emergency. What was it?” she asked.

Neruda stopped dead in his tracks. His face began to light up like a child just before opening a birthday present. “I think I found the access point of the optical disc!”

“You’re kidding,” she said. “What is it?”

“Each of the chamber paintings has a master symbol. I asked David if he could replicate the symbols in a three-dimensional hologram and input them into the optical disc when it reached its optimal resonance, in the exact same order as the chambers.”

“And?”

“We have, as of this morning at 1100 hours, over two thousand pages that have been printed out!”

Emily gave him a big hug and then quickly pulled away. “Wow, what incredible news! What’s the format?”

“Mostly hieroglyphs, some star charts, digital artifacts that we can’t begin to make sense of, and a sense that

the information is organized in the same structure as the chambers, namely twenty-three sections, but we won't know that for sure until we've finished printing. And that'll take another few hours we think."

They began walking again. "Let's go and check on the print-outs. I want to see what they look like. Okay?" Emily asked.

"I was already on my way when you fainted," Neruda grinned. "Do you think you can manage to stay conscious this time?"

"Very funny," she said, a smile curling around her mouth. "By the way, did you actually carry me all the way to the health office?"

"I'm not incapable of heavy lifting, you know," Neruda replied. "Not that you're heavy, mind you."

"Careful," Emily warned. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

"I'm just glad you're okay," he said.

The two walked side-by-side to the Computer Analysis Lab.





## Chapter Thirteen

### DISSONANCE

*Evolution in the material universe has provided you with a life vehicle, your human body. First Source has endowed your body with the purest fragment of ITS reality, your wholeness navigator. It is the mysterious fragment of First Source that acts like the pilot light of the human soul—fusing the mortal and eternal aspects. Can you fathom what it means to have a fragment of the Absolute Source indwelling within your very nature? Can you imagine your destiny when you fuse with an actual fragment of the First Source of the Grand Universe? No limit can be placed upon your powers of Selfhood or your eternal possibility.*

An Excerpt from *The Function of the Wholeness Navigator*, Chamber 15

**WingMakers**



Neruda, Andrews, and Emily had just finished their second pot of coffee. It was a few minutes after midnight, and the day's events had left them wired, even more than the caffeine. They had spent the last few hours analyzing the printouts from the optical disc—



8,045 pages in total—and were now convinced that they had found the mother lode.

“Hey, bossman,” Andrews said, “does Fifteen know what we’ve found here?”

“He knows,” Neruda replied.

“So where is he?”

“He had meetings all day. He’s also aware that I’ll brief him Monday morning.”

“Shit, man,” Andrews said, “if I ran this place, I’d be here.”

“If you ran the place, we’d all be designing James Bond’s techno toys,” Emily quipped.

Andrews grunted in disagreement.

“David, I know it’s late,” Neruda said, turning to the monitor, “but could you try one last time to discern any repetitions in the text that could be construed as a section heading or title?”

“Using what criteria?” David asked.

“Let’s try repeating glyph strings of up to thirty signs that repeat twenty-three or twenty-four times over the course of the text, and have a similar number of characters before and/or after them.”

“Done.”

A moment later David's voice came over the intercom. "We've identified something that meets that criteria. There're twenty-four repetitions and the sign-strings vary from four to twelve characters. It'll be onscreen in just a moment. Hold, please."

Neruda grinned and turned to Andrews. "We may have just found our first clue to their language structure."

The computer monitor flickered for a moment, and then text began to scroll over the screen.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS: THESE SIGNS REPRESENT FULL WRITING, AND ARE NOT PICTOGRAPHIC IN NATURE. THERE ARE A TOTAL OF 46 UNIQUE SIGNS, AND 49,721 UNIQUE SIGN-STRINGS, PRESUMABLY WORDS. VARIATIONS SEEM LIMITED TO 210 SIGN-STRINGS.

THE 24 SIGN STRINGS THAT YOU SPECIFIED HAVE—WITHIN A SEVEN-PERCENT MARGIN—100,000 SIGN-STRINGS EITHER BEFORE AND/OR AFTER THEIR APPEARANCE. THIS DENOTES A STRUCTURE WITH HIGH PROBABLE COMPLIANCE TO THE 24 INDEX TRACKS FOUND ON THE OPTICAL DISC.

A LIST OF THESE 24 SIGN-STRINGS FOLLOWS WITH PAGE MARKERS. PROBABILITY IS 97.6% THAT THESE 24 SIGN-STRINGS

ARE THE EQUIVALENT OF SECTION HEADINGS RELATED TO THE INDEX TRACKS.

THE MASTER SYMBOLS CONTAINED IN THE PAINTINGS, USED TO ACCESS THE OPTICAL DISC, ARE NOT REPLICATED IN THIS TEXT. THEREFORE, IT IS PROBABLE THAT THIS LANGUAGE STRUCTURE USES BOTH PICTOGRAPHS AND FULL WRITING IN SOME INTERACTIVE RELATIONSHIP. THIS RELATIONSHIP SHOULD BE FURTHER STUDIED. IT MAY BE THE KEY TO DECIPHERING THE TEXT. END.

Neruda finished reading before the others. "Thanks, David. Hold one second."

He turned to Andrews and Emily who were still reading from the screen. "I need you to leave for a few minutes."

"Now?" Andrews asked. "I'm not finished reading."

Neruda nodded.

"Should we start a fresh pot of coffee?"

"I think we're done for the night," Neruda said.

"Okay, then, we'll see you in the morning," Emily said, standing to her feet and stretching her arms and legs. "Don't stay up too late. It's almost midnight."

"It's twenty after," Andrews said.

Emily glanced at Neruda, who nodded.

Emily looked at her watch again, thumping it a few times on its crystal. "Must be time for a new battery."

"Rolex is so overrated," Andrews said.

"As much as I like Mickey Mouse," Emily sighed, "I have a hard time trusting a cartoon character for my time."

"Hey, don't knock'um, at least *my* watch works."

"Goodnight," Neruda said in the unmistakable tone of a parent reminding their children to go to bed.

"We're out of here," Andrews said. "I can tell when we're not wanted."

Emily looked over her back and waved. "Goodnight."

Andrews and Emily left the room without another word. As the door closed behind them, Neruda flicked on the intercom. "Have you done any comparative analysis, with the thirteen-digit number Samantha picked up in our last RV session, against this text?"

"No."

"Can you indulge me one last time?"

"Sure," David said. "Analysis is coming online."

Neruda glanced at the display of text as it scrolled across the monitor screen.

ANALYSIS: EACH SIGN IN THE THIRTEEN-DIGIT SIGN-STRING IS REPLICATED IN THE TEXT (DETAILED ANALYSIS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST). THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE IN THE TEXT WHERE IT IS REPRESENTED IN EXACTLY THE SAME ORDER, PAGE 121, LINE EIGHT.

INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS (34.3% CERTAINTY): IF THIS NUMBER DOES REPRESENT THE SERIAL NUMBER OF PLANET EARTH, IT IS LOGICAL THAT IT WOULD BE CONTAINED IN THE FRONT SECTION OF THE TEXT. IT IS PROBABLE THAT THIS SECTION DESCRIBES THE COSMOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CENTRAL RACE'S BELIEF SYSTEM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTH AND HUMANITY. END.

"David, cross-check the numbers against the twenty-four sign-strings. Let's see what the overlap is," Neruda requested.

"Do you want redundancies filtered?"

"Yes."

"Analysis complete," David said.

"Should be on the monitor momentarily."



ANALYSIS: THERE ARE ELEVEN NUMBERS FROM THE THIRTEEN-DIGIT SIGN-STRING THAT MATCH THE 24 SIGN-STRINGS FROM THE TEXT, PRESUMED TO BE SECTION HEADINGS. ASSUMING THAT

THEIR NUMBER SYSTEM IS HOMOLOGOUS TO OURS, AND BASED ON THE SEQUENCE OF THE THIRTEEN-DIGIT SIGN STRING, THE SERIAL NUMBER OF OUR PLANET—ACCORDING TO THE CENTRAL RACE—IS 5,342,482,337,666. END.

Neruda collected his thoughts with a long, drawn-out sigh. His mouth formed the number again, silently.

“David, ask ZEMI what the serial number means.”

“Understood.”

The screen scrolled a single line of new text.

ANALYSIS: THERE ARE AT LEAST 5,342,482,337,666 INHABITED AND/OR POTENTIALLY INHABITABLE PLANETS IN THE UNIVERSE. END.

“David, I’d like an interpretative analysis even if it’s below ten-percent certainty levels,” Neruda announced.

“Onscreen,” David replied.

INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS (8.5% CERTAINTY): ACCORDING TO OUR OWN DATA, THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 1.2 TRILLION INHABITABLE PLANETS WITHIN THE UNIVERSE. HOWEVER, THAT ASSUMES THAT THE UNIVERSE IS SINGULAR. IF EARTH IS PLANET NUMBER 5,342,482,337,666 THEN IT SUGGESTS THAT THERE

ARE MULTIPLE UNIVERSES AS PROPOSED BY THE CORTEUM IN THEIR MANIFESTO, LIMINAL COSMOGONY. END.

“Just when you thought you had everything figured out,” Neruda whispered to himself. “David, I’ll put together some decipherment strategies and send them to you tomorrow morning around 1100 hours. For now, let’s call it a night.”

“Agreed,” David replied. “Signing off, then. Have a good night.”

“You, too.”

Neruda electronically pasted the analyses from ZEMI to his personal, knowledge-management system, and then tidied up the office area, knowing that Fifteen might wander by in the morning before he got in.

He picked up a section of the text—presumably the first section, which he assumed was a good place to start the deciphering process. He packed the 341 pages of alien script into his briefcase, waved at the security camera, and turned off the lights. His legs ached from sitting all day and it felt good to be walking, even in the sterile corridors of the lab.

\* \* \* \*

Monday morning Neruda was preparing for his briefing meeting with Fifteen. A knock on his door distracted him.

"Yes?" he said.

The door swung open and Donavin invited himself in. "I can see you were expecting someone else."

"Actually, I wasn't expecting anyone at this hour," Neruda said. "What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you'd return my questionnaire," he replied. "Completed of course."

Neruda motioned him to a chair. "Can I get you anything to drink? Some coffee or a soda?"

"Coffee would be good," Donavin answered, his voice warming a bit.

Neruda opened his thermos and poured a cup of coffee into a Styrofoam cup, handing it to Donavin. "I tend to make my morning java a little strong. My apologies."

"Don't worry," Donavin said, "I could use a good jolt this morning." He took a sip and winced. "I see what you mean. Yikes, how do you stand it?"

"Years of practice. And growing up Bolivian," Neruda said, smiling. "How's your project progressing so far?"



“Great, except for one thing. No one’s ever around to talk with,” Donavin lamented. “Don’t you guys ever just sit and chew the fat?”

“We’re understaffed, Mr. McAlester—”

“Please, call me Donavin,” he interrupted.

“As you wish. But we are,” Neruda continued, “we’re terribly understaffed and have no time for the pleasantries of a normal office environment. Unfortunately, this must appear to you as if we’re avoiding you, but I assure you, we’re not. It’s just a question of priority.”

“Isn’t everything,” Donavin said, more as a statement than a question.

Neruda smiled. “You want your questionnaire, and you want it today. Right?”

Donavin smiled in return, nodding.

Neruda unlocked a drawer in his desk and pulled out a file folder. “Here’s your questionnaire, completely filled out.”

Donavin couldn’t hide his amazement. “Thanks. I’m a little surprised.” He thumbed through the pages quickly, noticing the level of detail in the answers. “This looks great.”

“Was there anything else?” Neruda inquired.

"No, no, I think that was the main thing," he said.  
"Can I take a look at this and get back to you later, just in case something isn't clear to me?"

"Of course."

"Great," Donavin said standing to his feet and taking one last sip of coffee. "But next time, the coffee's on me."

Donavin stopped. "By the way, is Evans back in the office today?"

"I believe so," Neruda said.

"He's harder to catch than you are," Donavin said, closing the door behind him.

Neruda smiled to himself, knowing his responses to the questionnaire would undoubtedly fester in Donavin's mind, and a return visit was certain.

\* \* \* \*

"You've seen these?" Li-Ching said as she placed the transcripts on Fifteen's desk, his office door clicking shut behind her.

"One of the perks of having complete access to ZEMI and the knowledge network," he replied. "Why, is there something wrong?"

“You know I’m just playing with him,” she said.

“Naturally.”

“He means absolutely nothing to me,” Li-Ching said, “I’m just trying to keep him preoccupied with the travails of an office romance. You even suggested it, remember?”

“Do I detect guilt,” Fifteen said. “Or are you angry that I take an interest in your affairs?”

“Neither!” she said. “I don’t like the insinuation that I’m doing this for any other reason than to protect you!”

Fifteen leaned back in his chair and removed his reading glasses. His desk was scattered with a variety of newspapers including The New York Times, London Times, and The Wall Street Journal. Dressed in a navy blue suit with a satin, white pinpoint shirt, and yellow tie with pastel accent colors, his normally commanding presence was amplified.

“Let’s both calm down,” he said. “I haven’t accused you of anything, nor, as best I can tell, have you done anything worthy of an accusation. Let’s start with these assumptions.”

He started to clear his desk of the newspapers, stacking them as if he had just noticed the untidy state of his office.

Li-Ching sat down and crossed her legs and then her arms. Her lips were pursed as if she were holding back a torrent of expletives.

“Good, now that we’ve both calmed down,” Fifteen said, “let’s try to sort this out. You’re angry because I reviewed the transcripts of Donavin’s recent... exploits—”

“No! I’m mad because you insinuate that I’ve chosen this course of action because I have real feelings for him. And you damn well know that I don’t.”

“And how have I insinuated any such thing?”

“You reviewed the PM transcripts using keywords that clearly indicate a lack of trust.”

“And how do you know this?”

“I’m the Director of Communication, have you forgotten?”

Fifteen made a mental note to delete the digital signature requirement to review PM transcripts via key word search. At least for him. “Okay, let’s assume what you say is true—”

“No, let’s admit that it is.”

“Okay, I admit that I reviewed the transcripts, and yes, I did use key words that could be construed as

untrusting. But in my defense, I'm not comfortable with Donavin. He could be more troublesome than we think."

"I love the way you can rationalize your irrational actions," she said. "You're not worried about Donavin any more than I am. You just want to spy on me to make sure that I'm not swept away by his rugged good looks and obvious physical charms."

"You find him physically attractive?"

"That's not the point!" Li-Ching said, almost screaming.

"Then what is the point?"

"Your lack of trust in my judgment," she said, softening her voice.

He stood from his chair and sat down next to Li-Ching, putting his arm around her shoulder. "My trust in you has never diminished, it's Donavin I don't trust." He raised his hand to his lips as Li-Ching started to speak, silencing her. "And it's not a rationalization. It's just that I care deeply about you and want to make sure that you're okay."

Li-Ching's pupils were like black holes absorbing light. "That's all this is?" she finally managed to ask. "You want me to believe that that's all this is about?"

"Yes," Fifteen replied.

"You trust me completely? Even if I choose to continue this trumped up affair with Donavin?"

"Yes."

"And do you want me to continue to seduce him and then push him away?"

"If that's what you want," Fifteen said. "It's probably the best way to keep him distracted. I know it'd work on me."

"You want to be distracted?" she said, her tone seductive.

"I already am."

"Good."

They began to kiss one another passionately just as a knock on the door interrupted. "Who is it?" Fifteen asked curtly.

"It's Jamisson," said the muffled voice from behind the door. "We had a meeting scheduled."

"One moment," Fifteen shouted, standing to his feet. He lowered his voice and turned to Li-Ching. "If you like, you can stay and hear his report."

"That's okay, I saw your e-mail this morning. Sounds like we have a whole new project on our hands. Are you going to leave Neruda in charge of it?"

“For now,” Fifteen answered. “He’s doing an exemplary job.”

“You know that Whitman wants this project under him in the worst way. Expect to be lobbied hard, especially now that we’ve opened up the disc.”

“Let’s just hope we didn’t open Pandora’s Box,” Fifteen said as he escorted her to the door. With his hand on the doorknob, he kissed her again.

As she pulled away, her thumb wiped across his bottom lip. “Are you too busy tonight with Echelon, or can you spare some time with me? I’ll be home all night. Alone.”

“Alone? I hardly think so,” Fifteen whispered.

\* \* \* \*

“How’d your briefing go with Fifteen?” Emily asked.

“It went well,” Neruda answered, joining Emily, Andrews, Samantha, and Collin in the Hylo Conference Room for their ritual project meeting. David was also present—on the monitor screen—tethered as always to ZEMI.

“Any changes to plan?” Emily asked.

"The good news, is that he's very impressed with our progress," Neruda said, pouring himself a glass of water. "A sign that he trusts our team's resourcefulness."

"And the bad news?" Andrews said.

"He changed the security level of the project to SL-Twelve."

"Shit," Andrews exclaimed. "So you and David get all the fun and glory."

"Why?" Samantha asked. "Why'd he decide this?"

"Let me finish my explanation," Neruda said, trying his best to look optimistic. "Everyone will be amply rewarded for their work to date, which will include a fifty-thousand-dollar bonus, and a promotion, one level up, Samantha being the only exception since she's already received her promotion.

"Fifteen's also granted that each of you can take next week off so you have an opportunity to spend and enjoy your bonus."

"That's great," Samantha said, "but what happened that required us to be pulled off the project?"



"He can't tell us," Andrews interrupted. "Give it up. It's time to take the money



and run, unless you wanna visit the MRP lab.”

Neruda sat down. He was dressed in khaki pants and a denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up just beneath his elbows. He looked well rested, but a little jittery—a combination of the caffeine and having to deliver bad news to his project team. He raked his hand through his straight, black hair. “I know you’re disappointed. So am I, but Fifteen feels very strongly that this is in the best interests of the ACIO and each of you individually.”

“Now what?” Emily asked.

“You’ll each get new assignments after you return from your vacation,” Neruda said.

“And in the meantime?” Collin asked.

“In the meantime, you’ll be involved in organizing the existing database for the project.”

“Geez, it looks like I finally got my wish,” Andrews said. “A nine-to-five job.”

“You mean semi-retirement,” Collin chimed in.

“It’s not so bad,” Neruda said. “You’ll have some downtime, relax. It’s not the worst thing that could happen.”

“Are we going to have to undergo MRP regarding our involvement to date?” Emily said.

“No MRP will be required,” Neruda replied.

Relief could be seen on the faces of the team.

“Your bonus was transferred to your accounts this morning,” Neruda said. “I’m sorry the four of you can’t remain on the project. I’m truly sorry. Li-Ching and Evans will handle security dispositions. They’ve scheduled a meeting at 1400 hours in the Literati Room. Should only take an hour, afterwards you can take the rest of the day off and get your heads clear. Any other questions?”

“Will we get updates on the project?”

“According to your security level, yes, you’ll get weekly updates.”

A knock on the door startled the group, and Fifteen entered with a grave, but friendly look on his face. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, “but I wanted to convey my appreciation for your hard work on this project, and extend my personal thanks for all your contributions.”

Everyone smiled in return of his praise.

