

CHAPTER 1

Mayan astronomers delved into the unknown and probed deep into the cosmos. This exploration led to the end of their civilization. Exotic hieroglyphs survived, warning future generations from making the same grave mistake. Nonetheless, scientists of the new millennium deciphered these archives as ancient myth...

Central America

Miguel Torrez bolted upright. His bloodcurdling cry echoed across the archeological dig and pierced the jungle, silencing the feral chatter of nocturnal creatures. The once tranquil night now hung in suspense like a sacrificial virgin dangling over a bottomless cenoté. Miguel patted his bare chest expecting to find blood. The all-too-real nightmare of the Mayan priest plunging a knife deep into his chest still lingered. Perspiration stung his eyes yet he refused to blink. Miguel stared into his tent mate's flashlight and spoke as though in a trance. "It's begun."

"What's begun?" Armstrong, the holder of the flashlight asked.

The prying tone sought specifics, so Miguel collected his wits. *No way is this cutthroat going to excavate any juicy details to use against me.* His fellow grad-student thrived on making him look bad in front of the professor. Miguel braced himself when he heard the sound of familiar footsteps.

Professor Frank Brodell stuck his baldhead inside the tent, his bushy beard jutting

forward. “Armstrong? Torrez? You all right?”

Unable to escape the spotlight, Miguel bit his lower lip to stop it from trembling. His parents, peers, and friends often told him his facial expressions revealed his true emotions better than a mood ring. He bit harder when Armstrong answered.

“Ask Torrez. He’s the one who woke the dead.”

Miguel remained silent.

“Another nightmare?” The professor raised an eyebrow and gestured Armstrong outside.

Alone in the dark, Miguel had no choice but to eavesdrop. He cringed while Armstrong belittled him. The nightmares of late cast doubt on his competence as a member of the team. In his defense, Professor Brodell reminded Armstrong of Miguel’s brilliance at deciphering Mayan glyphs. His genius salvaged the fact that he was the youngest undergraduate at the dig.

Miguel’s cheeks burned while Professor Brodell praised him, declaring how Miguel’s expertise exceeded all others. On the downside, the professor said if his protégé’s nightmares continued, he would transfer him ASAP.

Transfer—not an option. The discovery of the Mayan city Alcan promised to be the most profound archeological event of the millennia. Miguel promised himself he would tolerate the gruesome dreams. He tried to shake off his self-doubt, but each nightmare branded another scorching memory deep into his soul.

The tent zipped open and the flashlight sliced the darkness. Closing his eyes, Miguel relived the dream. A radiant beam pierced the night sky and struck a lone obelisk. Blinding light dispersed to the surrounding crystal skulls and blasted forth from their hollowed eyes. The surreal image chilled the marrow in his bones until his eyes met the concerned gaze of a Mayan astronomer. Recognition set in and he relaxed.

Miguel whispered, “*Xaman Ik.*”

“Hah. Those words are easy enough to translate—North wind.” Slipping into his sleeping bag, Armstrong pounded his pillow. “You don’t scare me, Torrez, go back to sleep.” He switched off his flashlight.

Cloaked in darkness, Miguel repeated the Mayan name. “*Xaman Ik...*”

California

Galen Stewart paced the sidewalk outside Berkeley’s Leuschner Observatory, cursing the weather. He glanced at his watch, stepped off the curb, and bounded across the lot to scan the road below. From his vantage point, the winding asphalt looked deserted. The ringtone of *New Divide* by Linkin Park shattered the silence and startled him.

“Talk to me, Cook,” Galen said.

“You’re on your own.”

“What?” A shot of adrenaline coursed through his veins. “What do you mean on my own?” Galen rushed back to the front entrance. The electronic keypad still flashed “reset” from the earlier power outage.

Matthew Cook’s voice resonated from the speaker. “Listen to me, don’t panic. The storm knocked a tree across the road. We’re on foot. We’ll get there as soon as we can.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Wish I were.”

“Come on, Cook, how am I supposed to get inside? There’s no way you guys will make it on time for the eclipse.” Galen plopped down onto a nearby bench and tucked the phone between his shoulder and chin. He rubbed his temples to relieve the onset of a tension headache.

“Professor Wheeler said to break in if you have to. Recalibrate the scope’s auto-sequencer. We’re counting on you, Krypto.”

Galen flinched, uncomfortable with the nickname his friends gave him because of his intense green eyes. Most of them thought he wore color-enhanced contacts until they saw the brilliance of his eyes behind reading glasses. Unlike most grad-students, Galen remained a humble introvert absorbed with his life-long goal of becoming an astronomer. The limited field forced him to enroll in physics instead. He spent most of his waking hours researching astrophysics, specifically black holes.

The front door of the observatory opened and Galen stuffed his cell phone into his pocket. He jumped to his feet. “Hold the door—”

A security guard in her mid-thirties eyed him as he ran towards the entrance. “Whoa, mister, where are you going in such a rush?”

“The telescope,” he answered, glancing at her nametag. “Ms. Martin, I’m supposed to record the solar eclipse. I need to reset it.”

“You look familiar.”

“The name’s Galen Stewart,” he said. “I’m usually with Matthew Cook. He’s on his way. Here, call him. Just hit redial.”

“No need, I recognize Matt’s number,” Martin said while pressing the “last received” button on his cell phone. “Can I see some ID?”

Galen pulled out his wallet and removed his license and student ID card.

She examined his picture before reading his stats aloud. “Galen North Stewart. Brown hair. Green eyes. Born 1987.” She raised her gaze to meet his and nodded. “Definitely green. Okay, go ahead.”

He snatched the cards and cell phone before he plowed through the entrance, barely giving her time to step aside.

“Easy—” Her voice trailed off as he sprinted down the hall.

Galen went straight to work programming the telescope. Minutes later, he finished keying in the last of the data to activate the recording. Metal upon metal whined as the telescope responded to its new coordinates.

“You need a lube job, old girl.”

Eager to check the progress, he glanced at the monitor. Concern replaced enthusiasm. A thin streak of light distorted the image. “What the hell?” Believing the monitor had malfunctioned, Galen peered into the eyepiece of the telescope. “Son-of-a-...” He rubbed his eyes. A blurry imprint now impaired his vision. *Did I forget to activate the solar filter?* After double-checking to find it in place, he recalibrated the coordinates and, this time, typed in a command to filter the eyepiece with a beefier, protective lens. A quick glance at the monitor revealed the solar eclipse in progress.

Soon, the faint beam in close proximity to the sun captured his attention.

“Whoa, where do you come from?” He returned to the scope, letting the eyepiece support his head. The narrow beam radiated from a quadrant near the sun, the same area he happened to be researching dark matter. “That’s impossible.”

From the corner of his eye, Galen caught sight of movement in the hallway. He looked up from the scope expecting the security guard and instead stared at the empty corridor, certain he had seen someone. “Who’s there?”

Galen cocked his head and listened. Only the high-pitched hum of the hard drive registered at first. Then, from the hallway, he swore he heard someone exhale a muted breath,

whispering his name. An obscure figure, darker than the gray light of day moved into view.

The first time Galen saw his doppelganger was after his thirteenth birthday. During a little league game, Galen waited on the sidelines cheering on the batter who swung, hit the ball, and released the bat. Airborne, it struck Galen's head. Since the blow, he kept seeing a strange man following him. His mother had him evaluated and the psychiatrist diagnosed it as paranoid schizophrenia, prescribing an antipsychotic to control the spells. Medication failed to help and the shadow continued to haunt him, separate, yet very much a part of his life.

Over the years, Galen grew accustomed to his older doppelganger. As he approached adulthood, Galen realized that they had the same physique, right down to the same shade of hair. Perhaps they shared the same eye color too; however, Galen never caught sight of his face, never got close enough, nor did he care to.

The figure slipped into the shadows at the sound of footsteps echoing down the corridor. Galen's jaw tightened when the security guard walked past the doppelganger, oblivious to its presence.

"Everything all right, Mr. Stewart?"

Galen blinked once and his recurrent companion vanished. "Something's wrong with the recording," he said. "Ms. Martin, would you mind taking a look?"

"Not at all." The security guard glanced at the computer screen. "It's beautiful."

What am I missing? Galen made several adjustments and then peered into the eyepiece.

Even with an additional lens, he spotted the beam, sharper than ever. Galen whacked the telescope. "That can't be."

