



Belize: Two Weeks Ago

**C**ONFIDENT THE LANDFORMS DESCRIBED in the Mayan diary matched Park Service terrain maps, they had set out on foot from Solomon Camp, a Park stationhouse about ten miles west of the Southern Highway leading back to Belize City.

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

Halfway up the mountain they camped for the night at the headwaters of Richardson Creek. Late the next morning, crossing a meadow at the base of a knoll, they passed by a stationhouse under construction and moved back into the canopy for the final mile to the

mountain prominence. Breaking through a thicket an hour later, they peered across a dry streambed about forty meters wide in front of the sheer rock face.

“It looks wider than Myakka described in her diary,” Dr. Courtney commented.

Calvin frowned. “It’s been fourteen hundred years, Doctor. What did you expect?”

According to the map, the streambed skirted the jagged prominence, terminating in a waterfall at the end of a valley cut into the north side of the mountain. Stark cliffs stood on the western side overlooking the lush green hills and valleys of Guatemala.

Facing them was a granite rock face fifty to sixty meters wide and a hundred feet high. “I believe this is what we’re looking for,” Calvin said with satisfaction.

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

Calvin was fixated on a huge tree sticking up over its neighbors to the right of the rock face, exactly as the Mayan diary described it. He spread his notes and maps on the field table, and the two men went back and forth correlating the diary description of physiographic features with the reality of the contour map.

“The tree is so obvious,” Dr. Courtney said, staring across the glaring bed of packed rocks. “As I’m sure you must realize, trees don’t live that long. You’re sure your notes are accurate, and you know what you’re doing?”

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

“I know, and of course seeing the tree exactly as you have it here gives the tale a touch of credence. But the buttons you describe —

I'm confused. You show four buttons here." Dr. Courtney's lips tightened, and the lines in his face ran rigid. "The summary you gave Minister Jacobson indicated only two."

"I am by no means finished translating the text. I rushed to get a cursory summary to the Minister. All I can tell you is the entry procedure was carefully explained at the beginning of the diary. I'm not clear yet on what the other buttons are for. We just want to see if we can actually get in. Agreed?"

Without comment, Dr. Courtney looked up from the maps several times to study the landscape. Calvin knew the Doctor had been skeptical from the beginning, but the existence of the diary, a perfectly preserved *codex*, had convinced him the trip might be worthwhile. He claimed Calvin's translation work had a mythical feel, inexplicable fairytale wonders the Mayan author attributed to the gods.

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

"It's an adventure calling out, my good Doctor. You see the tree."

"I do, and so far it appears you have done your homework well, but I'd feel a lot better with a more cautious approach. It's not just age that does it to you — did Myakka say how she found this spot in the first place?"

"Yes, she described the *vision quest* of her adolescence, a rather harsh and brutal coming-of-age ritual. If a youth was unsuccessful accomplishing objectives on a journey to the sea within a set time, among other things the priests enslaved the young girls and neutered the males."

Calvin went into detail, relishing the opportunity to explain the drug-induced journey of the young Mayan, her escape from a jaguar

by climbing the same tree they were now observing across the streambed, and accidentally triggering the appearance of a button-filled panel.

Calvin couldn't help that his narrative delivery sounded condescending. He was losing patience. Dr. Courtney's facial expression indicated he was troubled by the far-fetched fable.

"It's hard to imagine such events, Calvin. You tell a good story. You seem to have learned a considerable amount since we were together in Byron's office."

"Yes. I've done nothing else. There is more, but right now I'm anxious to follow the directions and see for myself. I suggest only one of us climb the tree, but first let's see what the situation is."

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

The boy quickly collapsed the field table, shouldered his pack, and tagged after the Doctor.

"Did you update Byron on your translation progress?" Dr. Courtney called out.

Calvin was already negotiating the streambed. "No time," he yelled back. "He sprung this little adventure on me, and I still have a lot to finish."

Calvin planned to hold off a day or two after they returned before surrendering more of his translation notes to Minister Jacobson. It would keep him in the Minister's good graces and buy time. Some key pieces of information would be missing, but submission of corrections and additions could come later with the final draft. How to deal with the Doctor from here on out was the immediate problem. Priceless artifacts could be resting inside the mountain. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Dr. Courtney struggled along after Calvin, watching his footing. "It's difficult to believe we're following in Myakka's footsteps four-

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teen hundred years later,” he mumbled, but curiosity had now clearly overcome his reluctance.

The bigger rocks were causing the Doctor to stumble here and there. Calvin looked back and let out a breath of frustration as he picked his way through the fringing boulders on the bank and entered a grove of trees.

The trunks were five to seven feet in diameter, clearly ancient, but not more than a few hundred years old. Reaching the giant gnarled anomaly, Calvin touched the trunk expecting some foreign material like plastic, but the dark bark was rough and supple, smelling naturally pungent like any other giant oak. It was hard to envision this as the same tree Myakka had shimmied to escape a jaguar so long ago.

