

# DESERTED CITIES OF THE HEART

BY LEWIS SHINER

AS THE HELICOPTER settled into the jungle clearing, Ryker could feel his promises slipping away from him.

The worst, he thought, was the promise to himself. He'd sworn he would leave Lindsey alone, stay out of her life. And yet here he was, running to her the first time she called.

The pilot sprung the hatch, and the hot, thick air of southern Mexico washed into the cabin. Ryker struggled with his harness, still disoriented by the high technology of the ship: holographic guidance systems; compressed, tasteless food; the abstracted courtesy of the crew.

Of course, he thought, it took her five years to call.

Camarena, the field director of the expedition, was waiting for him as he stepped down. Lindsey had mentioned her in the letter, warning him that Camarena was hostile to the entire mushroom experiment and hadn't wanted Ryker to come.

"*Buenas tardes,*" Camarena said, extending her hand. Her hair was pulled into a tight black knot, and her khaki work clothes were impossibly crisp.

"*Buenas,*" Ryker said, conscious of his worn jeans and the frayed elbows of his dingy shirt. He wondered why Lindsey wasn't there to meet him, and then decided it was better this way, that they both probably needed the extra time.

Camarena led him uphill, out of the grassy plain and into the jungle. A few turns of the steeply twisting path were enough to cut them off from the landing area. Eerie insect harmonies drowned the noise of the copter, stranding them in the timeless heat of the Mayan highlands.

Pieces of fallen temples littered the jungle floor, green with moss and half-buried under decaying leaves. Mahogany, fig, and ramon nut trees arched up to an invisible roof a hundred feet overhead. Through the veils of branches, Ryker could glimpse a stucco hand or carved helmet, elements of a gigantic unsolved puzzle.

Camarena hesitated, impatient, and Ryker tried to pick up his pace. "Coming," he said in Spanish.

He'd forgotten so much. The perfect stillness of the air, the beauty of the ruins in the watery green light. Five years ago, when he'd first come to the jungle, all the answers that he'd been looking for had seemed so close.

Five years ago. A shard of memory cut him deeply and without warning. He saw himself and Lindsey in the tiny apartment they'd shared in graduate school, sitting on the floor by the kerosene heater, their knees just touching, Lindsey's robe hanging open to show the flush still lingering on her breasts, her long red-blond hair hopelessly tangled, the smells of sex and their mingled sweat binding the two of them like a magnetic charge.

Ryker winced and pushed forward.

THE PATH OPENED suddenly into a clearing about forty meters across. A dozen or so foil hemisphere tents were set out in a rough circle around the ashes of a campfire. The clutter on all sides of the tents looked like a fashion photographer's idea of a layout for a computer ad. Video terminals sat on carved blocks of limestone, and the map lights of several processors blinked through the clear walls of a bubble tent nearby. Various electronic scanners, cameras, and measuring devices, half of which were completely mysterious to Ryker, were strewn near the clearing.

Most of the work was going on back in the jungle. Ryker heard a mixture of voices and languages: English, Spanish, Russian, and others too slurred to identify. The only person working in the clearing was a Japanese who was typing furiously at one of the CRTs. Camarena introduced him as Oishi, saying, "He designed and built most of this equipment himself."

"*Konnichi wa,*" Ryker said, bowing awkwardly, then switching to Spanish. "Things have changed in five years."

Oishi returned his bow and answered in English, "One becomes obsolete so quickly these days."

Obsolete. Before Ryker could decide if the insult had been intentional, Oishi had turned back to his keyboard, and Camarena was excusing herself. "Make yourself at home," she told him. "If you need anything, just ask one of the students."

Ryker thanked her and watched her walk away. It was politics, he knew. The Mexican government, particularly the powerful Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, had been won over by the recent breakthroughs in parapsychology. They began insisting that every expedition include a member trained not only in appropriate myths and folklore, but with a general occult background as well.

The last time Ryker had seen Lindsey, she was close to getting her Ph.D. in anthropology, but her letter said she'd taken advantage of the new laws and become a parahistorian instead, with Aztec and Mayan specialization.

Since the nearly bankrupt United States government hadn't funded any fieldwork in over a decade, it had seemed like her best chance of getting on a major dig.

