

"MCBRIDE JUST KEEPS GETTING BETTER!" - HELLNOTES

VECTOR BORNE



A THRILLER

MICHAEL MCBRIDE

AUTHOR OF BURIAL GROUND

VECTOR BORNE

A Thriller

Michael McBride

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Special Thanks to Roy and Liz at Bad Moon Books, Jeff Strand, Gene O'Neill, Bill Rasmussen, Brianna Keene, my family, and all of my loyal readers, without whom none of this would be possible.

The reason why the universe is eternal is that it does not live for itself; it gives life to others as it transforms.

— Lao Tzu

All gods are homemade, and it is we who pull their strings, and so, give them the power to pull ours.

— Aldous Huxley

Life is simply the reification of the process of living.

— Ernst Mayr

One

Pueblo Bonito
Chaco Canyon, New Mexico
June 17th
7:36 p.m. MDT

Twelve Years Ago

Dr. Graham Bradley waited for the rooster tail of dust that had followed them for the last twenty miles to pass over the forest-green Cherokee before he finally opened the door and stepped down on the sun-baked earth. His chief of security, Roland Pike, remained rigid behind the wheel, staring fixedly through the dirty windshield. The setting sun bled the sandstone escarpments crimson and cast long shadows from the sparse pockets of sage and creosote that spotted the sandy valley. A fair breeze ruffled Bradley's ebon hair and returned the dust, forcing him to shield his azure eyes. His custom-tailored Caraceni slacks and calfskin shoes were already gray with accumulation. At least he had enough foresight to shed his jacket in the car, just not enough to have packed a change of clothes in his hurry to reach the site. When the call came from Dr. Brendan Reaves eight hours ago, Bradley had been in the middle of a board meeting. The anthropologist had refused to divulge the nature of his discovery over the phone and had insisted that Bradley needed to see what he had found in person. Considering the scope of Reaves's research, Bradley couldn't imagine why he would be summoned in such a fashion, which only served to heighten his curiosity. The corporate jet had been fueled and was waiting at Sea-Tac when he arrived. Four hours in the air and three more wending through the New Mexico desert in the rental Jeep, and here he was, parched and irritated, and tingling with anticipation.

"This had better be good," he said, and struck off toward the cluster of khaki tents at the edge of the Pueblo Bonito ruins.

The rubble formed a D-shape, straight in front and rounded where it abutted the sheer cliff. Walls composed of stacked layers of flat rocks climbed three stories up the sandstone face to where petroglyphs had been carved by long-dead hands nearly a thousand years prior. Where once more than six hundred rooms and thirty-nine ceremonial kivas had surrounded a broad central courtyard, now only the framework remained. Some walls still stood thirty feet high, while others had crumbled to the ground. A large portion was buried under tons of sandstone where "Threatening Rock" had broken away from the embankment.

For nearly two hundred years, this had been the capital of the thriving Anasazi culture and could have housed as many as five thousand people. Until, abruptly, they abandoned the entire canyon and embarked upon a northwestward migration that would prove to be the end of this once flourishing society.

And no one knew why.

A ring of halogen lights blossomed to life just beyond the tents, turning half a dozen men and women to silhouettes. One of them raised an arm to hail him and broke away from the group. D

Brendan Reaves, Regent's Professor of Cultural and Evolutionary Anthropology at Washington State University, strode directly toward him. He wore a dusty ball cap over his unkempt, sun-bleached hair. The bill hid his face in shadows. He extended a dirty hand, then thought better of it and swiped it on his filthy shorts. Instead, he tipped up his chin and offered a beaming smile, which made his shadowed hazel eyes positively sparkle. He barely looked out of his teens.

"Thank you for getting down here so quickly," Reaves said. "I honestly didn't think you'd be willing to make the trip in person."

Bradley gave his best boardroom smile to hide his annoyance. GeNext Biosystems was his baby and he was intimately involved on every level from research and development through marketing and distribution. He wasn't the kind of COO who pandered to shareholders or spent his days swilling martinis on tropical shores. His vision was of a forward-thinking, revolutionary company that remained on the cutting edge of biotechnology through a non-traditional approach to research all over the globe, which meant that even he needed to roll up his sleeves from time to time.

"So, Dr. Reaves. Right to business. What could possibly be important enough to drag me across the country on a moment's notice?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Reaves turned and guided Bradley toward an old pickup painted tan by the desert. "Like I said, you have to see it with your own eyes."

