

The Chronicles of Eylis



Part I

TJ Parmer



A Novel

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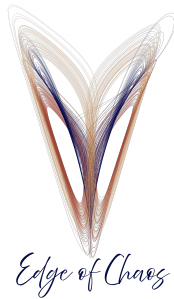
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Day 1



The archaeologist Carl Eylis was surprised to find someone waiting for him upon landing in Laos. It was so unexpected that he stood still, blinking, while the man who was calling his name came running up to him, waving his hands wildly. The man was pudgy and unshaven, his face partially hidden by a wide-brimmed hat, wearing white khakis streaked with dirt. Upon reaching Eylis he paused for a moment, breathing heavily, and then introduced himself as Oliver Lizari. At closer inspection, Eylis could see that he looked unsettled – his eyes darted around the room and his hands were constantly in motion; sweat showed on his brow beneath wavy, dark hair.

Eylis was taken aback. “Do I know you?” he asked.

“Please, just a short word, if you will,” Oliver said, and grabbed him by the hand, pushing him towards a small bar. “Have a coffee with me.”

“I’m afraid I don’t drink coffee...”

“Tea, tea, yes we will have tea,” he responded dismissively, waving his hand. He pushed Eylis into a seat, ordered two teas and sat down noisily across from him. His manner made Eylis feel anxious.

“Please, sir, will you just tell me what this is about?” Eylis asked.

“Certainly,” Oliver responded, his eyes narrowing. “I know your occupation. I also work in archaeology.”

“I’m sorry, what was your name again?” Eylis asked. Oliver told him. Eylis shook his head, thinking. He knew

all of the major names from his field, especially those who did work in this region; he didn't recognize this man.

Oliver sighed loudly. "I was the one who discovered Kanarion."

Eylis looked at him in shock. Kanarion was a major discovery. It had been inhabited by an ancient people, one of the original tribes of Kadune (it was said), but had been lost in the Andes before recorded history, although legends of it persisted. It had finally been found by a young boy on an expedition in the 1970s. Eylis vaguely recalled the name from the old articles he had read.

"But you must have only been eleven, or twelve..."

"Yes, yes, that was me," Oliver told him. "I was the one who actually first laid eyes on it." Of course, the significance of Kanarion was more than just an old archaeological site; it was rumored to be one of the Seven Sites, ancient areas whose exploration had become a major goal and source of funding from the Western powers due to their perceived natural resource values. They were linked by vague and disputed historical ties, but the commonalities they were thought to share were deemed important enough that the US government among others spent considerable effort trying to find them. The Kanarion region was rumored to have been used by the Asian drug cartel Golden Dragon to grow powerful narcotics with the echolia plant; eventually they were ousted, but the region was hard to protect given how difficult it was to access. The rest of the Seven Sites were apparently just as hard to access; some had supposedly been discovered by various parties over the years, but there was no general public consensus on where any of them were located. One was claimed to have been found in a hidden rocky area in the southwestern United States as recently as

the early 2000s; another in Africa in the 90s; another in Central America...

"Forgive me," Eylis responded, "I didn't realize you were an archaeologist. I haven't heard of any of your work since then."

Oliver snorted in annoyance and muttered to himself. "Yes, well, you see, my dear *colleagues* of mine have seen to that! It's not easy, you know, making such a famous discovery when you're just a boy! I hadn't even been to university yet. We're classmates, you know. I went to Auldbridge, just as you did."

"And you have heard of me?" Eylis was surprised. He had left grad school only recently and had published nothing yet of major interest.

"Indeed, indeed," Oliver mused. "A rising star, I believe. You know, I've been working in the field for quite a while, and I recognize the potential in *you*." He smiled at Eylis, who looked at him blankly.

"I think you've gotten me confused with someone else..." He looked around, still anxious, debating whether it would be too rude to stand up and leave this conversation.

"No, no, I haven't," Oliver grabbed his arm and looked at him seriously. "I've made another discovery you know. Something that will make Kanarion look like *nothing*. Something that would make anybody's *career*. You want to be famous, Carl? I'm asking for your help on this."

"Well, what is it?"

"Not so fast, my dear Carl. I can't just give away where it is. But I can tell you that I know *for certain* that it's one of the Seven Sites. And it's *much* more important than Kanarion was. What I think could be there... it could be the origin." Those who posited that there was a historical

connection between the Seven Sites believed one of them must have been the original, founded first by an ancient tribe of people who then spread their influence around the globe to the other six. Of course, no one could explain how these people had travelled globally with their limited, millennia-old technology. Eylis thought it was rubbish.

“If this is so important, then why do you want me?” he asked Oliver. “Why don’t you excavate on your own?”

Oliver smiled at him. “It’s too big for just one person. Not a discovery like this! This requires a team effort.” He searched Eylis’ face for some sign of excitement.

Eylis remained skeptical. “It’s just strange that you would track me down like this... how did you find me anyways?”

“I’ve been following your East Asian work, like I said,” Oliver responded. A tray with the tea came by. Oliver abruptly turned aside and grabbed the kettle from the tray; he poured into two cups and thrust one towards Eylis. “Lemon slice?” Eylis shook his head. Oliver put the kettle down, took another look at Eylis’ face, and sighed heavily. “Okay fine, you want to know the truth?”

“Certainly.”

“Well it’s like you said. The unfortunate nature of my predicament is that no one has heard of me since I was a kid. One damn famous discovery and that’s that. Due to the nature of my current work, I’m not allowed to publish and so I’ve been lost to the academic sphere. I’m nobody to them anymore.”

“Why aren’t you allowed to publish?” Eylis asked. Oliver ignored him.

“If I try to say I’ve discovered *another* Seven Site,” he continued, “no one will believe me – it sounds too good to be true. I need someone else to add legitimacy.”

“But... someone not famous so I don’t overshadow your discovery.”

Oliver smiled at him again. “You are a bright kid, aren’t you?”

Eylis sighed. “Look, I have to get going. I’m only staying in Laos for the night; I have to get to Kuala Lumpur tomorrow...”

“No, no, you must go with me tomorrow!” Oliver cried. “This discovery will not wait around for us. We must move on it quickly!”

“How do I even know any of this is real?”

“What do you have to lose? No real academic reputation – yet. But with this discovery you’ll be set for life! We leave tomorrow for South America. If we don’t find anything, you return back here and continue with your current studies. But I’m already taking care of everything. I have some personal funds, and I will cover travel, food, guides, everything that you need... There’s no cost to you, Carl. It’s a perfect opportunity. Guaranteed publication in *Natural History*. I already know the editor. Max Zandruff, you know him?”

Eylis nodded. Of course he knew of him. Zandruff was very famous as an explorer and naturalist, and was known throughout the world. He had had a good position at URawlins, but left very suddenly; there were rumors of a big falling out between him and the university president, Dick Thomas. Afterwards, he had taken over as chief editor of the prestigious publication *Natural History*.

“Well I know him *very* well,” Oliver continued. “He was leading that expedition when I discovered Kanarion as you might recall. Once we excavate this site – and as long as I

have you with me to show that it's authentic – we will be on the front page, I guarantee it.”

Eylis sighed again, thinking. “How long will it take?”

“A few days, no more,” Oliver replied excitedly. “I promise you, Carl, this is the best academic opportunity you will ever get. Just give me a few days, that's all I ask.”

“And we have to leave tomorrow?”

“Yes, yes, there and back. Super quick. Everything's already planned.”

“And you don't need anything from me?”

Oliver gave a short pause. “Well, there is one thing we need to find tonight.” He gave Eylis an awkward smile. “Girls.”

“Girls?” Eylis repeated later as he followed Oliver, against his better judgement, into a small, crowded bar. It was in a shack located near the hospital, surrounded by a narrow avenue and tropical trees. Night was beginning to fall and it was loud inside and smelled of beer. *Who is this guy*, Eylis asked himself for the hundredth time.

“As I said, we need a nurse and a cook. All of the medical students come here after their shifts,” Oliver yelled at him through the noise. “I will find one. You just need to find a cook for us.” And then before he knew what was happening, Oliver had shoved Eylis towards the bar area. Eylis turned to see him join a table of three young nurses; sighing, he turned and walked up to the counter.

A woman stood behind it; she was also young, fair-skinned with black hair that was tied up into a small knot above her head. Her arms were strong, and she rapped her fingers on the bar as he sat. “What do you want?” she asked.

Eylis felt awkward as her black eyes passed over him impatiently. “Um, uh,” he cleared his throat. “Do you cook?”

She turned around and grabbed a piece of paper which she put down on the table in front of him. “Food menu.”

“No, uh, I mean...” Eylis shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “I mean, do *you* cook?”

The bartender stared at him. “I can get you anything on that menu.”

Eylis felt his face growing red. “I’m sorry I’m not being clear. I’m looking for a person who can... be a... is a cook. Someone who can, uh, cook things...” Eylis began to curse himself for ever following Oliver to this bar. *What the hell am I doing?* he wondered.

The woman just put her hands on the bar and stared at him.

“My, uh, colleague has tasked me with, um, finding someone you see...”

“Is that him?” she motioned with her head, and Eylis turned around. He saw Oliver still standing at the nurses’ table. He was talking and gesticulating wildly; suddenly, he grabbed the nearest nurse and pulled himself towards her bosom.

Eylis turned back, embarrassed. “I, uh, barely know him really. I just met him, you see.”

The bartender’s face was dark. “The rich come to these places often, to take advantage of the local girls like that. And those airheads eat it up.”

“You don’t seem like the other women here, uh, miss,” Eylis replied, trying to be polite. “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Siley,” she replied.

“Interesting name.”

She shrugged. “My father wasn’t from this area. He was a navy man, see. Dumped me here.”

“Is he at sea?”

“He’s dead,” she answered, without any trace of emotion. “He fought in the Goatese War - he was one of those unfortunate enough to pick the wrong side. He was part of the Western American fleet, his ship was sunk off of California. I was left here with my mother, but she became a recluse after he died. I barely even see her.”

Eylis was taken aback. He didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry,” he muttered dumbly.

“You’re sorry about who I am?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that!” Eylis replied hastily.

Siley smirked. “I’m usually told I’m too blunt. But it doesn’t bother me. I’m not ashamed of who I am. Besides, it was almost 10 years ago now. I was just a teenager then.” She grabbed a towel and began wiping off the bar top. Eylis was impressed by how nonchalant she was.

“Do you like it here?” he asked, finally.

She looked up just long enough to give him an ironic glance. “Is that a serious question?”

Eylis shrugged helplessly. “I’m saving up money for school,” she continued.

“Oh, a graduate program?”

She glanced at him again. “No.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just thought... with your age, I mean...”

“We don’t get a lot of opportunities here,” she replied. She sounded annoyed. Eylis again desperately wished that he had never followed Oliver into this bar. “Those girls over there, they’re lucky enough to have gotten into the medical

program. I will too, once I save enough. I'm studying for the exams."

Eylis nodded. A patron came up to ask a question and Siley answered him from across the bar. Boisterous shouts arose from across the room, and he turned to see Oliver laughing loudly with his head thrown back, his arm still around the nurse. When he turned back, he noticed Siley staring at him.

"So that's your friend?" she asked, pointing.

"No, no, we just... work together. I mean, we're about to start working together," Eylis answered. He sat there in awkward silence, while Siley attended to the cash register and then leaned against it with her arms crossed.

"What do you want?" she asked finally, sighing. "A drink?"

"I don't drink."

She rolled her eyes. "This might be the wrong place for you then, my friend."

Eylis sighed. "This is certainly the wrong place. Oliver, that's the man over there, he told me to find a cook for an expedition we have coming up."

"An expedition?"

"We're archaeologists. Apparently he's made an exciting find and he wants me to help him excavate. But we need a team."

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere in South America, I think."

"Hmm," Siley mused. "That's a more interesting story than what I usually hear in this place."

"But it's true!" Eylis replied, for some reason feeling like he had to defend himself. "It will be a good publication, and this is just an initial survey. A few days."

“What’s the pay like?” Siley actually seemed interested; Eylis was surprised.

“5,000 USD.”

“For what, a week?”

“Per day.”

“Damn.” Siley took a few paces back and forth down the bar. “Damn. You need someone who can cook?”

“Uh, well, I think it’s more than that, really. Cook, manage the supplies, check equipment. It’s really a camp management position.” Eylis did not understand why he was actually trying to sell this position to Siley.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“And it’s just for a few days?”

“Yea, absolutely. You would be back here in a week’s time, tops.”

“When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“A little rushed, isn’t it?”

“Yea, but Oliver wants to go without any delays. He’s very passionate, you see.”

Siley sighed and leaned down on the bar, looking suspiciously across the room towards Oliver’s table. Eylis could still hear him laughing and chatting with the nurses. “He’s the one leading it?” Eylis nodded. “Do you trust him?” she asked, looking at Eylis dead in the eye. He felt intimidated.

“Well... yes, in an odd way, I do.”

Siley stared forward, thinking. Eylis leaned in towards her. “Siley,” he asked earnestly, “do you really want to stay here?”

Siley just gave a short chuckle in reply and shook her head. It was decided.

2 Weeks Before



Oliver Lizari was in love. For the first time ever, he was sure. Her dark hair, her wide eyes, her soft cheeks, the smell of her perfume. He had met Zara and Baku a few months before, as casual social acquaintances. He didn't know many in Burma, and he wasn't able to get away from his work often, and so he greatly enjoyed their company. They were both young, in their thirties. Baku, clean-shaven and with a kind smile, always spoke with a quiet energy. He told Oliver that they came from Ankara for work and were eager to get to know the region better. Oliver had been working there for a decade and was easily able to guide them around. He showed them the towns, the forests, the old Buddhist temples. He spoke mostly with Baku; Zara, by contrast, was always quiet, contemplative. At first, he averted his gaze from her to be polite. But as he got to know them better, he became bolder with his glances and soon he could not take his eyes from her. Any time she touched him, he was filled with excitement; any time she spoke to him, he was breathless with attention.

They would often have tea in the afternoons; that is, the three of them. Oliver never saw Zara alone. But he also never saw Baku treat her like a girlfriend or wife – he referred to her as a 'friend' – and hope began to grow inside of Oliver. That evening they had been out at a dinner; there was a cool breeze and, on the walk back, he saw Zara rubbing her hands together for warmth. He had grabbed her hand and squeezed it, and she had not refused it. When

they parted, she had given him a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek. Baku had not seemed annoyed. Oliver stood there and watched them disappear into the darkness, the wind rustling his unkempt, blond hair. He couldn't believe he had gotten that close to her – this is what the poets meant! He finally understood, truly, what passion felt like.

He drifted home with pure elation, not paying attention whatsoever to his surroundings. When he came to his camp he made sure to be quiet (since he had been humming to himself with pleasure) and diligently sat down in his excavation tent to look over the reliefs of the wall paintings he had been studying. They were from a lost civilization, but which one was hard to place. Handprints and animal hides were shown in vibrant colors, red, and yellow, and green. He was so engrossed in the drawings and his own musings that he didn't even notice that someone had entered his tent until Ali sat down in a chair only a few feet from him. Oliver looked up, startled.

Ali Fatah was in his late twenties, with short, dark hair and a serious demeanor. He was quick to anger and rarely smiled, except when he was playing some sort of cruel joke. Presently he rubbed his temples and stared intently at Oliver; he seemed agitated. Oliver gave him a faint smile.

“What were you doing?” Fatah asked him.

“What do you mean? Just looking over some of the paintings. I think-”

“You came back late.” Oliver recognized these words instantly as an accusation. “You were with them, weren't you?” Fatah asked. “What are their names, Zari and Battu?”

“Zara and Baku,” Oliver answered faintly.

Fatah shook his head. “I've told you, Oliver, you have to stop this. It's dangerous.”

“I hardly see how.”

“No one can know about what we do here,” Fatah replied, narrowing his eyes. “And I mean *no one*. Your friends will ask questions; they will find out what we do.”

Oliver was annoyed. “And who am I allowed to talk to, Ali? You keep me in this camp as your prisoner, doing research for my brother, completely isolated from the world...”

“You *wanted* to work here.”

“I wanted to do *research* here. Not be a prisoner.”

“You are doing research. We pay for all of it, anything you need. We don’t hamper you.”

“Ha!” Oliver retorted. “Don’t hamper indeed. You don’t even allow me to publish anything! What’s the point of researching this place if I’m not allowed to tell the world that it exists?”

“Not yet. Someday...”

“It’s always *someday*, isn’t it,” Oliver spat. He looked away, furious.

“Oliver,” Fatah said, “Oliver, look at me. Oliver!” The archaeologist slowly turned back around. “Oliver, you know the rules. You know the consequences of breaking them. Now, this isn’t a request. Don’t see those two again.”

Oliver glared at him. Fatah sighed and threw his hands up. “All the damn time, I don’t know why we have to go through this.”

“I just want a life for god’s sake,” Oliver murmured.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Fatah stood up to leave, then paused. “What are you so worked up about anyways, Ollie? Did you find something new for once?” He chuckled.

“Yes, I did, and please, don’t call me that,” Oliver sat up angrily and grabbed the photos next to him. “You see what we found on the rocks here? This isn’t like the other rock art. There’s ochre here of colors we’ve never seen before, mixtures of blue, green, vibrant mosaics of fantastic creatures with the faces of men, but bodies of ungulates or, perhaps, the bodies of bears or tigers and wings of birds, things we have never seen here before. And they are much, much older than the others, older perhaps than any equivalent cave art found in Europe or the Middle East. And think of what they represent? Spirits, sorcerers... think, this may be the first, the *first* conception of God by man, and I have found it here!”

Fatah scoffed. “And what, that doesn’t impress you?” Oliver asked him. “To see possibly the first instances of human interaction with the spiritual?”

“You want to know what I think?” Fatah asked him, and chuckled. He returned to his seat. “You want to know what I think of Man’s quest for God?” He leaned towards Oliver, who squirmed under the intensity of his gaze.

“Well, I suppose so, yes,” the archaeologist answered.

Fatah smiled coldly. “Okay then. Have I ever told you about my father?” Oliver shook his head. “Ah, then let me tell you about him. Let me tell you how he decided to die.” Fatah’s eyes, unblinking, were locked upon Oliver’s. He spoke slowly. “My dear father, named after the Prophet himself, decided to tie a bomb around his chest one morning and walk to a café. He carried ten kilos of TNT to a little storefront and decided to detonate it, in the name of God. The explosion was heard throughout our city. I ran towards that store as soon as I heard it; I was just a boy then. I ran, as fast as I could, calling out my father’s name. I knew

where he had been headed, you see. I knew that store. But when I got there, that store no longer existed. There was no shopfront, no road, no father of mine. Just a pile of rubble and concrete. In the name of God my father had exited himself from this world. But he hadn't exited alone. No, there was a woman who had been walking outside that store with her little girl. I found out later she was about seven or so years old. She was carrying a stuffed bear with her. This I know because I saw the bear in the rubble. But I didn't see her. I didn't see her, Oliver, because she didn't exist anymore. I didn't see her mother either. The only trace that was left, the only memento of their existence, the only evidence they ever *lived* was a single, human arm lying on the concrete. This was the mother's arm; you could tell it belonged to a woman because of the bracelet around the wrist. And that arm laid there by itself, so out of place without any body to attach itself to. You know, I didn't cry when I realized my father was dead, Oliver. But I never forgot that arm." Fatah tapped the side of his head and smirked. "I don't need to study old ruins to understand Man and God. I learned my lesson. Have you?"

Fatah stood up, casually pulling back his vest as he did so to reveal the high caliber pistol he always kept at his side. "I've warned you, Oliver. Stick to your research. No more friends." Oliver looked at him sullenly, and Fatah met his eyes with a fierce gaze. Then he turned and left the excavation tent.

Day 2



Carl Eylis arrived at the airstrip around midday. Oliver was already there, yelling at a man loading luggage onto the plane. When he saw him, Oliver waved enthusiastically and ran over. “So glad to see you again, Carl, so glad. We will head out shortly, I promise.”

“You still haven’t told me the destination yet,” Eylis answered wearily.

Oliver smiled. “And I will, I will! As soon as we get there.” He clapped Eylis on the back and turned around to survey the loading process. He was wearing dark sunglasses and the same wide-brimmed hat as the day before. Looking past him, Eylis saw one of the nurses from the night before, talking into a pay phone. Oliver followed his gaze, and jovially poked him in the side with his elbow. “Hey, she’s a beauty isn’t she?”

“That’s our medic?”

“Oh yea, she’ll do fine,” Oliver said happily. “Where’s yours?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The cook. Where’s the cook?”

“Oh yea, she’s, uh, coming...” Eylis hoped this was true; he felt embarrassed that she hadn’t shown up yet.

“I saw you two talking at the bar last night. Quite natural, the pair of you.”

“Is this all the supplies?” Eylis asked, not sure what else to say.

“No, no, don’t worry. We’ll pick up more food in... well, the Americas.”

Eylis allowed himself to smile. “Wouldn’t it be easier if you just told me where we’re going?”

Oliver didn’t respond but merely laughed. Then he left to make sure the tents were properly boarded. Eylis stood alone, again questioning what he was doing here with this eccentric man. He waited for a while, shifting his feet, not sure what to do. At some point, the woman was off of the phone and he decided he should go up to say hello.

He introduced himself and she greeted him warmly. “Sobe,” she said in a French accent, taking his hand. She was beautiful, Eylis had to admit. Her dark eyes looked playfully at him behind well-rounded cheeks; she wore dark pants and a tank top that was barely able to contain her breasts. “You are also an archaeologist, no?” she asked.

“Yes,” Eylis nodded. “And you are a nurse? Have you been practicing long?” he asked.

She smiled secretly. “Honestly no, only in my second year. But don’t tell Oliver, I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“I won’t.”

She looked at him curiously. “Have you known him long, Oliver?”

Eylis shook his head no. “Just met him.”

“But he is good?”

Eylis didn’t know how to answer this question. *Is he a good... what? Good person? Good at his job?* Eylis doubted somewhat that either of those was true. Instead, he just nodded. Sobe seemed satisfied by this response.

“I have never seen the other side of the Pacific,” she said, smiling happily. “Have you?”

“Sure, I’ve travelled for conferences to the Americas a few times,” he replied.

“Oliver says we will see a land no one has ever seen before. Is this true?”

“I don’t know,” Eylis responded honestly.

“Oliver says that we will be famous, that we will be on magazine covers! Is this true?”

Eylis shook his head. “I don’t know, it could happen I guess.”

“Oliver says we may see animals so exotic that no one would believe they exist. Animals so large and scary that they would give children nightmares. Is this true?”

Eylis had not heard of this and he felt unsettled by her comment. He didn’t know how to reply. Sobe seemed to not notice his silence.

“Oliver says...”

But then Eylis saw a car pull up, and a woman get out of it. He quickly excused himself from Sobe, eager to leave the conversation. He walked awkwardly quickly to get away from her, and almost tripped over his feet as he approached Siley. She smirked at his clumsiness.

Eylis quickly regained his composure. “I’m glad you decided to come,” he said.

“Against my better judgement,” sighed Siley.

“Hmm, me too,” Eylis replied.

Siley squinted through the sunlight at the cargo plane behind them. “This is it? The plane to take us to the Americas?”

Eylis glanced over to where Oliver was yelling at a porter to load the luggage properly. “Yea, that’s it. Have you flown before?”

Siley narrowed her eyes at him. “No,” she replied. Eylis once again felt foolish in front of her. He tried to think of something useful to say, but nothing came to mind.

“And the cooking supplies?” she asked after a pause. “I assume Oliver has it all – has any food been packed yet?”

“Some of the dry items, but most of it is being picked up on the other side of the ocean,” Eylis said, relieved for the silence to be broken.

“Show me.”

Eylis walked Siley over to the plane where they spent quite a few minutes eyeing the crates that Oliver had with him. Eylis noted that there was a lot of photography equipment, but very little in terms of excavation. Oliver, apparently, wasn’t planning on much digging. Soon everything was loaded, and Oliver called them onto the plane. There were a few seats behind the pilot and Eylis ended up sitting alone. As they took off, he watched the lush greenery of the countryside rush by outside the window and he felt one final surge of panic that, perhaps, he was making a very foolish decision to follow this stranger across the world.

The flight was smooth, but boring. Ocean and clouds drifted by outside the window, with the occasional island dotting the distant water below. At times Eylis would sneak a glance back at Siley, but she spent most of the flight sleeping. Eylis tried to do the same. At one point Oliver gave him a ginger ale and tried to speak with him, but Eylis was too preoccupied to pay him much attention. He noted though that Oliver seemed to have shed some of his affected excitement; he seemed wearier, agitated. Eylis wondered suddenly if the other archaeologist knew what was in store for them at the destination, or if he was just traveling on

hope, and the rest of them were foolish enough to come along.

Eventually the plane lowered, they saw land beneath them – more lush greenery, buildings, and palm trees – and the plane made a bumpy landing. Only then did Oliver actually tell them where they were. “Welcome to Panama,” he said, cheerful again.

“This is where the site is?” Eylis asked. The sun streamed through the plane window; due to the time difference, it was still afternoon.

“No, no, my friend,” Oliver shook his head dismissively. “Not even close. The place we’re going to is much more secret than this!”

Oliver set them up in a hotel, while he oversaw the unloading of the supplies onto a fishing boat. Eylis again asked him where they were going, but Oliver refused to answer. However simple deduction told Eylis that they were looking for an island away from the mainland. When Eylis returned to the hotel, the women were out; they had apparently left to explore the city. He waited around in the lobby for a while, trying to read some papers he had brought with him, but he found it extremely difficult to focus. He was relieved when Oliver returned and beckoned for him to follow.

