Jacob W. Edwards Word Count: approximately 85000

7600 Edgewood Ave.

Richmond, VA 23227

(804) 297-8365

jacobwebbedwards@gmail.com

ODYSSEY OF THE ANCIENTS

By

Jacob W. Edwards

Adult

Science Fiction

# 

# Part One: Junk Bonds

## April 27 2002

At the end of the lane was a mailbox with three balloons tied to the post, swaying with the wind and falling in its absence. Below the mailbox was a neon orange piece of poster board that read: YARD SALE Saturday April 27th 7am-NOON. Opening the car door always announced his arrival with a metallic creaking, followed by the loud thud that made him wince ever since he failed to move his hand that one time. He could still feel that ache in his right hand when he thought about it. Along the stone driveway were old sheets littered with knick knacks, yellowed paperbacks, assorted items of children’s clothing and toys, followed by a chainsaw and push mower. They were clearly a couple decades old due to the limited use of plastic parts. Perpendicular across the back of the driveway was a folding table with a couple who appeared to be in their early thirties hugging their coffee mugs. Informal pleasantries were quickly exchanged, but they seem preoccupied with an older woman haggling over the contents of a jar labeled 25¢ each. Another table met with the corner of that one, forming the last bend in the U heading down the other side of the driveway and back to the street. A box of VHS, that signaled the couple’s upgrade to DVD, caught his eye so he paused and leafed through. Jerry Maguire, Pretty Woman, Batman, Romancing the Stone, My Cousin Vinny, Predator, The Breakfast Club, Child’s Play, and the double VHS of Titanic. Pretty standard selection with a pretty clear delineation between who was watching Pretty Woman and who was watching Predator. *Although it does sound like an interesting double feature,* he thought. He threw an obligatory over the shoulder wave to the couple and said “Have a good day,” as he made his way past a broken floor lamp and back to his car.

Tom maneuvered his slender, gangly frame into the door, sliding into the bench seat of his ‘86 Cutlass Supreme. He grabbed a pen from the aftermarket cup holder/center console area and picked up the newspaper, quarter-folded to display the yard sales section of the classifieds, and put an X through another one of the five boxes he circled while drinking his coffee that morning. Only two left. Distortion blasted from one of the blown out speakers as the gas guzzler awakened. *Two more to go*.

After another bust, he pulled out the map to find the last address of this Saturday’s hunt. A rusted mailbox held the sign with an arrow pointing to the old cedar-lined dirt road heading to a farmhouse that reminded him of a horror movie, a la Texas Chain Saw Massacre. The front door was open with a couple of people wandering around outside. A large white oak tree to the left bore another cardboard arrow with “More in back!” scrawled in black. This was an estate sale, which usually had higher quality items than a yard sale, but he liked to go later when there was room to haggle over the price of unsold items. He wasn’t trying to be the first there to find gold. Instead, he held an idealistic philosophy that any special object he may stumble across will wait for him, and will unconsciously dissuade other potential buyers, until he comes along. That blindly optimistic approach was an internal coping mechanism used to tamp down the anxiety he associated with the stuff that could have been. In several years an acronym would come along that would perfectly encapsulate this feeling, and shortly after become extremely overused, but still the only word capable of describing it in such a short burst, FOMO. He decided to hit up the shed out back first. It looked like a mini-museum for hand tool enthusiasts. Mostly antique stuff from the 1930’s and 40’s, but also had some more modern stuff from the 70’s, which appeared to be the last time the shed was in regular use. Nothing in here piqued his interest, so he retreated back out of the musty shed into the fresh spring air.

Stepping inside the front door and onto the uneven hardwood floor, he could see an old broken grandfather clock and several other large pieces of furniture gathered in the main living room. He didn’t have a need for furniture, nor the room, so he usually didn’t pay it much mind except for curiosity. Plus, half of the pieces already had sold tags hanging on them. The farmhouse had a small foundation with only a living room, bathroom, and dining room kitchen combo. The second floor consisted of two bedrooms and a tiny office accessible from a narrow staircase in the living room. Descending them now, a man headed for the nice lady with the clipboard. Tom was drawn to areas like the office. Stacked papers everywhere, trinkets lined up on the shelves of a bookcase, and boxes of books, once organized, now strewn about from the morning’s vultures pecking at the carcass of someone’s life, modern scavengers fulfilling a necessary good. These places had mysteries to uncover and treasures to be found, where he could feel like Indiana Jones or one of The Goonies. It was one of the only things that still made him feel childlike wonder, even though most of the time he didn’t find anything approaching the inventions of his mind. Today was going to be different.

The air was illuminated from the low angle of the morning sun bouncing off all the dust particles flung up from the vultures’ wings. Hunched over these boxes, he assumed his true form and began to do a bit of pecking of his own hoping to scrape off some remnants from this old life. *Who was this person?* Tom thought. The books varied widely in topics — a mix of science, the paranormal, mysticism, pseudo archeology, and hallucinogens. *The Geology of the Eastern Shore. Marine Life of the Chesapeake Bay. Hypotheses on Ectenic Force. The Prophecies of Nostradamus. Field Guide to the Mushrooms of North America. Secrets of the Mayan Calendar. Underwater Pyramids of China. The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. And so many more. Such an eclectic mix could only belong to an interesting person. The small desk had a clean circle in the dust where a lamp would have sat. The drawers were slightly ajar and upon inspection already emptied, probably by the estate sale people. The contents of the desk looked like they were in boxes on the floor. He quickly rifled through the two boxes, just receipts and old maps, and slid them back against the wall. The bookcase displayed two brass cricket boxes, some carved wooden African tribal art pieces, a pair of jade foo dog bookends, and a peculiar clay statuette. He picked it up and sat back in the wooden swivel desk chair next to the window to take a better look. It had a lizard head and forearms with folded wings on its back and human legs, probably some religious idol. It had been glued back together rather poorly, like it had been broken into several pieces. Tom found the idol’s chimera form rather intriguing, just the kind of weird item he would like to add to his collection. As if possessed, one of his sneaky habits kicked in, and he quickly set down the idol and started reopening all the empty desk drawers, shoving one hand in palm up to feel around for anything hidden. For the first time ever in this OCD ritual, his hand touched something in the thin upper right drawer. It felt like a business card held up with two bits of tape. He picked at the edge with his fingernail, grabbed the loosened corner, and ripped it out. It was a miniature manilla envelope like the kind used for seed packets or hotel keys. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, he stood up and shoved the envelope into his back left pocket.

Nice clipboard lady walked in and said, “The desk is sold,” in a harried tone and taped a piece of paper stating the same to the corner.

“No worries. Hey, how much you charging for books? I didn’t see ‘em marked or any signs,” he said brushing back his mop of messy blond hair.

“Sorry. This has been a rush sale. The gentleman who lived here died suddenly while in Peru and his family needed to liquidate the property as soon as possible. The house auction is scheduled for next week, and we have to have everything cleared by then. What books are you interested in? Please tell me it’s a lot of them. At this point, I’ll be paying someone tomorrow to haul them out.”

This was always fun. A motivated seller. “How many will ten dollars get me?”

“Sounds like about two boxes worth…but I’ll tell you what, make it twenty and take all six boxes of books and those two boxes.” she said pointing to the drawer contents. “You can get a deal and help me clear most of this room at one time. It would really help.”

“You got it. It’s a deal.” he said, trying to temper his enthusiasm. He pulled out his chain wallet and handed her a twenty. “And how much for this little guy?” he asked, pointing to the clay idol.

“Grace?” someone called from downstairs.

“Take it.” she said as she picked it up, handed it to him, and hurried downstairs.

The trunk of the Cutlass had a surprising amount of room, just enough for all eight boxes. Gently, he tucked the idol in with the old maps and closed the trunk. This time the radio cut on midway through an ad for this summer’s X Fest held by the local alternative rock station. This year’s lineup included Reel Big Fish, Bloodhound Gang, Insane Clown Posse, and Cypress Hill. But, the only thing driving him insane in the membrane was his curiosity about the mini manilla tucked in his back pocket.

\*\*\*

Home was a meager spot, a camper parked on his uncle’s property, on the edge of the woods where he got free water by hooking up to the well and had access to an electrical hookup. He didn’t mess with the camper’s sewage system, finding it more sanitary to pee in the woods, and he had access to the house when the need arose. He found the used camper about six months ago, in the local Trading Post, for $2500 and had a friend help him move it. It was only about sixteen feet long, but the independence it represented made it a mansion. He had a mini fridge, a shower which just drained outside for convenience, a booth dining area, and a two burner stove. There was a microwave next to the sink, and a bed at the far end that folded up into a bench seat. He usually kept it in bed mode, so he could just pass out whenever. Not having much room meant he had to be careful with what he purchased, but he still had two empty cabinets at the back of the bed that could handle all the books from the estate sale. He was hoping to find a few to resell to make back the twenty dollars, or at least some of it. A friend of his, who grew up on a boat, said their family had a rule, in order to bring something new onto the boat you had to get rid of something else. This was Tom’s boat now, and he would have to abide by the rules of the sea.

Slamming the camper door behind him, he pulled the mini manilla from his back left pocket. He folded the two metal brackets and opened the flap turning the contents into his hand. It was a flat piece of blue-greenish metal. There was a flat circle where an elbow came off and made a ninety degree bend. Three flat prongs, of different lengths, came off from that piece. The whole thing was about three inches long and one inch wide and thin. It looked like it could’ve been a hair pick for a line of Neanderthal Barbie’s. That was his first thought. Most of his thoughts bordered on the absurd, life was funnier that way. He was puzzled by what the hell this little piece of metal was, but felt it had to be important given where he had found it. He felt a modicum of shame for taking the envelope, but also felt no harm, no foul since no one seemed to know it was there. The act of thievery was more of a reflex of protection from being startled than a genuine attempt at burglary. He would take it up to Colonial Antique Shoppe when he got the chance to see if it was worth anything.

After devouring a ramen noodle lunch, he sorted through the eight boxes, and ended up putting away about fifty books and a stack of old folded maps, from all over the world, in the cabinets near his sleeping quarters. He had one box of trash to get rid of and two boxes of paperback westerns that he would donate. He wanted to go through the other books more thoroughly, to see if they were worth keeping or selling, and he figured he would try to read a bunch in the meantime. A leather bound journal was among the books. He noticed it was half used as he flipped through the hand written notes and drawings, before stacking it with the other books. He took the clay idol and put it on a display shelf above the dining table. There sat a rare Polhem style Scandinavian rat tail shackle padlock and key he lucked up on at a garage sale. The person who sold it to him didn’t know what he had and neither did Tom when he bought it. It just looked cool to him and worth the three dollars he paid for it. Later, he found out it was worth about twenty times that, but times would have to get pretty destitute for him to think of selling it. The clay idol fit nicely beside it. The beginnings of his own eclectic collection.

Tom started a small fire in the pit outside and sat down in one of the camp chairs. A truck pulled up and his buddy Carl, who helped him move his camper, got out of the cab and grabbed his mini cooler from the back of the pickup. He sat down and popped open a can of beer. He took a sip and set it in the arm rest, so he could grab the joint Tom was passing in his direction.

Carl never fit in when they were in school. His dad was white and his mom was black. There was still a lot of racism where they lived, and he didn’t look like anyone in their small rural Virginia community that sat nestled up against the Chesapeake Bay. His skin was white, but he had black facial features and tight, curly brown hair. The black kids never seemed to accept him, he thought it was because he looked white. He liked fishing and dressed in country western gear, and the kids into that stuff didn’t accept him either. The jocks, the grunge kids, the hip-hop heads, the straight edge punks. Carl was a unique cat and didn’t fit into any of these cliques. That was one of the reasons he and Tom always got along, since they were little kids. Neither of them really fit in, so they made a great pair.

“Smoketh and be merry good sir,” Tom said in a weird wizard-like affectation.

“I shall and I will!” Carl retorted in equally amusing, but poor, British accent making a bowing motion with his upper torso. “Oh. Lordy-be-gordy” he said in a choking cough reminiscent of the late Chris Farley. He took another toke and started singing “Can’t Get Enough of Your Love, Babe” before passing it back. This was the kind of stream of consciousness, non-sequitur, pop culture gobbledygook they frequently used to communicate.

“Found a pretty sweet sale today budddyyy. Got some whacked out bibliographic selectionés. Go check them out the cab-i-net beside my love nest. Ca-caw ca-caw,” he said in his best Pauly Shore, flapping his arms. The southern accent really did not work well for most of his impressions but had its own charm.

He followed Carl inside and grabbed a pack of hot dogs from the fridge while Carl mumbled off some book titles to himself. *Humans and Humanism. Spectral Panes: Windows of Light. The Waterman of Tangier Island. Unknown Civilizations: Lost History in the Central Americas. Entheogens in Tribal Cultures*. The last title caught his eye so he carried it out by the fire. Leafing through the book, Carl skimmed chapters about Native Americans and peyote, Mesoamericans and mushrooms, and South American tribes and hallucinogenic toads. Carl and Tom had done their share of mushrooms, LSD and Ecstasy together, especially since getting the camper. It never got too crazy, but they were still on the fringes of norm in their small county. The camper gave both of them a spot of privacy for the first time in their lives. Carl was still living at home, but he spent most of his free time at the camper. Tom told him where he kept the spare key and gave Carl permission to hang there, even when he wasn’t around. The bond between them was strong, but they kept things playful and tried to never get too serious.

“So this guy I worked with last year told me this crazy peyote story,” Carl said, glancing at the peyote chapter. Neither of them had ever done peyote before. It seemed like more of an exotic West Coast or Mexican thing to them, and they had never run across it before. Carl continued his story. “He said this was in the 70’s when he was in his early twenties…our age, livin’ with his folks. He had some peyote, but he knew it was strong stuff, so he waited until he had a day off from work when his parents were working. That morning after they left, he scarfed it down, and took a walk out to this secluded chill spot in the woods. It’s kicking in hard and fast and he is just holding on for the ride…tripping his fucking balls off. Of course, he doesn’t remember most of it, and the bits he can still make out don’t make a whole lot of sense. But, he does remember sort of coming back to reality…..he is still trippin’ hard and realizes the sun is going down. Now, he’s got to get back home and play it cool. This is where it gets fun! He realizes he is sitting in a giant drain culvert in a different area near his house and has no recollection of how the hell he ended up in there. And, when he gets up to start walking he sees his pants are all ripped up and his clothes have dirt all over them. His arms and legs are covered in scratches and thorns. He figures his only hope is to slip in undetected and straighten himself the fuck up…..No such luck. As soon as his feet hit the front porch his mom comes running out. She yells ‘Where have you been?’ All freakin’ out and shit. He says ‘I was at work. Then after, I went down by the creek to fish and slipped on the bank.’ trying to explain his clothes and all the scratches. ‘For two days!’ she screams. ‘For two days!’”, Carl is imitating a screaming mom voice. “He couldn’t believe it. He lost two days on that peyote and has no idea what he did…..He didn’t eat. He didn’t drink…Well, he may have drank some water from a stream in the woods, but he couldn’t remember. He said that was the last time he ever did any drugs like that…..Can you imagine? Two days!” Carl shook his head in disbelief.

“What the hell? I wanted to try it before, but now I don’t know. I guess as long as you got someone you trust and a couple free days.” Tom said, chuckling as he spoke.

“He said he could never really explain what happened to his folks which just must have made him seem even craz…i-er…” Carl trailed off at the end and sort of tilted his head looking closer at the book.

The illustration of a lizard headed clay idol stared back at Carl. He had just noticed the broken clay idol on the shelf in the camper. The place was so small that anything new caught his attention right away, but he hadn’t stopped to ask Tom about it yet, because his attention was on the books. He knew there would be plenty of time for that later, but now seemed like the perfect time.

“Look familiar?” Carl said with a grin as he slid the book sideways towards Tom.

“What the…?” Tom snatched it to take a closer look.

The illustration looked identical to the statuette, except this one appeared intact, and it wasn’t shoddily repaired like the one he just bought. The caption below read: *Clay figure with a Komodo dragon-like head and forearms, human torso and legs, and large feathered wings. Circa 3000 BCE. South America. Cataloged in 1976 by Professor H. Wilhelm PHD in Ancient History.* Tom read the caption aloud. The name Wilhelm was all around him today. While sorting and organizing, he had noticed this name written neatly in cursive in the upper left inside covers of all the books. He didn’t pay it much mind, assuming it was the former owner’s name, only worrying that it might affect the resale value. And, that only really mattered if he had found anything decent. Tom flipped to the inside front cover of the book to confirm his suspicion, and then he reversed the book back into Carl’s view.

Furrowing his brow momentarily, as he processed the connection, Carl looked up smirking. Tom told Carl about Wilhelm’s office and the mini manilla he found hidden underneath the desk. They passed around the trinket, pondering what it could be, and inspected the idol, finding no difference between it and the illustration, minus the damage. They put some hot dogs on sticks and cooked them over the fire while imagining what this professor’s life must’ve been like. After several hours of drinking, Tom looked over to see Carl passed out in the camp chair. Tom grabbed his shoulder and gently shook him awake.

“Truck or floor little buddy?” he asked.

“Floor, skipper.” Carl replied half asleep.

“Aye, aye captain. Come on.” Tom said.

Carl always kept a sleeping bag stashed there. He spent most of his weekend nights in the crash coop, as he lovingly referred to it sometimes. He could sleep outside in the summer, but it was still chilly at night, so he crammed into the only usable space in the camper, the floor. And, Carl took up the whole floor, he was a hefty guy. He could’ve been a linebacker if he had any interest in sports. When Tom woke up to pee in the middle of the night, he had to step over Carl with one foot, open the door, and leap over and out in one motion. It could be tricky, but at their age, the independence was so new, none of this was an inconvenience to them.

# 

## July 4 2002

Independence Day celebrations were in full swing and parties across the country were solemn, but also had a patriotic fervor that hadn’t existed since World War II. Flag sales were at record levels and everyone seemed to be united together as one nation. Patriotism had reached peak saturation. Practically the whole country was taking an extended break, with July 4th falling on a Thursday that year. Only ten months ago the attacks on 9/11 changed everything. Armed military personnel roamed the streets in major cities, patrolling the holiday celebrations, for fears of another attack. The country would never feel the same, but that wasn’t quite apparent yet. As with all history, it takes some distance to see the real truth lurking under the surface.

Tom and Carl were just excited to have an extra two days off, a four day weekend. Both of them worked shit jobs. Carl used his brute strength doing manual labor for a siding company and Tom did stock work for a marine engine parts supplier. A hippie friend of theirs from high school, Ben, just got off the first leg of touring with Trey Anastasio. The tour had become the mecca for all the Phishheads who were in withdrawal, after the band announced they were taking a break that year. Ben had some shrooms he brought back from the road, to sell and fund his next leg of dates. His home base was only a few miles from the camper, so seeing him roll up on a four wheeler wearing sandals was nothing unusual. Ben got off and grabbed Carl in a bear hug. Then, he reached over to hug Tom with one hand clasped in front and the other over the shoulder.

“Partying tonight?” Ben asked.

“But of course.” Carl said. “You joining us?”

“Naw man! I got six more deliveries to make. Trying to get back on the road Saturday. Been some wild shows so far.”

“Well, we’ll be here all night. Ride through if you want to see some space monkeys later. These caps any good?” Tom asked.

“Ya better believe it.” Ben said, handing Carl a half full baggie of caps and stems. “Sixty dollars a half man.”

Carl and Tom whipped out their wallets and ended up splitting it. Carl gave Ben forty dollars and Tom handed him twenty. Tom promised to hit Carl back when he got some change, and Carl knew he was good for it. After catching up for a few minutes, Ben saddled up on the Kawasaki.

“Cheesecake!” he yelled as he started the engine, whipped it around, and sped away.

This had become Ben’s go-to goodbye, based on a prank from a live TV broadcast of the Phish New Years Eve three day extravaganza, called Big Cypress, that was held on a Seminole Indian reservation, deep in the swamps of Florida. The band instructed the crowd to chant “Cheesecake” in order to confuse the viewers at home. The three of them had made the trek together a few years back, and they had one of the times of their lives. They got stuck in one of the largest traffic jams in history on Alligator Alley. When they made it to the festival, they partied with a crowd estimated to be about eighty thousand people. It was billed as the largest gathering in the United States to usher in the new millennium.

After downing some burgers, cooked on a grate over the fire, Tom and Carl got about three grams each out of the bag and chased them down with some grocery store coleslaw.

“Get rid of that thing.” Tom said pointing at Carl’s canvas strap wristwatch. He didn’t like “having the time” while tripping. He felt it took something from the experience. Carl unstrapped the watch and slid it in the front pocket of his jeans.

Thirty minutes later they were smiling a little wider, and within an hour, they were wandering around looking at knots on trees. The light at dusk was unbelievable with vibrant oranges cascading across the sky and pulsating. After a few hours of this and the sun set, they sat around the fire staring into the heart of the coals and talked about the craziness of the world. Tom started to tell Carl about some of the books he was reading from Wilhelm’s collection.

“So this book I just finished relates the origins of Christianity to mushroom cults.”

“Wait… what?”

“Like…this mushroom is called Amanita something. It looks like the toadstool mushroom on all the Spencer’s posters…red with white flakes on it. The author claims that early ritualistic use of these mushrooms led to the invention of Jesus. The mushroom represents a heavenly penis… the bible uses coded language to describe fertility rituals. It’s all over the place, but it gives you a lot of mind blowing stuff related to shrooms to think about.” Tom spoke with a staggered pacing, still coming down.

“For real?” Carl asked.

“Like Derek, Derek Foreal.” Tom answered, referencing Paul Ruebens character in Blow. “Another book I started is about how that same mushroom is the origin of Santa Claus. The red and white outfit. The reindeer. The chimney. All tied in with these mushroom cults. The reindeer stuff is crazy. The reindeer love these Amanitas, and they seek them out to eat. They get all fucked up, and the shamans would collect their pee to drink. It helped purify toxins out of the mushrooms and make them easier to digest for humans…..They were trippin’ drinking deer piss!” They both looked at each other and laughed really hard at the thought. “I don’t even want to know how they collected the piss. This Wilhelm dude had some wild interests…I’m still trying to make sense of this journal of his. It all seems to relate to something he was looking for.” Tom said, intrigued at the puzzle.

“Like what?”

“Well the ‘modo man…” This was how they had been referring to the clay idol since discovering the illustration that described it as having a komodo-like head. “…he wasn’t really a god. He was considered a bringer of knowledge. Wilhelm seemed to be looking for him.” Tom said pronouncing it *Vil-helm,* as they both had taken to doing on occasion.

“Looking for him? Like the real ‘modo man?” Carl asked.

“Nah. A temple, I think?” Tom responded. “The idol was originally found on a dig in Peru in the ‘30s, with several other artifacts, but it was misplaced by the university archaeology department…..They accidentally mislabeled it in storage. Wilhelm rediscovered it working on another project, cataloged it, and that’s what spurred him to reopen the original dig site in 1993 after raising some money.”

“How did Wilhelm know this guy was some bringer of knowledge?” asked Carl.

“One of the artifacts contained part of a story about a place of great knowledge, but in order to get the info you have to meet this ‘modo man, and then, he will decide if you are worthy or something…Ya gotta ‘choose wisely’ I guess.”

“He chose…..poorly!” Carl did his best imitation of the Grail Knight from the Last Crusade.

Tom continued to tell Carl about the diary late into the evening, and he brought out some of the older maps of South America from the stash that Wilhelm had marked with probable locations of sites related to the ‘modo man. When they were ready for bed, they gathered up the books and maps and headed into the camper. It was hot that night, so Tom fired up the window AC unit. It was the only way they were actually going to be able to get any sleep in this humidity.

\*\*\*

The next morning Tom got up, cut off the AC, and started a pot of coffee. Then, he made his way up and over Carl and outside to pee on the edge of the woods. As he looked down, he smiled thinking about the tripping reindeer. After he finished, he made his way over to the camp chair, sat down for a few minutes and just looked around trying to remember how different everything seemed just twelve hours ago. He got up and headed for the coffee pot. *It better be ready* *by now,* he thought. As he opened the door, Tom smiled, Carl was already pouring two travel mugs of coffee. After handing Tom his coffee, Carl pulled out a pack of smokes and placed an unlit one between his lips.

“Breakfast of champions!” he said as the stogie bounced up and down.

They took the coffee outside, beside the fire pit, to sit in the camp chairs and wake up. They didn’t need to fill the air with chit chat especially after the fun of last night. They were comfortable enough to hang in silence. Carl lit his cigarette and noticed the ‘modo man tucked in the drink holder of his camp chair. *Must’ve left it out last night,* he thought. It had a thin layer of morning dew on it, but he figured the idol could handle it given how long it had already survived. Tom grabbed the ‘modo man, so Carl could use his drink holder, and started tossing and twirling it very lightly with one hand. On the third toss, a piece flaked off and fell into his hand as he caught it. It was a small shard from the waist. Apparently, the moisture had loosened up the poor glue job and tossing it wasn’t doing it any favors.

“Damnit!” Tom said as Carl looked over, noticing what had happened. “No biggie. I’ll glue it later.” He got up to get a refill and put the ‘modo man away back on the shelf where it belonged. The coffee must not have done its job yet because Tom stumbled on the step leading into the camper and almost fell. He reached for the booth table with his right hand, trying to stabilize himself, but the ‘modo man caught the edge, and the top half broke off and fell to the floor.

“Doh!” Tom said, holding the legs in one hand, travel mug in the other, looking down at the disembodied torso. He set the mug down, bent over, and grabbed the shoulders of the ‘modo man, picking it up head first. As he did so, a rectangular metal box fell to the linoleum floor of the camper.

“Carl? Come check this out.” he said in a peculiar tone.

*This better be interesting,* Carl thought. He got up figuring either way it was time to top off his cup. He flicked his butt into the fire pit and turned towards the camper. Tom was poking his body out the doorway with the box in the palm of his hand.

“What is it?” Carl asked.

“Dunno. Came outta here.” Tom said, turning back into the camper and sliding into the booth with the broken ‘modo man laying there.

“Damn. He broke?” Carl said refilling both their mugs.

“Yep. My clumsy ass almost took a header into the table.” Tom laughed and sipped the coffee. “But this little guy took it for me,” he said, standing the legs up on the table.

“Let me see that.” Carl said inquisitively as he slid the box towards him to pick it up.

It was about the size of a box of matches but slightly thicker. The bluish-green metal had smooth sides but you could make out what appeared to be joints, like it could be slid open or something.

“And this was in there?” Carl asked, pointing to the hollow torso laid on its back.

“Yep. Fell right out.”

“Looks like it should open or something.” Carl said gripping one edge with his fingernails and trying to slide the other side with his thumb. He flipped it a few more times trying this from different angles. Mimicking an old miner from the 1800’s he said, “Maybe there’s some gold in there,” in a mocking tone indicating he didn’t think there was a chance in hell there was gold in there. And, it’s not like it could have been much anyways.

“Let me try.” Tom said, holding out his hand. He repeated the same techniques as Carl with no luck, but on his last try the box was turned with an edge facing him that had three small holes in it. All of a sudden he made the connection. He jumped up to grab the book he had been reading two nights ago. He set it on the table between them and opened up to the chapter he had been reading. Carl looked down at the pages trying to put the pieces together.

“Not that. This!” Tom said holding up the mini manilla he was using as a bookmark.

He opened it and grabbed the key inside. *That’s what it was the whole time*, he thought, *a key*. The metals matched in color, and it seemed clear they went together. He gently glided the key into the three holes, but it only went in halfway before it wouldn’t go any further. Not wanting to force it, he slid the key back out, flipped it over, and tried it again. This time the key went in the majority of the way up the prongs. He pushed a little harder and they both heard a tiny click and one side of the box opened up. Tom put his fingernail in the crack and slid the door open to reveal the contents. They both looked down at a small piece of folded paper. Tom turned the box over letting the paper fall gingerly to the table. He swiveled around and grabbed two forks from the drawer behind him. Using the forks, he unfolded the paper, and they gazed down at it, studying the small circular pattern. It had squiggly lines, packed together, going from the outer ring to a small inner ring in the center of the design. The paper appeared old, thicker than modern paper, and it was fraying on the creases. One corner of the paper was torn off and about a quarter of the ring design was missing. Tom grabbed the disposable camera he had been taking pics with last night. He snapped off three pics, one without flash and two with. Carl turned away from the flash instinctively. *It’s too early for bright lights,* he thought. Tom used the forks to refold the paper and placed it back in the metal box. His thumb slid the drawer closed, using a little more pressure for the last bit. As it clicked, the key pushed back out to where it had originally given some resistance. Tom pulled the key out, slid it back in mini manilla, and closed the book. They just stared at each other for a minute. Then Carl took a sip of coffee.

# 

## July 8 2002

Tom pulled out of the drug store parking lot. He had dropped off the disposable camera in the morning, before work, and had come to retrieve the prints. Carl was already sitting outside the camper when he arrived. They had been discussing the circular pattern all weekend, but Tom didn’t want to pull out the original again, given how fragile it looked.

The past Saturday night of their extended weekend, they decided to take the rest of Ben’s good tidings. The mystery was enthralling both of them, especially in their neurally enhanced state. They began pulling all the Wilhelm books out of the cabinet, piling them up in stacks, haphazardly on the kitchen counter and table. They sat in the booth and started to flip through the books, one by one, looking for any pictures or illustrations that matched the ring pattern with internal squiggles. They started stacking the ones they eliminated on the floor beside them. This process took longer than necessary, but they were “on a magic carpet ride” and kept getting distracted, talking about other cool pictures they would randomly run across. A book of Salvador Dali prints basically stopped the whole project in its tracks for almost forty-five minutes, becoming entranced with his artwork. They even used Tom’s battery operated lantern attempting to peer deeper into the pages, frustrated that it wasn’t actually in 3D. The melting clocks sent Tom on a rant about his dislike of watches and clocks while tripping. They robbed you of part of the experience in his opinion. There shouldn’t really be a need to know the time when trying to hang your ego up to dry. Seemed counterintuitive, it just didn’t make sense to him. Midway through the second stack of books, Carl found what they were looking for.

“Holy Toledo Batman!” Carl said in Burt Ward’s Robin voice from the campy 60’s show. Tom leaned over to see the circular pattern that had been vexing them the last few days. Glancing at the caption revealed it to be a mushroom spore print. Carl flipped the book closed, keeping his hand as a bookmark, and read the title aloud “The Mushroom Cultivator by Paul Stamets and J.S. Chilton.”

Now the long weekend was over, and with the photos in hand, Tom flipped through and found the three pictures of the design. The first was too dark. The second was bright and a little washed out. The third was just glare reflecting off the table that obscured the design. He took the second photo and handed it to Carl, who already had the ‘Cultivator’ sitting in his lap. The mini manilla was being used to mark the relevant page. Upon comparison, the images were strikingly similar. Enough so, that upon discussion, they thought it was worth checking out the original again to confirm their findings. Carl brought the book inside, and they sat in the booth and opened the lockbox again, using some tweezers this time to grab the paper. It definitely appeared to be a spore print with a chunk missing. After a quick back and forth, they decided to double bag the box and key in some ziplocs with some small desiccant packs that Tom took from an empty parts box at work. They sealed those in a tupperware container and hid them in between the wall and the cabinet, under the sink. They weren’t sure why they were hiding it, but agreed that if *Vil-helm* thought it was worth hiding, they should too.

“Do you feel lucky, punk?” Tom said, misquoting Dirty Harry.

“With what, Enforcer?”

“Science!” Tom exclaimed like Thomas Dolby. “We are going to grow some mushrooms my friend.”

“You are a total nutcase, completely deranged, delusional, paranoid. Your thought process is all fucked up. Your information train is jammed, man!” Carl said, channeling a crazed Brad Pitt in a hospital gown.

“You wanna go? I’ll go right now mothafucka!” Tom said, challenging Carl.

Carl started to hum a strange accordion melody that signaled “let’s go”, and they grabbed the edge of the bed in unison and folded it back into bench mode. Carl sat on the bench and reached for the remote, off to the side. Tom grabbed 12 Monkeys, slid the tape out, and glided it into the TV/VCR combo. They always had time for a movie in those days.

\*\*\*

Over the next month, they both read the ‘Cultivator’ cover to cover and devised a plan. They learned that spores were like microscopic seeds that came falling from the underside of the mature mushroom caps. The spore prints were created by setting the caps on paper and allowing the fine dust of spores to settle onto the paper and become trapped, creating a pattern like the one they had discovered in the hidden box. The book had step by step directions on how they could scrape spores from the spore print and use them to grow mycelium cultures. The mycelium were like the roots, and they would spawn mushrooms when the fruiting conditions were correct; temperature, moisture, light, etc. They decided they would learn how to cultivate some psilocybin mushrooms, shrooms, using the techniques from the book. Through Ben’s connections, they had found a resource for some spore prints. He suggested using premade spore syringes, which were easier to deal with, but Carl convinced him they wanted to learn everything about the process they could, from scratch so to speak. Ben and some of his tour buddies would be helping them out, but their roles would be relegated to Manhattan Project status. They wouldn’t really know the ultimate scope of what they were helping them with, but neither did Tom and Carl in reality. They knew this project was unlike anything they had ever done before, but they had no idea just how life changingly big this would all become.

# 

## February 14 2003

Friday was Valentine's Day and love was in the air. The first successful harvest of cubes had dried. They had started calling them that because the mushrooms were psilocybin cubensis, and some of the Manhatty project boys used it as shorthand. After a month of more research, and a month of gathering supplies, and four months of hands-on learning filled with multiple failed attempts at sterility and multiple bouts of contamination, they finally had their first successful batch.

It started with creating a sterile growing medium in petri dishes for the spores. If you could get mycelium to sprout out from the spores, without getting contaminated, you would transfer a chunk of that into a jar of sterile grain. The hard part was keeping them from getting contaminated, all kinds of other invisible mold spores are constantly floating around in the air. But, if you could get the jar to colonize with mycelium without being contaminated, you would break up the fully inoculated grain into a storage tub filled with a sterile growing medium. Finally if that colonized, mushrooms would burst forth from the dense mycelium mass when the conditions were right. All this sterilization had to be done with a big pressure cooker they ordered at a local hardware store because no one else around there sold them anymore. Pressure cookers could explode if not properly sealed, or if it was opened prior to relieving the pressure valve, so they had to be extra careful using it. Given Tom’s proclivity for finding his way into accidents, Carl took it upon himself to handle that department.

After months of failed attempts in the camper, they moved the setup to Carl’s folk’s house. They needed to operate in a more sterile environment, and then they could figure something out from there. Carl’s mom and dad had made a decent living and started saving young. They were retired now and were spending three months in Florida for the second year in a row. This had been their plan for years, and their dream had finally come true. They left after Thanksgiving, and the boys set up shop.

After navigating their way through the trials and tribulations of amateur mycology, they were finally enjoying the fruits of their labor. A day to relax by the fire and reset a little. Between the new project and work, they were the busiest they had ever been.

# 

## October 31 2003

Halloween fell on a Friday that year, perfect night for a party. After several more months as weekend mycological warriors, they had learned the craft, and they were having much more success. They were able to set up a spot in a temperature controlled storage box they built beside the camper. They learned new methods to colonize more jars from previous jars, so they didn’t have to do as much sterilization which meant they didn’t have to grow every batch from spores. This really cut down the time it took for them to harvest successive batches. They had been selling Ben the bulk of their experiments. He was really the only person they knew, and could trust, to help with something like this. Their operation needed to be extremely hush-hush. The arrangement was mutually beneficial of course. Ben could fund his next tour, and they got some extra cash to help fund their ongoing project. The outlaw aspect of this endeavor was their least favorite part, and they shared all this with no one. They had managed to stash away 5k, but they were in no hurry to spend it. After all, it would seem pretty suspicious to their families and coworkers if they suddenly went on a spending spree. Later, they would be glad they saved the nest egg, as the project continued to expand exponentially beyond what they could’ve imagined.

After sparking a huge joint of some killer Ben graciously gave them, they pulled the camp chairs closer to the fire, setting their shoes on the toasty outer rocks of the fire pit, to discuss the next phase.

“Your folks still jetting on Black Friday?” Tom asked.

“Hell yeah. I love ‘em…but, I love having the place to myself too. I want to get my own place soon, but with them gone three months of the year now, and hanging with you at the camper, it just doesn’t make sense yet.” Carl said to Tom. This was also a way for him to check in and give Tom an easy opportunity to say if he was overstaying his welcome at the camper. But, Tom never said anything, he preferred not to be alone.

“Cool beans. Let’s take the spore setup there and get as many fully colonized jars as we can before they come back.” Tom said.

“Meth Lab at Mom’s House on the next Maury!” Carl said sarcastically. “Are we going full Pablo now?”

“I think we’re ready…Not for Pablo,” backtracking, realizing this sounded like an endorsement to become drug kingpins. “It’s time to try to find out what that spore print in the box is. The book you originally found the ‘modo man illustration in was all about tribal cultures. They used hallucinogenic plants and toad secretions for different rituals related to fertility and communion with their ancestors and shit. This has to be one of those, right?” Tom asked rhetorically. “Now it’s our turn to give it a shot,” he said referring to the theory they’d been floating. They thought it was possible Wilhelm had discovered the box and the key, and he had more than likely taken the piece of spore print to attempt some experiments of his own. From several of the later diary entries, Wilhelm seemed to be describing the location of the dig where the idol was found, but the descriptions were confusing. Something about them didn’t seem to make sense.

“Do you think they’ll work? Those spores seem…ancient.” Carl asked.

“It’s worth a shot. I’ve been reading anything I can find about mycology. Scientists believe under the right conditions, spores can survive thousands of years and may even be able to withstand the vacuum of space and still be viable. Pretty resilient little suckers.” Tom replied.

“Starting to sound like a scientist yourself there.” Carl joked.

“Hardly.” Tom chuckled.

“This seems freaking crazy in the best way. We are growing ancient mushrooms from inside a lizard statue that you bought at a dead guy’s house. And then what…we are going to eat them?…” Carl was pumped. Apprehensive as they were at the prospect, they knew this was unique and special. “You have now tuned into the sounds of Roni Size and Rahzel.” Carl broke into robot voice and proceeded to beatbox a few bars.

They hopped in Carl’s pickup and headed over to a nearby Halloween bonfire party. These bonfire parties went from “In da Club” to “Beer for my Horses”. Not exactly songs that Carl and Tom listened to, but it’s what was popular in their area. All the peeps they used to party with in high school would be there and probably half of the high school too. That was how it went down in this area. There weren’t enough people around to have multiple parties. Everyone showed up wherever there was a party which occasionally led to fights between different cliques. Sometimes adults would get pissed if someone there was too young, and the kids got upset if some older guy was creeping. But, for the most part it stayed peaceful, and everyone just had a good time. Even though the mix wasn’t ideal, the beauty lying in the chaos wasn’t lost on Tom and Carl. They parked in a field next to a Geo Metro with a donut on it, and leaning against the hood, Harry Potter yelled, uncharacteristically, into his cellphone.

“I’m not driving back over there. It’s too late. Find your own ride.”

They passed another group of three sitting on a tailgate. One of them held up a beer bong for a kneeling guy in a football jersey with a backwards cap. That was his everyday costume. Next to the bonfire, they found a couple of friends passing a bottle of Jim Beam. Jack Sparrow took a swig and passed it to Carl.

“Arrrgh, matey!” he said before tilting the bottle back.

“Shouldn’t you be drinking rum?” Tom quipped to Captain Jack as a familiar face caught his eye through the flames.

She was in mid conversation, and Tom watched her for a moment. The jet black hair framing her face was being distorted from the heat of the bonfire. Lydia had left for college in fall of ‘01, and that was the last time they saw each other. They had started dating their sophomore year of high school and were almost inseparable until she left. Carl and her got along too because she was one of them. She got all their dumb references, and she never made Carl feel like a third wheel. Carl had some girls over the years too, but they never wanted to chill with his friends as much. They always wanted him to morph into their world but would never fully accept his. Tom made his way around the fire and approached Lydia from the back. He made a shushing motion with his finger to the person she was talking to. He tapped her on the shoulder and walked around the other side as she turned to look. When she turned back, he was standing in front of her, smirking.

“Happy Halloween!” Tom said to her in a spooky voice.

“That was great,” said the friend who saw him coming. He recognized her friend from back in high school, but they only knew each other in passing. “Well it was nice catching up. Good luck with your classes. Later,” the friend said to Lydia before she walked off.

Alone now, Lydia darted her eyes at Tom, then looked away, but kept her peripheral gaze on him. Her eyes looked into his and flashed from “Hello” to “I miss you” to “What in the fuck are you looking at?” to “Fuck me” and back again in the course of a second. Two years of getting over her and it was all undone by this mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

“No costume?” she said.

“You know I’ve always felt weird dressing up. Although, it does look fun sometimes. What are you supposed to be?” he asked.

“Nothing, silly. Been too busy with college. I was just glad to have a weekend without much homework, so I could come home and see Mom and Tyler.” Tyler was her younger brother that was six years younger than Tom was. “He just got his license. He’s right over there,” she said, pointing to a group of Malibu’s Most Wanted passing a blunt. “You got to go say hi to him at some point.”

“That’s Tyler?” Tom said, confused. “Last time I saw Tyler he was watching Power Rangers,” he said remembering how that had seemed weird because he was fourteen and way too old for that. He was used to seeing Tyler play chess on his computer alone and make up plays with his action figures.

“Yeah. That changed overnight. He got different clothes, baggie jeans, white T’s, Tim’s, all right before the start of his freshman year, and he basically went into high school a different person. Got some friends and never looked back. Mom and I don’t even go there with him. We’re just glad he’s out doing stuff and who knows, maybe he’ll be somebody else for college.”

Tom had to really fight back the urge to say ‘Like you did!’. He was still hurt by the way they fell apart, but he was sure she was too.

“I’ll make sure to say hi. That little prick never let me win a game of chess,” he joked.

Their relationship had not ended well. They were just too young at the time. Things were going good between them, but when it came time for college, she made the decision to end things. She wanted to focus on school and didn’t want to go through the long distance struggles she had heard so much about. It was a perfectly reasonable thing for a young woman to do, but his insecurities and immaturity kicked into high gear. Then he really messed things up. He said some things related to her desires to fornicate with half the college, even though he knew nothing could be further from the truth. She truly loved him but had to move on, especially after that fight. But now seeing him, she too, couldn’t contain the chemicals flooding her brain. They talked for a while, but both of them made sure to keep it light. Carl walked up with a big stupid grin plastered across his face.

“Aww snap! Deetz in da house!” Carl said, sounding like he had taken more than a couple of swigs off that Jim. His nickname for her, Deetz, was based on Winona Ryder’s character Lydia Deetz in Beetlejuice. Lydia definitely had some of the same dark attitude and style.

“C-dizzle! How you been? Keeping this guy straight?” she said, motioning to Tom.

“Pffff!” he said, acknowledging her joke. “Just the same boring shit. School good?”

“Good as it can be,” she answered.

“Look man, I’m trying to get out of here. Want a ride?” Carl said to Tom. “You should come,” he said looking at Lydia, being the best wingman a friend could have.

Lydia hesitated for a moment and said, “I really shouldn’t. I told Mom I would keep an eye on Tyler tonight and make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble.”

“I feel ya. Well good seeing you. I’m out!” Carl said and looked at Tom. “You?”

“Yeah. I’m coming. Give me a second. I’ll meet you at the truck.” Tom said and Carl gave Deetz a hug. “It was great seeing you,” he said to her and headed back in the direction of the truck.

“Yeah. It was really nice seeing you.” Lydia said to Tom. “Hey, I got a new cell number before I went to college, but after…well you know, everything, I just never gave you the number. I’m coming back for Thanksgiving break. Maybe you could give me a call, and we could hang out?”

“Yeah sure. I changed numbers too,” he said pulling out his flip phone so they could exchange numbers.

“Hey! Don’t let Carl drive like that. You’re driving right?” she asked, looking Tom directly in the eyes.

“No, of course not. I’ll drive,” he said with no previous intention of driving. But, as always, she was right. Carl was pretty hammered. “It was great running into you like this!”

“Same. Well… Carl’s waiting,” she said and after an awkward pause, they had a brief and even more awkward hug. Tom contained his emotions and just smiled as he walked away, but inside he was bursting at the seams.

Tom made his way over to Tyler to say a quick hi and bye. Tyler tried to act cool, which meant he couldn’t act excited to see him, but Tom could tell he was. *Wow, that kid changed so much*, he thought as he walked through the field back to the truck. Getting the keys from Carl wasn’t a problem. He was never angry or combative about this type of thing. He just took it in stride and got in the passenger’s seat.

It was hard for Tom to sleep that night. He kept replaying the conversation with Lydia over and over again in his mind. Carl, on the other hand, was passed out on the floor of the camper as soon as he hit the linoleum.

# 

## November 28 2003

Black Friday was here. Several hours before, at midnight, crowds across the country were lined up at big box stores and performed the running of the bulls, *sans* bulls. Tom and Carl were packing the truck to get ready for a run of their own. It was time to set up the “lab”. That was the nickname they had given Carl’s parent’s house. Carl waved goodbye to his folks that morning. His mom kept continuously reminding him about things he needed to check and reiterating how to shut off the water, in case a pipe were to burst once the freezing temperatures set in.

Tom had always been jealous of the relationship Carl had with his parents. Carl loved his folks, but he frequently was getting annoyed with them over small things. Tom’s parents divorced when he was little. He didn’t have any memories of them all together as a family. His drunk father was still in the area, but he never checked up on his son. They had no idea what was going on in each other’s lives. Tom’s mother lived in a trailer park not far from him. He tried to encourage her to get out and do more stuff, but she was content to come home after her cashier's job and watch the soaps she taped from earlier in the day. He just let her be. If that made her happy, who was he to interfere? She had spent so much time and energy raising him, and Tom was grateful to have her. But, he wished he knew what it was like to have two loving parents, still together, and in his life the way Carl’s were.

It only took a few hours to set up the lab at Carl’s and do their first round of sterilization. From here, they would work on batches of the ancient spore print hoping to get some viable cultures. They had planned a schedule that would keep them on track, but for today, their work was complete.

Tom had called Lydia a few times since their encounter on Halloween. He didn’t want to rush anything, or seem overly eager to speak with her, but he couldn’t wait to talk to her every week. He didn’t want to mess things up this time. He wasn’t even sure there was a “this time” but he hoped there was. He had explained his meager living situation, but she still sounded interested to check it out. So, he dutifully cleaned the camper, placing more attention to detail than any other time in the previous two years since he moved in. One of the reasons he fell in love with Lydia was her non-judgmental attitude towards life and people, so he wasn’t too worried she would look down on his place. But, he was self conscious about it, so he snazzed it up the best he could. *Carl’s nickname is perfect for her,* he thought. *Her eyes have that soft, innocent charisma that Lydia’s in the film did…..And, this is the kind of thinking that is going to get me into trouble. There’s nothing going on here,* he told himself. Any hesitation he felt stemmed from trying to guard against his own feelings because he knew he had never truly gotten over her to begin with.

“Goose old buddy?” Tom said to Carl as they sat in the camp chairs taking a rest after getting back from the lab.

“Yeah, Maverick?” Carl said wondering where he was going with this.

Tom’s voice got serious. “Deetz is coming over tonight.”