Pike eased out of the Cherokee and stood at attention, but Bradley dismissed him with a subtle wave. He climbed up into the passenger seat of the professor's truck and kicked aside a pile of garbage to make room for his feet. The truck reeked of body odor and dust, and shook when Reaves started the engine.

"Where are we going?" Bradley asked.

He watched the ill-defined dirt road in the bouncing headlights.

"Not far. Just across the wash to Casa Rinconada. It's the largest, and only freestanding kiva in the Pueblo Bonito complex."

"You found more remains?"

"You could say that."

Reaves glanced over and gave a cryptic smile.

Bradley was in no mood for games. He was tired and famished, and had reached the end of his patience. Reaves must have recognized as much from his expression and started talking to fill the tense silence.

"Okay. Let me set the stage. In case you don't remember, I'm an evolutionary anthropologist. I study the changes—both cultural and physiological—in a society over time. My primary focus is the tribes of the American Southwest, specifically the Anasazi, who inhabited this amazing primitive mecca here in Chaco Canyon from about 800 to 1150 C.E.. We're talking about more than four hundred separate villages clustered around a dozen or so major pueblos like Bonito back there, and within a twenty-five thousand square-mile territory, the majority between these very canyon walls. They mastered agriculture, even in this hostile terrain, and set up a system of commerce that was beyond advanced for the time. And then, one day, they just up and abandon this community that took hundreds of years to build, by hand, stone by stone."

The tires grumbled over a bridge that shuddered under the truck's weight. The creek bed below them didn't appear as though it had ever held water. Ahead, a low mesa crowned by a tall stone rim resolved from the cliffs behind it.

"Next thing we know," Reaves said, "the Anasazi reappear in the Four Corners area, only the entire architectural style has changed. Instead of building at the bottom of valleys like this one, they're erecting fortresses hundreds of feet up on the cliffs. We're talking about the kinds of places that someone can only enter if a ladder is lowered down from the village or if they can scale the

sandstone like Spider-Man. Places like Mesa Verde in Colorado and the White House in Arizona. We speculated that the mass exodus was caused by a prolonged period of drought in the middle of the twelfth century, which killed all of their crops and drove the wild game from the area, but that didn't explain the necessity for the fortified villages carved into niches that only birds could reach. It was almost as though they feared something, as though they were preparing to defend themselves against some kind of invading force."

"I know all of this, Dr. Reaves. I'm the one underwriting your research. Tell me how all of this pertains to the project I'm funding."

The plateau rose above them to their right as the road wound around it. From their vantage point the circular walls of the kiva appeared remarkably well preserved.

"Right. We know that the Anasazi had an absurdly high incidence of anemia. Nearly forty percent of the remains exhumed here in Chaco exhibit *porotic hyperostosis*, which is a destructive pathological condition caused by iron-deficiency anemia that erodes the bones of the skull and orbits and the ends of long bones. We assume that this was caused by a shift in diet over time as the Anasazi came to rely almost exclusively on plants and grains rather than the increasingly rare native game animals. They essentially cut out the iron that the human body needs to function, which it extracts from meat. That's why it made reasonable sense when we found evidence of cannibalism. The body always knows what it needs to survive, and instinctively determines how to get it. It's the same reason that pregnant women have cravings. Their bodies are telling them exactly what they need, both for themselves and their unborn fetuses, from fundamental nutrition to vitamins and trace minerals."

"What GeNext is paying you for, Dr. Reaves, is to determine if the Anasazi had a genetic predilection toward anemia or if it was truly dietary. We need detailed physical assays of the structural and physiological damage in order to understand how to counteract it. And considering the prevalence of anemia diminished significantly within this same population over the next two hundred years as it migrated away from this canyon and into Colorado, we need to identify the mechanism by which it decreased, be it genetic or environmental. Nearly three percent of the population of the United States has converted to vegetarianism, which opens a huge market for targeted dietary supplements. Not to mention the intrinsic value of this information as it pertains to cultivating artificial plasma and blood."

Reaves stared straight through the windshield as they rounded the mesa into a makeshift dirt loop wedged between Casa Rinconada and the canyon wall.

"While we appreciate and respect your expertise in matters anthropological, and would be thrilled our shared venture afforded you the opportunity to advance your own theories in regard to the demise of the Anasazi, it is of secondary concern to our vested interest in your anemia research. GeNext is a biotechnology firm after all."