“Where are we going?” Eylis asked him on the way.

Oliver as usual did not give him a concrete answer. “To a bar,” he simply replied. *Another one?* Eylis thought nervously.

They arrived at a little cantina, next to a grove of palm trees. The seats were open to the outside air, save for a thatched roof above. Oliver nodded towards one of the tables. “There,” he said, “we must find our guides.” Eylis

looked over and was very relieved that this time he saw two men sitting there.

Oliver sat down in his usual brusque manner, without waiting for an invitation from the two strangers. Eylis nodded by way of apology and removed his brown hat and sunglasses. Oliver introduced himself and Eylis did likewise. He was surprised to find out that the two men were not from the area. One was an American named Dan Cedar, the other a Russian named Anton; Eylis did not catch his last name.

“How may we help you,” the American asked, confirming Eylis’ suspicion that these two did not know Oliver. He had dark hair and a muscular build; he was young, in his thirties. The Russian looked a little bit older; his hair was thin and greying and he had a hooked nose over which he peered at them.

“We need guides for an expedition,” Oliver replied.

“Sure, we can arrange something,” Cedar answered. “Did you get a referral or something? Usually we arrange these things through the office...”

“I had no time to call, you see,” Oliver cut in. “There is something of a tight schedule here.”

“Well, when did you want to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Anton laughed. “Must be an American. No one else would be so impatient.” He took a long drink of the lager in his glass.

“Don’t worry, I pay well for the inconvenience.”

“How much?” Anton asked.

“10,000 per day,” Oliver answered. “And those are American dollars.”

“I’ll say!” Anton whistled softly and a large grin broke out on his face. Cedar, by contrast, appeared more suspicious.

“10,000 per day to lead you around the isthmus?” he asked skeptically. “You like Panama that much?”

“It’s nice. A man, a plan, hah. But no.” Oliver smiled. “No, no, friends, the destination is much more *interesting* than that.”

Cedar looked at Eylis doubtfully, and for some reason Eylis felt compelled to speak. “It’s an island. The boat’s ready to go now.” Oliver just smiled at him as if he had expected Eylis to say this.

The concern on Cedar’s face deepened and his mood seemed to darken. “Where is it?”

Oliver shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. I don’t want anyone... stealing the discovery so to speak.”

“If we’re going to guide you, you have to tell us.”

“And I will, I will! Once we’re on the boat.” Oliver was cheerful, but Cedar’s moodiness was beginning to concern Eylis. Anton was looking at his friend, his expression uncomprehending. “Is there a problem?” Oliver asked them.

“I’ve been to one of the islands west of here,” Cedar replied hesitantly. “And I will not go back.” Eylis was very curious by this, but Oliver spoke before he could ask anything.

“And where was this island that you don’t want to go back to?”

“I don’t think it’s on any of the maps.”

“Do you know the coordinates?”

“Approximately.” Cedar wrote some numbers down on a napkin with a pen that Oliver gave him. “It should be

around here.” He slid the napkin over to Oliver; Eylis did not get a chance to see it.

Oliver barely looked at it. “This is not it,” he said dismissively. “Don’t worry! Where we are going is *much* further south.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.” Cedar still seemed unconvinced. Oliver smiled at him. “It’s good money, don’t you agree? And only a week’s work. No long-term commitment, I guarantee.”

“You’ve been away from America too long, comrade,” Anton said jovially. “You’ve lost the capitalist in you!” He turned to the archaeologists confidentially. “Dan has been banned from America, see, he...”

Cedar glared at him and cleared his throat loudly, cutting him off. Anton shrugged and was quiet. Eylis was worried, however. *Banned*, he wondered. *What did this guy do?*

Oliver, of course, did not seem the least bit concerned. “A guide who isn’t interested in money... something new every day, huh?” He looked over at Eylis and laughed.

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Of course, of course!” Oliver replied. “I understand, my friend. There are more important things... I shall tell you, just you two, because I *trust* you. The spot we are going to has *very* special significance. Have you heard of the Seven Sites?”

Cedar and Anton exchanged glances. “Yes, of course,” Cedar answered.

“And you have heard of the origin, then? Of course... the most significant of the most significant finds... and it’s not far from here. We will make it there *tomorrow*. And all I need is some photographic evidence, a few samples, maybe recovery of an artifact or two... That’s all I require.”

“The origin,” Cedar repeated. He seemed doubtful, but less skeptical than before.

“Dan, it’s not just an archaeological find,” Oliver told him. “It’s the *answer* to all of the questions about the Seven Sites. If you’ve been looking for any answers, they’re there. At that site. A day’s travel away.”

Eylis did not find this line of argument convincing at all, but he was surprised to see genuine consideration on Cedar’s face.

“Do you know what we’ll find there?” Cedar asked him.

“The remains of an ancient culture, I hope,” Oliver responded.

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Cedar thought for a moment, sipping from his beer. But then he nodded.

Oliver clapped his hands together. “Good, good! And you, Anton?”

“You had me at 10,000 a day,” Anton answered blithely, as he took another swig of beer.

“Excellent! We will leave tomorrow morning. Here, have a round on me.” Oliver put some coins down on the table and, after giving them the boat number, happily walked away with Eylis. Eylis tried to ask him what Cedar was so concerned about, but Oliver was dismissive, as always. “Folk worries, my boy,” he told him. “Just some old superstitions.”

Oliver did not accompany Eylis to the hotel, but instead said that he had a meeting he had to attend to. At this point Eylis didn’t bother asking any questions, but was content to walk on his own along the streets, stopping at a beach to gaze at the foamy blue waters crashing against scorched, brown sand. The sea breeze blew droplets of salty liquid

against his face. Eylis closed his eyes; despite the violence of the waves, and the shipping port nearby, the archaeologist felt a sense of tranquility.

He returned to the hotel and showered, then went to the lobby. He saw Siley there and went over to say hello, but realized that she was reading a book. She gave him a cursory smile and then went back to her pages; Eylis sat at a nearby table and tried again to look over some old papers of his. As the evening passed and the sun set, the hotel bar became more active and Eylis noticed the guides come in and sit there, with their luggage. Several minutes later Oliver walked in, leading another man. The man had dirty hair and a rugged appearance. His muscular arms were covered in tattoos and his face was stern; he wore a thick, bushy mustache that turned down at the edges, but no beard. He carried several bags on his shoulders; one was long and cylindrical and looked like some type of weapon.

Eylis walked over and greeted Oliver, who busily told him that he had to get their guide checked into the hotel. "But we already have two guides," Eylis said.

Oliver shrugged. "Now we have a third." He turned away to talk to the clerk.

Eylis turned to the new man. He did not look like Cedar or Anton, and his manner was different somewhat; he seemed like a military type. He introduced himself as Jeff Longlow. "You're a guide?" Eylis asked.

"Munitions expert," he answered curtly. He nodded towards a bag around his shoulder. "That one's an automatic, and this one here," he nodded towards the cylindrical bag, "is one of the X series."

Eylis looked at him blankly.

“Fires a shell up to 30 meters,” he explained. Before Eylis could ask why this was necessary, Oliver returned and told Jeff that he was ready to get checked in. Longlow followed the archaeologist down the hall away from the lobby.

Eylis sighed and walked into the bar area, where Cedar and Anton were sitting. They offered him a seat and a drink, which Eylis politely refused. Anton shrugged and downed his own glass.

“You saw the man who walked in here, with Oliver?” Eylis asked.

Cedar nodded. “He one of ours?”

“I guess... Is it normal to have three guides for an expedition like this?”

Cedar shook his head. “A normal expedition around here would only require one of us. Anton and I split the business.”

“He said he was a munitions expert.”

“I’ll say, did you see what he was carrying?” Anton asked excitedly.

“He said... something automatic and something from the X series... I think.”

“A lot of firepower,” Anton said wistfully.

“A *lot* of firepower,” Cedar repeated.

“What’s the X series?” Eylis asked.

Cedar unzipped one of his bags, showing a black rifle inside with green casing. “You see this here? This is one of the standard Shooter series. It’s basic issue for a hunter explorer. What our colleague has over there is like this, but much bigger. Instead of a regular bullet it shoots an explosive shell.”

“And that’s for what? Predators?”

The guides laughed. “Our rifles we bring mostly as a precaution,” Cedar explained, “to scare away the occasional jaguar. The X series isn’t for animal predators. Its blast could split an elephant in two. It has no practical purpose, except as a war machine.”

“What do you think it means?” Eylis asked them. “Does Oliver expect someone to be defending that island?”

“You tell us,” Cedar said, gazing at Eylis with an intense expression. “I would love to know what Mr. Lizari is getting us into.”

Eylis averted his gaze; again, he felt very uncomfortable, nervous. Anton laughed. “Stop scaring him, Dan,” he said in his accented English. “Come, get us another round, will you?” Cedar sighed and left the table. “Don’t worry about him,” Anton told Eylis, “he has just had some bad experiences in the past.”

“Like what?”

“You can ask him, but he doesn’t like to talk about it,” Anton answered. “And he has been away from his country for so long. He was threatened to never come back to America.”

“What did he do? What crime did he commit?”

“Huh?” Anton asked confused. “Oh, he didn’t commit any crimes. Those who are banished from their countries rarely do.”

“And what about you, Anton?”

“Me...” Anton replied distantly, “I have no desire to go back to Russia. It is not what it was when I was growing up.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?”

“No, no,” Anton chuckled. “I’ve been everywhere ever since. But I like it here. Dan is a good friend, you will see.”

Cedar returned with some drinks. Anton pushed a shot glass across the table towards Eylis. “Here, this will make you calmer.”

“I don’t drink,” Eylis responded distractedly.

“This time as an exception, no? To commemorate our partnership,” Anton urged him. “New friends.”

Eylis sighed and drank the shot; immediately he regretted it. He put the glass down, gagging, and desperately reached for a water glass.

“What the hell was that?” he asked, coughing.

Anton just laughed. “What is good for Russians is bad for Germans,” he said.

Eylis stayed with the guides for a while, hearing Anton tell stories of his childhood in Russia; by the time he left the table to go to bed, his head was swimming and he felt dizzy. With renewed confidence he made up his mind to talk to Siley on his way back by the lobby, but he was somewhat disappointed and somewhat relieved to see that she had already left. He fell asleep quickly, but was then troubled by disturbing dreams. He recalled one where he was on an island at a camp, but there were dark, shapeless monsters surrounding the tents. The monsters grabbed Siley who screamed out for his help. He grabbed a large gun, but it wouldn’t fire; he looked down at it, but it was a strange, mechanical contraption that he could not figure out how to operate. He noticed that Siley was no longer screaming for help; looking up, he did not see her, but only saw the monsters closing in tighter around the tents. And somehow, Eylis knew for certain that she had been consumed.

2 Weeks Before



Oliver spent the next day sulking after the strict warning that Ali Fatah had given him the night before. He worked quietly at the campsite, analyzing the different ochre drawings and working on their digital reconstructions. But his mind turned often to Zara and, try as he might, he could not accept the idea of never seeing her again. His agitation grew throughout the day and he found himself making many mistakes in his research; at one point, he physically threw his work down and thrust his head into his hands. After several moments, he tried to shake it off and made some tea for himself.

He noticed he was completely alone, surrounded by the dense jungle. Fatah had been around some earlier in the day, poking his nose in the various tents and doing whatever he did - Oliver knew to let him be -, but now he was gone. The dark trees around the campsite seemed to be brooding, hiding themselves in shadow from the afternoon light, and it reminded Oliver of the great loneliness that he felt. The archaeologist had been brought here by his brother and then abandoned; he was often alone save for Fatah. The lead scientist, Phaleah, usually worked by himself and did not socialize much with Oliver, and recently he wasn't even around. He had some matter to attend to elsewhere and, unlike Oliver, he was allowed to come and go as he pleased. Oliver had to get explicit permission from Fatah before he went anywhere. This had frustrated Oliver more and more over the last five years, but he had had some relief from

meeting Zara and Baku. And now... now, Fatah wanted to take even that away from him. To call him resentful would be too mild - now his resentment had turned to wrath.

As Oliver poured himself tea, he remembered what it felt like in the early days to be working at one of the Seven Sites. He truly felt that these sites were his life's work. He didn't mind the cold aloofness of Phaleah, or the unnecessary strictness of Fatah. He was just happy to have his place. But then, the excavations dragged on and any efforts on his part to publish his results were stymied. They kept him well-funded and well-fed so he didn't have to worry about providing for himself. But it also meant that he was isolated here in the jungle, hardly allowed to go to town and never allowed to stay out, barely able to talk to anyone...

Besides, he considered, what's so secretive about my work? Phaleah was doing important work with the echolia plant, and because it was a powerful narcotic and hallucinogen it made sense to keep it from the public eye. Who knows when Golden Dragon might come around again, looking to restart their drug trade. But all Oliver was looking into was the civilization – their artifacts, paintings, and structural ruins – that still existed at the site. They told him that public discourse meant public discovery of the area and the end to the private research agenda... Oliver understood this, but still did not understand why he couldn't write about the archaeological significance, while at the same time not disclosing the specific location of the site.

He also knew that his site was not the only one of the Seven Sites being looked into... at one point he had seen a map that was in Phaleah's possession that showed all seven of the supposed ruins. As far as he knew, no one had been able to locate them all precisely. Of course, he knew where

Kanarion was, but the map was old and incomplete, not to mention that it wasn't drawn to the proper scale (as one would expect given its age). If a second site was known, that could be enough in theory to determine the scale and coordinate system of the map which could then locate all of the other sites. Oliver now knew the location of a second site (his current work area) and so from the map he could locate the others... yet Phaleah for whatever reason showed no interest whatsoever in these other sites. He ignored Oliver whenever he asked about it, and he kept the map to himself.

As he thought about it, the desire for exploration once again rose in Oliver's chest. He remembered clearly the exhilaration he felt at the Kanarion discovery. As he sipped his tea, he eyed Phaleah's tent at the other end of the campsite. It was another large research tent, like his, with thick white canvas walls to protect it from the frequent rains. Oliver looked around, but again did not see Fatah; he hadn't seen him for hours. He strode cautiously towards Phaleah's tent.

He stopped upon reaching the opening and again looked around, listening for any sign of Fatah. But he heard nothing except for the background calls of the birds and insects amid the trees. He opened the tent flap and went inside. The interior was a mess of books, papers, food canisters, a stove, and other supplies. At the far end was a desk; Oliver walked up to it and set his tea cup down. He then looked around at the mess and wondered how he would ever find the map among all the papers.

He didn't have to search long. Guessing that the most important papers would be in the desk drawers, he started opening them one by one. Some contained old papers,

others pencils or notebooks, but nothing very interesting. Finally, he tried the bottom drawer; it did not open and he guessed it must be locked. He looked around for a key, but didn't find one in any obvious place; returning to the desk, he tried the bottom drawer again with a strong tug and was very surprised when it moved. He realized it was merely stuck shut, not locked, and with some more tugging was able to pry it open. He rifled through some papers and there, near the top, found a folder; carefully placed inside was a reconstruction of an old map.

Oliver recognized it at once; the reconstruction showed the trace of the frayed edges and the unevenness of the ancient cloth on which the original had been drawn. There, clearly, was the ancient map of the world that he remembered from years ago... the sites were each marked with a small, black stroke. Oliver found the one that must be his and the one that must be Kanarion; he drew his breath as he traced his finger between them, imaging where the others must be in respect to current geopolitical boundaries...

How many of these have already been explored, he wondered as he placed the map on Phaleah's desk. He had heard conversations that Phaleah had had about the sites, rumors of different ones being discovered and of the strange and fantastical things found there... not just natural wonder or archaeological ruins, but also of large, terrible creatures... Based on what he had heard, and of his knowledge of the sites, Oliver could guess which one may have been the 'origin', the home of the mystical KcKoo, the supposed original tribe of Kadune. *Does Phaleah already know?* He couldn't be sure of what the lead scientist did or did not know of the other sites. He was Cadunian after all, but seemed to not care about the origins of his people.

As Oliver gazed at the map, he suddenly heard a noise in the jungle outside: snapping branches, someone approaching. Turning quickly, he knocked the tea over; cursing, he realized that he had spilled some on the map. He tried to dab the liquid with his shirt then, leaving the map, went outside the tent. Right after he emerged outside, he saw Fatah enter the campsite. Fatah glanced at him and Oliver gave a faint smile.

“Hi,” Fatah said emotionlessly. “What are you up to?”

Oliver shrugged and feigned nonchalance. “Just working. The usual.”

Fatah eyed the tent behind him. “You were in P’s tent?”

“No, uh, I was just checking if he was back. I thought I heard someone.”

Fatah seemed at once suspicious, his hand naturally falling on his hip where he kept his pistol. “When did you hear them?”

“Not long ago... but it was probably nothing, you know. Probably just a jungle cat. My mistake.” Oliver hoped that he didn’t sound nervous.

Fatah looked at him for a long moment; his face was inscrutable. “I’m going to check the perimeter, all the same.”

“Please,” Oliver replied.

Still eyeing him, Fatah slipped past Oliver and went into the tent behind him. Oliver was about to call to him in alarm, telling him that there was no need to check the tent, but he kept control of his nerves. He stood there silently, breathing shallowly, listening for Fatah to cry out when he discovered the map and the tea that still sat by it.

To his great surprise, Fatah exited the tent without saying anything. He exchanged a glance with Oliver who again smiled weakly, then walked away into the jungle, checking

the campsite perimeter. He returned after a while, his hand removed from the pistol at his side. “No one,” he told Oliver. “Probably just the boy we pay to bring food here.”

“Probably,” Oliver agreed, hoping that his voice wouldn’t break. Fatah seemed satisfied and he went away to go about his business. Oliver walked stiffly back to his own tent and remained there throughout the evening. When night fell, he risked another walk back to Phaleah’s tent. Quickly entering, he walked over to the desk and picked up the tea cup. He then carefully replaced the map reconstruction back into its folder and closed the desk drawer. He returned to his tent at once, making sure to move as quietly as possible over the jungle floor.

Oliver felt a strange thrill when he made it back to the safety of his own lodgings. He couldn’t believe that Fatah had not noticed the cup or the map! *Probably he’s not as tough as he looks*, Oliver mused. *He threatens me, tries to scare me... but he’s just some kid that was hired to watch me. He doesn’t really know what he’s doing. I’m the academic after all – how smart can he be? He probably made up all the stuff about his father to intimidate me...*

Oliver clutched the tea cup to his chest as if it was some great trophy that he had won. *Fuck Ali, I’m my own man*, Oliver thought contentedly. *He can’t stop me from seeing Zara... he won’t scare me anymore!* Oliver resolved then that Fatah would never again take away his freedom. He would see Zara the next evening, and he would publish his damn article about the archaeological site. Smiling he lay down and, for the first time in a long time, was able to sleep continuously without waking.

Day 3



They left early the next morning, crammed together with the supplies on the boat; it was small, just a fishing vessel. Anton piloted the craft into the open ocean. *Just another boat on the waters*, Eylis mused. *No one to see us off... no one to notice if we disappear.* He watched Central America disappear into the distance and soon they were surrounded by nothing but water. The ocean was calm with barely any waves, and the boat made good time according to Anton's reckoning. Still none of them knew where exactly they were headed; Anton merely followed the instructions that Oliver gave him.

Eylis stayed in the internal compartment of the boat, reading papers, but in the afternoon the sea grew choppier and he began to feel seasick. Surprisingly, he found that he felt less sick if he looked at the waves. He stood at the railing for a long time, trying to spot a fish or stray bird far from land, anything to distract himself from the constant up and down motion of the vessel. He barely even noticed that anyone else was around, until Siley spoke to him.

"Seasick?" she asked, standing by the railing near him.

"A little," he admitted. "You're not?"

She shrugged. "I've spent some time in the Indonesian and South China seas."

Eylis heard giggling and, looking over, realized that Oliver and Sobe were not far off. Oliver was motioning towards the bow and seemed to be excited. Looking astern, Eylis saw

the aft deck with a few chairs. Longlow was sitting in one of them, smoking.

“Still a few hours left to go, or so I heard from Anton,” Siley said. “This must be one hell of an island to spend so much effort getting to. And yet, I’m surprised no one’s come here before. I mean, isn’t the earth entirely mapped out by now?”

“You’d be surprised,” Eylis said, his stomach churning. “The world is mostly covered by water. The Pacific, in particular, is vast. Hardly any of the ocean floor has been mapped. And the tectonic plates and sea levels mean that islands will slowly emerge or disappear... But yes, at this point, the surface is mostly covered, which suggests to me that this island must be small and located outside of traditional trade routes. Perhaps currents or weather patterns also serve to naturally protect it from the stray ship... Or, there’s the other possibility.” The boat lurched in the waves, and Eylis stopped talking so that he wouldn’t accidentally vomit.

Siley looked at him inquisitively. Eylis regained his composure and shrugged. “It may be the case that it has been visited before, many times even. Perhaps there’s just nothing that interesting about it after all.”

He heard Oliver say to Sobe something along the lines of, ‘Come on, I’ll show you,’ and the pair of them disappeared into the bridge. Eylis watched them go, then turned his eyes back to the sea. “She’ll probably be the first to know where we’re going.”

“He certainly likes to give her lots of attention,” Siley muttered.

Eylis gave her a sidelong glance. “So do you despise her? Or are you envious of her?”

“Neither,” she answered. “I feel sorry for her. In another life, she could have found a way out. Hell, in another life, I could have found a way out.”

Eylis looked at her sympathetically. “What will you do with the money? Will you go back home?”

She shook her head. “I’ll send some to my mother. But no, I will never go back if I can help it.”

They stood in silence for a moment, then Siley motioned towards the stern. “I’m going to sit down, catch some sun.” Eylis nodded. “Won’t you come with me?” she asked. “I don’t really want to be left alone with him.” She nodded towards Longlow, sitting alone and smoking, his tattoos gleaming in the sunlight.

“Ok,” Eylis agreed and he followed her to the back deck. Siley put on sunglasses and stretched out on one of the seats. Eylis sat beside her; he found that if he looked just off center from the bow he could settle down his stomach.

They were still sitting there several hours later, when they heard Anton’s voice through a loud speaker: ‘Land ho!’ the Russian called. Eylis instantly ran over to the railing and, sure enough, they could see the island on the horizon, obscured by low-hanging clouds. It grew larger over time and eventually Eylis could get a good look at it. It was of modest size, but large enough that it could have sustained a small human population. It was mostly flat and covered in dense, green vegetation; however, in the middle he could see some rocks rising upwards. He guessed that this was the shell of a long dormant volcano. There may well still be volcanic activity on the island, he reasoned. This was not uncommon for the Seven Sites, as they were expected to have unique geologic features caused by such activity. It was thought that this source of heat may have fueled the

biological growth that eventually sustained the ancient civilizations.

Soon the boat slowed and then Eylis heard a grating noise. The engines stopped, then started again. The boat reversed, then began to move forward slowly. Concerned, he went into the bridge to ask what was going on. Anton replied that there were rocks around the island rim; he had to be careful not to run aground. Oliver and Sobe were there as well. Eylis was surprised to see that Oliver did not have the careless cheerfulness that he had showed before; instead he seemed agitated, intense. Sobe was quiet, frowning; she seemed perplexed by his change in mood.

Soon they heard another grating noise, and Oliver shouted roughly at Anton. Anton reversed the boat again, and again tried to ease it forward. Another noise was heard, followed by more shouting from Oliver. Eylis was taken aback by the archaeologist's expression - Oliver's eyes were wide and his face was red; veins bulged near his temple. He began to shout directions continually at Anton and anytime he felt that Anton was not following his directions correctly he became livid, hurling abuses at the Russian guide. Eylis felt uncomfortable and left the bridge. He watched their slow approach from the railing.

Eventually they made anchor in a small inlet and were able to disembark. Oliver immediately put them to work; first, he had the men remove all of the supplies. Then, he tasked the guides with creating a perimeter and securing a campsite on a small beachhead next to the boat. He then ordered the women to unpack the supply crates. "You help as well," he said coarsely to Eylis, as he surveyed the island from the beachhead. Eylis could not figure out what Oliver

was looking for; it was almost as if he expected an ancient tribe to burst forth from the jungle and greet them.

Soon everything was unpacked and the camp was set up. Oliver then ordered Siley to make dinner and promptly retired to his tent. Eylis watched her fumble around with some of the packages; she seemed exasperated. She noticed him watching her. "Hey, can you help me out?" she asked.

Eylis walked over to her, eyeing the pile of food canisters around her. "You do know how to cook, right?" he asked apprehensively.

She glared at him. "I was not a part of the purchasing decisions, remember? This is not the kind of food I make at home... let's see, we have dehydrated this and pickled that. How am I supposed to make a meal out of this?"

Eylis shrugged. She sighed. "Never mind. Can you just start me a fire? You can make a fire, right?"

"Isn't there a gas stove?"

"Sure, if you can find me the fuel." She nodded towards the brush around them. "I bet there's a lot of good firewood in there." Then she went back to trying to organize their containers. Eylis sighed and started looking around for dry wood.