But once she had the job, she had to contend with the prejudice of the old-line archaeologists, Camarena included, who resented her influence. Not to mention the fact that she resented *norteamericanos* living off Mexico's newly stabilized wealth.

Now, because of his fluency in Mayan, Lindsey had brought Ryker into the middle of it. And he'd let her, because of the incredible finds the expedition had made.

They were all around him. At the west end of the camp a steep-sided pyramid over twenty-five meters high was slowly emerging from centuries of dirt and vegetation. Erosion had softened its outlines and loosened most of its stones, but Ryker could still make out the mushroom-shaped designs carved into the steps.

He crossed the clearing and stopped in front of the “palace,” an intricate complex of fallen walls on a ten-meter raised platform. Two stelae had been laid out in front of it, and Ryker knelt to read the inscriptions on the nearest one. The date placed the carving right in the middle of the Classic Era, but as Ryker’s eyes traveled down the limestone slab, he saw a series of glyphs he’d never seen before, all centered around one he knew especially well.

The mushroom.

The Mayan use of sacred mushrooms had been common knowledge since the last half of the twentieth century. But no one had imagined that there had been an entire ceremonial center devoted to their use, not until Camarena began to turn up the indisputable evidence.

Ryker straightened up, and the images seemed to lunge at him—here an umbrella-shaped stucco design, there a complete, three-dimensional fungus, carved from limestone and two meters high. He could hear the blood hammering in his ears, and when he felt a hand on his arm his muscles jumped, and he flinched.

Lindsey pulled back from him, saying, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Lindsey,” Ryker said.

“Are you okay?”

“Nerves,” he said. “Sorry I jumped—”

“My God. You look terrible.”

Ryker had no answer to offer her. Her own beauty had softened, grown lines around the eyes, become tired and a little sad. Her hair was cut short now, revealing unfamiliar planes and angles in her face. She was more of a stranger to him than Camarena had been. There was so much he no longer knew about her, so many dangerous assumptions to avoid.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She looked off into the distance, and Ryker could see emotion stinging at her eyes. “This isn’t going well at all.”

“I shouldn’t have come,” Ryker said.

“No. You saw the stelae and the carvings. You read my letter. You had to come.”

“I guess so.”

“Did Camarena show you the plants?” Ryker shook his head. “Come on then. You should see them.”

They took another path away from the clearing, and the clatter and whine of Oishi’s electronics faded behind them.

Lindsey was the first to break the awkward silence. “I’ve kept track of you, you know,” she said. “Peter told me you’d gone off into the jungle with the Lacondones. Some kind of grail-quest thing, he called it. I suppose I understood that well enough. I just didn’t understand why you never told me about it yourself. You could have sent a letter back with Peter. Or something.”

Ryker had dreaded this, being forced to justify what he’d done. From Lindsey’s point of view it was inexcusable. They’d been living together, been in love or something like it, and then he’d gone on an expedition into Mexico and not come back. For three years he’d lived in the jungle with the last tribe of Lacondones, the last uncivilized Mayan people. He’d hunted and fished with

them, followed them on their pilgrimages to the abandoned city of Yaxchilan, mastered their language, obsessively pursued their shadowy gods, the *Yumil Qax-ob*, the Lords of the Forest.

Then he spent two years at odd jobs in Palenque and Piste and the other little towns near Mayan ruins, living off of a black-market work permit, the bright urgency of his desire tarnished and nearly unrecognizable.

“Every so often,” Lindsey went on, “I’d hear something about you. That somebody’d seen you waiting tables in Villa Hermosa or guiding tours at Bonampak. But there were never any messages, never any explanations.”

Ryker was a step behind her on the narrow trail, and he took her arm to stop her. “Don’t you think,” he said, “don’t you think I would have explained it if I could? Didn’t it ever occur to you that it wasn’t something simple and rational that you could label and process and quantify?”

“You could have tried,” she said, still facing away from him, looking at the dead leaves under her feet. “You could try now.”

“I don’t know,” Ryker said. “I don’t know where to start. One day I woke up, and a lot of things that shouldn’t fit together started making a weird kind of sense.”

“What things?”