Reaves killed the engine, which died with a *clunk* that rattled the entire frame. He turned to face Bradley and offered a sly smirk.

"Prepare to forget all about that."

Reaves clambered out of the pickup, grabbed his backpack from behind his seat, and slammed the door.

Bradley climbed out and followed the professor up a steep dirt trail toward the ruins. It struck him as odd that this one sacred kiva would be built all the way across the canyon when there were nearly forty within the fortification walls. They scaled a crumbling mound of stones and dropped down to the level ground on the other side.

Reaves removed a long black Maglite from his backpack. He clicked it on and slung his pack over his shoulders. The beam illuminated a T-shaped opening in the tall circular wall, which framed a staircase that descended into the kiva. It reminded Bradley of a miniature coliseum with the rings

stone bleachers that encircled the main ceremonial stage. Three rectangles of flat rocks had been stacked a foot high to either side and toward the rear of the weed-riddled earth like primitive planting boxes roughly the size of graves. A mound of dirt and sandstone chunks loomed over the one directly ahead of them. The flashlight stained the pall of dust seeping from the hole.

“We found the first stair about three feet down.” Reaves nodded toward the pit and shined his light onto a stone staircase that vanished into the darkness. He hopped down into the hole and spotlighted the narrow channel. Bradley covered his mouth and nose with his handkerchief to keep from breathing the dust and followed Reaves underground. “It took nearly another month to excavate the remainder of the staircase and remove the stones they had used to seal off this chamber.”

Reaves led him into what appeared to be a natural cave. The walls and ceiling were rounded and scarred by dozens of petroglyphs, all of which featured massive centipedes with enormous pincers attacking stick-figure representations of men and animals alike.

“The Anasazi considered depictions of the centipede to be taboo,” Reaves said. “They believed it to be a powerful symbol of the transition between the world of the living and the land of the dead. The mere act of drawing it on these walls would have been considered sacrilegious.”

Bradley stared at the violent images for a moment before pressing on. Cobwebs swayed overhead and hung to either side where they’d been severed. Potsherds littered the floor amid a scattering of grains and gravel. Reaves stepped to his right and directed the beam at a heap of bones at his feet. They were disarticulated, shattered, and scattered in no discernible order.

“They’re human,” Bradley said.

“This wasn’t a burial,” Reaves said. “This was a willful desecration.”

“Who would have done something like this?”

“They did it themselves. We believe it was part of a ritual designed to trap the evil spirits down here when they sealed the kiva.”

Bradley knelt and inspected the bones. There was no residual blood or tissue, and the marrow had been scraped out. He couldn’t fathom the correlation to their project.

“That’s not what I brought you here to see.” Reaves pointed the beam at the back wall, where a jumble of rocks marked a shadowed orifice. He turned the Maglite around and offered it to Bradley. “I’ll let you do the honors.”

Bradley took the heavy flashlight and started toward the opening. He had to scale the fallen stones and duck his head to enter. Fractured segments of bone guided him deeper into the tunnel, which constricted around him, forcing him to stoop.

“We found the rock barricade exactly like you saw it,” Reaves said from behind him, his voice made hollow by the acoustics. “Not neatly unstacked, but toppled. We suspect it was knocked down from this side, by something that desperately wanted to get to the meat inside the main chamber.”

“They buried live animals down here?”

“Just keep going,” Reaves said.

Bones cracked under Bradley’s tread and threw uneven shadows across the stone floor. He ran his fingertips along the wall, which had distinct ridges as though carved by sharp, thin implements. The leading edge of the beam diffused into a larger cave ahead of him. The faintest hint of the orange sunset slanted through gaps in the low ceiling. It appeared as though a rockslide had sealed a natural entrance. Motes of dust sparkled all around him.

The ground was covered with piles of bones. Entire ribcages. Cracked skulls. Shattered pelvises and femora. Both human and animal. The mounds were tangled with hair and fur. It looked like a bear’s den.

Time had leached the stench of fresh kill, leaving the musty, mildewed smell of a crypt.

“At the back of the chamber,” Reaves whispered. “On the other side of the remains.”

Bradley had to remove the handkerchief from his face to balance on the bones. The flashlight beam swept across the desiccated figures propped against the cavern wall, casting vaguely hominid shadows onto the sandstone.

“They sealed them in here when they abandoned the pueblo,” Reaves said softly, almost reverentially. “And shortly thereafter started building high up on the sheer cliffs to the northwest.”

“There are more than enough bones here to assemble fifty skeletons,” Bradley said.