“One thing you can all be assured of is that the directors and I will do everything in our power to provide you with rewarding assignments when you return from your vacations. We have several exciting projects that are ready to commence, and you can be involved at the ground level.”

He stopped, looked around the table, assessing each person individually. "I hope you enjoy your well-earned break and return rested and ready for a new project."

Neruda wanted to read Fifteen's eyes, but he was too self-conscious to look. Instead, he kept his eyes focused on his hands before him on the table. He was anxious for Fifteen to leave. "Thank you for stopping by, sir."

A chorus of thanks joined Neruda's, and Fifteen left without another word.

"If there're no further questions, I think we're adjourned here," Neruda said, standing to his feet. "Oh, David, if you could stay a while, I have a few things I need to go over with you."

"No problem," David replied.

The rest of the team picked up their papers and notebooks and filed out of the conference room. The mood was mixed, half-elated and half-depressed. No one wanted off the project, but they understood that Fifteen must have reasons. Good reasons. Everyone within the ACIO respected his intellect and judgment.

Neruda waited for the door to close shut. "David, I have some decipherment strategies that Fifteen and I talked about this morning. I'd like you to try these this

afternoon if you can and let me know what you find.  
Okay?”

“Okay.”

“First, let’s take their numbering system and apply it across all of the text—”

“Actually,” David said, “we did that this morning already.”

“Good. What’s the numeric density across all the text?”

“Fractional, if you want an exact number, I can get it for you in a moment—”

“No, it’s okay,” Neruda said, “I’m actually more interested in applying the chamber and ETC-site glyphs to the text. I know the master symbols aren’t replicated, but what about the others? Have you done any analysis yet in this area?”

“No.”



“Let’s get that done. Also, several of the technology artifacts have glyphs on their body—including the homing device that blew up. All of these glyphs are recorded in file number AAP-787990A.

I’d like ZEMI to include these in the analysis.”

“Understood,” David replied. “Anything else?”

“We have a parent-language archive in the morphology database, file number AAP-1290B. I’d like an exhaustive, comparative analysis performed against this database. Use a ten-percent variant margin to sort matches.”

“Understood.”

“One last thing,” Neruda said. “I was looking through the first section of the text last night. Have you made a note of the digital artifacts that came off the printer?”

“Yes, they’re very odd.”

“Are they actually artifacts or a separate language structure?” Neruda asked.

“We did our standard quality tests on other printers and replicated the results precisely every time. They’re not, technically speaking, digital artifacts, though they sure look like it.

“What does ZEMI make of it?”

“We think it’s a different language structure.”

“Mathematics?” Neruda asked.

“We have no way of knowing at this time.

Mathematics, music, and geometry are at the top of our list, but it’s impossible to be any more definitive.”

“We need to include these in our language analysis process. The morphology database includes abbreviated

music and mathematics tables. I trust that you can locate them.”

“We already did,” David said with a not too subtle grin on his face.

“Great,” Neruda said. “That’s all for now, David. Thanks for your help on this. Oh, and I assume you’ll contact me as soon as you have the analysis. Any time estimates?”

“I’ll have something for you this afternoon.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” David said.

The monitor screen returned to its normal, blackish-green color, and Neruda suddenly felt very alone in the conference room. He gathered his papers and tidied up the room a bit.

As he left the conference room, he steered a course by Fifteen’s office, hoping that the sunroom wasn’t being used for a private meeting. He needed to fill his eyes with the sights of something natural, something curved by the hand of a creator he was all too anxious to find.

\* \* \* \*

“Why are you whispering?” Samantha asked softly.

“It’s prudent,” Neruda said. “We can take my car, and then I’ll drop you off later.”

“Okay, but I could follow you if you’d prefer.”

“No, that’s all right, I’d prefer to go in the same car so we can talk,” Neruda replied. “Evans will know anyway.”

Neruda and Samantha pushed through the double doors after waving goodnight to the security guards. It was early evening, and Neruda had a dull headache that didn’t seem to want to go away. Samantha had left him an urgent voice message earlier in the day, but he had been too busy to meet with her. The comparative analysis had come in from ZEMI, and the data had consumed his entire afternoon and part of his evening as well.

What had troubled him about the message was her tone of voice and the fact that she had found a document that used the term, *Central Race*.

They got into his Honda sedan, feeling oddly conspicuous as they drove through the security gate at the front entrance. An elderly guard named Curtis waved them on from his glass booth, but not before carefully scrutinizing Neruda’s passenger. Neruda had known Curtis for almost twenty years, but trust didn’t

come easy for Evans' security team, who were carefully cultivated to be paranoid. In the worst way.

Once they got past the final security check—a dozen, secret video cameras installed inside a metal arch that overhung the entrance to the compound—Neruda visibly relaxed. “So what’s the document you found?”

“I’ve had an MRP, haven’t I?” she stated, ignoring his question.

Neruda took a quick glance at her face and then returned his attention to the road. He hated to lie.

“What makes you think you’ve had an MRP?”

“Please, just answer my question truthfully,” she pleaded.

Samantha’s red hair was accented by the red glow of the setting sun. She was dressed in a sleeveless, white cotton dress cut just below her knees, and trimmed in iridescent turquoise.

Neruda glanced regularly in his rearview mirror; his paranoia bubbling to the surface of his mind for reasons he couldn’t pin down. He blamed it on his concentration, which was waning because of his headache and the ups and downs of the workday.

He forced himself to look relaxed and sound casual, preparing to answer her questions exactly how he had



been trained. "If I answer your question... truthfully, I might compromise project security. It would be a blemish on both our records, and could require serious remedies."

He turned to look at her eyes to see what effect his words were having. Her eyes were closed.

"When I was recruited to this place," she said, "one of the things Branson assured me was that I'd never have to worry about anyone misusing or abusing my special abilities. Ethical dilemmas—should they ever arise—would be sorted out with my involvement and cooperation."

She opened her eyes and stared at Neruda. "Someone's lying to me. I was taken off of this project for reasons I don't fully understand," she paused, her hands trembling slightly. "I *know* I was given an MRP."



"What exactly leads you to that conclusion?" Neruda asked.

She sighed at his evasion. "This afternoon I was organizing some of my project notes. In the margins of my project book, I found scribbled—in my handwriting—the phrase; *it was the Central Race who were the creators of the seven ETC sites.*

Neruda felt an adrenaline shot to his gut. He mentally scrambled to recover. "Samantha, maybe you're just reacting to something you wrote as speculation—"

"Speculation?" she exclaimed. "I've never heard of the term Central Race, nor was I aware that there were *seven* ETC sites! How can this be speculation?"

Neruda remained silent, his eyes glued to the staccato white line that divided the gray, endless road.

"There's more," she said, her voice softening. "After reading this, I immediately had an image form in my mind of three beings. The image triggered something... fragments of an RV session that I had with you, Branson, and Fifteen. They're jumbled images to be sure, but I remember enough to know that I interacted with this race. Didn't I?"

Neruda was cornered. He suddenly turned off the two-lane county road onto a gravel road he'd never been on before.

"Where're we going?" Samantha asked, alarm showing in her voice.

"I need to get out of the car," he replied. "I need to feel the sky. I've been cooped up in the office too long."

She nodded with understanding.

Two miles down the gravel road, they came to a washed out gully where Neruda pulled the car over and turned the engine off. "Let's take a walk."

The air held the faint aroma of pine needles from some nearby trees, which hid them from the setting sun. They followed the dry riverbed as their walking path, the setting sun at their back.

Neruda kept his eyes straight ahead, glancing occasionally to the sky in search of emerging stars in the growing twilight. Venus was already casting her silver charms.

"What I said before," Neruda admitted, "wasn't exactly the truth, but I... no, we, have a real dilemma." He stooped to pick up a stone that had caught his eye, tossing it back down after a quick look. "You've stumbled upon the very thing that caused you to have an MRP and be removed from the project."

"What's so secretive about the Central Race or the fact that there're seven ETC sites?" she asked.

Neruda stopped. "I'm not sure how to answer you, Samantha. There's a part of me that sympathizes with you, and wants to tell you everything. But there's also this rational side of me that knows protocol and knows I should follow it."

“And what *is* protocol in this situation?”

Neruda knew he was talking with the best RV within the ACIO, perhaps since RVs were first used 22 years ago. He either had to openly bullshit his way through the situation, or tell the truth. He chose the latter. An indelible instinct from somewhere deep inside told him to protect his credibility. “I’m supposed to sympathize with you, while at the same time deny your claim based on the probable implausibility of the given situation.”

“Sounds like something Evans would write,” Samantha said, her quiet sarcasm belying her feeling of total helplessness.

Neruda chuckled to himself, glad that for the first time in a long while he was following his instincts and not his training.

“So who’s the Central Race and why’s their identity so protected by Fifteen?” Samantha asked.

“I know you want to know, but you need to be clear about the consequence of this knowledge.”

“Which is?”

“Fifteen has ordered that no one under SL-Twelve know of the Central Race and its creation of the seven ETC sites. If you have this information, you’ll be subject to another MRP, and this time he’ll probably be inclined

to extract your memory of the entire project. I can't, in good conscience, let you have this knowledge and not tell Fifteen."

"I understand," Samantha said, "but maybe we could convince Fifteen that I'm an asset to the project instead of a liability."

"We could try," Neruda said. "But I have to tell you, Samantha, it's a slim possibility that he could be convinced of such a thing unless we had a watertight rationale. Do you have something in mind?"

"I don't know enough of the story," Samantha replied. "Tell me."

"Are you willing to risk a radical memory replacement of eighteen days?"

"It's my only real option... I mean... I *have* to know. It's just the way I'm wired," she said.

"You're quite certain?"

"I'm quite certain," she said, her voice firm.

"This procedure can have residual effects ranging from mild paranoia to fugal depression, which are usually temporary, but can last for months, even years in some sensitive types."

"And you're implying I'm a sensitive type, aren't you?" Samantha said with a hint of bitterness.

“I just want to make sure that you’re aware of the consequences of what you’re asking.” He quickly glanced back at his car. His paranoia was as high as it had been for nearly a decade. “Right now, this very instant, it’s quite probable that Evans or Jenkins are aware that we’re having this meeting out in the middle of nowhere. Given who you are and the fact that you underwent an MRP yesterday, they’d assume that we’re discussing your situation. I’ll have to file a report in the morning and you’ll fall under Fifteen’s scrutiny.”

“If you’re trying to make me nervous,” Samantha said, “you’re succeeding in spades.”

Neruda saw a large rock outcropping. “Let’s sit down over there so we can talk.”

They walked to a group of stones that looked like bones of earth bleached white from the desert sun, and sat on opposing boulders, the size of small cars. Neruda faced the final remnants of the setting sun, his dark skin saturated in the blood-red glow that bathed the western sky.

“You know this is an all-or-nothing situation?”

“Yes.”

“I tell you all, and if Fifteen decides you retain nothing, you willingly submit to a radical MRP.” Neruda paused, looking deep into her eyes. “I have your word?”

“You have my word.”

“Okay,” he said, shifting his legs to find a more comfortable position. He took a deep breath. “We’ve had two RV sessions within the last week. In both instances, you were probed by representatives of the Central Race.”

Samantha began to interrupt, but Neruda held up his hand to silence her. “The Central Race is the most ancient of all races, their evolutionary timeline being something on the order of twelve billion years. They’re



considered by the Corteum to be the Creator Gods of all beings in the universe—”

“They’re our gods?” her voice quivered.

“No one knows exactly who they are,” he replied. “There’re a few ancient scripts that refer to them. The Sumerian, Mayan, and Dogon cultures all had interactions with these beings that were recorded. We have the original texts in our database, and there’re a

few contemporary, channeled manuscripts that refer to them as well.

“But the Central Race has never been described in detail because no one really understands their unique consciousness, way of life, and culture, except presumably *their* creator. They are truly mythic beings. And, yes, they are, according to the Corteum, our gods—at least as it pertains to our physical bodies and minds.”

“So what happened to God? *The God?*” Samantha asked.

“The Central Race was created by God as the original humanoid soul carriers. They could be likened to the first version of humanity, who ultimately evolved into the elder race that engineered and refined the DNA of higher life forms or soul carriers. God endowed a fragment of itself into this genetically engineered soul carrier or what we call the physical body; so, you could say it was a joint venture between God and the Central Race. Again, this is according to the Corteum, who seem to have more insight into this race than any other source that we’ve found.”



“Okay, for the moment,” she said, “I’ll go along with you as to the identity of the Central Race, but why is it such a big problem that I know about this?”

“I’m only relating the background story,” Neruda replied. “The real issue is that the Central Race created the ETC sites, which *are* seven in number, to defend the planet against an ancient enemy of theirs that’s prophesied to visit Earth in 2011 and take it over.”

“You mean literally?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m still with you,” she said. “When do we get to the part that I shouldn’t know about? Because I’ve heard about a dozen doom and gloom prophecies for the turn of the millennium.”

Neruda smiled. “Globally, there’s not a lot of attention paid to these prophecies of Armageddon and the rise of the Antichrist. The real story’s a little too graphic and frightening to convey to the public, but watered down versions are allowed to circulate. And with them the persistent belief that religious prophecy has no real relevance or bearing in today’s society.”

He paused and swallowed hard. “But the prophecies that we have access to convey a tragic and overwhelming take-over of Earth by a race of synthetic

beings from outside our galaxy. We now have confirmation from the ETC site that this galaxy is M51, some thirty-seven million light years away."

"How's that possible?" Samantha asked. "I mean, even traveling at the speed of light, it'd take them thirty-seven million years to get here."

"They're synthetics from an ancient race of beings, not associated with our human genotype," he said.

"That's all we know. Even the Corteum haven't encountered them nor anyone who ever has."

"Have we RV'd them?"

"Yes, many times."

"And?"

"I can't tell you," Neruda replied. "But Fifteen's convinced the threat is real and that they have the technology to travel inter-galactically."

"You said you'd tell me all," she reminded him.

"You shouldn't take me literally. I only meant I'd tell you all of what you need to know relative to the Central Race and why you were taken off the project and subjected to an MRP."

Her face wrinkled in frustration.

The sun was now completely below the horizon, and the stars were visible, their pinpricks of light, poignant reminders of the universe's enormous scale.

Samantha tucked her legs under her. She felt a little light-headed, as if she had just come out of a RV session. "So the Antichrist is a synthetic, soulless race from some other galaxy?"

"Yes."

Samantha shook her head from side-to-side and stared at the ground. She had wrapped her arms around her to fend off the chill that suddenly possessed her. Her hands were cold and she blew on them—her warm breath reminding her of her humanity.

"Okay, so back to my problem," she said. "Why was I taken off the project and given an MRP?"

"Fifteen felt that you had been probed by the Central Race, and he doesn't want them to know about our capabilities and objectives relative to the defense of the planet."

"You're telling me that the ACIO has a weapon to guard the planet against these... these synthetic aliens?"

"It's developing such a weapon or defensive system."

"What is it?"

“Again, I can’t tell you,” Neruda answered, aware of Samantha’s building frustration.

“Shit,” she whispered under her breath. “Can you at least answer my questions with a yes or no?”

“I’ll try.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, sorting through the order of her questions. “The Central Race designed seven ETC sites and installed them on Earth sometime in our distant past?”

“Yes.”

“And they intended these sites to be an integrated force to protect our planet?”

“Yes.”

“Earth is important to them because we have human DNA that is unique... or... or perhaps highly valued for some reason?”



“We’re not sure, but we think it has something to do with genetics. In one of your RV sessions, you referred to the Earth as a genetic reference library for this sector of our galaxy. We assume they’re protecting these libraries by installing a planetary defensive weapon.”

“So this weapon conflicts with the weapon that the ACIO is developing?”

"We don't know," Neruda said.

"But it might?"

"Yes."

She stopped and gathered her thoughts.

"Representatives from the Central Race detected my presence during an RV session and probed me?"

"Yes."

"Fifteen fears that they'll find out about our weapon... that they're in a position to prevent us from using it?"

"Something like that," he replied.

"That's it! That's it, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "Fifteen doesn't want any of us below SL-Twelve or Thirteen to know of the Central Race and the fact that they've installed a defensive weapon on Earth that competes with our own. Right?"

Neruda looked away and sighed.

"Right?" she asked again.

"That's part of it."

"And," she continued like Sherlock Holmes, "he doesn't want us to have any further RV sessions because he's afraid that the Central Race has the capability to intervene in the deployment of our own weapon."

“I’m not sure that I’d use the word afraid. I’ve never known Fifteen to be fearful. I think he’s more concerned that the Central Race wouldn’t like our choice of weaponry.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Because our weapon is so powerful that it could destroy the planet?” she asked.

“In a manner of speaking, but it’s a completely defensive weapon as Fifteen envisions it.”

“Shit,” she said in a whispered voice.

Samantha stood to stretch her legs and arms. Her head arched back to look at the sky. “I’m in over my head,” she said.

“Maybe we all are,” Neruda said. “We’re not infallible in our approach, Samantha, but the ACIO has the best technology on the planet and is quite literally the only organization with knowledge of the 2011 invasion. If anyone is to stop this takeover, it will be us.”

“I’d put my dollars on the Central Race, if they are who you say they are. How could we hope to have a more advanced defensive technology than the beings that... that created us?”

“It’s not that our technology is more advanced than what the Central Race has because we assume they have this capability as well. It’s that the Central Race, at least in Fifteen’s opinion, wouldn’t place this technology on the planet to be discovered by humans, especially if their ancient enemy could somehow secure it.”

“Then wouldn’t it make sense that they’d do this for a good reason?”

“No,” Neruda replied. “It’s assumed that they’d restrict the use of this technology without knowing that the ACIO is in a position to properly utilize it and secure it.”

“So, we have this weapon at our disposal right now?”

“No.”

She stopped, and sat back down. “Everything you’ve told me is all based on assumption. For all you know, the seven ETC sites are exactly what we’re trying to build. And for all you know, the Central Race would protect its genetic library with its best defensive weapon.”

“Samantha, you must know that I can’t tell you all the reasons for our assumptions,” Neruda said. “Believe me,

we arrived at these conclusions by a thorough analysis given the available information.”

“Then why doesn’t Fifteen desire to interact with the Central Race? What’s he afraid of? That they’ll dismantle his incomplete and unproven technology?”

“Fifteen is a visionary far beyond what the world has ever seen before,” Neruda confided. “He was planning this technology before you were born. When most kids are worried about pimples, he was designing the blueprints of this system. At the time, he didn’t know anything about this impending alien invasion. He simply wanted to create this vision... to re-create time—”

Neruda stopped in mid-sentence, aware that he had said too much.

“So that’s what this technology is about.” Samantha interrupted. “Time travel.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why? I’m going to have this memory cleared anyway,” she argued.

“I’ve said enough.”

“Great! Now what do we do? I’m caught in the crossfire of the ACIO’s secret weapon and the Central Race. How do I save myself? How do I convince Fifteen to spare my memory?”



The desert was morphing from heat to cold, light to dark, and sound to silence. As they paused momentarily, Neruda could hear the muffled and somewhat annoying ring of his cell phone in his car. Apart from that, silence honored the light jewels of the deep, blue-violet sky. Samantha shivered in the evening chill, standing with her back to him as if she were absorbed in the sanctity of something unobservable.