The jungle was thick and he didn't desire to go far, at least not without a machete. Luckily, however, it seemed that the island had not received rain in a while, and he was able to gather some wood that was dry enough. He felt unsettled though, as he moved among the ferns and trees. For some reason or other, the jungle seemed animated, as if it were full of life; as if it were watching him. Yet he didn't actually see any animals and, besides some bird calls and occasional leaves rustling, he had no reason to believe that there was anything out there. Still he walked quickly back to camp as

soon as he had an armload of wood. On the way back he spied a large, leafy fern and with excitement he realized what it was.

He dumped the firewood in a small pit that Siley had dug; to her credit, Sobe was helping her and the two were beginning to mix ingredients together in a pot of water. Eylis walked past them, however, and sought out Oliver.

“What is it?” Oliver asked, sticking his head out of his tent as Eylis approached.

Eylis grinned. “You might be right, Oliver, this might be it,” he said. “You know what I found just now, in the jungle? Echolia. The same, unique plant thought to be at all of the Seven Sites.”

Oliver did not seem as pleased as Eylis expected him to be. Instead he looked intently around and said, “Not enough, though. I thought there should be more.”

Eylis shrugged. “That’s not a bad thing, necessarily. Some sites are bound to have less than others. Besides, maybe it started to die out over time. Plant populations change too.”

“Or someone removed it,” Oliver responded darkly, and then abruptly disappeared back into his tent. Eylis found this to be an odd comment, considering that there was no recorded survey of this island before.

He walked back over to the pit where Siley had already lit a fire. “Thanks for the help,” she said ironically when she saw him.

“Sorry, I thought I found something important.”

“Well anyways, the wood’s good. And Sobe’s not bad help.”

“Good. So... what do you think?”

“Of all this?” Siley asked, looking around. Eylis nodded. She sighed. “Honestly, I don’t like the jungle. It gives me the creeps.”

“Yea, me too. I can’t say why though.”

They heard the murmuring of voices and saw that Cedar, Anton, and Longlow had returned. Cedar and Anton had rifles strung around their shoulders; Longlow was carrying his large series X gun in his arms. Oliver emerged and at once asked for a report of their surroundings. The guides responded that they hadn’t seen anything of note, nothing at all except trees and ferns. Eylis thought this might disappoint Oliver but, on the contrary, Oliver seemed to relax a little. He smiled for the first time since they arrived at the island and told the men to sit and eat dinner.

Soon a soup concoction was finished and the seven of them ate it around the camp fire. It was warm, even as darkness set in, but the fire was useful to keep the mosquitoes away. While he ate, Eylis became aware of a conversation between the guides. Cedar had been asking Longlow about his background, why he agreed to come with Oliver.

“The money is hard to turn down, of course,” Anton had suggested.

But Longlow shook his head. “It wasn’t for the money. This one was personal for me,” he said gruffly.

“How so?”

Longlow sighed. “You ever heard of John Longlow? He was a famed naturalist, wrote a bunch of articles about twenty years ago. He was my brother.”

“I haven’t heard of him,” Cedar answered.

“Well, I haven’t heard *from* him, not in those twenty long years. He disappeared on an island like this one.”

“Was it this one?” Cedar asked.

Longlow shrugged. “Probably not. But who’s to say, right? I just want to know what happened to him.”

“And Oliver promised you answers.”

“Yes, he did.”

Cedar nodded. “Yea, that’s what he promised me too.”

Eylis glanced over towards Oliver, sitting on the other side of the fire. His attention was glued to Sobe; he was oblivious to their conversation.

“Do you think we’ll get them? The answers we seek?” Longlow asked.

“I think that Oliver knows something that he’s not telling us,” Cedar answered stiffly. Eylis glanced at Siley, sitting next to him. She was silent, listening as well.

“Well I think we better find out what it is,” Longlow answered, lighting a cigarette. “I can’t leave here without knowing what happened to my brother.”

“Do you have another, comrade?” Anton asked, and Longlow gave him a cigarette as well. Anton took puffs in between long sips of his beer. He noticed Eylis looking at him and gave him a warm, glazed smile. Eylis realized suddenly that Anton must be drunk.

Their quiet voices were suddenly cut off by a loud admonition from Oliver. “What are you two doing?” he cried. “You can’t smoke here!”

Longlow stared at him as he held his cigarette between his teeth. “Why not?”

“This is a new ecosystem. We don’t know what kind of wildlife could be here. Animal noses are very sensitive to new scents. Who knows what you might harm... or attract!”

In principle, Eylis agreed with Oliver and the old tenant that one should try not to interfere with any environment

they were observing. However, that was also known to be impossible; their human bodies alone were already providing scents that were surely new to this island. And Eylis didn't like how quick Oliver was to anger. But Longlow finally flicked his cigarette into the fire and Anton did the same. Oliver sat down and became calmer. Soon he was again engaged in conversation with Sobe, ignoring the rest of them.

After dinner, Siley and Sobe cleaned the dishes in a pot of water, and Cedar helped them to lay out rations for the trek inland they would take the next day. Anton retrieved a guitar from his tent and began to sing an old Russian waltz. Eylis enjoyed listening to the sweet, morose notes and the moving voice of the guide, even though he didn't understand any of the words. Cedar sat beside him and explained that the song was about a Russian peasant who was forced to fight to defend the motherland. Eylis was surprised to learn that Cedar knew some Russian.

"I've known Anton for a long time," Cedar said simply. "We met up back in Chile. I used to spend a lot of time in the Andes with the climber Andrew Harrison. You know him?" Eylis shook his head no. "Well, he's a real legend in the climbing community – the best in the world. And he's been doing it since the 80s."

"And climbing is Anton's passion as well?"

Cedar chuckled. "He tries sometimes. But no, Anton's real passion is drinking. But he's a pretty good musician as well."

Eylis was impressed with how well Anton could play while being drunk. But before long, Oliver once again became upset and began to yell at Anton, claiming that they didn't know what wildlife on the island they may be disturbing. Anton drunkenly yelled back at him. As the two shouted at

each other, Eylis became more perturbed himself. *Why is Oliver so obsessed with the wildlife*, he wondered. It was clear that no humans lived on this island anymore, and there didn't seem to be any animals around to be disturbed. The island appeared to be completely deserted, save for vegetation and mosquitoes.

Eventually Anton put the guitar down and Oliver stormed off. He entered into his tent and Sobe, a short distance behind, followed him. The rest of the party sat around the fire and Anton again told tales of his past life; it turned out he had been to many countries in between the USSR and Chile and had many entertaining tales of his travels. Siley sat by Eylis, and the archaeologist watched the light of the flickering flames dance across her legs. Before long, they heard the sound of a woman moaning coming from Oliver's tent. Anton mischievously put a finger to his lips and quietly walked towards the tent, while the others watched him in silence. He disappeared into the darkness; then they heard the sound of a woman's scream and some muffled shouting, and soon Anton came running back to the fire.

"Do not disturb," he said as he passed Eylis, winking.

Oliver stormed up to the edge of the fire's light, dressed in his underwear, and began to harass Anton, calling him a worthless drunk. "I never should have brought you!" Oliver cried, and then thundered off, heading back to his tent. Eylis was again surprised by how quick Oliver was to anger and the fury with which he spat at Anton.

Cedar mentioned then that they should put out the fire and get some rest so that they could start early the next morning. Eylis watched Siley get up, and their eyes met. "Goodnight," Eylis said, somewhat awkwardly, and turned away.

“Goodnight,” Siley told him and walked off towards her tent.

“Comrade, I know some love ballads as well, if that would help,” Anton said, coming up beside Eylis.

“Sshh,” Eylis said quickly, feeling his face grow red.

“Have it your way,” Anton shrugged, and disappeared into the night.

Eylis retreated to his tent, incomprehensible Russian songs lingering in his head.

2 Weeks Before



They sat around a low table in her house, having tea. It was just Oliver and Zara; Baku couldn't make it. This excited Oliver beyond measure - it was the first time he had had the pleasure of being alone with her. She held the tea cup with both hands and drank from it in quick, small sips, like a frightened animal. Oliver found it endearing. Her smile radiated warmth within him, and he sought as ever to capture for a moment the attention of her inscrutable, dark eyes.

"Zara, I do love these chats with you," he told her. "There is no one I can usually talk to. It's a very lonely life, in this jungle."

"But don't you have people here? Friends you work with?" she asked innocently.

Oliver shook his head gravely. "I work alone for the most part. The work I do is of a secretive nature - that's why I never talk of it. I'm not allowed to give any details..."

"Who's not allowing?"

Oliver wasn't sure how to answer. "Colleagues," he said finally.

"Well, I think it's stupid," she said. "You should share your work with the world."

"Yes, yes, I agree. And I will," Oliver answered. "I've decided that enough is enough! I won't work with these colleagues much longer. I will be independent."

"Good," Zara responded. "You will never be happy working for someone you do not like."

“Yes, no more working for anyone at all. I have made several exciting discoveries...”

“What?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What have you discovered?” Zara asked.

Oliver paused. “Well, it’s a little premature to talk about it...”

“But I can see you are excited, Oliver. Won’t you tell me?” she asked sweetly.

Oliver shrugged; what was the harm? “There are several archaeological sites thought to be of immense historic – and geopolitical – value. It’s thought that they were inhabited by various tribes that shared a historic origin. These are called the Seven Sites.”

“Because there are seven of them?”

“Exactly. But each one is in a different, hidden part of the world. One I already discovered as a boy. It is in South America and is called Kanarion. Another is here, Zara. I am working on it currently.”

“But what is so exciting about them? I do not understand.”

Oliver saw real curiosity in her gaze and it pleased him. “They are older than most archaeological sites previously discovered, certainly older than any civilization previously discovered. They are rumored to be the origins of the Cadunian people... but more importantly, at least for the powers that be, they are supposed to have great resource value. They are a natural growth spot of the echolia plant and it is thought they contain large deposits of chesanium. That metal alone has numerous uses in military and defense technologies. You know the Goatese War?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it wasn’t a war of rampant Asiatic nationalism as some would suggest. Yes, the ANM tried to invade Goatland, but it wasn’t to expand Asian hegemony. It was because Goatland also has coveted deposits of chesanium. And of course the drug cartel Golden Dragon, among others, is interested in the echolia as a narcotic. Many people have died because of these sites, Zara.”

At the mention of the drug cartels, Zara’s countenance seemed to grow darker. “It’s a shame,” she said distantly, “how easily men kill one another.”

“Well yes, indeed,” Oliver answered, “but there’s no need for these sites to be secret any longer. I have already discovered two... and I know where all of the others are.”

Zara seemed genuinely surprised. “You do?”

Oliver nodded, grinning. “I have a map, Zara. A map to all seven. And because I already know the location of two... it shouldn’t be hard to locate the others precisely. These discoveries will be my ticket to escaping my current drudgery. I will finally have recognition – world recognition, that is – of my work.”

“It sounds exciting. You plan to see them all?”

“Yes, of course. Over time, that is. I will start with the origin...”

“The origin?”

“The site thought to be the first, the one from which civilization spread to all of the others.”

“It’s first, so you want to study it first?”

Oliver paused. “Well, it’s not so much for chronological reasons,” he explained. “There are still men who are after these sites, you see. As soon as I excavate, others will come for them. That’s why I have to do the most important one first. This way I’m guaranteed to make the most major

discoveries. I'll become known as 'the Father of the Seven Sites'." Zara giggled at his enthusiasm and Oliver, encouraged, continued talking. "And there are other... rumors of that site. I have heard from my colleagues... well, it's hard to believe really. But evidence suggests that evolution has not tread the same path everywhere in the world. And here at this site, there may be animals people have always thought were extinct. Animals of a most magnificent kind!"

Oliver expected this to make an impression on Zara, but instead she frowned. "Rumors... you mean these colleagues of yours have already seen this site? I thought you said you would discover it?"

Oliver felt his face grow red. "I didn't say others hadn't *seen* it before," he said dismissively, "but certainly no one has published about it before. There has been no proper, scientific excavation of it before. It doesn't matter who *sees* it first, only who lays claim to it." Oliver felt annoyed that Zara had asked that question, and more annoyed still that she seemed to remain skeptical. "Anyways, there's no proof that anyone else *has* been there. They're just rumors after all," he said gruffly.

"I'm sorry, Oliver, I did not mean to offend," Zara replied, and she put a hand on his leg. Her soft touch was too much for Oliver, and suddenly he could not restrain himself – he leaned over to give her a kiss, pressing his face close to hers. But at the last moment she put her hand on his chest, pushing him away. Oliver sat back, devastated; Zara looked downward, averting her gaze. There was an awkward silence.

"Zara... I care so much for you," he said finally, brokenly.

“Oliver, I care so much about you, too,” she answered, looking over at him.

“Then why can’t we...”

Zara hesitantly put a hand on her belly. “You can’t tell yet, but I’m with child.”

“Oh, I didn’t know...”

“It’s Baku’s,” she said. Oliver felt his heart sink. He looked glumly at the floor. “But I do care about you, Oliver,” she continued. “You must forgive me.”

Oliver shook his head. “It’s fine, you did nothing wrong,” he said. There was another silence. Zara looked at him sympathetically.

“You must understand, Oliver,” she said finally, “that Baku and I are also trapped here.”

“How’s that?” he asked, still upset.

Zara sighed. “Baku, he’s.... he was... getting into trouble with the law, because of the people he worked with. The government is looking for us now – we can’t cross any borders.”

Oliver was surprised. “Is it very serious?”

Zara nodded, and he noticed tears in her eyes. “I think so.”

Oliver thought for a moment, then grabbed Zara’s hand. “Zara, come with me,” he said, staring into her desperate eyes. “I am about to leave this place... and I can take you with me.”

“How?” she asked, unbelievably.

“I have money... back at our campsite, see. I will take it with me – don’t worry, it’s enough. With it, I can definitely get you across the border.”

“And Baku?”

Oliver nodded. “And him too.”

Hope started to creep into Zara's eyes, but she still seemed doubtful. "But... this money is yours? You are rich, then?"

Oliver paused for a moment. Of course, the money wasn't technically his... it was for the expedition, which meant that it was shared between him, Phaleah, and Fatah and used to cover all individual or shared expenses. On the other hand, they had essentially kept him prisoner while he was the one who had made all of the exciting, meaningful discoveries. And to make it worse, they didn't seem to notice, or care about, what he discovered... So in that sense, Oliver reasoned, the money *should* be his since he was the only one who had done any reasonable amount of real scholarship.

"Yes, it is," he answered simply.

Zara again placed her hand on his leg; this time, there were tears in her eyes. "You are telling the truth? You would really do this for me?"

"Absolutely," Oliver answered honestly. "But we must leave soon. Is that okay?"

She nodded quickly. "Any time. The sooner the better."

"Ok, let me think... the day after tomorrow, then? Let's meet at the concrete bridge over the main avenue...let's say 2:00. By then I will know where we should go, and I can meet you there with the money. We can escape into Laos by the evening. Okay?"

She nodded her head furiously, tears falling down her cheeks. Then she threw her arms around him and squeezed tightly. "Thank you, Oliver, you don't know what this means to me," she said.

Oliver inhaled her perfume, his face pressed against her beautiful, dark hair. He felt a joy he had not experienced in a long time. Of course, he knew that she was still tied to

Baku, but who knows, as she travelled with him, maybe things would change...

Oliver left Zara several minutes later; she waved to him warmly from the window, as he walked back to the main road to grab a ride. On his long journey back to the campsite, he felt a great contentedness and tranquility with the world; peaceful and beautiful visions danced through his head of a future life together with Zara.

Day 4



The expedition set out the next morning, into the jungle. They went single-file, Oliver leading with Cedar and Longlow, and Anton following at the rear. Eylis delayed his step so that he would be next to Siley. Everyone was silent as they walked, but still it gave him pleasure to be near her; he watched her hair bob on her neck in its small bun and tried his best not to lower his gaze. Each person carried a small pack with two sets of rations and the guides carried the group's tents and supply bags, with the assumption that they would set up a new camp in the island's interior that night. The air was thick and humid, and Eylis was amazed that he was able to find dry firewood the night before.

The morning sun penetrated the canopy above their heads and Eylis soon found that his entire body was drenched in sweat; it seemed his explorations in Southeast Asia had still not prepared him for excursions in tropical climates. Eylis also found that the foreboding he had felt the previous evening had not left him. There seemed to be a darkness hiding in the jungle, despite the bright illumination the sun provided. At times they would hear chirps and hoots and other noises and Eylis again got the sense that something was watching them.

They covered the uneven ground slowly; the brush was thick and the guides were constantly hacking at it with their machetes. In two hours, Eylis was not sure if they had gone half a mile. They took a few water breaks, but at these times too they barely spoke to one another. He noticed that both

Siley and Sobe were drenched in sweat as well, yet neither one complained. *They're probably used to the climate*, he figured and wondered if this wasn't a reason why Siley might not want to return to Laos. Oliver's countenance was similar to the day before and he spoke little, with no trace of joviality.

At times the party would suddenly come across a wide path of beaten-down vegetation, as if someone had decided to drive a car through that particular part of the jungle. These paths were strange and inexplicable to Eylis, and they unsettled him greatly. The apparent destruction with which they were made seemed in stark contrast to the quiet calm of the brush around them. They appeared almost to be game trails left by some large predator, yet the party had not seen any wildlife and moreover, what would be large enough to leave them? Cedar and Oliver also seemed perturbed by these paths of broken vegetation and they never followed them to see where they would lead.

Shortly after midday, Eylis again was confronted with the same strange cries from the jungle and gazing intently at the ferns around him he saw something running through the brush. He quickly motioned everyone to stop moving and be quiet. Then, with a quick scurry, a lizard popped out onto the path in front of them. It lingered for only a split second, quickly surveying them with small, black eyes, before darting back into the vegetation. But the quick sighting was enough to give the expedition pause, for it was like no lizard they had seen before. It walked upright on two legs, stood nearly half a meter tall, and its head tapered off into a beaked mouth; its color was greenish with dark stripes, and it blended in almost perfectly with the jungle around them.

“That’s incredible,” Eylis heard himself say aloud. “I’ve never seen a reptile like that before...”

“Probably a species unique to the island. The Sites are known to have unusual biodiversity,” Oliver answered.

“But it was upright! There are only a few known species of reptile that walk on hind legs... this is quite a discovery, Oliver!”

Oliver gave him an almost patronizing smile. “I expect there to be much more interesting discoveries on this island, my friend.”

Sobe did not seem impressed. “That’s what you meant when you mentioned exciting new animals?” Oliver did not answer, but merely gave her the same wan smile and chuckled.

Eylis glanced at the guides. They, like Sobe, did not seem as impressed as he was. In fact, Cedar seemed somewhat perturbed. Eylis caught his eye and gave him a questioning look. Cedar turned away. “Keep an eye out,” he muttered to them, and then immediately started cutting away at the brush with his machete again. Eylis couldn’t fathom why he looked so perplexed. *Maybe he has some kind of reptile phobia*, he considered.

They broke for lunch and ate their rations, while Siley heated up water in a portable kettle. She served them tea and orange juice made from dehydrated powder mixed with the clean water. Then they headed out again and before long came to a ridge; emerging from the brush, they could see the land slope down sharply into a small valley perhaps a dozen meters deep before rising back up to meet the rocks they had seen from the boat. The rocks themselves rose only a few meters more but covered a wide area, encompassing what Eylis assumed was the interior circle of the island, the

core of the volcano that had caused this land to emerge from the ocean.

Oliver stared intensely across the short chasm that separated them from the other side of the valley. “There’s something there,” he muttered, almost to himself, “I’m sure of it.”

“Why do you suppose so?” Eylis asked, trying to sound more optimistic than he felt after hours of trudging through the thick heat.

“Well there wasn’t anything in the jungle, was there,” Oliver snapped, turning his head and giving Eylis a sharp look. Eylis thought to mention the upright lizard but said nothing under Oliver’s vicious gaze.

“Uh..,” Sobe broke the silence. “How are we going to get across there?”

Oliver gave her an annoyed look, as if the answer was obvious. “We’ll cross the valley. Come, no time to waste.” He began to search for a route down the steep slope. The guides helped him look and in the end it was Cedar, the climber, who found the best route.

“We can make it this way,” he said, his brown, bushy hair clinging to his head, “but not with the larger packs. We should set up camp on this ridge before we continue.”

“Is that really necessary?” Oliver asked.

Cedar nodded. “There’s no way we can move this weight down there safely and back up again. Plus, I don’t see any place we could make camp among those rocks.”

“He’s right,” Anton agreed. The poor Russian guide seemed to be having a rougher time than the rest of them. His usually amiable face looked aged, worn. Eylis suddenly realized that the man had not had a drink that whole day as they hiked – this must be what he looked like sober.

In the end Oliver agreed with the guides, although he muttered under his breath in apparent anger as they walked along the ridge, looking for a spot to shelter. After a short while, Cedar found a small clearing where, due to the proximity of the ridge, the vegetation was spaced out enough to allow them to pitch the tents. After camp was set up, they returned to the ridge, their burden lessened. Now only the guides wore packs, although they kept their weapons on them as well.

Cedar carefully threw down the guides' packs and then took the first steps down the ridge. He lead the way cautiously, stopping to make sure that everyone could follow his path, and the group made it to the bottom without incident, except that Sobe, fatigued, slipped once and landed roughly on her bottom. Siley picked her up and Sobe did not complain, although Eylis could tell how upset she looked. He got the sense that this expedition was not what she had in mind when Oliver had sold her on the idea of an exotic vacation.

Getting up the other side of the valley was trickier; it was essentially a sheer rock wall at this point, and Cedar and Anton had to help the others up. Sobe, after a few failed attempts up the wall, sat down and resolutely refused to go any farther. Oliver tried to encourage her onwards, but she shook her head and spoke emphatically, her voice angry. The others sat near the wall as they argued, the afternoon sun still hot on their necks despite the shade that the valley provided.

While they sat there they began to hear more strange noises coming from the jungle around them, although these were not the hoots and the chirps they had heard earlier, but instead were what sounded like short bursts of echoing

shrieks. They reminded Eylis of strange laughter. Upon hearing them, fear showed on Sobe's face and tears began to form around her eyes. Longlow lifted his gun and fired a couple automatic rounds into the air; the shrieks at once stopped and there was rustling followed by silence. Whatever it was, the munitions expert had apparently scared it away. Sobe at this point would not be soothed, however, and Oliver reluctantly agreed that she could return to camp. She demanded the accompaniment of a guide and Oliver offered Anton, but she refused, and so it was decided that Longlow would go back with her. The two disappeared through the brush, and the others turned their attention back to the rock wall.

By the time they had all scaled the wall, Longlow and Sobe had already scaled the other side and were presumably back at camp. Exhausted, Eylis sat down to rest and Anton laid down next to him, but before long Oliver began to pressure them, insisting that they continue. Sighing, Eylis got back to his feet. He, like Sobe, was beginning to have regrets at having followed Oliver to this island.

While they rested, Cedar had scaled the rocks above the ridge with Siley, to explore the shell of the volcano. They soon returned and reported that there didn't seem to be anything of interest up there – it was just dead, black rock. Oliver would not accept this. “You missed something,” he told Cedar stiffly.

“You can check yourself,” Cedar replied. Eylis could tell that the guide was getting annoyed too. He had been the one wielding the machete, after all; plus, he had become unnaturally quiet after the incident on the valley floor. His anxiousness did not help Eylis feel any better.

Oliver snorted and brushed past Cedar. He began walking around the rocks, running his hands over them, looking for something. "Perhaps there is no discovery here," Cedar called after him. Oliver ignored him and disappeared behind some rocks. Cedar sighed. "Not worth it," Eylis heard him mutter to Anton.

After a bit, out of boredom, Eylis too began examining the rocks. They did not form a smooth wall, but rather jutted out and retreated at irregular angles and intervals. The recesses allowed one to hide quite easily within the shadows of the rock. Seeking shelter in the shade of one of these recesses, Eylis again sat down, feeling a cool breeze on his back. He was so content to rest that it took him several minutes to realize that there should not be a breeze coming *from* the rocks behind him. Curious, another quick search discovered the answer: an opening in the rock.

"A cave," Eylis called out to the others. He took a few steps inside but dared not go farther; after all, he did not have a flashlight on him. Soon though, Cedar appeared behind him, followed by Siley. Cedar bent down next to Eylis and turned on his flashlight: it illuminated a clear, horizontal opening in the rock wall.

"What the hell," Cedar said, shrugging, and crawled through the opening. Bending down Eylis could just see his feet moving over the rocky ground, but it appeared that the guide was standing up.

"Does it go somewhere?" Eylis asked.

"Yea," Cedar called back. "It really opens up. It looks like there's a passage here. Do you think we should follow it?"

Eylis hesitated, then said, "I think we should wait for Oliver to come back."

He heard a sigh come from the other side of the rocks, and then Cedar said, "Ok, I'm coming out."

Siley and Eylis helped pull Cedar back through the opening, just as Anton came up behind them.

"Oliver is coming this way. What did you find?" the Russian asked.

Cedar shrugged. "Who knows? Probably nothing."

When Oliver did appear a minute later, Eylis was surprised to see a look of excitement on his face. He flashed Eylis a quick smile and said, "You'll never guess what I found. This rock here is all igneous, right? Well, walking around, I saw many openings...it appears that the volcanic activity has cleared some passages through the rock. And these passages offer a natural refuge from the jungle. They are cool, protected, large enough to walk through... potentially there's a whole network here."

Eylis could tell where he was going with his train of thought. "And these natural passages would be a good dwelling spot for indigenous humans, just like the cave-dwellers in Neolithic Europe or the more modern tribes in the southwest of the US."