"What's wrong?" Martin asked.

He pointed to the screen. "A streak is distorting the eclipse."

Martin's eyes narrowed. "You're mistaken; there's no distortion. I need to get back to my rounds. Thanks for the show."

"Wait. What about the beam? Look harder."

Her lips pursed and she spoke through gritted teeth. "Don't flip out on me, mister, or I'll kick your skinny ass out of here."

Noting her scowl, Galen changed his tone. "Sorry, ma'am, my eyes are playing tricks on me." He shrugged when she huffed and vanished down the hall. *Why couldn't she see the beam?* He slammed his palm against the metallic mainframe, its cold, unyielding steel shot a hammering jolt up his arm. His gaze returned to the empty hall.

Concerned the recording had failed, Galen re-examined the data. Although the eclipse had ended, the beam was still visible. He plotted the origin and calculated its trajectory. Seconds later, the computer flashed the exact longitude and latitude pinpointing Recluse, Montana. *Why there?*

Clatter from the hall startled him. Galen almost fell off his chair as he spun around.

Cook and another student rushed over to the telescope. "Stewart, did you record it?"

Relieved at first, Galen's shoulders drooped as he relinquished the controls. "It's ruined. Something distorted the recording."

"No way. Let me see." Cook pushed Galen aside. He and the other student studied the screen; smiles replaced frowns. "WTF...it's perfect." Cook cuffed him on the arm. "You had us going there for a minute, Krypto."

Confused, Galen studied the monitor and then glanced at Cook. "Are you blind?" he asked, "I still see it."

"See what? The image is clean."

“Right there.” Galen smudged a finger across the screen. By their expressions, he realized none of them could see the mysterious beam.

“He’s delusional,” the other student said.

Cook took Galen by the arm and pulled him aside. “Listen, Stewart, you’re a great guy, but sometimes your antics are tiring.”

“I’m telling the truth. The beam comes from the Sagittarius A* [A-star] black hole in our galaxy and touches down in Recluse, Montana.”

“Well, if I were you, I’d drop it. The last thing you need to do is alert Wheeler.”

“Too late.” The gruff voice came from Professor Timothy Wheeler.

Galen spun on his heels. Dark, beady eyes appraised him.

“Stewart, your dissertation is on crystals, correct?”

“Y-yes, sir.” Galen answered.

Wheeler slapped him on the back. “From now on, son, you’re on my team.”

Later that night, Galen accompanied the professor to his lab. Through the pane of glass, he noticed an attractive scientist skimming through the pile of notes.

“That’s Dr. Diana Yei,” Wheeler said, “but we call her Hal. You know, from *2001: A Space Odyssey*.”

“Because she’s cold and calculating?”

A smile spread across the professor’s face. “More like because she’s one with the computer. She recently received a PhD in Computer Science. Brilliant, young lady.”

“Who’s she talking to?” Galen asked about the overweight black man.

“Dr. Darryl Costas, team leader. And the redheaded beanpole is Tyler Weiss.” Wheeler’s

tone changed from high praise to disgust when he pointed out the third occupant. “You’re his replacement.”

Galen peered through the glass until his eyes settled on Tyler. Oblivious to his fate, the lanky team member mindlessly bounced a tennis ball against the wall.

Wheeler cracked the door open wide enough for them to overhear the conversation inside.

“*Ek’-Way*,” Hal read aloud, “a portal, the dark place, also known as the White-Bone-Snake or Black Transformer. Gruesome. Why would Tim be interested in Mayan legends? It has nothing to do with our project. What’s taking him so long? It’s half past ten already. You’d think he’d text us to let us know he’s running late.” Hal checked her phone. “He’s not answering his cell. Did you check yours? I hope he’s okay. The roads might be impassable after that storm.”

“Don’t know,” Darryl answered, “Don’t care. I have bigger problems. Red Dog Dakota is on Skype again. He sent a text and swears Recluse is the place we’re looking for, says he’s got proof this time. Since Timbo’s AWOL, do you want to talk to him?”

Wheeler plowed through the door. “Sorry I’m late; I’ll talk to Mr. Dakota. Put him on.”

“It’s just another false lead, but here, you’re the boss.” Darryl started the transmission and pushed away from the desk. His chair rolled into Galen. “Who the hell are you?”

“The professor will explain,” Galen replied. He smiled at Hal and greeted Tyler with a curt nod. Curious, Galen leaned against Darryl’s chair to get a better look at the computer screen. A Native American, he assumed to be Red Dog, appeared uptight.

“I’m telling you lightning came out of the mound, not from the sky.” Red Dog emphasized his next words by gesturing his hands to imitate an explosion. “The top blew off, exposing an obelisk. I’m sure it’s Mayan.”

“Are you certain?” Wheeler asked. “I need hard evidence before I make a trip to God’s Country.”

Mayan ruins in Montana? Galen exchanged glances with Wheeler. The professor’s thick eyebrows seemed to climb over the rim of his glasses and up his forehead.

“This is Galen Stewart. He also mentioned Recluse’s significance to me just this afternoon.” Wheeler’s finger hovered over the keyboard shortcut ready to disconnect Skype. “All right, Mr. Dakota. Email the photo immediately and I’ll get back to you.”

“Who the hell is Stewart?” Darryl asked.

“He’s standing behind you. Tyler’s replacement”

Galen cringed at the professor’s abrupt announcement. Before Tyler could object, Wheeler ordered him to pack his bags.

Flushing, Tyler glowered at Galen while Wheeler wasted no time and turned to the team leader next. “This could be it, Darryl. Why the hell did I let you talk me out of investigating Recluse?”

“Me? You’re the one who said it was too far north.”

“Don’t argue,” Hal said as Wheeler opened his email. “It’s definitely an obelisk with markings. Zoom in.”

“Probably Native American although Red Dog swears it’s Mayan. What could a Montana trail guide possibly know about Mayan hieroglyphs?” Wheeler asked.

Darryl looked at Galen. “And what do you know about Recluse?”

The Jamaican’s stare sliced through Galen as though he were a specimen under a microscope. He ignored the question and returned his attention to the professor, whose face was inches from the monitor.

“It’s hard to tell...only the top is exposed.” Wheeler scratched his jaw. “Good God, it does look Mayan.”

Leaning closer, Galen placed a hand on the professor’s shoulder. “Sir, the beam, I see it. It’s shooting straight into the obelisk.”

CHAPTER 2

A tennis ball bounced off the calendar pinned to the wall and landed in Galen Stewart's hand. He tossed it again, targeting a specific date. Had five long months already passed since he joined the SiLB team? And, what did he actually accomplish during that time? *Nada...not a thing.*

The organized desk and empty in-basket confirmed his wasted time. *Give me something to do. Anything!* Galen caught the ball and squeezed it, recalling how Tyler, the beanpole lackey he replaced, used to bounce the same tennis ball off the wall. Galen tossed the ball off the calendar one last time and then hurled it into the trashcan, the force nearly knocking it over.

Dr. Diana Yei strolled into the office with steam rising up from the coffee mug she held. "Only free time I have to get a facial."

"Morning, Hal. How was your night?"

"I crashed early. I'm glad Darryl and Tim will be back today."

Galen wished he were on a first name basis with the professor. He felt like an outsider. At least Hal and Darryl treated him as though he were part of the team. Professor Timothy Wheeler remained distant.

"Have one," Hal said with a mouthful, offering him a bag of pastries.

“Thanks.” Galen walked over and leaned against the edge of her desk. He grabbed the gooey apple Danish on top. “Got anything for me to work on?”

“You’ve been a great help answering emails and phone calls, which lets me concentrate on programming.”

“Wish I could do more.” Galen devoured the Danish, wondering if he had forgotten to eat breakfast. “I don’t recall signing on as a secretary.”

Hal flashed him a sympathetic smile and then logged onto the computer. “Tim, I mean Professor Wheeler has something special in mind. He texted me the details last night.”

Galen admired Hal. She was the brains behind the SiLB team. Always polite, she treated him with respect. He also marveled at how she kept to herself. Galen wondered if he should have kept his personal life in the dark. Instead, he chose to be straightforward with the team and told them about his schizophrenia. Still, that prognosis was a lie. *No need to worry them about my doppelganger.*

“Relax,” Hal said, “Professor Wheeler won’t replace you. You’re the beam keeper.”