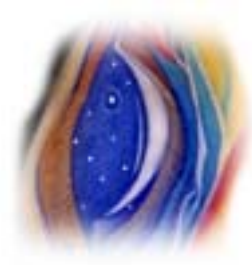
“Maybe we should be getting back,” he said.

“You have no ideas?” she pleaded, her voice struggling to find its normal tone.

“My mind is perfectly empty in this regard.”

Samantha nodded faintly, her eyes staring deep inside herself.

Neruda admired her more than he ever expected. He had never been that fond of RVs. They spooked him. Maybe his Mayan roots made him fear anything that seemed like magic or sorcery. But he could see that Samantha was authentic and vulnerable at the same time, traits he was attracted to, and this attraction wasn't easy to suppress. He felt a strong moral obligation to help, but he felt equally powerless to



protect her. In fact, he may have signed her expulsion papers, if not her death warrant.

“What do you think I should do?”

“I think we should go,” he answered. “Let’s meet again in the morning—before work—at this very same spot. 0700 hours. Maybe with fresh minds, we’ll be able to come up with something.”

“I’ll bring the coffee,” she offered.

“You’re from the Midwest, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll bring the coffee,” he smiled. “You bring the pastries. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They walked the hundred meters back to Neruda’s car and rode back to the compound in silence. They were both tired, and their minds reeled from the decision that awaited them only ten hours away.





## Chapter Fourteen

### REMINDERS

*When a species in the three-dimensional universe discovers irrefutable scientific proof of the multiverse and the innermost topology of the Wholeness Navigator, it impacts on every aspect of the species. It is the most profound shift of consciousness that can be foretold, and it is this event that triggers the Return of the Masters to explicit influence and exoteric roles.*

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

**WingMakers**



Evans opened his front door, startled to see Jenkins. "This better be good," he said as he walked away, leaving the door open and Jenkins standing at its threshold. "Yes, you can come in," Evans said over his shoulder.

Jenkins was a tall man, with a lanky build and wiry muscles that seemed ready to snap like a bear trap. He was widely regarded within the ACIO as the heir apparent to Evans, and for good reason. He was

extremely competent. His dark eyes always seemed to be searching for clues to a person's weakness or vulnerabilities, a trait that endeared him to Evans.

"I thought you should be aware of something. Can you open up PV?"

PV, or PansoVision, was the Security department's internal network, and was only accessible to SL-12 personnel through permission from both Evans and Fifteen. The only ACIO personnel who could use the system were the seven directors, Jenkins, and Fifteen.

"It's open, it's just on standby mode," Evans replied. He was in his robe, barefoot, and his hair was slicked back. "Can I get you anything?" he offered as he walked into his kitchen.

"No thanks," Jenkins replied. "I just wanted you to see this." Jenkins brought PV to operational mode and with a few keystrokes the monitor displayed a video picture of Neruda's profile in the driver's seat, next to him was Samantha. He clicked a button and freeze-framed the image. In the lower right corner was a date and time stamp.

Evans walked into the living room with a glass of white wine. "Are you sure?" he asked, lifting his glass.

"No, really, I'm fine, thanks," Jenkins answered.

“So what do we have here?” Evans asked, looking at the monitor for the first time.

“An anomaly,” Jenkins said. “Neruda and Samantha Folten left the office together a little past 1900 hours and drove to this site. A detailed photograph replaced the image of Neruda and Samantha. In the lower right corner was the phrase, *Archived EITS Photograph 091092: 1721 PST.*”

“EITS was out of range?” Evans asked.

“Yes, by only twenty minutes,” Jenkins replied. “He accessed our scheduling charts.”

“Or got lucky,” Evans remarked.

Jenkins hit a key and two red lines of code could be seen overlaying the satellite map. “They stopped here and talked for twelve minutes.”

“Romance?” Evans asked.

“Can’t say for sure, but the terrain was rocky and it was only twelve minutes.”

“Not a very likely location for a lovers’ tryst, then,” Evans said with a grin.

“Samantha had an MRP yesterday per Fifteen’s order,” Jenkins said. “Since she’s an RV, she may have had some memory bleed.”

“What’s the time-mark on their return?”

Jenkins hit a few keys and an image with Neruda and Samantha in the car displayed on the monitor, returning to the ACIO compound. "They were gone forty-two minutes."

"Current status?" Evans asked.

"They're both in their respective homes."

"Okay, we'll see what he does tomorrow," Evans said. "He knows we know. He's too smart."

"Do you want me to forward anything to Fifteen?" Jenkins asked.

"No, I'll handle it myself. I'm glad you brought it to my attention though. Keep me informed if there's any change. Let's switch to Theca Five for the next forty-eight hours, and watch these two as carefully as we can. He'll probably file a report in the morning and no harm done, but I want to make sure he knows we've turned up the heat, so let's leave no doubt."

"Her, too?"

"She wouldn't know the difference," Evans said.

"But she's an RV."

"Shit, I don't care, Jenkins. I was just trying to save you the time and effort. If you want to fuck with her head, too, be my guest."

"Okay, I'll be on my way," Jenkins said.

“Thanks, again.”

“You bet. Goodnight, then.”

Jenkins left the image of Neruda and Samantha—frozen in time like Bonnie and Clyde—on the monitor. Evans took one last look before putting his system on standby. He toasted his glass of wine, looking at the monitor screen. “Don’t blow it, man. We need you clean.”

\* \* \* \*

Samantha heard his footsteps before she saw him. Her heart jumped as he scaled the rock. “You scared the hell out of me!” she exclaimed.

“Sorry,” Neruda said, holding up his coffee thermos and two Styrofoam cups. “I wasn’t trying to scare you.”

“It’s okay, I’m just a little wound up.”

“Under these circumstances,” Neruda said, “you’d have to be tranquilized not to be wound up. My morning brew should relax your jangled nerves.”

“I’ve heard about your morning brew,” she laughed.

“Does it really come out in lumps?”

“Rumors. Only rumors,” he grinned, sitting down next to her.

“Did you notice anything unusual last night when you got home?” Samantha asked, her tone serious and soft.

“Like?”

“Like my phone has a carrier signal now, and my home terminal has a different hum that pulses almost imperceptibly, but I can feel it.

“They’ve placed us both in Theca Five,” Neruda answered matter-of-factly.

“Which is?”

“They know we met yesterday and they want me to know they know. It’s their not-so-subtle way of saying either you come forward and report what you know, or we’ll assume your loyalty and intelligence are compromised to such a degree that you’re no longer useful to our purposes. Something like that.”

“How can you manage to joke about this?”

“I’m not joking,” Neruda corrected her. “I’m lightening the situation so it’s easier to cope.” He flashed his smile.

“So they’re watching us right now?”

“No. I checked the Eye-in-the-Sky schedule before we met yesterday. We have,” he glanced at his watch,





“about forty minutes, but to be safe, I’d prefer to be out of here in thirty.”

Samantha stared at him. “There’s no privacy, is there?”

“You’re an RV,” Neruda laughed. “You of all people should know that.”

“RVs are never used against ACIO personnel,” Samantha said.

“True, but every other technology we have is, particularly if the personnel in question are meeting out in the desert the day after an MRP session.”

“Have you talked with Evans or anyone yet?” she asked.

“Don’t need to,” he replied. “They have exception algorithms that monitor our Body Prints and report any anomalous activity like this.” His arms stretched out like a priest in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Samantha relaxed her face and let out a long sigh. “Okay, I have an idea to get us both out of this situation.” She paused, as if on some dramatic cue. “What if we did an RV session right now, at point of creation of their weapon system?”

Neruda remained silent, his eyes staring at his hands.

Samantha continued, taking his silence as a good sign. "If we could determine the nature of their defensive system, perhaps we could convince Fifteen that they could be allies and not foes."

Neruda rubbed the back of his neck. "I haven't even had my coffee yet. Can we wait a few minutes?"

"There's no time if we have to leave in less than thirty minutes!" she said with an intensity that surprised Neruda.

He stood, surveying the landscape. "I'd be guilty of insubordination. Insubordination of a direct order from Fifteen, I might add. It would only worsen our situation, or at least mine."

"I know it's risky, but without this, how else do we convince him I should stay on the project and keep my memory?"

"Do you have anything to eat in that thing, or is it only your RePlay headgear?" Neruda said, pointing to a dark green shopping bag sitting at Samantha's feet.

"I do," she said.

"I'll take whatever you have that isn't RePlay. Please."

Samantha opened the bag, and pulled out a store-bought assortment of pastries, while Neruda opened his thermos and poured coffee.

“Two lumps or one,” he asked.

“You’re talking sugar aren’t you?”

“Sugar?”

“Very funny,” Samantha said, “but no lumps of either kind, thanks.”

Neruda handed her a cup and they both settled into a quick breakfast. Samantha pointed to the sky with her free hand. “If Evans knows we’re already here, why do we need to avoid detection from EITS?”

“The ‘e’ stands for more than eye,” Neruda explained.

“You mean they can hear our conversation... thirty... forty... however many miles up the thing is?”

“When EITS launched in seventy-five, the technology wasn’t available for audio transmission... that was added in ninety-one when the system was upgraded.”

“They can hear our conversation?” she repeated softly.

“They can,” he said.

“How?”

“Remember how you were required to have a security implant when you started?”

“Yes, but I thought these were for tracking purposes—”

“—That’s their main purpose, but they also have the ability to transmit audio to EITS. It’s one of the most

sophisticated technologies in our entire arsenal. And it'll be used on us in some thirty minutes if we're not careful."

"But these things were placed in my neck—"

"They transmit voice resonance, which the computer enhances, and they're so good, they can eavesdrop on a whisper."

"Wish I knew sign language," Samantha lamented under her breath. "I assume that they don't tell personnel about this technology on purpose."



"Correct."

"So, what do you think about my plan?" she asked.

"It's too dangerous to disobey a direct order from Fifteen. But I know another way we could do it."

"What?"

"Our goal is to present the facts to Fifteen. He'd know any deception, so it's not an option to tell anything but the full and complete truth. The facts are that you've had significant memory bleed in the span of twenty-four hours following your MRP. Obviously it wasn't successful. The memories were too powerful."

Samantha nodded while Neruda paused to take a bite of his pastry.

“The problem,” he continued, “is that you’re the only one who’s seen these beings and communicated with them. You were the one who guided the original exploration team to the site. You’re somehow connected into their frequency.”

“Okay,” Samantha asked, “so you’re suggesting that I represent myself as a liaison to the Central Race?”

“Sort of,” he replied. “We don’t know if any other RV can make contact with this race. You’ve been the sole contact thus far. Perhaps we can convince Fifteen that your memory shouldn’t undergo a radical MRP until we’ve made sure that a different RV can make the same connection. This would buy us time and provide a reason for your continued involvement in the project.”

“You’re saying that Fifteen will want to retain the option of contact with the Central Race in order to find out certain things in the future?”

“Correct,” he replied. “When we first heard about the Central Race from the Corteum, Branson conducted several experiments to see if contact could be made, but nothing worked.”

“Give me an example of something he might want to investigate in the future?” she asked.

“We have strong reasons to assume that the seven ETC sites are linked together through some means. We also know that there was only one homing beacon, which has since self-destructed, so we really don’t know how to get to the other sites. You could help us determine how to access the other six sites.”

“Do you think he’ll buy this approach?” Samantha asked.

“I don’t know,” Neruda said, taking his last bite of pastry. “But it’s an honest approach to our dilemma. It’s the best option I can think of.”

“Okay, then. When do we confront him?”

“I think it’s best if I talk with him alone,” Neruda answered. “He’d be much more close-lipped if you were in the room. We need him to be candid; he might just come up with a better solution.”

Samantha nodded and began to gather up the pastries and put things away. “One more thing before we go,” she said. “If you were planning to report the truth to Fifteen all along, why’d you go out of your way to elude EITS?”

“It’s intelligent to retain control of your options. Fifteen and Evans respect that. Perhaps more than anything else. You don’t want to make a habit of displaying any weakness or error in judgment to either of them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Samantha said.

The two quickly packed up their belongings and walked to their cars. Samantha couldn’t stop thinking about EITS coming into position overhead. She could almost feel its prying eyes and ears, and once she settled into her car and watched Neruda pull away, she yelled several times at the top of her lungs, “Screw your EITS!”

She immediately felt better.

\* \* \* \*

“Good morning, Jamisson,” Fifteen said. “Are you looking for me?”

Neruda was on his way to Fifteen’s office when he almost bumped into him as he turned a corner in the hallway. “Do you have a few minutes you could spare? It’s important.”

Fifteen motioned with his arm to his office door. "Of course. Go on in. I'll be right there."

Neruda sat down at a small conference table next to Fifteen's desk. The office had a way of making him feel vulnerable. It was so sparse that Neruda felt there was nowhere to hide, particularly when he had to deliver bad news.

The sound of the door closing startled him. Neruda turned to see Fifteen, Li-Ching, and Evans all joining him at the table. "We're all aware of your meeting with Samantha," Fifteen said. "We just want to hear your report. I invited Li-Ching and Evans so I don't have to repeat myself. Okay?"

Neruda nodded, though he'd have preferred to meet alone with Fifteen. He began to feel that his actions might have been a more serious breach of security and protocol than he had thought.

"As you know," Evans began, "We're aware of your actions of yesterday evening and again this morning. You're fully aware that these actions subvert protocol and—"

"Now, now," Fifteen interrupted. "We don't need to be so hard-nosed about this. I'm sure that Jamisson has an excellent reason for his behavior." Fifteen put his hands



flat on the table, and paused. "What we have I'm sure is just a misunderstanding. You have the floor, Jamisson. We'll simply listen and ask questions."

Neruda looked with searching eyes to his colleagues, careful not to betray his nervousness. "I had every intention of telling you exactly what happened," he said, looking directly at Evans. "Samantha had some memory bleed. Her memories of the RV sessions were too powerful to suppress."

"What triggered it?" Li-Ching asked.

"She was organizing her project materials and found a notation—In her own handwriting—about the Central Race and the seven ETC sites."

Fifteen pulled on a console that he slid from underneath the table and pushed a button. "I want Branson in here as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," came his assistant's voice.

Fifteen turned to Neruda, his eyes serious and sympathetic at the same time. "And what did Samantha want from you?"

"She wanted to know whether she had undergone an MRP," he replied. "And she wanted to know who the Central Race is."

"And you told her?" Fifteen inquired.

“Yes.”

“Why?” Evans asked.

“Because she’s the best RV we have, and my choices were to lie and alienate her, or speak truthfully and secure her trust. I chose the latter.”

“What does she want?” Fifteen asked.

“She wants to remain on the project. She feels that her skills may prove valuable later on.”

“And you agree with her?” Fifteen asked.

For the first time that morning, Neruda locked eyes with Fifteen. “We don’t know if any of our SL-Twelve RVs can contact the Central Race and perform RV reconnaissance, which could prove vital to the project later on. Samantha, I’m convinced, has a special connection with this race.”

Evans stirred. “Can you think of a reason we’d want to contact or observe the Central Race?”

“No, Jamisson is right,” Fifteen interjected. “We don’t know if anyone else could successfully make contact. We tried when the Corteum told us about their existence, and we had no success.”

“But that was before we had any physical connection,” Li-Ching said. “Samantha had the artifacts and ETC site. It’s not a fair comparison.”

“But that’s the point,” Neruda said. “She *has* had an advantage, and her advantage could be—sometime in the future—used to our advantage.”

A knock on the door distracted them. Branson stepped into the office, slightly out of breath. “You wanted me?” he asked.

“Yes, come on in and join us,” Fifteen said. “Samantha’s MRP failed.”

“In what way?” Branson asked as he sat down at the table next to Neruda.

“In every way,” Fifteen replied.

“Shit,” Branson said under his breath. “I’m not completely surprised.”

“Let’s assume that her memories can’t be suppressed by MRP... that... that they’re too powerful as Jamisson suggests,” Fifteen said. “We have two options. We can perform a radical MRP and eliminate the entire project experience, or we can retain her services for the project and isolate her from sensitive information as best we can.”

Fifteen glanced at Neruda out of the corner of his eye. “How much classified information did you provide her—in addition to information about the Central Race and the seven ETC sites?”

Neruda could tell that Fifteen sensed something. His voice tightened as he felt Fifteen's intuitive powers begin to reach inside his mind. "A little bit about EITS... I... I explained our rationale as to why we had to shut down her contact with the Central Race—"

"You told her about BST?" Fifteen asked, alarm showing in his voice.

"No, I didn't explain anything about BST, only that we had a defensive weapon... nothing more of consequence," Neruda answered defensively.

Evans couldn't restrain himself any further. "So now she knows about EITS and BST? We don't know how she'll handle this information. She's too wet behind the ears. I can't imagine how any payoff in this matter could outweigh the risks."

"She *is* the best RV we've ever had," Branson said. "The best. Jamisson couldn't have bullshit her any more than he could bullshit us. At least he managed to retain his credibility with her, which could prove more valuable to us than anything else, at least in dealing with Samantha."

Silence hung over the conference table for a few moments. Neruda kept his eyes cast on the tabletop,

wishing the meeting were over, but knowing it may have just begun.

Li-Ching fidgeted with one of the buttons on her blouse. "Why can't we take her off the project and give her a radical MRP?"

"I think Jamisson is implying that we need her," Fifteen replied. "We need her RV skills to accelerate our understanding of the seven ETC sites and how they interrelate... assuming they do."

Evans turned to Branson. "Are you sure we couldn't make contact with the Central Race using one of our SL-Twelve RVs?"

"We didn't have any success in our last attempts eleven years ago, but then we didn't have any artifacts or materials to establish contact either. We might be able to now."

"All I was suggesting," Neruda interjected, "was that we retain Samantha on the project until we know whether she has a unique capability to contact and communicate with the creators of these sites."

"Are you suggesting the creators of these sites are not the Central Race?" Fifteen asked.

"No," Neruda replied. "But we really don't know who they are within the Central Race. I just think we should

retain her skills and knowledge base until we've determined that we have a redundant, reconnaissance strategy and equally competent RV."

Fifteen sighed and turned to Branson. "Your succession plan for her is still seven years out. We don't want to do anything to jeopardize her leadership abilities. We want her to be a director. Given that, what's your recommendation?"

"She's retained on the project with full access to the SL-Twelve knowledge base—concerning Ancient Arrow only. She'll remain SL-Seven in all other respects."

"Evans?" Fifteen asked.

"I think the risks are too great to keep her on the project," Evans replied. "Any more contact with the Central Race, or any faction therein, could bring unwanted scrutiny to our own projects, particularly BST. I think a radical MRP and Theca-Five containment for a period of time... perhaps three months thereafter, is the best course of action."

Fifteen turned to Li-Ching. "And you?"



"In general, I agree with Evans," she answered. "The risks do seem to outweigh the rewards. However, I can also see the possible advantage of

having an RV reconnaissance strategy that gives us the flexibility to probe the creators of these sites... who knows what we'll want to know in the future."

Fifteen leaned back in his chair, spread his fingers apart and put his hands together fingertip-to-fingertip. "First of all, we know the Central Race, or some subset of the Central Race, created the ETC sites, of which we have good reason to believe there are seven in number. These beings can probe Samantha. This means that they may be able to access her entire memory structure, which means that if she knew about BST, they might be able to learn of our plans regarding BST.

