

BOOK I

The Ancestor Series of
Adventure-thrillers

THE MOUNTAIN PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE

Draft: 07-2013: By Marshall Chamberlain



SYNOPSIS

The burial chamber of a revered Mayan sorceress is uncovered atop a sacrificial pyramid at the Caracol ruins in western Belize. Translation of ancient metallic scrolls and a 1100 year old diary found in the chamber reveal the existence of a secret entrance to the inside of a mountain. The scrolls refer to the interior as *Trinium*, the *Place of Knowledge*, and explain its creation by an advanced civilization.

A flash of mysterious blue light brings death to a U.N. official assisting the Belizean government in the search for the secret entrance. John Henry Morgan and Mary Ellen Rollins, two scientists working on a U.N. project in Africa, are chosen to investigate the death and determine the veracity of the mountain story.

As the investigation progresses, the U.N. representatives come into possession of a *scepter* wielding miraculous powers, and they uncover the source of sudden death from a mysterious ball of blue light.

Hidden controls embedded in the trunk of a giant oak tree materialize the mountain entrance, revealing strange sculpted caverns. Bizarre mental prodding guides the representatives to the *Place of Seeing* for the most shocking experience of their lives.

Protection of the mountain's secrets requires cooperation from Belize, the United Nations, NATO and the United States. But leaks of the discoveries cause one nation to determine the mountain poses a threat to world order, and it will take great risks to neutralize the danger.

Marshall Chamberlain gives us a magnificent adventure into plausible reality and carries us into unique realms of danger and suspense, producing new insight for wrestling with age-old questions: who are we? Where did we come from? Is our historic record accurate?

Book I, *The Mountain Place of Knowledge*, is a spellbinding adventure, scientifically mysterious, and metaphysically familiar. Stalwart characters meet avarice and violence head on as Chamberlain weaves the first installment of the Ancestor Series of adventure-thrillers.



Belize: A.D. 876

Myakka's fingers and toes grappled at the tree's rough bark. A black jaguar was close behind, leaping for her, its lethal claws slapping at her heels. Her breath came in jagged hitches and her sides ached, but she climbed on, up into the high branches of the huge oak. The feral cat was relentless. Its desperate snarls pierced the silence of the forest.

During the frenzied climb, Myakka had ventured only one glance back at the cat, directly into its speckled yellow eyes. Without a doubt she was facing the ruler of these forests.

The young girl looked up into the branches. Her heart pounded and sweat rolled down her face, skin glistening in the fading light. Dingy croc-skins, embroidered with small colored stones mined from the swiftly-running Japona River outside the City State of Caracol, adhered to her hard brown body. Her arms and legs were bloodied from the desperate climb. *The gods must be angry. What have I done?*

Twenty feet above, the branches had grown together, forming a near-solid barricade. Was it possible to get over it? A snarl and the cat slashed a claw across Myakka's calf. She gasped at the searing pain and knew the cat had drawn blood. She scurried like a

squirrel toward a small break in the woody barrier. Could she squeeze through? If she could get on top, perhaps the barrier would stop the animal's pursuit.

It hissed at her, but she didn't look back.

Myakka worked her head into the narrow space. Sharp twigs scraped her ears and tugged the turquoise pins from her braided hair. She pushed and twisted and wormed her way through. On hands and knees she scrambled to the edge of the crude platform.

Eyes riveted on the cat, she tossed her braids over her left shoulder and brought her bow up, slowly nocked an arrow, pulling it to full, knowing this was her last chance. The beast was already moving into position along a branch for a leap onto the platform.

She let the arrow fly. It struck deep into the leopard's thigh. Myakka recoiled from the wrenching sound of the cat's shriek, but recovered and nocked another arrow. She peered over the edge of the platform.

The cat's cries were terrifying, but it was retreating down the trunk. She watched it disappear in the dense foliage of the branches.

The gods must be teaching a lesson. Had she won?

Myakka was immovable, holding the bow, arms tight around the tree trunk, its coarse, grating bark eating into her skin as the adrenaline eased. She heard the cat's dreadful moaning and observed it climb to a shelf along the sheer face of the mountain. The dangerous beast was no more than twenty meters from her and at about her level. It rolled on its back, clawing and biting at the arrow.

"Myakka, I am here."

The voice coming from somewhere below sent a thrilling shiver down her spine. Tyuco, her betrothed, had come to greet her on her return from the vision quest. There was relief in his tone, and Myakka knew why. More often than not, young girls

coming of age succumbed to the treacherous volcanic terrain or the deadly leopard or the great bear or the poisonous snakes and crocodiles lying in wait among the coastal marshes, or the black-tipped sharks in the shallow sea lagoons. But she had been successful and possessed the bounty of her objective, the precious shell of the giant conch. Delivery to the priests of her beloved city of Caracol would earn her the right to apprentice in the skills and crafts of the sorceress.