“Politics. Economics. The whole thing. I mean, the United States used to be the most powerful country in the world, and now look. Roads shot to hell and no money to fix them. No oil. No manufacturing. The economy in ruins, the air and water polluted beyond recovery. And it all happened almost overnight. Then I looked at the Mayans, the greatest power of their time. They invented the zero, had a more accurate calendar than we do, had all this incredibly advanced astronomy and architecture, and between about 850 and 900 AD, it all just disappeared.”

“And you think there’s a connection?”

“Not ... a connection. But something. A clue. Some knowledge that could make sense of what’s happening to us. You know? For five years I’ve been chasing this—I don’t know—this premonition, this sense of destiny. And back there in the camp I could feel it again, stronger than ever.”

Finally she turned to face him. “Can’t you see how ridiculous this sounds? You’re killing yourself by inches. You don’t weigh enough to walk against a stiff breeze, you jump out of your skin at the slightest noise, your eyes look like they’ve sunken clear through your skull, and it’s all over some screwy vision that you got from eating magic mushrooms.”

Yes, Ryker thought, he’d eaten his share. *Psilocybe cubensis* and *Amanita muscaria*. And the datura plant, Jimsonweed. And the bitter buttons of peyote, and the morning glory seeds that had brought visions of death and apocalypse to the builders of Teotihuacan. And mescal and hemp and even *aguardiente*, the powerful sugarcane brandy of the Mayan highlands. But none of them had ever been able to give him more than even a fragmentary glimpse of what he was looking for.

Lindsey sighed and turned away “Come on,” she said. “They’re right over here.”

SOME OF THE MUSHROOMS were no bigger than Ryker's hand, others nearly half a meter tall, all of them tinted in shades of red and gold.

"They're beautiful," Ryker whispered. "And there aren't any others?"

"We've never found any. When we tried to transplant them, even in plugs of soil, they started to wither within a couple of hours I'm convinced there's something about this specific spot that's more than just the chemistry."

"Any clue in the inscriptions?"

"We're not sure. We know this is the plant they're depicting, but we can't figure out what they were saying about it."

"I wonder what it's like—" Ryker said, not even aware that he'd put the thought into words until he saw Lindsey's face.

"Don't even think about it," she told him.

"One of the students, some kid from Vermont, tried it. We watched his brain burn out. He's a vegetable in a mental ward now."

"But the natives—"

"The natives can handle it. If it's doing what we think it is, and tapping some kind of ancestral memory, then the ancestry has to be absolutely pure. If there's any kind of racial mixture, then the brain just can't cope with the confusion."

She glanced to the west and said, "We should be getting back to camp. It'll be dark soon."

"The start of a new day," Ryker said.

"What?"

"The Mayans," Ryker said. "Their day started at sunset."

"Oh, yeah. Right. Well, maybe today will be the day our Indian shows up and we can get this damned experiment rolling."

THE CAMPFIRE LOOKED out of place in the middle of Oishi's technological marvels, but Ryker could appreciate its primitive comfort. He stood just outside the circle of light, drinking Bohemia and listening to Camarena hold forth on the United States.

"*Los Estados Unidos?*" she said. "*Se acabó.* It's all over. In your big cities the people live like animals. They burn their furniture to keep warm. Your cars rust on the side of the road. Now it is Mexico's turn. Now we have the wealth and the energy and the ideas."

Dream on, Ryker thought, moving away for another beer. You're just making the same mistakes a little faster.

From the opposite side of the circle, he could hear Lindsey's voice, relaxed now, in her proper element. "...destroyed by jaguars," she said, "killing off all the race of giants." He could see the firelight turning her skin translucent, lighting the bones underneath. He found he could not look at her without being swamped by strong emotions—guilt, desire, a gnawing curiosity about her last five years.

"The second sun was wind," she said, "ending with a hurricane. The survivors were turned into monkeys. The third sun was fiery rain, and the survivors were birds. Then the fourth sun was water, with a flood like in the Old Testament or the Koran, and the survivors became fish."

A voice asked, "Where do we come in?" Her right hand pushed at her hair, a gesture from Ryker's memories that forced him to turn his head away.

"We're next," Lindsey said. "The fifth sun. Movement. At least that's what the Aztecs call it." She sketched a symbol in the dust that looked like a block X with an eye in the center. "You've all seen that. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia took it for their symbol. We know the Mayans believed in something similar, but we don't know exactly what it was. We do know for sure, though, they had the concept of periodic disaster and renewal."