Oliver nodded his head rapidly. "It must be. We've seen no habitable spots in the jungle, no signs of civilization. They lived in the rocks."

"Ok," Eylis said, nodding. "We found an opening right here – as good a place as any to start the excavation, I think. We should know in a few hours whether or not this hypothesis is right."

Oliver gazed past him, at the opening in the rock. "Give me the flashlight," he ordered Cedar, and then he bent down to examine the mouth of the cave.

“We only have two,” Cedar reminded him, as he gave the flashlight to Oliver.

Without a word, Oliver disappeared into the rock. Cedar nodded at Eylis, and the archaeologist bent down to follow his colleague. He crawled through the opening which was large enough for him and certainly would have been large enough for an ancient human, given their relative smallness compared to modern man, following the point of light that bobbed in front of him from Oliver’s flashlight. Inside he was easily able to stand up without bumping into the rocks; the space in which he stood seemed large and the cool air around him was a welcome change to the humid air outside. He saw smooth rock walls glowing in the beam of Oliver’s flashlight.

The others followed them and soon there was an additional beam, this time from Anton’s flashlight. Once they were all inside, Oliver motioned towards another opening in the rock in front of them. “This way,” he said gleefully, and the others followed him down the passageway.

Eylis quickly realized that Oliver’s supposition was correct; the passageway soon led to other passageways and multiple forks where the path split. It did indeed seem to be a giant network of connected paths and with his excitement Eylis also felt fear that they would lose their way.

Some of the passages were small and forced them to hunch over, or even to scramble over rocks. More concerning to Eylis was that the passages all seemed completely barren. There were no markings, no signs of any kind that these had once been traversed by humans. He sensed that Oliver too was getting worried. He kept quickening their pace and their path became more chaotic; he would first turn one way, then suddenly choose to follow a

completely new direction. Soon, Eylis was sure that they were lost.

But then, when he had almost given up all hope, Eylis heard an excited cry from Oliver. “Here, look at this!” the archaeologist shouted, his voice echoing off the hollow rock.

Eylis gazed intently through Oliver’s flashlight beam, now illuminating a large rock that stood guard over another passageway. Eylis at once saw what Oliver was referring to and chuckled happily.

“I don’t get it,” Siley said next to him. “It’s just another rock.”

“Not just another,” Oliver replied, smiling.

“See there?” Eylis asked, pointing. “The rock edge nearest the passageway. See how the edge nicely circles over the path?”

“So, it’s worn away...”

“No, no, no,” Eylis replied, feeling for once the same giddiness he had sensed from Oliver when he had talked about the Seven Sites. “That is not natural wear caused by condensation. The rock is cut.”

“You mean... by a person?”

“Yes,” Eylis answered. “By a person.”

“And not recently either,” Oliver broke in. “Of course we’ll need to test the age, but it looks to be on the order of at least a few thousand years old, if not much older.”

“Really? How can you tell?” Siley still did not seem impressed.

“Look at the growth here,” Oliver pointed. “Rocks in caves actually grow over time, due to the condensation. If you remember, that’s where stalagmites comes from... well, this rock has considerable growth *after* it was cut.”

“The rock has grown since it was cut into?”

“Oh yes... which means this passage here used to be quite a bit larger back in the day...” Oliver trailed off and began muttering incomprehensibly to himself. He ran a hand over the rock in the light of his flashlight and then quickly looked around, the light dancing chaotically around the new passage. “This way, this way,” he said distractedly, and then took off down the passage.

Eylis followed him at a quick pace, tracking his motions by the dancing beam of light. There were more cuts in the rock, and Oliver scrambled from one to another, following the path of ancient human intervention. Soon they began to see small markings, tiny dots or dashes in black ink. “They marked them,” Eylis said.

“Uh-huh,” Oliver answered. “So they wouldn’t get lost.”

“We’ll need to map this whole place out.”

“Indeed.”

Siley and the two guides followed behind them silently, but Eylis paid them no attention. They quickly switched from one passageway to another, and then to another, following the markings. At times, faint sunlight even shone through the passages from cracks or openings in the rock above them. The excitement inside Eylis had grown to be almost over-bearing. But the markings were nothing compared to what they found next. Stumbling from a passageway, the archaeologists found themselves in a large chamber, a circular room at least five meters in diameter. The air was fresher here, and they could tell that several passageways entered into this chamber. But unlike the passageways, the chamber was not empty. Scattered here and there over the floor were objects that were not natural features of the caves.

Eylis gaped as first Oliver's and then Anton's lights lit the room. He counted at least half a dozen human-made artifacts, and dozens of more fragments of old tools and pottery. He and Oliver quickly catalogued what was in the chamber: there was a long staff carved from wood with notches carved into its head, a rock figurine representing some four-legged animal (they couldn't tell which), a stone pot, a sharpened blade presumably for hunting, some sort of colored tile, an expertly crafted star-shaped gem, of what kind of stone they could not tell... Eylis at once forgot all his doubts about Oliver, the expedition, and the island, and was consumed only by the thrill of discovery.

They carefully covered what artifacts and fragments they could with cloth and placed them in the packs of the guides; extensive analysis of course could not be done here but would have to be performed at a university lab or museum. Eylis carried the staff, wrapped in cloth, and Oliver took Anton's pack, not trusting him with the valuables. Surmising that dusk was probably setting outside, they knew they had to return to camp soon. However there were several passageways leading into the chamber and their point of entry that had seemed obvious to them before was now unclear. Oliver and Anton got into an argument about which was the right way to go; Oliver was confident in his choice, but Anton insisted that it was not the way they had come.

As they argued, Eylis noticed Siley staring at one of the rock walls. "Hey, shine the light over here," she called. Cedar obliged.

"What is it?" Eylis asked her.

"Look at this indentation here," she pointed at the rock in front of her. "It doesn't look natural, right?"

Eylis followed her finger, and saw that she was right. The wall at this particular point was curiously carved, in such a way that some of the rock was more recessed than the rest of the cave wall. As Cedar shone the light over the stone, Eylis realized that the recessed area was an oval shape. In the center was a hollowed out area with a vertical gash running through it.

“It’s a door, isn’t it?” Siley asked him.

Eylis shook his head. “Damn, I think you’re right. Here, help me.” He pressed his shoulder into the rock and pushed, but felt no movement. Siley and Cedar helped him, but still nothing. The rock appeared solid, immovable.

“I wonder what that part is in the center,” Siley said.

Eylis shrugged. “Probably some kind of decoration that’s faded over the centuries.”

“Yea,” she responded. “Strange that it’s in the middle through – it’s almost like a doorknob.”

Eylis looked at the area closely; he had to admit that it did look like a doorknob somewhat, except that it was inverted. Rather than sticking out, it was carefully cut into the rock.

By this point they had attracted the attention of Oliver and Anton. But even with five of them they could not move it, and they knew they had to leave soon before it became dark outside. Oliver waved them off. “We’ll try it tomorrow,” he said, sounding somewhat defeated.

“Is this what the explosive shells were for?” Siley asked. “Blowing up the rock?”

It was the first reasonable use Eylis had heard for Longlow’s weapons. But Oliver dismissed her. “No, no, of course not. We would be in danger of destroying this valuable archaeological site. Now, we must find the way back. This way, I do believe...”

They followed Oliver's direction, but soon Eylis got the sense that something was not right – the turns of the passageways did not seem to match those of the way there. Also the markings disappeared from the entryways to the different passages. Anton's cries of protest that they were going the wrong way became louder. Eventually they reached a dead end – a small chamber with no other exits leading from it – and Oliver had to admit that he chose the wrong way.

"Idiots," he heard Anton mutter under his breath as the Russian guide lead them back the way they had come. Soon they reentered the chamber with the artifacts and Anton confidently chose a new path back. At this point, they had already wasted another hour of daylight; Eylis' concern of being lost was growing and he was beginning to feel quite claustrophobic. He could tell from Siley's grim expression that she was scared too. If they couldn't find their way back, there was a small chance that Longlow and Sobe would find them – a small chance they would even find that cave to begin looking for them in the first place.

To make matters worse, Cedar's flashlight (which Oliver had given back to him) began to flicker. "I think the battery's almost gone," he muttered. To conserve power, he turned it off, and the five of them followed Anton's single light.

Anton led them quickly and without any hesitation, however, and much to Eylis' amazement, they soon found themselves back at the low entrance to the caves that they had ventured into that afternoon. They reemerged into the outside air and saw that the sun was quickly fading – already it was hard to see through the brush that was across the

ridge, and soon Eylis knew the jungle would be completely dark.

“I told you I knew which way to go,” Anton boasted to Oliver as the archaeologist emerged from the cave. “I used to study topology and I have a photographic memory when it comes to directions.”

“Very well, you were right,” Oliver sighed. “But please, now, get us back to camp.” Eylis heard some urgency in his voice and could tell that the thrill of the day’s discoveries were not enough to completely distract Oliver from concern over their present situation. Yet it was unlike Oliver to show such obvious anxiousness, and Eylis wondered why he seemed agitated. Was he just worried about getting lost in the darkness?

Cedar quickly led them down into the valley and up the slope on the other side. As they climbed back up the ridge, they heard the same echoing shrieks that they had heard earlier in the day. Oliver gave a start, and Eylis was again surprised to see him so jumpy after all the confidence that he had exuded up until then.

They reached the camp as the last rays of light left the jungle floor; there Sobe waited anxiously, and she ran up to hug Oliver when they finally appeared. Longlow had a small fire going, and the team sat down around its flickering light to eat their dinner. Eylis had not noticed being hungry the whole time they were in the cave, but now he suddenly felt like he was starving. Luckily Sobe had already prepared something, and Siley, free of her obligations, sat next to Eylis. After eating her fill, she sighed contentedly and put her head on his shoulder.

“That was really something today,” she said. “I have to admit, I didn’t think there was anything to this expedition. I thought it was all bull.”

“Yea, me too,” Eylis admitted, smiling.

“I mean, I didn’t care. It was good money either way... but still, it was cool to discover something. Like actually discover something *new*.” She lifted her head and smiled at Eylis. “I had fun today,” she said.

Eylis was quite excited about the day’s work as well, and even more excited that he was able to share it with Siley. But before they could converse longer, Oliver came over and stamped out the fire with his boots. “Have to get up early,” he said by way of explanation. “We should get some rest.”

The expedition members all returned to their tents. However, Eylis realized that the unsettled feeling he had had earlier in the day was back. He had forgotten about it in the caves, even when he was worried that they were lost. But he had noticed something in Oliver’s expression, a brief glimpse, even as the archaeologist extinguished the light. He had thought he had imagined it but now, reflecting back, he realized that it must have been real. It was the reason why Oliver had so awkwardly put out the light, quickly sent them all to their tents, and demanded absolute silence through the night. Oliver was expecting something – what, Eylis did not know. But whatever it was, the look that Oliver had was one of terror.

2 Weeks Before



Oliver's optimism continued into the next day; he still found it hard to believe that Zara had agreed to go with him. The prospect of being with her consumed him, and even the presence of Baku was not enough to dampen his spirits. But as the day wore on, his apprehension grew. He knew that he still had to steal the money – and the map – from Fatah, items whose absence Fatah would not take lightly.

Luckily, he knew that Fatah was making a supply run that day, not merely a day trip into town, but one of the longer trips he took to the capital or other parts of the region. He should be gone at least two days, maybe more; sometimes, he left for several weeks. The lead scientist, Phaleah, had also not returned and Oliver had heard no word that he would be back soon. Oliver was unsure what time Fatah would leave so he had told Zara to meet him the next day just to be sure that his colleague was gone. And, in accordance with schedule, Fatah had left late that morning. Now Oliver tried to relax in his absence, but found that he could not assuage his worries.

By late afternoon, he had worked up the courage to sneak into Fatah's tent where the safe was held. He knew that the money was kept there, although Fatah strictly forbade anyone from opening it. But Oliver waited outside the tent for several minutes just to confirm that he was completely alone, then slowly walked inside. In contrast to Phaleah's tent, Fatah's was well-ordered and sparsely adorned. He had a

mattress, a couple of desks with closed drawers, a rug, and a lamp table; there were no stacks of books or papers lying around.

Oliver easily spotted the metallic safe, about the size of a small stove, and got down on his knees next to it. Of course Fatah had not shared the code with anyone, but Oliver had learned some tricks growing up and he knew that this safe had only a simple lock. Pressing his ear against the metal door, he moved the dial and listened intently for the click. Then, one by one, he figured out each number: 2, then 16, then 34. 2, 16, 34, he thought to himself, and repeated it many times so that he would remember, 2, 16, 34, 2, 16, 34...

Opening the door, he saw stacks of American dollar bills alongside many other currencies: yen, rupees, rubles, and more spread around the floor of the safe. He tried to estimate how much money was there – one million, two million, ten million? He briefly rifled through the piles and determined that there were more than enough US dollars for him to get overseas to the origin site with, of course, his beloved Zara.

He was tempted to take the money right then and there, but his anxiousness held him back. *It's safer to leave it until tomorrow*, he thought, *just in the off chance that Fatah returns early...* It would be unimaginable if Fatah returned and found that the money was missing. On the other hand, Oliver knew that this was his one chance to leave with Zara; if he didn't manage to meet her and flee the country, he might never get another opportunity to do so. Yet his caution won out in the end and he closed the safe door, leaving the money inside.

Oliver passed the next few hours in idle thought. He had no ability to focus on his research, and he had already packed his travel bag – most things, like his tent, he would leave behind so as to not draw obvious attention to the fact that he had left permanently. So instead, he sat and drank tea, took a walk around the perimeter of the camp, leafed through some old papers without reading them, and then idly walked around again. As he walked, he thought of Zara, and he found himself singing an old tune. His voice became louder and more confident as he walked and soon his voice was booming through the trees around him.

He was thus taken completely off guard when at some point he turned around to walk another circle and nearly ran right into Fatah. Oliver stumbled a little and barely caught himself; his voice quickly died off, and he felt the color draining from his face. Fatah stood there, as impassive as always, calmly staring into his eyes.

“Hi Oliver,” Fatah addressed him. “Did I startle you?”

“No, no... I mean yes, a little,” Oliver, still shocked, tried to catch his breath. “I just didn’t expect you, is all...”

“You seemed quite happy,” Fatah said. “Did something happen while I was away?”

Oliver shook his head quickly. “No, nothing happened... I just like to um, sing, sometimes when I’m by myself...”

“I see.”

Fatah continued to stare into Oliver’s eyes, making the archaeologist feel very uncomfortable. “I thought... I thought you were traveling outside of town?” Oliver asked.

“I was,” Fatah answered, peering at him, “but... circumstances changed. It looks like I’m back early.”

“Oh, well, that happens I suppose,” Oliver said, while his heart sunk in his chest. His mind was racing, trying to think of how he would steal the money.

Fatah nodded slowly. “Anything I can help you with, Oliver?” he asked.

“Uh, no, no, not at all,” Oliver answered, and he began to back away from Fatah. “I’m just on my way back to my tent, I’ve got some more papers to review, you see...” He turned around and began to walk quickly towards his tent, but was stopped by Fatah’s icy voice.

“Hey Oliver, you haven’t seen... what was her name, Zara? You haven’t seen that woman since we last talked, have you?”

Oliver felt chills on the back of his neck. He turned around and tried to manage a smile. “No, of course not. You told me not to see her, so I haven’t...”

Fatah was silent for a moment, staring at him. Then he said, “Good, that’s good, Oliver. You know, I hate to repeat myself. I *hate* it. I think it’s very important that we listen to one another. Don’t you think so, Oliver?”

Oliver nodded stiffly; his brow was perspiring, and his heart was beating rapidly. He turned back around, feeling Fatah’s eyes on his back. Then he walked quickly back to his tent. He didn’t look behind him until he was safely inside, with the flap fully zipped up. Then he sat on his mattress, his breathing heavy, and tried to calm himself.

He doesn’t know, he told himself. How could he? It’s just his method of intimidation, trying to get information through fear. Everything will be fine, we just need to leave tomorrow before he gets more suspicious. Once Zara and I are out of the country, I’ll be free of him forever... Eventually his breathing became more regular and he turned his mind to the next day,

visualizing every step that he would have to take. He would wait until Fatah was distracted, and then steal the money. He would run to the bridge... Or maybe it was better to meet Zara first, and then take the money afterwards? He went through various scenarios in his head, figuring out how he would manage in different circumstances. Regardless of how he would do it though, he had to steal the money. He had made a promise to Zara and nothing would make him break that.

Oliver made some more tea for himself and stayed inside his tent for the rest of the evening, not daring to look out for fear that he would see Fatah's emotionless black eyes there, watching him.

Day 5



Eylis awoke the next day in his tent with a sort of inspiration. The door that Siley had found in the caves had been on his mind, and the ornament in the middle in particular had intrigued him. It had even entered his dreams, and in his dreams he had actually figured out how to open the door. Now, as his semi-conscious mind began to drift back towards reality, he struggled to hold onto the pieces of the solution. He could picture how the door looked in his dream, and he remembered Siley being there with him as well. She was holding one of the artifacts from the chamber... but it was already becoming hazy, and the more that Eylis tried to grasp onto the dream, the more it seemed to disappear. He closed his eyes tight and tried to concentrate, but it was too late; his conscious mind returned in full capacity and the dream was gone aside from stray fragments that no longer made sense to him.

Sighing, he got to his feet and ventured outside the tent. He saw that most of the others were already up, and there was motion as people moved about, getting ready to set out again. Cedar walked by, talking to Anton about something or other, and Eylis was struck by his appearance. He wore a dark shirt and khaki shorts, as usual, but there was something new, a chain around his neck. Eylis blinked his eyes in the sunlight and squinted, looking at it closer. It was some sort of necklace but it looked old, very old; the material was not modern but some kind of stone...

Cedar turned around and noticed the archaeologist looking at him. “Hey, good morning,” he said smiling.

“That chain there, around your neck. Where did you get that?” Eylis asked.

Cedar shrugged and gave a sheepish smile. Before he could answer though, Longlow suddenly pushed past them, grabbing the gun that was slung around his shoulder. Eylis and the others followed him with their gaze. Longlow walked to the edge of the campsite, staring intently into the jungle.

He looked back at them and put a finger to his lips. “Sshh,” he commanded. Eylis stared at the jungle himself and tried to discover what Longlow had heard. Before long, he heard it too. There was a distant thumping, as of a ball against concrete or some kind of subwoofer. It grew louder and Eylis began to hear other sounds as well, leaves crunching and the cracking of branches.

The camp was deathly silent now. Eylis looked around and saw that everyone was out of their tents, staring at the jungle around them. Longlow moved closer to the tree line, some ten paces or so from the rest of them. His muscled arms held aloft his X series; quickly, he loaded an explosive shell into the barrel, and then aimed the gun at the trees in front of him. The rustling of the branches and the cracking noises were much closer now. And then, suddenly, the noises ceased.

The camp was so silent that Eylis heard nothing except the soft sound of his own breath. His heart beat quickly, his muscles tensed. Longlow stood completely still, his eyes peering through the sight on his rifle.

And then, in a sudden blur, burst an animal from the brush. It lunged at Longlow and in a split second was upon

him; the munitions expert didn't even have time to cry out. Eylis saw it all in a flash; the creature was tall, 3 or 4 meters at the shoulder, and thick, perhaps the same mass as a truck. It looked like a giant version of the lizard he had seen earlier; like that lizard, it walked on two hind legs, holding its front legs aloft. It had a long tail to balance its weight. Instead of a beaked mouth, however, this animal had a boxlike head with gaping jaws, and large, shark-like teeth. Its skin was a similar greenish color with dark, blackish spots.

In a deft movement, it grabbed Longlow's upper torso in its teeth; Longlow had time only to fire a single shot, the shell flying harmlessly into the brush and then exploding. The animal bit down and Eylis heard the crunch of bone; Longlow at once went limp. Then, in the same movement, it ran back into the brush, carrying the munitions expert with it. The whole attack lasted less than a few seconds.

There were more noises of cracking branches and ever-distant thumps as the animal ran away. And then these were quickly replaced again by utter silence.

Eylis and the others stood still, shocked. Yet even so, his academic mind continued to function. "That was a dinosaur," he said finally.

"A tyrannosaur," Cedar echoed. "Very territorial."

Eylis stiffly turned his head and looked at the guide. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I've seen one before," Cedar answered darkly. The guide seemed to have recovered his composure somewhat. He looked over at Oliver. "You... you lied to me," he growled. "You said they wouldn't be here."

Eylis turned around to look at Oliver, huddled on his knees by his tent. He once again showed the look of terror that Eylis had seen on his face the night before. Yet even so,

his defensive instincts kicked in and he protested, “I *did* not tell you there weren’t dinosaurs here, I said it wasn’t the same island as the one you were on before. And it’s *not*.”

Eylis stared at them, open-mouthed. “You both knew about this?” he asked.

“He knew,” Cedar accused Oliver. He had picked up his gun and was anxiously scanning the trees around them. “This bastard knew the whole time. That’s why he hired our big gun.”

“I did not,” Oliver repeated. “I was simply taking a precaution. I heard that there were still dinosaurs on islands in these regions... I did not *know* that there were any here!”

“You didn’t think to warn us?” Eylis asked, unbelieving.

“I had never seen one before, why should I think they existed here?” Oliver replied defensively.

“And you...” Eylis turned to Cedar. “You’ve seen them before, and you didn’t tell us?”

Cedar shrugged helplessly. “Would you have believed me?” he asked.

“I can’t believe this...” Eylis said. His mind was in turmoil, trying to grasp a new piece of reality that he had heretofore thought impossible. How did they survive? And how had people found out about them? Were there others on the island with them? He heard whimpering and turned around to see Sobe huddled by her tent, in the arms of Siley. Sobe was crying softly, her body shaking; Siley looked dazed.

Anton, amazingly, seemed to have taken the incident in stride. “You said it was territorial, yes?” he asked. “Then perhaps it is a bad idea to wait here?” Eylis noticed he was calm, composed. *Perhaps he’s already drunk*, he thought.

Cedar shook his head, his expression still bewildered and anxious. “Yes, we need to leave immediately. We need to get back to the boat, now.”

Oliver followed his gaze. “And go back through the jungle? Where that thing is waiting?” Eylis could clearly see the fear in his eyes. Sobe’s sobs grew louder; her chest was heaving now, and she appeared to be on the verge of a panic attack. Oliver shook his head. “No, I will not go into that jungle.”

“Where else?”

Oliver nodded, “There along the ridge. Out of the trees as much as possible.”

“That takes us north, farther from the boat.”

“Oh, damn your boat, man. It takes us farther from it.” And Oliver, without waiting for consent, began hurrying off along the ridge. Sobe, despite her panic or perhaps because of it, at once took off after him. Siley ran after her, and Eylis watched her go, still somewhat in shock. As she got farther away, he had a sudden fear that he would lose her, and he started after her, but not before grabbing the pack with the artifacts from the cave chamber and the staff that was still wrapped in cloth. He didn’t really think about why he was taking them, but he wasn’t willing to leave them behind.

As he ran along the ridge, random, incoherent thoughts went through his head. The island, the artifacts, Siley, the discovery of living dinosaurs... he was so preoccupied that he almost ran past the group which had stopped at some point and was sitting among the trees. The valley at this point was sloping up gradually to reach the ridge and the rocks across from them were beginning to curve to the left; they must have been nearing the northern end of the island. He stopped when he saw them and stooped over, panting.

Oliver was sitting down, thoughtful, Sobe now in his arms. Siley was crouched silently, watching the jungle. She nodded to Eylis as he came over to sit next to her. Nobody spoke.

After a while, they saw their two guides approach. Somehow, Cedar and Anton had been of clear enough mind to pack some of the group's belongings, and each carried several large packs. Eylis realized now how panicked the rest of them had been.

Cedar, exhausted, laid down his packs, but kept his rifle at his side. "Ok, now we're back together. Let's start heading towards the boat," he said.

Oliver shook his head. "I don't think so," he replied.

"The hell do you mean?"

He looked at Cedar with a cold resolve. "The expedition isn't over," Oliver replied.

Cedar stared back at him, his mouth open in exasperation. "How...?"

Suddenly, without knowing why, Eylis said, "I know how to open it. I figured it out." The others looked at him, uncomprehending. "The door," he continued, "in the caves." He dropped his pack and removed the star-shaped gem from it. Then, he carefully removed the staff from the cloth. He put the gem on top of the staff, rotating it up so that the points of the star would line up with the notches in the staff. He inserted the points in the notches and then he twisted, locking the gem in place. "It's a key," he explained. "It inserts into the hollow of the door. You probably have to push with the staff or twist it or something, to move the locking mechanism. Then the door slides open. At least, theoretically..."

“Brilliant,” Oliver said softly. “You must be right, my dear Carl.” He shook his head and gave a weak smile.

“Brilliant.”

“How does that matter anymore?” Cedar asked gravely.

“Carl,” Oliver spoke to Eylis, “you know that if we go return now, we have to come back and do this again. All of the progress we’ll have made will be for nothing. We’ll have to take a boat back here, trek through the jungle, deal with whatever’s out here all over again. Think of the expense. Think of how many more lives will be put at risk that way.”

Cedar shook his head. “You would be more prepared. You can kill the tyrannosaur, burn this whole place down...”

“But we can’t,” Oliver replied, shaking his head. “We can’t destroy anything – it would risk the integrity of the site. If we burn the jungle, we’ll destroy the find.”

“And that’s more important than people’s lives?” Cedar replied coldly.