“Tyuco, beware of the great female cat on the ledge above,” she called. “I have wounded it.”

“I have been watching and see her. I will soon finish her life. Are you injured?”

“No. You must be careful.”

“I will. Stay where you are, beloved. I will return. We must make camp quickly. The sun has nearly departed.”

Myakka relaxed her death hold on the tree trunk, dropped her bow at her feet, and began sliding her arms down the trunk’s girth, guiding herself into a kneeling position to wait for Tyuco—but a keening whistle sounded, and she lost her balance trying to gain the safety of the tree trunk that suddenly wasn’t there. She sprawled headlong onto the confluence of branches. She looked up. To her amazement the entire top of the giant oak had disappeared.

What have the gods done?

A thick, round pole of brightly shining material topped by a huge, spinning blue jewel rose into the heavens where the tree trunk had been, sending silent streams of blue light from its facets strobing off the surrounding forest canopy.

With all her strength, Myakka instinctively grabbed the post. She closed her eyes tightly, wishing it would all go away.

What had she done?

She opened her eyes and cast her attention over the landscape below. The birds and ground creatures were moving in a confused manner.

Tightly holding on to the strange lustrous stanchion, her memory jolted: Tyuco and the cat. She looked over at the ledge. The jaguar appeared paralyzed by the event, cowering against the rock face. She wanted to call to Tyuco, but the words wouldn't come.

She stood there frozen. But then unexpected calm seeped into her being, and she trembled in response. To her startled amazement, below her hold on the pole a rectangular space had revealed itself. She let go as if the post were hot, adrenaline pumping anew.

Should she flee? But—no. Her terror oddly dissolved into strong curiosity. Four spots—red, green, orange, and blue—were indented into the bronze-colored space.

What is this thing?

An uncontrollable urge caused her to push at the green one. An image forced itself into her mind. She wrapped her arms around the pole again and prayed for the unwanted picture to go away. In her mind a ground-level opening in the sheer face of the rock prominence below was crystal clear, but the reality of it felt intrusive and oppressive. She instinctively pushed the red spot, and the scene dissolved.

She let out her breath, fixated on the colored spots. *Now what?*

Again, insatiable curiosity goaded her to touch the orange color. The huge, blue-blazing jewel began to spin faster, and solid streams of blue light emitted from its crystalline surfaces, disseminating intense beams over the forest as far as she could see.

She was bewildered by the chaos. *How to stop it?* She slapped at the pole, at the same time wondering why there was such quiet. Nothing happened.

She struck the bronze rectangle with an open palm and saw the round blue spot briefly light up. The view of the forest down the mountainside filled with streamers of blue light so forceful and concentrated she was forced to shield her eyes, holding onto the pole for dear life. The sound was like an angry waterfall.

In a moment it was over. She heard the whistle again and looked up. The tree had appeared as if nothing had happened, and she was again clutching its trunk. But there was a stench in the air she knew well—a taste on her tongue, in her nose, spelling death. The forest sounds had ceased, and a layer of smoke was gathering over the jungle terrain.

She turned her head and wrenched her body to observe the shelf. The cat lay on its back, still, but its yellow eyes were open and its silky black fur was smoldering.

“Tyuco, where are you?”

Nothing. She scuttled down the tree trunk, careful not to damage the conch shell tethered in a twine bag hanging against her back. Every muscle in her body ached, the adrenaline was dissipating, and she trembled from exhaustion. At the last branch, as she picked her spot and readied to drop to the ground, she stopped. Tyuco lay in a sprawling heap at the base of the tree. She could see all the way through the round hole in the middle of his forehead. His hair was smoking.



Two Weeks Ago

Confident the landforms described in the Mayan diary matched Park Service terrain maps, they had set out on foot from Solomon Camp, a park stationhouse about ten miles west of the Southern Highway leading back to Belize City.

Calvin Stanvich, the Curator of the Belize Museum of Natural History, and Dr. Donald Courtney, an elderly visiting scientist, were attempting to locate the hidden entrance to the inside of a mountain they believed to be Mt. Richardson. Petras, a local boy working odd jobs at the museum, was along to help carry equipment and camping gear for the sixteen-mile jungle trek, which included a seven-hundred-meter climb up the gentle eastern side of the mountain.