Disaster and renewal, Ryker thought. Disaster and renewal.

He turned away from the fire and walked quietly into the forest. The full moon barely penetrated the roof of trees, but it was enough for Ryker to find his way back to the mushroom grove.

Kneeling in front of the biggest plant, he broke off a thumbnail-size piece. It smelled like damp earth.

He put the mushroom in his mouth, chewed it carefully, and swallowed.

With his back against the smooth bole of a ramon tree, he shut his eyes and let the night sounds of the forest close in on him. In the distance, over the chatter of insects and the bubbling call of tree frogs, he could hear monkeys crashing through the high branches.

Fifteen minutes later the drug took him with a kick that nearly lifted him off the ground. His heart raced, and he felt the dizzy, roller-coaster rush of the alkaloids attacking his metabolism.

Jesus Christ, he thought, all this from one tiny piece?

The darkness around him came alive with incandescent purple highlights. The mushrooms in the grove snapped into high relief, as if lightning had just struck behind them. The grove seemed suddenly to extend endlessly in all directions.

Ryker's eyelids dropped, and he fell into starless night. Ahead of him a double helix made of red, green, and yellow neon spiraled toward infinity, pulling him with it.

He shook his head, and images began shooting past him like speeding cars, the roar of their passage brutalizing his stomach and chest muscles.

Each image was a tiny window, and beyond each window lay a synthetic nightmare of compressed experience. He was fighting to breathe, and he knew that if the windows opened for more than an instant, the intensity of the experience would vaporize his personality.

He forced his eyes open. The skin of his face was burned raw by salty sweat. He blinked, focused, and saw three faces staring at him from the jungle's edge.

The man in the center was naked, and the men on either side wore the long, white robes of Mayan villagers. Their bodies glowed softly in the moonlight.

Slowly Ryker extended his empty hands and greeted them in Mayan: "*Utzi-puksiqal*," my heart is good.

The glowing figures did not answer, and when Ryker blinked again they were gone.

In another five minutes the effects of the drug had passed, leaving Ryker numb, exhausted, and a little afraid. He crept back to his tent and fell heavily into bed.

HE WOKE UP with the sensation of floating, then felt himself bounce into the mattress. Struggling to wake up, he gripped the steel edges of the cot.

Quake, he thought. A light one, nothing like the one he'd been through in Mexico City. But had it really happened, or was it just another hallucination?

He tried to pull himself out of bed, but his strength failed him, and he fell back into a long and dreamless sleep.

By the time he got up in the morning, still shaky from the mushroom toxins, the others were at work. He was drinking a cup of lukewarm coffee when Lindsey sat down next to him.

"I was looking for you last night," she said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"What about?"

She shrugged. "I just wanted to talk. It's so awkward, feeling like I don't understand you anymore. I thought we could start to get to know each other again. But I couldn't find you."

"I had to ... go out for a while."

"You went back to the mushrooms, didn't you?" she accused.

He looked down at his coffee.

"You tried it, didn't you?" she said. "Even after what I told you. Even at the risk of destroying your mind."

"I had to," he said softly.

She got angrily to her feet. "I can't get through to you no matter what I do. I'm just wasting my time."

THEY'D SET UP the experiment in a clearing near the mushroom grove. Through a gap in the trees, Ryker could see the towering mountains to the south of them, just over the border into Guatemala. The highest peaks were still wrapped in swirls of mist that would burn off by noon.

His eyes kept coming back to the man in the center of the clearing. Lindsey was fitting small Teflon dots on the man's neck, chest, inner thigh, and temples. These would send continuous readings to a processor a few meters away. Four cameras mounted on the surrounding trees were focused on him, and the entire area was wired for sound.

The man was a pure-blooded *indio* from a village near Ocozingo. His name was Juan Garcia, and he spoke fluent Spanish, but everything else about him was Mayan, from his long robe to his thick, black hair and hatchet nose.

He was the man Ryker had seen standing naked in the grove the night before.

García had shown up that morning with the two other men that Ryker had seen, announcing that finally, after two weeks of delay, the time was right for him to take the drug. They'd made no sign of recognizing Ryker, and the two other men had quickly disappeared back into the forest.