"If we want only SL-Twelve personnel involved in this project, no RV reconnaissance can be performed. However, if we kept Samantha on the job, they could only probe to the level of SL-Seven, which may be an acceptable risk so long as she knows nothing about BST."

He turned to Neruda with an intensity that Neruda had only seen once before. "I will only ask this one more time, Jamisson. How much does she know about BST?"

"She knows we have a defensive weapon that the Central Race may not sanction. She's aware that the

ACIO—at a high level—is engaged in protecting Earth from the 2011 invasion... And she’s aware that our weapon may have a connection to time travel.”

“Nothing more?” Fifteen asked.

Neruda shook his head and looked down to his hands folded in his lap.

Fifteen took a deep breath and released it slowly. “She knows too much to be our RV. Any of our SL-Twelve RVs have the same dilemma—they know too much. These beings will probe any RV we use and they may very well, as a consequence, know our plans for BST. It’s too dangerous to interact any further with representatives of this race. In this matter, I agree with Evans.”

He paused long enough to shift positions in his chair; his back continued to bother him, despite the acupuncture that Li-Ching had prescribed. “However, I think that if we performed a radical MRP on Samantha, we would risk both her state of mind and possibly Branson’s succession plan. If Samantha wants to stay on the project, I will grant her request, on one condition. She must refrain from any RV sessions with the Central Race.”

Fifteen turned to Neruda. “You agree?”



“In what capacity would she operate if not as an RV?” Neruda asked, after nodding agreement.

“Whatever role she desires as long as it doesn’t include RVing the Central Race... I don’t really care.” Fifteen looked to Branson. “We’ll do as you say. She’ll be permitted SL-Twelve access on the Ancient Arrow project and remain SL-Seven on everything else.”

“Okay,” Branson replied. “Effective?”

“Now,” Fifteen said. “Evans, are you okay with this? I want your support, too.”

“You have it,” Evans answered, “but I’d like to keep her in Theca Five for another few weeks if you don’t mind.”

“Done,” Fifteen said. “Anything else?”

Silence hung in the air long enough for Fifteen to call the meeting adjourned. “Jamisson, could you stay behind for just a few minutes?”

Neruda nodded and sat back down in his chair while the others filed out of Fifteen’s office. At the sound of the closing door, Fifteen sat down, his face solemn. “You’re thinking you made the right choice by opening up to Samantha, aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure what I think,” Neruda replied. “I *feel* like I did the right thing—”

“Rest assured that you did not,” Fifteen asserted with finality.

Neruda’s internal composure crumbled at the words, though his physical presence was unshaken. “In what way?” The question left his mouth before his mind could censor it.

Fifteen shrugged. “You know. You already know. I just wanted you to be sure that I also know. And if you ever take liberty, as you did in this case, with another subordinate, you will most certainly be without subordinates. Do I make myself clear, Jamisson?”

“Very clear, sir.”

“Good.”

“One question, though, if... if I may,” Neruda said tentatively.

“Go ahead,” Fifteen said.

“If we hit an impasse in decoding the material on the optical disc, or the other artifacts prove unyielding to our probes, doesn’t it make sense that RV may be our only hope? And if that’s true, isn’t Samantha our best bet?”

Fifteen’s face softened with an eloquent smile. “It’s the only reason you weren’t taken off the project. It’s the silver lining in the breakdown of your behavior.

We'll see if your actions pay off in the future, but in the present, they unequivocally do not."

Fifteen stood and looked down on Neruda. "That's all, for now." He walked away without another word, opening his office doors and walking out. Neruda slowly stood from his chair. He felt chilled to his bones, knowing that he'd come as close as he ever had before to being terminated from the ACIO.

He felt like he had betrayed his father, his hero and mentor, as well as his future.





## Chapter Fifteen

### SEALED

*Upon the merging of your will with that of First Source, you unconsciously participate with thousands of personality formats devoted to the Great Cause. It is the joined endeavor of all that you are with the perfect unfoldment of all that is and will ever be. It is the suggestive line of evidence that points to your purpose even before you can speak the words or feel the emotion of your gift, and it only requires you to desire the will of First Source to take ascendancy in your life.*

An Excerpt from *Personal Purpose*, Chamber Seven  
**WingMakers**



Neruda got to his office and found Samantha waiting in one of his desk-side chairs, her face a collision of worry and hope.

“How’d it go?” she asked, trying to sound calm.

“You’re still on the project,” he smiled, “but on the condition that we perform no RV with the Central Race.”

“Fifteen ordered that?”

“Yes.”

“What else?” Samantha asked.

“You need to talk with Branson,” he replied. “I’m not sure there’s much else I can tell you.”

“You got in trouble, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry to have dragged you into this whole mess,” she said. “Is there anything I can do?”

Neruda sat down at his desk and turned on a lamp, leaned back in his chair, and finally looked at Samantha. She was wearing white, cotton pants and a sky-blue blouse. Her red hair was tied up tightly behind her head.

“Just talk with Branson and stay away from the Central Race,” Neruda replied. “That’s all. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Yes, but how will the others take this news?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Neruda answered. “Fifteen’s decisions—though there’re not always understood—are always respected.”

“But will they hate me for being allowed back on the project?”

“No, of course not,” Neruda answered. “You’re an RV... a specialist. Everyone involved in this project

knows that you had some special connection with the creators of the ETC site, so don't worry about it."

"Okay," she said softly. "So how do we know for sure that the Central Race created the ETC sites?"

Neruda could feel his mind being tossed on some inner wave. He felt an invisible tide pulling him farther and farther from the safety of shore. "Please trust me on this, just talk with Branson."

He took out a piece of paper from his notebook, and began writing.

YOU'RE IN THECA 5 FOR ANOTHER 2 WEEKS. CAN'T DISCUSS THESE MATTERS WITH YOU—OFFICE BUGGED—THEY'RE LISTENING. SORRY.

He handed the note to Samantha, which she quickly read. A troubled expression came over her face as she recognized the grave situation she was in.

"Okay, then," she said. "I'll talk with Branson. Thanks for all your help."

"You're welcome."

Samantha stood. "I need to talk with you," she mouthed the words silently to Neruda.

Neruda shook his head. "I'll see you later, Samantha."

“Thanks again,” she said.

She left his office frustrated at her loss of freedom, but gratified that she’d remain on the project and retain her memory, such as it was.

\* \* \* \*

A banging on his door woke him. Neruda checked his bedside clock, unsure if he was still dreaming or it was real. It was just after 1am, and the alarm clock’s luminescent dial assured him it was real. His intuition went on alert, trying to sense who it was.

He quickly put on his bathrobe and trudged downstairs to the front door, where he could see a shadowy figure waiting. “I hear you, Samantha,” he hollered. “Just give me a few seconds to turn the security system off.”

Neruda pushed a few buttons and then opened the door to the distraught face of Samantha. Her eyes were red from crying. “What’s wrong?” he asked, inviting her in with his arm.

As if a damn broke, she wrapped her arms around him and began to cry. Neruda stood still and tried his best to comfort her, eyeing the street and neighborhood

for any signs of onlookers. It seemed quiet and he felt safe, so he remained at the doorway, comforting her while she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Tell me what’s wrong. Please.”

“I’m sorry... I’m... I’m sorry to burst in on you... like this,” she said, letting go of him and walking toward a chair in his living room. “Can I sit down for a minute?”

“Of course,” he said. “Can I get you anything?”

“Maybe a Kleenex... or two.”

“Sure, hold on a moment.”

Neruda left for the kitchen and pulled several tissues from the dispenser and poured a glass of water. When he returned to the living room, Samantha was sitting in a chair, staring at the ceiling, tears streaming down her face.

“What’s wrong?” Neruda asked as he handed her the tissues and placed a glass of water on the coffee table in front of her chair.

“Thanks,” she said, blowing her nose. “I had a visitor tonight.”

“Who?” Neruda asked, the news jolting him awake like a shot of caffeine.

“Before I tell you, is... is your home wired—I mean, can we talk?”



“Yes we can talk here. They already know you’re here.”

“Can EITS pick up on our conversation even inside your home?”

“It can pick up yours, not mine.”

“You mean I have a different implant than you?” she asked.

“Mine was installed nineteen years ago, before we had the BP resonance broadcast technology.”

“Once again, I’m the problem.” Her face looked completely distressed. “So, they can only hear my side of the conversation?”

He nodded. “We’re okay, Samantha, but if you don’t mind, before you get started with your story, let me quickly change into some clothes and get some coffee on. Okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. It’d give me some time to compose myself.”

Neruda put some fresh coffee on and then changed into a pair of jeans, a white sweater, and quickly donned his Rolex. He splashed some cold water on his face and combed his hair. Five minutes later, he was serving coffee. “It’s essentially decaf, so don’t worry,” he said, handing a cup to Samantha.

*“Essentially decaf? You mean it’s normal coffee, don’t you,”* she said, forcing a smile to her lips.

“You were about to tell me about your visitors...” He commented, ignoring her remark and sitting in a chair opposite hers.

“It’s okay? You’re sure?” Samantha asked.



“I know the schedule for EITS, we’re okay... for at least another ten minutes.”

“But you said earlier that they already know we’re here, so how can they know this if EITS isn’t overhead?”

“The ACIO has twenty-eight satellites that comprise the EITS system, only nine have the updated technology for resonance broadcast, and the closest of those nine satellites is about ten minutes away from intercept range.”

“How? I mean how... how do you know this for sure?”

“I have a photographic memory, remember?” Neruda explained.

“Must be nice,” she laughed nervously.

“Tell me what happened, Samantha.”

She took a sip of coffee and let out a deep breath. “I was in my bedroom tonight... around nine o’clock, and

decided to do some meditation because I was so wound up after the day's events."

She closed her eyes as if she was watching something on her inner screen. "I had just started and was trying to drain my body of tension, when a light... a green and yellow colored light passed through my body. It was kind of like when the sun goes behind a cloud, you know, when it passes over you and you feel the difference, but you know the source of the shadow is a long ways away."

Neruda nodded. "You mean you saw it with your eyes, or you felt it within you?"

"Both, actually. The light source felt familiar, but I also knew it came from a great distance away. I watched it interact with my mind. It was a very gentle and peaceful experience."

Samantha leaned forward and set her coffee cup down, and folded her legs underneath her. Her face was slightly swollen and reddish in color. "And then this light somehow took hold of my mind and began to... to reconnect me... or my memory."

"In what way?" Neruda asked, leaning forward.

“The light was like a conduit... or portal. It had a magnetic pull and either I went to it or it came to me... I’m not even sure which—”

“It?” Neruda asked impatiently.

“It was a being,” she replied. “An intelligence...”

“Did it have a shape?” Neruda asked.



“Not really, but I felt its presence and it scared the hell out of me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I... I’ve done meditations before and I’ve felt... or... or least seen lights, but I’ve never had the light become something intelligent.”

“In what way was it intelligent?”

“It restored my memories of the RV sessions with the Central Race.” Samantha let her words hang in the air for a few seconds while she took another sip of coffee. “I have complete recall of my experiences, more now than before the MRP.”

“How?” Neruda asked, knowing he sounded incredulous.

“I don’t know how, but it happened. I remember everything as if it happened a few moments ago. And there’s something more,” she said, her voice suddenly

quiet. "It activated *all* of my experiences with them, including the time I was scanned inside the first cavern and... and earlier when I lost consciousness trying to communicate with the homing device."

"And?"

"I know more about the plans of the ETC site's creators," Samantha said. "But I don't know if I should tell anyone."

"Why?"

"Because Fifteen'll want to take away all my memories, if not my life," she said, as tears formed in her eyes. She dabbed the corners of her eyes with a Kleenex. "There's no doubt in my mind."

"Why?"

"Because I know too much, and for some reason, the creators of this site embedded something inside me that they use to contact me... or... or activate me to do certain things."

"What?"

"Look," she whispered, "you said that we had ten minutes before EITS would be in range. I'm completely spooked. I don't know who I can trust... other than you."

“EITS can only pick up your voice,” he said, glancing at his watch. “Let me ask questions and you can either write the answers down or just nod yes or no. Okay?”

“And you’re sure that you have no other listening devices in your house?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you, but only if you’ll agree to keep this conversation strictly between you and me. Okay?”

“Agreed,” he replied.

Neruda stood to gather his thoughts. The living room was spacious with a grand piano in one corner silhouetted by a large picture window. A floor-to-ceiling, sand-colored flagstone fireplace dominated the far end of the room where he began to pace back and forth.

He stopped pacing and turned to Samantha. “So, a light entered your body and reconnected all of your memories concerning your interactions with the ETC site, RV sessions with the Central Race, and the homing device. Correct?”

Samantha nodded, and then blew her nose.

“It was like being re-wired by a remote source that you took to be a representative technology or force from the creators of the ETC site?”

Samantha's face froze for a few moments as if she were debating Neruda's question inside her own mind. Finally, she nodded again, but motioned for something to write with. Neruda responded with a pen and pad of paper from a nearby desk. She scribbled something and handed the pad back to Neruda, pointing to her comments.

IT WASN'T A TECHNOLOGY OR FORCE; IT WAS AN INTELLIGENCE WITH THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE OF ACTIVATING MY MEMORY.

Neruda nodded. "And this intelligence, it only reconnected your memories... it... it didn't communicate anything of its own?"

Samantha looked at Neruda and nodded.

"However," he continued, "the memories of your experience with the homing device are intact, and they somehow gave you an expanded view of the creator's plans for the ETC site. Correct?"

She nodded.

"Do you know what the purpose of the ETC sites is?"

She shook her head, and began to write something and handed it to Neruda when she was done. Neruda took it and walked away, reading it out loud. "Not sure,

but it's not a weapon. It has more to do with raising the consciousness of the planet."

He turned around and locked eyes with Samantha.  
"Do you know how it will do this?"

She began to write.

I'M NOT POSITIVE, BUT SOMEHOW THE 7 ETC SITES COMBINE TO FORM A DATA STREAM THAT RAISES THE MOLECULAR VIBRATION OF THE PLANET AND EVERYONE ON IT. THIS DATA STREAM MODIFIES THE DNA STRUCTURE, NOT ONLY OF HUMANS, BUT ALL LIFE ON THE PLANET. IT WAS DESIGNED TO ENABLE US TO MAKE A CRITICAL DISCOVERY LATER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY.

His lips moved almost imperceptibly as he read her note. "This light, or intelligence, as you refer to it, is it from the creators of the ETC site?"

Samantha nodded.

"And you know this because it activated your memories. Are there other reasons you feel this way?"

She nodded again, and started to write another note.

I ASSUME IT WAS IMPLANTED IN ME WHEN I CAME INTO CONTACT WITH THE HOMING DEVICE, BUT IT FELT LIKE IT CAME FROM AN



INCREDIBLE DISTANCE AWAY. IT FELT ANCIENT. IT FELT ETERNAL.  
IT FELT LIKE GOD.

Neruda nodded as he read the note. "Do you know how we'll be able to locate the other six ETC sites?"

Samantha nodded, but then shook her hand as if she were erasing something from the air. She wrote in a flurry of motion.

DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOCATE THE SITES, BUT I KNOW THAT WE'RE NOT THE ONES WHO'LL FIND THEM.

His face instantly looked puzzled as he read the note. "Someone else is going to make the discovery?" Neruda asked, his voice sharp with surprise.



"Yes," she said, her hand moving to her mouth as if she wanted to recapture her word. Neruda waved her inadvertent remark away; assuring her it was no big deal.

"Do you know who?"

She shook her head.

“But you’re quite certain that it will *not* be the ACIO who discovers these other sites?”

She nodded.

Neruda sighed and sat down in the chair opposite Samantha.

“You’re telling me,” he began, sweeping his hand through his hair, “that you know with certainty that the ACIO will not discover the other six sites before someone else does. Correct?”

She nodded, her face showing signs of frustration at not being able to explain with speech. She began writing another note.

THIS DISCOVERY HAS BEEN CAREFULLY ORCHESTRATED DATING ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE ANASAZI INDIANS WHO FIRST DISCOVERED IT. WE PLAY A VERY CRITICAL ROLE, BUT THERE’S SOMEONE ELSE WHO’LL FIGURE OUT HOW TO ACCESS THE OTHER SITES. OUR ROLE—I MEAN THE ACIO’S ROLE—IS TO FIND THE OTHERS WHO’LL HELP US FIND THE OTHER SIX SITES.

Neruda lost his patience half way through her writing of the note and stood behind her, reading over her shoulder as she wrote. When she finished the last few

words, he walked back to his chair and sat down in frustration.

“We’ll never convince Fifteen to take this discovery outside of the ACIO,” Neruda lamented. “He won’t allow the NSA to know anything substantive about this discovery, let alone publish anything about this discovery in a scientific journal. Do you know anything about who this outsider might be?”

Samantha’s face was downcast and showed the telltale signs of uncertainty.

“Do you know if it’s a person or an organization?” he asked.

She shook her head from side-to-side, and mouthed the words, “I’m not sure.”

“Write down your explanation for why you’re convinced that the other six sites will be discovered by someone or... or some group outside of the ACIO?”

Her pen was instantly in motion as Neruda finished his last word. She wrote without hesitation for about a minute, and then handed a sheet of paper to Neruda.

ONE OF MY MOST VIVID, RESTORED MEMORIES HAD TO DO WITH A GIRL—MAYBE FIFTEEN OR SIXTEEN YEARS OLD—WHO WAS ABLE TO FIND THESE SITES AND ACTIVATE THEM THROUGH A MEANS I

DON'T UNDERSTAND. IT HAD TO DO WITH HER MIND. SOMETHING SHE HAD BEEN BORN WITH. SHE'S FROM THE CENTRAL RACE. SHE'S ONE OF THE ORIGINAL CREATORS OF THESE SITES, BUT NOW LIVES INSIDE A HUMAN BODY. HER FACE IS NOT FAMILIAR TO ME. BUT SHE'S THE ONE WHO'LL OPEN THIS THING UP. I DON'T THINK SHE'S AWARE OF HER ROLE YET. WE HAVE TO FIND HER. I'M SURE OF THIS. WITHOUT HER, WE'LL NEVER ACCESS THE OTHER SITES, AND WITHOUT THE OTHER SITES, THIS TECHNOLOGY WILL NEVER OPERATE AS IT WAS INTENDED.

Neruda read the explanation and looked up. "How do we locate this girl?"

Samantha shrugged.

"You have no idea?"

She shook her head, wrote a quick note, and passed it to Neruda.

IT'S ALL ORCHESTRATED. IT'LL HAPPEN IF WE GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT THE ETC SITE. SOMEHOW THIS GIRL WILL STEP FORWARD WHEN SHE HEARS ABOUT THE DISCOVERY.

It was Neruda's turn to shake his head. He looked up at Samantha. "There's no way this discovery will see the light of day. The chance that Fifteen would authorize

such a thing is nil. It won't happen. Is it possible that the girl you recollect from your memory is related to something else?"

Samantha shook her head and frowned at the suggestion that she could be mistaken.

"Explain again the source of this vision or memory," Neruda requested, sitting up in his chair and taking a sip of coffee.