Halfway up the mountain, they decided to camp for the night at the headwaters of Richardson Creek. The trek had been arduous. The forest was dense and uninhabited. They could have been the only humans to have ever come this way. The view down the mountainside was spectacular: a mottled green cover appeared to be draped over the terrain, making it look solid.

Calvin looked the part of the jungle explorer. Though as slight of build as the doctor, he was proudly donned in pure Patagonia.

It had been frustrating having to coddle to Dr. Courtney's pace; he had no empathy for the old man's physical limitations.

Making camp, Calvin stayed to himself—away from the nattering professor—wrestling with his Eureka enclosure and consumed in weighing the alternatives of what he might do if he found what he was looking for.

He left Dr. Courtney and the boy on their own to stake up their tent and execute their pre-agreed duties preparing the dehydrated stew they'd brought along for dinner.

Calvin worked methodically, rapidly setting up his bivouac, and then took a break sitting on a log next to his tent, admiring the sunlight from behind the mountain prominence playing against the clouds in the western sky, barely aware of his hunger and filled with a mystical optimism.

Late the next morning, crossing a meadow at the base of a knoll, they passed a park stationhouse under construction and moved back into the canopy for the final mile to the mountain prominence. An hour later, breaking through a thicket, they peered across a dry streambed about forty meters wide in front of a sheer rock face.

"It looks wider than Myakka described in her diary," Dr. Courtney said, his voice dry and gravelly.

Calvin frowned. "It's been eleven-hundred years, Doctor. What did you expect?"

As the day had worn on, Calvin had become increasingly irritated with the slightly-built, bald academic, who had been a constant source of aggravation since Minister Jacobson, Calvin's superior, had thrown the two together to add to his friend's vacation experience. The doctor was an avid archeologist.

According to the map, the streambed skirted the jagged prominence, terminating abruptly a half mile south where over the

eons intermittent waters had washed over a steep rocky grade and eroded the landscape to treacherous impassability. At the north side of the prominence, the streambed snaked around and ended in a deeply-cut valley and waterfall—dry at this time of year. Stark cliffs occupied the western side overlooking the lush green hills and valleys of Guatemala.

Facing them was a granite rock face fifty to sixty meters wide and at least twenty-five meters high. It was sheer and then petered out into the craggy remainder of the prominence. “I believe this is what we’re looking for,” Calvin said, sly wrinkles curling at the sides of his mouth. He was pleased with his intrepid diary translation.

“Let’s take a rest here. I’m afraid I don’t have your stamina.” Dr. Courtney turned and placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Petras, be a good fellow and set up the table.” He turned to Calvin. “What say we take another look at that map?”

Calvin was momentarily fixated on a huge tree poking up over its neighbors to the right of the rock face. He was euphoric; it was exactly as the Mayan diary described it: an anomaly in the landscape over a hundred feet tall, dense and foreboding. She’d referred to it as the *Sentinel*.

Calvin spread his notes and maps on the field table, and the two men went back and forth correlating the diary’s description of physiographic features with the reality of the contour map.

Dr. Courtney took another look across the dry streambed of smoothly-packed rocks glittering in the sunlight. “The tree is so obvious. As I’m sure you must realize, trees don’t live eleven-hundred years. You’re sure your notes are accurate and you know what you’re doing?”

“Please, Doctor, I’m an expert in this language. We went over all this in the minister’s office.”

“I know, and of course seeing the tree exactly as you have it here gives the tale a touch of credence. But the buttons you describe—I’m confused. You show four buttons here.” Dr. Courtney pointed to one of Calvin’s diagrams, lips tight, facial lines rigid. “The summary you gave Minister Jacobson indicated only two.”

“I’m by no means finished with the translation. I rushed to get a cursory summary to the minister. All I can tell you is the entry procedure was carefully explained at the beginning of the diary. I’m not clear yet what the other buttons are for. We just want to see if we can actually get in. Agreed?”

Dr. Courtney looked up from the maps several times to study the landscape. He seemed pathetically inept with his little glasses hanging on the end of his nose. What was he not seeing?

Calvin knew the doctor had been skeptical from the beginning, but the existence of the diary—a perfectly preserved *codex*—had convinced the doctor the trip might be worthwhile. But he’d made a harsh judgment of Calvin’s translation work right in front of him in the minister’s presence. He’d claimed it had a mythical feel—inexplicable fairy-tale wonders the Mayan author attributed to the gods.

“So, according to your notes, we climb that tree, we come to the confluence of branches, then feel around the trunk for a mechanism that materializes the controls. This is difficult for me to fathom.”

“It’s an adventure calling out, my good Doctor. You see the tree.”

“I do, and so far it appears you’ve done your homework well, but I’d feel a lot better with a more cautious approach. Did Myakka say how she found this spot in the first place?”