Standing at the base of the huge tree, his heart pounded like a racehorse. He couldn't wait. Flinging off his pack, he began negotiating the branches one at a time. The leaf-laden tree limbs quickly obscured the ground. All he could hear was his breath and leaves fluttering in the breeze.

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

“Calvin, are you up there?”

The voice sounded far away, bringing him back to the moment. “I'm at the three branches — ”

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

Minister Jacobson had saddled Calvin with the Doctor. Calvin hadn't taken into account the old man might want to go up in the tree with him. “I can hardly hear you. I'm sorry,” Calvin yelled. “I couldn't wait. Do forgive me — it's just as well. The branches wouldn't

accommodate us both. I'm searching for the control panel. If successful, perhaps later you can repeat what I accomplish. Does that sound equitable?"

"It will have to do, I suppose. The boy and I will wait, but be careful, will you?"

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

Calvin had a good idea of what it would take to locate the control panel and open the entrance. When Myakka had reached the three branches, she grasped the tree trunk for stability, causing a panel of buttons to materialize. She learned from subsequent visits the panel appeared at the touch of her open palm on the trunk at shoulder height, and the green and red buttons controlled the mountain entrance. Calvin was also aware of the danger. During Myakka's vision quest, curiosity led to experimenting with the orange and blue buttons. Unwittingly her experiments had turned to catastrophe. An ascending stalk topped by a swirling crystalline ball suddenly replaced the treetop above the panel. She was unaware her suitor, Toyoku, had tracked her and was coming to deal with the jaguar. Blue light rays issued from the ball's facets, raining over the mountainside, blistering the landscape and terminating animal life within its range. Myakka found her young man in a dead heap at the base of the tree.

Trying to keep his palms flat, Calvin carefully went over the trunk, starting at the junction of branches. He worked his way up to head height, and abruptly the panel materialized in front of his face without a sound. Recoiling, he nearly lost his balance, and then an image of the sheer rock face below flooded his mind. He wrapped himself in a death grip around the tree trunk, trying to fend off the mental intrusion. But then he remembered Myakka had experienced the same mental picturing.

The panel embedded in the tree trunk was bronze colored, inlaid with four jeweled buttons set in a row. He depressed the green one. In his mind he saw the rock face, and then a rectangular break formed like the next slide in a presentation. And just as Myakka had written, the opening remained pictured in his mind for about sixty seconds before it disappeared. He tried it again and used the red button, this time to cause it to close.

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

“I hear you, Calvin.”

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

“Was it like the diary said?”

“Yes, exactly. I opened the entrance. I have one more test, and then I’ll open it again. Go back through the trees — about thirty meters from the edge of the grove, and wait in front of the rock face. That’s where it opens.”

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

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

He was anxious to enter, but first he had to face the thoughts he’d been pushing aside. Minister Jacobson would understand experimenting with the control panel. The details of Myakka’s ordeal with the orange and blue buttons would not find their way into Calvin’s diary translation work until later. He could claim he never gained access to the mountain’s interior because of the accident.

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

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

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

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

"Amazing, no sound, just like magic," Dr. Courtney exclaimed. "It looks like a sculptured space in there." His eyes were wide, and the frightened young boy covered behind him.

The entrance wouldn't stay open much longer. "I must go quickly," he blurted. "It only stays open about a minute. I can reopen it from the inside, and then we can bring our equipment in."

Dr. Courtney raised his hands in submission, and Calvin rushed to the entrance, hesitating an instant to probe the space behind the rectangle. He stepped cautiously through into a room filled with golden light. Outside sounds immediately muted, and the soft interior

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seemed to press him with welcome. Moving slowly toward a solid white counter about twenty feet long, a pleasing sense of calm spread through him. A thick white column covered with ornate carvings all the way to the domed ceiling was attached to one side of the counter. Almost everything was white. Strange scenes were painted in sections high on the walls below the dome's curvature. He recognized animal forms and the jungle foliage, but the gray-skinned, slightly built beings clothed in white robes seemed out of place.

The entrance suddenly closed. Calvin was caught up in the stunning affects of the interior and snapped into claustrophobic shock. He cautiously walked toward the column, and curiously the feeling dissipated. The counter surfaces looked smooth like porcelain, without apparent seams, and seemed to flow into the structure of the column and into the tiled floor. The walls and domed ceiling appeared to pour out from the column connection at the top of the dome.