Her soothing smile reassured Galen. He returned the gesture and said, “You don’t know how relieved I was when Darryl measured an actual power level last month. It grounded me, if you know what I mean.”

Hal nodded. “Yeah, it must be hard to convince people when you actually do see something tangible while suffering from schizophrenia.”

Speaking of—where is my unattached shadow? Three months had passed since his doppelganger confronted him. Fed up with nothing to do and Darryl’s constant banter, Galen had tried to quit the team two months after he started. He had said his goodbyes and ignored the professor’s protests. When he opened the door to leave, Galen’s haunting shadow blocked his

path. Galen slammed the door shut and returned to his desk. That was the last time he saw him.
My shadow wants me to stay. But why?

The door swung open and hit the wall with a thud. Galen nearly slid off Hal's desk from the abrupt noise.

Dr. Darryl Costas crammed his body through the door. He let go of the rolling suitcase behind him and kicked it into the corner. "It's official," he said. "We are going to harvest the beam's energy in addition to lightning."

"Shouldn't we clear it with our sponsors first?" Hal asked. "It's a laser beam coming from a black hole. It's extraterrestrial. You have no idea if the Electronet will hold that kind of power."

"My pride and joy won't let me down. It's the perfect test for the Electronet. If she holds—and she will—we'll know she can harvest any amount of lightning Mother Nature can dish out. We only have to capture a smidgen of the beam compared to the amount of lightning. Besides, Timbo agrees with me. Okay, okay, it was his idea."

The Electronet reminded Galen of a two-sided spider web. Weaved of fiber optics and nanofibers, the net would expand and bulge outward like a puffer fish when it harvested energy.

"I sometimes wonder if Tim has his own agenda," Hal said. "His faith in Mayan folklore worries me."

"What do you expect? He used to be an archeologist with Professor Brodell." Darryl wheeled his suitcase over to his desk and removed his tablet. "Frank Brodell happens to be our most generous sponsor since the discovery of the obelisk. You're right, Hal, I'm sure Timbo has his own agenda. Works for me as long as it doesn't interfere with ours."

In Galen's opinion, Professor Wheeler was an oddball. The man had strange ideas,

strange plans. In the professor's eyes, Darryl could do no wrong. It was a mutual admiration society—one Galen knew he would never be a member of nor cared to join.

“Wait until you see the site, Galen.” Darryl's chubby fingers skated across the tablet's screen to display a row of photos. “Remember how we had to hike in from Lookout Point? Well, Colton and his crew cleared the trees so the road is passable now. Soon as he heads back, they will construct the barricade around the mound. I picked out this amazing steel fence guaranteed to keep even Big Foot out.” Darryl's jovial laughter seemed to brighten the brown hues in his eyes.

The photos looked as though the images were a world away. Galen wished enthusiasm or something would snap him out of his funk. “So when do Hal and I get to go?”

“In two days. Boys and girls, start packing.”

“I won't be ready,” Hal said, suddenly rearranging her desk as though someone had pressed a panic button. She nudged the bag of pastries toward Galen.

Passing the goods over to Darryl, Galen eased out of her way.

“I'm sure Galen will be ready. Right, mon?”

“Just need to re-evaluate the crystal setup.” Galen's jaw hurt from his Cheshire smile.

“Great,” Darryl said, rummaging through the bag. He stuffed half a cinnamon bun into his mouth. He swallowed and continued with gusto. “I ran some more tests on your laser beam. It's not hot like normal lasers; otherwise, it would burn straight through the obelisk.” He finished the other half of his pastry and then pulled a cheese Danish out of the bag. “Flying makes me hungry.”

“Everything makes you hungry,” Galen teased. He enjoyed the times when Darryl showed his jovial nature. The big teddy bear, however, turned into a grizzly whenever provoked.

Galen knew he would soon prove his worth; he would finally feel like part of the team. His daydream popped when Wheeler entered the lab followed by a tall man in his thirties. Galen immediately thought of the Brawny paper towel man.

“Dr. Diana Yei, Mr. Galen Stewart, this is Mr. Colton, general foreman of the crew in Recluse.” Wheeler moved to his desk after the introductions.

“Call me Hal, Mr. Col—”

“Colton, just Colton, ma’am,” he said, offering his hand. “Why the name Hal when Diana means the goddess of the moon?”

“She’s more geek than Greek,” Darryl said, laughing at his own joke.

Galen tried to hide his smirk for Hal’s sake, her face turning a shade of pink. He then noticed a hand in his vision.

“So, you’re the one with the X-ray vision,” Colton said.

The heat in Galen’s face rose and he wondered if his face matched Hal’s hue. “Yes, I’m the one who spotted the beam from outer space.” He feared he had held his gaze too long and that his green eyes triggered a reaction from the newcomer.

Colton exchanged glances with Darryl, and said, “I see why you call the lad, Krypto.”

Darryl slapped Galen on the back. “He’s no superman, but he is special.”

Special? Galen winced from the insinuation rather than from the smack. He would settle for being normal for a change. The next two days were definitely going to drag.

Miguel Torrez filled his lungs with the dense humidity of the tropical morning. He often preferred venturing off on his own before the rest of the camp woke. Never straying too far, he sat on the edge of the cenoté with his feet dangling high above the water. The ripples below

appeared murkier this morning, causing Miguel to wonder how many people over the centuries had drowned in the sacrificial well. The dark pool remained silent, unwilling to divulge its secrets.

Under the shade of a Copal tree, he opened his satchel and removed a sketchpad, flipping to the page of traced hieroglyphs from the ancient monument he and Armstrong unearthed months ago. It took weeks to clear the debris from the carved markings and, since then, Miguel struggled to decipher its meaning during his time here in Alcan, the oldest Mayan settlement discovered last year. His Harvard professor counted on him to interpret its significance.

To date, Miguel had decoded an account of a place far north where the 13 gods convened. The rest remained a mystery; however, he knew he would eventually break the code providing he managed to endure the cursed dreams haunting his nights. They began a month after he joined Brodell's expedition, on the same day he crossed paths with one of the locals. Miguel recalled how the elderly man had beckoned him to follow. Ignoring his better judgment, Miguel followed him as he hobbled down an overgrown path until they reached a half-buried entrance to an underground dry cenoté.

The old man paused at the narrow opening of the cavern and held out his hand to direct Miguel to stay behind. He slipped inside the cavern, and when he re-emerged, the old man held a ring in his wrinkled palm. "For you," he said in a Mayan dialect Miguel understood.

"I can't," Miguel said, examining the jade ring carved in the likeness of a jaguar. Its fiery opal eyes and fangs glistened under the sun. "It's magnificent." His eyebrows disappeared under the hair hanging over his forehead. He twirled the ring, inspecting the handcrafted quality.

"Looks like it should wrap around something."

"Yes," the old man said with a hiss from the gap between his front teeth. "A second ring

shaped as a serpent—lost forever. Try it on.”

“I shouldn’t. The ring belongs in a museum.”

“You must. It will prepare you for your journey.”

Miguel’s jaw tightened. Did he hear correctly? The old man’s dialect was rough, but he thought he heard the word *journey*. “I don’t understand.”

“You must save the world.”

“Save the world?” *From what?* Miguel wondered if the locals believed in the end-of-the-world rubbish splattered all over the Internet. The ancient Maya claimed the end of the calendar was a rebirth—the next 5000 years.

“Please, try it on.”

After exhaling, Miguel slipped the ring on his finger. The band felt loose enough, so he relaxed and admired it on his hand. *Not bad*. When Miguel looked up, the old man vanished.

“Hello? Sir?”

A cold gust blustered around him and then it rushed inside his body. The ring tightened around his finger, welding its band to his flesh. Miguel cried out and fell to his knees, heaving the contents of his stomach. Cradling his abdomen, he rose to his feet. *What on Earth?*

Miguel tugged at the ring, but it failed to budge, stuck on his finger as though it were a permanent fixture. That night, the nightmares started and never ceased. No other explanation other than that the ring was cursed.

The crunching of palm leaves spurred Miguel’s thoughts to the present. Someone or something approached the cenoté. He turned, surprised to see the same old man standing several yards away. The local smiled, showing off the gap between his teeth.

“You!” Miguel jumped to his feet. Using a Mayan dialect he believed the local would

understand, he said, “Take back this ring. It’s cursed.”