“Nice! Be like the ol’ days tonight.” Carl said, excited. Swaying back amd forth in his chair, he belted out the chorus to George Clinton’s classic “Atomic Dog”. Then, his face changed realizing what Tom meant by the nicknames. “Wow! Relegated to wingman status now?” Carl sounded deflated.

“No. No, it’s not like that.” Tom said, hoping he hadn’t upset Carl.

“No. I get it. I really do. It’s not a problem. I’ll get out of here.” Carl said in a genuine tone.

“Carl. Just hang out with us and have a good time…..just find a reason to head out early. We just need some time alone, to talk in person.” Tom said reassuringly.

“Makes sense. Song still works though.” Carl bounced back into “Atomic Dog”, and they laughed at the insinuation that Tom was the proverbial dawg chasing the cat.

Tom went into the camper, got his boombox, and popped in a Handsome Boy Modeling School CD. Then, he prepped some smoking apparati for Lydia’s arrival. She rolled up shortly after, and Tom gave her the grand tour of the camper. He had put the bed away beforehand to make the digs look a little more spacious. Afterwards, they all sat around the fire smoking and exchanging stories. Tom and Carl had agreed beforehand to keep all the weird ancient mushroom stuff out of the discussion. Tom thought it made sense. He didn’t want to get off on the wrong foot and that could make him come across like he had lost his mind the past couple years. As the conversation continued, Lydia said something interesting related to one of her environmental science classes.

“…so they’re discovering all these fungi that can help fix environmentally damaged areas. Algae that can eat oil spills and mushrooms that can pull toxic chemicals out of contaminated soils.” The last sentence made Tom and Carl smile at one another thinking about their own special mycological project.

“That’s wild.” Tom said “Life…finds…a way,” in a comical, staggered Jeff Goldblum.

“Speaking of ‘finding a way’, I need to be finding my way outta home slice.” Carl said, looking at Tom.

“Nooo.” Deetz said in a whiny voice. “Don’t leave yet!”

“I uh…told my neighbors I would watch their dog this weekend, and I’ve been slacking off this afternoon. But, it was great seeing you again. You coming back for Christmas?” Carl asked.

“Yeah. Whole week until after New Years.”

“Well, let’s hang then. More than just once. Peace out, girl!” he said, giving her a hug. “Alright later amigo,” he said, giving a sideways five to Tom.

Tom gave him that look that said ‘Thanks little buddy!’ knowing there was no dog for Carl to walk, and he was probably going to sit alone and rewatch Dogma for the umpteenth time. The wind had kicked up, so they decided to move the convo inside the camper. Tom cut on two ceramic heaters, and he and Lydia sat in the booth across from each other. After a few minutes, it had warmed up enough they were able to take off their big coats and gloves.

“Man…I didn’t realize how much I miss having that bloke around.” Lydia said, sounding reminiscent about seeing Carl again.

“Carl’s the best…I couldn’t make it around here without that dude.” Tom said and looked at Lydia. “He really helped me after you left.” His tone took a downshift. “I was pretty lost.” He paused and they both glanced down at the table. “I just really wanted…needed, to say how sorry I am for how things ended. You didn’t deserve that. I was just hurt, and I acted really immature…..I didn’t want to face you leaving, and I lashed out in the worst way.” She looked up at him as he continued. She could see his voice was trembling and he was trying not to cry. “I am so sorry, and I understand you not speaking to me…and I am so glad we’ve been able to talk again. I wanted to say something on the phone but it just didn’t seem right. I wanted to see you and tell you…in person,” he said, trying to find his words. “So again I’m sorry…and I’m so glad you’re here now.” He smiled as the last part came out because he hadn’t realized how much he had missed her. Now, he could be honest with himself as well.

“So am I.” Her voice quickened as she spoke. “I shouldn’t have left things that way. I’m not excusing what you said, but I didn’t know how to handle it either.” She slowed down, trying not to cry herself, but tears started rolling down her cheeks. “It really means a lot to hear you say that. I knew in my heart you didn’t mean that stuff, but…it was the excuse I needed…to just cut you off, and not feel guilty about it…But, it didn’t work. I have missed you so much.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He felt relieved of a burden that had been weighing on him the past two years. The relief made him realize how heavy it had been.

“I missed you, too.” he said, grabbing both her hands and squeezing them. “One second,” he said, putting a finger in the air. Her eyes followed him as he got up and reached into the bathroom. He came back with a roll of toilet paper.

He started tearing off a section as she jokingly asked “Spare a square?” using the back of her hand to wipe her cheeks.

Tom laughed and handed her the TP. He wiped his eyes as well and returned the roll to the bathroom. As he turned back to the booth, Lydia stood up and kissed him. She was almost as tall as Tom and their heads weren’t far from touching the ceiling of the camper as they embraced.

They both closed their eyes and when the kiss ended a few seconds later, they stared at each other. Their eyes went from displaying tearful reconciliation to animalistic hunger. Two years of passion and desire were suddenly unleashed. He grabbed her short black hair and kissed her again, as he pushed her butt against the edge of the booth. Her nose ring touched his cheek as she hopped up on the table and wrapped her legs around him. All these layers were slowing their progress, which was only making the anticipation more intense, as they peeled them off. *The bed, shit, the bed,* he thought as he looked over to see the bed in bench mode. *Aww screw it*, *why am I worrying about that right now,* he thought and continued where he left off.

She spent the night and left early in the morning. They said a quick, awkward goodbye, and as she walked away, it was hard for Tom to watch her leave.

# 

## December 26 2003

It was the Friday after Christmas, and the jars of ancient spore culture were coming along nicely. In fact, they hadn’t experienced any contamination so far, which seemed unusual. Usually one or two jars out of twenty would go bad, but not with this batch. The mycelium from the bottle psilocybin mushrooms had always been white and looked powdery. The new batch was also white, but it had a shimmery appearance like soap bubbles instead. Tom and Carl had both noticed the difference that morning as they transferred the jars to tubs. They were hoping to have their first batch of fruits in a few weeks. Everything was on schedule.

Lydia and Tom had kept in contact since Thanksgiving, and things were going really well between them. After putting their cards on the table last time, the air was clear, and they were able to keep things free of expectations. They had both decided to not put any labels on their new relationship for now, hoping this would help them both cope with the distance aspect. She was a two and a half hour drive away which wasn’t bad for weekends, but she still needed to concentrate on school. That’s why she decided to only visit on breaks, and Tom totally understood her decision. They were supposed to hang out for the first time since she had come by the camper, and Tom couldn’t wait.

He and Carl had revisited the idea of letting Deetz in on the project. They both had their reservations but decided to go for it. They figured if they both told her it would help legitimize this whole thing, but they weren’t sure how they were going to come across. She had always been thick as thieves with them, and they thought she deserved to know. After lunch with her meemaw, Lydia arrived at the camper, and they got all the excitement of seeing her again and small talk out of the way before diving in. Tom and Carl started the story at the beginning, telling her about the estate sale. The house. The office. The books. The diary. The idol. The key. The accident. The box. The spores. The shrooms. The money. The whole project. She sat and listened to both of them tell the whole story without saying a word.

“So…?” Tom said, hoping she hadn’t thought they flipped their lids.

“Wow…that’s a lot to take in,” she said, inhaling.

“Yeah, we know it sounds crazy…But, we had to let the Deetz in!” Carl said, taking a drag off his cigarette.

“It doesn’t sound crazy.” she said looking at Carl. “I just don’t know what to think yet. Are you guys going to try them?” she asked, turning to Tom.

“Yes, I think we have to. We’ve both been so curious, and we’ve been working on this thing a long time.” Tom could sense some trepidation from Lydia. “But, I read about several ways to field test for toxicity, so I think that’s a good way to start. If they aren’t toxic, and we start with small doses, work our way up, I think we could do it safely,” he said, attempting to reassure her.

“Let me help,” she quickly replied.

Tom and Carl looked at each other. They hadn’t expected this.

Lydia continued, “I can probably find a more reliable test for toxicity, and be a trip sitter to monitor. You need an objective, sober observer. Something this big deserves a little more planning, and you two sound like you need some help.”

“Hell yeah! Thanks girl.” Carl said.

They all piled into her two-door black Honda Civic and headed over to Carl’s place. They gave her a quick tour of the lab they had been using to do their experiments. As she looked around and took in the scope of the project, she gave Tom a few looks, and he could tell she was impressed with their work. They showed her the schedule and she realized how close they were to having the first batch. Lydia said she would get as much school work done in advance so she would have time to come back around Valentine's Day weekend. Tom was definitely happy to hear they would get to spend more time together now that she was an accomplice in their mayhem.

Lydia and Tom spent the rest of the break until after New Years together. They both felt so good being around one another. This was the most time they had spent together in years, and they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other. Carl could tell, so he made sure to keep himself busy and not pop in on them unexpectedly. They did have a New Year’s Eve blowout at the camper, and they shared some of the fruits of the previous experiments with Lydia. Carl brought over some cheap fireworks to celebrate and enhance the experience.

Lydia had so much positive introspection that night, and it was the reset she needed before the next semester. Recently, the stress of her schoolwork was becoming overbearing. The boys were the busiest they had ever been as well. Floating on the clouds together was the reboot they all needed, a time to connect and be human without mental constraints.

# 

## February 14 2004

Since the New Year's blowout, Lydia had a mini epiphany and was thinking a lot about her future career goals. Her current major was in Environmental Science, but she decided to reorganize her classes for the spring semester. She still needed plenty of science related electives, so she decided to take courses related to mycology and some prerequisites for higher level courses. Then, after the semester was over she could reassess her major. Either way, it wouldn’t be a step back, and the classes wouldn’t go to waste. She just needed to see where this new interest could go and wanted to be a real asset to their strange project.

In the previous weeks, Carl and Tom watched in amazement as the mushroom pins formed, and the ancient fruiting bodies came forth. The mushrooms looked different from any they had seen before. The surface was extremely smooth and glossy, but not wet to the touch. They were a light purple color and had small caps about an inch and a half in diameter, just like the spore print. They still had half the original print in the box. The fruits were also very uniform in size which was different from any of the other previous experiments. They also felt very firm, much denser, and the stems were hexagonal. They took new spore prints and stashed some in the hiding spot with the original.

Tom and Carl always dried their mushrooms before consuming them, knowing they could get a more accurate dosage that way, and it was also the proven method that was used for long term storage. Usually a mushroom is about ninety percent water, so when it’s dried it weighs about ten percent of the wet weight. But, when they dried their new experiments, they weighed about half the wet weight. These things had a much denser mass than any mushrooms they had read about, and they had been reading as many books on the subject as they could find, not just the ones in Wilhelm’s collection. This meant they could get about five times of these ancient bad boys in one batch versus the yield they got with the other batches. Tom couldn’t believe almost two years had passed since buying Wilhelm’s mystery.

Friday night as they all hung out by the fire pit, they told Lydia about all their new findings. Through her regular phone calls with Tom, she had let them know about her course changes this semester. She was talking fast with excitement, trying to give them tidbits of all the new info she had gained, as she prepped a toxicity test to get the ‘all systems go’ for tomorrow. After triple testing, they looked over all the results and didn’t see anything alarming. They all agreed they should be safe to consume.

Saturday morning was here, Valentines Day, and the grand experiment was upon them. Carl pulled up in his truck about 9 AM, and they sat in the camp chairs and had some coffee. Luckily it was pretty warm for February. Not having to wear a bunch of layers was more conducive to their undertaking. They agreed that starting early in the day was smart, especially since they didn’t exactly know what to expect.

“You guys ready for this?” Lydia asked. She had weighed two small doses of the Ancients. The doses looked really small given how dense they were, and they definitely wanted to start small.

Tom sang a few bars of “Ready or Not” by The Fugees and Carl joined in.

Taking it slowly wasn’t their style really. The small doses consisted of a tiny piece of cap and stem that were smaller than the size of sweet pea. They did a “cheers” motion with their cupped palms, opened their mouths and tossed them in. They didn’t know what to expect. All the psychedelic mushrooms they had before smelled extremely mushroomy and really didn’t taste that good. In the days leading up to this, they had noticed the Ancients didn’t seem to have any odor. Now as Lydia watched intently, Carl and Tom looked at each other in astonishment.

“What the crap?” Tom said, grabbing Carl’s arm and scrunching his face together and rubbing his tongue around the inside of his mouth.

“Are you okay?” Lydia said, alarmed by Tom’s sudden reaction.

“I’m fine.” Tom said, trying to quell her fears. “It just went away.”

“Yeah. Mine dissolved with the quickness….and there was…like no flavor.” Carl said.

“Ditto.”

“But you feel okay? Do you feel anything?” she said looking for reassurance looking at both of them.

Carl paused to see if he noticed any effects. “Nothing yet.”

“Same here. It was just weird the way it evaporated like cotton candy.”

“That’s good, I guess,” she sighed and paused. “I’d be a little worried if they kicked in that fast.”

They sat down and waited. Carl and Tom were just looking around at their surroundings trying to notice if they could feel anything different. Of course, it was hard to escape the placebo effect and not fool themselves into feeling a phantom tingling sensation or notice something distorted in the corner of their vision. Lydia was watching them, and so far she didn’t see any changes. Thirty minutes passed and still nothing.

“I’m feeling nothing.” Carl said. “ Let’s walk down to the creek. Get the blood flowin’ and help move things along.”

“Let’s do it.” Tom said, sounding a little dejected. “Nothing here either. Whatcha think Lyd?”

“If you guys are fine, might as well. But…if either one of you start to feel anything, let me know, and we turn this carnival right around and come back. Okay?” she said sternly.

“You’re in charge.” Tom said, giving her a thumbs up.

They grabbed some water and started on the trail behind the camper that led down to a stream. It only took a few minutes to walk down there, and it really wasn’t impressive, just a two foot wide channel of water snaking around the bottom of the hill. There was a fallen log that was the perfect bench height that they had all sat on for years, at different times, contemplating life. They sat there and no one said a word as they waited for something to happen. After about another half hour, they got restless and headed back up the hill towards the camper. Tom stopped to pee before leaving the tree line and Lydia stopped behind him.

“Anything? Feel any different down there?” she said half joking.

“Wanna check?” Tom said flirting as he zipped up.

When they got back to the camper, Tom put on a trance mix CD that he loved and started a fire.

After another half hour, Carl spoke. “I’m feeling jack. Nothing. You?” looking at Tom.

“Bupkis.”

“It’s been an hour and a half. I think we should take some more?” Carl turned the sentence into a question.

“What do you think?” Tom said, looking at Lydia.

“You guys should have felt something by now if it was going to happen. It was such a small dose, and we don’t even know if they’re psychoactive. If yall feel safe with it, then I am on board.”

Deetz grabbed another small dose equal to the first which quickly absorbed as it hit their tongues. This time it reminded Carl of one those dissolving breath strips minus the flavor, and Tom agreed with the comparison. Of course, they should have known better. Anyone who has taken drugs knows that as soon as you double down after not feeling anything, that’s when it always hits like a freight train. They, unknowingly, had just stopped on the tracks. The first sensation began to creep over Tom within a few minutes of the second dose.

“I feel something,” he said, looking at Carl.

“Me too.”’Carl said with a big grin.

Tom looked at Lydia and said, “I feel…like a warm sensation…like a tingle all over. And I feel good, but not fucked up, if that makes any sense.”

Lydia was now at full attention. “I suggest you guys just sit back, and take it all in. If anything…big…well…no…new. If anything new, or big, starts to happen, let me know.”

“Your wish is my command!” Carl said, folding his arms like a genie.

Tom nodded at Lydia in agreement and sat back, ready to report.

“The lights are getting really bright.” Carl said “and…” he trailed off as his eyes closed.

“Carl?” Tom said, then looked at Lydia. “He’s right about the lights, very…” — and he passed out too.

Lydia was up as soon as Carl passed out, checking on him, when Tom nodded off. She tried to wake them both, saying their names and shaking their shoulders. Carl’s breathing and heart rate were normal. His temperature was fine too. She quickly checked Tom as well and found everything to be normal. She noticed that both of their eyelids were barely twitching as if they were dreaming. They had discussed this possibility and many others in the planning phase. As long as their vitals were normal and they weren’t convulsing, she was to leave them alone for up to two hours. That seemed like a long time, but it was a risk they had accepted going into this. If the vitals were wrong or they went over the time limit, she was to call an ambulance immediately and say she found them this way and she didn’t know what they had taken. It wasn’t the best plan and pretty immature in hindsight. For now, Deetz would stick with the plan and continue to watch them and do a vitals check every fifteen minutes. She had agreed to this and was instantly regretting it. Her mind kept racing with negative thoughts. *What if blood isn’t getting to the brain?* …*Well, they would turn blue,* she thought, trying to console herself. The thought of them turning blue was hardly a consolation. She grabbed a cigarette and lit it up, attempting to calm her own nerves. Their vitals seemed fine, but hers were definitely elevated. After the cigarette, she checked them over again. Everything still appeared fine. She smoked another cigarette, and then checked them over for a third time. It had only been twenty minutes. *How am I going to make it through a full two hours of this?* She repeated this cycle a few more times: worry, cigarette, check the boys, worry more.

\*\*\*

Tom was suddenly outside of his body. He could still feel it, but he couldn’t control it. Normally, this would have scared the shit out of him and sent him into a panic, but it didn’t. He felt calm, relaxed, and oddly, he still didn’t feel as though he was tripping. He turned to look at Carl and saw him sitting in his chair, he appeared to be asleep. In front of him was a sphere of light that had the same shimmering quality as the mycelium from the ancient spores. Tom tried to say Carl’s name but no words came out. As he tried to speak, he could sense something he hadn’t felt before. He was thinking of speaking, and the thoughts carried a resonance in his mind like speech.

‘Hey man !?!’ he heard Carl reply to him, but it wasn’t sound and it wasn’t a voice. It was as though Carl’s thoughts were there with his thoughts.

‘Carl?’ Tom thought.

‘Yes Duderino.’ Carl thought.

‘I think we're doing telepathy or something.’

‘Doing telepathy or something? That’s a funny way to say it. But, I think we are my friend.’ Carl thought. ‘Hey let me try something. I want to think of something I don’t want to say to you and see if you can tell what it is. Ready, go!’

‘Nothing. I got nothing.’ Tom thought.

‘Good. I was thinking about your mom.’

‘Oh snap! I think you just did the first telepathic *your mom* joke.’ Tom thought amused.

‘Are we dead?’ Carl thought peacefully.

‘Good question. I hope not.’ Tom thought and looked back at Lydia who seemed to be frozen in motion getting up from her chair with a worried look plastered across her face. ‘Well, if we are dead, at least you’re here with me, little buddy.’

‘I can feel the sarcasm in your thoughts skipper.’ Carl thought as they both were still adjusting to this new paradigm. Carl looked at his body and could sense his body was not dead. ‘I can still feel my body, so I don’t think we’re dead.’

‘Good call! I can feel mine too.’ Tom said, reassuring himself. Everything around them was extremely vibrant and bright. Tom tried to interact with Lydia with no success. ‘It’s like everything is frozen,’ he thought and Carl agreed with the observation. It appeared they couldn’t interact with the physical world at all, but what they could observe was unbelievable. Tom floated over to the tree line and was looking at a massive pine tree that was a few hundred years old. He could sense the sap and nutrients flowing through it and feel the sun’s photons hitting the needles, which appeared like fiber optics, all lit up. ‘Hey, come check this out,’ he thought to Carl. Carl floated over from the fire pit to join Tom.

‘Man that fire pit is something else. You can feel the chemical reactions happening inside the fire.’ Carl thought with a childlike wonderment.

‘Check this tree out!’ Tom thought to him.

‘It’s like we have x-ray vision…but in full 3D…’ Carl couldn’t believe the things he was sensing all around him.

‘…but even better!’ Tom finished Carl’s thought. ‘I can feel how old it is. I can feel a fire from a hundred years ago. A swing that was hanging here…’ he thought zooming in on a large branch on a nearby oak. ‘…forty years ago. It’s like feeling history.’

Tom focused on the tree and the sensation. The history of the tree took over his field of vision like a full sensory mini movie playing out before him. He sensed he could control the speed and flow of events to see what he desired and absorb it at the desired pace. He attempted to send what he was seeing over to Carl.

‘Can you see these…memory movies?’ he asked Carl.

‘Yes I can. They just appear as I focus on something…It’s way better than 3D…it’s 4D, you can feel everything!!! It’s wild how we seem to be able to independently control them but also share them?’ Carl thought, perplexed yet impressed at the notion. ‘Also, the speed. I followed you from that tree to that branch…at ludicrous speed?’ he joked.

‘Race you to your body!’ Tom thought and they both felt a countdown kick in.

‘Three…..two…..one…..Go!’ they both thought.

They were back at their bodies before they had time to think. Looking at their shimmering spheres floating above their bodies, they both agreed there was no winner in that race. They looked down at Lydia smoking a cigarette. The nicotine cloud just hovered there in the air around her.

Carl suddenly darted towards Tom’s uncle’s house and was gone. Tom followed, curious what he was up to, and arrived right next to him. They explored the house together. They could feel the previous owners' children playing in the attic, drawing on the walls. There were two slaves in the kitchen area, from a couple hundred years ago, chopping vegetables. The smell of a delicious stew accompanied this memory as it replayed before them. There was a giant antique chopping block that had been with the house since it was built, and it was packed with as many stories to tell as notches on its surface. These 4D memories were only accessible when they wished to access them, otherwise things appeared stuck in the present, complete with Tom’s uncle still asleep in bed. He was trying to catch up on his sleep from a strenuous work week. Carl found his dirty magazines in the bathroom and really wished he hadn’t let his curiosity take over, these were not the kind of memories he wanted to access. Tom flew to the barn outside and felt the tug of a flounder from last summer on his uncle’s fishing rod. Carl followed him, and they both could sense a Confederate soldier hiding under some hay in the corner. An old well that was filled in forty years ago, when the new one was drilled, held the memory of a little girl’s body wrapped in burlap and rope with her mother leering down from above.

‘Do you sense that?’ Carl thought to Tom as they blipped here and there.

‘What?’

‘Like a slight…pulling sensation from your body.’

‘Now that you mention it…or think it…or whatever, I do feel it.’ Tom thought. They moved back and forth together in unison paying close attention to the sensation.

‘It’s like a bungee cord attached to our bodies,’ thought Carl.

‘I kinda like that…being tethered to my body feels…safer. Let’s see how far we can go?’ Tom thought to Carl as he zipped towards the neighbor’s old farmhouse sitting alone in a corn field across the road from his uncle’s house.

‘Feels fine to me.’ Carl thought as they stopped on the porch. They could both still feel the support of the tether attached to their bodies, gently anchoring them.

‘Should we go in?’ Tom asked. His uncle’s house hadn’t felt like a violation, but this was, at least voyeurism, and possibly worse, he wondered. He passed his trepidation on to Carl.

‘I get it. But, we can’t seem to affect anything…and as far as we know, no one has done this before. We have to explore and experiment a little. Wasn’t that what this was? Some big experiment? And, we have no idea how long this will last?’ Carl thought. That last thought should have distressed them, but it didn’t for some reason. They both still felt a sense of calm.

As they entered the Beaumont’s farmhouse, they could sense the owners and who they were. They had met them before when they had a barn sale, but now they could sense all the intimate details of their life and their children’s lives and their grandchildren and so on. This farm was recognized as a Century Farm by the state, meaning it had remained in the same family for over a hundred years. Unfortunately, they sensed their family had used this house to hold KKK meetings in the 1930’s, and they witnessed other unsavory acts done by some of the family’s distant kin. In a shed out back, they felt a father carving some wooden toys for his son who was yet to be born.

After they finished exploring the Beaumont’s, they zipped from house to house, to trailer, and even over to their old high school. The feelings of births, deaths, love, sex, and everything in between were all around them, in a bottomless matrix of time. If there was a story to tell in a place or an object they could sense it all, at will. Tom and Carl felt the despair of a lost wedding ring in 1983. It was right there where it slipped off the man’s finger while planting flowers next to the school sign, just below the surface. They felt an affair between the English teacher and a lunch lady in 1975, the year the school opened. *That’s one way to christen it,* they thought. An abusive boyfriend dropped his girlfriend off for a day educating the youth of America. They could sense the bruises she was covering up. The good, the bad, and the ugly were all available, waiting to be chosen, from the heaps of memories piled around them.

They went to Carl’s house, but only for a second, before he thought ‘I can’t do this,’ for obvious reasons, and they moved on. He didn’t want to stumble across anything lacivious about his parents. He didn’t need to shatter the image of them he had in his mind. Carl’s house was about six miles from the camper, and this was the first place they agreed they could both feel the tether more than before.

‘Let’s see how far this bungee can go bro.’ Carl thought, in SoCal surfer dude.

They consciously moved together side by side, outward away from the camper. As they got further from Carl’s house, they were moving slower and the world around them started to become animated, ever so slowly. A suspended bird in the sky was now moving in ultra slow motion. The gracefulness with which it flapped its wings was on full display. Tom shared the thought with Carl. Continuing to the county water tower, they were now moving at golf cart speed, and shortly after, they could move no further. They were probably about twenty miles from the camper. The tether was taut, but they felt no discomfort. Their surroundings were moving at normal speed. A car passed. The wind blew. They paused briefly and took it in.

‘Let’s head back again. I want to see how long it takes.’ Tom thought, wanting to check on Lydia.

They started back, and instead of their momentum slowing, it was now accelerating back up to ludicrous speed as they rocketed towards the fire pit. The sensation was exhilarating like nothing they had ever felt before. As they reached the Beaumont’s, Carl shot into the air in an arc, through the clouds and down to his body, as Tom stayed low following Carl’s ball of light with his thoughts. Lydia was now on one knee checking Tom’s pulse in a statuesque pose. They could sense her worries, but they could also sense she would be okay. They thought about it and agreed to try to send some calming vibes towards her. It didn’t seem to have any effect, but it was worth a try. They again tried to move their bodies and communicate verbally to no avail. *More time to look around,* they thought together.

‘That Superman leap you took looked pretty sweet!’ Tom thought.

‘Faster than a speeding bullet!’ thought Carl in an old-timey announcer tone. ‘Try it out!’

Tom’s soap bubble shot straight up towards a cloud above and Carl followed. They flew straight up and through the clouds to the limit of the invisible tether and snapped back and shot with purpose straight back down through the clouds to just above the ground and swooping up and again doing barrel rolls enjoying this new found freedom. They found they could move in ways that defied physics, darting at sharp angles, using the spheres to make their own hieroglyphs in the sky, without slowing or altering momentum. The bubbles were moving so quickly that the light would remain for a second, leaving ephemeral trailing patterns in their wake. Through their thoughts, they coordinated together to create a recreation of the Enterprise from Star Trek, complete with light shooting from the nacelles. It only lasted a flash, but they would remember forever. They continued playing with the light for a while before Tom got another idea, and he headed for the camper with Carl trailing close behind.

Tom could see an old man, clean shaven and thin wearing a bowtie, gluing the ‘modo man back together to conceal the box as Carl watched on. *This must be Wilhelm,* they thought. Then, as Tom controlled the 4D memories, they blurred together as time floated backwards to show Wilhelm breaking the idol to retrieve the box when he first figured out what was inside. They blurred further backward to an archeologist in a wide brim hat, cleaning the idol, after carefully excavating it from a hillside deep in the jungle. The final push back in time went much further back, to an old shaman placing the ‘modo man, reverently, on a shelf in an underground temple. Tom placed his attention on the small lock box and key with the ancient spores inside. They sensed the old shaman folding the print, placing it in the box, and sealing the latch. Then, he placed the box in the bottom of an unfinished idol and dropped the key inside another matching idol. Moving up through time, Tom and Carl could sense the moment Wilhelm tore off a quarter piece of the spore print. This gave them a few more clues about Wilhelm’s items, and they decided to give the diary a look as well. Every page had another memory, sometimes several, but it still wasn’t useful without all of the context and surrounding knowledge. It was a jumble of his frustrated theorizing about the idol and the spores, fragments of ideas. They decided to revisit the diary later. They hoped as they learned more, weaving the pieces together would become easier. They couldn’t wait to tell Lydia about all of this, but it would have to wait, there was still so much to explore.

Carl and Tom tried to get inventive. Tom got the idea to go to the library. There were people sitting in chairs reading newspapers on sticks and given their proximity to their bodies they could see the page being flipped, ever so slowly, if they focused closely. It was barely perceptible. Tom wanted to feel some of the books. He found a classic. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. He felt the frustration from a student up against a book paper deadline. *Gerald’s Game* by Stephen King. He felt a bored housewife who was getting turned on at all the wrong parts. A book about managing the grief of losing a loved one was filled with the pain of several widows and parents. Julia Childs’ *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was filled with stains of the trials and tribulations of the home cooks, and just regular stains too.

This spurred Carl to another great idea. He wanted to go to the county history museum. Wasn’t much there except little bits of the Civil War, some nautical items from the Chesapeake Bay, and a couple of old farming implements. Most of the bullets from the Civil War just whizzed through the air, they hadn’t actually hit anything. *Guess that makes sense,* they thought. They found one that had struck a Union soldier in the leg, and they could feel the agony as this man bled to death in a field. These more painful memories could be felt, but they did not cause them pain. Tom and Carl did not hurt in any way, even from the most potent of the dark visions. They could experience this darkness in a passive way, yet they felt they had experienced the emotions themselves, like a memory of something that had happened to them.

From there, they went to the county jail. There was a lot there, most of it not worth mentioning, except the warden who had a fetish for sniffing the inmate’s footwear. That gave them a good thought laugh. The grocery store stank of the slaughterhouses. The church was brimming with sin. They could have spent eons in the confessional alone. Don’t even get them started on the rectory, the stuff that happened there certainly was not holy.

Tom and Carl felt they had been exploring for a really long time now, although their sense of time didn’t feel normal. They thought about checking back on the bodies but got distracted by the marquee. The local two screen movie theater was a place they treasured. It was one of their favorite escapes in real life, but now they could go back, experience all the joy, the fear, the multitude of emotions held within. They went back to the night they took dates to see Ace Ventura, but it was sold out, so they had to go see Powder instead. They could see all their lecherous desires of their teenage minds on full ugly display. They went back to the opening night of The Shining and watched everyone lose their shit. Then, they went back to seeing the Land Before Time when they were just little guys. Neither of them even had a memory of this. But, Carl’s mom had told them several times about the time she took them to the movies, and Tom threw up in the popcorn. It was fun for both of them to finally be in on the joke.

Without warning, Carl started slowly being retracted back in the direction of his body, and the same happened to Tom a few seconds after. He sped up to be beside Carl. They wondered together if they should speed this process up, but decided to let whatever was naturally occurring take its course. As they got closer, the suction sped up, and they suddenly snapped back into their bodies.

\*\*\*

Lydia knelt beside Tom checking his pulse for the fourth time. It was normal. She felt a sense of calm rush over her body. They were going to be fine she told herself and sat back lighting another cigarette. It had only been forty minutes, and except for this minor respite, she had been internally freaking out the entire time. She sat back and looked at the sky. A shooting star passed overhead. *Unusual to see in the daytime,* she thought, but took it as a sign of good luck and took another drag. After the smoke, the anxiety started to creep back in pretty heavily, and she began the routine all over again, starting with Carl’s vitals. Just after lighting her fifth cigarette in less than an hour, they woke up.

“Holy fuck! You guys scared the crap out of me! Are you alright?” Lydia shouted, tossing the half-finished cigarette into the fire.

“Yeah. I’m fine…I think.” Tom said, reacclimating to his body.

“All good here.” Carl said, speaking over Tom.

“I need a drink.” Lydia said, only partially kidding, and Carl lifted his arm pointing towards the cooler in the back of his pickup. As she got up to head for the cooler, Tom stood up and gave her a big hug. Carl jumped up too and wrapped his arms around both of them.

“Aww. You guys are so cute.” Carl said in a baby voice and Lydia broke from the hug.

“You guys were fine one second, and then suddenly, you’re passed out,” she said frantically rushing her words, trying to keep up with her thoughts. “I’m over smoking like a chimney and checking to see if you guys are still breathing every few minutes. Never doing that again. Stupid. Stupid plan. Can’t believe I thought this was a good idea. It’s fucking Valentines Day, and I feel like I’m sitting here watching my boyfriend die slowly!”

Tom melted inside hearing Lydia refer to him this way. He didn’t mean to scare her half to death, but he had to admit it felt great getting labeled her boyfriend again. With her still coming down from the stress, he tried to hide his elation.

“I’m so sorry! I know that was crazy for you. It’s alright now, everyone is good, and we are back now,” he said trying to help calm her down.

“Sorry, Deetz! That must’ve been a long…day.” Carl said, trailing off as he pulled his watch from his pocket and noticed it had only been about an hour. “What?” he said, confused.

“Long day? It was only an hour. One hour, but that’s a long time when both of you are passed out stone cold. Are you guys even tripping? You seem normal,” she said, taking a step back to look at them.

“Nope. I feel straight as an arrow. You?” Tom said, looking at Carl.

“If I was any more sober right now, I’d be…..Mother Teresa.” Carl tossed his arms in the air as he struggled to finish his analogy.

“An hour? That doesn’t make sense. It felt like a full day, a day and a night. Felt like twenty-four hours.” Tom said and Carl looked up in thought and nodded in agreement. “But we weren’t exactly passed out.” Tom said, looking at Lydia.

“That’s for sure.” Carl chuckled and began belting out “Over the Rainbow” from The Wizard of Oz.

Speaking over Carl’s singing Lydia asked “What do you mean you weren’t passed out? I was right beside you guys the entire time and you both were out like a light,” with some confusion in her voice.

They told Lydia everything over the course of the afternoon and evening. It took a long time to explain everything given how long it felt like they were gone. She was stopping with questions every other minute. *Wait, you were both there together? You could see me? And you guys never felt scared, you were calm the whole time? Telepathy? You could “feel” objects? What happened in your uncle’s well? So he likes to sniff shoes, that explains a lot. Flying? A shaman?* It was all so fantastical. It was hard for her to believe, but they were obviously not lying. Whatever happened to them, they definitely experienced it together. It was hard for them too. Trying to put some of what they felt and “saw” into verbal words was challenging at times. But after several hours of this, they all needed a break from the project for the night. Carl said his goodbyes and stopped for a monster burger combo on the way home. This was his date for the evening.

Lydia and Tom laid in the camper bed, their bodies wet with sweat. The sex that evening was aggressive, filled with Lydia’s anger over the ordeal. As they lay there catching their breath, Tom kept replaying her words over and over in his head, her boyfriend. She rolled over and turned up the ceramic heater. The cold February air, which wasn’t even a thought a few minutes ago, was now combining with the soaked sheets. He sat up, popped in a homemade VHS of music videos, and laid back down. She pulled a thick blanket from the foot of the bed, laid her head on his chest, and they snuggled up to get warm.

“You know we could tell you were worried when we came to check on you the last time.” Tom said.

“Aww. That’s sweet. You were checking on me?” she said sarcastically.

“Yes. We were,” he said smiling. “You were watching us, so I figured it was the least we could do, since none of us knew what was happening. We could sense you freaking out. We tried to use our thoughts to calm you down, but it didn’t work,” he said laughing at the end.

“Wait. When?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to place ‘cause you were like frozen from our perspective…..but you were kneeling and checking my pulse on my wrist,” he said lifting his arm.

“Okay, now you are really freaking me out,” she said and sat up. “The next to last time I checked vitals, right after I finished checking your pulse, I felt this wave of calm come over me. I felt like you guys were going to be fine and everything was peachy for a few minutes. Then it went away as quick as it came. That’s just freaky.….Do you think it was that?”

“Now you’re wiggin’ me out. I don’t know. I’d like to think it was me sending good vibes your way, but maybe we’re just stretching here.”

“Well, it gives me something to try next time.” she said nonchalantly.

“Next time?”

“Yeah. There’s no way I’m not trying this out at some point. You guys have one of the most profound experiences humans have ever had, and you don’t think I want to give it a shot. Do men have to do it for fifty years before I get a shot?” she joked. “And now I know you guys were fine and having a blast, while I was trying to figure out my alibi.”

“Look. I’m sorry, okay. We tried to let you know we were all good. But, you’re right, the experience was life changing and you deserve to try it too. It just makes me nervous, you going in there.” Tom said, concerned.

“Welp. Get over it bud. I’ve got to try it. And, it sounds like there are a lot more experiments for us to run,” she said assertively.

“You’re right. You’re right,” he said, trying to tamp down the inner desire to control her. It was never his intention, but it came instinctively. It was a way for his mind to deal with the uncertainties of life and their relationship, the control added a level of comfort. He knew this wasn’t healthy, and he was trying to squash any untoward feelings as they arose. *Recognizing your flaws is half the battle*, he thought. He noticed the reaction time for this internal monologue of self improvement seemed to happen faster than normal, as if his level of self awareness was slightly more attuned. Serendipitously, a red and white pixelated man and woman danced on the screen as The White Stripes’ video “Fell In Love With A Girl”, played in the background.*I hear you,* Tom thought to the universe.

# 

## March 20 2004

Spring Break was here. Cancun was packed with frat bros and bottle blondes shaking that ass with MTV cameras everywhere. Back home though, it still felt like winter. Punxsutawney Phil got it right this time.

The past month was filled with planning for this week. Lydia was off from school, and Tom and Carl both got out of work as well. It wasn’t easy to get the time off, but this was important, and they really didn’t care if they got fired or not. They had too many questions to answer this week. They wanted to play with dosages to see how it affected the intensity and/or the duration of the experience. Deetz told Carl about her “calming” moment, so they wanted to experiment and define the parameters of its effects. They had agreed that for this second time in, Carl and Lydia would go in together. Tom wanted to stay and monitor. As much as he wanted to go in with her for the first time, he also wanted to make sure she was safe from the outside. They were going to stick to the same dose as before, but take it all at once. They didn’t want to wait over an hour for it to work if they didn’t have to and this would knock out two experiments at the same time. Lydia and Carl were also going to send some calm thoughts Tom’s way to see if he could feel a noticeable difference. They were going to try to time it the same way they had before by checking back with Tom regularly to see where he was and use him for reference. Tom was also going to tie a bandana around his wrist to make it easier for them during that time, in case they got busy or confused about how long it had been. They also thought maybe the chairs weren’t the safest option in case they fell over when the lights went out. They decided the camper bed was the best they could do for now. Tom didn’t like the thought of Carl next to Lydia on his bed, but he would be there the whole time. He knew there was nothing there to worry about, but his insecurities still gnawed at him. *Grow up,* he thought. It was 10 AM, and they were getting prepped. Lydia and Carl drank a lot of water thinking that it may be smart for their bodies to be as hydrated as possible. After a final bathroom break, Tom weighed out the Ancients and handed them their small portions. They ate them at exactly the same time.

“Wow! You were right about the breath strip thing,” Lydia said garbled as she swirled her tongue around in her mouth.

“Minty fresh!” Carl joked.

“Lie back so you don’t fall over.” Tom said, and they reclined back in unison.

“Guess we stare at the ceiling and play the waiting game now.” Carl said.

“Maybe put on some Pixies or something while we wait?” Lydia asked.

Tom grabbed the boombox and popped in Surfer Rosa. In about seven or eight minutes, the fourth track “Broken Face” kicked in and Carl was singing along. He looked at Lydia. “I’m starting to feel it. Lights are getting brighter. How bout you?”

“Yes. I see what you meant about the warm sensation,” she said looking at Tom and laid her head back down.

Within a few minutes, they both went non-responsive. Tom turned off the music and checked their vitals and found everything to be normal. He would be checking every fifteen minutes, just like Lydia had done. On his fourth check, about forty five minutes in, he was to put the bandana on his wrist and be aware of his mental state to see if he sensed any calming effects. Even though he had been in and didn’t feel they were in any danger, he was still nervous. *I can’t even imagine how bad this was for Lyd,* he thought. *Where are they now?…..What are they exploring?…..I bet she’s having a ball!* All these thoughts kept racing through his head as he sat in silence, anxiously tapping his knee. Then, he did the second check. As he sat down, a real sense of calm washed over him and he was bathing in it for a moment when he thought, *wait… is this it…but it’s way too early.* It had only been fifteen minutes.

\*\*\*

Lydia was light and everything was illuminated. Carl was able to show her the ropes rather quickly. Feeling another person’s thoughts could be jarring at first. He pointed out the trees, and they felt Tom’s used camper. They could see two fishing buddies out at the lake having a gay tryst, unbeknownst to their wives, Brokeback Mountain style. Then, she went to Tom’s uncle and the Beaumont’s to back up the stories that she heard from the boys. There wasn’t any real science happening in these experiments, but at least they could crudely use the scientific method to get a sense of the boundaries of this place. They wanted to map out the rules as much as possible. She came up with some basic tests based on what they told her. She was able to replicate the 4D memories from the Beaumont’s and other spots. And, she also felt others too. A pet dog that was put down when it went ill with the vet there beside it. An antique clock that contained old French memories inside. She tried not to get too wrapped up in these items and stick to her plan.

Lydia wanted to go to the edge of the tether and go around the outer edge. When they got to the edge and they slowed down as the world sped up, they realized they could spend the whole day just circumnavigating the rim because they were moving so slowly. Lydia did some quick math and realized that if the radius of the body tether was roughly twenty miles, then the circumference would be about one hundred and twenty five miles. If their spheres were traveling at a normal walking pace of three miles per hour here at the limits, that would take over forty hours to trace the perimeter. And, if the boys’ original estimate of twenty four hours of time in the bubble was correct, they wouldn’t have enough time anyways. Plus, it just wasn’t as fun. She got an idea that they could travel faster to different parts of the outer rim by moving inwards towards their bodies and as the momentum picked up, they used that to slingshot to another point back out towards the edge. They did this kaleidoscopic pattern a couple of times and moved closer to Lydia’s home, which was about a thirty minute drive from the camper.

Lydia’s mom, Debra was sitting at the table having a bagel and reading the newspaper at their kitchen table by a window that looked out on the backyard. Things appeared to be happening in real time. Lydia tried to get her mom’s attention with no success, and then Carl started making the equivalent of telepathic silly faces at Debra.

‘Ha! Ha!’ she thought mockingly at Carl. ‘She can’t see you!’

They continued to explore the house. Tyler was playing Xbox in his room. Carl suddenly felt an immense sadness come over Lydia. He wasn’t alarmed because the other bad visions hadn’t hurt him and Tom in any way. *Nothing should harm her,* he thought to himself. Then, he saw what Deetz was seeing. It was her father, Dan, playing with a three year old Tyler on the floor, in between the real time Tyler and the TV. Dan was in a car wreck on the way to a late shift at the shipyard. He had a long commute from their home, just over an hour, but the pay and benefits allowed him to elevate his family out of the poverty that plagued both him and his wife’s family for generations. He didn’t want his kids to grow up the way he did. A drunk driver swerved into his lane, he hit an embankment and flipped his car. After being Life Flighted to the hospital, he was declared brain dead, and his wife had to make the awful decision to remove him from life support. Lydia was nine, and this changed her forever. Carl knew why she didn’t like it when he drank and then decided to drive, even when he hadn’t had much. He tried to be respectful of this, but he was failing in this aspect of the friend department. This was a reminder for him to do better about this in the future and be a better friend to Deetz. Since his last experience with Tom on the Ancients, Carl had begun to examine his life a little differently and was trying to be more actively aware of how his actions affected others. Now, he could feel Lydia was feeling more nostalgic and peaceful watching her dad play with lil’ Tyler. Lil Tyler was also a good nickname for him now, with his new persona. *This isn’t the time for me to interject with some stupid joke,* he thought, although that was his go-to when any situation got serious like this one. Instead, he took it all in, and he was appreciative that he got to finally “meet” Lydia’s father and share in this moment with her. He sent supportive, happy thoughts her way. When he felt the moment stretching from positive and bouncing back towards the dark, Carl reminded Lydia they should get back to check on Tom, and she agreed. They started building momentum towards the camper.

When they arrived, it looked like Tom was resting with his hand on his knee.

‘We should send some serene thoughts his way.’ Lydia thought to Carl.

‘Serenity Now!’ Carl thought doing his best George Costanza. ‘But it’s early, and he’s not wearing the bandana.’

‘Exactly. Gotta throw some variables in there. We can still do the scheduled one, but this will be a random control experiment…and it can’t hurt to make him feel good.’

‘Tom got a good one. That’s for sure.’ Carl thought to her.

They put their soothing energies together and beamed it at Tom. *Hopefully, he felt something,* they thought. Then, they went off to do more research and play.

Deetz got the idea to fly to the edge of the rim on the Eastern side. They would be out over the bay there. When they got there it was fun riding right across the surface of the water, but since they were so far away from the camper, the speed of movement was much slower. *This is cool, but not as cool as if we were going ludicrous speed,* Carl thought to himself. But, Deetz quickly found a way to make it really awesome, by going underwater. It was like their own personal mini submarines. They even found a sunken fishing boat and a Colonial era merchant ship packed with stories. They felt shady deals, a mutiny, a hurricane, and a sinking. And, all that happened just on its last day on the water. Carl felt the gentle tug of the tether retracting.

‘This shouldn’t be happening yet.’ Carl thought.

‘So this is what that feels like.’ Deetz thought. ‘So…what’s going on?’

‘Not sure, but we are about to find out.’

They were vacuumed back into their bodies.

\*\*\*

Tom thought he was probably just psyching himself out about feeling calm for a moment there. *The mind plays tricks on you,* he thought. He pulled out some beef jerky and ate a piece. He got up for a second cup of coffee when they woke up. It had only been twenty minutes.

“Well that was quick.” Tom said, puzzled.

“That’s what she said!” Carl said, and Lydia rolled her eyes.

“What happened?” Deetz said seriously.

“Not sure. Maybe the dosage? But, I think I felt yall sending some chill my way and then you woke up a few minutes later…but, it was probably just my mind playing tricks on me.” Tom said, trying to make sense of the situation.

“Nope. That was definitely us.” Lydia responded. “I wanted to try it again at a different time when you weren’t expecting it, and we were also going to do it when you had on the bandana. That was the plan anyways, before things were cut short.”

They told Tom about everything they had done and about seeing Lydia’s father. Lydia teared up telling him about the memory. He held her hand as she spoke, and as she finished, he pulled her in for a hug. He regretted missing out on this moment, but he knew they could go back together another time.

Shifting gears, Carl told Tom about going underwater and the shipwrecks they encountered. After some back and forth, they concluded the most logical explanation for the shorter time inside was due to how much more time they spent on the outer edge, where time appeared to be at normal speed.

\*\*\*

Over the next two months they ran many more experiments. Their conclusion about time on the outer rim was correct. The more time spent there, the shorter the experience. This was good to know and gave them a way to get out quicker if the need arose. They didn’t ever go too heavy with the dosage feeling there were too many uncertainties. They found a heavier dose didn’t change the effects, it only increased to duration. But that seemed unnecessary because they had also found that they could dose back to back if they wanted with no loss of effects. The basic dose seemed sufficient to handle their amatuer research.

They experimented with the “calming”. Its effects seemed extremely limited. They tried different emotions and sensations, but they didn’t seem to have any effect. A simple, soothing relaxation seemed all they could accomplish and for it to last any significant amount of time, the person inside transmitting the sensation had to stay in the same spot and focus on them for a really long time. They all were starting to become more patient with the world and with one another, but these effects were so small that they never discussed them and weren’t truly aware these benefits were slowly accumulating within all of them from these experiments.