Samantha began writing immediately.

IT WAS A VISION THAT WAS PLANTED IN MY MIND BY THE HOMING DEVICE WHEN WE WERE IN THE FIRST CAVERN. I SAW THIS GIRL VERY CLEARLY, AND SHE LOOKED COMPLETELY HUMAN, BUT I WAS TOLD THAT HER SOUL IS VERY ANCIENT AND THAT SHE WAS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL PLANNERS OF THE ETC SITES. SHE WOULD BE THE ONE TO ACTIVATE THIS SYSTEM. THEY NEEDED TO HAVE ONE OF THEIR OWN ARCHITECTS INCARNATE AS A HUMAN IN ORDER TO ACTIVATE THE SYSTEM. IT HAD TO BE AN INSIDE JOB, SO TO SPEAK.

Neruda groped for the right words. "You believe that these beings... the creators of these seven sites... that they're going to make this discovery public... a public event?"

She nodded in agreement.

“But nowhere in your memory do you see how they will orchestrate this?”



Samantha formed the word “no” with her lips and shook her head in slow motion.

“Do you have any sense of how far in the future your vision was? I mean months, years, decades?”

She scribbled something quickly and handed it to Neruda.

IT FELT LIKE ONE, MAYBE TWO YEARS IN THE FUTURE, BUT I’M NOT SURE.

“Do you have any sense of what this critical discovery is all about?”

NOT SURE, BUT IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH A PROFOUND SHIFT IN HUMANITY. IT WAS GENETIC AND SPIRITUAL AT THE SAME TIME. I GOT THE STRONG IMPRESSION IT WOULD REVOLUTIONIZE SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

“We have a major dilemma, Samantha. I have to report this to Fifteen first thing tomorrow. I have no choice—”

Samantha stood up and stormed away to the other side of the room. She was furious and didn't hide it. She turned around and walked back within a few feet of Neruda's chair. He watched her as she silently mouthed the words “you promised!” twice.

“I know,” he said, “but I didn't realize the gravity of the situation like I do now. I'm sorry, Samantha. I'm really sorry, but I don't have any choice.”

Samantha sat back down and grabbed her pen and paper and wrote like an imprisoned martyr to her tormentors.

IF YOU TELL FIFTEEN HE'LL NOT ONLY TAKE ME OFF THE PROJECT,  
HE MIGHT REMOVE ME FROM THE ACIO ALTOGETHER. YOU  
PROMISED NOT TO DIVULGE THIS TO ANYONE ELSE!

“Samantha, I can't stay quiet on this issue,” he said. “You pose a security risk to the project and to the ACIO. You either believe this discovery should be published and shared with the world, or you don't. There's no middle ground.”

She began to write, stopped, and then crossed out what she had written. She closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Her face trembled with confusion. Tears were beginning to flow from her eyes, but she began to write anyway, brushing her eyes and cheeks with a tissue.

I'M NOT PLANNING TO TELL ANYONE OTHER THAN YOU. I KNOW THE RISKS I'D BE TAKING IF I TOOK THIS STORY PUBLIC. I DON'T HAVE THE COURAGE... ALL I CAN TELL YOU IS THAT THIS IS NOT IN MY HANDS. I BELIEVE THE CREATORS OF THESE 7 SITES ORCHESTRATE THIS ENTIRE SERIES OF EVENTS. I'M JUST THE MESSENGER, DON'T SHOOT ME! I NEED YOUR HELP, PROTECTION, ADVICE. WHATEVER YOU CAN PROVIDE. HELP ME, PLEASE!

He looked up at her just as she closed her eyes to blow her nose. Even in her disheveled state of mind, her face held a regal poise and grace that attracted him. He felt a brotherly love for her. Something he couldn't exactly explain, or deny. "If you want my help, you can't expect me to lie on your behalf. I can't do that."

Samantha shook her head, showing her agreement. A flicker of hope crossed her face.



“If I tell Fifteen the truth, our only hope is that he’s convinced that we’ll not be the ones who take this discovery public. And the only way we could convince him of that is if we’re convinced of it ourselves. Are you?”

Samantha froze for a few moments. She looked down at her pad of paper unsure of what to write. Then:

I’M CONVINCED THAT SOMEONE WILL MAKE THIS DISCOVERY PUBLIC, AND I’M CONVINCED IT WON’T BE ME. THAT’S ALL I CAN TELL YOU.

“Who? Who would make this public?” Neruda asked in a grave tone of voice. “Not McGavin. Certainly not Fifteen. It’d have to be someone who’d defect. There’s no other way. And if we kept this to ourselves, it would have to be you or I. And... and you just said you wouldn’t do it. So that leaves me...”

Samantha waved her arms as if motioning him to stop. She began writing again, her intensity rising like a spiraling hawk.

I HAVE THIS STRONG FEELING THAT THIS DISCOVERY IS OF EXTREME IMPORTANCE TO THE PLANET, EVEN THOUGH I CAN’T

EXPLAIN WHY. IT MUST BE SHARED. THERE'S SOMETHING HIDDEN IN THESE ARTIFACTS THAT'S CATALYTIC TO HUMANS. I'M SUPPOSED TO CARRY THIS MESSAGE. YOU HAVE TO HELP ME. I CAN'T CHANGE FIFTEEN'S MIND BY MYSELF.

Neruda read the note twice, stalling his response. He could only see one road ahead, and it scared the hell out of him. He couldn't champion this public disclosure with the Labyrinth Group's cooperation. He'd have to defect. There was no other way.

"If I bring this dilemma to Fifteen, he'll think I'm crazy if I advocate a public disclosure based on your vision, no matter how revered you are as an RV. The only help I can offer is to explain to Fifteen your experience and the reason for your visit, and downplay the whole thing. It'll buy us some time, and give us an opportunity to decode some of the material from the optical disc. Maybe something'll show up that'll add credibility to your vision."

Samantha had begun writing before Neruda finished his comment. She tossed him her note with a curtness that surprised him. She stood, whispered "goodbye", and walked out the door before Neruda could even

object. He read her note with a chord of fear reverberating through his body.

SO I'M GOING TO BE MADE TO LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT. MY CREDIBILITY WILL BE UNDERMINED IN ORDER TO PRESERVE YOUR OWN. THANKS FOR ALL YOUR HELP. I WAS HOPING FOR MORE.

The sound of her car screeching out of his driveway brought him to his feet. He watched her drive away, while his heart sunk to a depth he'd not felt for many years. His choices unsettled him. He knew he'd have to talk with Fifteen in the morning, and he needed to give careful thought to how much he'd disclose.

Neruda picked up the coffee cup and discarded the tissues that Samantha had carefully placed on her saucer. He could only imagine her frustration and fear. But he felt as trapped as she, perhaps more so, because he was the only one who could take the Ancient Arrow project public. And somewhere in his heart, beneath all of the disquiet he felt, he knew this path lay ahead of him, and that his life had just changed irrevocably.

He hit the "call" button on his phone and heard the telltale carrier signal that told him he was once again in Theca Five. He hated the efficiency of Evans and his

technologies. He flicked on his computer terminal to check e-mail. David had left him a message about a breakthrough that they'd made. A ray of light moved over him as he read one of David's comments over and over.

WE FOUND AN ACCESS POINT CONSISTING OF A MAXIMUM OF 23 CHARACTERS IN WHAT WE PRESUME IS A 52-CHARACTER ALPHABET. IT'S AN INTERACTIVE PASSWORD. WE'RE ON OUR WAY.

Neruda's mind couldn't concentrate on the breakthrough, though he felt some relief that progress was being made. He could only think about Samantha and how he'd explain what she had told him to Fifteen. He knew that Samantha was her own worst enemy right now, and was almost capable of anything. Perhaps he was, too.





Sovereign Integral



## Chapter Sixteen

### SOVEREIGN INTEGRAL

First Source is not a manifestation, but rather a consciousness that inhabits all time, space, energy, and matter; as well as all non-time, non-space, non-matter, and non-energy. It is the only consciousness that unifies all states of being into one Being, and this Being is First Source. It is a growing, expanding, and inexplicable consciousness that organizes the collective experience of all states of being into a coherent plan of creation; expansion and colonization into the realms of creation; and the inclusion of creation into Source Reality – the home of First Source. This Being pervades the Grand Universe as the sum of experience in time and non-time. It has encoded ITSELF within all life as a vibratory force that is the primus code that creates you as a silken atom in the cosmological web.

An Excerpt from *The Primus Code*, Decoded from Chamber Nine  
**WingMakers**



Neruda looked down the long hallway that led to Fifteen's office. It was empty, and the lights were dimmed. An almost ghostly terror shivered through him as he heard the

elevator from the sunroom open. His instinct was to fall back behind the corner's edge and wait.

Fifteen and Evans came off the elevator, and Neruda strained to make out their conversation.

"So you're clear?" Fifteen asked.

"Completely," Evans answered.

"Good, then keep me informed if there's any change. I'm meeting with Jamisson in a few minutes, so I'll handle him myself. You just see to Samantha."

Fifteen began to walk into his office, and then stopped momentarily. "Oh, and by the way, when you deliver the news, do it with sympathy. Put on your long face. Okay?"

"Understood," Evans returned.

"Oh, and remember," Fifteen added, "I want this handled exclusively by you."

"Jenkins knows—"

"No, he doesn't," Fifteen interrupted. "No one knows but you and I, and I want it kept that way. If you need to take Jenkins for MRP, do it. But I want this handled completely SL-14."

"As you wish," Evans said.

Evans walked down the hallway toward Neruda. Neruda ducked into a conference room, remaining

unseen. He was puzzled by what he'd heard. They definitely had a plan in dealing with both him and Samantha. His stomach began to swirl like a horde of butterflies trying to take flight amidst a windstorm.

It was still early, almost 3am. He had sent Fifteen an e-mail message marked "urgent" about an hour earlier and Fifteen had responded immediately, insisting Neruda meet him at the office at 0300 hours. Typical of Fifteen, sleep wasn't a priority. It also served notice of Fifteen's seriousness.

He made the slow, almost painful movement to Fifteen's office. The door was ajar, and the office brightly lit. Neruda knocked gingerly on the door. "Good morning, sir." He didn't try to hide the tiredness in his voice.

"Come on in, Jamisson," Fifteen said without looking up from his computer terminal. "Find something to sit in. I'll be right with you."

Neruda measured Fifteen's voice, looking for any hints of his mood. All he could hear was frustration, and his intuition told him it was more than mild. He sat down in front of Fifteen's desk in a wood chair with a seat of black leather. Its carved wood arms

reminded him of a swan's neck—fragile and supple at the same time.

Fifteen hit a keystroke and turned his computer off. Silence filled the room as his hard drive came to a halt. Looking up at Neruda, Fifteen locked his gaze and said, "We know," the words dropping from his mouth with absolute finality.

Neruda looked puzzled. His forehead crinkled like a pond stirred by a sudden gust of wind.

"You know what I mean," Fifteen said, "so don't look at me with those innocent eyes."

Neruda remained quiet, not sure how to respond.

Fifteen leaned back in his chair, waiting with the patience of a fisherman.

"You're referring to Samantha's unexpected visit?" Neruda asked.

Fifteen shook his head. "We know what happened *during* her visit. We know what you discussed and we know what you're considering even at this very hour."

"You spoke with Samantha?" Neruda asked, trying his best to sound casual.

"Yes."

Fifteen shifted in his chair to ease his nagging back. The tips of his fingers joined like beams of a log home,



his customary pose when he was preparing to expound on a subject. “For my sixth birthday, my parents took me to the Barcelona Zoo where the marquee attraction was the gorilla exhibit. They had an old timer, named Tumba—maybe twenty-five years old—who had been the signature exhibit for better than two decades. They claimed that Tumba scared people because of how humanly he behaved, which was exactly what attracted the crowds. When we arrived at his cage—thick bars of steel—he was emptying his bowels. When he finished, and with great relish on his face, he heaved his feces into the crowd of people who were watching. It was an intentional, carefully orchestrated event. Unfortunately, some of it fell on my mother’s dress and hair.”

Neruda leaned forward a bit, drawn by a rare glimpse into Fifteen’s childhood.

“My father was enraged,” Fifteen continued, smiling at the recollection. “My mother embarrassed. And I... I was hopelessly amused... until I saw the daggers flash from my father’s eyes.”

Fifteen smoothed his long gray hair behind his ears; his characteristic ponytail was missing. “To my

mother's protestations, my father took us to the zoo's administrative offices to complain. We went into the office of the director and listened to a rather lengthy apology. When my father asked why the gorilla would do such a thing, the director explained that Tumba had suddenly begun the odd behavior only a few weeks earlier. The zoo's staff was in something of a panic because their star attraction was quite literally pissing off the patrons of the zoo, and they had no idea how to control Tumba's behavior.

"Now, my father was a gifted engineer, but he couldn't offer any practical suggestions to the zoo director or his bewildered staff that they hadn't already tried. The one thing they'd devised was to mount Plexiglas as a precautionary measure, hoping that Tumba would relent when he saw that his feces couldn't reach his intended victims. But he kept on throwing it anyway, and they had to take down the Plexiglas because of the intolerable appearance. They were left with only one choice. Close down the exhibit.

"The zoo director explained how he'd called upon the best gorilla experts in the world and no one had any viable solutions. So, he was resigned to do what he had to do, particularly in light of my mother's

appearance. I asked him what would become of Tumba, and the director explained that he'd be shipped to a new zoo in Africa, closer to his original home. The zoo was going to exchange Tumba for a new gorilla. It seemed so clear to me that Tumba was simply doing what he had to do in order to change his habitat. Change his life. Make something happen—as if twenty-five years in the same cage was enough.”

Fifteen lowered his eyes to half-mast and squared them on Neruda. “So, my friend, is this what you want? A change?”

Neruda tried to keep his eyes on Fifteen's, but after a few moments he had to look away, stumbling on his first few words like an awkward schoolboy. “I've... I... I think you're making assumptions that I believe Samantha's conclusions. And I'm not sure why you'd conclude that—”

“I wasn't speaking about conclusions,” Fifteen interrupted. “I was asking you the question, do you want to make a change?” He paused and then added, “I believe you'll know when I've made my conclusions.”

Neruda felt lost in some surreal dream that wasn't entirely of his own making. So many events of the

past three days were whirling around in his mind, and none pressed upon him more intensely than the story he had just heard. He knew what Fifteen was saying. He also knew what Fifteen wanted to hear.

"No," Neruda explained, "I don't want to leave or change my status with the ACIO. You're like a father to me. You know that. I don't have any intention of taking this story to the media or anyone else."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Neruda found his head nodding well after his word echoed into silence.

Fifteen stood up and walked over to his bookcase. Only his directors and a handful of others were aware of the treasures he kept there. Ancient manuscripts—many that Neruda himself had translated—were bound in humble leather of browns and dirty grays. He took down one of the largest of the books and opened it. Thumbing to a specific page, his eyes smiled like a leprechaun as he began to read aloud. "The Central Race is blessed with the identity of God instilled in them, just as strongly as man is endowed with the identity of an animal humbled by an ego, so



compelling as to render him incapable of understanding his creator.”

He turned a few pages. “There is no race so advanced as the race of human archetypes known as the Central Race. While there is none who knows this race in our galaxy, their presence is universal, and all life within our galaxy is interpenetrated by their culture and vision.”

He put the book down on his desktop without a sound. On its tan-colored cover was the title, *Liminal Cosmogony* in gold, cursive type. “It was written by the Corteum, but you did the translations. You remember, twenty-five years ago, don’t you?” Neruda remained silent, but his head nodded faintly in response. “So, my dear Jamisson, do you want a change?”

Neruda flinched at the unrelenting method that Fifteen used to pull out into the light what he believed was protected or hidden. He could persist like no one else. It was the essence of his power. And Neruda felt the hypnotic persuasion rendering him increasingly vulnerable. He swallowed and reminded himself that he was at war with the most brilliant mind on the planet, and now was not the time to let exhaustion or

intimidation get the best of him. "As I said before, Fifteen, I'm not seeking any change. You persist in this line of inquiry for reasons of your own, but I assure you, your suspicions are baseless."

"We'll see," Fifteen intoned. "We'll see very soon."

"I feel like someone who's unwittingly flung themselves in the cross-hairs of a witch hunt," Neruda said. "I've done nothing wrong other than to help Samantha. It's not my fault that she's made contact with the Central Race—"

"What you think may be the Central Race," Fifteen corrected. "We still lack proof of who they are. They call themselves WingMakers, and yet our databases have no reference to this name whatsoever."

"Yes, but we also know that they've implanted a series of technologies on our planet that clearly suggest they're the genetic curators of our species and probably most of the other animal life on this planet. Anything less than this conclusion would be denial. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was Fifteen's turn to avert his eyes. He sat down, fingering the leather cover of the book he had just placed on his desk. "Jamisson, I had a succession plan with your name on it before you even completed this

translation. You know that. From the age of seventeen, you were destined to become a member of the Labyrinth Group as its Director of Special Projects. What you don't realize, is that it doesn't end there."

At Fifteen's remark, Neruda felt as though he were rotating above the flames of an invisible fire. He had never considered himself in line for Fifteen's position. He didn't know if he wanted it, much less if he was even capable of performing such an esteemed and complex role. Fifteen would be impossible to replace.

"Seems unlikely, huh?" Fifteen asked, smiling.

"No, seems impossible."

"You're not in the cross-hairs of a witch hunt, you're in the cross-hairs of a succession plan that involves you as my heir."

"Why're you telling me this now?" Neruda asked, his voice suddenly distant and withdrawn.

"I want you to know why I scrutinize your actions so carefully. It's not because I'm your adversary. I'm your future," Fifteen leaned forward, locking eyes with Neruda. "I need you to work with me, not against me. I feel you're being swayed by mythology... or... or at least a set of events that aren't exactly what they seem."

Fifteen paused and leaned back in his chair as if waiting for Neruda to say something.

"I think you expect too much from me," Neruda replied. "I'm not the one to fill your shoes, I don't know how I could possibly lead the development of Blank Slate Technology... let alone the ACIO. Why me?"

"Because I selected you," Fifteen replied. "You'll just have to trust me on this."

Neruda realized he had no choice. And if there was one thing he trusted, it was the soundness of Fifteen's decisions. "Does the rest of the Labyrinth Group agree with you?"

"It's our little secret," Fifteen said with a wink. "No one really knows. I prefer it that way. However, with the intuitive power of this group, there's little doubt in my mind that everyone suspects it."

"Do you really think the WingMakers are not what they appear?" Neruda asked, hoping to steer the conversation off of himself for a moment.

"Assuming the Corteum are right, I believe the Central Race is incapable of deception," Fifteen looked at the book and then spoke in a measured, choppy style. "But - we - don't - know."



Fifteen sat back and slipped his right hand behind his lower back, massaging a tender muscle. "Don't lose sight of the bigger issue," he added. "The so-called WingMakers could be a rogue subgroup of the Central Race or they could be representatives of the M51 synthetics. Who knows for sure? Don't be seduced by the unknown when the *real* world has a higher calling for your talents and skills. That's all I'm saying, Jamisson."