“My friend, I bring you another gift.” The old man held out five round disks, each five inches in diameter and carved from limestone. “They will protect you on your journey.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

The old man stepped closer. “Oh, but you are.” He reached for Miguel’s satchel and dropped the five disks inside. “You have no choice,” he said as he turned to leave.

“Wait,” Miguel said, grabbing hold of his arm. “The ring is cursed. I don’t want any of your gifts.”

“You must.” The old man twisted free and lunged into the well.

Miguel ran to the edge of the cenoté and stared at the smooth surface—not a single ripple. *I’m going mad, first the nightmares, now hallucinations.* He only had to survive one more month before the winter solstice. He would continue to conceal the nightmares from the others.

“Miguel,” Frank Brodell’s voice rang across the opening. “We need to talk.”

Not now. Miguel tried to clear his head—murky as the cenoté below him. With a deep breath, he turned to face his mentor. “Yes, professor?”

“Listen, son,” Brodell said. “You’re doing great work here. Unfortunately, I owe my friend and colleague, Dr. Wheeler a huge favor. He needs my best and you’re it. I’m letting him borrow you for his project.”

“You can’t loan me out like a library book.”

“I’m afraid I can.” Brodell tried to wrap his arm around Miguel’s shoulders, but he slipped free.

“No, I’ll miss all this...”

“Go see Wheeler’s obelisk, decipher it, and you’ll be back here in no time.”

“Send Armstrong.”

Brodell scratched his thick beard. “I need you to pack your bags. Your flight leaves this afternoon.”

Miguel’s eyes stung, fighting back tears. He had fought so hard to be part of this expedition. What choice did he have? He picked up his satchel, heavy from the weight of the disks. How in God’s name would he get through Customs? *Good, maybe they won’t let me leave.*

CHAPTER 3

Three mountains bordered the valley west of Recluse. Galen stood at the base of the thirty-six foot, treeless mound and gazed up at the limestone obelisk. The stream of luminosity that only he could see shot down from the heavens. The lustrous halo beckoned him like a lighthouse—a surreal scene against Montana’s mountainous backdrop. Galen thought of Excalibur wedged in stone, waiting for the chosen one to set it free. Was he the Chosen One? After all, he was the only one who could see the extraterrestrial beam. His self-assurance had grown when the team registered the beam’s astronomical energy, confirming, at the very least, he wasn’t totally mad.

Galen’s eyes burned from staring at the beam too long. He rubbed them while inhaling the crisp, mountain air of the late afternoon. Ponderosa and Blue Spruce rallied together; the bite of turpentine and pine needles stung his lungs. The atmosphere of Recluse differed from the life-sucking smog back home.

When he opened his eyes, the magnificent landscape transformed to an urbanized surrounding. To his left, he could see the top of a small wind turbine; to his right, solar panels ran parallel to the parking area. Three generators butted up against the backside of the steel shelter Galen had christened as the Hilton for its extravagant features. The ten-foot fence Colton

and his men erected coursed with electricity around the entire perimeter. Galen wondered if the constant hum scared away the wildlife. He wished the barrier could protect him from the resurfacing dread that shadowed him since his arrival. The minute he thought about his doppelganger an army of goose bumps stood at attention on his arms and neck.

Unable to concentrate, Galen leaned against the outside of the steel structure. Built to withstand earthquakes and the extraordinary weather of late, the shelter would shield the team while they captured energy from the beam. The stainless steel wall shimmered with his reflection, soon replaced by that of his constant companion. His doppelganger had never materialized this close before. “Leave me alone,” Galen cried, stepping back into someone’s firm grip. The person took hold of his torso, spun him around, and shoved a pill into his mouth.

“Swallow it for chrissakes!” Darryl ordered.

Galen obeyed without protest. He hid the truth from his friends by swapping out his prescribed medication with placebos. Schizophrenia was not the source of his troubles. Galen played the façade instead of having to explain his idiosyncrasies. He never revealed to anyone that he still saw his doppelganger—closer now than ever. Whenever his shadow appeared, Galen struggled as though the gravity of his fear weighed and slowed him down. He glanced at the wall to verify the image had vanished. With the heaviness lifted, he turned to Darryl’s concerned face.

As team leader, Darryl had become a loyal friend. It was not always the case though. Skeptical at first, Darryl disagreed with Wheeler’s decision to keep Galen until they recorded the off-the-chart energy levels emitting from the obelisk. Ever since, Darryl clucked around like an overprotective mother hen. Nonetheless, his initial resentment scarred Galen more than he cared to admit.

“You need to remember to take your medi—” Darryl’s words faded, drowned out by the

gunning motors of approaching vehicles.

A convoy of trucks and cars screeched to a halt in an adjacent lot. Dust obscured Galen's view of the people piling out. He looked to Darryl and then to Hal as she exited the shelter. Her bravado surprised him for such a petite woman.

Several townsfolk approached and stopped short of the gate. Galen recognized Nancy Denver, the sheriff's youngest daughter. She worked at Tanners Bar & Grill and instead of her uniform; she now wore jeans and a wool pea coat. She held up a handmade sign painted: 'Get Lost.' Others waved signs that read: 'Go Back to California' and 'Fear the End!'

An indiscernible figure moving against the crowd caught his attention. Galen's eyes locked with the piercing ones of his detached shadow. Hidden behind a rancher shouting incoherent chants, the dark figure slipped into the open before slithering behind another protester. His doppelganger popped its head over another man's shoulder and then tilted its head, mimicking Galen's movement as he tried to follow its every move. The shadow lowered itself, only to reappear behind another protestor.

In turn, Galen slipped behind Darryl.

The large man hid him well. Galen's eyes fell upon Hal whose boldness seemed to fuel his own. He peered around the human shield.

Darryl asked, "What's their beef?"

A couple of demonstrators nudged Nancy Denver forward. She stopped in front of the gate with her arms folded across her chest.

From the first time he met her at the restaurant, he sensed she might be trouble. His gaze left hers to find his shadow weaving through the bodies of protestors, all unaware of its presence.

A car door slammed. Galen jumped. He spotted a redhead retrieving a camera from the

trunk of her Yaris. She remained next to her vehicle while filming the crowd.

A whistle silenced the buzz of the crowd. Nancy removed her thumb and finger from her mouth. “We know what you’re up to. You plan to exploit Recluse in order to gain five minutes of fame. Well, we won’t let you get away with that. Leave Recluse and take your lightning rod with you!”

Galen glanced at her before his gaze switched to his shadow, to the reporter, and then back to Nancy, who chanted and clapped to incite the crowd.

Darryl raised his voice over the racket, but no one listened. He ducked to dodge an empty beer bottle.

The bottle nicked Galen in the head and shattered against the steel wall behind him. His eyes met those of the rancher who threw it. Standing in the cargo bed, the man rallied the others to cheer over his lucky aim. Galen disregarded Darryl and Hal’s coddling. Instead, he focused on the troublesome shadow that appeared behind the rancher who had targeted them. His doppelganger then hoisted the man upward.

The rancher sailed out of the cargo bed and hit the ground with a thud. He leapt to his feet and cursed the occupant left standing in the back of the truck. The crowd hushed with concern for their fellow townsman.

This was the first time Galen’s shadow had touched somebody, let alone attacked someone. His knees buckled until he felt Darryl and Hal steady him. Galen worried that the fighting amongst the townsfolk would eventually turn back on them.

A thunderous clap froze the action.

Colton stood near the mound wielding a Remington Woodsmaster. A trail of smoke snaked upward from the barrel. “This is private property! Leave now or face the consequences.”

He clenched his jaw already thick with five-o'clock shadow. Colton called out to his men. "Secure the perimeter." The three hired hands, Page, Hanson, and Evans followed their supervisor toward the protestors, each man armed.

The protestors lowered their fists and those holding signs dropped them. Everyone scrambled back to their vehicles and drove away in haste.

Galen searched in vain for his shadow in the back of the truck. Instead, his eyes came to rest on the lone woman holding the camera. Red heels matched the vehicle's color.

"If I can have a word—" She hesitated when Colton raised the rifle.

"Down boy," Darryl ordered.

A wolf-whistle sounded from one of Colton's men. The redhead removed her sunglasses and coat as she slipped through the gate. Her slim-fitting suit hugged her waist and the high heels accentuated her long legs. "Dr. Costas, my name is Valerie Urban. I'm a reporter for the Recluse Weekend Gazette. I've been hoping to interview you for the past two months. Can you spare a few moments?"