Calvin grappled in a pocket for a pair of surgical gloves. He ran his hands over the countertop and knocked on it. It sounded like stone. A basin-like bowl was embedded next to the column. Myakka had called it a *talking hole* and supposedly used it to communicate with people she referred to as the *Ancestors*. He inched along toward the bowl, contemplating Myakka's instructions. He cautiously lowered his head into the structure all the way to his shoulders to see what would happen. Suddenly, dark swirling blankets began collecting like clouds at the edge of his awareness. He was convinced they were poised to consume his consciousness. He yanked out of the bowl and slapped the top of the counter with both hands to get control. The pain stopped the onslaught. He had no idea where the images had come from. The diary hadn't prepared him for this. He could only assume Myakka had similar encounters with strange perceptions, but hadn't recorded them.

He backed away from the counter and checked his watch. It had stopped. How much time had gone by? He wasn't sure. The peculiar sensations could have distorted his perception. He snatched at the radio. He didn't want the Doctor to panic, go back to the tree and attempt to activate the entrance, but the radio was dead. Claustrophobia came for him again, and he grabbed at the column, poking and prodded the post in a frenzy. Suddenly, a buttoned panel appeared, and he was unaware how he'd accomplished the feat. He sighed at the sight of the colored buttons organized exactly as they had been in the tree, and his heart stopped racing.

Dr. Courtney and the boy might have already gone back to the tree. If he was going to do it, it had to be now, as Myakka had twice been forced to do to protect herself from attack by malicious guests, and another time when outsiders had followed her on a solo pilgrimage to the mountain.

He pressed the orange button, and the top of the column lost shape, forming into a blue ball, like a glassmaker blowing a bubble. It started spinning, radiating blue light from sparkling crystal facets. A cerulean sea of glittering chaos filled the room, awaiting the blue-button command to explode in a strobe dance of virulent blue beams.

Clinging to the column, terrified, his composure slowly returned as he got his bearings back. Now that he could exit, the most important thing was the cabinet. The dancing light made it difficult to see. His temples pounded, but he gripped the edge of the oblong counter and crept down the long side. As it began curving around, he pressed his palms against the edge and slid along. A section of the counter base noiselessly parted. The closet-like space was empty, except for a mold against the back that must have snugly held the instrument, the magic stick he'd recently found in Myakka's burial chamber atop the central pyramid of the Caracol ruins.

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Calvin scurried back to the post and pulled out his camera in acute disappointment. He had to have something for his efforts. He focused on the writings and glyphs covering the domed ceiling, hoping the camera would function through the flashing lights, but the digital screen was blank. The camera wasn't working.

Suddenly he realized he was cornered like a caged animal, no concept of time and completely frustrated. All he could think of was getting out. There was nothing to hide now. The Doctor could have a turn experiencing the inside. In fact, going over the interior with him would help re-establish his credibility and offer an opportunity to copy the dome writings longhand.

He pushed the blue button on the panel. The flashing crystal faces on the spinning ball ruptured with blasts of blue light rays, bathing the interior of the room except for the space around the column. And then the ball stopped rotating and melted away like a plasma stream, magically reformed the column.

He jabbed the green button, and the memory hit him — the orange button set up preparatory connection with the ball, but Myakka used the red button to cancel. His throat narrowed into dry knots, and icy cold moved up his spine.

The rectangular space had re-opened, and sunlight shown vaguely from the other side. Calvin burst outside squinting, chest heaving. The decimation in front of him made his flesh crawl. Over the streambed and down the forested mountainside, endless numbers of smoke-filaments were rising into hanging gray streamers. The equipment and the table in front of the rock face were a jumbled mass, burnt crisp and smoldering. Two bodies were sprawled on the ground about twenty feet apart near the grove of trees. They must have fallen on their way to the big tree, worried because he'd stayed inside so long.

Calvin ran toward them with a flickering of hope they might have survived. But he held up short. The bodies were un-naturally dis-

jointed, like overdone spaghetti, and hideous head wounds gaped against black-and-blue bruising. He turned away gagging, staggered to the edge of the trees, and latched on to the nearest tree trunk to retch. He held on until the bout subsided and stumbled back to the rock face, wiping his face with a handkerchief. It was simply an accident. His stomach settled. Strangely, he felt no remorse and started for the tree to open the entrance again. On the way his radio crackled.

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

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

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

“Edward ... I’m just now looking around. Some kind of explosion — but I can’t be sure. It knocked me out ... I was examining some rocks — my companions are on the ground. There’s damage in the forest. Something terrible has happened.”

“Are you all right?”

“I think so ... I didn’t realize you knew we were here.”

“Minister Jacobson asked me to relay a message for you and the Doctor to return to the city. He wants Dr. Courtney to contact him as soon as possible — it’s about his daughter. He sent a helicopter for you. It should be here shortly.”

There was a makeshift helipad on the knoll close to the new stationhouse. Calvin hesitated, wound up in the disintegration of his plans. He would have to look for another opportunity to access the mountain. “Edward, tell the helicopter to land in the streambed next to the flat rock face at the base of the mountain prominence. I think Dr. Courtney and the boy we had with us are hurt.”