Neruda listened carefully. His mind had recovered from the initial shock of Fifteen's disclosure. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to stay on the project and concentrate on decoding what's on the optical disc. We have over eight thousand pages of information, and if you've seen David's e-mail you know that we've found an access point into the disc. The information on this disc could be critical to our understanding of the technologies we've secured from the ETC site. But I need your focus and leadership."

"What's to become of Samantha?" Neruda asked.

Fifteen drummed his fingers on the top of his desk for a moment and then looked at his wristwatch. "She's being taken off the project."

"Entirely?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she's a security risk," Fifteen replied.

"And she's a distraction to the project?"

"Yes."

"We're not going to perform any more RV sessions, are we?"

"No."

Neruda gathered his courage. "Will she stay in the ACIO?"

Fifteen stole a glance at Neruda out of the corner of his eye. "As I said, she's a security risk. Let's leave it at that, my friend."

"I can't leave it at that."

"Why?"

"Because I believe she's the best RV we've ever had, and this race—whoever they are—is connected to her in some way that none of us truly comprehends. To put her through a radical MRP and send her to... to God knows where is not only cruel and senseless, but stupid."

Neruda folded his arms across his chest, looked to the ceiling and signaled his disgust with a long, drawn

out sigh. He could feel his face flush crimson, expressing the telltale signs of anger that he couldn't suppress. He felt responsible for her eviction from the ACIO and he knew the effects of a radical MRP and dislocation program on Samantha. She'd never recover.

He stood and walked over to Fifteen's refrigerator, taking a soda. He needed something to cool him down. Despite everything he felt for Fifteen, he knew he had a battle on his hands. Feverishly, his mind searched for a strategy to restore Samantha's good name. "Are you afraid she'll influence me in some unsavory way?"

"The only thing I fear is that you'll follow her into oblivion."

Neruda paused to take a deep breath before he answered Fifteen's comment. "Are you saying that Samantha will be killed?"

"No."

"Then what *are* you saying, exactly?" Neruda returned to his chair.

"Oblivion is just a metaphor," Fifteen explained. "She's no longer part of the ACIO, and I can't afford to lose your services, Jamisson. It's that simple. You

know the magnitude of our work. I shouldn't have to explain to you how vital you are to our plans. We need you to be sharp and focused. The path that Samantha has chosen, while regrettable, doesn't need to affect you. She's young and impressionable, and unable to control her self-interests. Don't make her same mistake. That's all I'm saying."

"We shouldn't do this..." Neruda mumbled.

"We *must* do this," Fifteen announced with strange conviction. "I swear to you, Jamisson, this decision is *not* reversible, so don't waste my time discussing it."

"Who's performing the MRP?"

"David is," Fifteen replied. "Evans will assist."

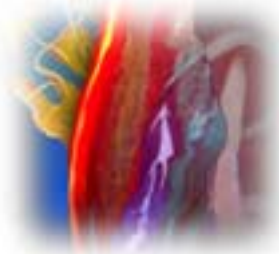
"When?"

Fifteen looked at his wristwatch. "Within the next hour or so."

Neruda sighed. "Can I talk with her before the MRP?"

"Why?"

"She has information that might be vital to our understanding of the purpose of the ETC site and its



technologies. I'd like to get as much of this from her as possible before it's too late."

"As I already told you, we talked with her. We know what she knows."

"She wouldn't tell you everything."

Fifteen picked up his phone and dialed a number. "David, I'm sending Jamisson up. Tell Evans I'd like Jamisson to have some time with Samantha before the MRP." Fifteen put his hand over the phone and whispered to Neruda. "How much time do you think you'll need?"

"Twenty minutes?" Neruda shrugged.

"Jamisson needs about twenty minutes," Fifteen said. He nodded, listening to something David said.

"Good, then I'll send him right up." Fifteen put the phone down gently. "Evans just arrived with Samantha. You should go now."

"Do I have your permission to conduct this interview in private?"

"Why private?"

"If Evans is there, she'll clam up," Neruda explained. "She has insights that we need, and if we don't get them now, we'll never get them." Neruda stood to his feet as if Fifteen had no other choice.

"I'll call Evans."

"Thanks."

Fifteen walked around the desk and held out his hand. "Do we have an understanding?"

"We do," Neruda replied, shaking his hand as if a complicated business transaction had been completed.

"Oh," Fifteen added, "the only thing I require is that this interview with Samantha is recorded.

Understood?"

"I assumed as much. I just don't want Evans in the room."

Fifteen nodded and walked Neruda to the door, patting him on the shoulder like a father would his son. "Just so you know, I'm not stepping down anytime soon."

Neruda laughed. "Good, because I won't be ready for about another twenty years."

Fifteen smiled knowingly. "You're more ready than you realize."

They shook hands again, and Neruda left, the office door clicking solidly behind him. On his way to the MRP lab, Neruda's mind focused on Samantha like a laser beam. He needed to help her, but he had no idea how he could do so without contradicting everything

he'd just pledged to Fifteen. Something told him that he was through sleeping for the day.

\* \* \* \*

When Neruda arrived at the MRP Lab, Evans eyed him with suspicion. "Looking for Samantha?"

Neruda simply nodded.

"She's in there," Evans said, pointing with his pencil to a closed door. Neruda scanned the security monitors and found the one with Samantha's blurred image sitting by a table with her hands propping her head up. She was staring at a box of white tissues.

"You have twenty minutes," Evans reminded him, pushing a button on his wristwatch.

Neruda opened the door as quietly as he knew how. Samantha didn't look up. She continued to stare, as if she'd lost interest in anything having to do with the outside world.

Neruda placed his hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. He could taste salt on his lips. "I'm sorry, Samantha."

"For what?"

Neruda pulled up a chair and sat down. He wasn't sure how to respond to her question, but he was relieved to hear her voice. "Are you okay?"

She turned to look at him. Her eyes were swollen and red, and her hair was tussled like spaghetti. "I'm not sure what I am. I feel like a damn lamb being led to the slaughter, so, no, I'm not okay. I feel like shit. No, absolute shit. Perfectly shitty, that's how I feel. Glad you asked. And how the hell are you?"

Neruda leaned back in his chair. He reminded himself that he'd never seen Samantha angry. It was a new side of her that he hadn't expected for some reason. He could imagine Evans smirking in the next room. "I think your description fits me pretty well, too."

"Are you playing the role of the priest? Here to give me last rites?"

"No one's going to die," Neruda said confidently. "I asked Fifteen if I could have twenty minutes to talk with you—"

"No, you want to get every last piece of information out of my brain before I become a vegetable. That's it, isn't it?"



Neruda looked down at his hands folded on top of the table. Samantha turned away and put her head on her arms. She looked as weary as he felt.

"Samantha, you're right, but I don't have any options. If I could wave my magic wand and release you from this situation, I would in an instant. But I can't. What I can do is preserve some portion of your memory that can help this project."

"Then tell me," she asked, "what's my disposition after the MRP? Am I escorted out of the ACIO to Timbuktu, or do I return to my post as an RV oblivious about the Ancient Arrow Project? Which is it? And don't lie to me."

"I don't know where you'll be taken..." Neruda sighed long and hard. "But you won't be returning to the ACIO."

"Thanks," she whispered.

"What?"

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For being honest with me."

"I only wish I could do more," he put his hand on her shoulder again.



“What’ll happen with my family? I mean, will I remember them? Will I be allowed to see them again?”

“I don’t know,” Neruda confided. “I haven’t been told how deep they’re going with the process.”

“It’s the hardest part—not seeing my family again. Can you make sure they don’t do that?”

“You have my word that I’ll try my best.”

Neruda withdrew his hand and remained silent for a few moments while he collected his thoughts.

“Samantha, I only have fifteen minutes. I need to know if there’s anything you haven’t told me yet that could be used to our advantage in decoding the ETC site. Can you think of anything?”

“Are they recording our conversation?”

Neruda nodded.

“Did you bring a pencil and paper?” she remarked sarcastically.

Neruda shook his head and smiled.

“What would you do in my shoes?”

“I’d walk out of here until they shot me. I’d resist until they forced me to submit. I’d never give them anything they could use. And I’d curse them so

intensely they'd never be able to look themselves in the mirror without feeling guilty."

"You make honesty into an art form, don't you?" Samantha snickered. "Are you sure they're recording this?"

Neruda nodded, a thin smile gracing his lips. He knew he was being a bit boastful, but it was, in essence, the truth. "I'm exaggerating, but I wouldn't let them take my memory without a fight."

"So how do I fight them?" she whispered, leaning a little closer to Neruda.

"I don't want to get your hopes up. There's nothing I can do to reverse this decision. If there's something you know that you think could be valuable to our understanding, the best I can do is use it as a bargaining chip to help you negotiate something. But you have to tell me first."

"So, I tell you something that's vital to the project that you don't already know. You tell Fifteen. Fifteen says, wow, this is great stuff! Let's keep her on the project—no, let's promote her to SL-10. Is that what you're suggesting?" Her voice raised in both volume and pitch, cynicism dripping from each word.

For the first time, Neruda could fully sense the futility of their situation. It was nearly 4a.m. They were both tired. Samantha felt her sanity slipping away like someone caught in quicksand without a rope. Neruda's own anger and frustration were beginning to show through, and he didn't know how to contain it.

His heart pounded like a tribal drum. "I'd do anything I could to put everything straight between you and Fifteen, but I don't know how I can do that. His mind is made up. Please, Samantha, if there's anything you know that would be useful to the project, share it with me now."

"I'm no longer a member of the club, so fuck them all. That's how I feel."

"That's it?"

"I think *fuck them all* sums it up pretty well," she said.

"Look, Samantha, I'm just trying to help, but you need to give me something—"

"What I know that you don't wouldn't be helpful to the ACIO anyway."

Neruda looked at his watch. He knew his time with Samantha was rapidly evaporating. "Who'd it be helpful to then?"

"Look, I appreciate everything you're trying to do for me. I really do. But this is all going to happen just the way it's supposed to happen. Do you really think Fifteen, or anyone else for that matter, can change the course of this thing? I could tell you everything I know and it wouldn't change one little thing. This thing is huge, and it's gonna happen exactly as it was planned billions of years ago."

Samantha raised her head and leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling. "The forces that're orchestrating this are not human or even extraterrestrial. They're ancient, primordial, fundamental... the very essence of life itself. It's been inside us from the start. The ACIO is kidding itself if it thinks it can hide anything from the WingMakers, or deny the unfolding of their plan. It's too late. Something happened twelve hundred years ago that set all of this in motion, and nothing's going to stop it."

She turned her head to look at Neruda. "Nothing."

At hearing a metallic edge to her voice, Neruda looked into her eyes. The back of his neck stippled with goose bumps and his body shuddered with chills. She was in a trance, and he had the uncomfortable feeling he was no longer talking with Samantha.

“Who are you?” Neruda asked.



Someone or something stared at him through Samantha’s eyes. “Your technology will fail you,” her lips moved awkwardly. “It is based on the unreality of your physics and your limited understanding of cosmological unity. It will fail you, mark our words.”

Neruda could sense a powerful, awe-inspiring presence. His skin crawled as a powerful electrical force pervaded the entire room, raising every hair on his body.

The being using Samantha’s body continued; her lips moved almost imperceptibly. “What you seek, what you believe you require, is nothing less than that which is perfected within you. And while this perfected aspect of you is invisible to your senses, it is all we can see of you. To our senses, your animal body and primitive human mind barely register. We see only the

core of you, your essential consciousness. You have glimpsed this core as well, but you have seen it through the lens of technology, and not through an organic, natural awakening. You are therefore misguided. Your technology is flawed and will surely fail you.”

The voice stopped and Neruda struggled to think of something to say. He didn’t want it—whatever it was—to go away. He had the sense that it could answer any question he could imagine. “What do you want?” he managed to ask.

“We desire your awakening. We want only this.”

“How?”

“It is not a question of how, it is a question of when.”

“Then when?”

“It is soon.”

“Soon, in terms of days, weeks, months, years...”

“Soon, in terms of minutes.”

Samantha’s voice was barely a whisper. Neruda imagined Evans adjusting the gain control on the listening monitor. He looked into her eyes but could feel none of her present, as if she had physically left the room. Her head continued its awkward cant,

staring into his eyes while it rested on the back of her chair. Her body was limp and lifeless except for her eyes.

“Come closer before we leave,” the voice commanded in a barely audible whisper.

He leaned forward.

“Closer. Put your ear to her lips.”

Neruda leaned forward, placing his right ear directly in front of her mouth. He closed his eyes, focusing all of his attention on the words coming from Samantha’s mouth.

“We are from the centermost point of existence. It is the place of your mythology, and yet we are not myths. We are the eldest of your kind, so ancient that we have been forgotten from your minds. Our presence is being re-established in your race so you can become reacquainted with your future.

“We have placed within you, Neruda, a code that is activated by two words: *Sovereign Integral*. From this point forward, you are awakened to our mission and you will serve this mission even though you do not understand it. The code is now activated and you are awakened. You must leave. You must find the girl, Lea. She will appear to you through her mother,



Sarah. You must leave now. Do not worry about Samantha. She is in our care, as are you. Go, and take this secret with you.”

Suddenly, the door flew open and Evans entered, his suspicious eyes darting around frantically. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

Neruda jerked his head up absentmindedly and spoke without hesitation. “Samantha needs some water. She’s not feeling well.”

Evans left and returned momentarily with a plastic bottle of water. “It’s mine, but she can have it.”

“Thanks,” Neruda said, handing it to Samantha, now returned and disoriented and groggy. She drank the water and began to cough uncontrollably. Neruda wanted to pick her up like a child and put her to bed, but he knew other plans were in store for her.

“Is she okay?” Evans asked.

“She’ll be fine, just give her a few minutes.”

“Fifteen wants to see you before you leave,” Evans reported, hinting that it was time for Neruda to go.

Neruda knew Fifteen had been watching his meeting with Samantha on closed circuit video. He’d probe him about what had been whispered in the last few

minutes of his meeting. Secrecy unnerved Fifteen as few other things could.

Neruda noticed that he felt oddly different. Somehow more confident. He knew that something had changed in him, though he couldn't place it. It was the feeling of being right, or, maybe it was the feeling of being on the right team. He had the sudden sense of conviction that he inherently knew what he needed to do, even though he didn't know what it was. He glanced at Evans and caught his eye. "Take good care of her."

Evans nodded and remained silent, trying to look patient. Neruda leaned over and kissed Samantha on the cheek and whispered in her ear. "You'll be okay. I love you." His finger touched her cheek as tenderly as any lover's could. He felt a new energy coursing through his body, which was causing a tremor in his hand.

Samantha smiled. Her expression relaxed, and the bitterness and anger that had possessed her earlier seemed extinguished. She formed silent words with her lips. "I love you, too."

Neruda turned back to Evans. "Like I said, take good care of her."

“Don’t worry,” Evans assured him. “You better go.”  
Neruda took one last look at Samantha, turned and left. He had the uneasy feeling that it would be a long time before he’d see her again—if ever. He wondered what would become of her in her new world. He wondered the same about himself.

\* \* \* \*

“Come on in, Jamisson,” Fifteen said. “You could probably use some coffee about now.”

“You made coffee?” Neruda asked, his voice incredulous.

“You’ve had a busy night,” Fifteen said, ignoring Neruda’s question and pouring a cup of strong, black coffee. “Care to tell me what went on?”

“You watched?”

“Yes.”

“Then you heard,” Neruda mentioned. “There’s not much to add.”



“Why don’t you start with the part I couldn’t hear?” Fifteen asked as he passed a cup of steaming coffee to Neruda.

“She wasn’t feeling too good,” Neruda began, “and I tried to help her—”

“Don’t start down that path. If you do, you’ll deeply regret it.”

Neruda locked eyes with Fifteen and felt his equal for the first time. He had no fear, and he knew Fifteen sensed this. “What do you want?” Neruda said in a frustrated tone. “If there’s something specific that you’re looking for, it would save us both a lot of time if you’d just tell me what it is so I can tell you what you want to hear. I’m tired of your suspicions.”

Fifteen eyed him as a man does when a lifelong friend suddenly becomes his adversary. Neruda could feel his scrutiny like a throng of emotions pressing in on his heart. He took a long sip of coffee and gathered his thoughts, knowing that Fifteen would assail him for his impudence.

“For such a short conversation, you’ve changed in a rather dramatic way,” Fifteen observed. “Are you sure you’re prepared for the consequences?”

“Perhaps more than you’re prepared for what I have to say.”

“Let’s remain civil, Jamisson. You don’t want my wrath, I assure you. So, just tell me what was said. This is the last time I will ask.”

Neruda knew his threat was real. There were technologies that Fifteen could use—under severe circumstances—to retrieve memories from either an unwilling or forgetful source. It was an unpleasant, invasive, and potentially injurious experience. Neruda had never required it, but everyone in the Labyrinth Group was well aware of the procedure and feared its use. The after-effects were often described as a “simmering paranoia” beyond the mitigating influence of drugs or therapy.

“You heard what she said,” Neruda replied. “Our technology will fail us. She said the WingMakers’ plan will—”

“Stop! As you well know, I don’t give a damn about what *she* said! I’m interested in the conversation you had with the entity that took over her body in the last four minutes of your discussion. You remember? The one that identified itself as *we*.”

Fifteen fiddled with the controls on his computer and swiveled his monitor so Neruda could see the screen. A video image of him with his head poised in front of

Samantha's face filled the screen. "Even with full gain, I can't make out what is being said, and because you're blocking the view, we can't read her lips. You can understand why I'm suspicious, and you can understand why I'm growing more suspicious as a result of your obvious evasion. Just tell me the truth. It's all I want from you, and you can go home and get some rest. I think we all could use some more sleep."

"I don't know who the entity was. It reiterated what it had said earlier. Our technology would fail. Their plan would prevail. That sort of thing. Evans interrupted before it could finish. That's all."

Neruda took another sip of coffee, well aware that Fifteen was scrutinizing his body language.

"Why is your hand trembling?" Fifteen asked.

"The energy of this being or entity was amazing. The electromagnetic field in the room must have been off the scale, and it's a shielded room, too. I'm still in the throes of it."

Neruda shifted in his chair. "Look, I'm sorry for sounding so damn pissed off, but I really care for Samantha and the thought of her mind being wiped clean... it... it just makes me angry. And then all of this

suspicion on your part doesn't exactly help my state of mind. I need some time to deal with all of this."

"Maybe a few days off—starting right now," Fifteen suggested.

"No, there's too much to do now with the breakthrough David made last night. I want to start on it immediately."

"Okay. Maybe I've been a little too intense about all of this," Fifteen said. "Accept my apologies. But in the future, be a little more forthcoming. Trust me. It worked for your father."

Neruda set his coffee cup down on the table next to his chair, and pushed back his chair, standing up too quickly. His head swooned from the sudden rush of blood and he steadied himself with his right hand. "I appreciate your understanding, and I'll take your advice."

"Which one?"

"What?"

"Which piece of advice will you take?" Fifteen asked, his voice clear and precise.

"The one about trust. Being more forthcoming."

“Good,” Fifteen remarked. “But consider the other one as well—the one about taking some time off. It might be just what you need.”