“Yes, she described the *vision quest* of her adolescence, a rather harsh and brutal coming-of-age ritual. If a youth was unsuccessful

accomplishing certain objectives on a journey to the sea within a set time, among other things, the priests enslaved the young girls and neutered the males.”

Calvin went into detail, relishing the opportunity to explain the drug-induced journey of the young Mayan: her escape from a jaguar by climbing the same tree they were now observing across the streambed and then accidentally triggering the appearance of a button-filled panel. His narrative took on a condescending tone as he observed Dr. Courtney’s questioning facial reactions.

“You tell a good story, I’ll admit. You seem to have learned a considerable amount since we were together in Byron’s office.”

“I’ve done nothing else. There’s more, but right now I’m anxious to follow the directions and see for myself. I suggest only one of us climb the tree, but first let’s assess the situation.”

They collected their documents, and Dr. Courtney nodded to the boy. “Petras, can you pack up and follow us?”

The boy quickly collapsed the field table, packed it away in his pack, shouldered his load, and tagged after the doctor.

“Did you update Byron on your translation progress?” Dr. Courtney called.

Calvin was already negotiating the streambed. “No time,” he yelled back. “He assigned this little adventure to me without warning, and I still have a lot to finish.”

Calvin planned to hold off a day or two after they returned before surrendering more of his translation notes to Minister Jacobson. He’d remain in the minister’s good graces and buy time. Some key pieces of information would be missing, but submission of corrections and additions could come later with the final draft. How to deal with the doctor from here on out was the immediate problem. The doctor’s skepticism and propensity for wanting to control the expedition was maddening. Priceless artifacts could be

resting inside the mountain. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Dr. Courtney carefully watched his footing as he struggled along after Calvin. "It's difficult to believe we're following in Myakka's footsteps," he stammered between breaths.

Calvin looked back and let out a gasp of frustration as he picked his way through the boulders on the bank. The bigger rocks were causing the doctor to stumble here and there, but it seemed his curiosity had clearly overcome his reluctance.

Entering the grove of trees, Calvin headed for the huge anomaly. He'd never seen trees of two to four meters in trunk diameter. They were clearly ancient but couldn't possibly be more than a few hundred years old. Reaching the giant gnarled oak, he touched the trunk, expecting some alien material, but the dark bark was rough and supple, smelling naturally pungent like any other giant oak.

It was hard to envision this as the same tree Myakka had shimmied to escape a jaguar so long ago. He stood at the base of the huge tree, looking up through the dense limbs. His heart pounded like a racehorse. He couldn't wait.

He flung off his pack and began negotiating the branches one at a time. The leaf-laden tree limbs quickly obscured the ground. All he could hear was the sound of his breath and leaves fluttering in the breeze.

Reaching the junction of three large branches, he heaved himself up. He was both jubilant and exhausted as he quickly took measure of the mountainside, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of a stalking jaguar. A line of brush growing along the rock face looked like an animal path. Or was it his imagination?

"Calvin, are you up there?"

The voice sounded far away, bringing him back to the present. "I'm at the three branches," he called out.

“I thought we were going to examine the situation together. I’d like to be intimately involved with any discovery. It’s why I’m here.”

Minister Jacobson had saddled Calvin with the doctor, and now the old man wanted to go up in the tree with him. *Ridiculous.*

“I can hardly hear you. I’m sorry,” Calvin yelled. “I couldn’t wait. Do forgive me. It’s just as well. The branches wouldn’t accommodate us both. I’m searching for the control panel. If successful, perhaps later you can repeat what I accomplish. Does that sound equitable?”

“It’ll have to do, I suppose. The boy and I will wait, but be careful, will you?”

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry. And turn your radio on station ten. I can’t hear you very well.” It was a frequency not in use by the Parks Department.

From Myakka's diary, Calvin had a good idea of what it would take to locate the control panel and open the entrance. At waist height he embraced the tree trunk, moving his hands over its rough surface from back to front.

As he continued his systematic caressing, he remembered Myakka's tragic first encounter with the control panel. Calvin flattened his palms, carefully going over the trunk back and forth, working his way up to head height. Without warning the tree trunk and the tree’s entire upper canopy vanished. He recoiled, nearly losing his balance as a metallic post and a massive, spinning blue jewel at its top rose overhead. He shuddered and grabbed onto the post for balance. The missing top of the tree left him on a perch with no reference points—nothing but open space. He was sitting at the apex of the forest canopy, alone.