They also discovered that the memories they found in objects stayed in their memories in almost photo realistic recall. This was a massive discovery. Also, the memories only really entered their mind if they wanted it to, which helped keep them sane. If all the history, especially the dark stuff, was just roaming around in their noggins, it would be hard to maintain any level of normalcy. Normalcy was a feeling that none of them could relate to anymore. They knew they were in on maybe one of the greatest secrets of human history, and they couldn’t share it. They agreed this was too powerful, and they knew they didn’t know enough to fully grasp the ramifications of exposing something like this.

There was one private experiment that Tom and Lydia conducted that they just didn’t feel comfortable sharing with Carl. He was close, but not that close. Lydia and Tom were in their high school gym. Lydia brought up a memory from her junior high school prom in 2000. Watching themselves laughing and dancing to Nelly’s “Country Grammar”, Tom had a flirtatious thought.

‘You look simply radiant in that light.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Lydia thought and he could feel her eye’s rolling. ‘Don’t look so bad yourself. A lot better than we did there,’ she signaled to their bad dance moves, and they both felt each other laughing.

As they stopped, their energies met like they were staring into one another’s eyes. They paused and just enjoyed the sensation of feeling each other in a way that had never been possible before. They could feel their love for each other was real. Any doubts that either of them may have had, evaporated. They opened their minds exposing their relationship to one another in a way that no other couple could. Even if they spent years in therapy, they couldn’t accomplish what Lydia and Tom were doing in seconds. He could see that her decision to breakup with him was made in an effort to try to do the right thing for both of their futures, and that it was the hardest decision she had made in her life. She could see his insecurities and even the childhood events that led to them, and she saw that he truly never meant to say those awful things. They had to open themselves up to one another and give those feelings to the other. The thoughts couldn’t be pulled from the other against their will, which made it even more of a pure gesture of togetherness. After they examined the human flaws in themselves, they began a telepathic embrace. They started sending thought beams of warmth and happiness. Then desire and lust. They pulsated together as one. They didn’t sense anything physical, everything felt like rushes and waves of immense pleasure intertwining their energies. It felt completely unique. The intensity kept rising and rising to a crescendo of spectral orgasm and their bubbles separated like a cell dividing. They were in a state of bliss. They tried to move on and continue to explore without dwelling on what had just happened, but they found themselves returning to each other on each subsequent visit inworld. As deep as these experiences were, it didn’t rob real world sex of the joys it offered. In fact, this new sex only added another level of passion to their regular old human sex. They could see each other’s desires and fantasies and then fulfill them without the sloppiness of verbal communication. They felt bonded for life and all time.

# 

## June 5 2004

It was summer, and the group had been discussing Wilhelm’s diary at great length. They had started taking doses at other locations where their bodies could be safe for an hour or so. They always tried to take every precaution, including always having one person stay on the outside to watch the bodies. Anything could happen. They were using the stash money to take short trips, so the boys continued to grow the cubes and make some deals with Ben to replenish the money. And, it was growing as well, the stash was now at 8k. They also continued to batch up the Ancients for backup, but still hadn’t made a dent in the first stash. Their first trip was to Washington DC. Their proximity made it a no-brainer, and there was so much embedded history to explore. They went to all the museums, and it was startling how many of the object labels were missing the most enthralling pieces of history connected to the items and paintings. The Natural History Museum was like being inside the walls of Jurassic Park. They explored the secret tunnels beneath the White House, going through walls had lots of advantages. So far, they hadn’t found a substance they couldn’t pass through. They also noticed there was a slight pressure change when passing through denser materials like concrete. The visual distortions that happened midway through thick objects felt like their energies were sonar mapping out the obstruction’s internal structures. Every task served as a training run, prep for the real trip, the jungles of Peru.

The gang was chomping at the bit to get there and maybe get some answers from Wilhelm’s diary, but there were a lot of obstacles in their way. They all needed passports, immunizations, guides, permission to protected archeological areas, not to mention all the money this would cost. They also had to come up with some plausible story to give to their families as to why they would be spending most of the next summer in Peru. After Lydia did some preliminary research online, they knew it would take a while to get organized. She was going to handle the bulk of the technical parts of the plan, and the boys were in charge of fundraising for their litttle excursion.

Lydia’s 21st birthday was tonight, time for another blowout at the camper. Time to partake in their cash crop for the first time since New Year’s. They had been so busy, and they just weren’t as interested since discovering the Ancients, which was now their shorthand for them. But, they needed a night off and thought the reset may also help them come up with new ideas or illuminate any blind spots they were having. Tom surprised them with a small cake he made in the tiny camper oven, and they used it to wash down the medicine after they sang Deetz Happy Birthday as she blew out her candles.

“Booyah!” Tom said, setting down the cake. “You won’t believe where I got the recipe?” he said, fishing for an inquiry.

“Martha Stewart?” Carl joked.

“No. But, just as cool, the memories from when Carl and I first went in my uncle’s kitchen. I saw it with other memories, and now I can recall the steps. Pretty cool, huh?” Tom said, so proud of himself. He had never baked before.

“Mmm. This is freakin’ delicious!” Lydia said, her mouth still half full of cake. “So now we can just have abilities from the memories we’ve collected?”

“Hardly. I went to Kim’s…” Tom said, referring to the local strip mall dojo. “…and found a championship gi that was framed on the wall on one of my last trips in.” They sometimes split up inside now that they had become familiar with the rules and felt safe being alone. “I was able to feel multiple tournaments and observe multiple techniques, hoping to become the next Daniel Larusso. But, apparently it doesn’t work like that. I can recall all the movements no problem, but I still don’t have the muscle memory or strength. I don’t have the balance or control necessary to pull it off. It would definitely give me a head start, but that’s about it. I have access to the knowledge but not the abilities, if that makes sense.”

“Daniel-san! You don’t learn karate, karate learns you.” Carl said, playfully imitating Mr. Miyagi.

“Can’t believe we hadn’t thought of that before. That could be really useful.” Lydia said, finishing her slice. They continued discussing all the possibilities. It was a night to forget about the daunting tasks that lay ahead and appreciate this unique gift that had fallen into their laps.

\*\*\*

Over the next year the boys increased the stash to 20k, but they were going to need every bit of it to fund their trip. Between the travel expenses, gear, guides, and food, they were going to be spread pretty thin. Lydia managed to get the various paperwork needed, in order, and even found a group that was still doing research at the site where Wilhelm had been working when he passed away. The team of scientists working there had little funding, so when she offered to donate two thousand to their research, they were more than happy to let her tag along at her own expense. Since her studies were science related, she was able to convince them that she would be conducting mycological research on a rare species related to her thesis project, and that she wouldn’t be getting in the way of their operation. It would also be cheaper for her to give them the money and pool resources for getting to the remote location. The mycological research for a thesis project was partially true. She would be graduating with her bachelor’s just before their departure and would be starting her Masters program when they returned. Her only stipulation with the donation was that they allow her two partners to come along. They would be paying their own way and would be able to help haul all of their gear to the site, so the researchers didn’t have a problem with her request.

The boys had to make some tough decisions about their jobs. They worked these shit jobs for lots of reasons. People saw them as slackers or stoners, but the real truth was they just wanted to be in the system as little as possible. Many late nights of discussions about the dysfunction of modern society had gotten them here. They saw the high costs of college, and neither of them wanted to take on that debt without feeling really passionate about what they were studying. They had watched most of their friends go off to college, and half of them didn’t even know why they were there, except that was what their parents and society deemed necessary. It all seemed like a big racket. Sure, the world needed scientists and doctors and those people needed college, but now the country was changing and even basic jobs were requiring a four year degree just to apply. There was nothing wrong with an art degree, but they couldn’t see paying that much for one, the students were being taken advantage of financially. They heard the saying, “College isn’t for everyone,” and figured that was meant for them. When they were in middle school and high school in the 1990’s, youth culture took on a non-conformist bent. A lot of the music was angsty and angry and filled with anti-consumerist lyrics. The groups they listened to didn’t sell out and put their music in commercials, no matter how popular their music became. The boy bands were still there, but for a moment, it seemed real art and real culture were breaking through the walls of the entertainment industry. In some ways, Woodstock ‘99 would be the swan song for that movement, and for the festival itself, but also for a generation railing against the marketing machines and commercialism. That cultural wave crested and broke that summer, and the ensuing chaos and riots scraped it all away, to pave the way for the Paris Hiltons of the world. Now, kids wanted to get deep in the muck of pointless consumerism. Money was all that seemed to matter anymore, and Tom and Carl didn’t fit into that world. They told their bosses they were taking the summer vacation of a lifetime and would have to quit. They said they would come back to see if there was work available when they returned home, but would understand if there wasn’t.

The trio had all been concerned about bringing the Ancients along with them to Peru. They knew they weren’t illegal, but no one knew they existed, and they wanted to keep it that way. They had a local contact who was to be one of their guides. They told him they needed to ship in some medical supplies and asked him to pick them up. They filled capsules with pre-measured doses and put them in an herbal supplement bottle and resealed the tamper proof packaging. Then they put that bottle in with a bunch of other medicines and vitamins, in the hopes they wouldn’t arouse suspicion and they would make it there safely. They figured worst case scenario someone could find them and take them, but that person wouldn’t have the ability to grow more without the spores. Luckily, their contact said the package arrived safely and the contents were intact.

# 

## June 18 2005

The past two weeks had been busy, Lydia had a birthday and a graduation. Tom was able to attend and screamed as loud as he could when her name was called. Combined with the final stages of prep, they had a lot going on, but now, departure day was finally here. After several connecting flights to get to Peru, they landed in the small city of Puerto Maldonado and located the hotel where they were meeting the head of the archeological research team to whom they had made the donation.

“Over here,” waved an older gentleman in his early fifties. Between the cargo pants and the fishing vest, he had plenty of pockets and looked like who they were looking for. “Jou must be Lydia,” he said with a heavy accent.

“Hi. Yes I am,” she said, shaking his hand. “And this is Tom and Carl.”

“Hello. I’m Dr. Jimenez. Javier Jimenez,” he said shaking the boy’s hands. “Jou all look so joung…but it will make it much easier for jou to carry all that gear than it is for me.” He laughed heartily, and seeing he was easy going, helped ease their nerves. The boys greeted the doctor, and he continued to fill them in on his team. “They got in to the site four weeks ago to set up base camp. We have to break it down every year. The rainy season is yust too much for it to handle. We will have three guides helping us to get there safe, with jou all and our final load of gear for the season. Thank jou all for your donation. Once jou help make this final trip in, jou three will be on jour own at the camp. All I ask is that jou stay out of the teams way and let them work, and we will do the same. Okay?”

“Yes. Of course.” Lydia said. “And, thank you again. I’m so glad this worked out for all of us.” They made plans to meet Javier in the lobby the next morning. They desperately needed rest after the day of traveling, and the journey was just getting started.

They met Dr. Jimenez before dawn and headed down to the docks on the Madre de Dios River. Tom managed to trip on a loose board and drop his hat into the water as they waved to their three guides waiting for them. As they helped load their gear onto the pequepeque, a small motorboat, Tom hung off the side of the pier and retrieved his new hat.

“Luis, so good to finally meet you.” Lydia said to their contact. “Do you have the medical supplies?”

“Yes. Here you go. Glad to see you all made it here safe.” Luis said, watching Tom shake the water off his hat before placing it back on his head. Lydia noticed how precise his English was as he handed her the box; he did not have the strong accent like Dr. Jiminez. She opened it up and found the supplements. She inspected the seal, broke it off, and used her flashlight to take a look inside. They were all there and undisturbed. They had put a small mark on their seal to know whether it had been opened, and it was still there, undisturbed. Now, they had everything they needed to begin the adventure proper.

The Madre de Dios was a wide muddy river and one the main natural highways of this region. Illegal loggers and clandestine gold miners floated alongside local fishermen and tourists. The further they got from Puerto Maldonado, the less traffic there was. Swarms of mosquitoes started following their boat down the river as the sun rose. A cattle egret flew overhead as they meandered past Monkey Island, flowing downstream with the current. Their eyes lit up at every new bend in the river. None of them had ever seen or experienced anything like this, and they had a look of awe plastered across their smiling faces to prove it. An occasional black caiman would be sunning itself on the bank, as they glided past with the small engine sputtering. They were constantly poking one another in an attempt to make them shift their attention to something happening on the other side of the boat. Back and forth, it was sensory overload compared to their day to day. Lydia looked over at Tom and Carl in their new safari excursion getups that screamed this was their first time in the jungle, and snickered.

“What are you laughing at?” Tom said.

“You two look like a couple of dorks,” she said and chuckled.

“You’re one to talk,” he joked back. “You look like Dora the Explorer is going through a dark phase.”

“Alright, children!” Carl said laughing. “I think we can agree, we all look ridiculous.”

After passing three more islands on the river, they stopped when they reached the fourth and landed on the north bank. They were surprised, it only took a couple hours to make this first leg of the trip. Across the river they saw Palma Real, a small community of Huarayos people that lived in raised houses near the bank of the river. They unpacked the pequepeque and loaded the gear onto a small truck that drove them to the southern edge of Valencia Lake, where they loaded the gear onto another boat. The narrow finger lake only took a half hour to traverse, but it was still a much faster route than taking the road around the lake. The group unloaded the gear at the small town of Valencia, where they would rest up for the night and get ready for the next leg of the trek.

In the morning, they packed a small truck which drove them to a trailhead. From there, it would be a two day journey on foot through grueling terrain filled with poisonous plants, stinging wasps, biting insects, and vicious carnivores. The group had read what they could about the jungle in this region, but being inside it was a different story, a constant barrage of sounds and brutal humidity. Their workout regimens hadn’t prepared them for this. The trail was very narrow and seemed to disappear in places. If it weren’t for the guides hacking away with machetes, they would be lost here. Javier told them that they had just gone through here two weeks ago when his team arrived, and the amount of regrowth that had happened was startling. A person would have no idea someone had been through here that recently. Luis pointed with his machete to a green tree viper hiding amongst the foliage hanging from a limb. The hemotoxic venom could have you bleeding from the nose and gums, and they made sure to stay far away from that. After half a day, they reached a break in the canopy at a waterfall where the land dropped down sharply. They had to shimmy along a ledge in a few spots to make it to the bottom, where they took a break for lunch. They were all exhausted and couldn’t believe the stamina of Javier. He wasn’t carrying anything, but the seasoned veteran made them feel completely out of their element. Carl briefly considered having a smoke while they were stopped, but he had been cutting back a lot recently in the hopes of quitting and figured this was probably a good opportunity to forgo his next smokey treat as long as he could muster the will. Luis had taken note of Carl’s size and endurance as they made their way through the first leg of the trail and was happy to see another capable body around camp should the need arise. Dr. Jiminez had a habit of springing projects on him at a moment’s notice.

The journey continued on for another four hours, and none of them spoke, they didn’t have the energy. Shortly after nightfall, the guides stopped at the cone shaped base of a giant heliconia tree and started a small fire. The guides took shifts watching the fire as they all slept. Their bodies were so tired they passed out soon after they ate dinner, but not before mummifying themselves in mosquito netting.

Lydia awoke to Tom gently nudging her shoulder. She unwrapped herself only to find she was still covered in insect bites. Luis informed them it was about another eight hour hike to reach the site, so they got moving quickly. The highlight of their day was seeing a family of tapirs playing in the stream, splashing themselves with water. They scurried off, probably after catching the group’s scents, and vanished in the thick vegetation. The trio locked in this moment, as they each individually formed their own memory — the joy of something new. Memory and what the brain chooses to remember could be a funny thing. It was much easier for them to block out the final leg of the hike. Two hours of uphill torture, with the last section to get up to the camp being the steepest portion. Cresting the ridge, they collapsed. The guides began to set up the large tent that would be their home for the next six weeks, at the opposite end of the site, away from the researcher’s tents.

“Lydia, this is Dr. Phillips, we call him Dr. Phil, and that’s Liz Perkins and her husband Kyle, down at the end there.” Javier said, pointing to a slender mustachioed fellow.

“Hi.” Lydia said, shaking their hands. “These are my friends, Tom and Carl.” she said introducing the boys.

“So nice to meet all of you.” Tom said out of breath.

“Hell of a trek. How ‘bout next time yall come to my place.” Carl said in a serious tone. Everyone paused, realized he was joking, and had a good laugh.

“Come on. Let’s get some food while they set you up.” Liz said, motioning them towards the mess tent. She knew how strenuous it was to make it there, so she had a stewpot for them, ready to go.

“So, this is the second summer my husband and I have come out to this site. And Dr. Phil…it’s your fourth right?” she said, serving them all bowls.

“That is correct.” Dr. Phil said dryly, as he lifted the spoon to his lips in a very proper manner befitting his genteel personality. “What brings you to this slice of paradise?”

“Well, I’m doing preliminary work for a Master’s thesis if I get lucky. My old neighbor was Dr. Wilhelm who worked at this site, and he gave me some photos he took of a rare species of mushroom. I believe it’s a potent psilocybin variety.” Lydia recited her pre-prepared cover story. “I am working with a research team that studies treatments for combat veterans with PTSD. These vets are finding long lasting meaningful relief from the use of psilocybin. It’s all first hand account research for now. But, we’re hoping some day the US government will allow us to do actual clinical trial studies.”

This part of her story was actually true. She had stumbled upon the research through one of her professors, and was hooked instantly. She had finally found her niche, something she felt passionate about, and Tom was so proud of her.

“And why come here again?” Kyle said, not looking up from his stew.

“Because this mushroom is uncatalogued, and if it’s what I hope it is, I’m collecting specimens to take spore prints and tissue samples for culture.” Lydia floated back into her cover story which was starting to show a few holes.

“Jou’re telling me Wilhelm gave you a photo of these mushrooms?” Javier spoke up. “Because in all the time I worked with the great doctor, I never saw him walking around taking pictures of mushrooms. Did jou, Dr. Phil?”

“No. Never in fact. The doctor was always working when on site,” he said slowly lifting another spoonful.

Lydia now felt a little backed into a corner and wasn’t sure what to say with everyone looking in her direction. Tom stepped up.

“Well, he had been a close friend of our families for quite some time. It was a hidden passion that he only shared with Lydia after she shared hers…..Maybe he didn’t want his colleagues to know…you know like a diversion from work, a way to relax out here or something.” Tom was trying to come up with something to stifle their curiosity. Lydia squeezed his thigh to show her thanks for bailing her out.

“Jou’re probably right. He was always working. A man needs something to keep him sane out here.” Dr. Jimenez said.

“We are sorry about your friend.” Dr. Phil said, setting down his spoon to make eye contact with the group. “He will always be remembered with great fondness by those that had the pleasure of working him in the trenches. Good luck on your hunt for this elusive mushroom of yours,” he said looking at Lydia.

“Thank you.” Lydia and Tom said in unison.

Lydia smacked Tom’s knee and looked in Carl’s direction at the end of the table. Carl had his head on his hands, laying next to his empty bowl, asleep.

\*\*\*

The morning was rough, and it took a while for the gang to all get moving. They decided to take the day to recover and the boys went back to sleep for a bit. They wanted to be clear headed before taking the Ancients and this would give them a little time to get the layout of the site as well. Lydia felt surprisingly good and prepared some breakfast. When she finished eating, Liz passed her as she left the mess tent.

“Good morning.” Liz said from under her bucket hat, the draw string dangling under her chin. “Let me give you the tour.”

“Oh no. That’s alright. I don’t want to impose. Dr. Jimenez made it clear to not disturb you all while you were working.” Lydia said.

“You’re no trouble. He’ll be fine. I’ll just give you a quick lay of the land.” Liz said and started walking over to what looked like part of two curved walls protruding from the bank of the hill on the edge of their small clearing. One wall was smaller than the other and terraced up. “We believe this is the outer wall of a circular structure, probably a celestial temple of some kind given its position on this hill. We calculate this wall to be about twenty yards in diameter based on the degree of arc on the exposed section and this second smaller wall on top is probably about fifteen yards across. So as you can see, we’ve only uncovered about thirty percent or so.” The other members of Javier’s team worked at the other end as they spoke. The guides were moving buckets of dirt from one section of the walls where Kyle was digging, over to sifting tables where Javier and Dr. Phil sorted through the material.

“How old do you think it is?” Lydia asked.

“Well that’s a little controversial. Professor Wilhelm had several objects carbon dated, with varying results, ranging from five thousand to twelve thousand years old. Wilhelm leaned towards the twelve thousand believing the site to pre-date any other in South America, and his colleagues felt the results were anomalies. His insistence to the contrary led his work to be taken less seriously, which left him chronically underfunded since he reopened the site in 1993.” Liz sounded intrigued by Wilhelm.

“Is that why it’s taking so long to excavate?” Lydia asked.

“The money? Oh yes. That’s part of it. More funding always helps, but most of it is the remoteness of the location. We can’t come here at all during the rainy season which lasts four to five months, it’s torrential with unpredictable flash flooding everywhere. Then, when we come back a portion of it has already been covered in dirt again from the flooding. The clearing is almost grown in again completely, so we spend the first week just cutting that back. The jungle really wants to swallow this place.” The reverence Liz had for this place showed in her voice.

“We saw a book that showed some items Wilhelm cataloged from an earlier expedition here in the 1930s. Where were they found?” Lydia asked.

“We’ve never really found the location. The original sitemaps led Wilhelm to an area near here, but the jungle was thick and the only thing he found was a tiny section of this upper wall here. He said runoff from the rainy season was the only thing that kept it exposed. We have found small pottery shards but nothing like the artifacts that were originally collected up here. That part is still a mystery.” Liz replied.

“Good morning,” the boys said as they approached, still half yawning.

“Good morning. I made you guys some brekkie. It’s in the tent over there.” Lydia said to them, smiling. “Don’t worry I covered it up.” Looking back at Liz she said “I’ve taken up enough of your time. This is all so fascinating. Maybe we can talk more later.”

“No problem. This has been great. To be honest, I’m just happy to have another woman around for a couple months. See you later.” Liz said then turned to Tom and Carl. “Have a good day gentlemen.”

Deetz filled the boys in on the info she had just gotten from Liz as they stuffed their faces with beans and rice. Carl’s was covered in hot sauce. Tom didn’t mind a little but *Jesus, that's a lot,* he thought.

“Liz said they couldn’t find the original dig site, so I say we take a look around once we’re in.” Lydia said.

“That’s what she said.” Tom said, poking Lydia in the side with his finger sticking his tongue out. “Don’t worry. You’ll find it, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m still hungry.” Carl said with hot sauce on the side of his mouth.

“Oatmeal bars in that box over there.” Lydia said as she took a napkin from her pocket and handed it to him.

“I’d buy that for a dollar!” Carl retorted, quoting the popular catchphrase from Robocop.

They went over the plan for the next day. They would do multiple shifts of one hour sessions giving them days of inworld time within a single day of actual time. They had to do this in the tent under netting. They couldn’t have their unconscious bodies just laying in the jungle waiting to be eaten. But, they also needed to keep an eye on Javier’s team. They needed to, at least needed to appear to, be looking for this made up mushroom they were supposedly hunting. They started a small trail behind their tent where they could do some scouting. They didn’t want to arouse suspicion by lounging around in the tent all day.

# 

## April 20 2002

All his research led him to this site in 1993, but his prior digs had been plagued with difficulties, and he kept coming up empty handed. Five years laters, he sat at his desk, frustrated, papers everywhere, and the idol slid off and broke on the floor. Once he found the spores it took him another two years to successfully cultivate a secret batch. Then after a year of at-home experimentation, he was ready to go to the site and see if he could finally uncover the history of the area. Maybe he could use this new tool to prove all his detractors in the archeologicalcommunity wrong.

Dr. Jimenez, Dr. Phil, and two others stood next to Wilhelm as he received updates from them on their progress. They had a team at either end of the wall carefully excavating as much as possible. He also had the guides working on some drainage trenches to divert the runoff, in the hopes of decreasing the damage done the next rainy season. Wilhelm retreated to his tent. The team could tell his health was going downhill quickly this season. He hadn’t looked well at Puerto Maldonado, and even a week after arriving at the site, he still hadn’t recovered from the journey there. They had all noticed that he was spending most of his days asleep in the tent. His skin looked thin and pale, and he was barely eating.

Wilhelm laid back on a cot in his tent that had netting hung from the ceiling, draped over him forming a jungle canopy bed. He had just taken his third dose of the day which had been his regimen since arriving at the site. His cancer was advancing rapidly, but he had managed to keep it hidden. He was afraid the other members of the team would discourage his participation at the site if they knew how bad it was. Today, it would finally catch up to him before he could finish his work. Before he left home, he destroyed the evidence of his cultivation work. He also decided to leave the diary at home. He knew it by heart and figured it was safer there. He was weary of taking future notes until he knew exactly what he was dealing with. He felt certain he was on the right track to unlocking the site’s mysteries from the previous sessions. There was so much inside to explore here. In his last session, he discovered the original dig site where the artifacts were found. He decided he would push the dig team in that direction later, once he could thoroughly go over it from the inside.

Four hours later Dr. Phil came to see if he would eat some dinner and found him dead on his cot. His skin already had a gray color, but he appeared peaceful. The team ceased all work, had a small ceremony, and wrapped up his body in preparation to get his remains out of the jungle and back home.

# 

## June 23 2005

Lydia, Tom, and Carl were all rested and ready to go. The first sessions would be Carl and Tom. Lydia would keep watch and deal with the research team if necessary. Their first goal was to locate the temple and also discover where the ‘modo man was originally found, but they had just been theorizing, hoping that they were both the same location.

“Just remember if anything seems wrong or off in any way, go to the outer edge and shorten the time as much as possible. Okay?” Lydia said.

“Affirmative!” Tom said, giving a thumbs up.

“Aiight!” Carl said and gave a thumbs up as he lay his head down and the Ancients dissolved on his tongue.

The jungle looked lush before, but now, it was in technicolor. They got to work right away. They headed right for the walls and felt what they had to offer. The two rings weren’t just walls for some circular structure. These two rings continued down underground with every step down being a larger ring. The hill they were on was actually one huge temple — the one they were looking for. The temple formed a cone-like pyramid of stacked rings, several stories high, that was buried over time as the plants took over. Each ring was like the floor of a building, and it looked like the cone was about twenty rings stacked on top of one another. They could see that the original temple also had an underground portion that was the inverse of the cone that had rings that got smaller and smaller until they reached the bottom of the structure. Their energies penetrated right into the ground, and within seconds, they were in parts of the temple that would take decades for the small archaeological team to uncover. There was an inner core that was the width of the top ring of the temple and continued down through the underground levels to the bottom with a wide spiral staircase in the middle. It was capable of handling the crowds they saw going up and down in service of some ritual. Each ring held small rooms coming off of the core that were filled with memories. It was overwhelming, they had no idea where to start.

‘This thing is like the Labyrinth, I keep expecting Bowie to pop out and sing us a song.’ Carl thought to Tom.

‘This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. This has to be the ‘modo man’s temple! We’ve got a lot of time to explore, so I say we do a general survey of the whole structure first. Then we’ll assess where to focus our time from there.’ Tom thought.

‘Game on!” Carl thought and sent Tom a vision of Garth playing street hockey.

‘Game on!’ Tom replied.

The rooms on the upper few stories were filled with women in linen hoods lined up to lay clay offering jars on the ceremonial pile. Below those levels, about ten of the floors in the middle of the rings contained an ancient museum holding the untapped secrets of this lost civilization. There were all kinds of totems and relics. Big blocks of stone with some form of hieroglyphic writings carved into them. They could feel the scholars working away and artisans chiseling their stories into rock. As old as this temple was, some of the pieces here were from a much older civilization that told stories of surviving a great cataclysm before finding their way here to start anew. Near the base of the temple, the lower rings housed the remains of the most powerful members of this society, a place where they could roam the afterlife and their families could come to visit them. There were five stories of these tombs, lined with statues, and the largest ring of the cone was almost three hundred yards wide. This thing was massive. One of the peripheral tombs was broken into from the outside. They could see a small tunnel at the bottom of the hill where the dig team broke through the outer ring in the 1930’s. This was where they found the original artifacts, including the ‘modo man, but the tunnel collapsed and the entrance had been swallowed by years of runoff. The plants did the rest of the cover job. As they explored the tombs, they encountered a sphere of light that looked like theirs, and they froze.

‘Hello?’ Tom thought to the new sphere.

‘Why are you here?’ the unknown sphere inquired to both of them. The sphere was an ancient guard for one of the rulers entombed here. They could tell its thoughts were in a language they didn’t understand, but they could feel the interpretation.

‘We are explorers..…and we come in peace!?!’ Carl thought struggling for the right phrase.

‘We know, you can do no harm here, nor can we,’ the sphere said as many more bubbles of light popped out from the tombs and the walls of the temple. ‘Are you here for the one like you?’ the guard thought to them as spheres continued to pour out and flow like lava, encircling Carl and Tom.

‘The one like us?’ Tom questioned. ‘What one like us?’

‘There is one here from your time. Descend down to the lower levels. There lies a chamber of knowledge. The one you seek resides there,’ the guard thought, and as he ended, the other spheres started to retreat back into the tombs and walls from whence they came.

Tom and Carl continued further down. Just below the base level of the temple, were the cultivation areas where the ancient mushrooms had been grown. They could see workers using some sort of bioluminescence light devices for the final stages of growth. Even though Tom and Carl had found the Ancients were easy to cultivate, they were very impressed with the methods and level of sophistication that was being used so long ago.

Everything below the grow rooms was dedicated to some sort of other dimensional mainframe for all the knowledge their society had access to thus far. There were rooms filled with the ancient mycelium, similar to a mass of roots hanging in a cave. As they examined the glowing threads of crystalline fibers dangling all around them, they could sense knowledge coursing through the still living system. Buried almost two hundred meters deep in this jungle hillside, this chamber, pulsating with light and knowledge, held an otherworldly presence unlike anything they had felt before. Suddenly, another sphere of light flew up from below, and they instantly recognized the presence they sensed.

‘Wilhelm! Is that you?’ Tom thought.

‘Yes! And who might you be?’ Wilhelm thought, puzzled at the site of the only visitors to stop in since his permanent arrival.

‘You may not know us, but we sure know you.’ Carl thought in excitement.

‘We came in possession of the spores and your diary and came looking for the temple, just like you did.’ Tom thought.

‘How did you get the spores and my diary?’ They could feel his disbelief.

‘Well there was this estate sale…’ Tom started to think.

‘Of course that’s what they would do.’ Wilhelm cut him off. ‘They wouldn’t take the time to donate it to the university…just take the money and run.’ They could sense he was referring to his family's choice to liquidate his estate immediately. His family had always thought he was a bit of a crackpot and never took the time to truly understand the man. ‘Well you boys are awfully resourceful if you’ve made it this far…and, so young too.’

‘How are you here? We thought you were dead.’ Tom thought.

‘I am. I saw the guides hauling my shrouded body away. It was so odd. I had taken a dose of the mushrooms and was down here working, and I felt my energy release from my body. The line went slack so to speak.’ Wilhelm could sense they understood what he meant, the tether had been broken. ‘…So, I went to see my body and could sense I was dead. I had no idea that I would be trapped here in this realm.’ Wilhelm thought. ‘I am still somehow confined to the same range…I can only go about thirty kilometers in any direction. There is more here than just the temple, but this is by far the most intriguing thing I have found.’

‘So, you been here for like three years…that’s heavy.’ Carl thought.

‘Hardly! I wish it was three years. Because of the time dilation effect, I have been down here over seventy five years!’ Wilhelm thought, and they could feel his exasperation. ‘I’ve basically lived a whole other life here.’ They were humbled by this revelation. Being stuck here for decades was incomprehensible.

‘You must have learned so much in all that time.’ Tom thought.

‘I have. I have. And, the profound thing is, I seemed to have just taken a bite of the full buffet available here.’ Wilhelm thought with some renewed enthusiasm. ‘These people were using this living mycelium to store information through memories in this realm. Here they would be safe from the ravages of time and only accessible to those who possessed the tools capable of getting them here.’

‘And where is here?’ Carl chimed in. ‘You’re tellin’ me that we been coming to the afterlife, or some purgatory or something? This is what happens when we die?’

‘No. Not at all. That was the same mistaken assumption that these people made. From what I can tell, this is just another dimension that exists in our world that isn’t available to our human senses. The mushrooms are simply changing something in our brain chemistry that gives us limited access to this dimension. From the visions I have seen, these people, who called themselves the Atruzura, had a much different perspective on what this place was. Shamans had been handed the sacramental mushrooms…’ Wilhelm’s thought was interrupted.

‘The Ancients…the sacramental mushrooms or whatever, we’ve just been calling them the Ancients for short.’ Tom interjected.

‘The Ancients…that does have a certain charm to it…well, where was I? Ah, yes. The shamans had been handing down the knowledge of the Ancients for generations, using it as a way to continue to advance their culture, by means of rapidly passing on vast sets of complex data. They used it as a teaching tool. Somewhere, down the line of rulers, one of them named Ch’unpitari caught word of it, and that changed everything. He demanded the shamans grant him passage to visit this realm. Once he saw what was here, Ch’unpitari became obsessed and started conducting experiments. He had one of his guards sacrificed while in here with him, and the guard’s energy remained here. Then, Ch’unpitari declared to his kingdom that he had found the place where their souls could rest for eternity, in bliss. He invited the masses to come join him and keep him company in the afterlife. The way they were to gain eternal passage was through ritualistic sacrifices here, atop the temple.’ Wilhelm thought and sent them the memories of the bloody events he was recounting.

Tom and Carl could see men, women, and children lined up, eagerly awaiting the sacrament. They saw them placed on the seven tables that sat on the upper most ring of the temple. The tables were on a slight angle with their heads all pointing down towards the inner hollow core of the temple. A shaman came and walked around to each of the tables, said some words to the person and gave them the sacrament, a dose of the Ancients. After they went into the other dimension, their heads were decapitated and fell, along with their bodies, into the core. Tom and Carl saw this cycle repeat a few times, and they also saw the crews waiting at the bottom of the core to wrap the sacrificial bodies in cloth for mass burial at a nearby site. At the top of the temple stood the ‘modo man with his arms outstretched. He was clearly a man, with some sort of ornate lizard headdress and long gloves, adorning his arms in iridescent scales.

‘Then…who is the ‘modo man?’ Tom asked.

‘Yeah?’ Carl piggybacked.

‘The mo-do man? I’m not sure I know to whom you are referring.’ Wilhelm thought.

‘The one with the spores inside…” Tom thought.

‘…ya know, the one you cataloged.’ finished Carl.

‘Yes, yes. That is Ch’unpitari. Because of his promise of the afterlife and so many sacrificed to be beside him forever, he became like a deity in this culture. He became mythical. The sad part is, he died in his sleep and never made it here. His hubris led him to believe he would live longer than most due to the vast knowledge he had gained on his trips inside. He believed he would have ample time to complete the ritual and rule over his sacrificial followers in the afterlife for an eternity. But alas, he never got the chance.’

‘So, he wasn’t some bringer of knowledge like the myths said.’ Tom thought.

‘Well, history is written by the victors, and in Ch’unpitari’s eyes, he was giving his followers the keys to infinite knowledge.’ Wilhelm answered.

‘All those other spheres are his followers?’ Carl asked.

‘Yes. They are all unwitting prisoners here…still waiting for the emperor who will never return.’ Wilhelm answered. ‘Traditional archaeology would have never given me the detailed answers to the history of this place, but now, I know this place better than my own home town.’

\*\*\*

Lydia was peeking out the front of the tent making a routine check when she saw Liz approaching from the direction of the dig site. She stepped outside and put on a smile.

“Hey. How’s the dig going?” Lydia asked.

“Slow, but this year has been better than last. The trenches we dug last year helped with the sediment buildup from the rains, so we are making more progress than usual.” Liz responded.“How bout you? How’s your hunt for this elusive mushroom going?”

“No luck yet, but we just started. Just getting a lay of the land, and trying to hack a few different paths in the lowlands at the base of the hill to give us a usable search area.”

“Where are the guys?” Liz asked.

“They stayed down there to keep clearing paths. I came up to get this GPS…” Lydia said as she pulled it from her back pocket. “…we’re using it to mark our search area.”

“Well, just be careful. Any time we go through the woods we have a partner. I wouldn’t trek up and down this hill by yourself. Too many hazards out here. Want me to walk down to the guys with you?” Liz asked in a motherly tone.

“No, no. I’m fine this time…but that’s good advice. We’ll come up as a group next time.” Lydia said deflecting. “Plus, Dr. Jimenez would be upset if he caught me taking you away from your dig time.”

“Fair enough. See you later.” Liz said, waving as she walked away towards her lab tent.

Lydia waited until Liz was out of sight and breathed a sigh of relief. She ducked back in the tent to check on the boys.

\*\*\*

Wilhelm was eager to show them around the temple, trying to contain his delight. He had been all alone for a long time. He occasionally spent time with the spheres of the sacrificial lambs for Ch’unpitari. They were full of history of their time, and he was glad to not be fully alone, but having the new visitors here felt very different. Men closer to his time who had found their way here on their own, following the breadcrumbs of his life, provided some much needed relief for the professor. He spent hours just showing them the beauty and wisdom of the underground mycelium chambers. They observed the generations of Atruzura shamans coming to absorb this knowledge, and then they would take it back into their physical world to utilize. The knowledge of all the plants and animals native to the area, and many that weren’t around anymore, they saw several large extinct mammals. They saw strange plants that appeared to have similar qualities to the Ancients. It seemed they were trying to cross-hybridize them. They also saw shamans bringing the new knowledge they gained to store for others to access. They had knowledge of organic processes to create energy to use for their technology. Their technology was completely different from anything humans possessed now. It functioned in this other dimension, but could also affect our physical space. They saw giant blocks of stone seemingly levitating into place to form the first rings of the temple. They were manipulating energy fields that scientists hadn’t even discovered yet. They saw closed loop farming that was completely sustainable and was a part of the functioning ecosystem. They seemed to be an unstoppable force of a society.

‘What happened to the Atruzura? What was their downfall?’ Tom thought.

‘Many things. The continued incest among the ruling class led to genetic disorders over time, and then when they were exposed to a new disease, it spiraled downhill from there. This place was too big for their rapidly dwindling population to handle and the last remaining Atruzura fled and integrated with other peoples nearby.’ Wilhelm answered. ‘That’s my best guess for now. It’s possible the Ancients had something to do with it, but I’m not sure. Near the end, the shamans tried to hide their technologies and protect the secret of the Ancients from escaping.’ Wilhelm had now fully adopted the boy’s shorthand.

He continued to show them visions and regale them with stories of the Atruzura for several more hours, until they finally felt the slow tug of their bodies wanting them back.

‘We’ll be back soon.’ Tom thought as he slowly moved away from Wilhelm. Wilhelm followed as they retreated. ‘We have another friend with us we want you to meet.’

‘Yep. She’s da bomb Wilhelm. You’re gonna love this chick.’ Carl thought and put his attention on Tom. Carl knew Tom would be thrown off by his use of street language with the wise professor.

‘Please hurry back.’ Wilhelm thought as he followed and watched their bodies regain consciousness.

\*\*\*

Lydia kept looking at her watch and peeking out the tent flaps, nervously awaiting the boy's return. They both sat up at the same time, looked at each other wide eyed, and turned to Lydia.

“This place is amazing. There’s so much to tell you.” Tom said thrilled.

“For sure! The temple and the dig site and…” Carl was cut off as Deetz interrupted.

“Sounds fascinating, but I don’t want the others getting suspicious. Let’s sneak out the back of the tent here. Go down the hill some and you can fill me in. Then, when we come walking back up the hill they won’t suspect a thing,” she said, opening the back flap and disappearing outside.

As they hacked a new path through the dense plant matter and tangle of vines behind their tent, Tom and Carl started telling her about everything they’d experienced in their first session.

“No fucking way!” Deetz said as they revealed Wilhelm’s presence.

“Yes fucking way!” Tom hit her back with. “It’s a lot to take in and obviously more than we have time to explain. I think you need to go in next and meet him. I’m going with her this session.” he said looking at Carl.

“Whatever you say skipper.” Carl said tipping his oversize hat he bought it Puerto Maldonado. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Just be careful. Liz almost snuck up on me earlier, and I had to make up an excuse. Since they will see us returning from working down here, just tell them we’re taking a quick nap if anyone asks…and don’t you decide to take one of your impromptu naps, stay alert.”

As they continued hacking down the side of the slope and got to the base, they made their way around the side to come up from a different angle and walk past the dig site. They wanted the team to see them returning. As they were about to make there way back up, a rock jutting from the roots of a large oje tree caught Tom’s eye.

“I think that’s it!” he said, delighted as he scurried towards it. “I think this is the original dig site from the ‘30s where they found the ‘modo man.” Tom filled Lydia in about the tombs and the collapse of the original tunnel.

“Yeah. I agree. This seems about right.” Carl said, chuckling. “Kinda different when you’re on the inside. Should we tell the team about it?”

“Maybe?” Tom said. “We could play it off like we stumbled across this rock, and say it looks similar to the wall, so we just thought they should know about it.”

“Look, I definitely want to help them out, but let’s not come in and act like we found what they have been looking for for twelve years on our first day.” Lydia said. “I feel like they are already watching us and that might not work in our favor. We need them paying as little attention to us as possible.”

“Deetz is right on this one.” Tom said to Carl. “We’ll steer them in this direction just not yet.” Lydia marked the location on the GPS and they started up the hill towards the wall.

“Ahh! The foragers!” Dr. Phil said as he lifted his hat to wipe his brow.

“Jou have any luck?” Javier asked.

“Nope. Not yet. Time for a lunch break.” Lydia said, continuing past them towards the mess tent.

“I’ll join you!” Liz said, dropping her tools and following them.

After lunch, Carl readied the doses, lit a cigarette, and checked the mosquito netting.

“See ya on the flip side.” Tom said to Lyd, and they closed their eyes.

\*\*\*

Tom gave Lydia a telepathic embrace. This was the first moment they had been alone since they left home. They were able to feel each other again, and they could both feel their urge to abandon their tasks and spoil themselves with the pleasures of no flesh. They were able to resist their base urges, and Tom began to show her around the buried temple.

They could descend the levels faster than he had before, and she could see all the same memories because Tom had experienced it before. This kind of compounded exponential learning was one of the greatest benefits of the Ancients. He started at the top, showing her the visions of the sacrifices. She watched the entire ritual in horror as the willing participants stepped up to the rock slabs, covered in fresh blood, and she saw their lifeless bodies as they sailed below, bones crunching on the stone floor. As they moved on down through the temple, she took the time to examine some of the offering jars more closely. She found families working for the empire praying for their chance to join the kingdom of Ch’unpitari offering dried herbs, seeds, and small mummified lizards from the forest. Because of their place in the hierarchy, they were unlikely to ascend unless they won a series of brutal competitions held once a year on the summer solstice, a kind of lottery. She could see no members of this family ever got the chance to participate in the games, which ended up working out in their favor. Once Lydia reached the museum levels, she had to stop and feel a few of the displays. There was a depiction of a small tribe of people finding the place where the temple now sits. These people predated the Atruzura, their ancestors resettling after a great catastrophe wiped out their home and people. They were survivors from fragments of a comet that made it through the atmosphere and nuked entire cities. She could feel the power of the comet roaring as it tore the air. The next object she encountered was a giant stone circular disk with patterns all over it emanating from the center. It reminded her of the spore print, which was the artist’s intent, but upon closer inspection, she could tell it was a calendar that showed the cycles of the outside world and their relationship to this unseen realm, form and function. Tom pulled her down further showing her the tombs where the original dig site was, and he thought out for the guard hoping he would return the gesture.

‘Yes I am here,’ the guard thought to them, and Lydia could feel the translation Tom had told her about.

‘This is my friend. Her name is Lydia.’ Tom thought to the guard. ‘I was telling her about you and your friends, and I wanted to introduce you.’

‘All are welcome here. We do not use names for ourselves anymore. We are all familiar with one another. If you need us, think and we will be there.’ As the guard spoke the multitudes revealed themselves to Lydia.

‘I’m sure you must have many questions for us.’ Lydia thought.

‘The one you call Wilhelm has answered any questions we have had about the world as it is now. We are confused by many of the choices that your people have chosen to make, but that is not our world anymore.’

‘Well there is still much I would like to learn from you.’ Lydia thought. ‘I will visit again.’ And as she finished, the followers of Ch’unpitari vanished again.

Lydia absorbed some basic knowledge of the ancient mycology cultivation areas as they bored through to the caverns filled with the magnificent hanging crystalline mycelium, that glowed a faint purple hue. Lydia hovered in this alien landscape, waves of awe cascading over her. Wilhelm sensed their arrival and was at them in a blip.

‘This must be the woman you informed me of before you left. Wilhelm, nice to meet you,’ he thought to Lydia. ‘And, good to have you again, Tom. To be honest, I never knew for certain if you would return.’

‘Came back as quick as we could. Waited a couple hours and came back in. Didn’t want the dig team out there getting too curious.’ Tom thought.

‘Yes. Thank you again. It was two days for me, but two days is nothing for me now.’

‘The guard said you had answered any questions they had about our world. What did you tell them?’ Lydia asked.

‘They asked if I knew where Ch’unpitari was and when he would arrive to rule them in eternity. They said they had waited a long time. I did some “back of the napkin” calculations and figured his followers had been waiting here over a quarter million years for his return.’

‘What? That’s unfathomable!’ Lydia was jarred at the thought.

‘And, they haven’t died?’ Tom thought rhetorically. ‘I guess they are immortal, in a sense.’

‘I explained that Ch’unpitari would not be returning to be with them. It took a long time, and I still don’t know if they fully believe me. I told them of his death, explaining he never had the chance to cross over. I’ve tried to get them to understand this place the way I see it and explain Ch’unpitari’s folly in thinking he had discovered a portal to the afterlife. I was able to show them all the things I had discovered. They seemed to accept it, but the knowledge I gave them was such heresy to their beliefs, they still just bide their time in the tombs. Sometimes, I think they are still waiting.’

‘That’s really sad.’ Lydia felt her sorrow for them.

Wilhelm focused his attention on Tom and thought, ‘I had an idea yesterday as you and your friend Carl went back into your bodies yesterday…’ and he paused.

‘Can’t try it if we don’t know what it is.’ Tom thought.

‘Well, I was wondering if when one of you went back, if I pulled my energy with you, if the force would somehow pull us both back through.’ Wilhelm thought to them.

‘Both? Like in the same body?’ Lydia thought.

‘Well yes. I’ve been here a long time, and I don’t have many options. It hadn’t occurred to me before because you all are the first visitors. It was just an idea. I know it sounds crazy. I needed to see what you thought. See if you were willing to give it a try.’

‘Sorry professor. I understand. I like you and all, but I don’t think I can have you permanently swimming around up there.’ Tom thought, trying to make light of his suggestion.

‘Good idea though. We’ll keep thinking and maybe that will lead us to a way to help you.’ Lydia capped off Tom’s thought.