“Daniel, this find is more important than any one of us,” Oliver responded. “If we turn back now, then Longlow’s sacrifice is for nothing. His life was wasted.”

“And what about us?” Siley spoke up. “What if we *die*?” She mouthed the last word, rather than speaking it aloud, and looked over at Sobe. Sobe’s face was buried in Oliver’s chest, however, and she seemed not to be paying attention to them.

Anton sighed. “My friend, the sad truth is that we all die.”

Cedar scoffed. “Anton, now is not the time for your nihilistic Russian shit.”

“There is risk any way we return,” he responded simply. Anton motioned over to the rocks with his head. “I observed these rocks, while we were landing the boat. They’re the

same everywhere, porous as far as I can guess. Why should the caves be only on the west side? I bet they extend to the south... to near where the boat is. If we go through the caves, we don't have to return through the jungle."

"We tried the other passageway yesterday, it was a dead end."

"But there were many more passageways. Why would they be built if they're all dead ends?" Anton countered.

"If we go back through the caves, we can try the door. See if the key works," Oliver said.

"But we don't know the passageways. If we continue north, we'll hit the beach. We can follow that around to the boat. When we did our perimeter sweep on the first night, we didn't see anything on the beach."

"We didn't but that doesn't mean something isn't there. And to get to the beach, we have to go through the jungle. You said the tyrannosaur is territorial."

"We don't know where its territory is."

Anton shrugged. "There is risk any way we go," he repeated.

Cedar looked frustrated but somewhat defeated. He glanced over at Eylis. "Carl?"

Eylis was silent for a moment, thinking. He could feel the eyes of everyone on him. Finally he said, "If we go back, Oliver is right. Everything is lost. If we continue, we might find what we're looking for and have a safer way back at the same time."

"And what are you looking for?"

Oliver answered. "Proof," he said, "proof that this is the origin. The answer."

Cedar shook his head, but didn't say anything. Eylis noticed the guide looking at him, and saw that Siley was

staring at him too. He realized that the other members of the expedition had come to view him as a leader.

Emboldened by their trust, he spoke again. "But if we go on, we have to agree to go together. We can't leave anybody behind at camp again. Nobody can wander off on their own in the caves. We continue as a group and always stay together."

"Of course," Oliver agreed quickly. Cedar looked around at the rest of them.

"I go with you," Sobe said quietly to Oliver.

"I'll take my chances with the group," Siley agreed.

Anton nodded.

Cedar sighed. "Okay, look, if we go through the caves, we agree that Anton leads, alright? He has a better memory for directions than anyone else here, and frankly, he's the only one I trust."

Oliver nodded. "Agreed."

"And we don't stick around any longer than we have to. We take only what we can carry with us from here. We make one pass through the caves towards the boat."

"Okay," Oliver replied, "but remember, I am still the expedition leader. I refuse to go until we try this door that Carl has spoken of."

"One attempt," Cedar said, lifting his finger. "We get the door open and see what's behind it or we don't. Either way, we exit the caves *today*, on the south side of the island, and make our way directly to the boat. Everyone agrees?"

"Yes, that's fine," Oliver replied.

Eylis and the others nodded. At the back of his mind, the archaeologist wondered why he was taking this risk, but the curiosity he had for whether the key worked, and what was

behind the door, intrigued him more than he wanted to admit.

They didn't wait long, but after a short break resolved to make their attempt through the caves. The guides left the large packs behind on the ridge and each person carried with them only a small bag or none at all. Eylis made sure that the artifacts were safely stored in his pack, and he carried the staff with the gem in front of him, as if it were a weapon to protect him from evil.

Then they climbed back down into the valley; the slope here was less steep and easier to navigate but it was still several meters down to the valley floor. No sooner had they reached the bottom then they again heard the loud, echoing shrieks they had the day before. Whatever it was that was making the sound was much closer than it had been before.

"Run," Cedar urged them, and quickly led the way to the other side. The path back up to the opposing ridge was still steep, and Cedar and Anton posted themselves midway up the wall so that they could help the others get up. Sobe and Siley went first, followed by the two archaeologists. Then Cedar climbed up, followed by Anton. As Eylis watched the guides ascend, he could see the leaves of the ferns covering the valley floor shaking and the shrieking cries rose to a deafening volume.

When Anton finally climbed over the ridge, his eyes were wide. "Did you see something?" Eylis asked him fearfully. The Russian guide merely looked at him, but did not say anything.

It didn't take them long to find more holes in the rock above the ridge. Anton went first to do some initial exploration of a few entrances, while Cedar stayed with the others, his rifle at his side. Anton returned, saying that he

had found a passageway that appeared to go far, and they followed him. Unlike the day before, this entrance was wide, easy to enter. Eylis made it through with the rock barely scratching against his khaki shirt. Inside was a small cavern, with sunlight shining into it through the rocks above. A few openings led away from the cavern; Anton nodded towards one with his head.

“This way,” he said. “This one keeps going for a while.”

They silently followed the Russian guide, the beam of his flashlight lighting the way for them. Soon one passageway lead to another, and then to another. Eylis realized he was once again lost and was grateful that they had Anton to lead the way.

After a while, Cedar spoke to Oliver. “It wasn’t random chance that you stopped at our table in that bar back in Panama, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Oliver replied.

Cedar sighed. “How did you hear about my story?”

“Rumors, just rumors,” Oliver answered.

“Rumors from *where*? Only a few people ever knew that I had been on that island before.”

“Colleagues,” the archaeologist said simply.

“Who are your colleagues?” Cedar asked. Oliver was silent.

Sobe finally spoke, her voice weak. “Was it random that you chose me, Oliver?”

“No, no,” he replied quickly in a reassuring voice. “It was not random – I wanted to choose you. It just wasn’t... predetermined.”

“Not predetermined,” she repeated. “Hmm.” Eylis noticed that she sounded upset.

“And how about Longlow?” Cedar asked. “I’m guessing that he was ‘predetermined’?”

“Yes,” Oliver admitted quietly.

“You heard about him from your colleagues too, huh?”

Oliver was again silent. Eylis felt very uncomfortable. *Why was their expedition leader so secretive?* He again felt as he had the first couple of days, wondering why he had followed this strange man here. Only now the stakes were higher – he knew that he might not make it back home.

They walked on a bit more. Sobe complained some about the dark, and Cedar gave her a flashlight. As they passed more passageways, Eylis began to pay attention to the marks in black that started to appear, trying to guess what these ancient drawings meant.

Anton, remarkably, seemed to know where they were going and before long, he stopped. “We’re here,” he said. Eylis, squinting in the beam of Anton’s flashlight, realized that this was the same room where they had discovered all of the artifacts before. At the far end was the door that Siley had discovered, with the inward depression that Eylis assumed to be a keyhole.

“Carl, give me the staff,” Oliver told him.

Eylis shook his head in the darkness. “No,” he replied. “It was my discovery. I will try to open it.” Oliver did not protest.

“Can I get a light?” Eylis walked over to the door, peering at the indentations. Siley took the flashlight from Sobe and came up behind him, illuminating the ancient stone. Eylis could clearly see the indentation and was pleased that it matched his memory of it. He lifted the staff and positioned it so that the star gem could enter vertically through the slit. The gem got stuck halfway through, however, and wouldn’t

go any farther. Eylis quickly withdrew the staff and tried turning it over and then again inserting it. This time it went in further before getting stuck.

“You’re at too low of an angle,” Oliver said.

“I’ve got it,” Eylis replied stiffly, and raised his arms to insert the staff more horizontally into the slit. This time it went much farther in until it seemed to run into solid stone. “That’s as far as it goes,” Eylis muttered, giving the staff a few more pushes. “Let’s see if it turns.” He tried rotating his wrists and felt the staff move a bit, but it was still impeded by the stone. He placed both hands on the staff and tried rotating it with more strength; this time he started to feel some give – the gem on the staff was turning.

“Don’t break it,” Oliver said sharply.

Eylis ignored him. He kept rotating and could hear stone grating through the door; he seemed to pushing some stone aside! With a final heave, he pushed the stone until the gem was horizontal and again rested against solid rock. “Ok, I think I got it,” he said. He pushed on the door. Nothing happened.

Eylis stepped back, then pushed on the door harder. It still did not budge. He put his shoulder into it, straining with all his weight. Still nothing. The guides came over to help him out, but still the three of them could not move the door. “I don’t think you did it correctly,” Oliver suggested unhelpfully.

Eylis sighed in annoyance. He motioned for the others to back off, and then he pulled on the staff, trying to retrieve it so that he could try again. The staff wouldn’t move either, however; it also appeared to be stuck.

“Well that’s it then, you broke the lock,” Oliver said irritably.

Eylis felt his face grow red. He pulled on the staff one more time; then, annoyed, he pushed on it. To his surprise, the staff moved further into the door. He could feel that once again there was some give to the stone and he was able to move the gem at the end of the staff. "It's a two-part locking mechanism," he said in wonder.

He again rotated the staff, feeling the gem pushing against stone, hearing the rock scraping faintly through the door. Then the rock seemed to slide away, and the gem was again in a horizontal position. Eylis eagerly pushed on the door; it didn't move much but he felt that it was not held as solidly as before. "Help me out!" he said eagerly, and the guides once again came over to push on the door with him. This time it moved easily against their combined efforts, and slowly opened inward. The staff was in the way of the rock framing the door, however, and Eylis again tried to get it out.

"You must move it the opposite way it was inserted," Anton suggested, and he grabbed the staff, twisted it, pulled it out halfway, twisted it some more, and then finally pulled it free of the door.

"Thanks," Eylis said, taking the staff back. Oliver was already pushing by them, eager to see what was on the other side. Cedar, taking his flashlight back, followed him, and then Siley and Sobe. Eylis and Anton pushed the door fully open and followed.

Eylis, however, was disappointed to see that there was nothing exceptional on the other side. There were simply more passages. "Great discovery, huh," Cedar said sardonically.

"But there must be something... maybe in these passageways..." Oliver muttered.

"No," Cedar said firmly. "We find a way out."

Anton looked around a bit and then chose a tunnel. “This one looks the most promising,” he said.

“Why’s that?” Cedar asked.

“It has more markings and is wider than the rest,” Anton replied. “Suggests to me it used to be some kind of main thoroughfare.”

“Maybe you should have been the archaeologist,” Cedar said. Oliver scoffed.

They followed Anton through the tunnel which before long also branched into other, smaller passages. Eylis again found himself looking at the markings on the tunnels. He could tell that they weren’t random. And he believed Anton was right – there was some significance to the main chamber having more dashes and dots than the others.

They turned another corner and found that the tunnel opened up into a small chamber. “What’s that?” Siley asked as soon as she entered. She walked over to the side of the chamber and Eylis, entering after her, saw that there was some sort of a small pedestal with a bowl-shaped top; inside the bowl was some kind of artifact, blocked from his view by Siley’s body. Cedar shone his light on the pedestal and Siley moved her body, and suddenly he saw the most impressive gem he had ever seen in his life. It sparkled brilliantly in the flashlight beam, reflecting a dazzlingly bright white light.

Moving closer he could see that it was some kind of a crystal; the stone itself appeared to be pure white, although there seemed to be a multiplicity of colors shining from the interior, making the crystal seem to glow. Siley gingerly picked it up; she seemed entranced, staring into its depths.

“Oh wow,” Sobe said quietly from behind Eylis.

Oliver brushed past and rudely grabbed the crystal from Siley’s hands. A large smile spread over his face as he gazed

at the artifact. “Do you know what this is?” he asked breathlessly. He looked at Eylis. “This is the proof we were looking for.” Eylis shook his head; he didn’t understand.

“There was a legend,” Oliver continued, “that Kadune, the leader of the KcKoo and the forefather of modern Cadunians, was just an ordinary man until one day he found... a source of great power. It was a stone of incomparable beauty, a stone that allowed him to communicate with the gods. This stone gave him an unnatural long life and it allowed him to travel all over the world. It also gave him great wisdom, which he spread to other civilizations – to those civilizations, that is, that existed at the Seven Sites, for these were the most advanced people of that ancient age. This was tens of thousands of years before Mesopotamia, mind you. This stone came from the origin, and it was what tied together all of the Seven Sites.” Oliver smiled gleefully, never taking his eyes off of the crystal that he held. “And this, here, is it. This is that stone.”

“But how can you be sure...” Eylis replied.

“Carl, just look at it,” Oliver responded happily. “We know that this is one of the Seven Sites, and that Kadune probably originated in this part of the world. There used to be an ancient civilization here, of that we have proof. And this artifact has to be that one which Kadune found. What else could have this brilliance? What else could inspire such legends?”

“It is... remarkable,” Cedar said after a pause. “But now that we have your proof, we should continue on.”

Eylis agreed. He could already hear the distant, harsh shrieks of whatever monsters were in that valley; they must be close to an exit, for them to be able to hear it. Better for them to leave quickly before the dinosaurs found them.

The group continued through the passage past the chamber, but again this passage split into a labyrinth of others. Listening to the shrieks outside did not help – they seemed to get louder no matter what passage they chose and yet the passages did not seem to end. Eylis could not understand why they hadn't found an exit yet. He continued to examine the markings on the passageway entrances.

They stopped by one, as Anton began to complain that his flashlight was flickering. "You can switch with me, I just changed the batteries on mine," Cedar said, giving him his flashlight.

Eylis, comparing the markings on this passageway to the last one, suddenly realized what they meant. "Hey, check this out," he said to Siley. "The dashes are decreasing now. They were increasing to the main chamber, and now they're decreasing again. I can't believe I didn't realize it until now. The dots are apparently random, they must signify what the passageway was used for, but the dashes appear to be a kind of marking of distance."

But Siley did not seem to be listening to him. Instead she said, "I can hear those dinosaurs... or whatever those creatures are."

"I know, I know," Eylis replied dismissively. "It's coming from outside."

"No, it's not."

Everyone seemed to realize what she said was true as soon as she said it. The shrieks were getting louder and the group wasn't moving. They weren't moving closer to the animals outside – the animals were moving closer to them, *inside*.

"Son of a bitch, they live in the caves," Cedar said quietly. "We have to go, *now*. Anton, which way?"

But the Russian guide looked at him helplessly. “I don’t know, let me try this way... Wait here.” And he quickly took off down one of the passageways.

“Wait, we shouldn’t split up!” Cedar hissed after him in a strained whisper, trying not to make too much noise. It was quite obvious now that the animals were inside the caves – the cries were different; there was more resonance to them now, caused by the echoes off of the cave walls.

“He went the wrong way,” Eylis whispered to himself.

They didn’t have to wait for Anton long, however. Soon the Russian guide came running past them, hurrying at full speed. “*Davai, davai, davai,*” he shouted, his light wildly bouncing off of the walls. Eylis could hear something else among the cries now, a sound of claws scraping against stone. They were close.

The rest of the group sprinted after Anton. Eylis considered himself to be in moderately good shape, but soon he could feel his lungs burning inside him and he was barely able to catch his breath. His heart beat rapidly, and the sweat poured down around his eyes. He had no idea if they were going the right way, but he simply followed the lights of the guides and the sound of his compatriots’ feet as they ran desperately through the rocky maze. In the background, the sound of echoing shrieks floated after them.

They turned down one passageway, and then another. It seemed to Eylis that the sound of their pursuers started to grow quieter, but he didn’t dare to slow down. Eventually they passed through the door he had opened, and Eylis realized that he was still holding the staff in his hand as he ran. The guides slowed down long enough to check that everyone was still behind them, and their flashlight beams blinded Eylis. Then, they turned back to the passageways

and continued to sprint. When Eylis felt that he could run no longer, he suddenly saw sunlight ahead, shining down through the rocks. He stumbled out of the caves after the others and fell down on his hands and knees, his chest heaving.

He wasn't given long to rest, however, before Anton pulled him to his feet. "*Davai, davai*," Anton yelled, pointing across the ravine to the ridge on the other side. "We must cross the valley!"

Eylis reluctantly got to his feet. He could see that part of the volcano dome had collapsed next to the ravine at this part, and a large stone had fallen across the valley, connecting the two ridges. It had apparently splintered upon impact, however, and he could see a large crack separating the first two thirds from the final third connecting to the other side. The stone was wedged into the ground on the other side, which was soft and muddy; it seemed it had rained while they were in the caves. The valley floor was about twenty feet below, and ferns rustled in the wind underneath the fallen rock.

Cedar eyed the stone suspiciously. "Is it safe?" he asked.

"We will see, yes?" Anton answered and stepped onto the rock. It didn't move. "It seems fine," he said. He took a few more steps and then, with more confidence, strode towards the other side. He had only made it halfway when they heard more echoing shrieks; these, however, were coming from the valley floor beneath them. "Our friends are back," Anton called to them with a half-smile. He made it the five meters or so to the other side. "Come on," he yelled, "quickly!"

Oliver brushed past the others and quickly moved across the stone at a trot; Sobe at once burst into tears as he left

her. Anton helped Oliver over the other side, as Siley tried to console Sobe. Cedar nodded to Eylis. "Time to go," he said grimly.

Eylis took a few steps out onto the stone; it was only a meter or so wide and he could easily see the valley floor on both sides of the rock when he looked down. The shrieks emanated loudly from the valley beneath him, and he could see the ferns rustling, although not from the wind but from large bodies moving through them. He could catch glimpses of brown flesh through the leaves but he couldn't see them more clearly, nor did he have any inclination to. He tried to steady his nerves and looked across to the other side of the ridge; Anton was there, waving to him encouragingly with his hand.

Eylis walked across the main stone, and then stepped onto the smaller portion that the crack ran through. He could tell now that the crack actually split the stone into two separate pieces, and it was the compression of the two pieces alone that was keeping them up. He swallowed nervously and took the last few remaining steps to the other side. Anton roughly pulled him onto the solid ground.

Siley was next. She took a quick glance down and then walked quickly over to the other side, looking straight at them. Eylis was impressed by her composure. Sobe, on the other hand, looked to be on the verge of another panic attack. She was breathing quickly and crying in soft, stilted sobs. Cedar was trying his best to encourage her to cross the rock, but she resolutely refused to go on her own. Finally, he got her to agree to go with him. Cedar walked in front with Sobe behind, holding lightly onto his hand.

As they reached the midway point, the snarling underneath them seemed to swell in intensity and Sobe stood

transfixed in fear, letting go of Cedar's hand. He tried to grab her and pull her forward, but she refused to cross the crack in between the two rocks. Meanwhile Anton was yelling at them to move quickly, which seemed to further scare Sobe. Realizing that he could not pull her across the rock safely, Cedar tried to show her it was safe; he took a few quick steps and Anton pulled him over the other side. However, Eylis swore that he saw the smaller rock sink under Cedar's feet and slide a few more centimeters down the muddy hillside.

By now Oliver had recovered from his flight of panic, and he sat by the ridge where the stone ended, calling to Sobe and trying to reassure her. Siley did likewise, and eventually it seemed to be working. Sobe took a hesitant step forward; then, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she moved forward quickly.

She didn't make it. As soon as she crossed the threshold between the two stones, the rock buckled underneath her; the smaller stone fell away and the larger one thudded into the opposite slope. With her momentum, Sobe crashed into the muddy ridge with her body; Oliver reached out to her and for a moment he managed to grab her. She looked up at him with desperate terror in her eyes; then, her arm slipped through Oliver's grasp and she fell with a scream into the ferns covering the valley floor below.

Eylis heard a crashing sound as her body impacted the vegetation below and a cry of pain. Then he heard the cries of the dinosaurs below turn into excited yelps, and the rustling of ferns. There was a loud, agonizing scream. He heard more rustling and snarling and new, slashing noises. The scream turned into a shrill, pitiful squeal. Amid the snarling and rustling, he could hear the trampling of feet and

then crunching, as of a dog chewing on bone. The squeal suddenly stopped, and the noises lessened. There was still some rustling but the cries of the dinosaurs had been replaced by a sickening, wet, slurping sound; Eylis realized with clarity that it was the sound of them chewing.

Eylis felt dazed; he looked around and saw that Siley had her hands pressed over her ears. Oliver was sitting in the same position he had been before, numbly staring down into the valley below, his arms still outstretched in the position where he had tried to grab Sobe. Cedar and Anton tried to corral them, to get them moving again. “We have to get to the boat quickly,” Cedar urged them. Eylis stood up stiffly and helped Siley to her feet; Oliver, however, would not budge. The guides spoke to him urgently, trying to encourage him, but still he would not move. Eventually the two grabbed him under the arms and pulled him away from the ridge.

They didn’t make it far before Oliver pulled away from their grasp and sat down resolutely on the jungle floor. The guides again tried to encourage him, to soothe him, even to threaten him, but whatever they said had no apparent impact on Oliver. He just continued to sit there with a blank expression on his face. Any attempts to move him by force were met with resistance. Eylis could see that the guides were exasperated. The light at this point was fading quickly; before long, it would be completely dark in the jungle. He was sure that the others were thinking the same thing that he was: *why don’t we just leave him here?*

But in the end, the guides decided to make camp there. “The packs aren’t far,” Eylis heard Cedar say. “We can make it back by nightfall.”

“But what about them?” Anton asked.

Eylis felt too exhausted, physically and emotionally, to move and he was relieved to hear Cedar say, "Let's leave them here. We'll be too slow as a group."

"What about the rule not to separate?"

Cedar shrugged. "What else can we do?" He walked over to where Eylis was sitting and thrust his gun into Eylis' hands. Eylis looked at him, surprised.

"Have you fired a gun before?" the guide asked him.

"No? Well, don't worry, it's easy. The safety is off now. That means all you have to do is point and shoot. But please be careful." He took out a cartridge of bullets. "Do you know how to reload? No, I suppose not. Here, let me show you..."

"I know how to do it," Siley said, sitting nearby. Cedar looked up at her, somewhat surprised, but took the gun out of Eylis' hand and gave it to her.

"We'll be back soon," he told her. Eylis saw Siley nod, and then throw the gun's strap around her neck with a serious expression on her face. In the back of his mind, Eylis thought about how little he knew this woman and what her life had been like back in Laos.

Then the guides disappeared and Eylis and Siley were left alone with the catatonic Oliver. Eylis anxiously waited for them to come back. He scanned the jungle constantly with his eyes; at any moment, he expected the tyrannosaurus to come back, or perhaps those creatures from the valley would climb onto the ridge and would be upon them before they even realized what was happening... The sun got lower and dusk fell around them. He heard the sounds of insects and night birds becoming active, or at least, what he hoped were birds.

Then he heard sharp crunching and turned around in alarm, but saw with relief that it was only Cedar and Anton. They had the heavy packs with them that the group had abandoned on the ridge earlier in the day, and they immediately set about making camp. They put up two tents: one would be shared by Oliver and a guide while the other guide kept watch, the other would be shared by Eylis and Siley. Cedar took his gun back then from Siley, and Eylis noticed she seemed almost reluctant to give it up.

The guides argued briefly over who would keep watch first. Cedar offered, but Anton refused. "It was my mistake, to choose the caves," Anton said. "I will keep watch."

"You'll wake me to switch shifts?" Cedar confirmed. Anton appeared to nod in the darkness. Cedar then crouched down next to where Oliver was still sitting, in the exact same posture he had assumed an hour or more before. "Come on, time to sleep," Cedar said softly, and put his arm around Oliver to help him up. Oliver did not move willingly, but he did not resist either, and Cedar was able to drag him to the tent and push him inside.

Right before Oliver entered the tent Eylis heard him say softly, "She fell." Cedar looked back at Eylis briefly and shook his head, then entered the tent himself.

Eylis followed Siley inside their own tent and lay down on a sleeping pad next to her. The tent was small and they had to sleep close together; Eylis could feel her breath on him when she turned over on her side. She fell asleep relatively quickly, likely due to exhaustion, but Eylis could not. He tossed and turned for most of the night, before his troubled mind settled down enough to allow him a few hours of sleep. He kept thinking, *what if it had been her instead of Sobe?*

2 Weeks Before



Oliver awoke that day in nervous anticipation. He knew clearly what he had to do - steal the money, steal the map, and escape with Zara – but Fatah’s threats from the day before had unnerved him. Still, he was excited; this would be the start of his new life with her, and he relished in the thought of being able to help her and Baku escape from trouble. As he washed and got himself ready, he felt a lightness in his step. *This may be the last time I have to see this damned campsite*, he thought.

He carefully monitored the camp through the morning, waiting for a chance to steal the money and slip away from Fatah. Fatah, however, did not seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere and he sat in front of his tent the whole morning unmoving, smoking cigarettes. Finally, Oliver knew that he could wait no longer or else he would miss his meeting with Zara. He reluctantly approached Fatah and told him that he had to make a trip down to the caves, to make some fresh tracings of some of the newer paintings he had found there.

“Okay,” Fatah replied. He didn’t seem to care.

“It will take a while... I’ll probably be gone for several hours,” Oliver explained.

“Okay.” Fatah was emotionless as always, not looking at the archaeologist.

Oliver swallowed nervously and quickly left the campsite; he carried only a small pack of essential belongings so that Fatah would not get suspicious. As he crossed the perimeter of the site, he looked back and saw Fatah, still sitting in the

same spot, not looking at him. This emboldened him, and he felt more confident as he set out. The jungle air was hot and humid, as usual, but Oliver did not notice it. He hurried along until he reached town, then turned down the main avenue, heading towards the bridge.

Due to a twist in the road, the bridge was hidden from view until he was upon it and he felt a slight panic that Zara would not be there when he turned the corner. It was to his great relief then that he saw her there when he stepped onto the bridge, standing next to the railing in a blue blouse, Baku standing behind her. They noticed him as he approached and he saw Zara give him a warm smile.