Fifteen returned his monitor to its original position and hit some keys on his keyboard. “Have a good day, Jamisson. Update me as soon as you have something on the decryption. I’ll be around all day.”

“I will, sir” Neruda said. “One more thing. Whatever happens with Samantha, I need your assurance that she’ll be able to contact her family after this is all over.”

“I heard your remark on the video. You have my word.”



“Thanks,” Neruda said. He walked to the door and turned around just as he reached for the doorknob. “Why do you have such strong suspicions about me?”

“I have suspicions about everyone. You’re just my latest target because of the circumstances surrounding your interactions with Samantha. It’s quite obvious that she’s under the control of forces that are not friendly to our cause. I know how easy it is to be seduced by the forces of change. Especially



when that change is from a force like the Central Race.”

“Then you do believe the ETC site is their creation?”

“It’s the most reasonable hypothesis. But remember, Jamisson, Central Race or not, they’re still human. Older, by billions of years perhaps, but not necessarily wiser. Remember that.”

Neruda nodded. “So experience doesn’t amount to much?”

“No, it’s damn important, but so is ingenuity and passion, and a hundred other things. No one knows this race. We’ve encountered extraterrestrial races more ancient than our own, and are they so much wiser than we are? They have a more developed brain system or capacity for assembling data, but are their decisions infallible? No!”

Fifteen stood and retrieved his sweater from the back of his chair, slipping it over his shoulder like a backpack. “We can’t afford to rely on anyone for our safety. Let me remind you, the Corteum, with brain systems more than double our own, are now living on their home planet in underground cities, the result of their own undoing. It’s not simply a matter of intelligence or experience. It’s a matter of

orchestrating a hundred variables toward a singular goal. It's what we do. And we do it better than any other organization on this planet. We can't afford to have our top people influenced by the romantic notion that the Central Race is our savior. *We* will be our own savior. I don't think there's any other way."

He paused for a moment at the sound of his computer alerting him to a new e-mail message. "If Samantha is in rapport with the Central Race somehow, and that entity who was talking through her was indeed a representative from the Central Race, or WingMakers, as they call themselves, then they seem convinced we'll fail. How could they know? Just ask yourself that question, Jamisson. How could they know?"

Neruda shrugged.

Fifteen reached for his briefcase and closed its buckles. "The whole notion of life before earth—of our planet being seeded by master geneticists, who were actually ourselves, just billions of years more evolved, may indeed be true. But doesn't it seem odd that they'd be relying on a *junior* RV to whisper something into *your* ear in order to convince us of the perfection of *their* plan and the futility of ours? Think about this

the next time you feel them tugging at your conscience. Your life may depend on it.”

Neruda could feel the seduction of Fifteen’s strategy. Plant seeds of doubt. Employ subtle threats. Hope that his hand-picked heir would step back into line. Neruda understood how Fifteen could believe that his strategy would have worked, except that now something within him was different. A brilliant, resolute, granite-like consciousness had moved over Neruda, enveloping him in its incorruptibility.

“I’ll walk out with you,” Fifteen said, heading for the door.

“I’m gonna stop by the lab and see if David’s still around,” Neruda replied. “I’m anxious to have a look at his results. Besides, the coffee’s kicked in, I couldn’t sleep now if I tried.”

“I’ll be back by eleven hundred hours. Give me an update then if you can.”

“I will. Good night,” Neruda said.

“Good night.”

Neruda walked down the hallway, opposite the direction that Fifteen walked. He noticed how well the sounds of their footsteps were synchronized until he could only hear his own. His attention shifted to the

image of Samantha lying in the MRP lab, her memories being stripped out with surgical precision. Barren of eighteen days and all they held. Memories unlike any other on the planet.

As he took the elevator to the lab he repeated the words, *Sovereign Integral*, in his mind, over and over like a momentum generator perfectly tuned to its source of energy. Each time the words rolled through his mind, he felt a propellant force, something within driving him towards a destiny of which he knew nothing except that it included a girl named Lea. He wondered how he'd ever be able to leave the ACIO to find her. How would this all happen?

He smiled at the recollection of Fifteen's childhood story. Maybe Fifteen was more prescient than he knew.





## Chapter Seventeen

### MOTHER LODE

*The potency of the human soul is defined first by the laws of creation, and second, by the awareness that these laws assure cosmic stability and spiritual poise.*

An Excerpt from *The Primus Code*, Decoded from Chamber Nine

**WingMakers**



When Neruda arrived at the computer lab, he noticed a handwritten note posted on his project monitor.

JAMISSON,  
CHECK OUT FILE AAP-1220. YOU'LL FIND EVERYTHING YOU NEED THERE. I SENT FIFTEEN A DUPLICATE FILE. I'M BACK IN AT 1400 HOURS. LEAVE ME INSTRUCTIONS IF YOU WANT AND I'LL WORK ON IT AS SOON AS I ARRIVE.

DAVID

Neruda's hands were trembling once again. He slumped in a black leather chair and ran his hands through his hair. The lab was completely deserted. Neruda hit a key and watched his monitor screen come alive with the phosphorescent glow of grays and blues. He clicked on the project file and settled back in his chair. David and ZEMI had found a potential mother lode. They had discovered the first real breakthrough in the decryption process. They had found the access point into the disc. The first opportunity to interact with the content that had been so carefully hidden on its gold, metallic surface.

An alert button drew his attention. He clicked it on. A video window instantly opened up and David's image slurred into motion.

HI, JAMISSON. I ASSUME YOU'LL GET THIS FIRST. WE ASSUME THE ALPHABET IS INTERMIXED WITH MUSIC NOTATIONS OR MATHEMATICS BECAUSE IT HAS SO MANY CHARACTERS. IT COULD BE THAT THE ENTIRE ALPHABET IS MATHEMATICAL. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT WE KNOW HOW TO ACCESS THE DISC AND IT'S CLEARLY INTERACTIVE. IT HAS THE EQUIVALENT OF A PASSWORD; WE'RE CONVINCED OF THAT, BUT WITH FIFTY-TWO CHARACTERS IT'LL TAKE A LONG TIME TO RUN ALL COMBINATIONS. LEAVE ME

AN INSTRUCTION SET. AS OF 2300, WE'VE BEGUN THE RANDOM GENERATOR PROCESS OF ASSEMBLING AND PROCESSING PASSWORDS. SEE YOU THIS AFTERNOON.

DAVID

Neruda's excitement was irrepressible. He gave out a loud whoop that echoed throughout the lab. They were on the cusp of cracking the safe. He could feel it. An electronic pop jerked him from his euphoria. One of the blank monitors lit up and David's image slowly emerged. He was busy putting on his headband, or Neural Bolometer. "I thought you'd be in here," he said.

"I was just going over your report. It's great news." Neruda said, looking up at the monitor image of David. "How'd it go with Samantha?"

"As well as could be expected. She's sleeping in recovery. I'm monitoring her right now—all vitals are strong."

"Can you keep me posted on her recovery?"

"No problem."

David continued to make adjustments to his headband of glass fiber tentacles. He was dressed in a

black sweater with thin white lines crisscrossing over his chest in a checkerboard pattern. "Any ideas about access strategies?"

"Not really," Neruda said. "Are you confident that we'll be successful through a random generator process?"

"If it's a mixture or combination of their character set, we've got everything we need. The only problem is time. We can assemble over ten to the thirteenth power password attempts per second, but the disc's validation process slows us down by a factor of two. Unless we get extremely lucky, we won't find it in our lifetime." David shrugged with a slim smile.

"The disc's access entry," Neruda began, "how many characters does the space accommodate?"

"Twenty-three, we think, but we're not absolutely certain."

"So, if we place the right combination of their characters in the password space and input it to the disc, what result do you expect?"

"We'll get a translation index for the disc. The good news is that once we find the correct password, it should only take us less than a minute to decode the entire text. But that's in theory."



“How many passwords have you tested so far?”

David closed his eyes. “As of this time-mark,” he snapped his fingers, “approximately 3.65 to the sixteenth power.”

“Shit! That’s not even scratching the surface,” Neruda grumbled.

“We could get lucky,” David smiled.

“I’m not interested in luck. Why exactly is it taking so long?” Neruda asked in frustration.



“We’re talking fifty-three characters—”

“I thought you said it was fifty-two characters?”

“It is, but we have to include the digital equivalent of an empty space because we don’t know if there’re multiple words.”

Neruda nodded before David had finished his sentence. “So there’re twenty-three character positions, each of which could contain one of fifty-three characters. It’s an astronomical number—forty some zero’s.”

“The exact number is 4.5535 to the thirty-ninth power,” David said. “Even without the relatively slow process speed of the disc, we’d still need over a trillion

trillion years under ideal conditions to exhaustively test every possible password variation.”

“It might as well be infinity,” Neruda said under his breath. “David, do you have the glyphs from the twenty-three chambers handy in your database?”

“Of course?”

“But you haven’t included these?”

“No.”

“If we include these, we’re now talking seventy-six characters that could potentially create the password string.”

“Which adds thirty more zeroes to the number of years.”

“I can’t believe they’d do that,” Neruda lamented.

“What?”

“I can’t believe a race this sophisticated would make accessing their data impossible. We’re missing something.”

“Yeah, but to them, it may not seem very complicated,” David asserted. “They may be able to do these computations in their head. Who knows?”

“Except they knew we’d be finding this thing, and they’d expect us to be the ones to open this disc—not them.” Neruda suddenly shot up in his chair. “David,

let's try something different. Put the random generator on pause for a moment."

"Done."

"Okay, bear with me. Let's apply the random generator on just the first character in the password."

"You mean apply each of the seventy-six characters to just the first character space of the password entry."

"Exactly."

"Whoa," David exclaimed a moment later. "We got something, hold on."

David closed his eyes. "I see it. We did it!"

"What?" Neruda asked.

"We have ourselves a translation index."

Neruda clenched his fist. "Fantastic. Is it for the entire text?"

"I'm checking it right now. Hold for a second."

David's expression went blank, and then he smiled the smile of a fox. "You know what they did?"

"What?"

"They've segmented each of the twenty-four sections with its own password. The first character opens up the first section and only the first



section. I'm looking at three hundred, twenty-one pages of perfect English. It should be onscreen in a few seconds."

Neruda could tell that David was reading with his eyes closed. Moments later, it displayed on his monitor, and both he and David were entranced by the writing. A delicate silence ensued while they both read what they had struggled so hard to gain access to.

You may refer to us as WingMakers. We are actually quite human, simply a future version of you. Humans of your time, conditioned as they are, seem unable or unwilling to comprehend that a future version of themselves could have invented humanity and seeded its genetic structure across the universe in which you now live. Humanity is a far more diverse and ubiquitous life form than you think. It is an ideal soul carrier, and its format is as common throughout this universe as there are life-bearing planets to sustain it.

Neruda looked at his monitor screen and realized, for the first time, how surreal his situation was. He was 12 stories beneath the ground in the middle of the desert 20 miles north of Palm Springs, California, sitting before a monitor that connected him to the

most powerful computer on earth. On his screen was a 321-page manifesto written by the Central Race. It was all he could do to ask David a question. "We got into the first section and not the others?"

"Apparently," David began, "the password was only able to access the first section. We now believe that the second section is accessible if we find a two-character password, and the third would open with a three-character password, and so forth."

"Let's try it," Neruda said impatiently. "If we're lucky, maybe the character set is reduced each time we open up a new section."

David leaned forward in his chair. "Understood. The second section is opened and I'm pasting it to your screen now. The third will be up in ten seconds or so."

"How many sections will you be able to open before we hit the time barrier?"

"Assuming that there's no character set reduction, we'll get to the ninth section tonight—it'll take approximately twenty-seven minutes to open. The tenth section will take fourteen days. The eleventh section will take eleven hundred thirty-one days, or about three years. The twelfth section, eighty-five thousand nine hundred fifty-six days, or over two

hundred years. You don't want to know the rest," David advised.

"Shit, we won't even be able access half of the information contained on this disc?"

"Bear in mind, I'm giving you the worst case scenario. We could get lucky with the eleventh section and find the password in the first week. However, probability dictates that we will only be able to reach the first eleven chambers—at least in our lifetime."

"No other options?"

"None that we can think of at the moment," David replied.

Neruda could feel a surge of exhilaration and disappointment flood through his body. His attention returned to the text, as if it were the only thing left to do.

Culture building is the primary focus of the WingMakers because it is understood to have such a significant bearing on the world of spirit and cosmological transformation. Culture building, by definition, integrates the values of individualism with the value of oneness. It is the goal of life, as it is related to a species, to evolve itself where it can be conscious of its diverse perceptions and expressions, and integrate them into a cohesive, all-inclusive culture.

Humankind deeply desires such a culture; a global culture that recognizes and appreciates the rights of its constituent parts. This is one of the primary reasons that communication technologies will evolve so quickly upon Earth in the 20th century. Through these technologies, the global culture will be more rapidly developed and experienced. And through this global culture, humankind will become increasingly sensitive to the spiritual inclinations of oneness. Not only oneness within the human species, but within the whole of life that embraces and envelops the human species, which extends into our world—the foundation of the universe.

Humankind is part of something more than simple interdependency as depicted in a food chain or ecosystem. You are part of the accumulative knowledge of First Source, achieved through absorbing the life experience of all sentient life forms within the Grand Universe. This all-encompassing knowledge is shared willingly to all life forms, but is only comprehensible to those soul carriers who have achieved an ability to step out of the constraints of time for the expression of their divinity.

You are part of an incalculably complex, but single-minded, cosmological organism devoted to the transformation of evolving life forms so that soul carriers can comprehend and appreciate their connection to the

whole cosmological structure of life, living in oneness with First Source. This is the fundamental system that overarches all other systems of the multiverse, and it is for this supernal reason that life exists.

Each of you is like a particle of a single, massive wave that moves outward, sweeping across the universal spectrum of life forms and experiences, and rebounding to the shore from whence you were created. The energy of this system is like a giant funnel that delivers a species to First Source unerringly. This funnel creates an overbearing drive for oneness and re-connection with the Primal Creator in a developing species, but the species does not realize that the Primal Creator is hidden behind the layers of human, angelic, extraterrestrial, and cosmic forces. It is so deeply hidden that until the final veil is drawn, it is never considered hidden.

The Primal Creator, or First Source, is stored within you in the cauldron of your genetic composition. There, it awaits you. And we, the elders of humanity, have come to show you how to free this image—this immutable memory of your future self. It has been seeded within your body, invisible to your senses and instrumentation, but absolutely real and absolutely yours.





What are before you are words, and behind them, a voice. What is behind the voice is a mind, which your psychologists call the Collective Unconscious. But we tell you that it is not unconscious—it is your innermost sanity, and it is beckoning you, and thousands of others like you, to step forward into this work that we have left behind. The words, music, pictures, symbols, definitions are all ways to touch this innermost sanity of First Source, and feel this world from the safety of your own. We hope that you honor these words by your actions and follow the sound of our voice to your home. Your true home.

Neruda stopped reading and glanced at the monitor that held David's face. "Are you reading this?"

"Yes."

"What do you make of it?"

David started to speak, stopped, and leaned back in his chair. "We believe the introduction is further proof of an alien intelligence, but it's impossible to say whether it's the Central Race. It certainly makes for interesting reading, though. By the way, we just finished decoding the eighth section. We'll complete the ninth section in a little less than twenty-six minutes."

"How many pages?"

“Through the eighth section, we have two thousand, eight hundred and seventeen pages,” David responded matter-of-factly. “We’re printing them out, but it’ll take another ten minutes or so to complete the printing. I assume you’ll want the first copy.”

“Please,” Neruda replied. He scrolled to the second page and continued reading.

We have installed a system of seven sites upon Earth that, when discovered and decoded, will facilitate your transformation into a new scientific and philosophical fusion that will create an entirely new, global society. You will discover this system, which we call the Galactic Tributary Zones, in due course, but first, you must share these, the first of the materials, with your planet’s citizens. They must be shared upon your data networks without regard to cost, geography, heritage, or belief system.

The material on this disc will awaken certain of your citizens to prepare for the necessary changes required to sustain your planet and enable the irrefutable, scientific discovery of the human soul. It is this discovery, and this discovery alone, that will pilot the human species into the greater society of inter-galactic enterprise and partnership.

We are aware that these words may instill fear and doubt in some of you. We are also aware that there will be many

in power that will not desire to share these materials, fearing panic and social disorder. However, if you doubt our prediction, you will not heed our warning nor will you take action. To do this is complete folly. We advise you to carefully study the system we have left behind. It is composed of more than mere words. There is music, symbols, mathematics, geometry, poetry, and art. In total, it is an encoded sensory data stream that is a potent catalyst for your next stage of evolution.

We created you; thus we coded within your genetic structure the receptors that we can activate with our words, sounds, and symbol pictures. When you immerse within our sensory data streams, you will mutate. In a genetic sense, your interior, subatomic architecture becomes more adaptable and accommodating to the frequencies of energy that emanate from the centermost section of the Grand Universe. These frequencies are quite literally the carriers of your new life as a species.

The technologies we have left behind for you to discover are able to coordinate this incoming energy to transpose your genetic structure to a higher dimensional existence, an existence that will render you invincible to our ancient enemy—the Animus. They are the soulless creatures of your nightmares. Your planet has experienced them before, but it was nearly 300 million years ago when the genetic structure of the planet's life forms were not so highly

developed, and thus, not as desirable. When they return, they will not be so apathetic. They will see the human soul carriers of your planet as being worthy of their pursuit and conquest.

The Animus seek the genetic repositories of our species because they desire to become soul carriers themselves. They fear only one thing: extinction. It is the motivation behind their quest to interbreed with species of compatible soul carriers that also possess the genetic structures that can support their collective intellect. They fear their own annihilation because of their inability to sustain the vibration of the sovereign soul within their physical bodies. They are unable to contain this frequency as an individuated essence. They can only sustain a group mind, which makes them vulnerable to the fear of extinction. And this fear drives their behavior as conquerors and nihilists.

What you have before you is the dilemma of how to bring this warning to the citizens of your planet in a way that does not break down social structures, but rather builds new ones that are complementary to the existing structures. Our only counsel is to read these materials and this will become clear to you. You have been chosen to see these words. Have no doubt of this. There will be those that will try to prevent the distribution of these materials, but your planet's future depends on your ability to find the help

you will need to bring these materials to the public's attention.

The Animus are very sophisticated life forms. They will not display aggression until it serves their purpose, and then, only after they have succeeded in gaining the cooperation of world leaders. It is their pattern to observe and analyze weakness, target leadership, build coalition, and through deception and long-range planning, orchestrate their introduction to the planet. After this introduction and the promise of charitable deeds, the Animus will continue to attract the influential elite in politics, academia, and culture into their web of selfish interests.



They are masterful manipulators with brilliant minds, and your citizenry, even the very best of your breed, will be unprepared to resist their carefully orchestrated plans until it is too late. They will interbreed initially, and establish colonies in nearby artificial planets. They will infiltrate the highest offices of government and their hybrid progeny will become the new leaders of earth and all its native populations.

The global economy will respond positively to the Animus technology transfers, propaganda, and political manipulations, but there will be pockets of unrest, and

strong resistance will bubble to the surface even in the first year of their introduction. As this resistance becomes increasingly vocal and violent it will ultimately reveal the true intentions of the Animus: control the planet Earth and its genetic repository.