The next moment it abruptly occurred to him that perhaps he shouldn’t be doing this. Did he really understand all the details? But the moment had arrived. He held onto the post, snickering. *I*

did it. Visions of money and power filled his mind. People would do his bidding. He would retire.

He scoured the post. His heart jumped as a panel materialized in front of his face. It was bronze colored, inlaid with four jeweled buttons set in a row.

No hesitation. The diary had revealed what to do.

He depressed the green one, and his mind filled with an image of the rock face below. Then a rectangular opening formed like the next slide in a presentation. And just as Myakka had written, the opening remained pictured in his mind for about sixty seconds before it disappeared. He tried it again and used the red button this time to make it close.

Comfortable with the open-to-close timing, he pulled the radio off his belt. “Are you there?”

“I hear you, Calvin.”

“I found the control panel. I think I figured out how it works.”

“Was it like the diary said?”

“Yes, exactly. I opened the entrance. I have one more test. Then I’ll open it again. Go back through the trees and position in front of the rock face and wait.”

“Okay. Give us a few minutes. We’ll set up the table and unpack the equipment. When it opens, we’ll wait for you, but one of us should stay outside in case we have to operate it from the tree again.”

Dr. Courtney was clearly caught up in the adventure now, but Calvin needed to be by himself inside the mountain to locate the compartment Myakka had discovered in the first room. It had originally held an instrument she referred to as the *magic stick* and was the logical place to begin searching for other valuable artifacts.

He was anxious to enter, but first he had to face the thoughts he’d been pushing aside. Minister Jacobson would understand

experimenting with the control panel. The details of Myakka's ordeal with the orange and blue buttons wouldn't find their way into his diary-translation work until later. If there were an accident, there would be no one to claim he had ever gained access to the mountain's interior.

A picture of his mother shaking a finger at him flashed across his mental screen. His hand hovered over the orange button. Since she'd moved them away from his father's family in Spain, Calvin had been taught to avoid violence. But during his early years growing up in the wine country of north-central Spain, at a time of vicious political turmoil, the children were taught to embrace brutality and death in order to survive. The conflicting imprints had left him in a permanent quandary.

Jacobson had directed Calvin to find out exactly how things worked. No one could fault him for the unexpected. It was a rational way to proceed, but he hesitated and brought his hand away from the panel. He had to get inside—then back out. An accident now would eliminate assistance from the doctor if something went amiss. Dr. Courtney was right. Someone had to remain outside in case he couldn't locate the duplicate controls inside, or if they failed to re-open the entrance when he was ready to exit.

He pressed the green button. "I'm coming!" he shouted and switched the radio back to roaming the park frequencies.

He scurried down the trunk like a backward squirrel, thrashed his way out of the trees, and ran to join Dr. Courtney and the boy. They'd unpacked all the gear, piled it on the field table, and were standing twenty feet from a gray, translucent rectangle in the rock face.

"Amazing, no sound. Just like magic," Dr. Courtney exclaimed. "It looks like a sculptured space in there." His eyes were wide. The frightened young boy cowered behind him.

“I must go quickly,” Calvin blurted. “It only stays open about two minutes. I can reopen it from inside. Then we can bring our equipment in.”

Dr. Courtney raised his hands in submission.

Calvin removed a shovel off the table and rushed to the entrance. He hesitated an instant, then began probing the space behind the rectangle with the shovel handle. Pulling the handle back out, he examined it. Satisfied it was no worse for wear, he stepped cautiously through into a room filled with golden light. Outside sounds immediately muted, and the soft feel of the interior seemed to press him with welcome. He moved slowly toward an oblong white counter about seven meters long. A sense of calm spread through him as he approached a thick white column at one end of the counter. It was covered with ornate carvings all the way to the domed ceiling.

Almost every surface of the interior was white. Strange scenes were painted in sections high on the walls below the dome’s curvature. He recognized animal forms and the jungle foliage, but the gray-skinned, slightly built beings clothed in white robes seemed out of place.

The entrance whooshed closed. Calvin had been caught up in the stunning effects of the interior but now snapped into claustrophobic shock. He eased toward the column, wary. Curiously, the feeling dissipated. The counter surfaces looked smooth like porcelain, without apparent seams, and flowed into the structure of the column and into the tiled floor. The walls and domed ceiling appeared to pour out from the top of the column.

Calvin grappled in his pocket for a pair of surgical gloves. He ran his hands over the countertop and knocked on it. It sounded and felt like stone. A basin was indented in the surface next to the column. Myakka had called it a *talking hole* and claimed to have used it to communicate with people she referred to as the

Ancestors. He inched along toward the bowl, contemplating Myakka's instructions. He lowered his head into the structure an inch at a time, all the way to his shoulders. Dark, swirling blankets began collecting like storm clouds at the edge of his awareness. He gasped, convinced they were poised to consume his consciousness. He yanked out of the bowl and slapped the top of the counter with both hands to get control. The pain stopped the onslaught. He had no idea where the images had come from. The diary hadn't prepared him for this. He could only assume Myakka had similar encounters with strange perceptions but hadn't recorded them.