Detecting Darryl's awkwardness, Galen wagered the reporter had caught him off guard, not because of her attractiveness, but because her attention was fully on him.

"Of course, please, sit." Darryl motioned to the picnic table.

Colton removed his worn, leather jacket and placed it across the dusty bench.

Valerie thanked him. She then smiled at Hal and Galen who sat opposite her. While Darryl settled next to her, she organized her laptop and video cam to record their conversation. All set, Valerie folded her hands on the table.

"What's your business in Recluse?" She eyed all three. "As you know, there's dissension among the townsfolk."

Darryl managed to squelch his Jamaican accent to project a professional manner.

“Ignorance is not always bliss. After I graduated MIT, I advertised for sponsors to finance my project. I always knew there had to be a more efficient and cleaner means to produce energy. Under the constant scrutiny of the oil mongers, I came up with an alternative source by harvesting Mother Nature. Dr. Timothy Wheeler is a highly regarded professor at Berkeley. He backed my Semi-independent Lightning Bay project; that’s S-i-L-B, pronounced ‘Sil-bee’ for short.”

Losing count of the “I’s” in Darryl’s intro, Galen studied the reporter’s face. Her burgundy hair pulled into a bun accentuated her pointed chin and thin nose. Behind tortoise-rimmed glasses, her heavily applied makeup highlighted her cheeks and large blue eyes, reminding him of his sister’s Bratz doll. Assuming the role of both editor and reporter, he assumed Ms. Urban adopted this style to appear more intellectual.

“What exactly does this Semi-independent Lightning Bay do?” Valerie asked. “Can you explain it in layman terms?”

“Certainly, SiLB, or the bay unit stores and captures energy via what I dubbed the Electronet. It started out as a containment system designed to house energy while still capable of absorbing more. To be precise—lightning. Next, came the tedious programming, and that’s when Dr. Diana Hal Yei joined our team two years ago.”

Hal bowed her head without interrupting the flow of his explanation.

“We then searched for an area known for its extensive lightning strikes. Wheeler and I investigated countless strike zones before we discovered Recluse. He was adamant about finding the perfect location. Red Dog Dakota, whom I’m sure you know, called us about this site northwest of Recluse. He claimed lightning struck daily—”

“Yes, Mr. Dakota, from the Flathead Reservation, is a renowned tour guide in these parts,” she said.

Renowned to whom, Galen wondered and noticed how Darryl seemed to take advantage of the pause to check a text message before continuing.

“We dismissed Recluse until he called us back with news of how one strike uncovered an obelisk. Wheeler believes it may be Mayan. Crazy, I know. Oh, and this is Galen Stewart, our newest member.”

Nodding his greeting, Galen lowered his gaze and bit his lower lip. Darryl managed to leave out his credentials and only remembered to introduce him after saying the word *crazy*.

“We should wrap this up,” Darryl said. “We have a lot of work to finish before the rest of our team arrives.”

“Rumors say Professor Wheeler went to pick up your Mayan expert. Is he the rest of your team?”

“Unfortunately.” Darryl held up his phone. “Wheeler is five minutes away if you care to interview his so-called Mayan guru.”

“I’d be delighted. Thank you. But please, one more question, if I may?”

“Make it snappy.”

“If the SiLB project means to capture lightning as an energy source, then why schedule it on the 21st of December? I’ve read on the Internet that it’s the end of the Mayan calendar, possibly the end of the world.”

“Tabloid bullshit,” Galen coughed into his hand. He did a double take when he spied Red Dog Dakota slipping through the gate.

“Galen’s right.” Darryl stood. “Here’s the real scoop, Ms. Urban. Wheeler believes the

Earth's magnetic poles will shift on the Solstice. A reversal will not end the world; the worst it will do is disrupt power and satellite transmissions. More importantly, we anticipate that it will intensify the lightning storms. The amount of energy produced during the solstice will be tenfold—thus the ultimate test for the Electronet. If it can handle that magnitude, then we can build thousands worldwide to capture enough power to supply the entire world for years to come. And that is why we chose that particular day to run the experiment.” He looked at his colleagues and chuckled. “End of the Mayan calendar—rubbish.”

“What about the unusual abundance of weather anomalies, earthquakes, tornadoes, and volcanic activity? People believe these are apocalyptic signs.”

“More like Mother Nature's revenge,” Galen said.

Flushed, Valerie shut off the recorder. “Thank you, Dr. Costas, Dr. Yei, and Mr. Stewart.” She shook their hands, unwilling to let go of the last.

Galen pulled his hand away when a dark shadow moved closer. He nearly tripped as he stepped back only to catch his balance by grabbing onto Hal. His darting focused on the gaze grizzly-like Native American who stood behind Valerie. Red Dog gave him the creeps. Perhaps it was his towering stature, hovering like a dark cloud. He reminded him of his ever-present shadow.

“Wheeler's team shouldn't have to answer your mindless questions, Ms. Urban.” Red Dog's low growl sparked a chill up Galen's spine. “Write a story that warns your readers to stay away from this site. Tell them it is off limits. The Great Spirit will strike down all trespassers. Do I make myself clear?”

“Great Spirit?” Darryl interjected with another chuckle.

The screeching of brakes and a blaring horn startled Galen. He relaxed when he realized

Wheeler had returned, not the protestors for a second round. Then he noticed the passenger.

Galen expected an Indiana Jones type of archeologist. With the Fedora absent, the top of Torrez's head barely reached the professor's shoulders. His disheveled hairstyle and lack of facial hair made him appear under 20. *How can this Torrez be an expert?*

CHAPTER 4

From his vantage point, Miguel Torrez stared at the obelisk. Its size was miniscule compared to the Alcan site. What wrong had he done to make Professor Brodell transfer him? Thinking about it churned the acid in his stomach. Ignoring the constant reminder that he was on edge, Miguel followed Professor Wheeler over to the crowd standing next to the steel shelter.

Wheeler pulled a heavysset black man aside. “Who the hell is she?”

Miguel assumed the professor spoke to Darryl Costas, team leader, whose dreadlocks would envy even Medusa.

“Valerie Urban, I’m a local reporter.”

“We don’t have time for interviews, Ms. Urban,” Wheeler said.

“Already done,” Darryl replied. “She wants to interview your golden boy next.”

“Perfect. Ms. Urban, this is Miguel Torrez.” Wheeler draped his arm around Darryl and pulled him aside. “I need to talk to you and Hal. Where’s Red Dog? Thought I saw his ugly mug here seconds ago.” When only Darryl shrugged in reply, he ordered Colton and his men to search the grounds.

“I have a few questions for Mr. Stewart as well,” Valerie said.

Miguel stood beside her as she pulled out a recorder. He removed his coat, realizing nobody else wore one. There was no snow at the site; yet he remembered the snow covered roads leading there. His eyes moved to the tall man staring at him. "I'm Miguel Torrez." He relaxed as they shook hands.

"Galen Stewart. Welcome aboard. Cool ring."

Embarrassed, Miguel pulled his hand away and slipped it behind his back. The ring was a long story, one that might raise suspicion and prejudices.

"And, as you know, Mr. Torrez, I'm Valerie Urban. If you don't mind, I'd like to get started.

"Please." Miguel welcomed the diversion.

"You look like you just graduated from high school. Can you shed some light on your background?"

Taken aback by her curtness, Miguel blinked several times before responding. He brushed aside the long wispy bangs behind his ear to appear older. "I'm twenty-three. My advanced studies in high school convinced Harvard to offer me early admission and free tuition."

"Sweet," Galen said.

"In my opinion, you're too young to be an expert. Dr. Wheeler, however, admires your work and agrees with Red Dog Dakota that the obelisk is Mayan." Valerie looked over to the others before asking, "Ever hear of them traveling this far north?"

Miguel glanced sideways to the top of the mound. The obelisk looked like a simple white pillar. "Preclassic Maya nomads traveled great distances in search of the Three Stones of Creation. The three mountains surrounding the valley resemble them."

"Interesting. Is the obelisk Mayan?" Valerie asked.

Miguel shifted his weight to the other foot. “I can’t be sure until I examine it; however, its significance could be another matter altogether. It could be a marker or a monument erected for those who died on their journey.”