Wilhelm began to ask them about the happenings of the last three years out in the real world. He was really confused about why we invaded Iraq again, and they had no real substantive reason either. They told him about our new Department of Homeland Security, and he thought it sounded like something out of dystopian science fiction. They had to admit their knowledge of current events had fallen behind since beginning this project. There had been the Columbia space shuttle disaster, and there was the giant tsunami in December of ‘04 that killed almost a quarter million people. They spent the rest of the session getting Wilhelm as up to date as they could.

\*\*\*

Carl and Lydia went in for the last session of the day after another round of path clearing. Wilhelm was happy to have regular visitors, and he could hardly contain his enthusiasm. He had to start telling Lydia about his new plan to escape because he had come to the conclusion she was the only one who could help him pull it off.

Tom nervously paced around the tent on his first session as the watcher. He couldn’t stop thinking about the vast amounts of new information he had learned from Wilhelm and the temple. The history and culture of the Atruzura was in some ways archaic and even barbaric, but in other ways, they were far more advanced than humans of this time. As these thoughts rummaged around in his head, he tripped on a set of stacked metal ammunition boxes they were using for storage. The stack fell over causing two of the boxes and Tom to come falling out of the front of the tent and onto the ground. Dr. Phil was standing outside of the mess tent after just refilling his water canteen. As he took a sip he saw Tom clumsily tumbling out the front of the tent. *I don’t think that man is suited for this place,* Dr. Phil thought to himself.

# 

## July 10 2005

“Maybe today will be the day.” Liz jovially said to Lydia, referring to her elusive hunt for the made up mushroom. *Geez, that lady won’t quit,* Lydia thought as she left the mess tent and headed for the boys.

“We need to go collect some samples today. I just need something to show Liz that looks like I’ve done something while I was here.” Lydia said as she came barging into the tent.

“Sounds like a plan, stan.” Tom said. “I need a break from the inside today.”

“I second that motion.” Carl said, standing up straight.

They made sure to go out the front of the tent so anyone around would see them, and they walked to the back of the tent and down their trail towards the base of the hill.

“Hey, why don’t we clue them in to the original dig site today?” Tom said, swinging the machete.

“We definitely should. It might help get Liz off my back. I love her. She’s so sweet, but a little too clingy for trying to pull off a secret mission.” Lydia said.

“Wilhelm seemed to think it would be great.” Carl said, remembering they had all felt Wilhelm’s opinion on the subject.

While Wilhelm had his reservations about the power of the find, he also felt it was his legacy. If they didn’t unearth it, he would never be vindicated. They collected a bag of mushrooms to catalog, Lydia figured at least they could do some survey work that she could actually turn in for her Masters, and it could work double duty as a cover. Sweaty and covered in insect bites, the group walked up towards the dig making sure their bag of sample mushrooms was on full display. They decided to let Carl start the conversation, his optimism was infectious, and they hoped it may charm them enough to take them seriously.

“Yall have got to see this. We found a stone down here that looks exactly like a piece of that wall but way down yonder.” he said pointing down and around the hill.

“That so?” Dr. Phil said, looking up from the sifting table.

“It definitely looks like part of something you are working on.” Lydia said.

“I think we should check it out immediately.” Liz said, looking at Dr. Jimenez.

“Let me get some food first, and I’ll show you the way down.” Tom said to Liz.

After lunch, the entire team including the guides followed them down to the site. It didn’t look like much of anything to the untrained eye, but the archeologists saw the connections right away just from the edge of a stone and the lay of the land. They started going wild with conversations and discussions, and the gang decided their work here was done. They headed back up to the tent and left the dig team to hash it out.

They sat in the tent going over some of Wilhelm’s plan. Over the past couple weeks, Wilhelm had tried to explain it to all of them, but they were all having difficulty understanding him. Some of his theories had been derived from the research he had done the last seven decades inworld, so they weren’t going to get it all in such a short time. They were getting in two to three sessions a day each which is why they needed the break. The basics they all agreed on, but how it would work in reality was anyone’s guess.

“So let me get this straight…” Carl said, looking at Deetz. “…Wilhelm wants you to go home and build some contraption…bring it back here…and what, he gets inside that?…I’m still confused.” Carl rubbed his eyes.

“He doesn’t get in it. The device sends off an energy field that he can use as a beacon to hone in on and then convert his energy into a physical form…like pulling him out of the matrix?” Tom said, looking from Carl back over to Lydia for approval.

“Yeah. That’s basically it.” she said with a slight sarcasm hinting at the ever expanding scale of the project. “Just create a new technology that’s never existed before, from scratch. Easy peasy.”

“I’m still not wrapping my head around this ‘physical form’ he’s supposed to be taking.” Tom said using air quotes.

“Think of it like a vapor. We may not even see it according to him. But, it’s not vapor, it’s some sort of ectenic force…like an ectoplasm for lack of a better word.” Lydia explained.

“Imma start calling you Dr. Egon Spangler, you’re on some Ghostbusters shit over here.” Carl said, and they all laughed as they sang a few bars of the Ray Parker Jr. classic.

“Still…what is he hoping to do as ectoplasm or whatever?” Tom asked Lydia.

“He still seems a little up in the air on that one…” she started to say when Carl interrupted.

“Up in the air…get it…he seems up…in the air.” Carl trailed off as the joke fell flat. “Nope. No one. Okay. Moving on. You were saying…” he said motioning to Deetz.

“Yeah. He has no idea. Maybe go into a tree or animal or something…” she said unsure.

“Go into a tree or something. I don’t know. Sounds kind of weird, but after what I’ve seen the last couple weeks I guess it’s possible. You don’t think he could try to take one of us…like inhabit our body or something, do you?” Tom asked.

“I don’t think so. I can feel his sincerity about this project. He feels this is the way.” Lydia took a serious tone. “I know none of us fully understand or comprehend his plan, but I want to help him and I trust him.”

“I think we’ve all felt that from him.” Tom said.

“Aww. This is sweet. I love you guys so much.” Carl said in a cloyingly sweet tone.

“Group hug?” Deetz said and the boys leaned over from the cot they were sitting on, and they all hugged. Their continued trips inworld were slowly altering their connections with everyone around them. They had always tried to be decent people, but their compassion and empathy was growing ever so slightly each time.

Lydia spent the evening trying to explain the device she was charged with building to them the best she could. It involved mirrors and lasers and some sort of organic bio-chemical goo. She only had two more weeks to learn as much as she could from him about how to construct this device, which they had started calling the convertor. Before they knew it, it would be time to start the journey back home.

# 

## July 17 2005

‘So then, you’ll transmute that substance using spectral rays to the final medium for use in the convertor. Make sense?’ Wilhelm thought to Lydia.

‘Do you mind going over that step again from the beginning?’ Lydia thought.

She was able to get accessible repeatable memories from these psionic conversations, but without the true knowledge, she lacked the comprehension to execute the plan. She had to really learn as much of every step as possible if she was going to pull this off. This is all Wilhelm and Lydia had spent the last week doing was going over the parts of the convertor and the assembly process. Wilhelm repeated the process going into more depth this time about the frequencies of light. Tom was there too doing his darndest to comprehend this new technology. He was acting as a backup note taking system for Lydia.

‘Wilhelm, you need to accept the possibility that we won’t be able to build this in one year. We will do everything we can, but you’ve had years to design it. This could take several years. We need some time…and not having a way you can help us construct it may slow us down.’ Tom thought. This was something the group had been discussing, but they needed to get the professor to understand their limitations. ‘Also, money will be a factor here. Some of these parts are going to be expensive and others will have to be fabricated somehow. That can’t be cheap.’

‘I had considered that and I understand your concerns. There’s one possibility, but I’m not sure how I feel about it.’ thought Wilhelm.

‘Fill us in.’ Lydia thought. ‘I need a break from these lessons anyways.’

‘Well…part of what you’re making, the plasma, creates a feedback loop of energy. The laser array is only there as part of the beacon used to attract my energy. So, the lasers use an immense amount of energy but there is only a small lithium power source that kick-starts this feedback loop process and a short burst of reversed polarity from the fuel cell can stop this feedback loop. The bio-chemical reactions in the medium can also run out of fuel, but from my calculations, a kilogram of the stuff should produce up to one thousand megawatts of stable power for anywhere from one to three years.’ explained Wilhelm.

‘In English doc?’ Tom thought, looking for clarification.

‘You could basically create enough energy to power a neighborhood for a couple years for whatever it ends up costing to create this device, and there won’t be any harmful waste products. This could bring about an era of true clean energy.’ Wilhelm thought to them. They paused briefly, taking it in with all the ramifications of this revelation.

‘You want us to release this knowledge in order to fund the project?’ Lydia asked.

‘I don’t know. This is such a delicate matter. If the large energy conglomerates paid you for it, they could bury the technology in fear of it being their downfall, or they could use it simply for profit and that would also defeat the purpose. This technology needs to be cheap and accessible to all, not to be monopolized by corporations, or the government for that matter.’ Wilhelm laid out his dilemma, now their dilemma.

They used the rest of the day’s sessions discussing the best plan forward. They had to come up with something, or there was going to be no way for them to build the convertor. They had now somehow stumbled into possibly changing the trajectory of human civilization and had to have some complex thought sessions to consider all the possibilities. One possibility was to simply find another way to raise the money, maybe society wasn’t ready for unlimited low cost energy, or maybe, they just weren’t the ones to decide. The philosophical debates between them all became intense. None of them were under the pretense that this could create some utopia or could change the darker aspects of human nature, but it was still hard to imagine having this knowledge and not trying to do something positive with it.

\*\*\*

Before dinner, the trio used the last bit of daylight collecting more mushroom samples for Lydia’s work. What started out as a cover was turning up some interesting samples that Lydia couldn’t wait to catalog once they got home. That night at the mess tent the group sat to eat in silence as they contemplated where to go from here with Wilhelm’s plan. The dig team on the other hand were quite vocal that evening having spent the last week quibbling over whether to move the dig site down the hill.

“I worked here with Wilhelm for jears up here on the hill and now jou think we should move everything?” Dr. Jimenez asked argumentatively.

“I think we should at least split the team and have one group start working down there.” Liz clapped back. “I know you have a history up here, but it has been slow with very little results to show the donors. If we could find anything down there to bring in more funding, I think we should.” Kyle sat beside her looking down at his plate being his usual quiet self.

“I think she has a point there, Javier. I vote we split the team and let one group finish the season down there.” Dr. Phil said.

“Well, I guess that settles it then, if jou are on board. We will give one guide to Liz and Kyle to start doing exploratory work there tomorrow morning, and if we do not see anything worth exploring by the end of the season, we are not going to follow up next season. Agreed?” Dr. Jimenez looked around the table for approval.

He was tired of debating this all week and hoped this concession would calm camp morale. They all agreed to his compromise and finished their meals amid the swarm of insects, flocking to the glowing lanterns hanging in the mess tent.

# 

## July 24 2005

It was their last day at the site before beginning the journey back to the airport at Puerto Maldonado. The little pequepeque’s engines would be fighting the current of the mighty Madre de Dios, so the return trip required an extra day. Today’s sessions were mostly spent on extended goodbyes to Wilhelm and rehashing details related to the convertor, but he also wanted to warn Lydia about the potential side effects of using the Ancients.

‘As I informed you before, I had advanced late stage cancer when I died and became trapped here, but I still feel the Ancients had some negative effect. I just haven’t been able to pin it down yet. My death felt premature in some way. They may not be safe, but they need to be studied more first before we make that determination. I would caution you all against using them for now, unless necessary for the project. If you become trapped in this realm before the convertor is finished, there may be no hope for me…or you, for that matter.’ Wilhelm warned her.

‘And, you’re just giving us this info now?’ she asked, feeling slightly upset.

‘I am sorry. I needed you here with me in order to learn how to make the device. But, in the service of honesty, I must admit the real reason I didn’t initially inform you was purely selfish. I needed the company…I really needed it. That was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.’ he thought.

‘I can understand that. We all need some companionship, but I can’t help you without all the pieces. Complete honesty from here on out. Follow me?’ she thought to him.

‘Certainly, certainly. Just remember that every year for you is twenty four for me down here.’ he thought.

‘We will come back as soon as we can, hopefully next year.’ Tom thought to him.

‘Thank you again for everything you have given to us.’ Lydia thought. ‘We will treat this responsibility with the utmost respect.’

‘It is you all that deserve the thanks. If it weren’t for your tenacity and determination, you never would have ended up here, and I would have no chance at escape.’ They could feel the emotions in his thoughts, the waves of despair and relief. ‘I don’t know how much longer I can take this. I am in no pain, yet the thought of being trapped here for possibly an eternity is too much. Thanks again for helping me. Just having visitors has brought about a vibrancy I haven’t felt in quite some time.’

Wilhelm also had some heartfelt messages for Carl on his last session in. Carl’s carefree nature and humor, that sometimes bordered on obscene, had been a welcome respite from Wilhelm’s scholarly existence.

‘Don’t let life…or the afterlife…I know, I know, it’s not the afterlife. But, don’t let yourself get too down in the dumps, man. It doesn’t help, and then you just end up feeling worse and worse. Keep ya head up. Know what I mean?’ Carl thought, imparting some street philosophy on the professor.

‘Thank you, Carl. Make sure those other two keep on track.’ Wilhelm thought jokingly.

Now, they had said all their goodbyes to Wilhelm and the followers of Ch’unpitari, it was time to do the same with the dig team.

“I’ll have two of the guides take jou back to Puerto Maldonado. I’m staying here to get as much done before the rains come. Got a few more months.” Dr. Jimenez said as he patted Tom on the shoulder.

“Thanks for having us.” Lydia said. “We hope to come back as soon as we can get more funding.”

“Please do.” Liz shot back. “It’s been nice having a few more members around camp to share meals with. And Carl, your pancakes will be missed.” Kyle stood beside her nodding in agreement.

“Legendary stacks, that’s what he’s known for.” Tom chimed in.

“That’s not all he’s known for.” Luis interjected. “He really helped us get the heavier pieces of equipment down to the lower dig site. He’s like an ox. Thanks again for all your help.”

“Please be careful returning home. It’s easy to get complacent after you’ve spent some time here. Lots of nasties out there.” Dr. Phil said. “You are all welcome any time…especially if you have some of that funding,” he finished only half kidding.

They turned and waved a final goodbye as they got to the edge of camp, and then they disappeared into the green abyss.

\*\*\*

By the time they made it to the docks of Puerto Maldonado four days later, the three of them were ready for a hot bath and a soft bed. Tom got some much needed relief from the insects. He had fared the worst of the group. They had torn him apart, with every piece of exposed skin covered in red, puffy welts. He put on a random telenovela on the small TV in their hotel room, and all three were asleep within minutes, Carl first of course.

# Part Two: The Pickle

## September 3 2005

A week prior Hurricane Katrina had made landfall in Louisiana. The levees failed in the Lower Ninth Ward and water poured in from there and St. Bernard Parish and flooded the eastern portion of New Orleans. Tens of thousands crammed into the Superdome for safety, but conditions quickly became unsanitary and overcrowded. Police officers were quitting mid shift with mass looting and violence breaking out all around them. The Superdome was no refuge, trash was piled several feet high inside, and water began to surround the complex when it had to be evacuated. People were stranded on rooftops for days and decaying dead bodies still lay in the streets a week later. Thousands of volunteers came from all over the country while over one million refugees looked for new homes, many of them in Texas. New Orleans created a new, but devastating, memory and whatever structures remained had stories to tell. It would take years before New Orleans’ population returned to normal levels. Katrina was one of the largest natural disasters in US history and the three of them were in awe every day as helicopters flew over surveying the damage, and news reporters conducted interviews with tearful victims still searching for their loved ones. They sat around the empty fire pit outside the camper, it was too hot for a fire, and swapped stories about the nonstop news coverage of the tragedy.

Tom was finishing up a round of potent antibiotics he had been on since returning from Peru. He had contracted a nasty bacterial skin infection on his right forearm from the insect bites. He had a bandage over the infected area and the rest of his skin was finally starting to clear up.

“Little buggers did a number on you.” Carl said.

“Feasted. Got me good.” Tom replied.

“Nom nom nom.” Lydia made a chomping motion with her hand. She had settled back into school and had started to make some small preliminary steps towards their new project. “So, I was online looking up some stuff related to small scale manufacturing to figure out the best way to do the housing and some assembly components for the convertor, and I ran across some interesting articles. You guys ever hear of 3D printing?” They had not, so she explained the basics. “It’s basically a small box that uses polymer to print 3D objects from digital files like blueprints. It’s perfect for some of these components that need to be made from scratch but require precision. And, since we only need to make one it could save tons on the manufacturing costs.”

“Dope! So how do we get one?” Tom asked.

“I don’t think we need one. Plus, do any of us really have the time to learn how to use it?” she asked rhetorically. “I found this forum where a bunch of these amateur builders…or makers, they call themselves makers. They hang out and exchange ideas and blueprints and troubleshoot issues in the community. After reading some posts I noticed a user named PicklePete seemed to really know his shit. So, I contacted him…I’m assuming it’s a him, but it’s the internet, who knows? Anyways, I was able to intrigue him enough with some hand sketches I took pictures of, that he says he’ll help us. He said he likes a challenge, but he needs some more detailed sketches with measurements, and I have too much on my plate. Can you still draw?” Deetz said looking at Carl who had an artistic streak in high school that he let fall to the wayside after graduation.

“I got you, D. I’m just glad there’s something I can do to help. Been feeling a little useless recently, as far as this convertor stuff goes, and I know it’s been a lot for you. I got your back.” Carl said, trying to ease some of the load off her back.

“Any way we can help, we will. I’ve been getting some batches of cubes started. I know it’s not enough to fund the convertor, but every little bit helps, and we would have never made it this far if it weren’t for Ben in a weird way.....He’s doing good. He popped by last week and burned one with the ol’ mummy over here.” Tom said, lifting his gauze-wrapped arm.

“Glad he stopped by.” Lydia said and paused. “I’m trying to figure out who can help me with the laser aspect of this thing and the bio-chemical goo…I have to find people I can trust. That’s not easy, and I need help figuring out what the hell to tell each of them I’m doing. I need my own set of Manhatty boys…and girls for this one.” she said, shooting a glance at Tom. “Try to keep any plausible cover stories in the back of your head. That’s one way you could help for sure.”

“Will do.” Tom said, giving her a reassuring look.

They tried to relax the rest of the evening. They had all been in overdrive recently. Carl was able to get his job back installing siding, but he was working a lot of overtime. Tom had to look for a new job after his old position was filled, but he wasn’t having much luck. He was pretty sure the bandage wasn’t going over well in the interviews. People seemed frightened about the possibility he had contracted some gnarly tropical disease, even though he was assured by the doctor that his skin infection was not contagious in any way. He was getting a lot of funny looks. It would be off in a couple more weeks, so he decided to hold off the job search until then.

Lydia had only been sleeping about four hours a night during the week. She spent all day in classes and studying. She was able to catalog the mushrooms they found in Peru, but unfortunately she didn’t find any samples that would help with her Master’s thesis. She did manage to find one previously uncataloged species that she intended to study more when there was time available. At night, she would go to her apartment near campus and split the time there between school and Wilhelm’s project. Tom was usually coming to her apartment on weekends since they returned, but she wanted to get away this weekend and catch Carl up on everything. Tom tried to stay out of her way when he was there. He would help cook her food, wash some clothes, tidy up a bit, anything he could do to make life easier for her without causing additional stress. She planned on sleeping half of tomorrow away in the camper. She had been dreaming about that the past two weeks. Way less distractions for her out here, and it felt like home being with Tom.

Carl left after only a few beers, which wasn’t his normal routine, but he had slowed down a little with all the hours he had been working recently. Lydia made her way to the camper, turned on the AC and pulled back the sheets to their bed. She got naked and got in bed and pulled the sheets up to her neck. Tom rinsed the residual toothpaste out of his mouth as he stood by the edge of the woods enjoying his surroundings. He missed being out here on a regular basis, the quiet. He took in the stars above the silhouetted treeline for a moment and went inside to find a welcome surprise waiting for him.

# 

## April 28 2006

Construction had begun on One World Trade Center the day before. After most of the fervor of 9/11 waned, typical American partisan bickering had begun even related to the design of the replacement for the twin towers. That was one of many delays contributing to the four and half year void in Manhattan, Ground Zero.

It was Lydia’s first weekend back at the camper, since the Christmas break, and it was clear from the slow progress they were making on the convertor, they weren’t going to get back to Peru that summer. But things were starting to take shape the past few months, and Tom was able to return to his old job at the marine engine parts supplier after someone left. It timed up nicely with getting the bandage off. It was easier for them to call him than have to find someone else and train them. Carl’s hours had finally slowed down a little, and he had a little more pep in his step this weekend. He had already polished off quite a few beers and was feeling himself.

Carl sang Harry Belafonte’s “Jump in the Line (Shake, Senora)” to Deetz as she walked up, and Tom joined in midway. She began shaking and joined in for the last few lines.

“That’s MY jam!” said Deetz, and they all laughed. Tom came in for a kiss and surprised her with a tushie grab. She winked and said, “Hey you!”

“So what’s crack-a-lacking in the world of Deetz?” Carl asked as he used a lighter to pop the top off another beer.

“Oh you know…just a little of this, little of that. Trying to freaking not lose my mind.”

“Aren’t we all.” Carl replied.

“How’s ol’ Pickle Pete?” Tom asked and continued on trying to remember the rhyme. “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

“He’s good. He really liked your drawings, Carl. He says thanks, he can totally work with those.” Lydia said knowing how hard it was for Carl to make the blueprint style drawings. He had to do some online research, and he even took the time to learn the basics of some design software to give the Pickle what he needed.

“My man Carl, fucking Leo DaVinci over here!” Tom said excitedly.

“Yeah, this Pete guy seems cooler and cooler the more I learn about him. He’s pretty secretive, but he’s starting to open up. Thanks for giving me the idea to tell him.” Lydia said to Tom.

“What did you come up with, skipper?” Carl asked Tom as he sparked a cigarette.

“I figured why not tell him as close to the truth as we could, without giving him the whole enchilada.” Tom said. “I suggested we tell him it was the housing and some components for a prototype of a clean energy drive. This way he knows enough to really help if we run into any design issues.”

“But, it worked better than we planned. I could tell he got fired up to invest some time, and he’s basically volunteering his services, so he needed some incentive. Plus, he understood my hesitation in sharing any info up to that point. He knows what this kind of tech could mean and would love to be in on the ground floor. I won’t share any more details with him yet, but it has gotten him to open up quite a bit. He’s pretty wild. He said he is part of some hacker collective that focuses on human rights and democratization of technology. He still won’t tell me their name, or his real name, for that matter.” Lydia said, trying to remember the details of her chats with Pete. “He probably thinks I’m crazy, but he is willing to play along just in case.”

“A hacker collective. That sounds pretty cool. Hackers is one of my favorite movies.” Tom said and looked at Carl.

“We have no names, man. No names. We are nameless!” quoted Carl moving his head back and forth.

“We don’t have to worry about this crew hacking the convertor plans do we?” Tom asked Lydia.

“Nah. Got everything split up. I’m using two hidden laptops at my apartment to split the files between for safety, and I never hook either of them to the internet. I’m using a flash drive to transfer info about individual components using my school laptop and disseminate it from there. Then, I overwrite the flash drive for safety. Also, the two laptops wouldn’t be enough. There’s a few key pieces of knowledge that Wilhelm gave me that I’m keeping in my head for safety, until it’s built.”

“Sounds like you got that all under control…sort of like you do with me.” Tom jested and squeezed her thigh. “Well, Ben has been coming through again, and I’ve put away 5k so far.”

“Good. We’ll be needing it soon. The laser for this puppy is ex-pen-sive.” Lydia said, indicating the high price with her pronunciation.

“I’ll keep coming up with what I can. It’s not like we could even profit off of a clean energy source if we don’t have a working prototype. And…..I’m not so sure we even should.” Tom said and they heard the hesitation in his voice.

“We can cross that bridge when we get there.” Carl said reassuringly.

“If…if, we get there.” Lydia replied.

“We will. You will. I got faith in ya sister.” Carl smiled.

“So I found a laser gal. Her name is Violet. You can’t make this shit up sometimes.” Lydia laughed as she said her name. “The snozzberries taste like snozzberries!” She imitated her favorite Violet, Violet Beauregarde.

“A laser gal, huh? What’s she look like?” Carl perked up at the mention of a member of the opposite sex. He had been in a long dry spell, busy with work and the project, and he didn’t have many opportunities to meet new people.

“She’s cute, got brown hair and…wait, I’m getting off track. We’ll save that for another time, lover boy.” she joked to Carl. “She thinks she knows which laser I need for my ‘mycology project’. I came up with that one doing some work for my Masters program. You can do laser microscopy to detect the chemical compounds and elements inside the mushroom samples, so it seemed like a perfect cover story. It actually has me really interested in analyzing the Ancients to see what we could find out.”

“That’d be sweet! Crack the code, girlie girl.” Tom said and winked at her.

“Got another girlfriend I think may be able to help with the goo,” she said referring to the oddest part of the convertor, a bio-chemical goo that was alive in the most prehistoric sense of the word.

“Another lady in the mix. What’s she look like?” Carl asked, unable to control his curiosity.

“Oh, Hailey. She’s cute too, but you’re a little too male for her liking if you smell what I’m cooking.” Lydia said, patting Carl on the shoulder.

“Smells like defeat.” he quipped back frowning childishly.

“So, what’s her deal, Lyd?” Tom asked.

“Nothing set in stone yet. Haven’t even asked her to do anything yet. I’m waiting to see how she reacts when I tell her my plan…which I’m still struggling with.” she answered.

“If you think she’s the right one, let’s use the Pickle Pete approach.” Tom said. “She might get psyched about it, or think you’re crazy, but either way she won’t have any real info yet. So, I’d feel safe about it if you two did?”

“I’m down. Not like I know any chemists. But, I do know a couple of good mycologists.” Carl said, narrowing his eyes as he looked at both of them.

“Getting there.” Deetz replied. “Yeah. I guess that is probably the way to go. One less thing on my mental plate.”

“Speaking of mental plates, let this rattle around on your brain stem.” Carl said passing Lydia the jay he just lit. She took a long puff and passed it to Tom.

“Looks like you may have found your Manhatty boys…your Manhatty crew.” Tom said, trying not to cough.

“I sure hope so. Wilhelm will probably think we’re never coming back after we don’t make it back this summer.” Lydia’s voice had a tone of sadness.

“He’ll survive…he has so far. You’re doing the best you can, and I’m so proud of you. He can hold out a little longer.” Tom said, doing what he could to console her. He admired her compassion for Wilhelm’s plight, and the drive she had to bring his vision to fruition.

# 

## August 26 2006

Lydia had been talking with Hailey on a regular basis now and had her on board as the crew chemist. Hailey was a second generation Indian-American, and her parents tried to give her the whitest name they could think of to give her a better chance in this country. It was a sad reality that they even had to consider that possibility, but her parents wanted the best life they could give her. She was always in the top of her classes and knew her stuff, but she also knew how to throw down and have a good time which was part of the reason Lydia chose her. She knew she needed people that were balanced and human, not just cogs in the academic wheel. Hailey always dressed prim and proper, typically wearing a business skirt and tucked in white button down shirt, which made her seem even cooler when she did decide to let loose.

“How’s the search going?” Lydia asked, referring to some of the more unusual, hard to acquire, components of the goo.

“Not good, but I think I’ve been going about this the wrong way. We need four different chemical compounds that are rarely used…and usually by research labs, so the companies that do manufacture them require permits…it’s a really big hassle, and then there’s this giant paper trail which doesn’t help your cause at all…..So, I started thinking what if I manufactured them myself, and when I started to do the research I found out it’s actually not that hard, and you can get most of the base supplies from hardware stores and drugstores…oh, and one of the components is living fungi you can find in plants shops, it’s good for the soil. The raw costs are surprisingly cheap for the amount we need.” Hailey explained, excited to tell Lydia the news.

“That’s freakin’ awesome. If this is about producing cheap clean energy, we need it to be as cost efficient and easy to manufacture as possible.” Lydia responded.

“But, I’ll need some funds to get started. Ya know, starving student and all.”

“Totally. How much you need?” Lydia asked.

“Five hundred should do it?” Hailey responded, unsure of how much she would need.

“Okay. Give me a couple days, and I should be able to get you the money.”

“Most of that is supply costs, so if you’re trying to cost out the final product, I think it will be a fraction of that in the long run. But you know, making one of anything is always a little more expensive.” said Hailey trying to justify the price tag.

“No problem. I’m just a little tight in the pocketbook myself right now.” Lydia was always playing the part.

Lydia’s budget was constrained, but she had expected the cost to be much higher. Still, she didn’t want any of the crew knowing how much money they could spend or where it was coming from. They were all playing with chump change in the real world, but for the boys and Lydia this felt like a lot of money to be handing out to people they hadn’t known very long.

“So, I’ll call you in a few days. Thanks so much for looking into all this. I wouldn’t have known where to start.” she said to Hailey.

“My pleasure. This is way more exciting than any of my actual research. Do you mind if I ask you a question?” Hailey scrunched up her face indicating she hoped she wasn’t crossing any lines.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“It’s just…I’m a little confused on how you came up with this formula if chemistry isn’t your main focus.” Hailey said hesitantly.

Lydia was blindsided and was trying not to show it. “Well…um…I have several partners on this project, and there’s someone who…um…was piggybacking on some older research, and unfortunately, he passed away before he could finish, and I’m doing my best to finish his work. He wanted to keep things secret until the concept was proven. He didn’t want to be ostracized from the academic community if he failed,” she said and was proud of her improvisational skills, weaving some fact and fiction from Wilhelm’s life.

“Got ya. I understand. Just curious was all. Hopefully, we can do some justice for him then.” Hailey said.

“All right. I’ll see you soon…with that money. Bye!” Lydia said and turned, breathing a sigh of relief.

\*\*\*

Coming home to her apartment, Lydia started going over the new plans with Tom as he folded some clothes.

“So, I need five hundred dollars for Hailey to get going,” she said.

“We just gave Violet six grand. There’s only two thousand left. Ben can only sell so much. I’m not going to be able to save enough to get money to get us back to Peru next summer, even if we get this stupid thing finished.” Tom said angrily tossing a shirt on the pile of laundry.

“Look, we knew the lasers were probably going to be the most expensive parts, and we needed them. What in the hell are you so mad about?” she said, frustrated. “I’m the one who is doing all the leg work here!”

“I knew it. I knew you’d say some shit like that. Who do you think is coming up with money, honey?”

“You can be a real jerk sometimes, honey!” she shot back.

“I know you are doing a lot of the work, but what I’m contributing is a lot, and I deserve credit too. My ass is literally on the line here!” Tom was trying, unsuccessfully, to control his temper.

“What the fuck does that mean?” She was starting to get angry now. The Ancients’ lasting effects on patience were being tried at this moment.

“It means I could go to prison if I get caught. That’s what it means!” he yelled and tossed another shirt in the hamper. Then he paused and softened his voice. “Carl isn’t even involved in the growing anymore now, so I feel really alone. It was okay at first, but the longer we do this the more paranoid I get. I can’t go to prison…but, I know we need this money too. If it was just for the money, I would stop, but it’s about what this money represents. Not just freeing Wilhelm…I know what this project means to you…and possibly the world…as dumb as that sounds.” He stopped to see how she would respond.

“Oh shit.” Lydia said as she grabbed his arms. “You have never put it to me like that. I had no idea the stress that all of this was causing you. That’s stupid. I should’ve known. I’ve just been so freaking busy trying to finish school and work on this project. I know I’m never around anymore, and when I am, I’m working or too exhausted to do anything. You know I love you though, right.”

“I know, I know. I love you too. And, I know we have to do this for now. I’m not going to set things back. I’m being careful. I just need you to know where my head’s at on this. Look, sometimes I feel like I’m not getting enough credit and that’s stupid. I know, I shouldn’t let my ego get in the way of this or us. Truth is, I just fucking miss you and want to spend some time with you. And, I lashed out. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok…honey!” she joked. “I should’ve known how hard this is for you. You just play it so cool sometimes, and I wasn’t paying enough attention. You can always stop if you want. I’m sure we can find another way.”

“I think we’re fine for now. Ben plays it as safe as he can and keeps his ear to the streets. He’s even got a friend in the local sheriff’s office who keeps an eye out for him. I know all this is temporary, and we’ll get through this phase. I’m just stressed is all, and I know you are too.” Tom stared out the small window of her apartment and looked deflated.

“Let’s go to the camper for Labor Day weekend. Hang out with Carl. Maybe even enjoy some of the fruits of your labor. We haven’t done that in a long time.” she said, tickling his stomach. “Some camper sex and coffee by the fire…We both need it.”

“You had me at camper sex.” Tom smirked and pulled her in for a kiss.

# 

## October 27 2006

Pickle Pete had finally agreed to meet in person. He had come to the realization this was the only way they were going to be able to complete this project. His unknown hacker collective had thoroughly checked Lydia out. They knew everything about her family, her dad’s accident, her boyfriend Tom, and their friend Carl. They had sent her digital files showing everything. They knew where they all worked. They knew the names of the last three dogs her mom owned. None of that really seemed to matter, they just needed to know who they were dealing with, before they would decide to work with them. They now felt confident enough to bring Lydia into the fold, even though she didn’t know anything about hacking at all. They were meeting at a mall food court on the outskirts of DC and Pete allowed Tom to come too. They knew he wasn’t a threat, and they knew anything they told Lydia would make its way to Tom anyway.

“How will we recognize you?” Lydia typed in the chat window on her laptop.

“Don’t worry! You will! I already know what u2 look like. L8r” PicklePete typed and closed the chat.

Lydia and Tom surveyed the busy food court, wafts of waffle fries and cinnamon pastries filled their noses, which made Tom’s stomach grumble.

“What do you think he looks like?” Tom asked.

“He said we would recognize him, but I don’t know how?”

“Is that him?” Tom said, pointing to a little person waving at them.

He was wearing blue jeans, sunglasses, and a white t-shirt with a huge green, pop art pickle on it.

“That’s our guy!” she said, and chuckled, realizing now what Pete meant when he said they would recognize him.

“Hey! Told you, you wouldn’t miss me!” Pete said with his hand outstretched as they walked up to him. They both noticed he looked to be about ten years older than them, probably in his mid to late thirties, as they leaned over to shake his hand.

“Hi! I’m Lydia and this is Tom.”

“Hi!” Tom said.

“So what do we call you?…Pickle…or Pete?…or…” Lydia asked, trying to keep things moving before there was an awkward pause.

“My real name is actually Paul, but I got this nickname a long time ago on a gaming forum. I wrote something dumb on some bulletin board when I got stuck at a spot in this game. I wrote ‘What a pickle?’ Seemed like a harmless comment, but I got burned hard by my boys over that one. They started calling me Pickle Pete, and that’s been me ever since. But, I like it. Just call me Pete. That’s what everybody else does.”

“Dope name, man! Way better than Tom.” Tom said laughing.

“Thanks!” Pete said as climbed up onto one of the high chairs at the table. Lydia and Tom pulled out chairs trying not to stare as he got seated.

“All these months of chatting online, it’s so cool to finally meet you. Thank you so much for doing this. I know you had to make sure who we were first.” Lydia said.

“Sorry for all the cloak and dagger stuff. Our group is working on some big stuff including your project, so we can never be too careful. We have released some documents in the past that has put us on a few different government’s bad sides.” Pete said to Lydia as he pulled a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and slid it to Tom. “Why don’t you grab us all some shakes, chocolate for me.” Pete thought this might help them blend in with the food court crowd.

“No problem.” Tom said and side eyed Lydia as he got up.

“Me too. Chocolate sounds good,” she said.

“Three chocolate milkshakes coming right up.” Tom said smiling, and as he turned his back, he dropped the fake smile.

As Tom walked across the food court, he thought to himself, *How the hell am I on milkshake duty, right now?* Once again, he knew this was a dumb way to think, one of his flaws, he was trying to work on. *Lydia’s been the one communicating with Pete the whole time. It only makes sense I am getting the drinks* he thought, trying to calm the inner asshole lurking underneath. Tom somehow managed to squeeze one of the shakes too hard, and he shot a nice dollop of chocolate brown milkshake right in the middle of his chest. By the time he got back to the table, he was completely over his internal monologue and more worried about how to get this wicked stain out of his shirt.

“…so when we got those parts machined and combined those with the 3D shell something was still off, so we had to start over. Oh, thanks!” Pete said as Tom slid him a chocolate shake.

“So we’re at square one again?” Lydia asked and took a sip of her shake. She raised an eyebrow and thought *Damn, that’s good!*

“No, not at all. I think we are about two or three builds away. That was the third prototype. Just so you know though, we have about two thousand into this already, and it might take another grand to finish it off.” Pete stirred his shake as he spoke. “A few of us chipped in on it. We don’t mind contributing, but we didn’t expect it to be that much. We need some funds from you, as a sign of good faith, if nothing else.”

“I can get you two grand, no problem.” Tom chimed in. He had been able to save another 5k already. But, he thought he had enough time to come up with the rest of the travel costs if they were ready to go to Peru the following summer. Funds were tight, but he was trying to hold up his end of the bargain the best he could. Lydia knew Tom had been really hustling. She rubbed his leg under the table and grinned.

“Righteous.” Pete said calmly. “That will allow me to pay back the other donors. I don’t mind footing the rest of the bill…but you gotta give me some carrot, I feel like I got all stick here.”

“I get what you’re putting down.” Lydia said looking down and then over to Tom trying to figure out what to say. They obviously hadn’t discussed all the possibilities of this conversation.

“Listen, I understand you gotta hold your cards close to your chest on this one, but give me something.” Pete pleaded.

“Okay. You already know the basic concept, but all you’ve got is a box with a cell battery mounted in it, and that has to be frustrating for you. But, I’ve got two other crews working on other parts that are just as in the dark as you are.” Lydia said.

Tom was surprised at her measured but commanding tone. He didn’t get to see this more mature side of her that often, but when did, it turned him on. He watched her closely as she continued.

“But…you were the first one on board, and when you finish the shell…I need you to do the final assembly with me. I can’t do it myself. So you see, you’ll have a front row seat before anybody else. Is that enough carrot for you?” Lydia said and sipped her milkshake still making eye contact with Pete, cool as a cucumber.

*Damn, what’s in this shake?* Tom thought. *I’ve never seen her this cool, she’s Uma Thurman, Pulp Fiction level cool.*

“What’s up, doc?” Pete said and took a bite of an imaginary carrot. “Plenty, thanks!”

“This guy is cool, Lyd! Definitely one of us.” Tom said, smiling at Pete. “I’ll get that dough to her, and she can send it to you, Pete.”

“Well, I don’t want to hang here too long, and I want to finish this thing ASAP now. I’ll be in touch. See you online, Lydia. Nice meeting you, Tom.” The Pickle jumped off the seat and tossed his empty milkshake in the trash. He disappeared into the crowd as quickly as they found him.

“Hope you were fine with my offer to him?” Lydia asked Tom.

“You’re good. You’re steering this ship. He is definitely our type of people, got a good vibe. And, I know you always keep at least one card up your sleeve.” he said knowing she wouldn’t hand over the keys to the kingdom that easily. “Did I mention how smokin’ you are when you take control like that?” looking her body up and down as he said it.

“Oh, really!” she said seductively and twirled her hair. Taking control like that turned her on as well. They couldn’t make it to the parking deck fast enough.

# 

## November 24 2006

Carl poked at the coals in the fire pit, scraped them together in the center and threw on a few fresh logs. Tom was fiddling with the boombox as Deetz sat cross-legged in the camping chair with her hood over her head. She had one of her multiple laptops open on her lap typing at breakneck speed for a few seconds and then stopping to think before smashing the keys again. None of them had been talking that much this evening. There wasn’t any tension though, they were all just in their own heads and comfortable enough with each other to just sit in it. Lydia did one final smash, lifted her right arm up high, hitting the enter key with her index finger and slammed the laptop shut with her left hand.

“Done! At least for now.” she said. “Six more months and I finish my Masters. I’m so ready to be done. Mom wants me to go right into a PhD right away, but there’s no way. I need a break for a while. If she only knew about all this other stuff, maybe she would get off my back about it.”

“You’ll get there. Try to forget all that shit for tonight. Chillax wit’ ya boys!” Carl said.

“Did I tell you Violet’s getting the lasers delivered next month?” she asked Carl but didn’t give him time to answer. “Three powerful mofos, our three amigos.”

“Have a rave in this bitch!” Carl joked and serendipitously a rhythmic electronic thump of a bass drum, bom bom bom bom, came from the boombox. “Killer timing T!” he said, giving Tom a thumbs up as he sat in the empty camp chair next to them.

Lydia had been meeting with Violet once a week on campus to go over notes on the laser portion of her “microscope” project. Violet wore a lot of purple, it was her thing, and her personality was pretty purple too, equal parts blue and red. When she wasn’t depressed, it was usually because she was angry about something. Lydia had learned how to navigate their relationship when she realized that Violet’s anger was usually at the world and not directed at her, but it sure felt like it sometimes.

“So, when do I get to meet this Violet?” Carl asked, glancing over at Lydia.

“I can introduce you if you want, but I’m warning you, she can be a handful.”

“I’ll decide that for myself.” he said, smirking.

Lydia invited Carl to come up with Tom to her apartment in a month. Her semester would be over and they could get the lasers to bring home for the Christmas break. Tom hadn’t met Violet either so this would be a good opportunity. She made sure to remind them not to mention anything about the energy convertor, Violet was still under the impression all of this work was for some school project.

# 

## December 22 2006

The apartment was a mess as always, piles of clothes on the floor, stacks of papers and books were clogging the few empty places left to set things. Lydia lit a candle trying to cover up the funk from some moldy tangerines she found that morning in the kitchenette. She cleared off her small round table dining table and wiped it down. Then, she took all the books stacked on the chairs and made a new pile on the floor in the corner, usually there was only one empty chair at her morning coffee spot. Tom rang the doorbell, and she answered to find him with a pizza in hand. Carl was right behind him holding a case of beer.

“Pepperoni and mushroom. Hope she’s good with that?” Tom said as they walked in, and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“She’ll have to be. I’m pretty depleted in the food department right now.” Lydia said.

“Deetz!” Carl said as he slid the beer into her nearly empty fridge and turned to give her a hug.

A few minutes later, Violet showed up and Lydia greeted her at the door. She took off her big purple puffy coat and sat down in front of the open pizza box. Tom passed out some plates, and they all grabbed a slice.

“This is my boyfriend Tom, and that’s our friend Carl…And this is Violet, of course.” Lydia said, introducing them all. “I see you brought my present.” She nodded her head in the direction of the box Violet was carrying with her.

“They should be all ready to go. I mounted the lasers on the base you gave me and tuned the mirrors per your specs.” Violet said as she pulled all the pepperonis and mushrooms off her slice and stacked them on the edge of her plate. “Do you have any forks?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah sure!” Lydia jumped up and grabbed one from the kitchen drawer, giving it a look over to make sure it was clean before handing it to Violet.

“You know when I mounted this up for you, and tested the output of the focused laser from all three, I realized something. You could achieve the same thing with a quartz prism and one laser, if you change the mirror alignment. Just wanted to let you know. If you plan on making more of these microscopes, it would cut the cost by about half.” Violet said.

Carl was trying not to stare, but he was hanging on her every word. Her voice had a deadpan, I don’t give a shit quality, that Carl found attractive.

“That’s amazing.” Lydia said. “Would you mind drawing me up some specs? I may be making more, if this works out the way I’m hoping…I could pay you something.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get those right out to you.” Violet said sarcastically. “I have no idea how to draw it up, but I could show you, if I had the right parts.”

“Carl could help you out.” Tom interjected.

“Yeah, he is a wiz with that design software.” Lydia said quickly, looking at Carl.

“Um…yeah sure…I’d have to brush up my skills a bit. Been a minute.” Carl said, stumbling over his words. Tom and Lydia could tell he was a little nervous. Violet didn’t really react to their suggestion. “I could bring a cheese pizza next time.” he said, trying to sweeten the deal.

“Why not.” Violet said. The fact that Carl took notice of her dislike of pizza toppings softened her hard shell slightly. “Get my phone number from Lydia, and call me after New Years. You’ll have to work around my schedule. Hope that’s okay?”

“Sure. Want a beer?” Carl asked Violet.

“Only if it’s not that pretentious crap. I’m kind of a cheap beer in a can type person.” she replied.

“Never.” he said and handed her a cold silver can with silhouetted mountains on it. Their shared love of cheap beer helped break the ice between them.

They finished off the pizza and sat around drinking beer, talking about their plans for Christmas break with their families.

“My dad is a nut job. He buys everyone these goofy matching sweaters every year.” Violet said. “I refuse. But we still take the group photo every year and dad tries to hide me in the back, but I still stick out in every one.” They all laughed imagining the awkward family photos.

“My uncle always wears those sweaters too.” Tom said, picturing one of the particularly tacky ones covered in drunken elves.

“Well, my mom orders our food from the shop at home channel. It’s gross, and kind of embarrassing, but now it feels like a tradition.” Carl said, chuckling as he and Violet had an extended moment of eye contact.

Lydia was watching this interaction, and she caught Violet actually smiling for once. She nudged Tom under the table, and they both grinned watching their good friend Carl and Violet hit it off.

# 

## February 24 2007

Lydia sat on her couch surrounded by books and had her laptop open on the coffee table. She had about twenty tabs open in her browser and was switching between them and her thesis paper*. Only three months to finish,* she thought to herself. The previous year, she had been able to work on a psychedelic research study that focused on psilocybin assisted therapy programs for veterans. It had been the first to get FDA approval to use the drugs in a generation. This was the basis of her work and something she had become very passionate about. She hated to see the veterans who were being sent into horrible situations under the guise of protecting the nation. She really felt this was all just a huge money making scheme for the weapons manufacturers and these soldiers were pawns in the process. History would prove her right years later when we finally ended a two decade occupation, and investigative journalists and ex-military would uncover the schemes of the weapons manufacturers, who were producing equipment that would require the governments to continue to pay maintenance fees for years, even after it was abandoned overseas. And then, they claimed we needed to pay for new equipment to replace the equipment they abandoned. But, in typical American fashion the public was too distracted to care for longer than a few days, and everyone moved on to the next story about some drug-addled actor or political sex scandal. The twenty-four hour news cycle was eroding everyone’s attention spans, and the trend would only worsen in the next decade as technology bulldozed over the collective synapses replacing measured thought with a reactionary mob mentality, all for a quick dopamine hit, to satiate the most base desires.

Lydia found time in between her studies to examine the new mushroom species she brought back from Peru. The sample had mostly deteriorated in storage. She knew she needed to deal with it as soon as they returned, but she had been too busy. There was one piece of tissue that had not rotted, and it was barely enough to run tests on. Upon analysis, it did not contain psilocybin, but it did contain a strange chemical composition, similar to some results she found in testing she ran on the Ancients. She theorized this was a long lost relative of the hybrids the shamans were working on. She didn’t want to turn this over to the University just yet until she knew what it was. This sample was too far gone to try to attempt reproducing from tissue cultures. Her true hope was to get a viable spore print along with healthy tissue samples on her next trip to Peru, so she could clone them in the lab.