He backed away from the counter and checked his watch. It had stopped. How much time had gone by? He wasn't sure. The peculiar sensations could have distorted his perception. He snatched at the radio. He didn't want the doctor to panic, return to the sentinel tree, and attempt to activate the entrance, but the radio was dead. Claustrophobia came for him again. He groped at the column, poking and prodding the post in a frenzy. Then a bejeweled panel appeared. It was the same bronze color as the one up in the tree. He was unaware how he'd accomplished the feat but was relieved at the sight of the duplicate colored buttons. His heart was still racing.

If he was going to see if the system worked, he should do it now, just as Myakka had twice been forced to do to protect herself from attack by malicious guests during pilgrimages to the mountain.

He pressed the orange button, and just as had happened at the top of the tree, a spinning blue jewel appeared at the apex of the column, throwing off rays of blue light from sparkling crystal facets. A cerulean sea of glittering chaos filled the room.

As he clung to the column, his throat ran dry and he trembled. He took a deep breath and concentrated on gathering

his bearings. Now that he was sure the system was working, he could plan his exit. Just one thing remained for now: the cabinet.

The dancing light made it difficult to see. His temples hurt, and he was disoriented, but he gripped the edge of the oblong counter and crept down the long side. As it curved around, he kept his palms against the edge and rounded the end.

A section of the counter base noiselessly parted. The closet-like space was empty except for a molded outline embedded against the back. His eyes opened wide. The diary was accurate. Here was the home of the scepter instrument, the magic stick he'd recently recovered from Myakka's burial chamber atop the Caracol central pyramid.

Calvin dashed back to the post and pulled out his camera to snap pictures for later study. He focused on the writings and glyphs covering the domed ceiling. He hoped the camera would function through the flashing lights, but the digital screen was blank. Like a caged animal, he felt cornered, without any concept of time, and the radiating light was driving him crazy. The only thing in his mind was getting out. And he realized there was nothing to hide now. The doctor could have a turn experiencing the inside. In fact, going over the interior with him would help re-establish credibility and offer an opportunity to copy the dome writings longhand.

Calvin pushed the blue button on the panel. The flashing crystal faces on the spinning gem ruptured with blasts of blue light rays, bathing the interior of the room except for the space around the column.

What had he done? A chill ran down his spine. Then the jewel stopped rotating and melted into the top of the column like a plasma stream.

The memory hit him as he jabbed at the green button. The orange button set up preparatory connection with the spinning

jewel, but Myakka used the red button to cancel, not the blue one. His throat narrowed into dry knots, and he was nauseas. He stood hanging onto the column, unable to move.

The rectangular space had re-opened, and muted sunlight shone from the other side. Calvin burst free from the column and rushed outside, squinting, chest heaving.

The decimation made his flesh crawl. Over the streambed and down the forested mountainside, smoke rose like giant, gray party streamers beginning to drift away on the wind. The equipment and the table were a jumbled mass, burnt crisp and smoldering. Two bodies were sprawled on the ground about three meters apart near the grove of trees. They must have fallen on their way to the sentinel, worried because he'd stayed inside so long.

Calvin ran toward them with a flicker of hope but held up short. The bodies were un-naturally disjointed like overdone spaghetti, and hideous head wounds gaped against black-and-blue bruising. He turned away gagging, staggered to the edge of the trees, and latched on to the nearest tree trunk to retch. He held on until the bout subsided, then stumbled back to the rock face, wiping his face with a handkerchief. It was simply an accident, his mind rationalized. His stomach settled. Strangely, he felt no remorse.

He started for the sentinel to open the entrance again, but his radio crackled.

“Mr. Stanvich, Dr. Courtney, do you read? Over.”

“Stanvich here. Go ahead,” he said shuddering.

“It’s Edward at the stationhouse. We’ve been trying to reach you with no luck. And then we saw...well, we think we saw a massive blast of blue light surround the mountaintop, and now smoke’s rising all over the place.”

“Edward, I’m just now getting my bearings. Some kind of explosion, but I can’t be sure. It knocked me out. I was

preoccupied examining some rocks. My companions are on the ground. There's damage in the forest. Something terrible has happened."

"Are you all right?"

"I think so. I didn't realize you knew we were here."