“Mayans in Montana sounds crazy. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Stewart?” Valerie asked.

Galen’s eyes narrowed. “Again with my name following the word crazy,” he said in a low growl. “On the contrary, the obelisk is of Mayan origin and the hieroglyphs date those previously documented.”

Valerie’s hard looks seemed to soften by the tone of his voice. Miguel imagined Galen had to fight off women all the time. He had the height, the looks, and killer green eyes.

“Fair enough,” Valerie said. “And how do you fit in this team?”

“I’m a physicist. Crystals are like diodes. They control the flow of electricity in one direction. I’m in charge of the crystal setup.”

“Sounds brilliant,” Valerie said. “Thank you for your cooperation, gentlemen, but it’s getting late. I’d best head back to town before it gets dark.”

“I’ll walk you to your car.” Galen’s offer made the reporter gleam.

Miguel knew where he stood—out of the picture altogether. *Brilliant?* He remained behind and listened to the valley. Other than a constant hum from the fence and the wind whistling through the trees, silence shrouded the basin. There were no birdcalls. Twilight here differed from the jungle chatter he had left in Central America. The serene moment ended when Darryl spoke.

“So, you’re the Mayan expert.”

“A pleasure,” Miguel said, reaching out to grasp his hand. “I’ve read your articles on the Internet. I wanted to familiarize myself with your work before I arrived.”

Joined by Wheeler, Darryl seemed to drink up the flattery for his shoulders and chest puffed up like a penguin. He extended his hand. "Let's start with intros, shall we? This is Dr. Diana Yei, hired for her computer expertise. Where's Krypto?"

The petite woman nodded politely. "Hello, call me Hal, everyone else does."

Miguel returned the gesture. The longer he stared at her, the more he found himself lost in her exotic eyes. Then he realized Darryl had dragged Galen Stewart back over. In contrast to Hal's dark eyes, Galen's were as green as Kryptonite.

"We've met," Galen said. "Listen, it's great to have a new face around here; a newbie the others can harass besides me." His eyes glistened with mischief like a jaguar on the prowl.

"Those hard-working lads over there," Darryl said, "we dubbed the grunts: Colton, Page, Evans, and Hanson. We keep them segregated, so none of our intelligence rubs off on them."

"Ha, ha, Costas," Colton said. "You're about as funny as they come. If I were you, Torrez, I wouldn't bother to unpack."

"Colton, why is your team just standing around?" Wheeler asked. He then faced Miguel. "I'm sure you're eager to start examining the obelisk first thing tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." Miguel wanted to check it out now, but the sun would vanish behind the mountains soon. He feigned a smile. *Curse Brodell for transferring me all because of a few nightmares.*

CHAPTER 5

Snow blanketed the town of Recluse. After rising early to shovel, the hired hands set off to plow the road leading to the site while the rest of the team shopped at the general store. Miguel bought a wool coat to wear around town. He still found it odd that the site was 30 to 40 degrees warmer.

Well under way, Miguel sank low in the backseat of the Land Rover, unable to tell where the road ended and the 500-foot drop began. He prayed for their safety while Wheeler barreled the four-wheel drive over snow-packed roads. To suppress the hazards outside, Miguel turned his attention to the calm interior.

Sitting in the center of the backseat, Hal occupied herself by entering data into her tablet. However, for all he knew, she could be farming in Facebook. Next to her, Galen seemed light-years away, probably daydreaming about his latest encounter with Joyce, the general store clerk. In the passenger seat, Darryl chatted nonstop with the professor.

“Did you hear Colton’s remark during dinner last night?”

“No, what did he say now?” Wheeler asked.

“SiLB stands for Stewart’s Invisible Laser Beam.” Darryl laughed along with the professor and said, “I think he’s smarter than he lets on.”

An hour later, Miguel relaxed his grip on the side handle bar as soon as Wheeler parked at the base of the site. The nerves in his fingers tingled from the released pressure. Eager to exit first, he jumped out, greeted by a warm blast of air. Off came the coat. He gazed beyond the parking lot at the huge mound where the obelisk reflected the morning's orange hue. A soft murmuring of calculations reached his ears as Hal herded him to the rear of the vehicle. She often talked to herself and Miguel found it endearing.

Darryl shouldered between them and lifted the hatch open. He grabbed one side of an eight-foot long container while Galen leaned in to reach the other end. Both seemed eager to get underway. Galen argued with Darryl about the placement of the poles. Their voices faded, carried off by the wind as they climbed the hill.

Three snowcapped mountains enclosed the entire valley, their peaks cloaked by low cumulus clouds. Outside the perimeter gate, a ledge dropped another 500 feet into the valley. Glistening snow frosted the tops of ponderosa pines two-hundred yards away. *Yet there's no snow on the ground.* "Why is it so much warmer here?" Miguel asked Hal.

"Schnook winds most likely," she replied.

Satisfied with the answer, Miguel strapped his tablet to his waist as he hoisted his satchel over his shoulder. The rugged "outdoor" model with 4G connection even in the remote Rocky Mountains offered dedicated apps coded to his specific field of study. With Hal preoccupied gathering her gear, he detached his tablet and snapped a few pictures.

"Torrez," Hal called out, "Let's go."

Miguel tried to keep up as they ascended the steep incline. Regardless of his excellent physical condition, he found the altitude encumbering his breathing. Between huffs, he braved a

question. “Hal, why is Dr. Costas so curt? Did I do something to offend him?”

Hal stopped long enough to let him catch up. “Darryl is afraid your involvement will jeopardize the gravity of his project.”

“How can my evaluation of the obelisk jeopardize the project?”

She shrugged her shoulders and continued walking.

Inhaling to fill his deprived lungs, Miguel reached the top. He came to a standstill alongside the others, certain his eyes could grow no wider. “Whoa...”

The eight-foot limestone obelisk stood dead center atop a 20-by-20-foot platform. Each corner held identical sculptures of a serpent challenging a jaguar.

Miguel eyed each statue and then stepped closer to the obelisk. Beneath encrusted dirt, the carved hieroglyphs shimmered with life from sunlight. Further inspection revealed a chrome-like substance outlining the glyphs as though a river of silver coursed through the etchings.

Curious about the group’s silence, Miguel glanced at Professor Wheeler and then at Darryl. They were waiting for Hal to finish measuring a tick mark on the obelisk to the base of the platform.

“Wow, two feet lower than yesterday,” she said.

Her enthusiasm made Miguel smile.

“What’s that?” Galen asked, pointing to a dark circle on the ground.

Miguel spotted a similar circle ten feet away. “There’s another.”

Moving behind Miguel, Galen beckoned him to follow. As they rounded the obelisk, they exchanged glances. Two more holes paralleled the other side. Galen ran his hands through his hair. “That’s weird.”

Trying to piece the puzzle together, Miguel noted that the obelisk stood dead center of the

four holes.

“What do you make of it?” Wheeler asked as he, Darryl, and Hal congregated behind Galen while he traced his finger along one of the metallic circles measuring two-inches in diameter.

“Sir, there are four altogether.”

“A pattern of some sort,” Darryl said.

“A quincunx.” Miguel examined the obelisk’s magnificence. His fingers traced the smooth edges of the sleek column unable to reach its apex. Except for the hieroglyphs, the rest of the structure seemed untouched, its limestone surface pristine. A rare find compared to the Mayan monuments in Central America.

“From the Latin *Quintus* meaning five.” Hal searched the ground. “Where’s the fifth?”

“You’re right,” Miguel said. “Quincunx is an arrangement of five objects. A common example is the five-hole pattern found on dice. Looks like these holes form a perfect square around the obelisk, which I assume to be the center. Mayas believe this pattern is the essence of life. An example is the four directions with you as the center.”

“Undeniably a quincunx,” Wheeler said. “Must be here for a reason.”

Miguel paused to relish the approval before brushing his finger across the outline of one glyph. The polished surface chilled his finger. He leaned close and sniffed, almost certain he smelled a combination of rotten eggs and metal. Removing a leather-embossed case from his fanny pack, Miguel flipped the lid and selected a delicate tool resembling a dental pick. He poked and dislodged a small piece of the metal that liquefied and rolled around his palm. Furrowing his brows, Miguel asked, “Mercury?” Afraid it would meld with his ring, he held out his outstretched palm until his fingertips touched the obelisk. His eyes widened as the silver ball

spun in place, rolled along his fingers, and danced across the stone until it fused again with the metallic substance within the chiseled glyphs. Rubbing a finger against the hard surface, Miguel asked, "How can it change from a solid to liquid and back again so fast?"