García had a cloth bag full of the mushrooms. According to everything Ryker had been able to find out, García would go into a light trance within a

few minutes of eating the plants and wake up about two or three hours later with vivid memories of a prior existence. Ryker would then be on hand to translate any difficult terms or explain unusual customs.

Ryker was still weak and disoriented from his own experience and suspected that García's trip would be more grueling than any of the others imagined.

As García began to eat the mushrooms, Ryker moved over to Oishi's workstation. "Busy?" he asked.

"Not too," Oishi said "What's up?"

"I need a program. Something that will be able to convert dates to and from the Mayan Long Count. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Only vaguely. But if you can give me the numbers, I'm sure that we can put something together."

Ryker quickly showed him the system. Each date had five places, the number on the far right representing days, preceded by twenty-day *uninals*, working all the way up to one-hundred-forty-four-thousand-day *baktuns*.

"You're starting from August—Jesus, what is it? August the twelfth, that's right, 3113 BC, which is written 13.0.0.0.0. Okay?" Ryker wrote it out for him on a slate. "That's as high as it goes—thirteen *baktuns* is the end of a cycle. So the next day would be 0.0.0.0.1."

"No problem," Oishi said.

Ryker moved back to where he had a better view of García. He might not need the dates, but it was better to be safe. He was rusty with the numbers, hadn't even thought about them in years.

Something was bothering him about the dates, something he couldn't quite remember, but the sound of Lindsey's voice made him lose the connection.

"How many of those is he supposed to be eating?" she asked Camarena.

"Didn't he say two or three?"

"That's his fourth, right there."

García was eating quietly, the mushroom caps making no noise at all, the stalks crunching just a little, like limp celery. He pulled a fifth mushroom out of the sack and began to eat it.

"Shouldn't we stop him now?" Lindsey whispered nervously.

"He knows what he's doing," Camarena said. "Doesn't he?"

"He's being polite," Ryker said, interrupting. "He wants to be sure to give you a good show."

Lindsey touched the Indian's shoulder and waved her hand at the bag. "*Ya basta*," she said. "*No mas*, okay?"

"Okay," García said.

Ryker was both envious and amazed. A tiny piece of one of those plants had devastated him, yet he had watched García eat five of them.

And yet, if the drug really worked, if one of those alkaloid windows could open on the city in its prime, Ryker would have given anything to see it. The jungle pushed back, the temples pristine and shining white, the frescoes painted in rich colors, the palaces crowded with feathered priests and sumptuous women.



Close to ten thousand people had once lived in the area surrounding the temple complex, their clusters of stick houses on pedestals covering the surrounding hillsides for miles. In the ball courts, the players flaunted their costumes and agility for the nobles while massed ranks of soldiers drilled nearby. The market was packed with traders and craftsmen and artists, the air rich with the smells of cooking and copal incense.

And somewhere in the city, in the mind of a priest or an astronomer or a sculptor who carved the stelae for the temples, there was the key to Ryker's obsession. It might be in the calendar, with its three separate cycles, a time scheme so convoluted that no Western mind could grasp it completely. It might be in the religion, in the multitude of gods, each an aspect of at least one other—a theism so complex that scholars identified the gods with letters of the alphabet rather than proper names.

Or it might have been something even more abstract and visionary. Ryker's mind filled with images of quetzal feathers, serpents, and stucco skeletons. He didn't realize he'd dozed off until a sudden movement in the clearing brought him around.

He checked his watch. About thirty minutes had gone by, more than enough time for the drug to take effect. García was staring around him with frightened eyes, whispering in Mayan.

"*Baax a kaati? Baaxi?*" What do you want? What's happening?

The first thing Ryker noticed was the accent. It was close to that of the Laccondones but even crisper and more precise. Ancient Mayan, Ryker thought.

Then he saw Garcia's face.

The man had been transformed. His features were the same as a minute before, but a different personality was looking out through them. A sudden new intelligence lit the eyes, and the mouth was working with fear and disbelief.

"I thought he was supposed to be in a trance," Lindsey stage-whispered.

Ryker stood up slowly, licked his lips, finally managed to speak "I don't think," he said quietly, "that he's García anymore."

"Who are you?" the man asked again in his strange, delicate Mayan.