Tom sat in the kitchenette reading a magazine article about recent convictions in music piracy cases. There hadn’t been many of these cases, and they seemed to be the labels just trying to scare people, but it didn’t work. He still bought his music the old fashioned way, at the store, but almost everyone Lydia knew in college downloaded their music for free on peer to peer websites. A difference in philosophy he thought, but that wasn’t how a lot of younger people saw it, they felt it was their right to have any music or movies they wanted, free for the taking.

The doorbell rang and Tom tossed the magazine to the side. He answered the door to find Carl and Violet. They came in, cheap beer in tow, and Lydia set her laptop on the table and piled her thesis heap out of the way so they could sit down. Violet and Carl had finished their collaboration on the new laser design and were delivering a flash drive to Lydia with their work.

“Check it out. Tell me what you think.” Violet handed it to Lydia, and she popped it in the side of her laptop and took a look at the drawings.

“These look amazing! Nice work. I’ve got a guy who can work with these for sure.” Lydia said to Violet.

“Without Carl, I never would have been able to do it.” Violet said and as she finished she looked back at Carl and smiled.

Tom and Carl hadn’t hung out much since New Years. They had both been busy with work, and Tom was also busy supplying Ben. On weekends, Tom had been here at Lydia’s apartment, and Carl had been coming up to work with Violet on Saturdays. Now seeing Violet and Carl interact, Tom and Lydia could tell something was going on between them. Violet was much happier than Lydia had ever seen her, and Carl couldn’t stop grinning. They were so happy to see them together like this, especially Carl, he had been alone for so long.

\*\*\*

Wilhelm’s warning, combined with how busy they had all been, meant none of the group had used the Ancients since leaving Peru. Tom and Lydia had been discussing the possibility that they could lose potency, or become ineffective, over time in storage. They had agreed that Tom would take a dose tonight after Violet and Carl left. That way Lydia could watch Tom, and if the Ancients weren’t viable any longer, Tom would have time to prep a batch before the summer. They needed to be ready in case the convertor was finished. Their plan was he was to go in and make his way to the outer ring. This way he could be out in fifteen minutes, and she wouldn’t have to watch him for an hour. He didn’t really like the thought of being inworld by himself for what would feel like a whole day. It could be a lot to handle. *How was Wilhelm handling it all,* he wondered. Tom laid down on Lydia’s bed, took one of the gel capsules she had pre-measured, and he was inside the light within seven minutes.

It felt weird, none of them had ever gone inworld here at Lydia’s apartment before. Tom knew Lydia deeply so her objects didn’t hold any secrets he felt needed to be revealed. *She needs what little privacy she does have*. Plus, he needed to stick to the plan. He flew through the walls into the night air a couple stories off the ground. He blipped past the campus. When he reached a bridge nearby, he did some barrel rolls around the span as he crossed over the river. He continued to the outer edge until he reached his destination, a park they walked around sometimes. *Well, they work!* he thought to himself. *I’ll just chill here and zen out until I get pulled back.* Within a few minutes, he could sense Lydia coming right towards him. Before he could even take time to think if everything was alright, he could sense it was and knew she was safe.

‘What are you doing here?’ he thought to her. ‘Who’s watching our bodies?’

‘No need to worry. You’ll be awake out there in eight minutes and then you can watch me my last few minutes. I couldn’t resist myself. I wanted to have some fun in here. It’s been a while.’ she thought.

‘Naughty little girl!’

They engaged with each other, and they both could feel the built up desires they had for one another burst forth. They spent several hours inside consumed with one another, before Tom was pulled back. Lydia went as far she could with him until he snapped back into his body. Then, she returned to the outer edge to finish off her time. He was right there waiting when she woke up, and they picked up right where they left off.

# 

## April 20 2007

Hailey was coming by the camper tonight. She was bringing by the first viable batch of the bio-chemical substrate, AKA, the goo. She was finally able to get it to survive the combination process without killing the microbes inside the final product, a triumphant moment for Hailey. Once she realized her mistake, it was much easier to synthesize than she imagined it would be. Hailey found the chemistry perplexing and thought it didn’t make sense from an energy conversion standpoint. *If this substance is able to generate any usable amount of electricity, it will seem like magic from our current understanding of chemistry and physics…* Hailey thought to herself…*but maybe Lydia has some answers*. She was just excited to finally be able to deliver something.

Carl and Violet had been spending most of their free time together, so he was excited to see Lydia and Tom. He wanted to bring Violet tonight, but that was a problem because she would be the only one there that didn’t know she was working on an energy drive. Carl had been distressed about the Violet situation, he had been completely honest with her, except for this. He tried to avoid the subject after they finished the drawings, but it was impossible. Lydia and Tom felt there was no reason not to fill her in. Violet had gone above and beyond to help Lydia, and the initial reason for telling her they were working on a microscope was a way to limit who knew about the project. Violet deserved to be in the fold now, they all agreed.

Carl and Violet got there early so that they could break the news to her. Lydia took the lead and made it clear it was fully her decision to not tell her the truth at first. Lydia really just wanted to take any possible heat off of Carl because his relationship had been going really well, and Lydia did not want to screw that up. As Lydia explained, Carl and Tom sat on eggshells waiting for Violet’s anger to surface, but it did not. She was actually ecstatic. She started pacing back and forth tossing different possibilities of what this could potentially mean if they were successful. Violet found the microscope project a bore in reality, but now that she knew the truth, she couldn’t contain her excitement. They were all glad to see Violet taking it this way and not flipping out. They still stayed silent on the laser array’s true goal of freeing Wilhelm from the inworld, which bothered Carl, but he understood. He hoped that one day, after they had completed their goal, he could tell her the full truth. But he was conflicted, he also knew telling her the full truth could make them all seem crazy and send her running for the hills. He hated having secrets, but this was a necessary secret. The energy drive compromise was the best solution for now.

Hailey carried a brown plastic jug in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other, as she approached the fire, where the rest of the group had gathered. Her preppy chic attire, the short dress skirt and white button down with glasses, was the perfect compliment to their expanding crew of misfits, the disruptors. Lydia invited Pickle Pete, but his anxiety and paranoia about his hacking exploits prevented him from attending. Carl lit several joints and started passing them around, one for each of them, it was a holiday after all. Lydia sat back and felt a sense of pride watching everyone talking and laughing as Carl told funny stories. She saw Tom drop his joint and burn a small hole in his hoodie. *He’s a mess, but he’s my mess,* Lyd thought. She was working on the final draft of her thesis and was completely burnt out. She was sleep deprived and had been fantasizing about sleeping-in at the camper for weeks now. It was just so much easier for her to escape out here, spend some quality time with Tom, and not worry about school.

“What’s in the jug?” Carl asked Hailey. “Bring some fun punch or something?” He was already buzzed and failed to make the connection between the jug and the goo.

“Definitely not for human consumption!” Hailey said as she lifted the jug laughing, and then they all realized Carl’s confusion and joined in.

“My bad. I would be the guy to drink something you spent months working on,” he joked picking up the jug and tilting it back in a fake chugging motion. Violet punched him in the shoulder playfully, but she made sure it hurt.

“All joking aside…” Hailey said “…it may be safe to consume, but I wouldn’t want to be the first one to find out. None of the components are toxic, but I would imagine, it would lead to some painful bathroom experiences.” Hailey crossed her arms over her stomach as she talked.

“Mind if I take a look?” Tom asked.

“Sure.” Hailey replied. “I put it in that brown jug because it keeps out UV rays which seem to degrade the substance rapidly, and it basically neutralizes the substrate rendering it useless. But, there’s not enough light out this evening to do any damage. Go ahead, have a look.”

“Please be careful.” Lydia said as Carl handed him the jug. She could just imagine it flying out of Tom’s hands and landing in the fire or some other blunder.

Tom unscrewed the cap, which was similar to a laundry detergent container, and looked inside. The goo was an odd fluorescent amber color that had a shimmery quality that looked similar to the ancient mycelium. It appeared to Tom to have the viscosity of a thick gravy. He brought the jug up to his nose, took a quick whiff, and raised an eyebrow.

“I was surprised too. There’s no smell that I can detect, completely odorless!” Hailey said looking at Tom, who passed off the jug to Violet who seemed curious.

They passed the jug around while Hailey continued explaining part of her process. Carl and Violet set up a couple tents, one for them and one for Hailey. After a full night of drinking and partying, Hailey grabbed her designer patterned sleeping bag and hopped in her tent. As she drifted off with all the possible futures swirling around in her head, her dreams and her fantasies began to meld together.

Lydia and Tom snuggled up in the camper with one of the ceramic heaters aimed in their direction. They both reeked of wood smoke, but neither of them cared. They both just needed some sleep.

“I’m bringing a bunch of my laundry up with me next weekend. That cool?” Tom said. “I’ll take care of all yours too.”

“That’s cool.” she said, sounding very tired. “I will be in thesis mode for the next few weeks. After this weekend, it’s nothing but that for the next month. Sorry, I won’t be able to hang out at all, but if you’re fine hanging around by yourself, go for it.”

“No, I get it. I’ll stay out of your way. I can make you food on the weekend to help you get through the week. It would be one less thing for you to worry about,” he said, hoping to relieve some of her stress.

“Aww. You’re the best,” she said half asleep with her eyes already closed.

“Man, tonight was crazy, huh? Having basically the whole crew here…I missed Pete. I really want to hang out with that guy. He seems super chill…..Hailey really came through for us though, I’m hyped she knows the deal now. And, don’t get me started on Carl and Violet. Seeing them together…a spark in their eyes, it’s so cool. They don’t seem like they would work just looking at them…so different…but, now I see they’re totally right for each other. I haven’t seen Carl smile like that since we were kids. I mean, he’s usually a happy dude, but this is a whole other level! And, Violet knows how to keep him in check, keep him out of trouble. And, she seems almost like a different person. I couldn’t believe she didn’t flip out when we told her the truth. You used to make it sound like she was so tough to work with, and I never see that side of her anymore. Do you?” he asked as he stared at the ceiling.

Tom turned his head anticipating a response and found Lydia fast asleep with her mouth open. He turned on his side and put his arm around her. She woke up for a second without opening her eyes and closed her mouth, turned, and put her head on his chest. Then, she fell right back to sleep.

Tom laid there staring at Lydia, admiring her, so proud of everything she had managed to accomplish on this project, and completing her masters at the same time. He felt so lucky and wasn’t taking a bit of it for granted. He wanted to be everything she needed him to be, especially right now. He was sometimes hit with feelings of insecurity about her. He felt she was so much smarter than him, he wondered what she saw in him. He had to stamp down these intrusive thoughts, he knew it was his own issues bubbling to the surface again. As he thought about their last session together at her apartment, and could remember the feelings of true love she had for him that emanated from her into him. A calming sense of relief washed over him as her head melted into his chest, and he drifted off to find her.

# 

## July 14 2007

Lydia finally turned in her thesis work and completed her Masters program the month before. Her mom threw a party at the house. Tyler was there. He was in his second year of college and had dropped most of his popularity act. He still wore a backwards baseball cap, a remnant of the last Tyler he had been. Tom listened as Tyler talked about the engineering classes he had taken the last semester, and Tom couldn’t help but think how proud Dan would have been of his son and daughter. Carl got to introduce Violet to everyone. But, the highlight of the party was probably when Carl asked Lydia’s mom, Debra, to dance with him to one of her favorite songs, “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet” by Bachman-Turner Overdrive.Lydia hadn’t seen her mom enjoy herself like that in a long time. Her appreciation of the genuine friendship she had with Carl reached a new plateau with that simple gesture.

Pickle Pete had started making regular visits to Lydia’s apartment. It took some coaxing at first, but they needed to assemble the device somewhere and he wasn’t comfortable revealing his address. This was a compromise and each time he came, he seemed to get more relaxed being around Lydia and Tom. If everything went according to plan, they were hoping to complete the final assembly of the convertor that evening. Pete was on the fifth prototype of the shell and everything seemed to be lining up correctly. Last weekend, they mounted Violet’s three laser mirror array inside the housing and connected the cell phone battery to a circuit board Pete designed to interact with the goo. They all sat around the small round kitchenette table with the device in the center.

Tom handed Lydia the brown jug. “Do you want to do the honors?” he asked her.

Next to the device was a holding tank that Pete fabricated to house the substrate and connect to the circuit board. The container had a flat circular screw on lid on top about the size of a pickle jar, oddly enough. Pete unscrewed the tank lid and inserted a wide mouth funnel as Lydia opened the brown jug. She slowly poured the amber, gravy substrate into the holding tank until it was full, and Pete removed the funnel, placed it in a plastic shopping bag to clean later, and closed the holding tank.

“You wanna take it from here?” Lydia asked Pete.

Without responding, Pete took the holding tank and slid it into a bracket inside the housing, and then connected it to the circuit board with an eight pin connector that made a small click when inserted. “Should we start it up?” he asked.

“We can test the power output, but I still need to take the prototype to our secret donor for a test before we move forward. If he’s happy with the prototype, we can move forward.” Lydia said, reciting their cover story for taking the convertor to Peru.

“We wouldn’t have been able to start this project without him…” Tom said. “…so we have to honor his wishes.”

“Hey. It’s your party. I’m just invited.” Pete said, reaching in his bag. “Let me grab my meter.” He attached the testing leads from his electrical meter to the circuit board and Lydia flipped the switch. There were no sounds or vibrations. Tom let out a sigh and Lydia was just staring at Pete. He looked up from his meter smiling. “I don’t know what it’s doing exactly, but it’s generating a lot of power. I’m not sure how it’s discharging it, I don’t feel any heat, do you?” Pete asked.

“No. Nothing.” Tom replied and looked at Lydia who was nodding in agreement as she felt around the device for heat.

“When will you be done with your donor? I think we need to prototype this some more to reduce the cost and run some tests.” Pete said and switched off the device.

Lydia was sure they had it this time, so she had Tom start arranging travel plans to Peru for them and Carl prior to meeting with Pete. Even if it didn’t work, she figured she would need to consult with Wilhelm again, but Pete’s meter readings were really reassuring. The only problem was they weren’t going to be able to go until early November, over three months away.

“Unfortunately, we won’t be back with it until early December.” Lydia said.

“December! Wow. That’s frustrating.” Pete was not expecting to wait that long.

“I know. But, I think I have something that may interest you until then.” Lydia handed Pete a flash drive. “It’s a modified version of this laser array using a single laser and a quartz prism, a different mirror layout…well, it’s drawings for that. Check it out and see if this is a viable alternative to what we have now. We may not need it at all. I need to check with my guy in Peru and get his input, but any preliminary work you can do may save us some time when I get home.”

“Got you covered, Lydia. You always seem to have something up your sleeve.” Pete said, shifting his gaze from hers to Tom. “Got to watch this one?” he said, joking. Pete put his meter and the funnel back into his bag along with the flash drive. Then, he placed the outer cover back on the shell and sealed it.

Later that evening, Tom and Lydia sat in her bed discussing the convertor.

“I feel happy about the direction things are going, but I can’t say I’m not scared.” Lydia started to speed up her words. Tom knew this was one of her tell-tale signs she was feeling anxious about something. “There’s so many moving parts with this project, and I feel like we’ve had to put our trust in people we really haven’t known that long. I just don’t want this leaked until we have some kind of plan. Does that make sense?”

“Kinda,” he said, trying to think of what to say. “I think you have done amazing so far, girlie girl…you’re always a step ahead. That move with Pete today was so sweet. That’s chess. I don’t think his group would release this work without it being ready. I could definitely see them going over our heads if we got cold feet about releasing it, but you’ve been smart enough to not give him everything at once. Just save that last piece of the puzzle as insurance. Know what I mean, Vern?”

“It’s like you’re in my head sometimes. You know exactly what I am afraid of.” Her voice was already beginning to slow down. “What should we watch, Thomas?” It was rare for Lydia to say his name like that, but that was what made it special when she did. The distinctive sax riff of Saturday Night Live came blasting through her TV’s crappy speakers as she pressed power, her fingers quickly maneuvering over the remote to find the volume button.

# 

## October 31 2007

This Halloween would be spent in airports with layovers and occasional turbulence for Lydia, Tom, and Carl. Violet couldn’t come for obvious reasons, and Carl had inner turmoil about it. But, he had made promises to Tom and Lydia before he even knew Violet, and he was going to stay true to his word.

“Wake up little buddy!” Tom said, shaking Carl. “We’re finally here.” After a bumpy van ride to the hotel, they checked in quickly, and all followed Carl’s lead and hit the hay.

Luis was still the main guide Dr. Jimenez employed for transporting people to and from the site, so they were pleased to see a familiar face. He began grinning when he saw Carl had returned with them. Javier hadn’t come to meet them. This was the last few weeks the team could be on site before the rains would bring a halt to this year’s dig, so everyone there was busy getting in the last bit of work before they had to prep the site for their seasonal evacuation. Tom had a really intense regimen of lotions, sprays, and medications to deal with the bugs this time. He was hoping to not have a repeat of his last experience. They would only be onsite for three weeks before they had to start the journey home, so the bugs would have less time to feast this go round. He also had some mosquito netting wrapped around his safari hat that tucked into his shirt. His goofy jungle look had really gone full tilt this trip. Having his vision partially obscured wasn’t ideal, but necessary, so he made sure to watch his footing as he traversed the docks.

The Madre de Dios was flowing swiftly, and they glided down the river in no time. They docked across from Palma Real and unloaded the gear onto a truck waiting to take them to Lake Valencia. Carl grabbed the waterproof case that held the convertor, which Lydia was able to get through customs with no issues. She had acquired permits for transporting scientific equipment with some guidance from Dr. Jimenez, under the guise of field testing a laser microscope prototype. As they crossed over the still waters of Lake Valencia, Luis threw out some fishing rods and caught several small croakers and a large golden dorado, which he grilled whole that evening over a fire at their camp in Valencia. Luis was a master bush chef and provided some much needed protein along with some Peruvian flavor. It was exactly the fuel they needed to complete the two day hike to the dig site.

Lydia noticed some of the village children that evening, curiously watching their visitors eat. She tried to come up with something to bridge the language barrier, and she pulled out a notebook and ripped out a sheet of paper and started folding it up. She lifted up a paper airplane and reared back launching it up with an arc, so it glided far away from their fire. The children’s eyes all lit up. Tom and Carl joined in and started making jet noises as well. Kids of all ages were smiling ear to ear as they passed out paper for all of them to have a turn making their own. Lydia had them circle around so she could show them how to fold them. It didn’t take long for them to catch on, and there were squadrons of little planes floating around with the glow of the flames illuminating them from below. Tom watched Lydia with these children, trying to take it all in, making sure to record this memory. He didn’t want to forget this moment.

Carl must have tried to block out the hike portion of the last trip because he didn’t remember it being this difficult. He kept having to stop, it was all he could do to try to keep pace with the group and not slow them down. *I gotta quit smoking…* he thought to himself …*Monster burgers probably aren’t helping either*. He had cut back to only a few smokes a day, but hoped this trip would be the incentive he needed to make the final push to quit for good. It was a tough two days slogging through the dense jungle. But, they were all still in awe of all the sights it had to offer, and in no way, took this awesome opportunity for granted. Every howling monkey and birdsong was a special treat. As they rounded the crest of the final hill, everyone gathered in the mess tent to get out of the drizzle.

“Hey!” Liz said smiling. “Took you long enough to get back,” she chided and hugged Lydia before she could even take her pack off.

“Well, you should know more than anyone how hard it is to get funding.” Lydia retorted.

They piled their gear in the corner and greeted everyone. It felt like a mini reunion with Dr. Jimenez, Dr. Phil, Liz, and Kyle, all still there, and even the odors in the mess tent held a certain nostalgia from what had been the adventure of their lives thus far.

“Jou are coming so late this year, but we are glad jou all could make it. So nice to have visitors.” Javier said dunking a hunk of bread into his bowl.

“Fashionably late.” Carl said, tipping his hat.

“Yeah, we are hoping that the specimens we are looking for will fruit right after the first rains, like the one we’re getting now.” Lydia said as her eyes looked towards the canvas ceiling keeping the moisture at bay.

“Well, we wish you the best of luck in your endeavor.” Dr. Phil said. “You certainly appear to have set us on the right path.”

“What do you mean?” Lydia asked.

“He’s referring to the tip you gave us on the area at the base of the hill.” Liz answered. “We uncovered a section of wall exactly like the ones we’ve been working on up here, but much larger. I’ll show you our progress in the morning.”

“We have a renewed vigor working here now!” Dr. Phil exclaimed. “I wish Wilhelm could be here to see this.” Tom and Lydia made eye contact.

“I’m sure he is.” Tom said, squeezing her leg under the table. “I think he felt this place was his true home.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself.” Dr. Jimenez said, capping off this solemn moment.

Carl got up and pulled a flask from his pack and waved it in the air. “Would a toast be fitting?” he said looking around to nods of approval. Kyle grabbed some tin mugs and Carl went around the table pouring out shots.

“To our dear friend Dr. Wilhelm, may he rest in everlasting peace knowing his work lives on in all of us.” Dr. Phil said joyously. “His legacy will not be forgotten and his name will forever be tied to the history of this place. To Wilhelm!” he said, raising his mug.

“To Wilhelm!” they all cheered, taking turns clinking their tin mugs together.

# 

## November 4 2007

Liz met them over by the upper walls the following morning after breakfast.

“So, as you can see, we are still working up here as well. We still haven’t made it all the way around, but we’re getting there. Look down here, we started to uncover the edge of a wall just below here. We’re reconceptualizing our whole theory. We think it’s possible this could all be part of a single massive structure.” Her eyes widening as she made a pyramid with her arms in the air.

“Woah! That would be cool huh?” Carl responded.

“Well, it’s thanks to your tip.” she said, patting one of his thick shoulders.

“I can’t wait to see what you’ve done down at the base.” Lydia said as Tom fogged himself thoroughly with bug spray.

The guides had cut a wide path making it much easier to access the original dig site than it had been two years prior when they rediscovered it. Approaching the oje tree where they found the edge of the wall protruding from the roots, they saw a sifting table set up alongside a tent. The team had exposed the rim of that wall about twenty yards in either direction of the tree. Just above that area they had actually uncovered a vertical section of the circular wall about ten yards wide. It looked exactly like the upper walls but the narrow arc indicated the walls were much larger in diameter.

“Impressive!” Tom said, looking at the face of the wall with his hand blocking the sun. His left foot lost traction, and he put his arms out to regain his balance. The drizzle from the evening before had made the site slick with mud.

“Let me show you the most interesting part.” Liz said walking to the right side of the exposed wall where it disappeared into the unexcavated hillside. There was a small opening dug into the wall there about two meters tall and less than a meter wide. It was only about a meter deep.

“That’s the interesting part?” Carl said, confused. He was really getting into playing the fool today.

“Yes it is. We didn’t break the wall right there. It was just filled with dirt as we exposed the wall around it. We just found it a month ago and we’ve been very carefully excavating there since then. We found some evidence this may be the original dig site from the ‘30s. We are still digging out what seems to be fill-dirt from decades of runoff. We’re pretty sure it goes deeper, but now we are in cleanup mode. Most of the team will be working to try to divert as much water away from this area as possible before the end of the season.” Liz explained making a lot of hand motions indicating where drainage channels would go. They could see Luis and the other guides were already working hard. “But, this is probably perfect weather for your work, Lydia. I’ll let you get to it. We are all in a time crunch now.”

“Yes, we do have a lot of work to do.” Lydia said. “We will be trying to collect some samples and analyze them with this laser microscope we brought. We are putting up some black out shades on the inside of our tent for part of the process. Please let everyone know to keep our tent closed if we are inside,” she said, proud of her plan to give them a little more privacy this time around. She did hope to collect some more samples of the undiscovered mushroom they found last time, but there was no microscope, only the convertor, and that was her main focus for now.

“Completely understand.” Liz responded.

\*\*\*

Lydia lifted the waterproof case onto her cot like a suitcase, they were similar in size. She unclipped a small key from her belt loop and unlocked the center latch facing her. Then, she quickly flipped up the other latches going all around the outside and lifted the top cover off of the case and set it upside down next to it. Inside, the shoebox shaped device was nestled into form fitting foam cut specifically to house the convertor. While it was still in the case, she pulled out an allen wrench to remove the top panel. She inspected the inside and saw everything intact with the substrate holding tank full and disconnected from the circuit board, exactly how they packed it. Wilhelm had made it clear not to turn on the device on the site until he had a chance to inspect their work. It only had one power switch, so to be safe, they also disabled the circuit board for transport. Pleased having put her eyes on it, she replaced the panel, locked the case shut, and brushed off her cot.

Tom stepped in from outside with a mini cloud of insecticide following him after a reapplication. He closed the blackout curtains, began checking the mosquito netting above their cots, and laid down in preparation for the Ancients. Carl was going to be the watcher for Lydia and Tom who were going in to greet Wilhelm after all this time. It felt long for them, over two years, but for Wilhelm it had been over fifty since they said goodbye. He had been there for approximately one hundred and thirty two years since his death, five and a half years ago. Carl opened the vitamins from their medical supply box and retrieved two capsules.

Once Lydia and Tom were inside, they quickly moved from their tent on top of the temple down through the layers, heading to greet the followers. They felt a duty to show their respect and gratitude for allowing them in their home. There was still so much to learn from them about their history, but they would have time for that later. Their main goal was to assist Wilhelm in breaking free from this place, even if he just became a vapor of energy that floated away in the breeze, never to be seen again.

‘The followers of Ch’unpitari welcome you.’ The guard thought to them with a positive bent they hadn’t experienced from him before, a glowing foam of bubbles surrounded him. ‘The one you call Wilhelm awaits you in the chambers below. We thank you for your return.’

‘We thank you all for such a warm greeting. We hope you can feel the respect we have for all of you and this special place.’ Lydia thought to them all. Tom and Lydia felt a sense of warmth from the assemblage they had not felt on their prior visit.

Wilhelm sensed their approach and shot up from the lower storage chambers to meet them in the underground cultivation area of the temple. They could feel a buzz pulsating from him. He had been eagerly awaiting them, but they could also sense he felt they may never return. Yet, here they were.

‘Thank you. Thank you. So glad you returned!’ he thought to them.

‘Of course. We knew we would. We just didn’t know when.’ Tom thought.

‘We are sorry it took us so long, but it is good to be back.’ Lydia thought.

‘It felt like a long time, but thank you again. I had confidence in you, and it looks as though it wasn’t unfounded.’

‘We have a completed convertor with us…at least, we think it’s complete.’ Lydia revealed to him. They could feel his energy vibrate faster as he absorbed the news.

‘I knew you were the one to make this a reality.’ Wilhelm thought to Lydia.

‘You should have seen her. She managed, not only to pull off what seemed impossible, but she got her Masters done at the same time.’ Tom was so proud of Lydia and he didn’t want her accomplishments to get lost to her humbleness.

‘Congratulations!’ Wilhelm thought to her. ‘That’s a major achievement!’

‘It still hasn’t had a chance to all sink in yet.’

‘Do you mind if we go look at the device?’ Wilhelm asked. ‘I know you just got here, but I have been waiting so long.’

‘Of course. We understand.’ Tom responded, and the trio traversed their way up through the corridors and out to the surface inside the tent.

Wilhelm saw Carl kneeling next to Tom checking his pulse. ‘Ah! Glad to see Carl is here with you.’

‘See that case in the corner. The convertor is in there.’ Lydia moved nearer to the device as she began to explain their process to make this idea a reality.

Wilhelm focused in and inspected the construction of the various components. He browsed through the different memories and could see all different aspects of the construction. Tom and Lydia took a look as well and could see Pete working with an unknown person on the housing. They saw Violet adjusting one of the mirrors, and Hailey peering into a pot on a bunsen burner with various bottles and glass flasks on the counter around her. They even saw a small Asian woman working in a factory where the toggle switch was made. *If she only knew about her contribution,* they thought to one another.

‘This is extraordinary! I have never seen construction methods like this.’ Wilhelm thought referring to the 3D printing process. This technology was in its infancy when he passed away and only existed in lab and industrial settings. *The speed at which these devices became efficient and cost effective enough to manufacture for consumer use is astounding,* he thought to himself. He spent quite a while reviewing the memories of this process, his academic curiosity kicked in.

Tom and Lydia took this time to go through the construction as well, confirming the loyalty of the crew that Lydia had assembled, and recording as much knowledge to understand all the aspects of its design. The idea of going in and inspecting the device in this way to spy on their crew hadn’t occurred to them before. The morality of their voyeurism was becoming questionable as they explored further, and unintentionally, began to see personal memories of the crew as they worked on their respective components. Having this kind of power came with a certain kind of intoxication that could blur the lines between right and wrong. One could feel almost godlike if they allowed their mind to stray into that kind of territory, which was another reason they had their doubts society was ready to know about the Ancients. The gifts had to be used in a calculated manner with the utmost discretion in order to not stray into the darker impulses of the human psyche.

When Wilhelm finished looking it over, he expressed great joy over what they had done for him and for science in general. ‘From what I feel from the convertor, I have a ninety nine percent confidence it will work as intended. When can we turn it on? I can see you disabled it. That was a smart safety measure.’

‘Thanks, I thought so too.’ Lydia replied.

‘I think we have some questions before we turn it on.’ Tom thought. He and Lydia could feel Wilhelm’s energy turn. He went from positive and curious, to a more fearful reserved tone.

‘What would you like to know?’ he asked somberly.

‘For starters, explain in more detail what you think will happen to you when we turn this thing on.’ Lydia thought to him.

‘I’m not completely sure because I developed this technology from this ancient knowledge…’ he paused. ‘…but my best guess is that when it is powered on, I will be able to see a beam emanating from the device that I will be able to focus my sphere on. The way I envision it, it will act as an artificial tether similar to the one that you have with your body. Once my sphere is in the beam, it should pull me in like when a session is naturally ending. From there, my theories of what may happen vary wildly. I believe, most likely, the energy of my sphere will be converted from this invisible spectrum into fine particles of electric plasma. If I can control the particles, I may be able to take some physical form. And then again, I may just dissipate into the air.’

‘Wait…so, there’s a chance this thing just kills you.’ Tom thought.

‘Yes, but that’s a chance I’m willing to take.’ Wilhelm thought back.

‘It’s your party. We’re just invited.’ Lydia thought, invoking the words of Pickle Pete. ‘We tested the power output as you could see in the memories. It’s incredible! With some simple tweaks we can publish the designs. We think we can release them in a way the world will have access to them before our efforts can be suppressed.….Do you think the world is ready?’

‘I don’t think it’s my decision to make. Or, yours for that matter. The more time I have had to think about it, the more I have felt that the possible positive outcomes outweigh the potential negative consequences. And, I’m in no position to say what technology humanity deserves and what it doesn’t.’ the professor thought to them. ‘Although, I do think you have the right idea when it comes to releasing it. The way it is released has a huge impact on how much positive impact it can have for the greatest number of people.’

‘Well, that’s good to know that’s how you feel. In getting the convertor built, we were worried about who we could trust and whether any of the information would be leaked. Everything is still under wraps for now, but we don’t know how long we can keep it that way.’ Lydia thought.

‘I know you are ready to try it, but give us another week or two before we test it. We’re here for three more weeks.’ Tom thought. ‘This way we can prepare for any possibilities and say goodbye. It seems like we probably won’t be able to communicate with you after it’s powered on. I just don’t want to rush it if we have this time available to learn as much as we can from you about the Atruzura and the Ancients.’

‘Good point.’ Lydia thought. I’m sure you’ve seen that Dr. Jimenez and his team have just gotten into the original dig site.’

‘Ah, yes! That has been the most exciting thing I’ve seen here since my death, but the progress moves entirely too slow from my perspective.’ Wilhelm thought to them. ‘I had found the original dig location before I passed, but I wanted to explore it more from the inside before I moved the dig team. I’ve regretted it ever since, but now I see they are on the right track and it makes me overjoyed for them. I know, more than anyone, the frustration of fighting back the jungle here, trying to tease out its mysteries, only to see them swallowed again the following year.’

\*\*\*

Carl was prepping to go in for his first session and Tom would be his partner while Deetz stood watch.

“Do you mind going in alone? I want to talk to Lydia if that’s cool with you little buddy.” Tom asked Carl.

“Yeah sure. No problem.” Carl said with a tone of concern. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, yeah. All good in the hood.”

Lydia came back into their tent after grabbing an oatmeal bar from the mess tent. “What’s up? Carl going alone?”

“Yeah, if that’s cool with you.” Tom said seriously. “I wanted to talk.”

“Okay!?!” Lydia said slightly confused by the situation. Once Carl was inworld and unconscious, Lydia kept waiting for Tom to say something. “So what’s up? Why are you being so quiet now, thought you wanted to talk. What’s going on?” she said concerned, but also annoyed that now he was hesitating.

Tom sat for another few seconds trying to get his words together then spoke. “I don’t know what I’m thinking exactly. I knew Wilhelm dying was a possibility, but he didn’t present it the same way before.”

“I’m not understanding the problem here.” Lydia said, still confused.

“I thought we came here to save him, not kill him.” Tom sounded distressed.

“We aren’t killing him. At best, it’s assisted suicide.”

“Well, I didn’t come here to play Dr. Kevorkian.” Tom’s voice raised.

“I know this wasn’t the goal, but what other options do we have to help him? I’m out of ideas.”

“So am I….. I just didn’t think it would go down like this.”

“Hey. We’ve talked about this before.” Lydia said, reassuring him. “I thought you believe in the right to assisted suicide. Especially for people in chronic terminal pain. I know this doesn’t fit that bill exactly, but I don’t think there is anything wrong with helping him free himself in any way we can. We don’t know what it’s like for him.”

“You’re right. I am just having a tough time processing it all.” Tom said and Lydia put her arm around him.

“Just remember, it’s Wilhelm’s risk to take…and, we don’t have a right to make that decision for him,” she said respectfully.

“You’re completely right. I’m sorry if I was being dramatic about this. It’s his decision.”

“Come here ya big softy!” Lyd said and gave him a hug. “You’re so cute when you’re like this. Guess what? Now you’re stuck on watcher duty. I need to find another one of those mushrooms I found before, and I don’t have much time. If it’s a hybrid of the Ancients that’s reproducing naturally, that would be huge.”

Lydia headed out scanning the forest floor for mushrooms, making sure to keep a lookout for anything harmful that may be lurking about. There was infinite beauty here, but also infinite dangers, and she knew trekking around alone was not advisable. Lydia spent every spare moment she had over the next two weeks hunting for the elusive one. She found several common species she had become more familiar with, but never stumbled across her prize. She knew the fruiting conditions for certain varieties had to be very precise in order to spawn, and figured she must have missed their window. Moisture definitely could be the factor, it was much damper than their previous trip, with at least one small shower popping up every day.

# 

## November 20 2007

It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, but the group would be observing it deep in the jungle this year. The Peruvians celebrate Thanksgiving as well, having a long tradition of harvest festivals that stretch much further back than the modern American version and falling relatively close together. Although, in Peru you were much more likely to get served Pachamanca or some form of ceviche with roasted maize than turkey and mashed potatoes. They were all going to be making the trek back to Puerto Maldonado on the Monday after the holiday, so they were in the final week of preparations. There was still a lot of work to do. Thanksgiving was the day the trio was planning to say goodbye to Wilhelm in case this was their last chance. Then, they would turn on the convertor and hope for the best.

The night before it had started drizzling again, and they were all in the mess tent eating breakfast trying to keep dry. Luis opened the front flap and looked around.

“Javier? Can we talk?” Luis asked.

“Jes. Come in. Have a seat. What can I help jou with?”

“This batch of rain is just the start of a larger storm. It looks like the heavy rains are coming a couple weeks early this season.” Luis said.

“That is not what we wanted to hear.” Dr. Phil said.

“I don’t like delivering bad news, but I suggest we leave the day after Thanksgiving.” Luis said, looking around the table.

“Understood!” Dr. Jimenez said. “We cannot fight Mother Nature. Everyone listen up, we will be leaving in three days, so wrap up whatever jou need to do. Essential projects only and get everything packed and ready to depart. Understood?” He looked around getting confirmation that everyone was on the same page.

Back in their tent, the group quickly modified their plans based on the incoming weather and the shortened departure window.

“What’s the plan, stan?” Carl said to Deetz.

“We’ll have to go in today and let Wilhelm know our situation. We will have to try out the convertor this afternoon. That will still give us two days to wrap up and get our gear together. Sound good?” she asked.

“Yeppers.” Tom said. “Let’s go in and give Wilhelm a heads up and see if there's anything we’re forgetting, and then we can start the goodbyes, I guess. Carl, why don’t you and Lyd go in first, and I’ll stay back this time. I’ll get our gear off the ground before it gets soaked.” Tom was already getting out the capsules.

“Be safe.” Lydia said, giving him a quick kiss before she took the Ancients.

\*\*\*

‘My man, Wilhelm! Got some news for you buddy.’ Carl thought. ‘We gotta get this party started sooner rather than later.’

‘Rains are coming in a little early this year. It’s unfortunate, but we have to evacuate the site in three days, so we only have two more days. We were thinking of trying the convertor today, if you are good with that decision of course.’ Lydia thought to him.

‘I have been waiting so long. To be honest, I’m glad we are trying it sooner.’ Wilhelm thought to them with a sense of relief.

‘You’re one cool cat, Wilhelm.’ Carl thought. ‘You don’t know how lucky I feel to have known you. I hope this isn’t goodbye, but just in case, I love you man. You’ve got to be the smartest man I’ve ever known. Your mind is like one of these giant river turtles out here.’

‘Thank you Carl.’ Wilhelm was touched. ‘I will remember you always, little buddy.’ He had adopted the nickname Tom sometimes used for Carl. ‘If I don’t see you again here, I hope we meet again, somewhere, somehow.’ Wilhelm telepathically embraced Carl.

‘I’ll be back with Tom soon.’ Lydia thought. ‘We are going to the edge to shorten our visit, and then Tom and I will make one last trip in before we test the convertor.’

‘Thank you. Please remember not to turn on the convertor with any of you inside. I think it would potentially kill you or even trap you. Please be careful.’ Wilhelm thought as Carl and Lydia started accelerating towards the outer edge.

Once inside, Tom and Lydia rushed through the temple making their way to the followers. When they got to the tombs at the base of the temple, Wilhelm was there with the guard and the rest of the followers.

‘Nice to see you here.’ Tom thought to Wilhelm. ‘We came to give our goodbyes to the followers. We may see them again some day, but we don’t know when we will be coming back after this project is complete.’

‘Yes. Say your goodbyes now. They won’t be here any longer.’ Wilhelm thought to them.

‘What do you mean?’ Lydia asked. ‘They won’t be here?’

‘Over the last few decades inside, I have convinced them to come with me. It may be their only chance at freedom. And, for those still clinging to Ch’unpitari, I have explained this may be their way to join him. They do not belong here.’

‘Is this your decision?’ Lydia asked the guard.

‘It is. Ch’unpitari has forsaken us and left us here. You and your people have been true to your word in returning here sealing our bonds together with the ties of your honesty.’ The guard thought to them in a measured tone of certainty.

‘We will honor your decision,’ Tom thought to them.

‘Yes. Thank you all for sharing this place and your knowledge with us.’ Lydia thought humbly.

‘We would like to perform a ceremony for you all.’ the guard thought to them, and he could feel Wilhelm, Lydia, and Tom’s approval at his invitation.

The guard’s bubble began to rise above them, glowing brighter as it ascended higher. The followers encircled around them and started to pulsate different colors of light. They formed into rings that created the optical illusion of motion, with each ring flowing opposite the other. The ring closest to them rose up to be just below the guard, and the other rings followed, each one larger than the last, until they formed a moving replica of the temple. Tom felt a wave of joy remembering the first time he and Carl went inside and created their own patterns with the light, just two friends having fun. The rings of the temple began spiraling around faster and faster, and suddenly, the guard dropped through the central shaft of the light temple and stopped just above them. The followers collapsed inward toward the guard and bounced back into the shape of a lizard morphing into a bird and finally a man and woman together. The man and woman embraced and the group could all feel intense feelings of love and respect coming from the guard and the followers. They were enwrapped in these layers soaking it all in, and as the man and woman released their embrace, they felt the release as well. The man and woman morphed into one form, and then the followers flowed back into a circle around them. Their energies slowly crawled to a stop signaling the end of their ceremony.

Lydia, Tom, and Wilhelm sent several of their own pulses of gratitude and thanks for the appreciation they had received, for the guidance their ancient knowledge had given them, and for the beautiful ceremony that had just witnessed. Tom and Lydia were trying to make sure that they kept every part in vivid detail as a remembrance to them all and to show Carl later when they got the chance.

‘Wilhelm…you can’t possibly know how much you have changed our lives.’ Tom thought to him. ‘The hidden key, the mystery of Ch’unpitari, the Ancients, the adventure of a lifetime out here in the jungle, not to mention this device, which could change everyone’s lives. I…I really just want you to know whatever happens today, you will always be in my heart, brother. You will always live on through us and we hope we have shown respect for your work and your legacy. Thank you so much!’ Wilhelm could feel the tearful sincerity coming from inside of Tom.

‘Tom speaks for all of us in that regard. You're the best teacher I’ve ever had, and I will always remember that.’ Lydia thought to Wilhelm. ‘Your patience with me is something I will take with me and try to pass on by being that person. That’s probably one of the biggest lessons a person could ever learn…that they can create change in others by example. Thank you for that.’ she thought and embraced Wilhelm. Tom joined in on this cathartic moment.

‘I have left a final memory for you down in the mycelium chambers below the temple. I wanted to leave it for you to view after we test the convertor. If it works, the message will be here waiting for you. And if it doesn’t work, I will be here to greet you and we start again, I suppose. I thank you all so much, but there is so much I want you to know and frankly, I don’t want to have to spend more time here than necessary.’ Wilhelm thought to them.

‘Well, let’s get this show on the road then.’ Tom thought.

‘So when we get out, we will set up things and turn on the convertor in exactly thirty minutes.’ Lydia instructed Wilhelm. ‘That should be twelve hours for you. That will be your signal to try to detect any beam energy coming from the device and do whatever it is you need to do from this end.’

‘Understood. I will be standing by. Please make sure you leave the convertor on for one hour. From my calculations, I will only need fifteen minutes, but I want to be safe. Can you do that for me?’ he asked.

‘That’s exactly what we’ll do!’ Tom quickly responded with assurance. ‘Count on it.’

‘We have promised Dr. Jimenez we will help his crew close down the site tomorrow. We will come back on Thanksgiving morning to retrieve your farewell memory, if that’s fine with you?’ Lydia asked. ‘This is going to work! I can feel it.’

‘I hope you are right. I have a good feeling about this too, but Javier needs you out there. Go. Help him secure the site. You will have plenty of time to get my message later. Please be safe out there getting home. The jungle can be unforgiving when the rains hit.’ Wilhelm warned. ‘Thank you all for all your hard work and determination. I owe you more than you know right now!’ He floated with them towards the limits of their tethers and soon after they reached the edge, Lydia and Tom were towed back to their bodies.

\*\*\*

Carl was nervously chewing off his pinky nail when Tom and Lydia sat up, an unconscious habit he picked up when he was trying to forgo his next smoke. Lydia immediately checked her watch and made a mental note of the time so she could start the convertor in thirty minutes, as promised. They quickly briefed Carl on the ceremony and assured him that they would give him a vivid viewing another time. They told him about Wilhelm’s farewell memory and decided that would be a good time to show him the gorgeous ceremony the guard and followers put on for them. Carl couldn’t help but feel a little jealous, but knew he could experience it later.

Tom got out the three small digital video recorders they brought with them. They wanted to record the test and make sure to be as scientific as they could with this technology they barely understood. They were recording standard video, but they also had special lenses on the other two cameras to record in spectrums of light invisible to the human eye. He unfolded the tripods and mounted the cameras in the corners of the tent to get a wide view of the center of the tent. He checked the viewfinders and screens to check the framing and looked up as Lydia plopped the waterproof case onto the cot. She unlocked the case and unscrewed the panel on the convertor, reconnected the wiring harness running from the circuit board to the substrate holding tank, and replaced the cover. Now that the device was equipped, she placed it onto a small table in the center of the tent. Tom went back around checking all the cameras to make sure they were lined up and all set to go. Carl was moving the cots and rearranging the gear on them trying to keep as much off the ground as possible. The mud was becoming slicker and slicker by the minute as more runoff seeped under the edges of the tent.

“We all ready?” Carl asked as he lit up a cigarette. He couldn’t resist any longer.

Lydia looked down at her watch. “About five more minutes. I want to be as accurate as possible with the timing.”

“Group hug?” Tom asked, arms outstretched and they came in for a good squeeze.

“I’d like to say a few words if you guys don’t mind.” Carl said and they nodded. “May Wilhelm and all of the followers get the peace they so deserve. We hope to see you again here with us, but if not…welp, see you on the flip side, I guess.” Carl’s words had a rustic elegance to them. “Let’s take a moment of silence.”

They held hands in a circle around the convertor and closed their eyes. After a minute, Lydia peeked to check her watch. “One minute left boys!” she said breathing in hard and they opened their eyes. Lydia took off her watch and set it on the table next to the device, so they all could watch the seconds tick down. At the twenty second mark, she put her hand on the toggle switch ready to power it on. “Welp, here goes nothing.” she said and exactly as the thirty minute mark hit, she flipped the switch.

Nothing happened. But, they knew this was a strong possibility. When they tested it at Lydia’s apartment, it reacted the same way, but Pete was able to measure a strong power signature from it. They sat there a second looking around the tent and the device and each other. After a few moments of this, Tom spoke up.

“What now?” he asked. “I guess we just wait, right?”

“All we can do, skipper.” Carl replied.

“Yep. I’ve got my watch set.” Lydia said, pressing a button on the side of her watch. “In one hour we’ll pack it up, and then check back inworld on Thanksgiving. Funny how that worked out. Perfect day for something like that.” They smiled at her observation.

“You got it!” Tom said. “We’ve done what we came to do. All we can do is wait.”

The hour felt excruciatingly long. Lydia hadn’t had an hour feel like this since the first time the boys went in. She wasn’t as scared this time, but the time was creeping. Carl hung out at the back of the tent, blowing his cigarette smoke through the flap. After about fifteen minutes, they all started feeling an intense euphoria rush over them.

“What do you think that means?” Tom asked Lydia.

“I don’t know.” she said, confused. “Wilhelm didn’t say anything to us about this.”

“Maybe it’s like a space hug goodbye.” Carl chuckled.

“Maybe. Or, maybe it’s some other kind of signal. It’s all they really have.” Lydia said quickly her mind pondering the possibilities.

“I’m sure they are alright.” Tom said, trying to comfort Lydia. He could see her agitation building after the calming effects started to wear off. “There’s nothing we can do now. We will get some closure soon.” He kept his gaze directly on hers until she made eye contact, and he could see her relax a little and take a breath.

They waited out the timer and Lydia, unceremoniously, turned the device off and sealed it back in the case. Carl helped Tom break down the cameras and tripods. Tom took the digital tapes and handed them to Carl.

“Triple seal these, will ya.” Tom instructed Carl. “Don’t need these getting wet.”

“Hey! Anyone in there?” Liz yelled from outside.

Lydia stuck her head out the front flap. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Emergency meeting in the mess hall in fifteen!” Liz yelled over the rain and scurried away holding her hood over her head.

\*\*\*

As the trio ducked into the mess tent escaping the rain, they saw the entire team, including the guides, huddled around the table. The atmosphere was serious as they listened to Luis.