"Don't know, mon, but it's also magnetic," Darryl said. "Stranger things have happened, like the fact that we have to watch out for lightning strikes. Galen can sense one before it hits. Don't ask me how, but he always warns us just before it happens."

"Strike!" Galen shouted.

"Is he 100 percent reliable?" Miguel asked looking skyward. Hearing no response, he lowered his gaze to find everyone else had vanished.

CHAPTER 6

Lightning and Miguel were well acquainted from his encounters with hurricanes and tropical storms. Experience was a good teacher and he learned early in life to respect Mother Nature and her wrath. Mustering the quickest exit possible, he scrambled for the edge, tucked himself tight, and let his body roll down the mound. When he hit bottom, laughter resonated across the valley.

Standing over him, Galen offered his hand. “Sorry, but you should expect a prank or two. After all, you’re the newbie now. Think of it as a rite of passage into the club.”

“More like hazing.” Miguel grumbled his displeasure as Galen hoisted him to his feet.

Wheeler cast a shadow over them both. “Be a sport, Torrez, and tell me what you think about the site now?”

Miguel tensed. “Follow me.” He patted both coat pockets and reached inside for a bottle of Tums. He led the ascent up the mound while chewing on a couple of chalky tablets.

“Well?” Wheeler asked.

Out of breath, Miguel refreshed his parched mouth with water from his canteen before answering. “The architectural style is too plain for the classic period, but it’s unquestionably Mayan.” To bolster his confidence, he inhaled and then circled the base of the monolith,

speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “Some of the hieroglyphs might even be pre-classic.”

He cut his description short when he plowed into a stone altar positioned behind the obelisk, isolated on the northern side of the platform. Miguel’s foot had rammed the pedestal shaped as two gods sitting back-to-back with their heads and arms supporting the slab above them. He squeezed his eyes shut to drive out the nightmarish image of the priest thrusting a knife into his chest as he lay across this same altar. His body twitched and his eyes opened wide.

“Are you all right,” Hal asked, her hand resting on his arm.

Her concern pleased him. “I’m fine.” Miguel abandoned the memory, his gaze drifting to the stone pillar. Hesitance shrouded his voice when he continued his assessment. “The engravings are extraordinary and will require the proper resources to decipher their meanings.”

“Then you’ll be staying on?” Wheeler asked.

“Of course...” Miguel’s love of Mayan archeology fed his excitement; however, his nightmares nurtured his apprehension. Still, his eyes must have sparkled like those of a new parent. This discovery thrilled him beyond any expectation. “I’ll know for sure once you get the results from radiometric dating.”

When Miguel turned to examine the southern face of the obelisk, he noticed an indentation on the structure that measured roughly two by three feet, positioned a couple of feet above the base. The depression resembled a window casing. He saw no hint of a handle or lever in the elaborately carved snake and jaguar carving above it. “This could be an entrance.”

Inspired by his own hypothesis, Miguel’s astuteness peaked. He turned to the group. “Do you realize we might be standing on the upper level of a Mayan pyramid?”

“Bullshit,” Darryl said.

Ignoring the rude comment, Miguel walked around the perimeter of the platform to scope

out the precise size of the hill. “My God, I could be right. If the mound continues to erode, we might find ourselves with a pyramid—undersized mind you—but an entire pyramid. Considering the condition of the obelisk and the corner statues, the rest of the temple should be just as pristine. We could be sitting on a gold mine.” Miguel smiled to himself. *Shame Professor Brodell isn't here.*

Galen's voice wrenched Miguel away from his daydream.

“Do you really believe we're standing on top of a Mayan pyra—” Galen cut his own question short. He seemed to be scanning the mound for something. When his gaze returned to Miguel, he continued to glance back and forth.

Trying to pinpoint what caused Galen's sudden distraction, Miguel narrowed his eyes but found nothing out of the ordinary. The jumpy physicist behaved as though someone were following him. Concerned, he asked, “Are you all right?”

“Nothing, just dirt in my eye.” Galen's large eyes settled on Miguel as though he had cast off an anchor. “Tell me, what makes you so sure this is a pyramid?”

“Just a feeling. The Maya used altars for rituals, but they usually built them on temples of worship, namely pyramids.”

“Based on your feelings?” Darryl asked. “We are men of science. We'll need more to go on than your sentiments.”

“At the rate of the erosion,” Hal said, “we'll know for sure in a couple of days.”

Her support calmed Miguel after Darryl's condescending tone; still, his stomach pleaded for more Tums.

“Enough talk,” Wheeler said, waving his arm. “Get busy. Have you recorded any measurements yet, Mr. Stewart?”

“No, sir, I’ll get on it,” Galen answered.

The professor’s curt behavior annoyed Miguel; however, he took advantage of the time to study one of the four corner statues. The upper carving resembled a viper, its fangs exposed, ready to strike its prey. Below, the jaguar crouched in defense, also baring powerful jaws.

As if someone had rearranged his scrambled thoughts, the mystery became clear. Each mouth formed an angled slot that meant to hold something. An image appeared—one of the stone disks the old man had given him—now lodged between their jaws. He turned to Galen. “In Mayan archaeoastronomy the serpent symbolizes the celestial equator.”

“Yes, it’s the dark line running horizontally across the center of the celestial sphere, dividing it into the northern and southern celestial hemispheres.”

Pleased that Galen knew what he was talking about, Miguel shielded his eyes and looked skyward. “The Maya called this dark drift the Black-Dream place or the Black Transformer. It resembled a portal to the Otherworld where the souls of the dead journeyed.” Miguel approached Galen who still stared skyward. “The professor claims you’re the only one who can see the beam. Is it visible in the middle of the day?”

“Yes. At first, I needed a telescope, but since we arrived at the site, I can see it without any aid.”

“There must be a logical explanation as to why you’re the only one. When did you first see it?”

“Back in May.”

“May?”

“May 20, during the solar eclipse.”

That date had stamped an impression forever in Miguel’s mind. “The night I dreamed I

was sacrificed...” His voice trailed off trying to bury the dreadful memories. Miguel then noticed how Galen seemed eager to share his own story. “Sorry, go on.”

“I was recording the eclipse when the beam nearly blinded me. I pinpointed its trajectory to Recluse. Wheeler learned of my discovery and made every effort to get me onboard. He doesn’t know I’m just along for the ride until I finish my dissertation.”

“Aren’t you the least bit curious as to why you alone can see it?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Galen rummaged through his tools. “I see lots of things other people don’t see—even dead people. I’m surprised no one’s told you I was diagnosed schizophrenic.” He attached the level to the tripod and, using a laser meter, measured the distance between the circles.

Miguel watched him work for a while, realizing the silence fueled the awkwardness between them. “Could you show me which sector of space the beam comes from?”

“Sure, but we’ll have to come back at night. The celestial equator should be visible around ten. I know it’s kind of late, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Sounds good.”

Busy with the results of the next measurement, Galen must not have heard Miguel’s approval. “Now that’s odd,” Galen remarked while he measured the distance between the last set completing the square. “This is unbelievable. Darryl, you’ve got to see—”

“This better be good, mon.”

“The distance between the four outer circles is equal and each one is equidistant from the obelisk. Miguel is right, it’s an exact quincunx,” Galen said. “I calculated the refraction angle the instant the beam enters the Earth’s atmosphere and as soon as I figure out the angle of refraction emitted from the main crystal mounted atop the apex, I’ll be able to determine the height of each

pole.”

“Well,” Darryl said, slapping Galen on the back. “Looks like everything’s laid out for you. Your work’s cut in half, too bad mine’s not.”

Galen’s face turned a shade brighter as the Jamaican resumed his work.

Miguel leaned closer to Galen. “It’s strange how everything seems to be falling in place.”
Once again, images from his nightmare inundated his mind.

“Fate has something up her sleeve,” Galen muttered.

CHAPTER 7

As promised, Galen returned to the site after sunset with Miguel. When he turned off the ignition, he left the high beams on to illuminate the site.

“Won’t they drain the battery?” Miguel asked.

“The perimeter lights aren’t hooked up yet. This won’t take long.”