He crouched in front of the only two intact carcasses in the chamber. They were gaunt, their flesh mummified, parchment skin stretched across knobby bones, cloaked in shadows. He raised the flashlight toward their faces—

“Jesus!”

Bradley toppled backward onto the bones and scabbled away from the bodies.

“This is why the Anasazi fled Chaco Canyon,” Reaves said. He clapped Bradley on the shoulder. “Like I said, you wouldn’t have believed me if I’d told you.”

Kilinailau Trench
South Pacific Ocean
176 km East of New Ireland Island, Papua New Guinea
November 26th
11:58 a.m. PGT

Present Day

The deep sea submersible cruised over a mat of gray lava pillows the size of boulders, twenty-two hundred meters beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean. Far off in the murky black distance rose the rugged rim of the Kilinailau Trench, formed by the subduction of the Pacific tectonic plate beneath the Bismarck microplate. Their movement resulted in a steady flow of magma and geothermal heat from the Earth's molten core. Forty-five hundred watts of HMI lights mounted on an array of booms enough to nearly illuminate an entire football stadium, turned the water a midnight blue. Jagged crescents of mineral and ore deposits appeared at the extent of the light's reach, where they abruptly climbed hundreds of meters back toward the sun.

After close to four hours of freefall in absolute blackness and another two skimming the bottom of the world, they had finally reached their destination.

The Basilisk Vent Field was a hotbed of geological activity. Seawater that leached through the seafloor was superheated, suffused with toxic chemicals and minerals, and funneled back into the ocean more than seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit through tall chimneys called hydrothermal vents. Several main chimneys, nicknamed black smokers for the noxious plumes of water that poured out of the vents like the smoke from a tire fire, were staggered across Basilisk. It was one such formation, a more recent eruption named Medusa, that had summoned them more than a mile down to where the pressure could crumple a man in tin can fashion. Over the last twenty days, intermittent seismic activity had already toppled two of the older chimneys and increased the ambient water temperature by two degrees, which may not have seemed significant to the average man on the street, but reflected a massive expulsion of hydrothermal energy at nearly twice its previous rate. An opportunity like this might not come along again.

The submersible *Corellian*, named after the fictional manufacturer of the escape pod used by R2-D2 and C-3PO in *Star Wars* due to its striking physical resemblance, slowed to zero-point-eight knots and closed in on the ridge. Its thirty-foot, twenty-eight ton body was primarily fabricated from fiberglass and foam attached to a titanium frame that served as housing for the rear thruster assembly, a series of lights and cameras on forward-facing booms, and the two-inch-thick titanium personnel sphere that accommodated a dedicated pilot and two scientific observers. Patterned after the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution's Deep Submergence vehicle *Alvin*, which had set the standard for nearly half a century, the *Corellian* had cost GeNext Biosystems more than thirty millions dollars to build for its own personal use. Factor in the cost of its mobile berth, the one-hundred-and-seventy-foot Research Vessel *Ernst Mayr* and the salaries of the eighteen scientific researchers and twenty-eight

officers and crew, and this was a two hundred million dollar private venture that amounted to little more than deep sea prospecting.

“Medusa rears her ugly head,” John Bishop said. The pilot could have passed for a beach bum with his unkempt blonde hair, deep tan, and lazy surfer drawl, but the former Navy Seaman was a professional when he assumed the helm. He eased back on the throttle and watched through the foot-wide porthole as they approached the hellish eight-story behemoth. The *Corellian* had been equipped with a thirty-six inch LCD screen that relayed the footage from the digital video assembly mounted above the window so that the pilot no longer had to press his face against the reinforced glass to see where he was going, but Bishop was old-school. His motto was *I didn't come all the way down here to watch it on TV.*

Dr. Tyler Martin shifted his lanky six-foot frame. His unruly chestnut hair fell in front of his brown eyes. He tucked his bangs behind his ears and leaned back from the port view window, where he had been watching the lava fields transform into sharp crests that came to life with scuttling crabs and shrimp, and turned to face the monitor. The digital clarity surpassed even what he could see with his own eyes.