“This storm just keeps building, much stronger than anyone anticipated. Thanksgiving is canceled. Sorry folks! We leave that morning. Tomorrow’s the last day to pack.” he said breaking the bad news.

“Liz, Kyle. I need jou to focus on the upper dig site. Get all the stuff packed and down to the trail head by tomorrow evening. Understood?” Javier asked them.

“Consider it done.” Liz responded and Kyle nodded in agreement. “Might not be as organized as usual with the rush, but we’ll get it packed.” she said.

“Dr. Phil and I will work on the lower dig site.” Javier said.

“Hope no one minds. The seasoned gentlemen are taking the easiest area. The hill is a younger man’s…excuse me, a younger person’s game if you will.” Dr. Phil said.

“The guides will be helping wherever they can. Just let Luis know if jou need a hand somewhere.” Javier said to everyone. “Last meal in this tent is breakfast tomorrow morning! I need jou three…” he said looking at Lydia, Tom, and Carl. “…I need jou to help break down this area and get all the mess equipment down the hill. Everyone have a lunch and dinner for tomorrow in jour sleeping quarters. Everyone got that?” he asked.

“When will we pack up our sleeping areas?” Tom asked.

“Glad jou asked. Liz and Kyle pack theirs tomorrow and move their cots in the tent with Dr. Phil and I. The guides will take down that tent and theirs early Thanksgiving morning. Jou all will do the same.” he said looking over to Lydia. “Set early alarms for tomorrow and Thanksgiving. We need to be packing those tents in the dark that morning and on the trail ASAP. Now, eat up. Time is not on our side.” After dinner, the whole team started prepping meals for the next day and then retired to their tents.

“This storm is nuts.” Carl said and sat back on his cot. “Our rain gear will definitely get tested tomorrow.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of work. Let’s get some sleep.” Tom said. “When are we going back to get Wilhelm’s farewell memory?” he asked Lydia.

“We can do it right before we break down our tent, early Thanksgiving morning. I figured you and Carl can go in and retrieve it and then go to the edge. It’ll only take about twenty five minutes for the doses to kick in, grab the farewell, and go to the edge and come back out. I’ll set my alarm tomorrow night so we get up a half hour before the others. Sound like a plan?” she asked.

“Good with me.” Carl answered.

“I should’ve known you’d have us covered.” Tom said and gave her a kiss. “Get some rest baby. I’ll see you in the morning.” He looked back at Carl. “Night buddy. Wild day, huh?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. Night y’all.” Carl said.

“Night Carl.” Lydia replied and pulled Tom back towards her for a hug. She whispered in his ear, “Sleep tight tastycakes!”, a nickname for him she rarely used.

Tom cut off the lantern, and they used their flashlights to get wrapped up for the night. One good thing about the rain, the mosquitos weren’t as bad as before. There was no need to completely mummify themselves, and the showers were not going to be letting up any time soon. That night, the raindrops bouncing off the skin of the canvas tent created a polyrhythmic noise machine that made it much easier to fall asleep in the hot, humid air.

# 

## November 21 2007

Lydia’s alarm rang the following morning, everyone got ready quickly, and they made their way through the flurry of rain to the mess tent for their last meal there before tearing it all down. The mood in the tent was hurried, everyone was trying to multitask. Between taking bites of food, they were wrapping up meals to store in their sleeping tents to last them until they left. Liz and Kyle were packing away silverware and dishes in storage containers, wondering how they would get it all done by tomorrow morning. Dr. Phil and Javier looked over maps with Luis. Tom and Carl wolfed down some breakfast, trying to eat any perishables that they would be leaving behind. Decisions were starting to be made throughout camp, prioritizing what was most essential, there was no way everything was going to make the rush trip home. Liz and Kyle finished the container they were working on and walked over to Lydia.

“We tried to help some. It's all yours from here. We’re off to pack up the upper dig and get the essentials down the hill. See you later.” Liz said and followed her husband out the front flap.

“Stay safe.” Lydia said loudly as they walked into the storm.

Dr. Jimenez folded the map and looked at Luis. “Well, we are trying to get out of here as soon as we can. Let’s get a move on.” he said and Luis hurried out. “We should do the same.” he said looking at Dr. Phil. “Lower tent has tons of gear to pack.” As Javier pulled up his hood he looked at the three left and said “Yust do the best jou can, and call for Luis or one of the guides if jou need help. Leave the tent for last, we may have to just abandon them. It may be too much to get back this trip, but we’ll do the what we can.” Javier and Dr. Phil ducked out of the tent, and the trio were left alone in the mess tent.

“Why don’t Carl and I start to carry some of these containers down the hill to the staging area, while you pack some more.” Tom said to Lydia. “That way you can stay dry for a while, and if we need a break, we’ll switch off.”

“Sure, if that works. But, don’t hesitate to switch off if you need a break.”

“Don’t worry. There’s plenty to go around.” Carl joked looking around at all the totes.

Tom grabbed a storage container and ducked out into the storm, with Carl following close behind. The walk down the hill was becoming treacherous, with mud as slick as ice, going down the slope. Tom had to move slowly to keep his footing. When they reached the bottom, they set the containers on pieces of bamboo the guides had laid out to keep them off the ground. Dr. Jimenez was approaching with some gear as they slid more tubs onto the pile.

“I am realizing now there is no way we will get all this gear out. It takes days to get in. Dr. Phil and I will sort out the essentials here. We will secure what’s staying, and I will have the guides come back once this heavy storm passes, in a week or so. Yust keep it coming.” Dr. Jimenez said, dropping his load and walking back towards the lower base area.

Carl and Tom helped each other get up the incline, bracing themselves against one another for support. Once they made it back inside the mess tent, they saw Lydia was making quick work of the packing. The totes were piling up, forming a semicircle around her.

“I think we should get as much of our gear down as possible now.” Tom said. “It’s slow going, and if we get in a time crunch, at least we’ll know we have the important stuff. We’ll keep our personal packs and cots there ‘til morning.”

“Agreed.” Lydia said. “Hopefully I’ll be done here soon, and I can start hauling stuff down too.”

Carl spun around in the mud as he exited the tent, doing his best Gene Kelly.

The boys were able to pack up their equipment pretty fast. They learned a lot from their previous jaunt in Peru and had packed light. Carl grabbed the waterproof shell, housing the convertor, in one hand and the case of camera gear in another, with Tom following close behind. About a third of the way down the slippery slope, Tom lost his footing, landed on his butt, and started spinning downhill like an upside down turtle. He clipped Carl in the ankles as he shot past, causing Carl to fall backwards and start sliding behind him. The trail down the incline was like a chute at a waterpark and they made it most of the way down before stopping abruptly, as Carl slammed into Tom. They were covered in mud, but the gear had glided right down with them.

“I’m sorry man. I couldn’t stop.” Tom said apologetically.

“No problem. I was waiting for it to happen. That thing is a Slip and Slide at this point.” Carl was rubbing the back of his calf where Tom slammed into him.

“Hey. Let’s use one of these tarps and some rope and lower the gear down. Some stuff that isn’t as fragile, we can just push it down.” Tom suggested.

“Love it buddy. Let’s rig it up.” Carl said. “I can lower stuff down to you and you stack it up.”

“Jou guys okay?” Javier asked. “I saw that ride jou took. Pretty impressive actually. Please, be careful. As jou can see Dr. Phil and I have two piles here. Put all jour gear to the left. That pile is going with us. This stuff will have to stay for now.” he said pointing to a stack of gear on the right.

“Thanks.” Tom replied. “That’s looking a lot more realistic now.”

Carl and Tom spent an hour rigging the tarps and rope to haul more gear down the slope. It was worth it though. They were able to empty their tent of everything, except their packs and sleeping cots, in one load down. But, the day was passing quickly. Tom made his way back up the hill for lunch. The path was useless at this point, he had to straddle the edge, along the treeline, where he could get some traction on the roots. Carl was waiting for him at the top and they made their way through the downpour to Lydia. She had the mess tent almost fully packed.

“This looks great.” Tom said. “Let’s grab some food. I’m starving.”

As they made their way towards their tent, they passed Liz and Kyle trudging up the hill.

“We’re almost done with the upper site. Breaking for lunch. Looks like you’re doing the same. This storm is crazy, huh?” Liz shouted to Lydia.

“Yeah. Mess area is almost done. Go eat. Try to get dry for a second.” Lydia replied.

The boys took a moment to show Lydia their improvised gear drop before heading into the tent. Now mostly empty, the noise of the rain on the canvas was even louder. They all pulled back their hoods, shook off a bit, and took off their rain jackets. Tom grabbed a towel and passed it around, not much was dry anymore including their feet. Lydia tossed over a couple of foil-wrapped sandwiches, and they huddled together, on a towel spread out on one of the cots, to eat their lunch. Exhausted, they ate in silence, before getting back to work.

The boys followed Lydia to the mess tent and started staging a load at the top of the hill. Tom scurried down the side and managed to make it without falling. Carl lowered the load, although it was more like a controlled slide. When Tom finished stacking the load in the improvised bamboo staging area, he made his way back up to Carl.

“Hey! I’ve got to use the bathroom!” Tom yelled over the rain.

“Me too! I’ll follow you!” Carl responded, and Tom made his way down the path behind their tent, to a spot they had been using as an improvised urinal.

The foliage in this area created a mini sanctuary from the deluge. The rain was still able to get through, but the base of this giant tree, with its thick lower branches and dense canopy, reduced it to a drizzle. Tom found his spot on the trunk, relieved himself and waited for Carl. Some mosquitoes had apparently taken refuge here as well. For the first time all day, Tom got bit. The skeeter flew into his hood and got him just above the neck line of his shirt. He flung the hood off attempting to swat the bastard and his arm hit a lower branch. A small green snake fell from above, landed on Tom’s arm and bit him on his right hand, faster than he had time to react. Tom screamed and flailed in a circle and the snake fell to the ground. Carl turned, as Tom hollered, just in time to see the little guy slither into the wet leaves littering the forest floor.

“Holy shit! I just got bit by a snake. Fuck! Fuck!!!”

“It’s alright buddy. You’re going to be okay. We’ll figure this out.”

“I think it was one of those green pit vipers, but luckily, it was small.” Tom said, trying to calm himself.

“We need to get you to the tent now! Come on!” Carl said. He knew small wasn’t a positive in this case, juvenile snakes don’t have as much control and sometimes release more of the toxic venom. But, he didn’t want to freak his best friend out, he needed him to calm down as much as possible. “Put your arm around me.” Carl grabbed Tom’s arm trying to keep it elevated.

Within a minute, they were back in the tent, and Tom laid back on his cot. “How did that even happen?” he said.

“You’re going to be okay. Just calm down. Lay here. I’m gonna go get some help. Be right back. Okay?” Carl said and ran out the front of their tent towards the mess tent. “Lydia? Lydia?” he yelled as he approached. He popped in the front and saw her moving a tote. “Tom was just bit by a snake.”

“He what?” she asked, almost before he had finished.

“He’s laying down in his cot. I’m going for help.” Carl yelled out of breath. She dropped the tote and ran for their tent. He started sprinting towards the top of the hill. Without even thinking, Carl grabbed the tarp and used it like a sled trying to shoot down the hill as fast as possible. He reached the bottom, now covered in mud and shouted for help. “Help! Javier? Luis? Dr. Phil? Anyone? Help!”

Carl was running towards the lower dig site when Dr. Phil came out from the tent carrying two jerry cans. He dropped the cans and met Carl halfway.

“Good heavens! What’s going on?” Dr. Phil asked Carl as he saw him approaching slathered in mud.

Carl was struggling to get the words out in between breaths. “Tom…..he was just bit…..by a green pit viper…..we need help.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s up in our tent.” Carl said, bent over trying to catch his breath and pointing up the hill.

“Come, come!” Dr. Phil shouted and motioned Carl towards the lower tent.

Inside, Javier, Luis, Liz and Kyle were all packing crates and handing them off to the other two guides as a mud-caked Carl and Dr. Phil came running frantically towards them.

“Tom has been bitten!” Dr. Phil said to Javier.

“…by a baby green pit viper!” Carl added. “He’s up the hill in our tent.”

“Take me to him.” Luis said authoritatively.

Everyone rushed up the hill, but it took several minutes for them all to reach the top.

“How in the hell did he manage to get bit by a snake in this weather?” Javier asked, flabbergasted, as they made their way up the muddy embankment.

\*\*\*

Lydia ran to the tent as fast as she could to get to Tom. He was laying on his cot and jolted up as she entered.

“Are you alright? Lay down.” she said, pushing him back down. She was panting, her eyes wide.

“My hand hurts, and it’s starting to swell a little.” he said, holding his right arm up.

“Carl went to get help. He should be back soon. Just try to relax and not think about it.” she said and knelt beside him holding his left hand. “I’m here. Don’t you fucking die on me,” she joked to lighten the mood.

“I’ll try not to!” he laughed.

“Do you know what kind of snake it was?” she asked.

“It was a small green pit viper, like the one Luis showed us on the first trip out here. It was actually really pretty, that little fucker. It’s already starting to hurt more.”

“Why a spoon, cousin?…Cause it’ll hurt more.” she said in a gravelly voice, reciting one of his favorite lines from Prince of Thieves hoping to keep things positive until help arrived.

“Legendary!” he responded. Tom really appreciated Lyd trying to comfort him. He could see she was worried, but she was pushing through it for him. *She’s so special,* he thought to himself. *How did I get so lucky?*

Luis and Carl burst into the tent, and bolted over to Tom. Lydia backed away to give Luis room to assess the situation.

“Where’s the bite?” Luis asked. Tom raised his right hand and pointed to the bite marks on the outer meaty portion. “I can see it’s started swelling already. Do you feel any pain?” he asked as the rest of the team shuffled into the crowded tent and stood just inside the flaps.

“Yes. It’s burning pretty bad now, and it seems to be getting worse.” answered Tom.

Raul and Filipe, the other two guides, noticed everyone clamoring up the hill and decided to see what the commotion was. As soon as they entered the tent, Kyle and Liz moved to the side, and Luis caught their eye.

“Coge una de estas cunas y haz una camilla. Ahora mismo.” Raul went around the far end of Lydia’s empty cot and Filipe grabbed the other end and out they went.

“Stretcher…I don’t think we need a stretcher. I can walk.” Tom said understanding a bit of Luis’ Spanish.

“I need you to move as little as possible and keep yourself calm. Okay?” Luis said and stood up to face the rest of the group. “We need to get him out of here immediately. Javier, I’m taking Raul with me. Carl and Lydia, you come with me. Filipe will stay back and guide the rest of you out tomorrow. We take minimal gear. I can get your stuff to you later.”

“I don’t give a shit about the stuff. Let’s get him outta here. Is it bad?” Lydia asked.

“It’s hard to tell, but it definitely wasn’t a dry bite. The problem is the hike. It’s two days just to Valencia, and that’s too long to wait for anti-venom. If we hike through the night, it may be possible to get him there by tomorrow night, but I’ve never done it that fast before, especially in a storm like this.” Luis had to lay out the reality of their situation.

“Take the sat-phone with jou!” Javier interjected.

“Yes. Make an emergency call to the hospital in Puerto Maldonado once you reach Valencia. They can have a helicopter there in less than an hour.” Dr. Phil added.

“We’ll need it.” Luis said and looked at Carl and Lydia. “Help me get him down the hill.”

“We’ll grab you guy’s packs!” Liz said to Lydia and elbowed Kyle to grab one of the packs beside him.

Luis gave further instructions. “Once you’re done with that, grab all the medical supplies together down at the base. There’s a few things we’ll need.” He looked at Carl and pointed to the cot. “You grab that end!”

At first, Tom thought they were making a big fuss, but now the pain was becoming really intense, making it hard to focus as they lifted him up. Lydia held back the flap as Carl backed out holding one end of the cot, followed by Luis. The rain was coming down in sheets. So, they covered Tom with a tarp up to his neck, and Luis tried to block the rest with his body. At the ridge of the hill, they used Carl’s rig to lower him down. They set the cot on a tarp and tied a guide line to the back of the cot underneath Tom’s head. Carl manned the line up top to control the descent, while Lydia and Luis guided the bottom of the cot. By the time they got to the bottom, they looked like Carl, painted with red clay and mud, but Tom had made it down the slope safely.

“We’ve only got a few more hours of daylight. We need to get moving. Cover as much ground as possible.” Luis said and turned to Raul. “Traiga la camilla. Rápidamente!”

Raul and Filipe brought over the stretcher and set it parallel to the cot. Lydia instinctively started helping them move Tom to the stretcher, and Carl joined in. Then Raul grabbed some straps next to them on one of the piles of gear and strapped him in. Luis ran to a nearby tent and grabbed the medical box from Liz and began rifling through it. He took a small brown glass bottle and put it in his pocket.

“Water? Liz?” Luis asked, hurried.

“Right here.” she said as she lifted the jug and he ran outside, back towards Tom.

Luis knelt next to the stretcher and pulled out the little bottle of white liquid. It was sap from oje tree which had several medicinal uses in his culture.

“Here. Open up. Doesn’t taste good, just warning you.” he said and poured a small amount into Tom’s mouth.

Tom didn’t mind, he already had a gross metallic taste in his mouth, an effect of the venom. Luis poured a canteen of water from the jug and poured some in Tom’s mouth, then closed the lid and set it in the stretcher next to him. Then Luis looked at Lydia.

“Make sure to keep him hydrated the best you can!”

“What’s that stuff do?” Lydia asked loudly, referring to the sap.

“It can slow the effects. Hopefully…but, we need to get moving.”

Dr. Phil and Javier came up behind Luis. “Here’s the phone.” Javier said.

“Carl, empty out your pack and Lydia’s. We need this phone, water, and dry clothes. Leave everything else.” Luis instructed him.

“Liz, grab me a bag to throw our stuff in.” Carl said and she ran to the tent and was back in a minute to find him packing the phone on top of his clothes. “Pack this up for us.” he said to her pointing to the pile he was leaving behind.

“How you feeling?” Lydia asked Tom.

“It’s really hurting. I feel like I’m going to throw up.” Tom coughed up some of the oje sap and the acidic bile coated the inside of his throat.

“Let’s have a look.” Luis said, pulling back the tarp. The swelling on Tom’s arm had increased significantly. “Try not to throw up. I know it’s hard, but try to keep everything down as long as possible.”

“I’m ready!” Carl said, closing the flaps on one of the packs and handing it to Lydia. Then he stood up, slung his pack over his shoulders and adjusted the straps.

Raul, his pack already on, handed Luis a pack. Everyone at the site was huddled around Tom.

“Jou are going to be alright. Luis will get jou out of here safe. Yust hang in there.” Dr. Jimenez said.

Carl bent down and picked up the lower end of the stretcher at Tom’s legs, with his back to Tom, and Luis lifted the other side. He looked at Tom and said “I’m going to try to keep your head elevated. You keep that arm down below your heart.” Tom nodded, his face grimacing as the waves of pain shot through his body. “Carl, Raul will clear the path as we go. If you need a break, switch off with him.”

Liz grabbed Lydia’s shoulder and said “We’ll carry Tom’s pack out with us. He’s going to be okay,” as she gave her a quick hug.

Raul jogged ahead and was skillfully hacking and slashing at any stray branches on the path. He was only about ten yards ahead of them, but they could barely see him through the wall of precipitation between them. This first section of the hike back to Valencia was downhill. They wanted to move faster but had to make sure they had good footing. Carl was looking ahead at every root he could brace his foot on and which spots to avoid because they looked too slick. He did the best he could, slipped a couple times and landed on his butt, but he never let go of the stretcher handles. Luis managed to stay upright all the way down the hill. If he saw Carl slipping, he would lower his end of the stretcher to relieve some of the weight so Carl could regain his balance.

Lydia walked beside Tom when the trail was wide enough, but most of the time she was behind Luis trying to peek around him as they went down. She was trying to remain calm. It felt like her head was going to explode with emotions, and she tried to hide her tears from Tom. The rain had permeated every piece of her clothing at this point, soaked head to toe, her hands and fingers had turned to prunes, macerated from the moisture.

An hour into their emergency evacuation, they stopped for water and to check on Tom. Lydia opened the canteen and poured some water into his mouth, water trickling out the corners as he struggled to swallow. Luis pulled back the tarp covering the wounded area. It had been a few hours now since the bite, and Luis could see newly-formed bubbles that looked like second degree burns on his swollen forearm. He quickly covered him back over, not wanting Tom to see the pustules. He needed to keep him calm. Tom began moaning from the shooting pains that felt like shards of glass had entered his bloodstream and were coursing through his body. He sounded like he was in the middle of a bad dream, but in reality it was a nightmare. Lydia put a hand on his forehead.

“He feels hot.” she shouted to Luis. “I think he has a fever.”

“Let’s go.” Luis said and lifted his end of the stretcher, and Carl followed suit.

The grade of the slope starting decreasing with each step as they descended, and they were able to move faster. The wind was picking up and the rain was blowing sideways against them, pushing itself into any dry crevices that remained. Lydia’s memories of Tom and her together kept replaying in her mind. She pictured him smiling after he made one of his bad jokes, and she tried to stay positive. But, her mind was an asshole and loved to interject scenes from Tom’s impending funeral, complete with her sobbing, clutching his urn. She had to push these dark thoughts out and move forward. She watched Carl, his forearms tight from carrying the stretcher, breathing heavily, eyes laser focused on his footing, scanning for the next safe foothold. He had transformed into a machine with only one purpose, to get his best friend in the whole world to safety at all costs.

Once the path leveled out, they stopped for another break. Carl took off his pack and grabbed his water jug and took a chug. “How you doin’ back there, Luis?” he asked.

Luis had taken off his pack and was doing various back stretches and rotating his hips, attempting to relieve the pressure on his spine. “If you’re fine up there, I’m going to switch with Raul for a couple hours. I don’t want to slow us down,” he said, looking over as Lydia tried once more to get Tom to drink some water.

“Switch. I’ll make it a while longer.” Carl said, resting his arms on his knees.

Luis smiled and leaned in to Tom and said, “I’ll give you a break from looking at my ugly face for a while.” His joke and comforting grin helped Tom, he was really scared now and writhing in agony.

“Try to stay still.” Lydia said and rubbed his left shoulder. Then, she slid her arm under the tarp to give his good hand a gentle squeeze of reassurance. “Look at you, getting carried out of here like a king while us mere peasants have to walk,” she chuckled with tears in her eyes.

“King Tom! Master of the jungle.” Carl joined in on the quick moment of levity while Luis and Raul switched places.

Tom was barely able to grin through the pain. “Fuck you guys,” he said dryly.

“That’s the spirit!” Carl said lifting the bamboo handles.

The parts of the trail that seemed mild on the way in, had become mud pits, and their boots were completely caked over. The extra weight was gaining slightly with each new patch they encountered. The clay was making their treads useless. Carl’s legs and arms were now burning intensely from carrying the stretcher, it felt like transitory effects of the venom from Tom permeated through him. As Luis trudged through a mud hole, he recalled helping to carry out Dr. Wilhelm’s body after his unfortunate passing, a surreal form of muscle memory swept through him. The weather was much better then, no deep mud, and he didn’t have a life-threatening emergency on his hands. He just hoped he wasn’t carrying another corpse. The light began to fade quickly as the sun set. Luis stopped and set down his pack.

“Set him down!” Luis hollered over the rain. “We need to gear up if we are going to keep going through the night at this pace.” He pulled some spare head lamps from his bag and passed them to Carl and Lydia. “Put these on. I have more batteries if we need them. Also, change socks and clean that mud off your boots. It may not make much difference with this weather, but it may be the last chance you get until tomorrow.”

As Lydia and Carl sat on a downed tree changing socks, Raul handed them each some jerky. Carl scraped as much mud off his boots with one hand as he could, devouring the jerky with the other. Then he found a stick and cleaned his treads with it before passing it off to Lydia, her cheeks puffed out as she ate as fast as she could without choking herself.

Once Lydia got situated, she knelt beside Tom. “Let’s get you some more water,” she said, unscrewing the canteen lid. She could tell he was getting worse, his skin was turning a pale yellowish hue, and his breathing was short and fast.

“I…” Tom barely could get out the words so Lydia leaned in. “I love you,” he whispered to her.

“I love you too,” she said and stood up alongside him as they lifted the stretcher.

Luis didn’t get too far ahead of them now that the darkness had set in. Between the dense foliage and sheets of precipitation, visibility was extremely poor, even with the headlamps. They could only see a few feet in front of them. This slowed things down quite a bit. Tom’s groans were getting louder and sometimes he would say something, but it wouldn’t make any sense. Lydia was able to understand some of it.

“…we left…memory…the farewell,” she heard him say. None of the others were paying any attention at this point. Their focus was staying on the path and staying upright. They paused while Luis figured out how to get around a massive tree that had fallen in the storm and was completely blocking the trail.

Lydia leaned over to Tom and said “Don’t worry about that. It’s not going anywhere.” His eyes were wide, he almost looked catatonic, but he was still there with her.

To get around the tree, Carl and Raul had to hoist Tom up in several places. Lydia took Carl’s pack so he could make his way through. Carl would get blocked by a huge limb and had to balance one end of the stretcher on it, so he could go over or under the obstruction. Then, he would lift up and pull, and Raul would set his handles in the same spot, maneuver around, and pick Tom back up. Lydia tossed Carl’s pack over and under the giant limbs that were the size of the largest trees they had back home, as she followed closely behind them. Forty-five minutes of traversing the labyrinth of branches and they finally made it out the other side.

Huge rumbles of thunder rolled from one side of the black sky to the other. The occasional flashes of lightning illuminating the jungle around them. The sounds of creaking and cracking trees sounded as if a giant beast were chasing them through the forest. They marched on as if they were trying to escape this invisible threat, and Lydia looked down at her watch. It read 12:00 AM, it had been about ten hours since Tom was bitten.

# 

## November 22 2007

Lydia’s watch flipped over to 12:01, it was officially Thanksgiving. Years ago, she thought she may lose Tom on Valentine's Day. Now, on another holiday, she was sure of it. She was volleying back and forth in her mind, she didn’t want to believe this was really happening, but she was also trying to prepare for the worst. That was just how her brain operated. She had to analyze all possibilities, for better or worse, but it was doing her no favors today.

Luis stopped and turned to them facing his headlamp down so he wouldn’t blind them and said “Carl, let’s switch. You have to be tired by now.”

“I’ll make it. Let’s just keep going.” Carl said. “I can do this!”

Luis pointed his light back to Raul and could see he was struggling. He motioned for them to trade places and handed Raul his machete. Lydia was already bent down giving Tom a drink of water, and Luis folded back the tarp to inspect Tom’s arm. It was changing colors in spots and there were more blisters, the skin on his fingers and hand were tight from the swelling. As Lydia pulled away the canteen, she could see small drops of blood seeping from Tom’s gum line and tried not to overreact. She grabbed Luis’ hand and motioned with her eyes to look at Tom’s mouth. Luis took notice of the new symptoms, which were accelerating rapidly.

“That’s one of the effects of the venom. It’s rare, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a chance. We’re going to get him out of this jungle. I promise you.” Luis said to her as Carl watched the exchange.

*I know you’ll get him out. I just hope it isn’t in a bodybag,* she thought to herself as her head lamp started to flicker.

“Let’s all go ahead and change batteries before all the lights start to die. These should last until sunrise.” Luis said as he rummaged through his pack and pulled out a ziploc of double A’s. Everyone replaced their batteries, trying to remain focused over Tom’s wailing. He would go through these screaming fits of pain for a few minutes and then return to a low groaning.

Evolution had made sure the nocturnal bird songs and insect chirps could make it through the downpours, adding to the cacophonous nature of the pitch black that engulfed them. It was a full force assault of the senses that felt like a bad case of tinnitus at times. After another hour of hiking, they came to what was usually a small creek that required stepping over a few rocks to cross. The swollen stream now covered all the stepping stones, but the group was already completely soaked anyway. Luis found a section where they could cross.

“Each of you grab a handle!” Luis said, taking the left handle from Carl.

Lydia grabbed the handle behind Luis, in the back with Raul. Luis and Carl stepped slowly in the rushing water making sure to keep their footing. By the time Lydia and Raul stepped in, the front crew was up to their waists holding Tom’s feet just above the current. For a few steps in the middle, the water was chest high on Raul, the shortest of the bunch. They had to lift up the handles and rest them on their shoulders to pass through the deepest section. The rushing water surrounding them, trying its best to throw them off balance, unsuccessfully. When they made it out the other side and reached the bank, they set Tom down and Lydia collapsed to her knees from exhaustion. Carl chugged some water along with the guides. Tom got into a screaming fit, and he suddenly started throwing up all over himself. It was watery and smelled of bile, tinged pink from the blood he had been swallowing. He coughed the last bits out and breathed in.

“You’re alright. I’m right here.” Lydia said as she wiped the side of his mouth and face. Small rivulets of blood were oozing from the sides of his eyes.

“…black box…Thanksgiving…..special…day…I…I can’t believe…today, hahahaha” Tom was whispering gibberish and laughing to himself as she cleaned off the blood from his face.

Lydia looked to Luis. “He’s not making any sense. And, he’s really pale.”

“He’s delirious from the fever. Just keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t choke if he throws up again.” Luis said. “That’s all we can do. Drink some water yourself. We still got a ways to go. Carl, you still good to carry?”

“Ready!” Carl yelled over the wind. Luis could see he was exhausted but pushing forward with everything he had.

After another hour, they reached the next hurdle, another downed tree, much smaller than the last. The trunk was only about five feet off the ground. Luis helped Carl balance their end of the stretcher on the tree, and they climbed over. Carl slipped trying to slide off and landed on his back. Luckily, his pack softened the blow a bit. Luis bent down and helped him to his feet. Lydia and Raul rested their end on their shoulders, Tom’s shivering made the stretcher tremble. Then, Carl and Luis took the weight off the other side, so the other two could climb over and lower it back down.

The monsoon wasn’t showing any signs of letting up, just waves of heavy rain, with occasional spats of even heavier rain. Lydia kept shining her headlamp at Tom’s face to make sure he wasn’t vomiting in his own mouth. He was still writhing in agony, but that actually gave her hope, that meant he was still alive. She had a brief respite from all the stress, recalling the time Tom snuck up and scared her at the Halloween bonfire. That moment was the first time they had seen each other in two years. *It seemed like yesterday and a lifetime ago, our lives have changed so much,* she thought. *I never could’ve imagined where we would be at right now. Stay with me…..please stay with me.*

As the sun rose behind the dark storm clouds, they reached the area where there had been a clearing around the beautiful waterfall. One of the spots where they had always stopped to rest and eat, was now a cascading torrent of water that flooded the whole basin below. Where they would normally sit and eat was under a couple feet of rushing water. The rough path to the side of the falls they took on the way in was nowhere to be seen. It had become an extension of the waterfall which had tripled its width at the crest. Mammoth logs flowed over the top of the falls, and they looked like sticks spiraling around in the frothy basin, like a giant clogged toilet bowl.

“What’s the plan?” Carl said, staring dejectedly at where the path used to be.

Carl was breathing heavily and was scared to sit down, his back was starting to spasm. He wouldn’t be able to stand back up without being helped up, but he didn’t want to let them see how much discomfort he was in. His only concern right now was getting Tom to that helicopter as quickly as he could. There was only about another six to eight hours of hiking to reach Valencia. *You can do this,* he thought to himself.

Luis paused and said “Only choice is to go around. We’ll have to make a new path as we go. Lydia, can you carry this end?” he asked, pointing to Tom’s feet.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t know for how long but I’ll go as long as I can.” she responded.

“Great. Carl, you take Raul’s spot. Raul will help me clear a path up this hill for you two.” Luis said and looked at Raul. “Ayúdame a cortar un camino!”

The clearing crew and the carrying crew were both moving slowly up the steep grade beside the oversized waterfall. This gave Lydia and Carl a few seconds every few minutes to set the stretcher down and breathe. It was giving Carl a break from the constant load and giving Lydia a chance to look at Tom. His nose had started to bleed a little, and she put a towel under his neck to keep his head elevated. She didn’t want the blood draining down his throat. Carl had been facing away from Tom for so long, it was hard to watch him wail. Carl wished he could comfort Tom but realized he wasn’t cognizant. Midway through another howling fit, Tom suddenly went silent. Lydia immediately set her end down and flipped around.

“We need some help over here!” she yelled up to Luis and began to check his pulse. “Still alive,” she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Luis put his ear over Tom’s mouth. “His breathing is shallow and short. We need to move,” he said and stood up, bracing himself, using the machete as a cane. “Rápido!” he shouted to Raul.

Leaves and limbs flew as if Edward Scissorhands were cutting the path for them. Lydia kept a safe distance, not stopping to look back. The spasms in Carl’s back had been supplanted by a motivating fear. Everyone got a burst of adrenaline from Tom’s loss of consciousness, and the group moved at breakneck speed up the hill. They stopped at the top so Luis could scout a way to connect back to the trail. He knew if they got lost now, there was no chance of getting Tom out to safety.

“Tom will make it through this.” Carl said, wrapping his arm around Lydia.

She was kneeling next to Tom with her head on his chest rocking back and forth. “He doesn’t have much time, I can feel it.” Lydia’s strong confidence was failing her at this moment.

Luis reappeared and shouted “This way!” Raul understood and began cutting away at a tangle of vines so Lydia and Carl could get Tom through.

The last bit of the slope was too much of an incline for two people to manage the stretcher. It took all four of them to shimmy Tom up and over. They were thankful to get back on the muddy trail and would take it for granted no more, after that slog. Luis took back his spot carrying Tom, and Carl took his old spot up front.

“Raul can handle the machete from here on. We’ve got a nice section of trail here.” Luis said to Carl. “Can you handle jogging for a bit?” he asked.

“Yes sir!” Carl answered with military-like precision.

“Just slow down if you need and we can rest when you need.” Luis said loudly. The storm was still making it hard for them to hear one another.

Carl jogged at a steady pace, watching for roots and high stepping when necessary.

With the synchronicity of their movements, it almost looked like he and Luis had trained to do this. Lydia was amazed at the speed they were able to make up here on the trail. They were double-timing it now. She looked down at her watch, it was 11:53 AM. She was surprised it was still working after the beating it had been through today. Carl tripped and fell, but never fully dropped the stretcher. He got back up and kept jogging like nothing happened. After a half hour, Carl stumbled from exhaustion, tripped again and fell. As he got up, Lydia could see he had a bloody nose.

“You okay?” she asked him. “Let me take it from here.”

“I’m fine.” he said, wiping his nose. “It’s too heavy by yourself. You could get hurt.” He released the left handle so she could grab it. “Here, take this side.”

“We ready?” Luis asked. “Let’s go!”

Lydia was able to match their gait and not throw off the rhythm they had going. Tom’s unconscious body bounced up and down in time with them. The thwack-thump beat Tom was producing, thwack thump thwack thump, brought up memories of hanging out by the fire pit together. Carl envisioned Tom putting some crazy trance music on his boombox and doing an impromptu dance. Carl used this to try and not let his mind go to the dark side, and he was able to muster the last bit of energy he had to keep going. Also, Lydia was handling most of the weight in the front. He couldn’t believe how strong she was, not just physically. He couldn’t imagine what this must be like for her, seeing Tom like this. Lydia and Carl couldn’t believe their eyes as the path ended, and suddenly, they were standing on the dirt road that led back to Valencia.

“We need to stop here!” Luis shouted up to Lydia and Carl.

“I can keep going if you guys can.” Lydia said. “Let’s do this last leg.”

“We need to call the hospital and get the helicopter en route to meet us in Valencia. It’ll take another hour for us to get him there.” Luis said and looked at Carl. “I need that phone my man.”

They set Tom down, and Carl dropped his pack and pulled the satellite phone from the top, handing it to Luis. As he picked up the headset and dialed the number, Lydia was scared the phone would be fried from the rain. Carl tilted his canteen up and took several swigs and tapped Lydia with it on the shoulder, she was entranced.

“Here, finish this off.” he said, breaking her focus. “We’re almost there.” She lifted the canteen, and as she finished off the water, she looked down at her watch, 12:37 PM. Then, she heard Luis talking into the receiver.

“We need a helicopter in Valencia as fast as possible. We’ve got a snake bite, victim going into shock…” Luis paused listening to the dispatcher. “...it’s been almost twenty three hours…..okay, okay…..it was a green pit viper…..yes that’s definitely confirmed by a witness, please bring some anti-venom…..please hurry.” Luis finished and replaced the headset on the top of the phone and looked over to Carl and Lydia. “They said it will take at least two hours to get prepped and get here. They have to be careful taking off in this storm and wait for the right window.” The blustering winds were strong and whipping the stinging raindrops against their faces like tiny needles.

They took a brief moment to scrape the excess mud off their boots, weighing them down, and picked Tom up. Raul was now helping Luis carry the back end. Next stop, Valencia. The two ruts in the road had become ditches, a foot deep with muck. They tried running in the middle, but it was too slick and they kept falling. So they used the left rut as their path. They looked like Marines on some jungle evac training exercise, covered head to toe in sludge, jogging in unison. With Valencia in sight, Tom suddenly started convulsing, and his breathing became a fast, low pitch hiss.

“Keep going!” Luis yelled as he watched Tom shaking. “We’re almost there!”

Lydia started sobbing thinking, *This is it, this is the end!*

“Hang in there buddy! You can do this. I know you can!” Carl shouted back without stopping. He didn’t think Tom could hear him, but he was hoping it would at least give Lydia some hope.

As they came into the village, people who were standing at their doorways looking out at the storm started to notice them and came out of their homes to see what was happening.

“Get him up there.” Luis said and took one hand off the stretcher and pointed to a large covered porch on a communal building. It was right next to where the kids usually played soccer, the perfect landing spot for the chopper.

The relief of being out of the deluge and under cover for the first time in a day was unbelievable. Lydia instantly collapsed next to Tom’s convulsing body and held his hand. She tried to think of anything she could to help keep him alive. So many thoughts rushing through, she briefly wondered if she should try to administer a dose of the Ancients. If he was going to die, maybe he could transcend like Wilhelm and stay alive on the inside. But, what if he wasn’t going to die, and that killed him somehow or prevented the anti-venom from working. *Not a good idea,* she thought. *But, there’s got to be something I can do.*

“Luis? How long till the chopper gets here?” she asked.

“Not sure. But probably, another hour or so.”

Lydia stood up and grabbed her pack and began frantically rifling through it. Her hand touched the vitamin bottle, that’s what she was looking for. She went over to Carl who was sitting against the railing of the porch, nearly passed out from exhaustion, and got face to face with him.

“I’m going in. It’s the only thing I can think of that may help him,” she whispered so no one else could hear.

“What?” Carl said, taken aback. “You sure you want to do this.”

“I can’t just sit here for an hour and watch him die. You have to understand,” she said exasperated.

“What the fuck am I supposed to tell these guys when you pass out? They’ll put you on that helicopter too.”

“I don’t know. Figure something out. I hadn’t thought of hitching a ride. May not be a bad idea.”

“I can’t stop you, but I can’t say I like it either.” Carl said. “…If you’re going to do this, you better do it now.”

Lydia unscrewed the lid, took one of the capsules, crushed it with her teeth, and the Ancients dissolved into her. She handed the bottle to Carl.

“Hang on to these for me,” she said as laid down next to Tom’s convulsing torso holding his left hand.

Luis and Raul sat on the other end of the porch. They could barely stand any longer. The whole crew had gone right to their breaking point. About seven minutes later, Lydia passed out. It took the others several minutes before they even noticed. They assumed she was just resting. Carl began checking her pulse and that let them know something was wrong.

“She’s passed out.” Carl said, trying not to be overly alarmed.

“Probably just exhaustion. How’s her breathing?” Luis asked. Carl leaned over and listened to her chest.

“Seems fine.” he responded.

“Well, you sit back and drink some water. Don’t need you passing out.” Luis said. “I don’t think they have room for three on that chopper.” He patted Carl on the shoulder. “Amazing work out there. You’re a good friend. I’m sure your friends will be okay.”

Carl was watching Tom violently shaking as he listened to Luis. About the time he finished speaking, Carl noticed Tom’s tremors were starting to subside, and he felt again to make sure Tom still had a pulse.

“Hey, check that out.” he said to Luis as he pointed at Tom’s body, no longer convulsing. “Hope that’s a good sign. His heart’s still beating.” Carl closed his eyes, said an internal *thank you,* and hoped Lydia’s plan was working.

\*\*\*

Lydia’s energy huddled right next to Tom. She hovered just above his torso and sent all the calming thoughts she could. She could sense his erratic heartbeat start to slow, and he stopped hyperventilating. She could see the faint lines of venom coursing through his bloodstream, the highest concentration in his right hand and arm were moving to his heart and outward from there. She tuned in with the rhythm of his heart and tried to stabilize its pumping. She slowed her vibrations, syncing up with Tom, putting all of herself into relaxing his physical body.

‘Hang on! Just a little longer.’ she thought to him. She knew he didn’t know she was there, but she thought to him anyway as a means to comfort herself. She could sense his energy was still there, but it felt faint and distant, somehow. ‘You got this!’

Looking around, she saw Carl and Luis checking her body over. Their movements were imperceptible in Lydia’s time, but she kept looking up every few minutes or so to see what was going on. After a while she saw them notice Tom’s body starting to relax. Then, they sat back watching her body and Tom’s looking for any signs of change. The time crept by and it seemed like nothing was going on around her. She saw children start to approach one by one. As a crowd formed outside the porch in the pouring rain, they started chanting prayers for their visitors. She saw a woman with a bowl of cool water and a towel. She started to wipe the blood off of Tom’s face and placed the rag on his warm forehead. Lydia could sense their combined efforts dropped his temperature a degree. She had been in with him for several hours now from her perspective.

She observed the surrealistic slow motion scene waiting for changes to occur. Everyone started turning their heads looking at the sky in the direction of the lake. Lydia looked in that direction but saw nothing. She looked back and forth from the loving statues to the clouds over the lake. The rain looked like it was strings of light with a green hue descending from above. She thought it looked like she was in the matrix. But really, she felt like out there, in the real world, was the matrix. *That’s what it seems like humanity is working towards building* *sometimes,* she thought.

Over the lake, she saw the chopper slowly creep out from the clouds. From that point it only took the air ambulance a few minutes to land, but it was an hour for Lydia. A long hour, as it grew larger and larger in her view. The closer it got, she felt the wind from the blades like gentle waves crashing over her. It flew over the porch and landed in the field on the other side of the building. She could see each rotation of the blades and tail rotor as it softly touched down and bounced. Two medics jumped out with a fluid motion and pulled a large transport stretcher from the back. The pace of the action was excruciatingly slow for Lydia. Luis was running up to meet them and was yelling something at them over the roar of the turbines. Then, she saw them pull a smaller collapsible stretcher out and set it on top of the larger one. When they finally got up onto the porch, the medics set the small stretcher up next to Lydia’s body. They hoisted her up and strapped her in. She noticed her watch, it was 2:37 PM, over twenty four hours since Tom had been bitten. *Get him first!* she thought to herself. But, she saw that they needed to get her out of the way to get to him. They lowered the larger stretcher down as low as it would go, lifted him on, and strapped him down. She stayed with his body right on top of the stretcher as they loaded them both onto the helicopter. Carl made his way off of the porch to see them takeoff. He stood in the pouring rain cupping his hand over his eyes as the chopper took off.

Lydia could feel the medics hands and instruments and the needles of anti-venom as they passed into her bubble to work on Tom. It was a very strange sensation. She could tell he was their main focus after they checked her vitals and confirmed she was okay. Then, she felt a familiar sensation as the tether yanked her the short distance from Tom’s body back into hers.

\*\*\*

“Come on. Let’s go!” Carl said to Luis as the helicopter took off. “I need to get to that hospital, and make sure they are okay.”

“Not so fast. Have you even taken off your boots yet?” Luis asked.

“Now’s not the time to kick up our feet!” Carl said, upset.

“No, no. That’s not what I mean. Sit down.” Luis guided Carl back onto the porch to have a seat. “Let’s take a look.” he said and started unlacing Carl’s boots.

“Ow! Oww, oww!” Carl winced in pain as Luis removed his right boot. When he looked down his foot looked somehow wet and mummified at the same time, with chunks of skin sloughing off the sides. He had a bad case of trench foot.

“Let’s get you inside and into some dry clothes. We sleep here tonight and hit the lake at the crack of dawn. That’s the only way we are going to make it. We’ve been awake almost thirty six hours. You did good. You’re a good friend.” Luis patted him on the shoulder. “They will be okay.”

Carl appreciated Luis’ kind words, but he wouldn’t feel content until he saw his friends Tom and Lydia alive.

\*\*\*

“Establecer. Relájese.” one of the medics said, pushing Lydia’s shoulder back down as she sat up.

“Is he okay? Is he going to be alright?” Lydia asked frantically.

The medics weren’t responding to her, they were focused on Tom, so she shut up and watched them work in the cramped space. They started cutting his wet clothes off his body and hooking him up to IV bags. The medic pushed her back again and inserted an IV into her arm to deliver fluids, she was so dehydrated. Another medic began to cut her wet clothes off as well. She briefly resisted, and then relented, now was not the time for modesty. The storm was battering the chopper, and it shifted up and down through columns of air, jostling them around the cabin. The medics would occasionally brace one hand on the stretchers and one hand on the ceiling as they hit rough patches of turbulence.

Lydia looked over at Tom’s arm. It looked much worse than the last time she saw it. Most of the pustules had burst and were painful open wounds, surrounded by patches of dark discolored skin. His hand looked like someone had beaten it with a mallet repeatedly, purple and swollen tight. She had to look away. She looked down at her feet as they removed her boots. The pain caused her to grit her teeth as they peeled back her socks. Her feet looked a lot like Carl’s except her pale skin, that was normally translucent, had turned an unusual milky white color from all the moisture her skin had absorbed. It looked like some sort of synthetic android skin grafted to her body.

The chopper sat down on a small asphalt pad next to the emergency department. As they were wheeled in, Tom and Lydia were carted to separate areas. She lifted her head and kept her eyes on him as long as possible.

“I’m fine! I’m fine!” she shouted as they pushed her back down on the stretcher. “I need to stay with him! Let me go!” She jerked her arm out of a nurse's hand.

Unbeknownst to Lydia, they injected her with some intravenous sleeping medication, after they had assessed her condition, to calm her down. She didn’t know she was fighting an unwinnable fight. She wrestled against the sleep for a few moments more before she went unconscious.

# 

## November 23 2007

Dawn was breaking and Carl and Luis were already on a pequepeque skimming across the lake. Raul stayed behind to hike back and help Javier and the rest of the dig team get out of the forest safely. *It is amazing how resilient these guides are out here in the jungle,* Carl thought. He gave Raul a huge hug and thanked him, with Luis acting as a translator, before they parted ways. At top speed and with minimal gear, they were able to get to a truck on the other side of the lake in fifteen minutes. The storm was still raging, and the river was high and muddy when the truck arrived. Going upstream on the Madre de Dios, Luis navigated the currents with expert precision, his years of experience acting unconsciously. He wanted to get Carl to his friends as fast as possible, but he knew Carl’s feet needed medical attention as well. Luis called ahead to make sure someone would be waiting at the docks to take Carl to the hospital in Puerto Maldonado. Carl gave Luis a huge hug and looked into his eyes, giving him the most earnest thank you he had mustered in his life, before jumping into the waiting car. He knew Luis was headed back into the jungle to help everyone get to safety. When Carl arrived at the hospital, he hobbled through the entrance, scanned the lobby, and made a beeline towards the front desk clerk.