"We are ... travelers," Ryker said, trying to match the accent. "We brought you here to ask you some questions."

"*A-qu-ob-etsh?*" Are you gods?

"*Ma.* We are men, like yourself."

Ryker began to sweat. This was nothing like what he'd expected. No one had ever dreamed of having a live informant from the Classic period. Ryker had no idea how much time he had, could only hope that he asked the right questions, that he would get the answers he needed.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Chilam Sotz'," the man replied nervously. "I am *Ah Qin*."

Ryker couldn't believe his luck. *Ah Qin* meant chief priest of the city. "The year," Ryker said. "What year is it?"

The man recited the count slowly, sketching line and dot numerals in the dirt. Ryker copied them into modern numbers, 10.2.5.17.17, and handed them to Oishi. “Run that for me, will you?”

Ryker knew it would be late. The last stelae dated in the Long Count came from 10.3.0.00, just before the collapse of the culture. My God, Ryker thought, this Chilam Sotz’ was there. He was an eyewitness to the devastation that wiped out ninety percent of the Mayan population in the course of a few generations.

Oishi handed him a date July 16, 874.

“I don’t feel well,” Chilam Sotz’ said. “What is happening to me?”

Ryker decided to risk a little of the truth. “You have eaten a mushroom. It has brought you to us.”

“The mushroom,” the priest said “Of course. The mushroom.”

Lindsey was feverish with impatience. “What’s going on?” she blurted in English. “Dammit, what’s he saying?”

Ryker waved her quiet and said to the Indian, “Your people are dying. Every year there are fewer children. Why? What is happening to you?”

“It is time,” Chilam Sotz’ said. He used the word *qin-il*, the suffix indicating time in the abstract.

“I don’t understand,” Ryker said.

“We act as we must in this part of the cycle. For each part of the cycle there are things that must be done.”

Ryker tasted blood. In his excitement he had chewed through his lower lip. He touched the cut abstractedly with one forefinger and said, “What things? What must be done?”

“In the first *baktun* man is created. For three *baktuns* he is a savage; for three *baktuns* he learns language and becomes civilized; for three *baktuns* he builds and reaches greatness; for three *baktuns* he prepares for the end.”

Each *baktun* was about four hundred years. Ryker had known that the Maya thought in periods much greater than their own lifetimes, but to hear the priest talking in terms of millennia was staggering.

“The end?” Ryker asked. He smoothed out the ground between them and wrote the lines and dots for 13.0.0.0.0.

“*Bei*,” the priest agreed. His single, sharp nod was more a gesture with his chin than with his whole head.

“Then you really believe that the world will be destroyed at the end of the cycle.”

“Believe? It is not a matter of belief It is a matter of time.” Again that word, *qin-il*.

Slowly Ryker began to understand. Not “time,” at least not in any sense Ryker knew, but rather “Time,” a force, a power that shaped and controlled. It explained so much—the different aspects of gods at different times of the year, the sudden flurry of building, the equally sudden demise of the great cities of the forest.

Was that what was happening now to Ryker’s own civilization? Was it Time for them as well?

“But the end,” Ryker insisted “What happens at the end? A literal disaster? A real flood or fiery rain?”

But Chilam Sotz’ was not answering. He had discovered the black dot on his neck and was attempting to peel it off. Ryker touched his arm gently and said, “No, please.”

The priest stood up. Ryker watched his gaze move from the machines around him to the distant hills, to the sun, to the shattered buildings beyond the clearing.

“Something is wrong here,” he said finally. “You are not gods. You are not *mam-ob* either.”

*Mam-ob*. The Old Ones. According to what Ryker had been taught, the Old Ones were the gods of the mountains and valleys. But if Chilam Sotz’ said they were not gods, then—

Ryker’s head spun. The other meaning of *mam-ob* was “grandfathers.” Ancestors. Thanks to the mushroom, Chilam Sotz’s people would have known their ancestors intimately. Christ, Ryker thought, how could they have anything but a totally deterministic philosophy? The entire memory of their race was available to them anytime they wanted it, just as their own lives would be available to their descendants.

Chilam Sotz’ was starting to panic. “I know this valley. But what has happened to the city? Why have you taken me out of the cycle?”