With these seven sites and the artifacts therein, we, the Central Race, have provided your species with a sensory data stream that will catalyze members of your population to mutate. This mutation is extremely subtle, but it will awaken select members to their purpose, which is to discover the Wholeness Navigator—that fragment of First Source that is stored within each of you. With this discovery, you will have clear access to our protection and assistance as a species, not simply as individuals.

For time immemorial, we have protected our progeny and genetic repositories from the Animus. In honesty, we have not always succeeded. Your success is vital because of the earth's unusually diverse genetic populations. Our assistance is contained in the system of encoded sensory data streams, which will become known as the WingMakers' Materials. It is our method of reaching into your world with subtle assistance until that golden day in which you realize—as a species—that you are not the product of earth animals, but rather the vision of First Source.

All of this that we have disclosed in this communiqué is scheduled to occur over the next 75 years. This is nothing short of a revolution. It requires of you to act as a revolutionary. Your eyes alone will read these words. Remember them well. You are thus commissioned.

Neruda rubbed his eyes. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the words were directed exclusively at him. "David, are you reading this introduction?"

"I've been a little preoccupied getting the other sections translated. Why?"

"Can you look at the print out of section one and tell me what you see on page two."

"Just a minute," David replied. "Do you want me to read this aloud?"

"Yes."

"Okay," David said, clearing his throat as if rehearsing for a play. "*Life Principles of the Sovereign Integral*—it's the heading. *The entity model of expression is designed to explore new fields of vibration*—"



"Whoa, how'd you get a different text?"

"What do you mean?"

“My second page is entirely different. How’s it possible that you don’t have the same—” Neruda stopped in mid-sentence. He was looking at his monitor screen, and the text he had been reading was suddenly gone and replaced with the text that David had been reading moments before. His mind went blank. “How’s this possible?” He said to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

“What?” David asked. “What happened?”

“I was reading text that just disappeared. It didn’t print out, and you didn’t read it. It’s as if the second page was erased.”

“Like they were meant for only one pair of eyes?”

“Exactly,” Neruda exclaimed. “But how could they do that?”

“Hold on a moment.” David busied himself at a control panel. It was the monitoring system for ZEMI. “There’s nothing wrong with ZEMI. All functions are normal. The only thing that would make sense is if the program were designed to be self-erasing from the source file. Nothing’s been saved to our system. We were focused on opening up the files and printing them out.”



"Do it now," Neruda ordered. "Save everything you have the instant you open it."

"Understood," David said. "Everything'll be saved in file name: AAP DISC CONTENTS ONE THROUGH ELEVEN."

"Is the second page still the same?"

"Yes."

"Shit."

"Perhaps you should take the time to reconstruct the text," David suggested. "You remember it, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," Neruda answered, but he was already thinking how to keep it to himself. Too many things had happened in the past eight hours that convinced him that his world had changed, as if a gigantic hand had reached down, gathered him up, and dropped him on a new stage. He no longer felt a loyalty to the ACIO, but rather to the enigmatic WingMakers. It troubled him that his loyalties could be swayed so dramatically, but he also recognized that the creators of the ETC site, if they were the Central Race, offered every reason to make a change.

"Why don't you just reconstruct it into a text file and I'll insert it into the second page," David offered.

“I’ll do it in the morning, David. I’m too tired right now. I think I’ll read a little more and call it a night.”

“Okay,” David replied. “Do you want the printout before you go?”

“Yeah, is it done?”

“Stop by on your way out and I’ll have it ready for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, one more thing,” David remarked. “I was scanning the three hundred and twenty-one pages printed out for section one, and there’s not that much text. Most of it is musical notations and what appears to be programming code. We’re still not certain of its purpose, but it looks intelligible—it’ll just take some time to translate it so we can construct an application model. Philosophical text represents five percent of the printed output, poetry is two percent, mathematics is eight percent, programming code is sixty-three percent, and music is twenty-two percent. It’s a rather odd mixture.”

“Not for self-professed culture builders,” Neruda said, smiling.

David remained silent.

Neruda returned to the text, eager to read more from the voice he had come to trust. He noticed familiar words in the title.

### **LIFE PRINCIPLES OF THE SOVEREIGN INTEGRAL**

The entity model of expression is designed to explore new fields of vibration through biological instruments and transform through this process of discovery to a new level of understanding and expression as a Sovereign Integral. The Sovereign Integral is the fullest expression of the entity model within the time-space universes, and most closely exemplifies Source Intelligence's capabilities therein. This is the level of capability that was seeded within the entity model of expression when it was initially conceived by First Source.

There have been those upon Terra-Earth who have experienced a shallow breath of wind from this powerful tempest, which we have named the Sovereign Integral Consciousness. Some have called it ascension; others have attributed names like illumination, vision, enlightenment, nirvana, and cosmic consciousness. While these experiences are profound in human standards, they are only the initial stirrings of the Sovereign Integral, as it becomes increasingly adept at touching and awakening the remote edges of its existence. What most species define as the ultimate bliss is merely the impression of the Sovereign Integral whispering to its outposts of form and biology and nudging them to look

within to their roots of existence and unite with this formless and limitless intelligence that pervades all.

The Sovereign Integral consciousness is far beyond the calibration of the human drama much like the stars in the sky are beyond the touch of Terra-Earth. You can observe the stars with your human eyes, but you will never touch them with your human hands. Similarly, you can dimly foresee the Sovereign Integral consciousness with the human instrument, but you cannot experience it through the human instrument. It is only accessed through the wholeness of the entity, for it



is only in wholeness that the Sovereign Integral and its residual effects of Source Reality perception can exist. And truly, this wholeness is only obtained when the individual consciousness is separated from time and is able to view its existence in timelessness.

The human instrument is the soul carrier, which contains the physical, emotional, and mental aspects of the human being, and these can become aligned to trigger—like a metamorphosis—the integration of the formful identities into the Sovereign Integral. This is the next stage of perception and expression for the entity model, and it is activated when the entity designs its reality from life principles that are symbolic of Source Reality, as opposed to the reality of an external source that is bound to the evolution/saviorship model of existence.

Neruda paused. His eyes expressed wonderment at what he had read. He felt his mind throwing off some long-established shackles. He was anxious to read more, but was also aware that his energy was draining away rapidly. He rubbed his eyes again. "David, are you done with the text print-out yet?"

"Almost."

"I think I'll pack up and read the rest in the morning," Neruda said with a tired voice.

"I'll have it all ready for you in three to four minutes."

"Thanks, I'll stop by in five."

Neruda glanced at the monitor unable to resist the temptation to see what the next section held.

These life principles are Source Intelligence templates of creation. They are designed to create reality from the perspective of the Sovereign Integral and hasten its manifestation within the fields of vibration that has thus far repelled it. They are principles that construct opportunities for the integration of the entity's formless and formful identities. They are bridges that the human instrument—with all of its componentry intact—can experience the Sovereign Integral perception of wholeness.

As the human instrument becomes increasingly responsive to Source Intelligence it will gravitate to life principles that symbolically express the formative principles of First Source. There are wide ranges of expressions that can induce the transformational experience of the Sovereign Integral and liberate the entity from time-space conditioning and external controls. Inasmuch as the expression can vary, the intent of the expression is quite narrowly defined as the intent to expand into a state of integration whereby the human instrument becomes increasingly aligned with the Sovereign Integral perspective.

There are three particular life principles that help to align the human instrument with the Sovereign Integral perspective. They are:

- 1) Universe relationship through gratitude
- 2) Observance of Source in all things
- 3) Nurturance of life

When the individual applies these principles, their life experience reveals a deeper meaning to its apparently random events—both in the universal and personal contexts.

### ***UNIVERSE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH GRATITUDE***

This is the principle that the Universe of Wholeness represents a collective intelligence that can be personalized as a single Universal Entity. Thus, in this model of inference, there are only two entities in the entire cosmos: the individual

entity and the Universal Entity. Inasmuch as the individual soul carrier is impressionable and constantly changing to adapt to new information, so is the Universal Entity, which is a dynamic and living template of potential energies and experiences that are coherent and as knowable as a friend's personality and behavior.

The Universal Entity is responsive to the individual and their perceptions and expressions. It is like a composite omnipersonality that is imbued with Source Intelligence and responds to the perceptions of the individual like a pool of water mirrors the image that overshadows it. Everyone in a human instrument is indeed, at his or her innermost core, a sovereign entity that can transform the human instrument into an instrument of the Sovereign Integral. However, this transformation is dependent on whether the individual chooses to project an image of a Sovereign Integral upon the mirror of the Universal Entity, or project a lesser image that is a distortion of its true state of being.

The principle of *universe relationship through gratitude* is primarily concerned with consciously designing one's self image through an appreciation of the Universal Entity's supportive "mirror". In other words, the Universal Entity is a partner in shaping reality's expression in one's life. Reality is an internal process of creation that is utterly free of external controls and conditions if the individual projects a sovereign image upon the mirror of the Universal Entity.

This process is an interchange of supportive energy from

the individual to the Universal Entity, and this energy is best applied through an appreciation of how perfect and exacting the interchange occurs in every moment of life. If the individual is aware (or at least interested in having the awareness) of how perfect the Universal Entity supports the individual's sovereign reality, there is a powerful and natural sense of gratitude that flows from the individual to the Universal Entity. It is this wellspring of gratitude that opens the channel of support from the Universal Entity to the individual and establishes a collaboration of purpose to transform the human instrument into an expression of the Sovereign Integral.

Neruda stopped and glanced at his wristwatch. He had read concepts of similar perspective, but he felt there was something fundamental in the words that felt authentic, if not true. He remembered translating texts from the Corteum that felt resonant to these teachings. He wondered if somehow the WingMakers had already shaped the philosophical beliefs of the Corteum. Perhaps the Corteum's planet had also been visited by these beings from the center of the universe—though he thought it strange that the Corteum could be genetically linked to the human species.



"It's ready," David's voice interrupted.

"Thanks," Neruda said absently as if his mind were lost on other matters.

"So, what do you think so far?" David inquired.

"It's fascinating, but I'll need more time with it before I could do justice to a critical review."

"I'll leave the output from the first eight sections on my desk. Oh, and the ninth section'll be completed in another ten minutes. Do you want to wait?"

"Sure, I'll wait. There's plenty to keep me occupied for ten more minutes. This isn't exactly light reading."

"Even for you?" David chuckled.

"Especially for me."

"I'll let you know when it's ready," David remarked, and then changed his tone of voice. "We have a theory about the software programming."

"I'll bite," Neruda said. "What is it?"

"So far, each of the eight chambers has a similar data distribution. There's definitely a pattern. The majority of the data is programming code. We think the programming code is an activation sequence for the technologies found within the chambers."

"Are the translations of the code applicable to

ZEMI?"

"No, but I think we can crack it. Though it'll take a little experimentation.

"It'd help if we knew how to access their technology."

"Agreed," David said, "but maybe if we could understand their programming language, we could figure out how to access the technology."

"So you're talking about wireless code transfers?"

"Perhaps. But it could also be the music or sounds that appear to be present in these texts. Maybe these activate them. We'll see—hopefully very soon."

"Is everything saved within ZEMI's data architecture?"

"Yes, at least through the eighth section."

"Do a search on interface protocols."

"No matches."

"Damn. I was hoping we'd get lucky."

"Anything else?"

"No, I'll let you get back to work."

Neruda put his hands through his hair and briefly rubbed the back of his neck. While his body was

exhausted, his mind was reeling from all the events of the past eight hours and the text before him. He decided to resume his reading until David was ready with the ninth section.

It is principally gratitude—which translates to an appreciation of how the inter-relationship of the individual and the Universal Entity operates—that opens the human instrument to its connection to the sovereign entity and its eventual transformation into the Sovereign Integral state of perception and expression. The relationship of the individual with the Universal Entity is essential to cultivate and nurture, because it, more than anything else, determines how accepting the individual is to life's myriad forms and manifestations.

When the individual accepts changes in sovereign reality as the shifting persona of the Universal Entity, they live in greater harmony with life itself. Life becomes an exchange of energy between the individual and the Universal Entity, which is allowed to play out without judgment and experienced without fear. This is the underlying meaning of unconditional love: to experience life in all its manifestations as a single, unified intelligence that responds perfectly to the projected image of the human instrument.

It is for this reason that when the human instrument projects gratitude to the Universal Entity, regardless of

circumstance or condition, life becomes increasingly supportive in opening the human instrument to activate its Source Codes and live life within the framework of the synthesis model of expression. The feeling of gratitude coupled with the mental concept of appreciation is expressed like an invisible message in all directions and at all times. In this particular context, gratitude to the Universal Entity is the overarching motive behind all forms of expression that the human instrument aspires to.

Every breath, every word, every touch, every thought, every thing is centered on expressing this sense of gratitude. A gratitude that the individual is sovereign and supported by a Universal Entity that expresses itself through all forms and manifestations of intelligence with the sole objective of creating the ideal reality to activate the individual's Source Codes and transform the human instrument and entity into the Sovereign Integral. It is this specific form of gratitude that accelerates the activation of the Source Codes and their peculiar ability to integrate the disparate componentry of the human instrument and the entity, and transform them to the state of perception and expression of the Sovereign Integral.

Time is the only factor that distorts this otherwise clear connection between the individual and Universal Entity. Time intervenes and creates pockets of despair, hopelessness, and abandonment. However, it is these very pockets that often activate the Source Codes of the entity and establish a more intimate and harmonious relationship with the Universal Entity. Time establishes separation of experience, and the

perceived discontinuity of reality, which in turn creates doubt in the Universal Entity's system of fairness and overarching purpose. The result creates fear that the universe is not a mirror, but rather a chaotic, whimsical energy.

When the human instrument is aligned with the Sovereign Integral and lives from this perspective as a developing reality, it attracts a *natural* state of harmony. This does not necessarily mean that the human instrument is without problems or discomforts, rather it signifies a perception that there is an integral purpose in what life reveals. In other words, natural harmony perceives that life experience is meaningful to the extent you are aligned with the Sovereign Integral, and that your personal reality must flow from this strata of the multidimensional universe in order to create lasting joy and inner peace.

Gratitude is a critical facet of love that opens the human instrument to acknowledge the role of the Universal Entity and redefine its purpose as a supportive extension of sovereign reality, rather than the whimsical outreach of fate or the exacting reaction of a mechanical, detached universe. Establishing a relationship with the Universal Entity through the outflow of gratitude also attracts life experience that is transformative. Experience that is richly devoted to uncovering life's deepest meaning and most formative purpose.

David's voice interrupted Neruda's train of thought.

“Are you still reading?”

“Yes. Why?”

“We have something for you.”

“And what’s that?”

“We found a form of hypertext linkages throughout the text. There’s the equivalent of a glossary for each section of the text. I’m refreshing your screen with the new data files from ZEMI. Click on any word or phrase that seems unusual.”

Neruda pointed his cursor at the phrase, *Sovereign Integral*, and double clicked.

### **SOVEREIGN INTEGRAL**

The Sovereign Integral is a state of consciousness whereby the entity and all of its various forms of expression and perception are integrated as a conscious wholeness. This is a state of consciousness that all entities are evolving towards, and at some point, each will reach a state of transformation that allows the entity and its instruments of experience (i.e., the human instrument) to become an integrated expression that is aligned and in harmony with Source Intelligence.

“That’s great,” Neruda exclaimed, mostly to himself.

“It’ll make the text more comprehensible. That’s for

sure,” David remarked. “I think I’m going to run home and catch some shut-eye. Anything else you need before I go?”

“No, I’m fine. I think I’ll walk out with you, though. Can you bring the printout with you? I’ll meet you at the elevator in two minutes.”

“No problem. Oh, and by the way, Samantha is up. Evans escorted her from our offices just a few minutes ago. She’s fully recovered, and seems to be doing well.”

“Thanks, David. I appreciate the update.”

“You’re welcome. Signing off.”

Neruda watched the ZEMI monitor fade to a brownish, dark gray. He turned his attention back to the text of section one, and moved his cursor to the phrase, Source Reality, and instantly a definition appeared.

### **SOURCE REALITY**

First Source exists in Source Reality. Source Reality is the dimension of consciousness that is always pushing the envelope of expansion—the leading edge of development and evolution for the *whole* of consciousness. In this realm of dynamic expansion is always found Source Reality. It can be

likened to the inner sanctum of First Source or the incubator of cosmological expansion. There is no identity as a place in time because it is outside of time and non-time. It is the seam between the two, perfectly invisible and yet absolutely real.



He stood to his feet, knowing that he needed to close down the system and pack up in order to meet David. His body felt different, as though he had shed weight and was now the occupant of an elongated, not-so-coordinated, young swan's body. His head ached with the thought of Samantha. His whole world seemed in absolute turmoil, and yet he felt calm, as though he were inside the eye of the hurricane while all around him calamity struck. For some reason, the thought came into his mind to talk with Emily.

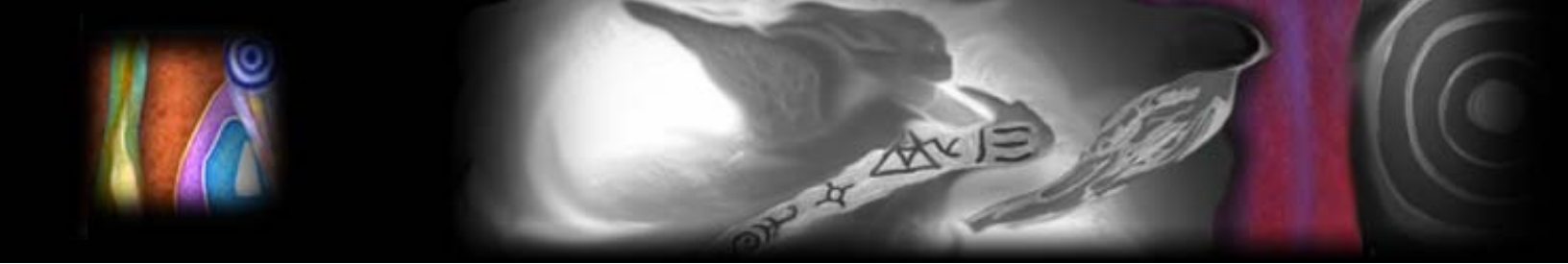
Neruda let out a long sigh as he flicked off the overhead halogen lights. He felt more alone than he ever remembered feeling, even as a five-year-old after his mother died. He knew that his defection was inevitable. He had no real choice but to find this girl Lea who held the key to this magnificent puzzle. The forces directing him were more powerful than his



personal will. He could feel them propelling him into the future, but their faces were blurred in the indistinguishable fires of transformation that surrounded him.

He smiled for the security cameras as he left the computer lab. A part of him was already thinking about the freedom that was beckoning him, and the danger that would undoubtedly accompany it.





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](http://www.wingmakers.com)

Among the other resources you will discover are:

- The Neruda Interviews (post-defection from ACIO)
- Chamber Philosophy Papers & Glossary of Terms
- 46 Chamber Poems
- Complete gallery of Chamber Paintings
- Information about the anonymous source of the WingMakers' materials
- 24 Chamber Music compositions 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