“I need to find my friends!”

\*\*\*

Lydia’s eyes opened, and she was laying in a hospital bed hooked to an IV next to her. She sat up and looked around panicked for a second, taking in her surroundings. She saw a red call button to her right. She grabbed the control box and pressed the button. A gray haired female nurse arrived within a few seconds.

“I need to see my boyfriend, the guy I came in with. Where is he?” she asked.

“No hablo inglés. Un momento, por favor,” the nurse said and walked out.

Lydia looked down at her feet that were elevated on a pillow. They already looked better than they had yesterday, the skin was starting to dry out. She looked down and her watch was gone. She looked around and saw a clock on the wall. It was 8:02 AM. She had been out for about fourteen hours. Noticed her watch on the table beside the bed, she picked it up and began putting it back on her wrist when another nurse walked through the door.

“Hi. Glad to see you awake, Lydia. My name is Julio. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Where’s Tom? My boyfriend?” she asked, her feet still throbbing.

“He’s in the intensive care unit. He’s stabilized, but he has had a rough night for sure. The doctors have him in a medically induced coma. Let me get you a wheelchair, and I can take you down to see him,” the nurse said.

“I don’t need a wheelchair. I can walk,” she said sternly, swinging her legs off the side of the bed.

“I’m sure you can, but I cannot have the doctors mad at me. I’ll be right back.” Julio said jovially.

Nurse Julio pushed Lydia down the hall, her IV bag clipped to a pole attached to the back of the wheelchair.

“He’s right through these doors,” he said, backing her through two swinging doors and swinging her around. “You sit right here,” he said, locking the wheels. “And, I’ll go get a doctor who can give you more information.”

Tom was almost unrecognizable with all the IVs and breathing tubes sticking out of his body. His arm had bandages over the open sores. The beeping from his heart monitor sounded normal to her. *He’s still alive, a Thanksgiving miracle,* she thought and sighed. A short middle aged man with a lab coat and a scrub cap came in.

“Hello. My name is Dr. Gutierrez. I see your feet look better than yesterday.”

“How is he?” she asked. He could hear the concern in her voice.

“Well, it’s amazing he survived after going into shock and convulsing like he did. His brain scans seem fine. The fever didn’t cause any permanent brain damage. He will be finishing up the last round of anti-venom sometime today, but he will still be here for a while. We plan on taking him out of the coma sometime tomorrow, but his body has been through a lot, so this is what’s best for now. He’s really lucky about the arm…glad we didn’t have to amputate. Those wounds are pretty nasty though. He’ll be on some heavy duty antibiotics for a while and we may need to do a skin graft. He will be here at least two weeks…maybe more, hard to tell. But, he is alive and we are giving him the best care available. Know that. Any questions for me?”

“I don’t think so. It’s so overwhelming right now. I’m sure I will have a million questions as soon as you walk out.”

“Well, I’ll be around if you think of something. Just ask for Dr. Gutierrez,” he said, pointing to his name tag before he walked away. He stopped and turned around to look back at Lydia. “You know he’s special, right? The nurses around here have started calling this the Thanksgiving miracle.”

The doc's final words sent a chill through her body, and she was a little taken aback at the coincidence. She sat watching Tom for a few more minutes before the nurse , Julio, came in.

“We need to get you back to your room. Get you some breakfast. I’m sure you’re hungry,” he said, trying to take her mind off of Tom.

\*\*\*

Lydia was having lunch in her room after sitting with Tom most of the morning. The food was actually pretty good and not just because she was hungry. The Peruvian plate put the American institutional food, found in most schools, hospitals, and elder care facilities, to shame.

“Can I get a bite?” said a familiar voice from the hallway. She looked up and saw Carl sitting in a wheelchair in the open doorway.

“Holy shit! Get over here!” she said, and he wheeled over. “Are you okay?” she asked, looking at his chair.

“I’m fine. Just my feet got messed up, and they wouldn’t let me see you without getting them looked at. They got me in this thing for a day or two to stay off of them. Screw that.” Carl said and stood up to give Lydia a hug. “They wouldn’t let me see Tom yet. What’s going on? How is he?”

Lydia told him everything she knew, including the crazy, turbulence-filled, chopper ride through the storm. She also told him about her experience going inworld to try to help Tom. The time dilation effect had only prolonged her agony of watching him suffer, but she didn’t care. If there was any chance it would help Tom, she had to try.

“I don’t know if it did anything, but at least I tried,” she said, unsure of herself.

“Stop. Don’t be like that.” Carl said. “I saw what you did for Tom, and I saw the results. You said it yourself, they’re calling it the Thanksgiving miracle, and you know damn well you’re at least partially responsible. Stop being so modest. Even if they don’t know, I know you did something amazing, and you probably saved my best friend’s life, one of my best friend’s.” He corrected himself.

“Well, you practically carried his ass out of there. Not to take anything from Luis or Raul, but they live out here and have experience. You just brute-forced your way through. Without that, he never would have made it in time. We all did it together.” Lydia exclaimed. “Thanks, I mean that sincerely. I owe you one.”

“Thank you too,” he said. “But, you don’t owe me shit…..Hopefully we can all laugh about this around the fire pit soon.”

They ate some food together and Carl was jonesing hard for a smoke afterwards, but he had decided, this was it. After this ordeal, he was going to quit for good. He and Deetz continued talking about the wild journey they took together to get Tom out of the jungle, and that helped take his mind off the cravings for a while. Their conversation kept going back and forth, marveling in hindsight, at what a truly momentous undertaking it had been.

“…then that waterfall. Just insane.” Lydia said and looked up to see Carl fast asleep sitting up in his wheelchair, head back, mouth open.

She called a nurse to wheel him back to his room and help him get into bed, so he could get some proper rest. The nurse elevated his feet to help them dry out and heal. Then, the nurse tucked Carl in like a child, and he slept like a baby.

# 

## November 24 2007

Lydia and Carl sat beside Tom’s bed. The doctor said he could wake up at any time from the medically induced coma. A nurse came in to check his fluids and administer more antibiotics. Tom began to open his eyes as the nurse changed one of the IV bags. The nurse saw him waking up and left to get the doctor. Lydia and Carl stood up on their injured feet to be next to him.

“Tom, we’re here. You’re safe.” Lydia said, touching his face.

“Glad to have you back buddy!” Carl said smiling.

“I’m alive!?!” Tom said. “I thought I was dead for sure.”

“We did too, a couple times.” Lydia said. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Raised from the dead. He cannot be stopped.” Carl said, in movie trailer voice.

“Ahhh! Mr. Grendell. Glad to see you awake. How are you feeling?” Dr. Gutierrez asked as he walked in.

“Like I got run over by a truck.” Tom replied. “My arm is in a lot of pain, and I’m sore all over my body.” The muscles in one section of Tom’s forearm were actually exposed. He tried not to look at it as a nurse changed his bandage.

“That’s to be expected. The general pain should wear off soon, but that arm will take several months to heal. You will need a skin graft on your forearm there. I’m going to schedule a surgery for tomorrow, and we’ll see how that takes. I’m hoping to be able to get you back home in few weeks and you can do followup care from there.”

“Thank you.” Lydia said. “I can’t tell you how thankful we are for you saving his life.”

“You’re welcome but this one’s a fighter, for sure,” the doctor said, looking at Tom. “Well, I’ll be back later to let you know about the surgery. Keep resting. Make sure you two let him rest,” he glanced at Lydia and Carl as he walked out.

“Man, I had the wildest dream when I thought I was dead…I was a follower of Ch’unpitari and went through the ascension ceremony. I could feel the life drain from my body as the blood flowed out of me laying on that inverted table. Then my lifeless corpse flew through the shaft. It was like a first person perspective even after I was dead. Very vivid and very strange.” Tom said eyes wide trying to get them to realize how intense it was from his perspective. “Before I woke up here, my energy was spiraling up through the temple towards the sun up the shaft, like a tunnel of light. Kept expecting to hear the voice of God telling me how fucked I was for not believing in him all these years. But, that didn’t happen,” he chuckled at the end.

Lydia barely heard the words as he spoke. She was just studying his face and all the little movements, taking him in. She couldn’t believe she had almost lost him.

“I’m going to grab us some lunch. Give you two a few minutes to yourselves.” Carl said and clasped Tom’s left hand. “I bet you’re hungry. Be back soon.”

Lydia and Tom were alone and she sat on the edge of his bed staring at him. Tom tilted his head so he could look directly at her.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to put you through this.” Tom said feeling guilty.

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault,” she said, gripping his good hand. “But, try not to do it again, please,” she joked and brushed back his hair. She leaned in and gave him a small peck, before looking into his eyes inches apart from one another, and they kissed with an intensity, befitting the severity of their circumstance. “I’m serious,” she said smiling. “Don’t do that shit again.” They both laughed.

Carl came back quickly with a couple of stacked cafeteria trays filled with Peruvian delights. “Dig in!” he said, sliding the overbed hospital table into position and setting a tray in front of Tom and Lydia. Tom wasn’t able to eat much, his body couldn’t handle too much before the surgery.

In between bites, Tom looked at them and asked, “So what do we do about Wilhelm’s farewell? I kinda messed that up.”

“I don’t know.” Lydia said. “We definitely can’t go back until after the rainy season.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Carl assured him. He took a bite of food and continued talking as he chewed. “To tell you the truth, I’m in no hurry to go back out there anytime soon. I feel like I’ve had enough jungle for right now.”

“Hey thanks, man. Lydia told me what you did for me out there. I don’t know if I can ever repay you.” Tom said, getting serious. “I owe my life to you two.”

“You better thank Luis and Raul, too. They are still out there today.” Lydia said, looking at the storm out the window. “They should have everyone to Puerto Maldonado tonight. I hope everyone is okay.”

Carl backed up Lydia. “Without them, we never would’ve gotten you outta there, brother.” He paused. “Dude, you missed that waterfall. That shit was wild….hey, maybe I can show you the memories one day?” he said as he got the idea.

“Oh yeah!” Tom said, excited. “No doubt! We’ll have to do that…But, maybe we shouldn’t, what Wilhelm told us has me feeling like we shouldn’t use the Ancients anymore until we are sure they’re safe.”

“I keep forgetting about that.” Carl said.

They all agreed, the risks may not be worth it. Considering they may not be going in again until they retrieved the farewell, Lydia and Tom took a moment to tell Carl all about the magical light ceremony the followers performed for them as their special way to say thanks and goodbye.

Later that afternoon, Dr. Gutierrez came in to check on Tom’s progress and let him know the first surgery was scheduled for tomorrow morning at 10 AM.

“First surgery?” Tom said, concerned.

“We may be able to do it in one, but I want you to be prepared, sometimes it takes two or three to get the graft to take.” He looked over to Lydia and Carl. “You two need to go rest your feet and let him get some rest. You can come see him again in the morning, before the surgery.”

Lydia didn’t want to leave but knew he needed to rest. She just didn’t want to let him out of her sight again. She kissed his forehead, and they left him there to sleep.

# 

## November 25 2007

Dr. Gutierrez came out of the operating room to a waiting Lydia and Carl. “Everything went smooth. They are transporting him back to his room. He should be fully awake soon.” Lydia felt such a sense of relief and hugged Carl.

Lydia was happy to see the exposed muscle in Tom’s arm was now covered and stitched up. The skin tone was much paler, the skin had come from his upper thigh which had been bandaged. Tom woke up to see Lydia and Carl sitting there.

“Ohh! Hi!” Lydia said to him gently.

“Hi.” Tom sounded groggy.

“Back to the world of the living…again.” Carl said grinning. “You feel alright?”

“Probably as good as I look,” he joked. “Nah. I’ll be okay. Just glad to wake up. I don’t like going under like that, especially after this whole ordeal.”

“I’m not a fan either, trust me.” Lydia said sarcastically.

Nurse Julio knocked on the side of the open door. “You have visitors!”

Liz popped around the corner followed by Kyle, Dr. Phil, and Dr. Jimenez. She was holding a vase of flowers, which she quickly set down on the table and ran over to greet them.

“Oh my god! I’m so glad to see you all. I was so worried. I mean, we all were. And, to see what you had to make it through. That trail was blocked in so many places. I don’t even know how you made it out of there. But, you did, and that’s all that matters.” Liz said, looking at all three of them. Then, she grabbed Lydia and gave her a big hug.

“Well, thank you all so much!” Tom said, looking at Javier first. Then he went down the line, acknowledging Dr. Phil and Kyle. Once Liz finished her hug with Lydia, he gave her a nod of thanks. “I’m so sorry for any trouble I’ve caused!”

“Jou have caused us no trouble. I am yust glad jou are here safe and recovering. The weather is really what caused us the most trouble this jear, not jou.” Javier smiled.

“You have the worst luck, my friend…but somehow you bounce back. And, you have the best crew of friends, I hope you know that.” Dr. Phil said, glancing over to Carl and Lydia with a look of gratitude.

“Well, we were told to make it short. I know you need to rest. We’ll visit again tomorrow before we leave.” Liz said to Tom. She looked over to Lydia and pointed towards the door. “Can I talk to you out there for a second?”

The group took turns at Tom’s bedside saying their goodbyes before shuffling out into the hallway.

“The guides have your gear stored down at the docks. I think we got everything, but it was pretty chaotic when we left. I did bring Tom’s pack.” Liz said and looked back to Kyle who was holding the pack. “We’ll check back in on you all before we leave. Hope this isn’t your last season. I really hope to see you out here again,” she said to Lydia as she handed her the pack.

“We’ll come back, I’m sure of it. Just don’t know when.” She gave Liz a quick hug. “See you all tomorrow.” Lydia said as she waved goodbye to everyone as they walked down the long hospital corridor.

\*\*\*

Carl checked in at a local motel after he was officially checked out of the hospital, Lydia was as well. Carl offered her a bed, he got a room with two beds, but she opted to just sleep in a chair next to Tom that night. Tom went to sleep early, his body was tired from the surgery and drugs and the excitement of having visitors.

Lydia began getting bored sitting alone with him asleep, all the machines making their rhythmic bleeps. She saw Tom’s pack leaning against the wall and decided to check it out. It was mostly just his clothes, which were still damp. She started pulling them out one by one and hanging them wherever she could find space in the hospital room to dry out. As she pulled out the last shirt and unrolled it, a small black box fell onto the tiled floor. She paused, a wave of warmth rushed over her as she bent down to pick it up.

It was a ring box, and she knew what it meant right away. Her heart sped up and she forgot to breathe as she opened the box. It was a small gold ring set with a stunning ruby gemstone. *A perfect size*, she thought. She preferred rubies to diamonds, and she was blown away that he remembered. She pulled it gently from the satin interior and looked at the shimmering ruby in the light. It was beautiful. She noticed an inscription on the inside and turned it so she could read it. It said “To my wife Lydia - Thanksgiving 2007” She pulled the ring into her chest and started crying. *That bastard almost died before he got the chance,* she thought. She laughed through the tears and stared lovingly at his sleeping body. *Well, he’s got a surprise coming to him when he wakes up tomorrow.* Somehow she managed to fall asleep, her body made sure of that, relenting against her restless brain, racing with emotions, overflowing with joy from her discovery.

# 

## November 26 2007

Tom opened his eyes and saw the ring box sitting on his chest and had a momentary panic before he saw the little handwritten piece of paper that just said “YES!” on it. He immediately looked up to see Lydia sitting in the chair next to him watching his reaction. She picked up her left hand off her lap and flashed him the back of her hand displaying the engagement ring.

“Hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of putting it on. I couldn’t wait.” Lydia said in a naughty tone.

“How did you…what…” Tom couldn’t find his words.

“I went to dry out some of your clothes, and it fell out. Snake ruined your plans, huh?” she chuckled.

“In more ways than one,” he retorted and opened up his arms. “Come over here…..wife!”

They kissed and shed happy tears together, saying how much they loved one another, repeatedly. It was a special moment they would never forget for the rest of their lives.

Carl knocked on the side of the open door.

“Oh sorry. Looks like I might be interrupting something.”

“No!” they both said in unison and looked at each other and laughed.

Carl gave them the side eye. “What’s going on in here?”

“We’re engaged!” she said, holding up the ruby ring.

Carl knew Lydia wasn’t a traditional marriage type of person, so seeing her react like this, he was a little taken aback. He knew their love was as genuine as it gets and this news made him so thrilled for both of them.

“Finally locked it down, huh?” Carl said to Tom, ribbing him.

“Sorry I didn’t tell you, but it was going to be a surprise for you too…Carl, meet my fiancé, Lydia. Lydia, this is my best friend, Carl. If you’re going to marry me, this guy is part of the package deal, sorry.”

“Nice to meet you!” Carl said, smiling at Lydia.

“Likewise.” she replied seriously.

“Hey! We gotta celebrate!” Carl clapped his hands and whispered “I’m going go get a bottle of wine and sneak it in here. Be right back.” He spun around as he was walking out and pounded his fist on the top of the door frame. “I can’t wait to tell Violet, she’s going to flip.”

Carl returned in a half hour with a bottle of red and some plastic cups. Tom only took a few sips. With his medications, he knew it wasn’t smart to mix with alcohol, and Carl and Lydia were so excited, he didn’t want to be a buzzkill. He sat back watching them laugh thinking about how lucky he was to have them both in his life. For a brief moment, he was able to block out the pain and just bask in it.

That afternoon, after lunch, the dig team came by and joined in the impromptu celebration. Carl procured some more libations, and Javier and Dr. Phil were in rare form after a few glasses. A nurse came in and was mildly upset at the situation, but calmed down when she heard the news and allowed them to continue as long as they promised to end their little party soon. Lydia was really thankful to Liz for bringing the pack to the hospital. She told her the whole story. They exchanged contact info and promised to keep in touch as they said their goodbyes.

Shortly after they left, the nurse politely told Carl visiting hours were over. Lydia and Tom were alone again for the first time since that morning when he woke up to find his wife sitting there. She squeezed in the bed with him, on his left side, and rested her head on his shoulder. She knew they couldn’t sleep like that, but just needed to touch him for a few minutes. Apparently, he had no problem sleeping like that, Tom was out like a light. They were still giving him sleeping medication to make sure he got enough rest to allow his body to heal.

Nurse Julio was on duty that night and brought her a cot and a blanket, so she would get some decent sleep.

“Congratulations! The whole hospital is talking about you two.” he whispered to Lydia. “No funny business in here. Got it? That man needs his rest,” he chuckled.

# 

## December 22 2007

Tom was finally checking out of the hospital. His first skin graft had taken successfully, and the doctors were amazed at the speed of his recovery. He would still need to be on several medications for a while and check in regularly with a specialist near him, until his hand and arm had fully healed.

Their flight left that afternoon, and they had arranged a meeting with Luis and Raul to get their gear and thank them for what they had done. The gear was mostly trashed in the storm and not worth the money it would take to get it home. They told Luis to keep or donate whatever he could. It was the least they could do to repay him for all he had done for Tom. Of course they would be taking the convertor which looked intact and dry, just the way Lydia had packed it. The cameras looked fine too, no water damage, but she couldn’t find what she was really interested in.

“Carl, where are the tapes?” Lydia asked, referring to the ones they had filmed when they powered on the convertor, in the hopes of freeing Wilhelm and the followers.

“I don’t know. I thought they would’ve been with the gear. I had them in my pack and took them out after Tom got bit so I could fit the sat-phone in there,” he replied confused.

“This is all my fault.” Tom felt guilty for all the trouble he had caused.

“It’s no one’s fault.” Lydia said, but Tom could see she was obviously bummed about the loss of the tapes.

\*\*\*

Just before midnight, their plane landed in DC, and Violet was waiting to pick them up at the airport. Carl ran to hug her, and she met him halfway. Lydia and Tom watched their embrace and smiled at each other, happy to see their friends happy. On the two and a half hour ride home, Violet was ecstatic to hear about Lydia and Tom’s engagement, and she wanted to know every detail. Ten minutes into their story, Carl was already snoring, his head resting against the seatbelt.

# Part Three: The Farewell

## December 24 2007

Debra was throwing them an official welcome home bash, that was doubling as an engagement party, at Lydia’s childhood home on Christmas eve. All their family and friends had heard about their crazy Peruvian adventure, Tom’s brush with death, and the surprise reverse proposal in the hospital. The mood was festive, and everyone was overjoyed they had all made it home together safe and sound. Tom still had his arm wrapped in a large bandage in a sling, so he didn’t damage the skin graft. Everyone was giving him handshakes and soft hugs over the shoulder, cautiously avoiding his injury. Lydia watched as Carl and Violet danced together, with their arms wrapped around each other's waists, and she remembered the time Carl had asked her mother to dance. This time Tyler took up the mantle in his place and asked his mom to dance. As they danced, Lydia saw her father, Dan, in Tyler’s face for the first time. She had to hold back the tears. But, they weren’t sad tears, it was a beautiful thing to witness.

Hailey was there with her new girlfriend, but of course, Pickle Pete didn’t show. He was invited, but they knew he would come up with some excuse. Ben showed up, and he actually put on a shirt that didn’t have holes in it. It was exactly the kind of random cast of characters that Tom felt essential for any real holiday party. Going from a jungle monsoon to a hospital room to drinking eggnog next to a crackling fireplace in the course of a month was quite the spectrum of experiences. As the evening wrapped up and everyone prepared for Christmas the next morning, the guests started to trickle home.

Hailey and her guest said their goodbyes and walked out to her car as Lydia, Tom, Carl, and Violet stood on the stoop waving them off.

“I almost forgot.” Hailey yelled from the car. She ran back to the stoop with a shopping bag and handed it to Lydia. “It’s your mail from the apartment you asked me to pick up while you were gone.”

“Ohh. Thanks so much. Drive safe.” Lydia said as she walked away.

Lydia and Tom prepared for bed that night at her mom’s place, they were spending the whole week there until the new year rolled over. Lydia peeked into the shopping bag full of mail as she took it off the bed and noticed a large padded envelope. She pulled it from the bag and turned it over to look at the address. It had one of those shiny premade return address labels with flowers around the border that read :

Kyle & Elizabeth Perkins

7054 Hewlett Drive

Houston, Texas 77013

“Looks like Liz sent us something,” she said to Tom.

“Open it up! Wonder what it is?” he said curiously.

Lydia ripped open one end and saw something taped in bubble wrap with a slip of paper next to it. She opened the note and read it aloud.

“Dear newlyweds, I hope you had a safe trip home. Lydia, I found these tapes in with my gear when I got home. They must have gotten mixed up with my stuff in all the commotion. I wouldn’t want your research to get lost on top of everything else you two have been through. Congratulations again on your engagement, you both seem so happy together. Give Tom a big hug for me. Hope to see you both next year! Keep in touch! Your friend, Liz.”

Lydia tore open the bubble wrap and saw the tapes were still triple wrapped and bagged the way Carl had prepared them. Tom watched intently, standing next to the bed, and recognized what they were right away.

“Let’s check ‘em out.” he said. “What are we waiting for?”

“We don’t have any way to play them right now. I donated the cameras to Luis. Violet probably has one I can borrow that’ll work. I’ll upload them to my computer when I get back to the apartment,” she said, setting the package inside her suitcase.

“We waited this long, I guess. What’s another week or two?” he responded. “That was super cool of Liz. Good lookin’ out.”

“I know. I’ll call her soon and say thanks.” Lydia started undressing to put on her pajamas and stopped halfway through and jumped under the covers and patted one hand on his side of the bed. “Hop on in!” she said sensually.

“What? Are you crazy?” he said smiling. “Your mom is right down the hall.”

“So!…..I can be quiet. Can you?” she said and folded back the sheets.

# 

## January 5 2008

Lydia had returned to her apartment after the holidays they spent with her mom, and Tom was living there now too. He still had the camper at his uncle’s property but was letting his arm heal before he figured out what to do with his life. They would be building their future together, as a unit, from here on out.

Violet didn’t have the camera they needed to convert the tapes, so Lydia ordered one online, and it was set to arrive in a week or so. What blew Tom away was the way she ordered the new camera. Her mom had gotten her some fancy phone for Christmas, called an iPhone. This thing was like a miniature computer. *If she can do that now, what will that thing be able to do in ten years?* he thought.

Pete was coming by to hang out with them and show them the work he had done for the laser upgrades to the convertor. They were stoked to see him, it had been almost six months since their last meetup and a lot had happened.

“Sorry I missed the party.” Pete said as they sat in the tiny living room. “And hey, congratulations. I heard the news.”

“Thanks Pete!” Tom said. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Got any beer?”

“Sure. I got ya.” Tom said getting off the couch.

“Thanks Pete. Wish you would’ve come, but we get it.” Lydia said. “What’s in the box?”

“What’s in the box? What’s in the box?” Tom joked, dramatically handing Pete his beer. They all laughed at Tom’s corny Brad Pitt impersonation and each took a turn repeating the phrase.

Pete set the box on the coffee table in between them and opened the flaps. “Got a mockup of the new design. It’s all complete…even got the holding tank for the goo. Let me open it up, I’ll show you.” he said and started opening the cover.

The convertor was much smaller than before, the three lasers took up a lot more room with the old configuration. Also, the side panel where the single power switch was, had several power outputs like a generator.

“Woah! What’s that?” Lydia asked, pointing to the outlets.

“Well, after our last test I realized the circuit board just needed some modifications to create power outputs. I hope you don’t mind. I wanted to surprise you. It should be fully functional now, and it can be modified depending on what you want to use it for.” Pete sounded like a giddy child.

“I have the other prototype here.” Lydia said. “And…um…we got approval from our donor to move forward. We can use the substrate from the other prototype tank if you’d like to test it tonight. Do you think it’s ready?” she asked. Tom was looking over the new convertor as they talked, admiring how the design had evolved into this sleeker, much more professional, model.

“Yeah. It’s ready. Let’s give it a whirl.” Pete said, excited.

Tom got up and grabbed the old convertor for Lydia and placed it next to the new one on the coffee table. She opened up the case and found the tanks and pin connectors to be identical, so she was able to just swap tanks without having to pour the substrate from one tank to the other. She looked up at Pete, and he gave her the visual go ahead to connect the wiring harness to the circuit board.

“Is it ready to turn on?” Tom asked.

“Sure.” Pete said. “Why don’t you do the honors this time?”

Tom was actually genuinely honored that he asked.

“I feel like Edison testing out the first light bulb,” he said and flipped on the power switch. Nothing happened. “Okay, now what?”

“You got to plug something in, dummy?” Lydia joked.

“What should we plug in?” Tom asked.

“It can be anything.” Pete said in hurried excitement. “We just need to see if it works.”

“Hold on, I got something.” Lydia replied to Tom and ran into their bedroom. She came back with the stained glass lamp from her nightstand. “Your Edison comment gave me the idea,” she said to Tom. “Seems kind of fitting given that this could be a historic moment and all. Also, my late father gave me this antique lamp when I was young, so it has a sentimental value as well.” Tom clasped her hand with his good hand as she spoke.

Pete’s nervous energy relaxed as he listened to Lydia. “That really is much more appropriate. I’m glad we didn’t just plug in something random.”

“To you, dad!” Lydia said as she plugged in the cord and pulled the little chain on the lamp fixture. The lamp lit up immediately and shined a kaleidoscope of stained-glass colors across the drab apartment walls. They cheered, and Pete raised his beer in celebration. It was a momentous occasion and the gravity of the achievement, and its implications, were not lost on them.

“This is unbelievable…..Thank you Pete. This is beyond my expectations.” Lydia said ecstatically. “I don’t know what the next step is yet.”

“Well, that’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about.” Pete said, and they noticed his tone changed from giddy to nervous. “I feel really bad about this, and I hope you’ll forgive me….. I took the funnel from the last time I was here and gave it to a member of the collective that works in organic chemistry to have it analyzed. When they originally found out about what we were working on, they put a lot of pressure on me to get more information out of you. There were, and still are, a lot of internal discussions about whether you should have the ability to decide if something this world changing gets released.” Lydia and Tom didn’t want to stop him, they could tell Pete had been holding this in. His delivery felt like a guilty killer, driven by his conscience to confess his crimes. “I feel terrible, I really do. But, the truth is, they have the formula now, and they are ready to release the plans for this device, whether you want to or not. They said they’ll release the plans on the web in thirty days. But, everyone agreed to give you the courtesy of taking credit if you wanted. Probably not a smart call. We all wanted to give you a chance to say if you’re in or out. Your call?”

“Lot to take in. First off, What the fuck?” Lydia said, upset. “I trusted you. I can’t believe…..ohh…ohh, we’ll come back to that…..So ‘they’ are just going to release it in thirty days,” she said annoyed using quotation marks to denote the unknown hacker collective. “Look, in all honesty, I knew some shit like this would happen. We knew there was no way we were going to be able to control this thing, but I hoped to be a little more in the loop than this…..As far as taking credit, you’re completely right, I don’t want my name on this, but that’s because, that’s not what this whole project is about. I’m not taking credit, but I don’t want any of these other assholes saying it’s theirs either. If we are releasing it for ‘the people’ then no one gets credit. Get what I’m saying?” she asked Pete, angered at his betrayal.

“So…what I’m hearing is, you’re in?” Pete asked, shrugging his shoulders, trying to lighten the mood.   
 “Yes. I’m fucking in,” she said gruffly, smiling. “I can’t believe they were going to release it without testing it.”

“They wanted to, but I convinced them to wait until we could talk. So, I’m really glad I could be here, and we could do it together. You deserved to be the one to do it.” Pete said, sincerely. She could tell from his demeanor that Pete really did rally for her, against the will of the collective, and the situation had just gotten out of his control.

“You have to convince them to wait longer than thirty days. It’s not ready. Trust me. I haven’t been completely honest with you either, and I’m not about to start now. But, what I can tell you is the whole laser mirror array thingy, is useless for what we are using it for. It was a diversion. You’re not the only sneaky one,” she said to Pete with a tone of one-upmanship.

*She’s at it again, boss lady’s back!* Tom thought and grinned.

“Touché…..We were a little perplexed by its purpose, but we still don’t understand how the substrate works either, so we were just trusting your plans. Speaking of, how does the goo work?” Pete asked.

“Even if I did know, I’m not sure I would tell you.” she said, the wound still fresh.

“Nixing the laser array changes the whole ballgame. That’s probably eighty percent of the cost and half the weight and size, gone. This is freakin’ awesome. They will be hyped you’re on board. And this shows you’re down for the cause. They won’t be able to question your motives from here on out. No doubt, this will make it affordable for everyone and easy to replicate. Makers and 3D printers could make the shells and circuit boards for ultra cheap. And it would pay for itself in no time.” Pete’s tone reverted back to giddy. He couldn’t help himself thinking of the potential.

“What do you think will happen when it’s released?” Lydia asked Pete. “Tom and I have discussed it a lot, and we see a lot of ways this could go good…or bad.”

“Yeah. That’s a tough one. We all want it to work out the best for everyone, but everyone envisions that differently. And, I don’t think any of us are naive enough to think we will create some kind of utopia. That’s one of the paradoxes of humanity, we all have different motivations in life. Either of you ever heard of the Hadza tribes in Tanzania?” Pete asked them.

“Nope.” Tom replied. “You?” he asked Lydia, and she shook her head no.

“This tribe…the Hadza people, they are a hunter-gatherer society of small fluid groups that have lived in the same area in Africa for tens of thousands of years, ‘the cradle of humanity’, existing on roots, baobab fruits, berries, and all kinds of bush meat. They even have a bird, they call the Honeyguide, and if they follow their calls in the morning, they can find giant nests of African killer bees high up in trees where they wouldn’t be able to find them without the birds. Then, they build a fire and make smoke sticks to stun the bees with, while they collect the honeycomb. As they throw the comb to the ground, the birds come and collect small bits of the honeycomb, their little slice of the pie for helping them. So, they have evolved to have a mutually beneficial relationship, humans and animals working in tandem, over who knows how many thousands of years, to truly live in harmony with nature. They’re nomadic people and live in grass huts that melt back into the landscape when they move on leaving no trace they were ever there. But, they are losing all of their land as the modern world encroaches. They were only documented like a hundred years ago, but now, they regularly get tourists who pay them money to watch them live basically, which has changed their culture dramatically already. There are still the hardcore Hadza that don’t partake in the modern world in any way, but they are dwindling fast. Even, what used to be a sacred ceremonial dance called the epheme has been raped by commerce. It was a ceremonial dance that only happened on nights when there was no moon, and they would extinguish their fires to be in complete darkness, except for the stars. The men and women would separate, and then a man would start the dance as the women started the chanting rhythms. Then the women would get up and join in, and at the end the children would be allowed to join in the festivities. They would continue this until all the men had a chance to participate. It was a joyous dance to bring the community together and appreciate what the hunters had been given by the land. The purest form of human expression and communal harmony with the land has now turned into doing the dance in the hot sun in the middle of the day for a few bucks or alcohol, stripped of all its meaning. A gross display, if you ask me. But, they have decided to do this while others have decided to resist as long as possible, and who are we to say whether they should stay the same if they don’t want to…or change for that matter. Thousands of years of culture and the foundation of what got us here today is being undone in a few decades, a modern cultural extinction right in front of our eyes…..You can decide what it all means to you.” Pete said as Lydia and Tom listened intently. “Point is, this shit is coming whether we like it or not. We may be the Hadza when history plays out. We might as well guide it as best we can, and what happens from there, is truly out of our control. Hopefully…we can keep our dance pure, if you get me.”

“Damn…..dude…that’s exactly the way this needs to be approached. Most people would just be seeing dollar signs. We are definitely on the same wavelength on this thing.” Lydia said, processing Pete’s story. “Just fucking be straightforward from here on out. We are in this together now…..whether we like it or not, like you said.”

“I can’t apologize enough for what I did, but I hope this helps you both see where we…the collective, is coming from on a deeper level.”

“It makes me feel a lot better about this whole thing to tell you the truth.” Tom said. “The secrecy aspect of this whole thing makes me paranoid sometimes. Once it is out, no one would believe me, even if I told them I had something to do with it.”

Pete stayed for a bit longer and left the newest prototype for them to keep. It was theirs after all, and it was obsolete in his mind. He was jacked to start the first release version of the power convertor, without the laser array, to see how low he could push the reproduction cost.

“Hey, before you leave, I want to name it if that’s okay?” Lydia said. “What do you think of…the Wilhelm Drive?”

“A little clunky. What’s it mean?”

“A nod to a silent partner. But, the name is too common for anyone to have any idea who it is.” she responded.

“What about Inworld Energy Device? Or I.ED. for short.” Tom joked.

“Don’t think so.” Pete replied not understanding the inworld part, but figured Tom just squeezed it in to fit the joke. “No one will build it…..well, maybe a few people, but they would not be happy with the results.” Pete jested back.

“I like the acronym idea though. What about ECO? Energy Convertor Organism. Works in a lot of ways. The substrate is alive on a cellular level. And, it’s sorta close to what we’ve been calling it anyways. A little basic, but it’s not about style points.” Lydia said.

“I like it.” Tom said.

“Not bad.” Pete said, scratching his little chin, as his eyes drifted upward to the ceiling, pondering Lydia’s suggestion.

“We’ll all sleep on it. No need to make that decision right this second.” Lydia said. “You can run it by your crew. Let me know.”

“Later!” Tom said as the door closed behind Pete, he and looked back at Lydia with an expression that said *Wow, that was a lot!*

They sealed up the convertor and put the two devices away. They ordered some Chinese and sat on the couch with a spread of fried rice, dumplings, and egg rolls in front of them on the coffee table. Lydia squirted some hot mustard on an egg roll.

“Some story, huh? The Hadza?” she said to Tom.

“Sad…really sad.” he replied and popped a dumpling in his mouth.

“I know. I wish there was a way to have all this progress and somehow live in harmony with the natural processes at the same time,” she said. “But, I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I think what you’ve done here is a step in that direction. Let’s just hope the world doesn’t blow itself up before we can get there,” he said dripping dumpling sauce on his bandage. *Good thing I’m replacing this thing before bed,* he thought.

“I hope you’re right. But, it seems to me, humans' constant need to search for fulfillment actually gets in the way of feeling genuinely fulfilled with the bounty of wonder all around us. It’s almost like we, as a society, have chosen through our actions, to actively annihilate these people that have chosen to live naturally, as a way to justify our modern way of life…..Like you said, it’s sad, very sad,” she said. “Hey, pass me that fried rice.”

# 

## January 19 2008

Lydia opened the door to find Carl holding a six pack.

“Hey, Friendo!” Carl said in a low voice imitating a character from the movie they all went out to see last weekend.

“Get in here,” she said laughing.

“What’s happening, man?” Tom said, getting up for a hug.

“Same shit. Just working, and hanging with Violet when I’m not working,” he said sitting down next to them on the couch.

“That’s cool. Good to see you!” Tom missed seeing Carl on a regular basis the way they used to, but life has a way of doing that to childhood friendships.

“So, I guess we all know why we are here. I got that camera and was able to upload the footage to my computer. I haven’t watched any of it. I wanted to wait until we could all see it together. There’s probably nothing here anyways, but just in case, I didn’t want to spoil it.” Lydia said. “I hooked my laptop up to the TV so we could watch on the big screen.”

She stood up and pressed enter on the keyboard. The screen flickered from the camera cutting on. They saw themselves huddled around the convertor before they turned it on. The scene continued on as they turned on the convertor. It was weird seeing themselves on the TV. But, it was how they remembered it. Nothing happened, and there was a lot of noise on the tape from the rain bouncing off the canvas tent. They sat for a while watching nothing happen, until they got bored. It felt like they were watching themselves in some strange avant-garde art film.

“Any way to speed this up?” Tom chuckled. “I don’t think I can handle three hours of this. We got two more tapes to get through.”

“Sure can. I’ll put in on 3x. We can watch all three in less than an hour that way,” she said, pulling up the video settings window.

Suddenly, they saw themselves speed up and their pacing back and forth on the screen made it look even more like experimental cinema. After a few minutes of watching themselves, boredom set in, and they just naturally started chatting.

“So, when do you think we’ll make it back?” Tom asked them. “I’ve got to make a dent in some of these hospital bills before I go back. It just wouldn’t feel right otherwise. I guess I need to hit up Ben. I wanted to get out of the game, but it just keeps pulling me back in,” he joked.

“Yeah. I’ve got to bring in some money too.” Lydia said. “I’ve been focusing so much on this project and then the whole snake bite incident. Time to get back to the real world for a bit, and not looking forward to it either.”

“What do you think you’ll do?” Carl asked and crushed his can before getting up to get another from the fridge.

“I’ve stayed in contact with the researcher working with veterans with PTSD, helping them deal with trauma through psychedelic assisted therapy sessions. I helped him before and he said there was still a position available for me. I don’t know why I said I’m not looking forward to going back, because it is something I’m truly passionate about, and I think it’s making a genuine difference in their lives…I’ve just been enjoying all this time with Tom,” she said softly and glanced over at him.

As they talked, the first recording finished and Lydia switched to the upload of the second tape, which was from the camera with the infrared lens.

“Predator vision! Sweet!” Carl said watching them from a different angle, all sped up, huddled around the convertor again.

This new colorful version kept their attention a little longer. Lydia took note of the fact the convertor remained a cool dark blue color indicating its temperature never changed. *How does this thing output that much power without generating any heat?* she wondered.

“When we do go back to the temple, I’m hoping to get some more answers about how this thing works, especially the substrate.” Lydia said. “I’m sure it will take me a while to decipher the memories Wilhelm used to create the design of the device, but I think it will be worth it.”

“It seems like you could spend years down there, trying to back-engineer that thing. Wilhelm obviously did.” Tom said. “I don’t want any of us spending more time than we need in there. We still don’t know if the Ancients are safe.”

“Yeah. I’m sort of over this adventure after we go back. I want to go and make sure you two are safe.” Carl said. “But, then I think I’m done. I want to go back to my boring old life for a while.”

“I don’t think we are making it back this summer anyways.” Lydia said. “I’m broke as shit right now. I returned the camera after the uploads…too expensive. Looks like tape two is nada,” she said and pulled up another window with the third and final upload.

The last tape came from a camera that Violet modified for them to shoot full spectrum digital video. They told her it was for testing the laser. This image had surrealistic colors that painted them in pale colors, very different from the bright primary look of the infrared video.

“This came from the camera Violet modified?” Carl asked.

“Yep.” Lydia replied.

“When are we going to tell her?” Carl asked. They had recently told him about the whole Pickle Pete early release situation.

“We can tell her after it’s out there. The laser won’t even be in the final design, but she still contributed so much. She deserves to know when the time is right.” Lydia said. She could tell Carl was not happy keeping this from her, and she didn’t blame him. They just didn’t have any other choice right now.

Carl changed the subject. “How’s that arm healing up skipper?”

“It’s looking good. Lydia helps me change the bandage every day and I am shocked how quick it’s healing. Dr. Gutierrez did an awesome job on the graft.” Tom said.

“I get a little kick out of seeing the progress every time we swap bandages.” Lydia said.

“Hey, what was that?” Tom said and tapped her leg, pointing at the screen.

When Lydia and Carl turned to look, there was a flickering around the edges of the video for a few seconds that faded quickly out of frame.

“Did you see that?” Tom asked them, gripping the arm of the couch.

“I saw something at the end, but I don’t know what.” Lydia responded.

“Same here.”

“There’s more, I saw something else. Go back.” Tom said.

Lydia clicked the time scroll bar at the bottom of the video window and dragged it back several minutes. She adjusted the playback speed to normal and hit play. They watched closely trying to take in every pixel.

After a minute, a bright neon orange glow started emitting from the convertor. Then, thousands of small neon lights came out from the glow. They looked like fireflies except orange and the shape of the lights were angular like small crystals. Except for the color, they resembled little pieces of the ancient mycelium. The neons flew up and formed a geometrical pattern that looked like Wilhelm from the pictures and memories they had seen. His image remained pulsating for a second, and he bowed his head. Then, thousands more lights came from below and through Wilhelm tearing him apart as his lights merged with the others. Then, they branched off and swirled around the odd colored versions of the trio. The patterns continued spiraling around them, then through them, and finally, outwards. The neon crystals flickered out to the edge of the frame and beyond. They sat, watching the TV screen for a few moments after the action ended, not talking, just waiting to see if anything else would happen.

Lydia was the first to speak. “We did it.” she said with calm amazement. “I can’t believe it. It actually worked.”

“Here’s to you, Wilhelm.” Carl said, lifting his beer and tossing it back.

“That was trippy.” Tom said. “I think you might have the first images of people traveling between dimensions.”

“I’m still stunned. I don’t know what to make of that, but it seemed positive. Remember that euphoria we all had a few minutes after we turned on the convertor. That had to be it, right?” she asked.

“Yeah. That was like the shortest hit of ecstasy ever.” Carl joked.

“I can still feel it if I think about it.” Tom said, momentarily closing his eyes. “I’m glad to get some kind of closure. It makes the wait for his farewell not as bad. Not knowing if we did anything, has sucked.”

“I know. I feel like a weight off my shoulders in a way.” Lydia said. “All the time, work, sacrifices, and then you almost died out there. It’s nice to feel like we accomplished something good.”

“Do you think we will ever share this?” Carl asked in a serious tone.

“I don’t know if we should.” Tom said.

“I wish we could study it or learn something from it scientifically, but I’m not sure if we should either. The validity of any scientist studying it would be questioned and their work tarnished, ‘Wilhelmed’ if you will.” Lydia said.

“Nice one.” Carl chuckled at the new phrase.

“I hope soon his name will actually be cleared.” Tom said. “Dr. Jimenez is close to that burial chamber. They may make it inside the temple in a few years. I wish I could be there to see their faces.”

“Me too.” she said. “They’ll have hundreds of archeologists working there after that. It may be the largest, oldest, most well preserved archaeological site ever discovered. They have no clue the magnitude of what they are sitting on.”

# 

## April 26 2008

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Carl said joyfully. Tom bent Lydia back and they kissed passionately, as the small crowd of about twenty that were gathered in Lydia’s mom’s backyard cheered. Carl acquired an online certificate that allowed him to legally officiate their wedding. He was more than thrilled to take on the task when they approached him with the opportunity. He got to be the officiant and the best man.

Tom’s arm had finally healed, and all that was left was a scar around the skin graft, which was still a shade lighter that the rest of his forearm. They had decided not to do a honeymoon and asked all their family and friends to donate money to their Peru travel fund in lieu of gifts. They decided that would be their honeymoon next year. It may not be what other people considered a relaxing getaway, but they knew it could be their last trip to the temple for a long time. They had actually planned a romantic night in the camper for their wedding night. Everyone thought they were crazy, but the cramped space had a sentimentality for them that no fancy hotel could match.

The cool spring night air flowed through the open camper windows. It was amazing how strong that little table was in there. Lydia felt sure it would come crashing down with her on top of it at any moment, but she didn’t care. She was ready to rip this place apart with their love, and Tom was a willing accomplice in their acts of vandalism. Later that evening, they popped in a VHS, like old times, and smoked a joint.

“It’s official now, wifey.” Tom said, inhaling. “Trapped with me for life,” he smiled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re the one trapped with me,” she clapped back, smirking.

“I’ll be your prisoner. Is that what you want?” He held his hands up as if they were handcuffed.

“Maybe I changed my mind, maybe I want to be the prisoner,” she said, biting her lower lip, releasing it slowly.

Tom quickly extinguished the joint in the ashtray. “Looks like someone got caught escaping,” he said, and they continued to ransack the camper like two thieves in the night.

# 

## November 4 2008

It was election day in America and the polls were packed. Long lines were the norm, signaling one of the highest voter turnouts in decades. Lydia, Tom, Violet, Carl, and Hailey sat around the tiny dining table in Lydia’s apartment, eating pizza after going out to vote that evening. “I voted!” stickers proudly displayed on their shirts.

The collective had released the plans for building the ECO device four months prior on Independence Day. The independence the device could afford people, the symbolism of it, fit the spirit of the holiday. They also released how-to videos on YouTube showing how easily the device and its components could be made and constructed. To boost the validity of the device, they sent one to Stanford and one to MIT to be delivered on launch day. Immediately, the secrecy surrounding the organization that would release something of this magnitude was scrutinized. Everyone wanted to know who they were. Some people thought it was an elaborate terrorist plot to get people to blow themselves up. The conspiracy theories that popped up just got crazier and crazier in the days that followed.

It didn’t take long for the scientists to validate what the anonymous group claimed the device could do, but none of them could explain how it worked. The substrate was functioning on a super quantum level to produce energy, and scientists wouldn’t be capable of manipulating, or truly understanding the mechanism behind its power generation capabilities, for over a hundred years. DIY makers began to build the device, test their experiments, and post them online. They started popping up in third world countries, entire small villages were being powered with them.

Today was the day the trio had agreed to tell Violet as much of the truth as they could. They didn’t intend on waiting so long, but it was the only time they could coordinate getting all five of them together. And of course, Pickle Pete found an excuse as to why he wouldn’t be able to attend.

“Most of you know why we are here, but we need to clear the air a little.” Lydia said to the group. “We’ve all seen the news on TV and the internet about this ECO device. I will just go ahead and confirm any suspicions you may have. This is the project we’ve all been working on. Sorry, if you feel you didn’t get any credit, but no one did, including the person who gave me the original design. That was the point. But, now that it is released, you deserve to know personally, from me.”