“Just what the hell is going on here?” Lindsey wanted to know, standing up next to the Indian. “I demand to know what’s happening!”

“He’s freaking,” Ryker said. “I think he just figured out where he is.”

“Where he is?” Lindsey seemed close to hysteria. “Ryker, for God’s sake. Don’t you have any idea of what I went through to bring you here? Don’t screw this up!”

“I can talk to him,” Ryker said. “It’s okay.”

“It better be. What date did Oishi give you? Is that what he’s remembering?”

“Not just remembering. He’s living it.”

“Oh, Christ,” Lindsey said.

“The date,” Chilam Sotz’ said. “What is the date?”

Ryker turned to Oishi “Give me today’s date, will you?”

Oishi nodded and a moment later handed him a slate. At the top it read DECEMBER 23, 2011, and underneath were the numbers 12.19.19.19.19. While Chilam Sotz’ shifted nervously from side to side, Ryker transcribed the numerals into Mayan.

For a second the Indian was absorbed by the novelty of the slate, turning it over in his hands and touching the surface lightly. Then he saw the writing on it, and his eyes bulged.

“Oh my God,” Ryker whispered, the meaning of what he’d written finally coming to him. “Oh my God—”

Chilam Sotz’ looked into Ryker’s eyes in stark terror. “*Ah Puch*,” he said, and ran into the jungle.

Camarena and Oishi sprinted after him, but in seconds he had disappeared. Lindsey dropped to her knees and slammed one fist into the dirt. “What the

hell happened?” she asked, spitting out one word at a time. “What did he say to you?”

“*Ah Puch.*”

“*Ah Puch?* That’s God A as the death god.”

“That’s right. His special job is to watch over the end of epochs.”

“I don’t get it. What are you saying?”

Ryker handed her the slate. “Add one day to those figures. Know what you get? 13.0.0.0.0. The world ends tomorrow.”

“NO,” CAMARENA SAID. “You’re out of your mind. I am not even going to consider abandoning this expedition because of some Mayan superstition.”

The inside of Camarena’s tent seemed hideously cold to Ryker. He folded his arms over his chest and looked over to Lindsey for support. but she only stared down at the tabletop.

“Where have you been for the past twenty years?” he asked Camarena, forcing himself to keep his voice down. “You’re using Kirlian cameras on this dig. Yevtushenko proved the existence of thought waves fifteen years ago. Then there’s Rosen’s work with the Lemurian cultures and Gnostic almanacs. I’m not talking about superstition; I’m talking about science. Science changes, expands to take in new ideas. That’s the point. Monadic physics would have been a joke thirty years ago.”

“Is this a history lesson?” Camarena asked, getting up out of her chair at last. “Because if it is, there is some history I could remind you of. Such as the fact that you never finished your PhD. You’ve spent the last five years stumbling around in a haze of drugs, waiting tables or playing Indian, and you want me to take your word that the sky is falling?”

“Lindsey?” Ryker said. “Do you think I’m crazy, too?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was so low that Ryker could barely make it out. “I could never manage to believe in things the way you do. You know? You’ve got this weird obsession with clarity. You think that if you take drugs or starve yourself or go live with some tribe in the jungle, then everything will become *clear*.”

Finally she looked at him, and her eyes were puffy and shot with red. “But it never does. And it’s never going to. Because life is murky. All that happens is that you get more and more detached and obsessive until people just can’t care about you anymore. Even the ones who want to.”

“You can’t blame me for this,” Ryker said. “Do you think this is my own little fantasy? Why did García hold off until today? Why did he take so many mushrooms that another personality could take him over? Why did that personality just happen to be a high priest, who could give us the warning that he did? Do you think I invented that date? Do you think this is all some bizarre coincidence? Because if you believe that, you’re going to stay here in this valley, and you’re going to die.”

Camarena slumped back in her chair. “There are two copters at the landing strip. One of them can take you back to Villa Hermosa, and then you’re on your own.”

“You won’t come.”

She shook her head. “You’re convinced there’s some kind of destiny working itself out here. Then I guess my destiny is to stay. I’ve worked my whole life for this, for my own expedition, for a site as rich as this. No, I’m staying.”

“Lindsey?”

“What is it you want? An act of faith?”