The smile faded somewhat as he approached. He shook Baku's hand and embraced her, but could feel that she was anxious. "Such a small bag," she said, looking up at him with her beautiful dark eyes. "You do have the money, no?"

"Um... almost," Oliver replied, not sure how to respond.

"You do not have it?" Zara seemed alarmed.

"I will, I will, don't worry... it's just that, logistically, I wasn't able to get it yet, but I will have it later today."

"Are you sure?" Baku asked. His hands rested lightly on Zara's shoulders in a casual pose, but he seemed edgy. He kept looking around at the bridge and the road that ran underneath it. He wore dark sunglasses though, and Oliver could not read his expression.

"Absolutely, I already have it, you see. I just need to... pick it up. Don't worry," Oliver tried to reassure them. "I can meet you this evening at the river pass near the old temple... we can still leave tonight."

Baku did not seem reassured. "We should go," he said softly to Zara, and he tried to turn her shoulders and walk away.

Zara took a step, but then turned back to Oliver. Her face was contorted in thought and she seemed troubled; then she broke free of Baku's grasp and clasped Oliver's hands in her own. He could see tears forming in her eyes.

"Oliver, I have not been completely honest with you," she said.

Oliver was startled and didn't know how to respond. Her hands were warm, her expression scared, almost pleading.

"Oliver, it is Golden Dragon that is after us," she told him confidentially. "Baku worked for the drug cartel for a few years, just for the money." She shook her head, and the tears started to fall down her cheeks. "You must understand, we needed it. We had no other choice. But someone found out about this and used it to blackmail us. They told the authorities so we could no longer leave this area, and they threatened to turn us in if we did not do what they said." She turned away bitterly; Oliver noticed also that Baku had lowered his head and was staring downward, ashamed.

"It's okay," Oliver said slowly, trying to reassure her. "Whatever you did, it was because you had to. I don't care that you worked for Golden Dragon... we will get you across the border, and to a safe place where you can be hidden."

Zara looked back at him, the tears shining in her eyes. "There is no safe place, Oliver. The authorities will execute Baku, Golden Dragon wants to quiet us, this man who blackmails us will kill us if we cross him... You must understand, that is why I lied to you Oliver."

Oliver was taken aback, confused. "Why do you say you lied to me?" he asked. "And why was this man blackmailing you?" He noticed that Baku was still not looking at him; Zara too was silent, crying.

“Look, it doesn’t matter, whatever it was,” Oliver said, desperate to console her. “Meet me at the river pass, I will bring the money, and everything will be fine. Trust me, Zara. I would do anything for you. I...”

Oliver desperately wanted to say those three words to Zara, even with Baku there, and he contemplated whether he should. He was so distracted that he stopped paying attention to anything around him; the bridge, the road, the jungle, it all faded into the background. He didn’t notice anyone approaching; he didn’t see or hear anything, until he noticed Baku suddenly react in alarm. He wondered briefly if it was because of what he was about to say.

But then he became aware that there was a man behind him. An arm was raised, outstretched; from this arm a pistol fired, and Baku’s forehead exploded in blood, his body falling limply to the concrete. Zara was screaming, Oliver’s ears were ringing. He turned, even while everything around him seemed to move in slow motion. He realized in a detached sort of way that it was Fatah’s arm holding the pistol. In his other hand, Fatah held a knife, and he raised this knife up and slashed downward cruelly, cutting into Zara’s stomach. He stabbed her two more times in her belly, and she screamed in agony, her face twisted into a contorted expression, the tears glistening on her cheeks. Then with his other arm, still holding the pistol, Fatah pushed her against the railing of the bridge. He used both hands to lift up her small body and push her over, and Oliver saw her falling away from him, her eyes wide as they looked at him desperately. She hit the ground with a loud thud; a second later, a passing truck drove over her body, and Oliver heard the thump of the wheels passing over her flesh. When it had

passed, all that Oliver could see was a large, bloody stain on the concrete.

Oliver stared numbly at the road. Then he felt Fatah's hands on his shoulders, and the man roughly spun him around. Fatah's eyes looked intently, dispassionately, into his own. "I told you not to see her," Fatah spat. "I told you how important it was for us to trust one another. To not lie to one another. For you to *listen* to me, when I give you a command. I warned you what would happen."

He pushed Oliver back towards the path through the town. "We will go now," he ordered. Oliver stood still, his mind unable to process what had just happened. He felt a gun poking into his back. "It's not a request," Fatah whispered viciously. "Walk."

Oliver stumbled along, Fatah behind him, the gun sticking into his ribs. Oliver made it another hundred meters or so before he collapsed onto the ground. Tears began to fall heavily down his face, and his breath came in short, shuddering moans. Fatah sighed heavily and sat next to him.

"Oliver," Fatah said to him. "Do you know *who* they were working for? Do you know what their mission was?" Oliver stared at the ground blankly. Fatah lifted the archaeologist's head up with his pistol. "Look at me, Oliver. Understand, they were using you for information. They were working for your friend from up north. He had them stealing intel from you about the Seven Sites. They were after the map, Oliver."

"We were going to escape together," Oliver responded numbly.

"And then what?" Fatah asked. "He would track you down, you know that. He would kill you *and* them, and then

take what he needed. You almost gave him the Seven Sites, Oliver.”

Oliver shook his head, tears still flowing down his face. “Who cares...” he said softly.

Fatah grabbed his head roughly. “Look at me, Oliver. You know the rules. If you tell anyone about the Seven Sites, we kill them. If you tell anyone about us, we kill them. If you say anything about the work that we do to anyone, we kill them. The only reason that *you* are still alive is because of your brother. So show some damn gratitude. Do you understand?”

Oliver didn’t respond and Fatah shook him by the neck, squeezing his throat. Then Oliver nodded, and Fatah released him; the archaeologist fell to his hands and knees, gasping. “Come now, up,” Fatah commanded, and he dragged Oliver to his feet. They started walking, and Oliver once again found himself stumbling along with Fatah’s gun sticking painfully into his back.

“Why don’t you just kill me?” Oliver asked weakly as they walked away from the village.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Oliver,” Fatah replied, “this isn’t a death march. You still have a lot of important work to do. Now pick up your pace please. We still have to make it back up the mountain.”

Oliver eventually found himself back at camp, whereupon Fatah led him to his tent. “Rest, Oliver, regain your strength,” Fatah told him, as Oliver crawled through the tent door. The archaeologist collapsed on the floor of the tent, and a moment later Fatah stuck his head through the flap. “Oh, and Oliver? Remember, I’ll be right *here*.” Then Fatah disappeared and Oliver was left alone.

Those hours of Oliver's life were filled with agony. He could not sleep, nor rest, nor think. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw Zara falling. He was filled with pain and with his devastated expectations. The loss, and the guilt, was overwhelming.

Day 6, Part I



When Eylis awoke in his tent the next day, he noticed that Siley was not there next to him. The memories of the previous day came back to him and he at once became anxious, fearing that something terrible had happened to her. He quickly rose and went out into the warm morning air, but was reassured to see the guides there. Cedar sat a few paces away, checking his ammunition. Next to him propped against a tree lay Anton; the Russian guide was snoring, an empty bottle next to his hand. Eylis wondered if he had kept watch all night and when that bottle had been drunk.

“Where’s Siley?” he asked Cedar.

The guide shrugged. “Packing, I think.”

A moment later she appeared out of the guides’ tent, a bag on her shoulder. She gave Eylis a small smile. “Good morning,” she said.

He nodded to her, feeling relieved that she was still okay; he was distressed to notice that the camp was quieter than the day before, the lessened activity a stark reminder that fewer members of the expedition were left behind.

“What’s the plan?” he asked. “When do we leave?”

“That depends on him,” Cedar said, nodding towards Oliver.

Eylis turned to see his fellow archaeologist walking around in circles, muttering to himself, apparently still distraught.

“He’s upset about Sobe?”

“I guess... but it’s weird, he keeps saying this name, someone I’ve never heard of.” Cedar shrugged. “The guy is nuts.”

“It was a terrible thing to see,” Siley said. Eylis could tell that she was still very upset herself.

Oliver certainly looked crazy. His hair was disheveled, his clothes dirty and ragged; his eyes were wide and darted around incessantly, not seeming to recognize any of them. Eylis approached him sympathetically. “Hey, Oliver,” he said softly. “Hey, why don’t you come over here and have some breakfast with us?”

Oliver glanced over, but his eyes seemed to look through Eylis. He was saying a name over and over again, as Cedar had mentioned. It sounded like ‘Zara’.

“Oliver, come on...”

“Zara, why, Zara?” he suddenly snapped, locking eyes with Eylis. Eylis looked at him helplessly.

“Why... why did you...” he peered closely at Eylis. “Why did you kill her?”

Eylis was surprised by this comment and unsure how to respond. “I didn’t kill anybody... I don’t know anyone named Zara.”

“Zara... yes, yes, you did, you did,” Oliver said to himself. “But I know, ha, I know.” He seemed agitated, aggressive. But then, a moment later, his demeanor changed and he appeared sad, pleading. “But why, why did you kill her?”

“Oliver, there’s no one named Zara here,” Eylis told him.

Oliver looked at the archaeologist with a sudden hatred. “You killed her. You killed her, you bastard!” And he lunged at Eylis, knocking him onto the ground.

The archaeologist stood over Eylis in a threatening pose, his eyes flashing with anger. Eylis could hear the others moving but he waved them off. He tried to stay as still as possible, taking care for any movements to be slow and unaggressive. He sat up a bit but remained in a vulnerable position so that Oliver would feel in control and wouldn't feel threatened.

"Oliver," he spoke softly, "you are on an island in the eastern pacific with your team, remember? I'm Carl, and those are our teammates over there. We do not have anyone named Zara on our team. We are all on the same side here. But we are also in serious danger, and we need to leave as quickly as possible. Oliver, are you ready to go home?"

Oliver appeared to be confused and he turned away from Eylis, still muttering to himself. Eylis remained on the ground, afraid that any movement would trigger him. Most of what Oliver was saying was incomprehensible, but Eylis caught occasional words and phrases, such as 'killed her', 'escape', and 'live together'. He had no idea what Oliver was talking about, but it was clear that the archaeologist was not in his right mind. And he continued to repeat the name 'Zara' over and over.

Eylis slowly got to his knees, watching Oliver closely. The archaeologist had wandered away from him a few paces, closer to the surrounding brush. Eylis took a deep breath and placed his foot on the ground to stand up; however, Oliver instantly spun around at the sound of his boot crunching on the ground, and Eylis saw at once that any calmness from the archaeologist's demeanor had vanished. His eyes were dark and his face was contorted in rage; with a howl, he picked up a stick and lunged at Eylis. Eylis fell

backward and put up his hands to defend himself. He heard Cedar and Siley shouting now, telling Oliver to calm down.

It was to no avail; Oliver's rage seemed only to increase. Eylis backed away on his bottom, trying to escape the furious swings of the stick. Then Oliver let up for a moment, as he seemed to hear something in the brush. Looking into the ferns intently, he thrust his stick into them and when he pulled the stick back up, there was a large boa entangled in it. The snake hung from the end of the stick where the wood split from a main stem into several smaller branches; it curled its brownish-orange skin around the stick and raised its head in the air, hissing in agitation. Eylis guessed it must be two meters long.

Oliver swung the stick awkwardly at Eylis, which was now much heavier with the boa's weight. Eylis covered his head and neck, terrified that the snake would strike him. But the snake seemed to be upset at having been speared and, realizing that Oliver was the one swinging it through the air, it doubled back over the wood and lunged at him. Oliver dropped the stick, but the boa was quicker and it had already managed to wrap itself around the archaeologist's neck. It started to squeeze its body, and Eylis could hear Oliver choking. His hands grasped at the snake's body, trying to pull it away, but the snake was holding on too tightly. Oliver still had enough sense, however, to pull a knife from his belt and he stabbed the snake with it.

As Oliver struggled with the snake, Eylis shakily got to his feet. He saw Cedar and Siley shouting at Oliver and Anton, who was awake by now, for some reason was trying to get everyone to be quiet. The Russian guide was waving his arms wildly and kept pointing towards the jungle behind them. By the time Eylis figured out what he meant, it was

too late; the trees were already shaking and their branches snapping, and the thumping of approaching feet was already filling the jungle air.

He looked back in terror, just in time to see the tyrannosaur burst forth through the trees, exactly as it had done the morning before. Oliver, too, seemed to realize what was happening and he had a dazed look as the dinosaur ran towards him. It attacked just as swiftly as before, picking up Oliver up in its jaws and biting into his flesh. Unlike last time, however, it did not run off into the brush; instead, it threw Oliver down violently to the ground. The archaeologist fell hard, screaming in pain, his khaki shirt torn and bloody.

“Anton!” Cedar yelled to his fellow guide, and they both picked up their rifles and began to shoot at the tyrannosaur; the dinosaur, however, didn’t seem to be hurt but only further enraged by the bullets. Roaring, it turned around and swung its thick, green tail through the air. Cedar and Anton had to fall to the ground to avoid being struck by it. Eylis scrambled away from the dinosaur on his hands and knees towards his tent, searching desperately for something to defend himself with. He saw the staff through the open tent flap and quickly grabbed it; turning around, he held it in front of himself, as if it would somehow stop the tyrannosaur.

The dinosaur looked at them threateningly and roared again. Eylis noticed that by this point, Oliver had managed somewhat to get back to his feet and was trying to limp away from the animal, the blood streaming from his chest. The tyrannosaur turned towards him and, in a chillingly casual manner, bit down on the archaeologist’s neck. Oliver at once fell to the ground, his body unmoving.

The tyrannosaur then turned back to them and growled. Cedar and Anton continued to fire at it, and Eylis noticed the bullets chipping away at the animal's flesh, causing it to bleed. Angrily the dinosaur lunged at them.

"Let's go!" Cedar cried, and he and Anton turned and ran, crashing through the trees behind them. The tyrannosaur took several paces after them, but then sniffed the air and turned back. It looked directly towards where Eylis was crouched, locking eyes with him. The archaeologist stumbled backwards, still holding the staff in front of him like a weapon. The tyrannosaur approached him menacingly, but did not attack. Eylis almost tripped over his own feet; his fear was immense and threatened to overwhelm him. But then he felt something pulling on his arm, and he turned to see Siley there, grabbing his shirt. She took off through the jungle trees, her pack bouncing around her shoulders, and Eylis ran after her. The tyrannosaur behind them roared and Eylis could hear branches snapping behind them; the dinosaur was giving chase.

Before long they came to the ridge, not far from the fallen stones where they had crossed the night before. Siley jumped down into the ravine and, without thinking, Eylis jumped after her. He landed hard on the slope and his legs gave out from under him; grunting in pain, he fell and rolled down to the bottom of the small valley. His body came to a rest, his hair full of dirt and leaves. Dazed, he looked up at the top of the ridge and saw the tyrannosaur there, looking down at him.

"Come on!" Siley cried and pulled him to his feet. They ran towards the opposite side of the valley and, as they did so, Eylis heard that other terrible sound, the echoing shrieks of the valley's monsters. Along with the loud cries, he heard

rustling in the ferns and he saw flashes of animal bodies moving through the leaves. They were close.

They reached the other side of the ravine and began to scramble up the rocks. Eylis quickly realized it was impossible to keep holding the staff, and so he heaved it up and over the ridge above. Even without it, though, the vertical wall was hard to scale; Eylis knew that neither one of them was an experienced climber, and he could feel his muddy boots slipping on the rock. Siley was ahead of him and, despite a few slips, seemed to navigate the rock better than him. Soon she was near the top. Eylis tried to follow her movements and was about halfway up when his foot slipped completely off the stone and he fell hard against it; his body slid towards the ground and the rock ripped against his flesh through his pants. Eylis howled in pain and reached out frantically to try to stop his fall. As he did so, he heard the yelping shrieks around him grow louder; the creatures in the valley were almost upon him now.

Then suddenly the guides were there, at the bottom of the rocky wall, grabbing him under the shoulders. They were both breathing hard, their rifles slung around their shoulders. Anton carried a pack that appeared to have a large rip torn into it.

“Up, up, we go,” the Russian guide said, lifting Eylis back onto the wall. Cedar climbed up next to him, his hand on Eylis’ back to steady the archaeologist and make sure he didn’t fall. Then they climbed up, as carefully and quickly as Eylis could manage. Eylis noticed that he felt more confident with the experienced guide and climber next to him and they reached the top without incident. Anton came up after them.

As they pulled themselves onto the ridge, Eylis heard a loud cry of pain. Turning in alarm, he saw Anton sliding down the rock. Below him, partially hidden in the tall ferns, was some kind of dinosaur with brownish skin that Eylis guessed to be about the size of a bear. He saw what appeared to be a clawed forearm retract from Anton's leg and blood began to pour from the wound.

Anton grabbed a protruding rock to stop his fall, the leaves around him rustling as the animals moved forward to attack him. But the Russian guide quickly started to drag himself up again, pulling himself away from the creatures. He climbed swiftly, despite his bloody left leg, scrambling over the rocks while the dinosaurs shrieked excitedly below him. Soon he was within reach, and Cedar lifted him over the ridge.

There was an opening in the rocks nearby, and Anton and Cedar stumbled towards this, collapsing on the other side of the stone wall. Eylis quickly grabbed the staff he had thrown and followed Siley towards the wall, but before entering the rocks, he took one last look back across the ridge and saw with terror that the tyrannosaur was still there, eyeing them patiently through the brush. Then Siley pulled him inside and his vision was replaced by darkness.

As Eylis' eyes adjusted to the dim light in the cavern, he saw that Anton was sitting nearby with Cedar and Siley crouched over him. The Russian guide was wincing in pain as Siley examined the wound.

"What are those things?" Siley murmured as she tried to wash the wound with some water from Anton's pack.

"Some kind of raptor, I think," Cedar answered.

Siley gave him a sidelong glance. "You seem to know a lot about dinosaurs."

“I read a lot. I had to know.”

“Well they seem to be all over the valley floor,” Siley said. “There’s so damn many of them – hey, do you have any kind of antibiotics?”

“Should be, in the pack,” Anton grumbled. It looked to Eylis like the guide was sweating from his forehead, although it was hard to tell in the darkness. Siley started rustling through his pack, and pulled out what appeared to be a small medical kit. “Yea, that one,” Anton said.

“Ok, brace yourself, this is going to hurt.” Siley applied some sort of substance to Anton’s leg and began rubbing it around with her hand. Eylis thought that Anton looked tense but the Russian guide didn’t seem to acknowledge that he was in any sort of pain.

“I actually don’t think there are that many,” Cedar said thoughtfully. “I think it’s the same pack of dinosaurs.”

“How can you tell?” Siley asked as she worked on Anton.

“As far as I can estimate, the number that tries to attack us is always roughly the same, based on the noises they make. And I think those cries mean something... it’s how they communicate. Probably how they track and hunt prey.”

“But they’re always there.”

“Yea,” Cedar replied. “They are. And I think that means that they’re tracking us, too. Remember, the first day when we heard them they were far away. But since then they’ve been getting closer and closer to us. I think they remember where we leave the valley when we enter the caves, and they wait for us to return. And they can smell us in our camps too, and so they know where to expect us to be.”

“If that’s the case, why don’t they come to our camp at night, when we’re undefended?” Siley asked. She looked

nervously at the rock entrance while she did so, as if expecting the raptors to come through any moment.

“The same reason they don’t attack us here. It’s not their territory.”

“They’re afraid of the tyrannosaur?”

“Probably.”

Siley tore a long strip of cloth from the bottom of her shirt and began to wrap up Anton’s leg. “And here? Why would they be afraid of entering the caves?”

Cedar paused. “I’m not sure,” he replied hesitantly, “but I think there is a distinct pack of raptors in these caves. The ones we heard yesterday. And the two groups do not cross paths.”

“There’s so many predators,” Eylis said quietly. “This whole island is full of man-eaters.”

“Yea, I’ve been thinking about that,” Cedar said. “It’s like this island is... militarized.”

“What do you mean?” Siley asked. She used some adhesive tape from the pack to seal the makeshift bandage around Anton’s leg.

“Well,” Cedar answered, “we know about three distinct territories the animals preside over. The tyrannosaur has the jungle, the raptors outside have the valley, and the raptors inside have the caves.”

“And that’s unusual?”

“Yea, a bit. It’s odd that the differences between the territories are so... obvious. This isn’t a case where multiple predators are sharing the same jungle. Here, each individual or pack seems to know exactly where their territory is and where it ends. The valley raptors, for example, never come up to the ridge even when there’s prey there. And the cave raptors... well, it’s strange that they live here in the first

place. I'm guessing there's not a lot of food in the caves. And from what I know of dinosaurs, they're not supposed to be cave-dwellers. So the fact that each group has their own demarcated space – it just seems a little contrived.”

“You mean, like someone designed it that way?”

Cedar nodded towards the valley outside. “Notice how the territories are oriented too. It's like a concentric defense of the island. The tyrannosaur is the first layer of protection, then the valley raptors, and then finally the cave raptors.”

“Protection for what?”

Cedar shrugged. “You tell me. Maybe that crystal you found.”

“And you think the ancient people who lived here devised this?”

“No,” Cedar answered darkly. “I do not.”

Anton gingerly moved his leg, testing the bandages. “I'm ready to go,” he said.

“Where?” Eylis asked despondently. He did not like the conversation that he had just been listening to. “We can't go back through the jungle.”

Cedar sighed heavily. “Ok, well we've seen that the tyrannosaur likes to feed in the mornings. It didn't bother us at all last night.”

“You want to wait here until nightfall?” Siley asked.

“The tyrannosaur chased us away today, even after it had its prey,” Anton said. “I think we were lucky last night. I think the tyrannosaur will defend its territory, any time of the day. And if you're right,” he continued, “then the tyrannosaur is probably tracking us too.”

“I do not want to cross that valley again,” Siley added. “We can't keep pushing our luck.”

Cedar sighed again. “What else can we do?”

“Carl,” Siley said to Eylis, “didn’t you say yesterday that you had figured out the markings on the cave walls?”

“Um, yea,” Eylis responded, taken aback by the question. “I had a theory at least.”

“You said they were for tracking distance?”

Eylis nodded. “It appeared that way. The dashes at least, I’m not sure about the dots. But the dashes increased in number as we got further into the cave, until we reached one of the main chambers, then they started to decrease again.”

“And what do you think that means?”

“Well... I think it marks distance into the cave, away from the entrances. It’s kind of like how exits are numbered on the highway – they increase in number as you drive farther in from the state line.”

“So, on the other hand, if the dashes decrease all the way to zero – there’s an exit?”

“Theoretically. But I really have no way to be sure.”

“You said yesterday that Anton went the wrong way.”

Eylis shrugged, unsure of himself now. “The number of dashes in the passage he took increased, but they decreased for one of the other passages.”

“And if we take that passage, maybe it leads to a way out.”

“Maybe... I don’t know.”

Siley turned to look at the guides. “You said that the rocks on the south side run close to the beach. If we exit there, there’s not much jungle to go through.”

“Yes, but –”

“And if we leave through the caves, the dinosaurs won’t have any way to track us. They’ll think we’re still on the north end of the island.”

“That’s true,” Cedar said after a pause.

“It’s the best way to go.”

“But we can’t leave. Anton is in no condition to walk, and he’s the only one who remembers how to get to the main chamber. Dashes or no dashes, these passageways are still a maze that’s too difficult for the rest of us to navigate.”

“I can lead us,” Anton spoke somberly.

“Come on, Anton, your leg is a mess...”

“It is fine.” Anton unzipped his pack and rummaged around for something. Eylis saw him withdraw a small bottle full of some kind of liquid. Anton unscrewed the cap, and Eylis smelled alcohol; the Russian guide then cocked his head back and emptied the contents down his throat. He wiped his mouth and put the empty bottle back in his bag; then, holding on Cedar, he lifted himself to his feet.

“Anton...,” Cedar said, “you don’t have to do this. We can wait.”

“I am ready,” Anton said, ignoring him. He looked around at the others, and Eylis reluctantly got back on his feet. Anton fished two flashlights out of his pack and gave one to Cedar. “We go now,” he said. Then the Russian guide started down one of the passageways. Eylis was impressed to see that, despite the pain he must be feeling in his leg, Anton did not limp or complain in any way.

“Dammit,” Cedar said, shaking his head. He motioned for Eylis and Siley to follow Anton, and then he fell in step behind them. Soon all outside light was extinguished, and the group was once again immersed in the dark labyrinth of the caves.

They walked silently through those passages, Eylis’ eyes blind to everything except for brief glimpses of the rocks they passed, seen through the small beam of light cast by Anton’s flashlight. Their footsteps echoed lightly, along with the

small thud of Eylis' staff which he now used as a walking stick to try to help fend off the utter exhaustion that he felt. His nostrils were filled with the old, damp smell of the cave, and he felt the coolness of the air upon his neck, along with the occasional sliminess of a rock when he used his hand to steady himself. These sensations Eylis had become used to over the last few days, but now they began to bother him and the darkness of the cave seemed to wind itself around him almost as if it were a physical entity, pulling on him, trying to drag him away from the world and into its utter nothingness.

To escape the oppressive darkness, he broke the silence. "Please tell me why you were banned from the US," he asked Cedar. "I must know."