"Minister Jacobson asked me to relay a message for you and Doctor Courtney to return to the city. He wants the doctor to contact him as soon as possible. It's something about his daughter's medical condition.... He's sent a helicopter for you both. It's parked on the knoll waiting."

The Park Department had a makeshift helipad on the knoll close to the new stationhouse. Calvin hesitated, wound up in the disintegration of his plans. He would have to look for another opportunity to access the mountain.

"Edward, tell the helicopter to land as soon as possible in the streambed next to the rock face at the base of the mountain prominence. I think Dr. Courtney and the boy we had with us are hurt."



Zambia: October 21st

They were working near Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. Two years ago the U.N. Institute for the Study of Unusual Phenomena (ISUP) awarded a grant to the Geology Department at Florida State University to analyze rock exposures along recent fault lines created by tectonic plate movements in the Rift Valley region of central Africa. The seismic activity had unearthed remnants of human habitation 180,000 years old. People living like the early Egyptians was definitely out of sequence with present-day historical archeology. The anomaly was even more mysterious because the inhabitants all appeared to have died simultaneously, annihilated in place. Analyzing phenomena that might yield greater understanding of the planet was at the heart of ISUP's mission.

It was Dr. John Henry Morgan's third summer as the leader of the FSU team working for ISUP, consisting of Dr. Mary Ellen Rollins and a crew of graduate students. Morgan represented the geologic side of the business and Mary Ellen the microbiology and paleontology. The graduate students were primarily doctoral candidates versed in the ground sciences, including anthropology and archeology.

“Dr. Morgan, can you hear me?”

“I hear you, Gallagher,” Morgan said, dropping his pick-axe and covering his ears. “I hear you. I don't suppose you remember the reverberations down here.”

They were in the southeast corner of Zambia, working a fault about forty feet wide and fifty feet deep. It was one of many projected to soon bridge the major rift zones holding Lake Kaniba to the south and the Zambezi River to the north. The pressure was on to salvage as much as they could of the freshly uncovered remains of these ancient people—including tools and evidence of habitat—before the faults flooded out.

“Sorry. A Western Union delivery just came in for you from the United Nations,” Gallagher said softly. “I had to sign for it. Looks important. Dr. Rollins has it.”

“Gallagher, if it was important, don't you think they'd call me? Never mind, I'm coming up.”

It was a time-consuming climb along the makeshift footholds cut into the bedrock to a column of chiseled steps leading up and out. Getting in and out of the trenches was a major undertaking. They went down with everything needed for half a day. Canvas bags of samples were pulled up with ropes, and food and water came down the same way.

Morgan was irritated. He had no clue why they would need to contact him directly. His part of the dig was just a small piece of a major project. He was out of the decision-making process—exactly how he liked it. The only time he'd had contact with the U.N. bureaucracy was at the time ISUP was formed over two years ago. Dr. Courtney, his old graduate adviser at ASU, had asked him to consider a position under him as ISUP's Deputy Director. The process was cut short by the unexpected death of Morgan's father. Ironically, here he was working this project under ISUP's direction.

Morgan adjusted the samples in his pack and looked up at Gallager standing at the edge of the fault bank some fifty feet above. He wondered why the United Nations hadn't used e-mail. The U.S. Government had made satellite connectivity to the Internet available to the project. How could something be important if they sent it by Western Union? It took an extra day for delivery from Lusaka.

As Morgan was climbing the rough-shod footholds, he glimpsed Mary Ellen joining Gallager at the top of the fault, hands on hips—not a good sign.

“Do you want me to read it?” she badgered, shaking the yellow piece of paper in the air to taunt him.

She'd already opened the envelope. “Yes, please do, so I don't have to come out of here. Thank you.”

Morgan halted, momentarily losing his left foothold. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he looked up at his colleagues silhouetted against blue sky and cumulus clouds. The wind was blowing hard enough so that Mary Ellen was gripping the brim of her bush hat. It controlled her long black hair tied in a wrapped ponytail. She looked like a five-foot-seven porcelain doll dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a greenish short-sleeve safari shirt. Her deeply tanned face held feline facial features and those green eyes. He never could understand how she kept her skin so smooth with as much sun-time as she got in the field. And why she seemed in a huff over the wire, he had no idea. He'd never been able to figure her out. She ran hot and cold and could change her attitude in a nanosecond.

“I think you better come out of there, John Henry,” she said seriously. “You're not going to like it.”