“No,” Ryker said. His hands and feet felt numb from the cold. “I just want you to come with me.”

“All right,” she said, looking down again. “All right.”

HE SAT BY THE ASHES of the campfire, waiting for Lindsey to pack. She had found two of the grad students who’d wanted to come with them. Ryker suspected that they were just tired of the heat and the hard work and the insects, but he didn’t question their motives.

He was beyond questioning anything. He felt himself caught up in a torrent of events that left no room for hesitation. His eyes moved to the sun, dropping beneath the tops of the trees on the western end of the clearing.

So much had happened since the last sunset he’d watched.

Suddenly he was on his feet, running for Lindsey’s tent. He tore open the door, surprising her with a handful of clothes poised above her travel bag.

“Hurry!” he shouted. “Grab what you’ve got! We have to get out of here!”

“What—”

“Sunset!” Ryker shouted, seeing his own fear beginning to infect her. “The new day starts at sunset!”

THEY HEADED FOR the landing strip at a shambling run, Lindsey leading the others, Ryker bringing up the rear.

As the sun dropped behind the mountains, Ryker felt the crystalline sense of destiny that had brought him that far suddenly disappear. He slowed to a walk, thinking, I don’t even know what this disaster is supposed to be. What if I’m wrong? What if—

He was lying on his face, tasting blood and feeling the shock of impact in his wrists. Thunder roared in the mountains overhead. Movement, he thought dazedly. The fifth sun.

Earthquakes.

“Run!” Ryker shouted. “Run for it!”

He pushed himself up from the dancing ground and stumbled on, sometimes slipping to one knee, sometimes losing his balance completely. Lindsey and the others were just ahead of him, not doing much better than he was.

He was just getting to his feet after a bad shock when someone stepped in front of him. “*Que pasa?*” Juan García asked in a dazed whisper. “What’s happening?”

Ryker searched for a trace of Chilam Sotz’ personality in the Indian’s face, but it was gone. He gripped the man by the shoulders “Do you remember?” he asked in Mayan. “Do you remember any of it?”

“Yes,” he said abstractedly, now speaking Mayan as well. “I remember.”

Ryker took his arm, and together they staggered into the clearing. Lindsey had one of the pilots already warming up a copter for them. The other pilot was pacing back and forth beside his machine, obviously frightened and confused.

“Wait for the others as long as you can,” Ryker shouted to him in Spanish. “But save yourself, okay?”

“*Si, hombre.*”

Ryker pushed García into the copter, and as soon as he got the door closed behind them the machine leaped into the air. As he took a seat next to Lindsey the ground below them rose like an ocean swell and then cracked down the middle with a sound like cannon fire. Hot gases spurted from the wound.

“Take her up and hover,” Ryker shouted to the pilot.

The ground shrank to the size of a model railroad layout. Off to his right, Ryker could see the top of the great pyramid just poking through the surrounding jungle. As he watched, it shook itself to pieces and disappeared. The air was filling with dust and steam and the agonized sound of rock grinding under pressure.

Tiny human figures appeared in the clearing, on the wrong side of the fault from the remaining copter. They waved and seemed to be shouting as the machine tried to take off for them. It bumped along the ground like a broken toy, then fell slowly onto its side. The rotor caught in the earth and gently tossed the copter into a tree, where it burst into flame.

“Can we go back for them?” Ryker asked the pilot.

“No chance,” he said.

“Then get us out of here.”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know yet.”

The pilot switched on a radio. “...San Andreas Fault has finally lived up to the predic—” He spun the dial. “...*muertos en el ultimo*—” “...still more earthquakes all across Europe and Africa—”

“How much air time have we got?”

“Twelve, fourteen hours.”

It should be enough, Ryker thought. Enough to get someplace far enough inland to be clear of the tidal waves. Enough to find other survivors, to prepare for the new sun. He collapsed into the cushioned seat and squeezed his eyes shut.

At least they’d saved Garcia. And his memories of Chilam Sotz’, whatever they were. That seemed important, somehow. It would be important because this time there were people surviving, not just the monkeys and the parrots and the fish from the ancient myths.

Ryker felt the touch of Lindsey’s fingers on the back of his hand, tentative, questioning. He took her hand in his and held on to it tightly.

This time, he told himself, things were going to be different.

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