Cedar chuckled drily. "Ok," he answered. "It was about ten years ago. I was tasked with escorting one of our government officials to an 'unknown' island. But the mission didn't go as planned. That island was full of dinosaurs; our boat was attacked and we were stranded. The government official was eaten by a tyrannosaur. We finally got off, but then were taken immediately into custody by another government official, some general. He told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was never allowed back on U.S. soil."

"They kicked you out because you knew too much."

"Yea," Cedar answered. "That's why I haven't been back home since."

Eylis thought for a while. "You know, Oliver made a strange comment to me. About the echolia plants. He said it looked as if someone had removed them."

"Uh-huh."

"He also said that an island like that should only have one large predator. But we found many more besides the tyrannosaur."

“Oliver said a lot of shit.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it? There are too many predators for this island. The fauna doesn’t look natural at all. Where are all the herbivores?”

“I don’t know,” Cedar answered.

“Is it possible that they were removed too? Maybe moved to another island?”

Cedar sighed. “It could be.”

“If this *is* the origin, then maybe the dinosaurs you came across were from here. Maybe they were moved.”

“I don’t know,” Cedar responded. “There were too many to have originated here. But I agree with you. The ecosystem here looks like it’s been tampered with. Like they left the predators here alone on purpose.”

“But then they would die. They need something to feed on...”

“The dinosaur – or lizard, or whatever - that we saw the first day in the jungle,” Siley said. “That must be the food source.”

“So they left the predators here, but with a food source to sustain them. For what purpose – to guard the island?” Eylis asked.

“It’s like Dan said,” Siley replied. “The island’s been militarized.”

Eylis didn’t know what to think. He couldn’t believe that somebody would actually have the ability, or intent, to use dinosaurs like they were guard dogs. But if it were true, that would mean that something on the island was strongly worth protecting. He thought of the crystal that Siley had discovered the other day. Perhaps Oliver had been right – perhaps it was the stone of Kadune and did have some sort of power, as the old legends said.

“Too bad we lost the crystal,” he said aloud. “But if that was what the dinosaurs were guarding, it didn’t work. It’s lying somewhere out in the jungle now, no longer hidden in the caves.”

Siley cleared her throat. “Uh, that’s not actually true...”

Eylis looked back at her, but couldn’t see anything in the darkness. “But Oliver had it in his bag.”

“I, uh, took it from him... this morning. I didn’t trust him, I guess.”

“Makes sense,” Cedar said.

“I still have it,” Siley continued. “It’s in my pack.”

“Hmm,” Eylis considered. “At least that’s something to take back with us.”

“If we make it back.”

As they talked, Eylis continued to lean on his staff like it was a cane and it made dull noises on the floor of the cave.

But before they went much further, Anton stopped suddenly. “Quiet, quiet, quiet,” he whispered. “The raptor’s will hear us.”

They were just about to enter the first large chamber with the door that Eylis had unlocked the day before. “We haven’t passed through the door,” Eylis said. “There weren’t any raptors on this side of the door – they were all on the other side.”

“Yea, but maybe the door was keeping them locked on the other side.”

“That may be, but then we should be fine until we pass through the door...”

“No Carl, you don’t understand. We left the door open.”

Anton walked a few paces into the chamber and shined his light on the door; Eylis could see that he was right – it was pushed open. When they ran through the other day, no

one had closed the door behind them. Everyone became silent, and Eylis strained his ears, listening for any noises in the dark abyss of the cave. But he heard nothing.

“Maybe they left the caves then?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe...” The guide didn’t sound convinced. “Let us move fast now. And no noise!”

As the four of them moved silently towards the door, Eylis almost thought he heard a faint scraping sound coming from one of the side tunnels. He paused for a second, but couldn’t be sure. Then, as he began to walk again, he through he heard another scratching sound, this time coming from a tunnel on the opposite side of the room. But again, the noises were faint and he couldn’t tell if they were real or if his nervous mind was conjuring them itself.

They passed through the door, and then down through additional pathways, heading back towards the chamber they had discovered the day before. The deeper they went into the cave, the faster Eylis felt his heart beat and the sweatier his hands became. He was constantly listening to every small noise around them and trying to determine if it was made by their party. Eventually he became convinced that there were scratching noises, coming from different passageways, and he wondered in vain hope if this could be the sound of some natural cave process, such as the dripping of water from the walls.

The noises grew louder as they went. Eylis was sure that the others must hear them too, but no one said anything, and they pressed onward in silence, ignoring the sounds. *They would shriek*, Eylis reasoned. *That’s what they did yesterday. That’s how they communicate. And we don’t hear any shrieking sounds. We must be fine.* He told himself this over and over, but it was hard to make himself believe it. Despite

the coolness of the caves, he could feel the sweat forming on his brow and dripping onto the damp ground below.

And then he heard something else, a low whistling sound, almost a moan. If they were outside, he wouldn't even have noticed it – it sounded just like a soft breeze moving through the trees. But there was no wind in the caves, and he knew by the markings that they were not close to an exit. The moaning continued, somewhere to their right, and then another moan answered it, coming from another passage on their left.

They changed their strategy, Eylis thought with a chill. *Yesterday they chased us but we got away. Now they're trying to use stealth to sneak up on us.* The moans were long, soft, mournful sounds, and Eylis realized that it was their nonchalant character, their lack of ubiquity, that was what filled him most with dread. Along with the moans came the scraping noises that Eylis now knew were the sounds of claws moving lightly over stone. There was no uncertainty anymore. They were being followed.

2 Weeks Before



Oliver still felt numb the next day. He hadn't slept all night and he had had no single moment of respite from his agony. The outside world seemed unreal to him, something so far away as to be beyond consideration. And his internal world was filled with terrible images of Zara screaming, bleeding, falling. It seemed that there was some sort of cruel cosmic intervention that had offered him everything he wanted – his freedom, an escape with Zara – only to snatch it away and utterly destroy it at the last moment.

Oliver lay there on his sleeping pad through the night, through the morning, perhaps even through the afternoon. He couldn't be sure – time had seemed to stop moving and instead had grinded down into an infinite sorrow. Eventually he got up and stepped outside, shielding his eyes against the sunlight, and walked over to a tree to relieve himself. Then he walked back to his tent and again collapsed on his blankets.

After a while he felt he couldn't breathe and again went outside. Only then did he think about Fatah, that he was close by, this man who had showed such extreme wickedness to the woman he loved. Oliver looked around, making sure that Fatah was not there. He had no desire to see that man who had constructed such sorrow for him. Oddly, he realized that he had no hatred, or contempt for Fatah, or any feelings for him at all. He had no mental capacity to feel any sort of emotion whatsoever except for the agony that consumed him. He was desensitized to all else.

Oliver returned to his tent for an undeterminable period of time. And then eventually his thoughts returned to Fatah. He hadn't been there when Oliver last went outside, and Oliver was pretty sure he hadn't been there when he peed earlier, either. Was Fatah in the camp? At first this thought didn't strike Oliver as being of the least importance, and he ignored it. But then it came back. If he was gone, why was he gone?

Oliver remembered the previous day when Fatah had dragged him all the way back to camp at gunpoint, and then watched over Oliver's tent. It seemed strange that Fatah had abandoned him the next day. If he was worried about Oliver fleeing, or telling someone, the day before, then why would he leave Oliver alone the next day?

He knows I'm broken, Oliver realized. He has taken everything from me and knows that there is nothing left. Nothing even worth keeping an eye on. And Oliver thought about what a pitiful state he was in, that Fatah would leave him alone like that. But after a while it started to annoy him. *He thinks that I'm nothing, Oliver thought. He thinks that he controls me, that I am powerless. But of course, I am powerless...*

The more that Oliver thought about it, however, the more annoyed he became. *And what if it I'm not so powerless?* Oliver thought defiantly. *What if I could get back at him?* And eventually Oliver became disgusted at himself, disgusted that he felt like such a coward. *He thinks that I'll stay here – but I won't. I'll show him,* Oliver thought with resolve. *Besides, what does it matter if he kills me? I have nothing left to lose...*

Oliver knew what he had to do. He grabbed a backpack sitting nearby and walked out of his tent. He was surprised

by how easy it was; there was no longer any fear or second thoughts holding him back. He moved like a machine, feeling nothing except for the aching pain left by Zara's absence.

First, he went to Fatah's empty tent and sat down in front of the safe. *20-16-43* he thought, *or wait, was it 2-16-43?* He couldn't be sure. His memory from two days ago was hazy. He tried both combinations but neither worked. Oliver was stymied but he had already resolved to go, and for that he needed to take Fatah's money. He tried listening to the lock mechanism but wasn't able to make out the individual sounds in his present state. Frustrated, he tried to think carefully about the combination, knowing that if Fatah came back when he was in there he would surely be killed in some horrible way. This mattered to him more than he thought it would - it seemed that he still had some self-preservation instinct, and his hands grew sweaty as he turned the safe's lock.

43... no, no, it was 34, he realized suddenly and he tried both combinations again. This time it worked: he turned it to *2-16-34* and the safe door opened. Then he quickly emptied the money into his backpack. He still didn't take most of it, and in some detached way he knew that he was still afraid of what Fatah would do to him if he caught him with that money. But he filled the backpack with American dollars, around \$200,000 he guessed, and then he left the tent.

He next went to Phaleah's tent and walked over to the researcher's desk, opened the bottom drawer, and took out the map of the Seven Sites, its brown paper still blemished from the tea stains. He put this carefully into a separate pocket, making sure that it would not get wrinkled. Then he

walked out of the researcher's tent, checked briefly to make sure that Fatah was not there, and left the campsite forever.

As he headed down the muddy mountain trail, he noticed that the light was fading. He knew that might make it difficult to hire a cab, but he wouldn't dare wait for the next morning to leave. *I have enough money*, he thought. *I'll find someone to help me*. As he entered the town, he saw a car pass by and he ducked behind a building to hide. He glanced into the driver's window as it passed and he thought that it looked like Fatah, although he couldn't be sure. The car headed away from him, towards the mountain. *I have to hurry*, he thought. He started to run stiffly, his legs already tired from the stress of the last two days.

On the outskirts of the town, Oliver came by a house and saw the boy that sometimes delivered food to their campsite. He was standing outside the house, bent over a motorbike. Oliver walked up to him and said hello; the boy gave a start. Oliver realized how frightening he must look – an unwashed, dirty man coming to the boy's home at night, appearing out of the shadows.

"It's okay, it's okay," Oliver told the boy in his native tongue, "I just need some help. Can't you help me?"

The boy shook his head vigorously and turned to run away.

"I can pay. A lot!" Oliver called after him. The boy looked back, unsure. Oliver opened his backpack, showing the American dollar bills stuffed inside. The boy's eyes widened somewhat and he walked back towards Oliver slowly.

"I just need a ride," Oliver said, motioning to the motorbike.

“It’s broken,” the boy answered, nodding towards the tools that were left on the ground.

“What’s wrong with it?” Oliver asked.

“The kickstand doesn’t work, see? I have to lean it against the house...”

Oliver stared at the boy, bewildered. *How could that possibly matter?* he thought. But he reached into the bag and pulled out some of the bills.

“I’ll pay extra, don’t worry,” Oliver told the boy. “It will be enough for you to get really nice repairs.”

The boy hesitantly reached out his hands and Oliver stuffed the money into them. “But we must go. Now!”

The boy shrugged and started the bike; Oliver hopped on behind him. Soon they were on the road leading away from the village. Oliver looked around anxiously as they left, worried that Fatah would catch them. He saw lights from a vehicle in the distance, and he yelled at the boy. “Faster, faster! I’ll pay for speed!”

The boy pressed on the accelerator and Oliver nearly fell off the bike as it jolted forward; he grabbed tightly onto the boy’s waist and they sped away, towards the main highway. They drove for a while, until the bike was low on gas, and they were forced to stop at another town. Oliver then paid the boy and hired another driver, this time an older man, to take him to the border. They reached the border station without problems, and Oliver paid the official there a nice bribe to let him cross. It was early the next morning by the time Oliver finally made it into Laos.

Then Oliver hiked to a nearby village and hired an elderly boatman to take him down the river, away from the main road and any major towns where Fatah might think to look for him. The boatman accepted the money without speaking

and transported Oliver silently downstream in an old, open canoe. Oliver sat back in the boat, resting his head against the hull, and looked at the stars above; the only sounds he heard were the insects flying around and the soft paddling of the oars. At first he saw only trees lining the lonely river, but then he noticed that they were passing mountains too, appearing as massive, dark shadows in the background whose details he couldn't make out. After a while, the old boatman began to hum quietly, his voice blending with the other sounds of the night. It was a peaceful morning, Oliver thought to himself. The kind of morning that Zara would like.

As the minutes passed, Oliver felt himself growing tired and he realized that the adrenaline of his escape was wearing off. Soon, he knew, Fatah would be looking for him, if he wasn't looking for him already. But for now, he didn't have to worry. It was just him and the boatman, paddling along a quiet, dark river. For now, he was safe.

Day 6, Part II



Scrape. Scrape. Scrape. The noises were constant now, ringing in Eylis' ears, filling his consciousness. *Scrape, scrape.* They seemed to be coming from all around them, and Eylis could not tell if this was actually the case or if it was just an echo caused by the tunnels they squeezed through. The moans whistled through the air as well, filling any empty spaces left by the sounds of the claws scratching the rocky ground.

The group was jogging now, moving as quickly as they could. Anton still led the way, shining his flashlight quickly over the tunnel walls to make sure that they did not miss any passageways. But the faster they moved, the more that Eylis could tell that the Russian guide was injured. He had a definite limp in his jog, caused by the injury in his left leg. This slowed down the group a bit, although they were already moving much slower than they would be over open ground as they tried to navigate the tight twists and turns of the cave tunnels.

Their pursuers were ever behind them, and the noises that had once seemed so distant, and almost imaginary, to Eylis were now very near, practically surrounding them, and very real. He began to hear short, excited shrieks as well, interspersed with the mournful moaning sounds. *They know we're trying to escape*, Eylis thought, *and they know they've almost caught us.* The archaeologist could feel the intense fear hanging onto him, covering him in its endless dread. His legs burned, but still he wanted to move quicker, and

impatiently he followed Anton, upset that the guide could not run faster.

Time passed at an indefinite rate; Eylis could not tell if minutes or hours had gone by since he had first heard the sounds. It seemed the caves were never-ending. At some point, though, the group found itself in the cavern that had once contained the crystal, and Anton slowed down to a halt. “Ok, Carl, where do we go?” the guide asked breathlessly, wincing in pain and holding on to his leg.

“Ok, ok, let’s see...” Eylis looked around desperately at the different passageways. “Give me some light!” Cedar shined the flashlight over Eylis’ head as the archaeologist carefully inspected the different markings above the doors. Some of them had similar markings, and it wasn’t always clear what was a dashed mark and what was a dot... Sweat poured down Eylis’ head, and the salty liquid stung his eyes. His heart raced in his chest, and his breath came out in ragged gasps. It was very difficult to concentrate on the markings, and Eylis had to remind himself to focus, to not let his fear distract him.

“Ok, ok, this way... I think,” he finally decided.

“You think?”

“Hmm.”

Cedar sighed; he sounded annoyed, but Eylis knew there was no time to argue. Cedar shined his light down the passageway that Eylis had chosen, and started jogging down it. Siley followed after him, and then Eylis. He glanced back briefly to see that Anton was behind him, shining his own flashlight on the rocks by which Eylis was running. The tunnel became very narrow, and the group had to slow down to squeeze through several tight turns. Eylis became very worried that maybe he had *not* chosen a good tunnel, and

that maybe they would soon reach a dead end. The scraping sounds of the raptors' claws behind them reminded him that the dinosaurs were still very close behind the group.

Occasionally, Cedar would shine his flashlight back to make sure that everyone was still behind him. This disoriented Eylis, as the light would shine into his eyes and blind him or he would be blinded by the utter darkness in the tunnel ahead that the light was no longer illuminating. Often he would stumble into Siley and issue a mumbled, out-of-breath apology. Occasionally, Eylis would look back himself when he noticed Anton's light no longer illuminating the rocks around him. With distress, he could tell that the Russian guide was having a harder and harder time keeping up with the rest of them.

Then Cedar turned around to shine his light, and came to a dead stop. Siley stopped suddenly as well, and Eylis tripped over her, knocking them both into the rock wall next to them. Siley grunted in pain, and Eylis again made a hasty, useless apology. Cedar's features were slightly illuminated as he held the light close to his face, and Eylis could tell that the guide was fearful. "Where's Anton?" he asked. Eylis looked back down the tunnel that the light illuminated, but did not see the Russian guide.

"Anton?" Cedar called. "Anton, where are you?" he shouted in panic. The guide at once started back-tracking down the tunnel, and Eylis and Siley hurried to follow him so that they would not be left in darkness. They turned a tight corner and could see down a long, relatively straight passageway that they had just come through moments before. Near the other end a light bobbed up and down, casting thin rays here and there over the rocks. They could hear the Russian guide wheezing as he struggled forward.

And then Eylis heard the excited shrieks, which previously came only at irregular intervals, increase in number and intensity so that they filled the entire tunnel with their harsh sounds and the archaeologist was forced to put his hands over his ears. They drowned out the sound of the Russian guide, and of the scraping claws, and even of Cedar's shouts. Eylis thought he heard a cry and suddenly the light dropped and stopped moving; he could tell it was resting on a rock somewhere ahead, illuminating the grey dirt of the tunnel floor.

Panic filled Eylis' chest. *Did Anton fall? Was he hurt?* The archaeologist couldn't tell. The symphony of excited cries suddenly stopped, and was replaced by individual, excited yelps. He heard the claws scraping over the stones again, and he could hear Anton groaning. The light emanating from the guide's flashlight shined forward, and Eylis could see nothing clearly but the tunnel floor, but it seemed to him that he could almost make out shadows moving around the light; formless, indefinite, monstrous shadows.

Cedar at once started sprinting down the tunnel, shouting Anton's name. But then Eylis heard Anton cry out in pain, followed by the slashing of claws, the tearing of flesh, and the crunching of bone; the all-too-familiar sounds that the archaeologist had become accustomed to over the last two days. Eylis felt a nauseousness growing in his stomach. And then, finally, he saw one of the raptors, illuminated in Anton's fallen flashlight. It poked its head forward into the light, and Eylis saw small, dark eyes and a long, brownish snout, covered with blood that dripped slowly to the ground below.

Cedar screamed in anguish and anger, and Eylis could tell by his flashlight that the guide had stopped running forward. The archaeologist turned back to look at Siley, but realized that without the guide's flashlight there was nothing but the deep obscurity of nothingness behind him. He reached out his hand and was reassured to feel her arm there, close to him. She seemed understandably tense.

"Dan, we need to keep going!" Siley cried, and Eylis could hear that her voice was strained with tears. Cedar paused, his flashlight staying where it was. "Dan, please!" Siley pleaded, her voice breaking. "We need you!"

Cedar's flashlight slowly turned around, facing them; after a few moments, Eylis could tell that it was moving towards them. Soon he heard Cedar's deep breathing and the guide nearly ran into them as he came by. Eylis saw a flash of a crazed, harrowed look as Cedar ran by, and then the guide was in front of them, and Eylis and Siley were running as closely behind him as they could manage.

At first they didn't hear any cries, nor even the scraping of claws, and Eylis finally felt some small relief as he directed Cedar down another passageway with three marks. But soon the group could again hear the familiar scraping of claws, interspersed with the occasional excited, shriek.

"Why don't they leave us alone!" Siley cried in desperation, but Eylis remembered what Cedar had said about the dinosaurs being territorial. *They're going to hunt us down, until they kill every one of us*, he thought.

Still they had gained some ground on the animals due to Anton's sacrifice, and Eylis felt some hope in his chest as they found a passage with two marks. The three of them ran like madmen through the darkness, and Eylis could feel the occasional stings of pain from rocks scraping him or walls he

bumped into. He wondered briefly how raw and torn up his skin would be if they made it out of the caves. But the sounds of their pursuers were ever-increasing in intensity, and Eylis knew that they had to find an exit soon.

And then they found it, an opening to a cavern labeled with only one mark. *An exit!* Eylis thought excitedly, and a desperate hope soared within him. Cedar ran into the room first, with Siley and Eylis behind, and he shone his light onto the walls opposite them. Eylis' heart sunk as he saw the wall was solid; there was no opening in the rock.

Cedar swung his flashlight around desperately, in a circle, looking at every angle in the stone. But the room was a circular shape, evidently carved into the stone on purpose, and all of the walls were solid rock. Cedar even shone the light upwards, but the top of the cavern also had no openings in it. He shone the light down on the ground, but this too was solid. The only remarkable feature of the ground was that it had some sort of carving engraved into it; a circle with some ornamentation in the middle. Eylis did not care to try to figure out what the markings meant. Even the flashlight flickered sorrowfully, as if it shared the same desperation as the rest of them. The room was a dead-end; there was no way out.

"But this was it," Siley said hollowly. "You said the markings would decrease to an exit."

"I guess not," Eylis answered quietly. It looked to him like the room was for some sort of ceremonial purpose, and that was what the marking in the center was for. Probably an alter for some type of animal sacrifice went there, he guessed. A desperate, scared animal would be led to this place and cruelly slaughtered. And now they would be the modern-day sacrifice.

The flashlight again flickered, and Cedar shook it. “There has to be some way,” the guide said numbly. “There must be an alternative way out.” Eylis did not share his optimism. As they spoke, the tunnel behind them was filled with excited shrieks and the sound of large bodies moving through it. They wouldn’t be able to backtrack, Eylis knew. They were stuck.

Then the flashlight went out, plunging the three of them into complete darkness. It was sudden and Eylis blinked his eyes rapidly, his pupils desperately trying to adjust. But there was no light to adjust to, and the archaeologist could see nothing but an infinite void before his eyes.

“I forgot to change the batteries,” Cedar mumbled. “I’m sorry.”

Eylis felt a lump rising in his throat, and he realized that he could barely breathe, despite the fact that they were now standing in place. He leaned over, trying to catch his breath, and stared into the blackness morosely, as he heard the sound of claws scraping over the ground nearby. *They’re entering the chamber*, he realized. He heard the sounds move past him, to the side, behind him. The sounds increased as more and more animals seemed to enter the cavern. Eylis could not tell how many there were, but it seemed to him to be an endless number. The bodies moved all around them, and the chamber was filled with the echo of their scraping claws. *We’re surrounded*, the archaeologist thought with dread.

The animals were mostly silent, aside from the rustling of their claws and the occasional moan or shriek that pierced through the darkness. But Eylis could hear them getting closer, and he knew the circle of the raptors surrounding them was getting tighter as the animals moved inward. *This is it*, the archaeologist realized. *I didn’t think it would end*

this way. Somehow, he had always held out hope, even after Longlow and Sobe and Oliver and Anton. He had always thought they would find a way out, even up to that last cavern in these desperate caves. But now, he realized, they had absolutely no way out. They would all be torn apart by these vicious, alien creatures.

Although Eylis could still see nothing, the animals were close enough that he could hear them exhaling and he could smell their rotting breath. Eylis felt despair and panic as he waited to feel the slash of a claw tearing into his flesh, maybe through his leg or his chest, maybe through his neck. He wondered how long it would take, and he prayed that it would end as quickly as possible. The anticipation ate away at him, filling him with a nervous terror, so that he even began to hope the animals would attack sooner. The waiting was too much for him to bear.

“They’re not attacking...” Siley breathed, close by. Eylis realized that she must be right, that it wasn’t just his destroyed perception of time. He glanced over towards her voice, and was surprised to see a small light coming from her bag. It was only a moderate glow, but he could make it out now that his eyes had gotten used to the darkness.

“Your bag... there’s a light,” he said quietly.

Siley’s bag moved as she turned around to look at it. “Huh,” she said, surprised. She reached into the bag and removed from it the crystal that she had taken with her into the caves. Eylis could see the gem clearly as it was radiating a soft, warm light. He could make out Siley faintly as well, although he couldn’t see anything beyond her.

Siley lifted the gem before her, and Eylis could hear the scraping of claws again, moving away from her. The raptors were apparently trying to stay out of the light. “They don’t

like it,” Siley said in wonder. “That must be why they don’t attack.”

“Why would they be scared of the light?” Cedar asked. He seemed doubtful.

“Maybe they’re not scared... maybe it is what they’re supposed to protect. Or they recognize anyone who’s holding it as not being an intruder.”

“I don’t know...” Cedar replied.

Siley took a few tentative steps, holding the crystal in front of her, her face faintly illuminated in its whitish-greenish glow. Eylis heard more scraping of claws, but the noises seemed less hasty than before. “Maybe we can make it out past them...” Siley suggested.

Eylis felt too terrified to follow her, and Cedar also seemed unwilling to move. “Even if that’s the case, why wouldn’t they attack the two of us?”

“Carl, do you still have your staff?” Siley asked.

Eylis nodded, but then realized that no one could see him. “Yes, I have the staff and the star-gem.”

“Maybe that’s why they didn’t attack you. Remember the tyrannosaurus hesitated to approach you in the jungle? Maybe anyone with an artifact is seen as belonging here.”

“But that still leaves me unprotected... oh,” Cedar cut off suddenly.

Eylis remembered the old chain that he had seen on Cedar’s neck before Longlow was attacked. He realized with shock that that was only yesterday. “That chain on your neck. You took it from the caves,” Eylis said aloud.

“Yea,” Cedar admitted. “It just... spoke to me, I guess. I liked it.”

Eylis heard more scraping noises, and he realized with horror that the dinosaurs were no longer moving away from

them. “They’re getting closer,” he whispered. “I don’t think the artifacts are enough protection.”