It didn't sound like her usual cajoling, but Morgan wasn't sure. She could just be fooling around. He knew better than to yell back at her, but saying something so open-ended was irksome. He

slapped the dust off the jungle hat he'd kept with him since his Marine Corp days and ventured another look, but they had moved out of sight. Disregarding the steps, he scuttled up the rocky slope, clawing his way with the help of his pickaxe. Heaving over the bank, he was dusty and sweaty. Now more than aggravated, he scrambled to his feet in front of them.

"That was quite entertaining," she said. "I suppose it's the old Marine obstacle-course instincts."

"What did you expect? You tell me I have news I'm not going to like. The first thing in my mind is my mom. You *do* remember her health is failing? Is she okay?"

Mary Ellen's forehead was pinched. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. It's not your mother."

Morgan took the envelope and let out a breath. "And try to refrain from opening my mail in the future."

He turned and walked away from them. Nobody wanted to be told they had bad news.

When Morgan was out of range, Gallagher said, "I've never seen him like that. What's the story?"

"It's one of his few hot buttons. His mother's very sick. His father split when he was in eighth grade. No brothers and sisters."

Fifty yards away, Morgan had calmed and sat down on a boulder in the shade of a *muombo* tree. He felt a little regretful he'd been so harsh with her. He pulled out the message. It was from V.K. Rao, a high ranking U.N. official he'd met two years earlier in New York interviewing for the job Dr. Courtney had offered him.

Dear Dr. Morgan:

We regret to inform you that our colleague and your friend, Professor Donald Courtney, lost his life under questionable circumstances while on

vacation in Belize. As you might know, he was visiting a long-time associate, Byron Jacobson, the country's Minister of Interior and Historic Affairs.

Dr. Courtney contacted me personally about two weeks ago, several days before he was due to depart Belize, with some preliminary ideas for qualifying the area around Richardson Peak in the Mayan Mountains as an ISUP project of potential international significance.

I am not at liberty to discuss the detail of those ideas in this communication. Suffice it to say that one of our own might have met with foul play. His body lies in Belize City. We will bring him home in the next few days. A request for autopsy has been made to his next of kin.

Because Dr. Courtney held you in high regard, and due to the intense screening you endured two years ago as a candidate for the Deputy Director's position at ISUP, we respectfully request you accept our invitation to confer here in New York as soon as possible. Your expenses, a generous retainer, and travel schedule have been arranged. A first-class ticket on KLM flight 619, departing Lusaka International Airport this evening at 11:04 local time, awaits you at the KLM counter. You will arrive at LaGuardia, refreshed we hope, at 7:31 a.m. New York time.

Yours sincerely and with great sorrow,

V.K. Rao

Deputy Secretary General

“Questionable circumstances,” Morgan muttered. “Confer on what?” He stood, folded the wire back into the envelope, and rummaged along through the bush. He began nursing flashbacks of the professor during their times together at Arizona State and the brief contacts over the past two and a half years. The Zambia project had kept them in communication, but lately a secretive flavor had crept into their conversations. In the past, the professor had routinely been open, sharing bits and pieces of potential ISUP investigations, but in the last few months he'd clammed up.

Morgan reread the message as his mind continuing to wander. When he stumbled over a bed of ground vines, he looked around, and for a moment he wasn't sure which way was back. But then a line of low-cut brush the graduate students kept trimmed, marking the border of the fault, provided orientation. Mary Ellen and Gallagher poked up like stick figures, probably waiting for him to cool down.

He jogged back. "Hey, guys, sorry about my attitude. Gallagher, would you excuse us for a minute? I need to talk to Dr. Rollins. And you'll have to get someone to take my position in the fault, but be careful, the rock layer I was working has a film on it I've never encountered before. Use the gloves, vacuum seal the samples, and send them on to Lusaka for analysis."

"No problem. I'll take Jake off *tag-and-storage*."

Gallagher moved out of earshot, and Morgan held his hand up to stop Mary Ellen from diving in. She still had sorry written across her face. "First, I apologize for biting your head off. Okay? You know Professor Courtney was one of the few friends I've had in the world. Take it from me, he was a first class guy. I don't know what they want, but if it has anything to do with *him*, I'll cooperate. You knew that already. Right?"

"Of course, that's just the way you are. I've always liked your loyalty, but we have work to do.... So you're going to drop the show on *me* and take off? Remember, you're a scientist now. You're not in the military."

It had been nine years. His office walls at FSU were covered with military paraphernalia hanging alongside mementos from geologic fieldtrips. It irked Mary Ellen every time she'd asked about something and he had to tell her it was classified.

"You'll do a better job than I would anyway. Please be cool with this. Just do it."

Mary Ellen folded her arms across her chest and walked away, kicking at the rocks. “You know what they want.”

Morgan didn't reply. He didn't want to think about it.

end