The lights reflected off the steel shelter. Beyond the structure, the mound loomed. Galen hated the night—too many shadows lurked in the darkness. He opened the door wide enough for the interior light to shine.

“Galen, I appreciate you being honest with me about your schizophrenia, but I’m curious. Do you suffer from hallucinations?”

Galen bit his lower lip as he scratched his five o’clock shadow. Had he made a mistake by telling Miguel? He had not known him long enough to confide any more. Instead of answering, Galen turned to stare out the driver’s side window. His reflection blurred into the obscured shadow that haunted him. He gasped, sucking in a mist that seemed to spray off the glass. An unexpected, overwhelming confidence inundated every cell in his body, replacing the insecurities that poisoned his battered ego.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. You ready?” Miguel asked.

“For centuries...”

“What?”

This newfound assurance rekindled Galen’s fondness for playful mischief. He held the flashlight below his chin and shone it upward, casting a menacing shadow across his face. His eyes grew wide and he deepened his voice. “Never forget, I am the chosen one.”

Miguel yelped and heaved against the passenger door. “Hey, that wasn’t funny. Knock it off.”

Galen smirked. “Let’s go.”

Together, they climbed the mound, shining their flashlights ahead. When they reached the top, the flashlights illuminated the sleek obelisk, yielding a supernatural ambiance. Goosebumps sprouted over Galen’s arms and this time he sneezed out the same mist he had inhaled moments ago. The confidence his doppelganger had loaned him now vanished.

“Is everything all right?” Miguel asked in a whisper.

“We’re not alone.”

A number of silhouettes bobbed in place—black as coal and featureless. The silent wraithlike shadows waved weapons overhead. Some wore headdresses that writhed in the wind much like Medusa’s hair.

Galen squeezed his eyes shut hoping the dark figures poised along the edge of the platform would vanish by the time he reopened them. Being haunted by one shadow was bad enough, never mind an army of them.

“Stop with the pranks already.”

Galen opened his eyes to find the shadows had vanished. “You didn’t see them?” he

asked, unwilling to admit he was hallucinating.

“See what? Maybe I’d be able to see the beam if we killed the lights.”

“Keep them on,” Galen said too quickly. His body tensed. “I can see it fine with the lights on. You won’t be able to see the beam no matter what.” He set his backpack onto the altar and assembled the telescope. “It’s show time.”

“Why bother? You just said I couldn’t see the beam.”

“That’s the beauty of CGI. The telescope here interfaces with my laptop. I’ve entered the coordinates, measured the beam’s intensity, and estimated its dimensions. *Voilà*, an exact simulation.” Galen stepped aside to let Miguel examine the screen. “Besides, I thought you were more interested in seeing its origin.”

“Wow. That’s what you see?” Miguel leaned closer. “It’s fine, like a laser. Where is it coming from?”

“There.” Galen pointed at a starless expanse.

“I recognize that sector—the black ridge along the Milky Way, the Cosmic Monster—”

“Now look who’s using scare tactics.” Galen glanced about for any unwelcomed shadows.

“It’s almost the winter solstice,” Miguel said while searching the sky. “Mayan cosmology claims the sun will cross the Milky Way. Can you determine its exact position during the solstice?”

“Sure.” Galen typed in the commands to launch the necessary calculations. The trajectory of the sun soon appeared on the digital display. “I’ll highlight the exact spot. There, it’s the blinking dot.”

“Wait, the sun’s blocking the beam. Check its position before and after the solstice.”

Entering different times, Galen watched the blinking dot—its pulse matched his heartbeat. “It intersects the beam at the exact moment of the solstice. We’ll have to capture it before the sun blocks it.”

“I don’t understand. I thought Darryl’s Electronet captured lightning.”

“That’s SiLB’s cover story. There’s not enough energy in lightning unless you store or produce an actual bolt. Wheeler and Darryl may have been searching for a location with heavy lightning activity, but I think Wheeler knew about the beam all along. He just couldn’t see it.”

“So why not capture it sooner?—like now?”

“Wheeler also believes that a geomagnetic reversal will coincide with the end of the Mayan calendar.” Galen suspected the professor knew more than he divulged.

“The professor believes this? What does the reversal have to do with anything?”

“He’s convinced a reversal will magnify the energy from the beam at the precise moment of the winter solstice. Darryl never questions the professor’s authority because he funds the project.”

“Wheeler must be loony.”

Galen nodded. “Must be the archeologist in him.” He smiled at Miguel and then recalculated the program. “I’m adding interference from the magnetic reversal to see how much time we have during its buildup.”

Together, they watched the new simulation. Galen sighed. “Great, we have an open window of exactly ten seconds to catch the energy before the sun blocks the beam. Darryl’s going to freak. He looked up to witness Miguel’s baffled expression. Galen wondered if the shadows had returned. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Do you realize ancient Mayas predicted the sun’s alignment in the Milky Way?”

An unpleasant sensation similar to fingernails scoring a chalkboard grated Galen's already taxed nerves. "We should pack up." *The sooner we leave the better.*

"I wonder why the beam is pointing here of all places. Sorry, I'm only rambling." Miguel paced around the obelisk. "Ever wonder about its origin, its mysteries, its—"

Touch it.

"What'd you say?" Miguel asked.

"No." Galen wondered if the shadows had returned. *Are they speaking now?*

"What puzzles me is the significance of the beam. Where does it come from, what is its purpose, and why visible to only you? Maybe you have x-ray vision."

"Wheeler's convinced it has something to do with my schizophrenia. I like your theory better. Not only can I see it, I can touch it."

Touch it.

Galen swore he heard an echo.

"What?" Miguel asked. "You can touch it?"

"Yes. It vibrates within me, a calm soothing reverberation. Darryl says it would fry anyone else." Backing away from the altar, Galen bumped into the obelisk; his eyes traveled upward, following the beam to its origin. He stood on his toes and reached for the apex. His fingers fondled the carved crown where the beam entered the obelisk.

Miguel leaned beside Galen. "Are you touching it now? Can I—"

Touch it.

"Don't be ridiculous." Galen shone his flashlight at Miguel. "You're not serious are you?"

"I might not be able to see it, but if you can touch it, then so can I. It must be harmless—"

Touch it.

Miguel stretched his body along the obelisk. “I can’t reach...” His groping fingers extended a foot shy of the apex. He turned to Galen and asked, “Give me a boost, will you?”

“No.”

Help him.

The barrage of voices carried on the wind urged Galen to do as ordered. His alter ego had never spoken to him, so it had to be the new apparitions. Before he realized what he was doing, he dropped his flashlight, cupped Miguel’s foot within his hands, and hoisted him upward.

“Perfect. I should have no problem now—” Miguel pulled away. “Whoa...”

Touch it.

Paralyzed with fear and powerless to speak, Galen watched Miguel’s fingers stretch further up the apex. He didn’t stand a chance. Galen’s jaw jammed shut when the power surge hurled Miguel’s body away from the obelisk to the platform’s edge like a wet rag. Miguel landed with a dull thud and rolled off the ledge.

His boot was all that remained in Galen’s hand. Miguel’s other foot had smacked him in the jaw. Stunned, he picked up his flashlight and scrambled to the edge. He peered over the platform, shining light across the ground until it found Miguel’s limp body.

“Miguel?” Skidding over loose scree, Galen stopped short of reaching him.

Slithering out of the ground like sooty smoke from chimney tops, the phantoms rose all around Miguel’s body to prevent him from advancing. Galen counted thirteen. The apparitions bobbed and swayed in menacing stances, yielding weapons.

“Go away!” His unblinking eyes stared at the phantoms and then at Miguel. *They’re harmless—only shadows.* Galen shielded his face with his arms and leapt through the ghostly

barrier. His charging girly cry broke the silence. When his feet touched ground, he spun around expecting the groping hands of the shadows to strangle or maim him. Instead, the figures remained stationary, several taunting his soul with their voices.

It's over.

Leave him be.

You are the Chosen One.

While glancing over his shoulder at the brandishing forms, Galen knelt over Miguel and started CPR. After his third glimpse, the thirteen shadows shriveled into the ground leaving one lone figure that now stood in their place. Perhaps his doppelganger scared them off. Relieved, Galen continued with the compressions until he pumped over a hundred. Following the multiple sets, he placed an ear against Miguel's chest and listened to his own raspy breaths until a faint heartbeat gave him hope.