“Should we run for it?” Cedar asked.

“No,” Siley answered quickly. “If they’re like guard dogs, they’ll attack us if we run.”

“Ok. What the hell do we do then?”

Eylis was struck with a sudden idea. “Siley, lower the crystal! Towards the ground!”

“What? Why?” she asked, confused.

“Just shine its light on the ground!” Eylis responded. “It should illuminate it enough to see by... no, not there, towards the center, where the engraving was... yes!” Eylis could faintly see the circular engraving in the middle of the cavern’s floor. Cedar’s boots were nearby, the rest of the guide still in darkness. “Illuminate the whole thing, please! We don’t have much time...”

“I don’t understand...” Siley replied, but she moved near to Cedar and bent over, illuminating the engraved ground. Eylis crouched down next to her, trying to ignore the sound of scraping claws as the raptors seemed to hesitantly approach them. In the middle of the circle, Eylis saw the ornamentation that he had noticed before. What he hadn’t paid attention to, however, was that the markings in the middle surrounded a deep recess, a vertical slit in the rock. The slit looked just wide enough for the star gem to fit inside.

“It’s another door!” Eylis exclaimed quietly. He turned his staff over and lowered it vertically, carefully turning the star gem so that it would fit into the slit. It was just narrow enough and Eylis could feel the gem slide neatly into the stone below. “See? This was the exit!”

Siley and Cedar murmured in excitement, but a sudden snap of an animal’s jaws nearby silenced them. They were

quiet as they heard soft, tentative footsteps approaching. Siley reached up with the crystal, just in time for Eylis to see a dark pair of eyes retract back from the gem's light into the surrounding darkness.

"Hurry!" Cedar urged him. The archaeologist tried to turn the star-gem but, like before, the rock was heavy and would not move easily. He pushed on the staff without success; he tried again and heard a sharp, cracking report from the wood. He realized he was in danger of splintering the staff. "Turn the bottom, I'll help you," Cedar told him, and Eylis lowered his hands towards the bottom of the staff. Cedar grabbed the top and they turned together, careful to not put too much pressure on one part of the wood. They felt the stone below starting to give.

There were snarls from the darkness and a single, ear-splitting shriek filled the cavern's black walls. "Quickly, please," Siley told them desperately, as she waved her arms around, moving the crystal in front of her like some sort of charm to ward off evil.

Luckily, Eylis and Cedar did not need the light. They turned the star-gem all the way until the stone below moved no farther. Then they removed the staff and pushed on the stone doorway. It was heavy and Eylis and Cedar had to use a bit of strength, but then they felt it suddenly give way and they heard a loud thud as the stone piece crashed to the ground below. Eylis could feel cool air on his hands; looking down into the new passageway, he was dismayed to see nothing but more darkness with no trace of external light. But they had no time to worry about what was done below. He heard Siley cry out as a raptor snapped at her.

"Go, go, go," Cedar urged him and he gave Eylis a hearty push. The archaeologist fell face-first through the opening

and landed hard on some rocks below. He rolled over quickly, trying to catch his breath. Above him, he could see the small opening faintly illuminated by Siley's crystal, but around him there was only darkness. Then the light in the opening was obscured and Eylis realized that Cedar was jumping through the hole; he had to move aside quickly to avoid being landed on by the guide. Finally, Siley jumped through, cradling the crystal in her arms. She landed awkwardly, and cried out in pain as she fell over. Eylis quickly helped her to her feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"It's my ankle... I think I twisted it," she answered. They heard snarling above, and Siley lifted the crystal towards the opening. They could just make out some dark shadows above them, and the occasional snout poking through the door.

"Can they fit through?" she asked wearily.

"I don't know," Cedar answered, "but we should keep moving. I thought this was supposed to be an exit out of the caves?" He grabbed Eylis and Siley and pushed them away from the opening, into the darkness. Siley's crystal gave them some faint light to navigate around the rocks.

Eylis could tell at once that this passage was not like the ones up above. The rock underneath his feet and on the walls around him was more jagged, and more brittle. The air was thicker too, and he felt warm, moist currents pass by them. In the light of Siley's crystal, he noticed that one was coming from a horizontal slit in the rock. *It's a steam vent,* he realized. *There must still be volcanic activity underneath the rock.*

He also noticed some vegetation growing near the vent, and recognized it immediately as the large, green leaves of

the echolia plant. There was a slightly sweet smell in the air, especially near the plants. The warmth and the smell made Eylis feel calmer somewhat, and he relaxed ever so slightly.

This relaxation soon disappeared when Cedar abruptly stopped. “The passage ends,” the guide told them. Siley held her crystal close to the wall, and they searched for an opening in the rock but, as above, they found none.

“It can’t be,” Eylis said, unbelieving. He moved around the passage, feeling desperately with his hands over the rocky walls. He was sure that the door above had to lead to an exit. That’s why the previous cavern was labeled with one mark. It had to be near them, right around the corner... Eylis, however, could not find any corners or any alternate passageways. There was just the one tunnel, its smooth walls interrupted only by the occasional steam vent.

In the distant, they heard a *thump* and then a scratching sound. This was followed by another *thump*, and then another. “The raptors,” Cedar said grimly. “I think they found a way through the hole.”

Eylis’ mind reeled, refusing to believe that they had come through all this horror just to be stuck again in another tunnel. “Look closely!” he cried out desperately to the others. “There must be something, something we missed...”

“There are some marks over here,” Siley called out from the other side of the passageway. “It looks like... a painting, I think.”

Eylis quickly walked through the blackness towards the glow of her crystal. “Another door?” he asked eagerly as he approached.

“I don’t think so,” Siley answered despondently.

Eylis pressed his face close to the rock that Siley was illuminating; he could tell that she was right. All that was

on this wall was paint – there were no recessions or slits that they could possibly open with his staff. Even so, Eylis pushed against the wall with all his strength. The wall did not budge, however, and soon the archaeologist was panting with exhaustion.

“Save your strength,” Cedar cautioned him. “What about the paintings, do they say anything? Maybe they show a way out?”

“I don’t think so...” Eylis mumbled despairingly.

“Well check again,” Cedar snapped. The guide’s harsh tone surprised Eylis and, sighing, the archaeologist took a closer look at the cave wall. He could see that there were a series of images, and that they had once been in full relief, painted with vivid colors. Now, however, the paints had faded and started to chip away, and it was very difficult to make anything out. In the background, Eylis heard the now familiar sound of claws scraping against rock and the snarling of the approaching dinosaurs. He tried his best to tune it out and focus on the rock.

He could tell that he was looking at two complimentary images. In each there seemed to be some main figure, a protagonist, that was vaguely human-shaped, and some other paint in the background. The features of the protagonist were obscured, but Eylis could tell that there was some part of his body that was painted a brighter color than the rest. Peering intently at the body between the two images, Eylis realized that this brighter spot was not actually part of the figure, but was something separate, though still connected in some way. Light colors were traced away from the bright spot, fading away into the rock.

Eylis realized the figure was holding the bright spot, and he immediately knew what that spot was. *It’s the crystal*, he

thought, intrigued, *with light rays emanating from it...* The figure was holding the crystal in both scenes; in the first he was alone, in the second there were small dots of paint spread around in the background. *They look like stars*, the archaeologist thought, but he couldn't tell what it meant. Night and day? The figure's body was turned 180 degrees from one image to the next.

"What do you see?" Cedar asked him impatiently. In the background, Eylis could hear the sounds of the approaching raptors growing louder.

"I... I don't know," he admitted. "There's some figure... a man, I think. He's holding the crystal. And it shows him twice, once with stars. It looks like a contrast – night and day, maybe. Or maybe, he's standing in two different places... I really don't know."

"They're getting closer," Cedar whispered intently. He fired off a few shots from his rifle, and Eylis felt his ears ringing. The raptors appeared to be unfazed by the loud noises, however; they kept coming closer, and it sounded to Eylis like they were moving faster than before.

"Two places," Siley repeated. "Like he went somewhere with the crystal? Like somewhere out of the caves, maybe, where you can see the stars?"

"Maybe... but what's the point of drawing the crystal? The first image shows the man holding it up and light coming out of it."

"Because it glows?"

"I don't think so, there was too much light. It's like the crystal was... exploding or something."

"Like it destroys the rock?" Siley suddenly slammed the crystal against the stone. The gem hit the rock solidly and did not break into it, but neither was it chipped or

scratched. Siley, on the other hand, yelped in pain as she retracted her hand. “Worth a shot,” she said wincing.

“Hard stone,” Eylis replied sympathetically. He thought it was somewhat interesting that the stone here was smoother than in the rest of the passage. *Probably why they made their cave paintings here*, he thought to himself. He also noticed that the rock by the edge of the crystal’s light appeared almost golden, probably due to the gem’s glow. But as Siley shook out her hand, he noticed that the golden areas stayed where they were and did not move around with the light.

“Hey, can you shine some light down here?” he asked Siley. Siley moved the crystal downward, and Eylis could see the bottom of the tunnel wall faintly illuminate. He leaned close to it, touching it with his hands.

“What is it?” she asked. The raptors were beginning to shriek excitedly again, their calls echoing off the tunnel walls. Cedar fired a few more shots into the darkness.

“Some kind of sediment... a metallic substance it looks like.” Eylis then remembered something about the Seven Sites, why they were so lucrative to so many governments. “It must be chesanium,” he realized. “That metal is often found around volcanic areas, in the same places where the echolia plant grows.” He noticed that the sediments formed chaotic patterns on the cave wall. At first it seemed to him to be random, but then he noticed that there were recurring dense patches of the metal. These patches formed a sort of broken circle, and within the circle the rock was indented, almost as if it had been chipped away so that the metal could be harvested.

“What did... what did Oliver say?” Eylis spoke to himself. “He mentioned that, according to the legend, the stone allowed Kadune to travel all over the world. Of course, that

doesn't make sense... how could someone travel by stone? It's not like..." His thoughts were drowned out by a long volley of rifle fire from Cedar. The volley suddenly stopped.

"I'm out," Cedar said gravely.

"What do we do?" Siley asked Eylis. He could hear the pleading urgency in her voice.

"You can't travel by stone," Eylis answered, looking up at her.

"Carl, please, focus..."

"You can't travel by stone," Eylis repeated, "but you can travel by metal."

"What are you talking about?"

Eylis was starting to put the pieces together in his mind. "The Cadunians, they use that technology. They never shared it with our scientists... but, under limited circumstances, they were able to use chesanium to transport particles between two nearby points. The chesanium is activated under heat and pressure and a great deal of energy... the kind of heat and pressure that causes volcanic activity, and the energy that comes from... a 'stone of power'."

Cedar was backing up, pressing into the rock wall. The raptors were very loud, crying out in excited yelps. Their claws were drumming on the stone floor as they ran forward. "They're coming," Cedar whispered intently, "and I don't think they care that we have the artifacts anymore."

"It's another key, another door," Eylis realized. "Kadune traveled using the power of the stone in reaction with chesanium. It's here – this indentation in the rock... Place the crystal here!"

"What... will that work?" Siley asked. She sounded confused and distracted. Eylis could hear that the raptors

were almost upon them. Their shrieks filled the tunnel and made his ears ring. He could smell their rotting breath.

“Who cares, try it!” Cedar cried out.

Siley thrust the crystal into the indentation that Eylis had pointed out. Eylis grabbed it as well, helping her to push it into the rock. As they did so, the glow from the gem expanded outward and turned into a dazzling, whitish-blue light. The stone grew hot underneath Eylis’ hand, and he felt this warmth spread throughout his whole body. The cavern was illuminated, and looking back Eylis could see the snarling mouths of the approaching raptors, their gaping jaws revealing razor-sharp teeth.

“Grab the crystal!” he called to Cedar who looked shocked, but reached down to grab the stone. Eylis turned back around, just as he felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder. Then he was completely enveloped by the light and Cedar and Siley, the cave, and the raptors all disappeared. All of his senses vanished and Eylis felt nothing, but the sensation of the bright light burning throughout his body. And then he felt nothing at all.



The archaeologist’s senses came back to him slowly. First, he noticed that he felt anything at all, much to his relief. Then individual sensations arrived; he was laying against something hard, his clothes stuck to his sweaty back, there was a burning pain in his right shoulder. He was able to move his limbs; reaching out with his hand he felt dirt and grass. He tried to open his eyes, but a bright light blinded him. He blinked rapidly and realized after a moment that this was sunlight. He sat up slowly, feeling soft dirt

underneath his bottom. His eyes adjusted to the light, and he saw that he was surrounded by trees; the sky, blue and nearly cloudless, spread overhead. *He was outside.*

His reasoning slowly came back to him as well. He could tell that he was on the island. Trees and ferns nearby rustled in the wind, while behind him, the rocks rose up jaggedly away from the tree line. *The caves must be under those rocks,* he thought. And then he realized, *we escaped! We escaped the caves!* He quickly looked around in alarm for the others, but to his relief saw Siley lying a few paces away from him and Cedar a few paces away in the other direction. They both appeared very dazed.

“We made it...” Siley mumbled, looking around in amazement. In her hand remained the crystal, although it no longer gave off any light.

“How, how...” Cedar said, shaking his head. “That was a portal, wasn’t it? Cadunian particle transport.” Eylis nodded, and he saw Cedar break into a wide grin. “I can’t believe it,” the guide said giddily. “I heard about it during the LeMonte War, of course, but... I can’t believe I actually got to experience particle transportation... and to survive like we did... at the last moment too!” He chuckled and collapsed back on the ground with a wide smile on his face.

Eylis shook his head. “I can’t believe it either... the legends were true. Kadune did have a crystal. We always thought particle transportation was a new technology, but the ancients had it too...” He shook his head again, in disbelief.

Siley, meanwhile, had managed to crawl over to him and she wrapped her arms around him in a big hug. Eylis winced in pain, despite himself. Siley noticed, and the archaeologist quickly apologized. “My shoulder is killing me,” he tried to explain.

“Let me see... oh, that explains it,” Siley said, looking him over. “Just one sec... let me take this out.” Then she pulled hard on something and Eylis felt an excruciating pain radiate through his back. He cried out in alarm.

“Sorry, sorry,” Siley said soothingly. “I had to take out this.” And she handed him a black claw several centimeters long; the end was as sharp as a knife and it was covered in his blood. “It looks like one of them got you,” she said, as she pulled out a bandage from her pack and began to wrap it around Eylis’ shoulder. The archaeologist noticed that each of them had their clothes and all of their belongings with them. He remembered from old explanations he had seen of the Cadunian technology that a localized energy field was created during the reaction and that everything inside that field got deconstructed and transported, particle by particle. Eylis wondered briefly what had happened to the rest of the raptor whose claw had been transported with them.

Cedar walked over and leaned on the rock, pressing his ear against it. He listened intently, and then smiled. “I can hear them,” he said. “I can still hear those bastards in the rock, crying out, wondering where we went.” Eylis remembered that the more energy in the reaction, the larger the field and the farther you went. Apparently they had not gone very far. Still he felt very lucky. He shuddered to think what would have happened if they had been transported only partway through the rock.

Siley finished bandaging him, and then Eylis gingerly stood up. He had carried the staff with him through the tunnel, and he noticed now that this had also been transported with them. Siley tried to hand him the artifact, but Eylis refused it. “Take it yourself, for your ankle,” he told her.

Siley nodded and tried walking a few paces with the staff. “It helps,” she said, smiling.

“I’m glad. Dan, can you lead us?”

“With pleasure,” the guide answered, slinging his empty rifle around his shoulders. He took off into the brush, heading south, and Siley and Eylis followed him. To his relief, Eylis noticed that the brush was not as thick here as in the jungle on the north side of the island. Cedar was able to navigate them through, even without the use of his machete. The jungle was reassuringly quiet around them, and they walked without incident, albeit at a slow pace to accommodate Siley’s sprained ankle. They didn’t speak and they didn’t take any breaks. Eylis knew that all three of them wanted nothing more than to be back on the boat and off the island, and that any break would delay that goal.

Before too long, the jungle thinned out and the dirt turned into sand. Then they emerged from the trees and were back onto the beach, where they could see the crashing surf slamming into the rocks by the waterline. Eylis was overjoyed to see the ocean stretching out before them and he could almost imagine that he saw, very distant on the horizon, the edges of South America waiting to welcome them home.

They turned left to follow the beach around to the east, and it wasn’t too many minutes before their boat appeared, moored among the rocks. Eylis could barely restrain himself from running to it, but he patiently waited for Siley to make her way over the rest of the beach and the rocks that separated them from safety. Then he helped her up, onto the boat, and soon all three of them were standing on the deck, looking out over the island that had ensnared them for the last few days. The sun was just starting to lower in the sky,

and the tops of the trees were illuminated by its glow. The rocks were enshrouded in the middle but still clearly visible from the boat. Eylis thought they looked so harmless now, so innocent; it was hard to believe that so many of the horrors that they had experienced had occurred there.

“Dan, can you pilot the boat?” Siley asked the guide. Cedar didn’t answer, however; he was staring out over the island with a solemn, mournful expression. His giddiness after their escape had been completely replaced by a cold seriousness.

“It doesn’t seem right,” he finally said aloud. “It’s not right to leave Anton there, in the caves.”

“Dan, we can’t go back for him,” Siley answered.

Cedar didn’t answer, but continued to silently look out over the island. From somewhere in the jungle came the roar of the tyrannosaur, possibly hunting some prey. Eylis couldn’t see it but he knew that it couldn’t be too far away.

“Dan, can you pilot the boat?” Siley asked again.

Cedar slowly nodded. “Yea,” he said wearily. “We can go.”

The guide started the boat and carefully navigated around the rocks that protected the inlet where they had docked three days before. Then he piloted them away from the island, into the open seas, heading towards Central America. Eylis continued to observe the island from the railing on the deck, his hand on Siley’s, slowly watching it fade from view.

2 Weeks Later



Siley and Cedar were already sitting at a table by the time that Eylis arrived at the bar. Siley noticed him first as he walked in under the thatched roof, and she ran up to give him a tight hug. Cedar gave him a smile and a friendly wave from the table. “One moment,” Eylis told them, as he walked over to the bar and got a small bottle of liquor. “I usually don’t drink,” he explained when he returned to the table, “but today we have reason to celebrate.”

“Did it go well, in America?” Siley asked him.

Eylis smiled as he poured from the bottle into three separate glasses. “Very well, very well, I am pleased to say.” He gave a glass to each of them. “I met with Zandruff and he has agreed, of course, to publish my work on the island imminently. It will appear in *Natural History* by the end of the month.”

“That’s great to hear,” Siley said.

“But there’s more...” Eylis gave a wide smile. “Zandruff was so impressed that he also helped me to get funding, and I have been promised enough money already to start my institute.”

“Wow,” Siley replied, and she leaned over to give Eylis another hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

Eylis shook his head happily. “It’s everything I wanted. A full-fledged, private institute to study the island, with enough funds for support staff. All of the academic research on the island will flow through us.”

Siley smiled at him with excitement, but Cedar looked impassive. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, Carl?” he asked. “We know that... special interests have found these dinosaurs before, and the results have been disastrous. A lot of people have died.”

“And that’s exactly the point of this institute, to stop that!” Eylis said, slapping the table for emphasis. “The problem with these Pacific islands is that they’ve been kept secret, for private interests to use and abuse at their will. An institute like mine, where all information is scientifically-disclosed and open to the public, will stop that. Everyone will know that our island is the origin of the Seven Sites; everyone will know that dinosaurs still exist. If anyone else is interfering with the island, or with the wildlife, they won’t be able to hide in secret anymore. We’ll be shedding light on the whole thing. Trust me, public knowledge is the best weapon we have against any governmental or private actors!”

“Maybe,” Cedar replied hesitantly. “Maybe this will prevent any accidents from happening with the island.”

“Trust me, the public will know to avoid it. Besides, I won’t publish exact locations. No one will know specifically where the island is, except for us.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Siley said. “It will prevent any attempts to *banish* someone from a country because they know about the site.”

“Speaking of which, did you take my suggestion to try to go back to the U.S.?” Eylis asked.

Cedar nodded. “I talked with the embassy, and it appears I can go back home. It seems that whoever was stopping me before is no longer around.”

“That’s fantastic, really fantastic Dan, because I want both of you to come work for me,” Eylis said energetically. Siley

and Cedar gazed back at him with perplexed expressions, and the archaeologist was somewhat disappointed that his friends did not seem to share his excitement.

“Work for you... at the institute?” Siley asked.

“Well, yes,” Eylis replied. “And why not? You don’t want to go back to Laos, do you?”

“No,” Siley answered. “My mom is still there, but I plan to send her money from abroad.”

“The job will pay well. And the institute can sponsor you, so you can live in America.”

“But... I’m not an archaeologist, or an academic. What would I do?”

Eylis shook his head. “Your background doesn’t matter. More than anything, I need people I can trust. And I trust no one more than you two. Besides, your first-hand experience on that island counts for more than any degree anyone else would have.”

“But what would I do?”

“You would help run the institute,” Eylis explained.

“There will be a lot of administrative tasks that I will need help with. Plus expedition support. You can help with research too, if you want.”

“And you’re sure I’m qualified?”

“There is no one else I would rather have,” Eylis answered, smiling.

Siley shook her head thoughtfully. “Ok,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“Splendid! Dan?”

Cedar shook his head. “I’m not much of an administrator. More of a field guy.”

Eylis nodded. “I know. That’s why I need you.”

“I don’t want to go back to the island.”

“Of course, of course. We don’t want anybody to go back. When I talk about going public, that means there’s going to be a lot of interest generated in the island. People might try to go there to see what it’s like, to interfere, or even just to catch a glimpse of the impossible. It’s vitally important to have conservation efforts in place. I’ve already spoken with the International Conservation Society, and once the island is public they will mark it as an ecologically-fragile site. No one will be allowed to go there.”

“But who will enforce it?” Cedar asked.

“Exactly,” Eylis answered, staring at him.

“Oh,” the guide said, and sighed. “Carl, I really don’t want to go back there.”

“You don’t have to,” Eylis answered quickly. “We will have international agreements in place to protect the island. I just need someone I trust to make sure that those agreements are upheld.”

Cedar seemed hesitant. “I don’t know,” he answered. “That island is so... dangerous.”

“That’s why I need you, Dan, to make sure that no one else goes there. You would ensure that no one else ever gets hurt. That both islands are protected.”

Cedar’s eyes narrowed. “Wait... *both* islands?”

Eylis nodded. “I noticed it on Oliver’s map of the Seven Sites, but I was also able to confirm recently with satellite imagery... there’s another island, not far from the one we were on, that appears to be part of the same chain. I believe that it too is part of the Seven Sites, and possibly was home to the same race of people as the first island.” Eylis reached into his bag and pulled out a couple of satellite images.

“Possibly home to dinosaurs too,” Cedar muttered, looking at the images. “And I suppose you plan to take an expedition there?”

“*Only* if it’s safe. We will do some aerial surveillance first, and I will not take anyone there if there are *any* signs of animal inhabitation.”

“Who will decide whether or not it’s safe?” Cedar asked.

“You will,” Eylis answered, smiling, “as long as you accept the job.”

Cedar continued to stare at the images. Finally, he said, “Do you remember this place, Carl?” He motioned around the bar with his hands.

“Of course,” Eylis answered seriously. “This is where we first met.” The archaeologist reached into his bag and pulled out several more images, which he slid across the table to Cedar. “This is the institute. The current building we found, and mock-ups from the architect of what the interior will look like. The main exhibition hall will be named after Anton. Believe me, I haven’t forgotten what he did for us.”

Cedar looked quietly at the image of the main hall; the picture showed Anton’s name engraved in wood above the opening, and a plaque bearing his image stood near the entryway. Eylis noticed tears come to the guide’s eyes.

“I need you,” Eylis told him sincerely. “We’ve been through too much together. No one else knows what we faced. I need you on my team. Please.”

Cedar nodded slowly and passed the images back to Eylis. Eylis squeezed him sympathetically on the shoulder, and then raised his glass. “For us. For the three of us working together,” he said. Siley and Cedar raised their glasses as well.

Eylis took a small sip and lowered his glass, but then noticed that Cedar had already finished his whole drink and was refilling it. The guide topped off Eylis and Siley as well, and then offered another toast. “For Anton, we will drink the Russian way,” the guide said. “To Anton.”

“To Anton,” Eylis agreed, and he downed the contents of the glass, feeling the liquid stinging his throat harshly.

Cedar refilled their three glasses. “And to Jeff. And Sobe.”

“To Jeff and Sobe,” Siley repeated, and Eylis downed another full round. He quickly put the glass down and wiped his mouth, coughing; he could feel his head starting to swim.

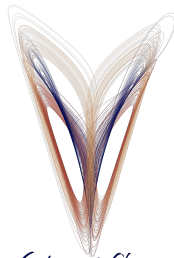
Cedar seemed content, but then Siley refilled their drinks one more time. “For Oliver,” she said quietly. Eylis scoffed, but Siley gave him a warm smile. “Without him, we wouldn’t have met each other,” she explained.

Eylis looked at Cedar and shrugged wearily, but then lifted his glass. “Ok, to Oliver,” he said. “To that psychopath, for bringing us together.”

“To Oliver,” the others echoed.

About the Author

TJ Parmer writes for the Edge of Chaos Collective, a project that intertwines multiple genres and mediums into one complex system of expression. This text is part of the *smallworld* series of stories that take place in the same universe.



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