“Thanks for coming clean.” Hailey said. “But, I knew as soon as I saw the substrate formula. I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe I had a small part in something this monumental. Thanks for trusting me to work on it with you,” she said to Lydia.

Violet’s old rage came back quickly and she looked angrily over to Carl and asked “Did you know about this?”

“I mean….. I…..” Carl was caught off guard by her sudden outburst. Before he could answer she cut him off.

“I, I, what?” she said, mocking him.

“Please don’t blame him.” Lydia interrupted. “I put him in a bad spot. Let me explain.”

“Alright, I’m listening.” Violet gruffed.

“When you and I started working on the laser array, I didn’t know what to tell you, and the only plausible explanation I could come up with was the laser microscope stuff. Carl knew about the project, but you two weren’t together yet. Then, when you two started dating, I asked him to lie. It’s my fault. Carl and I have been friends for so many years, and I asked him to do it. I regret it. Please don’t hold this against him. I put him in a bad spot, and that wasn’t fair. The laser array isn’t even in the final design, but I still wanted you to know the truth. And, I couldn’t expect Carl to keep it from you forever. Please forgive me, or at the very least, Carl.” Lydia said sincerely.

Violet sat silent for a moment and maintained her look of disdain. “Just give me a minute,” she said and folded her arms. “So, what I worked on was for the early stages of the ECO drive.” That was what some people had started calling it. Her tone had shifted slightly. “This is like a dream come true, and I wasn’t even in on it.”

“You’re in on it now.” Lydia said regretfully “That’s my bad. This whole project was a little out of my experience level, and I didn’t handle everything right. But, I’m trying to fix that. That’s why we’re here. Hopefully, you can overlook my mistakes and be proud you had a small part in something historic.”

“And, nobody get any bright ideas and try to take credit.” Tom said, trying to lighten the mood. “You’ll just look crazy.”

“I know Tom’s making a joke.” Lydia said. “But, if anyone didn’t understand from the mission statement released with the ECO plans, this was never meant to be about money or vanity. This is meant to be a completely selfless project intended to help the world. Jury’s still out on that one, but we’ll see. I know it may not matter at this stage of the game, but I want to know everyone’s on board with that,” she said, looking around the room.

“You know how I feel.” Tom said, putting his arm around her shoulder.

“I think it’s fucking brilliant! The way it was released, everything about it.” Hailey said out of character. “Punk rock as a motherfucker.”

Carl looked at Violet as he responded. “I feel honored to be a part of this. And without it, I never would have learned how to make those blueprints or how to do graphic design. I mean, this whole thing is probably going to change my career path. I’m looking at getting some certifications now. Thanks to all of you, but especially you,” he said to Violet. “I never would have met you if it weren’t for this. So, you can’t be mad about that, right?”

“Fuck yes I can,” she said and hit him in the stomach. Then she made a quick change to a smile. “But I’m gonna let you off…this time.” Her comment broke the tension in the room. She looked at Lydia and said, “I can’t top what Hailey said, but I’m on board with the whole thing. Secret’s safe with me. It’s a lot to digest, quite frankly.”

The pundits on TV had all kinds of colorful maps with all the various predictions of the election results. A constant scroll at the bottom and side of the screen with poll numbers being updated as the votes were tallied. The group continued discussing all the wild things they had seen on the internet, about the ECO drive and everyone’s theories about how it functions, when they started to hear cheers coming from other apartments and from outside. They all looked over to the TV. The United States of America had elected its first black president.

# 

## May 22 2009

Lydia and Tom settled back into a somewhat normal life and were prepping for their Peruvian honeymoon adventure to retrieve Wilhelm’s farewell message. He had grown the last batch of the shrooms he would be growing for Ben to help pay his medical bills. He decided he may still grow some for personal use, but that’s it. Then, Lydia convinced him to keep doing it in a smaller capacity to supply some veterans. She had set something up with the collective, and they were able to do it online in a way that would be untraceable. Her best hope was that the laws would change over time as politicians realized the benefits, but for now, it was a risk she was willing to take to help the vets cope with their traumas. She promised Tom that even if she was somehow caught she would take the blame. He wouldn’t let it go down like that if it ever came to it, but he knew he could trust Lydia’s judgment.

Tom had gotten inspired by Lydia and her research. He started taking some night classes and was working slowly on the prerequisite classes towards a science-related degree. He wanted to work with his wife one day, like Liz and Kyle, maybe even get to travel on occasion. He was trying to review some notes for class when his pasta water boiled over. He turned down the burner, cursing, got a rag to wipe up the mess, and stirred the pot of sauce next to it. Lydia came in the front door holding a few cloth bags of groceries, set them on the counter next to him, and gave him a kiss.

“Smells good in here.”

“Thanks. Hope it tastes good.”

“I’m sure it will, always does. I’m just so glad it’s the weekend. I could eat a cardboard box, and as long as I don’t have to leave the apartment, I’ll be happy.”

There was a loud knock at the door.

“You expecting someone tonight?” she asked.

“No.”

“Huh? Let me see who it is.” Lydia walked over and looked out the peephole. “Looks like a delivery guy?” she said to Tom, confused, it seemed a little late for a delivery. “Can I help you?” she asked loudly through the door.

“Hi. I’m with Light Speed Couriers, and I have a package for a Lydia Grendell.”

Lydia cracked the door and saw him standing there with the small package. She closed the door to undo the chain latch and reopened the door.

“I’m Lydia Grendell.”

“Alright, if you could just sign right here.” As she signed, the delivery man handed Lydia the small brown box. “Sorry to bother you. Have a good evening.”

“Thank you. You too.” Lydia said and closed the door.

“Who’s it from?” Tom asked.

“Don’t know. No return address,” she said, flipping it over.

Tom grabbed a dull knife from the drawer and handed it to her. She cut the brown packaging tape and folded open the flaps of the tiny box. Inside was a USB flash drive and a folded up piece of paper. Lydia unfolded the paper and read the note aloud.

“Dear Lydia, Congratulations on the successful release of the ECO device. I know you have not taken credit for your role in this project, and I completely understand the anonymity. I have been a casual observer on this project through some mutual friends of ours, and that is how I have become aware of your involvement. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. Enclosed is a flash drive that contains a small piece of a large project I have been working on, a new decentralized digital cryptocurrency. Please keep the data secure and the digital key offline until you intend to use it. I have awarded you 10,000 units of this new currency. It isn’t worth much now, but I hope in the near future it will pay you more than enough for your contributions to creating a better world. Sincerely, Satoshi Nakamoto.”

# 

## July 2009

Lydia and Tom’s Peruvian honeymoon had finally arrived, and their buddy Carl was there too. Luis met them at the docks on the Madre de Dios, and the trio greeted him with open arms and took turns hugging the man they felt ever-indebted to. They were much closer with Luis now than any of the previous trips. Saving a man’s life together, or being the one getting saved, created a strong bond of friendship that transcended any time spent apart from one another. They were thrilled to see blue skies with no rain clouds on the horizon. They had their fill of rain on their last adventure.

The children of Valencia, all two years older, were happy to see Tom up and walking around. Lydia brought three new soccer balls, a pump, notebooks and pencils. She gave them to the coach and a teacher to use as necessary. She didn’t want to cause any arguments between the children, but unfortunately, she couldn’t bring enough donations for every kid in the village. Watching their faces light up again with excitement brought such a pure sense of joy to Lydia’s heart.

Verdant greens surrounded them once again as they entered the jungle. Although the forest was constantly changing, it was beginning to feel more familiar to them with each new trip. No matter how familiar it became, complacency was their enemy, and they remained hyper vigilant for any threats that may be lurking about. They were able to reach the waterfall on the next day’s hike. It was back to normal size, but the old path had eroded completely. The path that had been used since, was the one Luis and Raul cut to get Tom out. The basin at the base of the falls, that had been a swirling torrent of logs, was flushed clean at the height of the floods. It had returned to the smooth rocky resting spot they remembered, where the sun’s rays could break through the thick canopy.

When they arrived at the lower dig site the following afternoon, it was obvious they had been busy the past season. There were more tents here now, as this had become the main focus of Dr. Jimenez’s team. He saw them approaching and walked over to greet them.

“Welcome! Welcome!” Javier said. “Jou look like jou made it in one piece,” he said throwing his arm around Tom.

“Yes. All safe. Thanks to Luis.” Tom replied through his mosquito net hat contraption. “Tried to stay close to him. It’s like the forest parts around him,” he joked.

Everyone came out, happy to have them back, and helped them get their gear up the hill. The team still thought this was the safest area to keep the mess tent and sleeping quarters, even though the upper dig had become low priority with the new discoveries. They had told Javier before they came, they wanted to volunteer for a few weeks as a way to say thanks. Lydia still wanted to spend some time hunting for the unidentified mushroom, but she knew the chances of finding it were slim. Of course, their main priority was to retrieve Wilhelm’s farewell and honor his memory.

Tom had caught the archeology bug from working inside the temple with Wilhelm. He was pumped to see what progress the team had made, but night descended upon them quickly after they ate a hearty dinner with the team and unpacked their gear.

After breakfast, Liz walked them down the hill through the thick, misty fog that was hanging in the air that morning. The guides had to cut a new path the previous year. The old path where they lowered down Tom had become unusable. She pointed out one area of the old path where a new section of wall had been uncovered. The storm from two years prior cut a channel where their path had been, and in one place it went deep. A small, previously uncovered, section of one of the temple rings was exposed. The lower dig site was already abuzz with work. Dr. Phil lifted his arm to wave to the group and went back to shaking the sifting table. The guides were hauling buckets of soil back and forth from the hole where Javier and Kyle were digging. The hole in the wall at the lower dig, that had just been an indentation two years ago, looked like a tunnel now going through the wall at an angle. It went about fifteen feet into the hillside. They could see the guides had built structural supports every few feet as they progressed inward. Javier looked back and shot them a wave.

“Wow.” Tom said to Liz as he peered into the opening. “You’ve really made some progress here.”

“Yes. It’s been so much more productive than the upper area,” she said. “I can take you in one by one later, so you can see what they are working on, but it’s super exciting. We think we may have found a tomb!” Liz moved her feet and did a happy clap as she finished.

“Should I call you Lara, or do you prefer Mrs. Croft?” Carl joked.

“I’m so happy for you…for all of you.” Lydia said. “I’m glad your work here is finally paying off.”

“Follow me. I’ll show you some of the stuff we’ve found.” Liz said. “It’s not much to look at, but still, very promising.” She walked them over and into one of the nearby research tents. “Here, we have tons of pottery shards. We think these were left around what we believe is the outer wall of a stone sarcophagus. Dr. Jimenez and Kyle have uncovered the narrow end of a rectangular stone structure and believe they can remove the side in a week or two. Hopefully, it is a sarcophagus, and you all will be here with us when we find out what’s inside.”

\*\*\*

After a few days on site, Lydia was still coming up empty handed in her search for the hybrids, but the big day had finally arrived. It felt like the end of their journey, and there was a mournful tone between them that morning as they prepared to go inworld for possibly the last time. Carl volunteered to be the watcher. He told Tom and Lydia that he was fine not going in to see the farewell for himself. He had become more worried over time about the potential bad side effects of the Ancients, and he also knew they would be able to recount the memory to him in great detail. Carl shook two capsules from a vitamin bottle and handed one to each of them.

“Remember, after you get the memory go to the edge and come back as soon as possible.” Carl said nervously as he chewed on a toothpick, a habit he picked up on his journey to becoming smoke-free.

“Aye Aye, Captain!” Tom said.

“Be back soon.” Lydia said, laying back trying to reassure Carl. “Probably about twenty minutes.”

The temple felt empty as they went in through the layers of soil buildup and in through the top. They could still feel the memories of the objects as they went downward, but the main chamber, containing the tombs, had an eerie quality without the presence of the guard or other followers of Ch’unpitari. The mycelium chambers felt even emptier for some reason, there was a void that extended past the absence of Wilhelm. They could sense the ancient mycelium was still alive, safely buried deep below where the lower dig team was excavating to uncover the tomb. They could feel an energy signal pulsating outward from one of the strands, and they knew that must be what they came for. There was no physical object, just a memory stored in the mycelium, that attracted Lydia and Tom as they moved closer. Lydia and Tom did not share any thoughts, everything between them had already been thought and said. They became one, and opened up Wilhelm’s final message to them. They could hear his thoughts resonating from inside themselves.

‘Hello. If you are receiving this, it means we were successful in our endeavor. Thank you all so much for the time and energy you have put into assisting me. I do not have a way to express what this means to me. Without your curiosity and heart to help, I would have been trapped here, unable to escape this prison, possibly forever.

‘I have not been fully honest with you up until this point. I knew there was no chance that I would survive the conversion process. I knew what you were building for me was my only hope, a portal to true freedom, death. I cannot impress upon you enough, the burden of everlasting life.

‘Men throughout the ages, men just like Ch’unpitari, have dreamed of eternal life. They have bet fortunes, staked their reputations, and even killed for the hope of attaining this gift. They have prayed to shadowy deities and offered their souls for the taking, sacrificed children, and committed many other depraved acts hoping to conjure some dark magic. We have written fantastic tales, created myths, telling of a fountain of youth. And, we created multitudes of religions to soothe our souls from the inevitable void of the unknown. All of this for the ego, the thought of losing yourself to the blackness of death has caused many a malady of the human spirit. Yet, it is the fate of every person who has ever lived, as far as we know.

‘Except, now I have been trapped here, along with the followers of some long forgotten dark dreamer, with no way to escape, until you came to my rescue. I was in shock when you first showed up. I had to try to compose myself and not seem like the crazy professor who had locked himself away in the lab for too long. I had to pretend I was not losing my mind, even though I felt an ever-growing anxiety. I feared you would be driven away by my despair and frustration. I have no idea how the others remained zen for all this time. I do not think humans are built to withstand the mental strain of being alive forever. At the time of creating this message, I have been here the equivalent of over one hundred and thirty four years on top of my life before this, and who knows how many eons the followers were here before me.

‘A long time before you came, I resigned myself to the fact that I probably would never escape no matter how much knowledge I gained. I extracted every drop of information I could from these chambers in the hopes of finding a way out. Having no way to manipulate the physical world, left me with little options…..I accepted my fate of being stuck here for eternity, what else could I do? But, the longer I was here, the more I realized that dying was an essential part of life. Maybe, the most essential. In some ways, I do not think a person has lived until they have died. I know, it’s a silly way to put it, but it’s true in some ways. Humans all have a natural expiration date. Even if we make it through the perils of life, sicknesses, and diseases, our bodies will all succumb with time, freeing our minds. Our minds, even when separated from the body, are not meant to be in perpetual motion for an eternity. It robs us of our humanity in an indescribable way. For what is life without death? Finding out what happens after that, has always been *the* great mystery, and we all have to face that one alone.

‘Endeavoring to live forever is a fool’s errand, and one I have had a little bit of firsthand experience with myself, although unintentionally. This is one of the many reasons why I decided to take drastic action. I hope you will forgive me, but I have taken it upon myself to erase all the ancient knowledge from the mycelial network inside this chamber. Once I figured out the shamans had to come to this dimension to store them, I was able to find a way to remove them. All the ancient knowledge is now stored inside my energy and will be discharged along with me when I transmute back into physical form. This is my expiation…..If this upsets you, I hope in time you will understand why I have made this decision. All the relics in the temple still retain their memories, I could have no effect on those memories, considering they were coded naturally. Those memories contain small fragments of the knowledge, but nothing approximating what the Atruzura had stored down here. This was the motherlode, and if we are, as a species, to wield such a powerful tool, we need to earn it on our own. I do not know if the decision was mine to make, but I was the only one in the position to make it, and some of what I saw and uncovered in their experiments…..we are definitely not ready for.

‘I thank you for risking your own health by taking the Ancients in order to help me. I still don’t know how dangerous they are, they may not be, but when I discovered the origins of the ancient fruits, I became even more concerned. The earliest memory stored by an Atruzura shaman in the network showed me their civilization was much older than I could have ever imagined and contained the location where they found the original ancient mushrooms. The area no longer exists. It was swallowed by tectonic forces, where the Altiplano tectonic plate smashed between the Nazca and South American plates. But back then, deep in the heart of the jungle, there was a massive crater from a comet. This comet traveled through our galaxy from another solar system. It was formed from the remnants of an alien planet that was decimated by a collision with a large asteroid. The ancient spores traveled through space and time on the comet for millions of years before crashing into the Earth. The spores had been underground, incubating, for millennia before the mycelium reached the surface, and the fruiting conditions became correct. The Atruzura happened to be exploring there at the right time, when the alien mushrooms had sprouted in abundance. Like everything else in their society, they believed it was simply another gift the forest had given them to use, and they gathered many of them. They experimented with them and discovered their power. The power it gave their culture over time was unbelievable, and it helped them advance much faster than they would have naturally. I still believe that using the Ancients is somehow connected to their downfall. But, since they were not aware of any long term effects, there was no knowledge for them to store on the subject. This ancient gift may be a curse. You must be careful.

‘The mycelium in this chamber may one day reach the surface or be uncovered in the archaeological dig. It may be destroyed during the excavation process, or wither away on its own. Who knows? And, if it is discovered, humanity will make its choices from there, and none of us will have any control over that. I know you still have the ancient spores, and I have no dominion over the decisions you choose to make with them. That is your burden now…..The energy drive, you created from my plans, is such a leap forward. I think that is enough for the world to digest right now. Let’s see if society can handle that first.

‘You may be curious as to what exactly will happen, to myself and the followers, during the conversion process. Once we pull our energies into the beam, our energy will be transmuted into fragments of near infrared light particles. We will exist back in the physical world, just not in the visible spectrum, and not for very long. Ultraviolet radiation will tear through the particles and dissipate our energies into the ether, once and for all. I am sorry if this brings up a million more questions that I will not be here to answer. Again, thank you all so much for everything you have done.

‘You three have such kind hearts, and a friendship that I hope you appreciate. Not everyone has the bond that you have together. Never lose that and make sure to nurture it. Good friendships do not happen by accident, they have to be loved and cared for, and it’s a lesson I never mastered in life. Do not make that mistake. Do not let time and life get in the way, make time for each other, always. Maybe we will see each other again, some day on another plane, in another time. Who knows? But, I am off to solve *the* great mystery for myself…..Goodbye. I love you all. Peace be with you, my sister, and brothers, in light.’

The message ended. Lydia and Tom could feel the multitude of emotions coming from one another as they separated, but they did not feel the need to actively share any thoughts. They moved their spheres of light out towards the outer limits of their tethers. The revelations contained in Wilhelm’s farewell were a lot to absorb and gave them much to think about.

As soon as they regained consciousness, they saw Carl’s smiling face, happy to inform them it had only been eighteen minutes. Lydia and Tom’s silence was broken, and they began a rapid fire back and forth, telling Carl every piece of the farewell message Wilhelm left for them. They were finishing each other’s thoughts with a fluidity Carl had never seen before. He sat listening to every word, blown away, saving his questions until they concluded their story. They all looked at each other in amazement at this new wisdom about the origin of the Ancients.

“He felt that about our friendship?” Carl said. “That’s amazing. That means a lot. Group hug? He would’ve wanted it that way.”

They all stood up and embraced and could feel the harmony of their small coalition.

As Carl broke from the hug, he asked. “So wait, we’ve been taking alien fungi from another planet this whole time? I don’t know whether to be hyped or if I should be scared.”

“Well, you haven’t grown tentacles yet, so I think you’ll be alright.” Tom joked.

“I will never get to find out how the substrate works.” Lydia said deflated. She understood Wilhelm’s decision but still wished she knew the full truth of how the ECO device functioned.

“It’s okay. It was the way it was meant to be, I guess.” Tom said, struggling to find the appropriate words to comfort her. “I’m sure some of those university scientists the collective sent the device to will solve the riddle.”

“The secret of the ooze.” Carl jested which made Lydia laugh — she loved the Turtles.

“I think we should agree from here on out we won’t discuss any of this with anyone, including Violet, okay?” she said looking at Carl.

“My lips are sealed. She would just think I lost my shit out here on mushrooms…and probably leave me. I think now that we know where these babies came from, we should just leave them alone.” Carl said and looked at Tom. “You have all the ancient spores. I’ll leave it up to you what to do with them. Like I said before, I think some normalcy is what I need for now.”

“I don’t know if Carl should have to keep this secret his whole life.” Tom said in disagreement to Lydia. “You and I have each other to confide in. What if he finds someone he wants to spend the rest of his life with? Is he supposed to not tell that person about an experience that will shape his whole life from here on out? Seems too much to ask, even for a best friend.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s fine, really.” Carl interjected trying to diffuse the tension he could sense was coming before it built up.

“No, it’s not alright.” Lydia said, digesting Tom’s thoughts on the matter. “Tom is right. It’s not okay of us to put that burden on you. I…..we both trust your judgment Carl. I’m just trying to protect all of us.”

“Maybe one day I’ll be ready to share it with someone. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from this journey, it’s you never know what life has in store for you, even when things seem just about as boring as they can get.” Carl said, thinking back to the times when drinking beer around the fire pit was a part of his regular schedule.

“For real, for real.” Tom said, backing him up.

“Like Derek!” Carl clapped back and they laughed.

\*\*\*

Lydia sat in the mess tent, her breakfast relatively untouched in front of her, twirling her spoon, deep in thought about Wilhelm’s farewell message.

“Not hungry?” Liz asked.

“Just lost in a thought.” Lydia replied and took a bite.

“You should grab the guys when you’re done and come down to the site. Dr. Jimenez thinks he will be able to remove the stone slab they’ve been working on.” Liz said. “The anticipation is killing me. I’m going down now to help. Enjoy your breakfast.”

Carl and Tom passed Liz on the way out and waved good morning. They got some food in their bellies and headed to the lower dig site. The team had set up high powered lights on stands and cameras to record the removal of the stone slab at the end of the tomb. Kyle and Javier wore masks to protect them from any gasses that may be trapped in the sealed tomb. The narrow tunnel was blocked by their bodies obstructing the view. As they slowly pulled back the slab, Javier began to describe what he was seeing to the others.

“It does appear to be the inside of a stone sarcophagus. There is a coffin. It appears to be wooden and painted. I do not see any other visible objects inside. Do jou Kyle?”

“No…but, I do think we could remove the coffin from this tunnel, safely.” Kyle replied.

“So do I.'' Javier said, then looked back at Liz. “Get a camera in here and take as many photos as jou can. Don’t miss anything. Then we will put the slab back and prep the tunnel to remove the coffin.” As he backed out of the tunnel he glanced at Luis. “Start prepping some wooden rollers, blankets, and straps. We need to remove this beauty as gently as possible.”

Liz hopped in the tunnel next to her husband, and her flash began to strobe through the tunnel as she documented their discovery. Lydia, Tom, and Carl stepped to the side while everyone was busy.

“Do you guys realize who’s coffin that is?” Lydia asked.

“It’s the guards, right?” Carl asked.

“Yep.” Tom replied. “They built all the outer tombs partially into the wall. And those were the tombs of guards and the military. The first line of defense in the afterlife.”

“And, it’s nothing compared to what’s in the inner chambers of the temple.” Lydia said, finishing Tom’s thought.

They began helping wherever they were needed. Of course, Liz adopted Lydia to be her right hand woman. Carl was helping Dr. Phil and Javier with a pulley rig. Tom was relegated to basic tasks like moving supplies. Javier couldn’t afford accidents at this moment and made sure to keep Tom, the disaster magnet, at a safe distance. This was their biggest find ever on the site. He and his team didn’t expect to find anything this significant so soon. The energy at the dig site could be felt in the air, camp morale had never been higher.

The next morning the team gathered, ready to remove the coffin from its resting place. It was placed there thousands of years before any of the previously known advanced civilizations. Now this small dedicated team, who had been working here for years, eagerly waited as Kyle and Javier removed the stone slab again. They gingerly lifted one end of the coffin onto a wooden roller, and began to shroud the coffin with blankets. Once it was wrapped, they put loose straps around it in several places, attached it to the pulley and it swung out in one clean motion. They got six people around it to safely support it, and they carried it into one of the research tents and placed it on a table.

Javier turned off some of the lights before he began unwrapping the coffin from the blanket cocoon they had placed it in. The outside of the wooden coffin had a layer of dust that softened the bright paint underneath. The coffin had tribal patterns carved into the wood depicting battle scenes accented by hues of purple that reminded Tom of the ancient mushrooms. In the center of the lid was the ‘modo man, they now knew to be Ch’unpitari. Dr. Phil examined the seam around the lid and found two hand holds near the upper portion. The two doctors put on masks and asked everyone to step back for a moment. They slid the lid back. Javier slid his mask down.

“Jou all can come closer now. It appears safe.”

Inside, there was a body, wrapped in layers of thin cloth shrouds. The head of the body seemed to be detached and was mummified separately from the rest of the body, but placed to look as one inside the coffin. On the chest were symbols and markings unlike any they had seen before, strange geometric patterns with sharp angles. It seemed almost printed on after the body was prepared, an advanced technique that puzzled the scientists as to how it could have been accomplished. Around the shrouded body were several weapons. Javier slowly picked up a dagger with his gloved hands and lifted it so they all could see it. The handle appeared to be bone with a three colored gemstones on the pommel. The blade looked like obsidian but it didn’t have the traditional knapping marks used to shape the blade. It was unusually smooth and looked sharp as a razor on the edges. After turning it over and inspecting the other side, Javier gently placed the dagger back in the box and slid the lid closed. Dr. Phil and Liz carefully draped a padded blanket back over the coffin.

“Luis, I’m not sure how we are going to do this, but we need to build a large crate to get this out of here. Jou may need to go back to Puerto Maldonado and hire more guides and bring in some lumber. Make up a list of everything jou think jou may need, consider all the problems that may come up. We only have one chance to get this right.” He looked in the direction of Dr. Phil, Liz and Kyle. “We need to catalog and photograph everything here extensively. Be very careful. After being sealed for so long, we need to limit exposure to the elements as much as possible. Prep everything to be moved out. We need to get this to a lab to be analyzed without damaging it.” Javier’s tone was very serious now, but they could still see an elation hidden behind his commanding presence.

“How can we help?” Lydia asked him.

“They will need to handle the coffin.” Javier said motioning to Liz, Kyle, and Dr. Phil. “They have waited their whole careers for an opportunity like this. See how you can assist Luis for now. I need to structure a more formal plan. I’ll be in the next tent over if anyone needs me.” Before he walked out, Javier gently tapped the blanket and stared at the wrapped coffin. They could tell he was trying to take in this moment, a rare victory for an archaeologist. “This one is for jou, Wilhelm.”

That night after dinner, Lydia, Tom, and Carl were going over the day’s events.

“I’ve never seen Dr. Jimenez like that.” Carl said. “You could see how much this find means to all of them, but I’ve never seen that look in his eye.”

“I can’t believe we were here for it.” Tom said. “I asked Dr. Phil what the next steps in the tunnel were. He said they would excavate slowly on the left and right side of the stone sarcophagus to see if it is possible to remove safely, but that could take a year, maybe two with the time it will take to get the guard out of the jungle safely. They have no idea that the other half of the sarcophagus opens into the temple. They think the whole thing is surrounded by soil.”

“I was thinking about the same thing. Since we’ve been inside we know there is a whole temple just waiting for them.” Lydia said. “I feel like they would take an entirely new approach if they knew what was just beyond that sarcophagus. I mean they could just lift the lid off of the inside section…and climb right in.” As the words came out of her mouth, they looked at each other delighted at the idea Lydia had just stumbled upon.

“Should we tell them?” Carl asked.

“For sure. I just don’t know what we should tell them,” followed up Tom.

“I’ll figure something out. Let me put a bug in Liz’s ear tomorrow.” Lydia said slyly. “She’ll listen to me.”

\*\*\*

The next morning as Liz left the mess tent after breakfast, Lydia trailed closely behind.

“Hey. Do you have a minute to talk?” Lydia asked her.

“Sure, but I need to get back to work on this coffin as soon as possible. Let’s walk and talk, if you don’t mind.”

“No, no. I understand. I don’t want to hold you up.” Lydia said as they started on the path down to the research tent. “It’s just, do you think it’s possible that there may be a lot more on the other side of that tomb?”

“Oh yes! It’s very possible.” Liz answered. “But, it could take decades to excavate this site, and we have our hands full with this coffin. Now that we have exposed it, we need to protect it as soon as possible. If there is anything else, it can wait. It’s been encased in dirt for thousands of years, what’s a few more? A find like this is super rare. It’s a high probability, this is the most interesting thing we will find here.”

“Has anyone considered trying to open the lid from the inside?” Lydia asked naively. “I am just curious. I know this is your field and I don’t want to step on any toes with my silly questions.”

Liz chuckled. “No. We hadn’t considered that. It’s buried a decent ways into this hill. I don’t think that’s going to work. But, thanks for trying to help.”

Lydia was screaming inside. *She thinks I’m an idiot now. How do I convince her?* she thought, scrambling for a solution.

“What if I told you I had a dream?” Lydia asked her.

“A dream?” Liz said, confused.

“Yeah….. I had a dream about the temple, I mean the tomb.”

“So, what happened in this dream?” Liz sounded skeptical.

“You and I were working together in the tunnel, and we had the idea to lift the part of the lid furthest from the outer wall. It lifted up, and we could see inside.”

“See inside what?” Now Liz was really confused.

“It was a temple of some kind with all kinds of other tombs and artifacts inside.” Lydia said. “Do you think we could try?”

“I don’t know. That sounds a little crazy…I understand wanting to try. If I had that dream, I’d probably want to try too. But, how do I explain that to Dr. Jimenez? He’ll think we’ve lost our minds.”

“They're all busy. We could just run in for a sec and try it out…just to satisfy my curiosity.” Lydia appealed to her.

“If you weren’t my gal pal out here, I wouldn’t even consider it, but…screw it, let’s try it.” Liz said quietly. Her natural inquisitive tendencies combined with Lydia’s story spurred her change of heart.

They hunched over and walked into the tunnel. The stone slab was leaning off to the side, from when they removed the coffin. Lydia crawled into the sarcophagus first, turned sideways and sat down. Liz followed and sat beside her. Lydia raised both palms up and pressed upward on the lid, and Liz copied her movements. Nothing happened, it wouldn’t budge.

“Let’s try again.” Lydia said after taking a breath.

Lydia pushed with everything she had, and Liz matched her efforts. There was a small cracking sound and the lid shifted ever so slightly.

“It’s working!” Lydia said, straining to get the words out.

Just as their strength was failing, the lid shifted a little more. They collapsed down and Lydia took off her headlamp and shined through the small opening they had created. They couldn’t see anything, but she could tell from Liz’s reaction that she was astonished.

“It’s not completely buried. There is definitely a void there of some kind.” Liz said. “We need to tell the others. But, what do we say?”

“I don’t know. That’s your department.” Lydia said. She was happy to have convinced Liz to check it out, but the dream story may not fly with everyone.

“Screw it. I’ll just tell them about your dream. I don’t care what they believe. If there is more there, that’s all they’ll care about.”

Liz found Dr. Jimenez and told him what just happened. She apologized for the unorthodox methods, but said she had to see.

“Jou did what?” Javier said, upset. “We will talk later. If there is more to recover, it may change my plans. I need to see for myself.”

Javier had Luis and Carl crawl in to see if they could move the heavy stone lid. Javier had heard the story of Carl’s heroism in getting Tom out of the jungle and decided to let him put some of that strength to use — Carl was honored to be asked. He squeezed his way in, and Luis followed behind. They were able to move it to one side enough to fit their hands in and slide the lid off. The stone lid grinding against the top of the sarcophagus made a satisfying scraping sound ending in a thud as it hit the ground on the inside of the temple.

“It’s open.” Luis yelled back to Javier. Luis backed out of the sarcophagus and helped pull Carl from the tight space.

Dr. Jimenez crawled into the stone sarcophagus and poked his head through the open lid and shined around his headlamp. He could see there was a large cavity, but he needed more light. He ducked back in and yelled back.

“I need the floodlights!”

Liz grabbed two of the small tripods and passed them one at a time to Javier. He set them up using his headlamp and angled them outward into the void. He ducked back in and looked at Liz.

“Jou can plug them in.” he said with nervous anticipation.

As she connected the cords, they could see the glow from inside. Javier crawled up and into the temple. He stood there for a moment, speechless, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. The temple was so large, the two floodlights only illuminated a small portion of the space. Javier stuck his head back into the sarcophagus and made eye contact with Liz, who was right there impatiently waiting.

“Jou all have to see this!” There was a soft wonderment in his voice she had never heard before. “Have everyone come inside…and have everyone bring in another light as they come.”

All of them filed in, helping the person behind them get up and over the lip of the guard’s tomb. As they entered the main chamber, they spread out forming an arc facing into the cavernous space. Everyone was speechless, they were all in awe at the grandeur of the hidden temple. Dr. Phil took off his glasses and began to cry. He gave Dr. Jimenez a forceful hug, almost lifting him off the ground. They were surrounded by a ring of the stone tombs containing the guards. More ornate tombs of Ch’unpitari’s family were laid out in front of them. The architecture was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. The lower portion of the central shaft held a marvelous inlaid depiction of Ch’unpitari, in his mythical amalgam of man, bird, and lizard. A shrine to the forgotten ruler, encrusted with gemstones, was at the base of the grand hollow column, encasing the spiral staircase. It rose up higher than their lights would reach. This was the shaft where the lifeless bodies of the sacrificial followers plummeted from the ceremonial halo above, located on the top of the temple. They had no idea their mess tent was on the hill above where it was buried. They could not believe how immense the inside of this main chamber was. Gazing around, they could barely make out the lower level of the ancient museum. Splendid statues made of unusual stones, carved by the finest Atruzura artisans, ringed the perimeter. The group could see they were in a beautiful state of preservation. Everyone started hugging and cheering, their joy echoing through the temple. Luis had happy tears streaming down his cheeks. He and the other guides knelt down and began engaging in a silent prayer. Liz grabbed Kyle’s hand and pulled it into her chest, squeezing it tightly. *Wilhelm’s dreams had finally come to fruition!* she thought. Carl reached over to Tom and Lydia for a group hug. They embraced, and then touched their heads together, looking down in a huddle. Tears of joy were hitting the dusty floor of the temple below them.

“I love you guys!” Carl said, wiping his face.

“We love you too!” Lydia and Tom responded in unison.

# Epilogue

## April 27 2048

The world had changed a lot since the crew helped uncover the mysteries of the Atruzura. Dr. Jimenez received more funding than he ever could’ve imagined. He led groups of scientists from across the globe, of all disciplines, as they fast tracked the preservation of the site. Dr. Phil, Liz, and Kyle continued working there as well. The original team all worked there in some capacity for decades, eventually passing the torch of their work onto other dedicated colleagues, as their bodies began to fail them in old age. What they unearthed, in the jungles of Peru, was recognized as the most important archaeological site ever found. The artifacts in the ancient museum proved to be much older and more advanced than previously thought possible. They, literally, changed the history books.

An unintended consequence of the find was the havoc it brought to that region of Peru. Roads were built through once pristine sections of jungle in order to bring in the equipment needed to fully excavate the temple. Later, the roads were used to haul in the busloads of tourists that would come to swarm the newest wonder of the world. Archaeologists were still working to uncover the back half of the temple while tourists visited the front. The site was always busy, even during the rainy season, which was now much shorter because of the shifting weather patterns due to climate change. The government loved the extra money coming in, but it came at a price. The villages in Valencia were bulldozed over, and the native people forced to move. Illegal loggers and wild game poachers used this new infrastructure to their advantage to exploit the land at a much faster pace. The jungles of Peru and their cultural practices were disappearing at an alarming rate. The area that was already being Westernized when they first came, was almost unrecognizable now. The once small city of Puerto Maldonado had grown immensely in the wake of their discovery, including a new hi-tech international airport, designed to handle the growing demand of travelers.

Scientists used ground penetrating radar and lidar to map the area around the temple. They discovered the remnants of many other smaller buried structures, the homes and villages of the followers of Ch’unpitari, along with a mass grave — the testament of their sacrifice. They found evidence of the underground chambers, but it took them several years to find the secret entrance hidden in the bottom of the central column. They feared digging in from the side may destabilize the foundation of the temple. Years of work done above ground, scraping the native soils from around the temple and replacing it with gravel and modern drainage systems, had killed the mycelium mass that fed down into the ancient underground storage chamber.

Researchers found stories, in the Atruzura writings, that told the legends of the shamans using the ancient mushrooms and the powers it granted them. They learned of the sacrificial killings and the belief the followers held. The followers believed they were entering another dimension where they could live forever with their misguided ruler, Ch’unpitari. The researchers attributed all of this to delusions, brought on by the ritualistic use of hallucinogenic fungi by the shamans. They had no idea how wrong they were. The ancient mycelium had been lying underneath the temple, undisturbed, slowly extending upwards for thousands of years, and they managed to destroy it before they even discovered it. The magnificent beauty of the mycelium chamber was lost, and now, it just resembled a dusty old root cellar, completely empty.

The continued hubris of the modern university system, and the dismissal of the myths, was actually holding them back from propelling society forward through a means of new technology. Raw, uninhibited curiosity had slowly been crushed by rigid bureaucracy that pushed out any freethinkers out as quacks, as the academic community became corporatized. The large tech firms had been using subsidiaries to purchase learning institutions all around the world for the last decade, and the effects were showing. But, no one could openly talk about it. There was still “free speech”, but questioning unhindered capitalism, such as the university buyout program, was seen as un-American. Shoe companies and social media firms having their names attached to Ivy League schools was becoming the norm. Any politician attempting to run against these policies, quickly ran up against funding issues, and someone who towed the line would manage to slide into the race and take over. Voter confidence in their ability to bring meaningful change to the current system was at an all-time low.

The Smithsonian dedicated one section of a new wing to the site in Peru and the people of Atruzura. Several of the artifacts found in the temple were there, on loan from the Peruvian government. At the opening, the crew felt out of their element in their formal wear, but were happy to see some of their friends from the original dig team — it felt like a reunion. For months after, the floors were packed with patrons filing through, eyes wide in amazement at this newly uncovered chapter of human history. Many of the photos displayed, on the walls of the museum, were ones Liz had taken in the days after they breached the tomb. Above the visitor’s entrance, there was a bronze plaque dedicated to the late Dr. Wilhelm. His legacy and reputation had been vindicated, and his work to uncover this lost civilization was now studied in college courses throughout the world. As part of the exhibit, his notes and diary were on display as well — although several pages went mysteriously missing. A small notation at the bottom of each frame said, “Donated by Thomas and Lydia Grendell.”

Initially, when the ECO drive was first released, it continued to gain in popularity in pockets across the globe, but widespread adoption never got off the ground. The energy conglomerates began lobbying governments and politicians in every nation they supplied, pumping billions into their efforts, not wanting to lose their foothold of control. Several factors aligned, creating a perfect storm that would stall any meaningful progress from occurring. A yet to be discovered branch of science kept the world’s top scientists from figuring out the super quantum mechanics by which the substrate functioned. Any doubts this caused were leveraged by conspiracy theorists to undermine the validity of the device in the eyes of the public. Politicians warned of a total collapse of the global financial system if citizens were allowed free access to energy. The entire house of cards was in jeopardy. Propping up the current system, to unfairly benefit the ones at the top, was more important than revamping it to make it better for everyone. It didn’t take long before every major nation outlawed the technology, until it could be better understood. The government even went so far as to place some of the ingredients on a special controlled substance list so they could monitor and track purchases. The energy conglomerates had their research teams develop a detection device that enforcement agencies could use to locate energy signatures from anyone attempting to use an ECO drive. Then, they would use force to confiscate the illegal equipment and the owners would be hit with a hefty fine, large enough to scare most law-abiding citizens away from even attempting to gain their own independence.

Organizations like Pickle Pete’s collective began their own research programs and pooled their resources to create a shielding technology that could be used in conjunction with the ECO drive, the next move in the chess game against the controlling forces. They started clandestine manufacturing facilities to make free units, and they distributed them illegally to anyone who hadn’t succumb to the constant fear mongering. Still, this didn’t have the consequential effect needed to change the paradigm. There needed to be widespread adoption by governments, corporations, and citizens for it to have substantial repercussions for the planet. There was a vested interest in keeping the masses away from any technology that could change the economic structures or disrupt the balance of power in any way. Over the years, everyone involved in making the prototypes saw any utopian visions they had slowly evaporate back into the ether.

\*\*\*

Carl ended up moving to the outskirts of Austin, Texas. The area was now called the New Silicon Valley after the Big One finally hit California and insurance rates pushed out the major tech firms that were still there. Violet’s laser expertise landed her a lucrative job out there for a major robotics designer. They missed Lydia and Tom but would make trips to see them as often as possible. Carl and Violet still had family that lived near them in Virginia, and Lydia and Tom always let them stay at their home when they traveled. The Grendell’s became the godparents to Carl and Violet’s two daughters and loved any chance they got to see them. Whenever there was an extended period when they couldn’t see each other, they made regular holo-calls to keep abreast of what was happening in their lives. They always tried to remember Wilhelm’s final advice and nurture their friendship together as much as possible.

The cryptocurrency that Lydia and Tom received thirty nine years ago had gone through many changes as well. The original purpose of the new currency was lost long ago. It was meant to subvert government control and give people access to make transactions that couldn’t be traced back to them. It was a great idea at first, one of the only ways to obfuscate tyranny, but it fell victim to obstructive regulations. Governments began to heavily tax and track all transactions. The tool meant to liberate personal finance from the banking system became the catalyst and the vehicle for the cashless society so many feared.

Before the crypto became the antithesis of its design, its value fluctuated wildly, and Lydia and Tom sold off chunks netting them a half a billion dollars and they still had some of the original stash given to them. When the value stabilized and the government transitioned to the new currency, they were forced to trade their dollars back into digital assets. They were still extremely wealthy, but they made a conscious effort to not live like they were. They donated most of their fortune to independent research organizations dedicated to solving the riddle of the substrate used in the device, and a chunk secretly made its way to fund the shielding tech being used by the few brave souls willing to chance it. They hoped unlocking the mystery of the goo would push the potential of the technology further, but the solution remained an enigma long after they were gone.

Wilhelm’s old farmhouse went up for auction about nine years after they entered the temple. Lydia and Tom took some of the assets from their first sale of the cryptocurrency and bought the entire property. She knew Tom had always wanted it because he mentioned it every time they passed it. They turned one of the barns into the guest house where Carl and Violet would stay during visits. Initially, they had to do a lot of work to the dilapidated house. But, they tried not to modernize it too much — aside from some special non-governmentally approved upgrades. The pace of change was speeding up around them, and this was their refuge from the intrusive expanse of the hi-tech world that had become the staple of daily existence for almost everyone else.

Lydia was able to take some of their fortune and research any of the possible bad effects the ancient mushrooms may have had on them. What she found was startling, the Ancients shortened the telomeres in a person’s DNA based on how much time they had spent inworld. Shortened telomeres could have grave effects over time depending on the severity of the damage. Cancer was definitely an issue and a myriad of other organ related problems on the higher end of the spectrum. It seems all that extra time did come at a price. Wilhelm’s late stage cancer, combined with the damage he was doing to his telomeres, was what had caused his sudden unexpected death in Peru. It also explained the decline of the Atruzura people. The regular use of the Ancients by the shamans and the ruling class caused genetic disorders and diseases which were passed down and eventually destabilized their population to the point of no return.

Lydia never found the unidentified mushroom she once stumbled across, and she always held some regret for not getting a viable tissue culture from the original before it rotted. The damage done to the site surrounding the temple in the excavation process had killed off the micro habitat where the hybrid mycelium lived, and she saw her assumption was correct upon returning and seeing the poured concrete everywhere she looked. It still didn’t squash her curiosity, and she continued experimenting in the lab, inspired by the memories of the shamans. She hoped to be able to create a hybrid without the harmful effects on human DNA, possibly one that could even reverse them.

Luckily, Carl used the least amount of the Ancients, compared to the rest of their small crew. Lydia let him know about the dangers she found, and he didn’t seem too concerned given his current state of health and his most recent scans. Lydia had definitely used them more than Carl. She and Tom did continue to use them a few more times alone together, they couldn’t resist the intense euphoria they experienced together. Decades ago, when the trio had done the majority of the sessions, the way they scheduled the watcher rotations meant Tom had spent the most time inworld, and therefore had the most exposure. Ten years ago, they began to see the first symptoms appear indicating the permanent damage he had done to his DNA. Unfortunately, his life span was shortened due to his use of the Ancients, and some of his organs were now beginning to fail him in the early part of his twilight years.

Lydia and Tom continued to grow their bond over the years. They had developed an extraordinary sense between them and could feel things about the other that no other couple could. They both knew that Tom was dying, and the moment was near. He was only sixty six years old. Lydia sat in a chair next to Tom, who was lying in their bed. This had been their bedroom for the last thirty years. His skin was pale, and he looked weak. They didn’t need to speak, everything had been said, and they could feel the love flowing between them. Lydia reached over and grabbed Tom’s hand. After they held hands for a moment, she moved her hand up and gently caressed the area where he received the skin graft after the viper bite. She thought back to that ordeal replaying the scenes in her mind. She really thought she was going to lose him back then, and she was thankful that they had all these years together. But, now his time had come. Tom took his final breath, and she knew he was gone from this world.

Lydia released Tom’s hand, bent over and kissed his forehead. She slowly stood up and walked out of their bedroom. She passed the small office where, on this day, forty six years ago, Tom rummaged through Wilhelm’s belongings and found the adventure that would frame the rest of their lives. Lydia walked down the narrow staircase, through the living room, and into their modest kitchen. She twisted the lock on the back door and stepped out into the bright spring day. The grass felt nice under her bare feet. She approached the faded wooden doors to their root cellar. She pulled out a key and unlocked the padlock keeping it shut. She swung the doors open revealing two metal doors sealed with a digital biometric scanning lock. She placed her palm in the sensor which was followed by a metal clinking sound as the doors unlatched. Opening the metal doors, she stepped on to the grated spiral staircase, closed the doors behind her, and descended to the bottom, almost two floors. Going down she passed the shielding device that kept their ECO drive away from prying eyes. A shelf that contained the original broken idol, pieced back together, with the spores still locked inside. Next to it was the tarnished old key hanging on a strand of leather. The only other object was an unlabeled bottle. She opened it up, shook out a capsule, and swallowed it. As she waited for the Ancients to kick in, she glanced around at her and Tom’s final project together. They had created their own mycelium chamber like the one the shamans had built underneath the temple. The crystalline mycelial network was still in its infancy, but it was beautiful and it had plenty of storage space for memories. They had started storing all the memories related to their adventures down here along with everything they knew about the ECO drive. They thought it was more than likely, they will fill this thing in and bulldoze the whole area for some shopping development, after we both die. But, there was still that chance that they would pass on the knowledge to some unsuspecting person. They sort of liked the idea, it was like leaving humanity an easter egg after they died. The legacy wasn’t really their concern, it was more of a temple for them to never forget the special moments they had throughout their life. Lydia laid down on a small cot, went inworld, and saw the brilliant glowing mycelium cascading all around her. There she stored the final memory of the person she loved the most in this world.

THE END