The live feed focused on the chimney, a great branching trunk composed of anhydrite, and copper, iron, and zinc sulfide precipitates. Black smoke poured out of various openings reminiscent of the pipes on some bizarre Dr. Seuss machination and roiled toward the sky. Six-foot tube worms that looked like crimson tulips bloomed from chitinous tunnels, filtering the hydrogen sulfide from the scalding water, which fueled the chemosynthetic bacteria in their guts, the source of all life in this strange ecosystem. White Yeti crabs snapped at the worms while clouds of ghostly shrimp swirled from one toxic flume to the next. Golden mussels and pale anemones staked claim to every spare inch of space. An octopus squirmed away from their lights.

“You guys ready to get to work?” Bishop asked.

“Might as well, you know, since we're already down here and all,” Dr. Courtney Martin said. With her long auburn hair and emerald eyes, it was nearly impossible to tell that she and Tyler were related. His little sister snuggled up to the starboard viewport, where she could use the control panel to help him right to manipulate the retractable armature. The monitor above her head displayed footage from the camera affixed to its hydraulic claw.

“How close can you get us?” Tyler asked.

He dimmed the screens that displayed their GPS data and bathymetric maps to better see the monitor for his own armature.

“Close enough to count the hairs on a crab's ass.”

Bishop smirked. He had logged more than four thousand hours in this very submersible over the last three years and took his job so seriously that he even catheterized himself prior to launch so that nothing would distract him from his duties. He maneuvered the *Corellian* with such fluidity that it seemed like an extension of his body, an exoskeleton of sorts.

“Take us up about thirty feet,” Courtney said. “You see where the chimney forks like a cactus? Right there by those two vents where all the smoke's coming from. That work for you, Ty?”

“Perfectly,” he said.

He fiddled with the armature controls, flexing the elbow, testing the clamps. Satisfied, he used it to pinch the handle of his collecting device, a tubular bioreactor that looked like an industrial coffee dispenser, and drew it out of its housing beneath the sphere.

“Sonar's registering seismic activity,” Courtney said. “Looks like a swarm of mini-quakes.”

“It's been like that for the last three weeks,” Bishop said. “It comes and goes.”

As Bishop watched, several of the fluted pipes broke away from the chimney and tumbled toward the sea floor, dragging crabs and anemones with them. There was a flicker of light as magma oozed

out of the ground and immediately cooled to a gray crust.

~~Courtney bumped him from behind, knocking him forward against the glass. Three of them in the~~
diminutive metal ball was like keeping a trio of goldfish in a wine glass. With the rounded walls
racked with equipment and monitors of all kinds, it barely left room for them to squat on top of each
other in what amounted to an uncomfortable, padded pit. There was barely space for them to kneel.
The air was damp and sweaty. Fortunately, that was one luxury they had in abundance. There was
enough oxygen for forty hours, while their dive was timed for only ten. Of course, that wouldn't
matter if the sphere breached. The pressure would compress the titanium shell and the equipment
with them right there in the middle, into a metallic tomb the size of a basketball.

My Son Ruins
69 km Southwest of Da Nang
Quang Nam Province, Vietnam
March 12th
9:46 a.m. ICT

Seven Years Ago

Dr. Brendan Reaves shoved through the overgrowth of fan-leaved dipterocarps, palm trees, and conifers and stepped out into a small clearing, if it indeed qualified as such. The blazing sun reached the moldering detritus in slanted columns that stained the early morning mist like penlights shining through the dense canopy. Before him stood a knoll upon which a stone *linga*, a symbol of the worship of Bhadresvara, the local variant of the Hindu god Shiva, had been erected. The sculpted red stone was furry with moss and shrouded by a proliferation of vines and grasses, most of which had been ripped away and lay in brown tangles at its foot. Four identical life-size faces of Shiva had been sculpted to mark the cardinal directions of the compass on the three-foot-tall pedestal. The diety's slender face tapered to a point at his chin, where a garland of snakes encircled his neck. A crescent moon framed his braided hair, which was coiled into a conch shape on top of his head. His flat eyes, of which there were three, stared indifferently into the jungle. Excavated dirt and stones ringed a dark opening in the base of the hill.

He wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow and tried not to think about whatever was crawling on his skin beneath his damp khakis. The assault of the insects had begun the moment he stepped out of the rental Jeep at the My Son ruins, arguably the crown jewel of the Champa Empire, which ruled Central Vietnam from the fourth through fourteenth centuries. Phuong Dinh, a former student who had been with him on the Chaco dig, had been waiting at the A1 temple as she had said she would be, leaning against what little remained after it was shelled during the war, the first rays of dawn caressing her tan skin and making her rich ebon hair glimmer with reddish highlights. She had smiled so broadly when she saw him that he couldn't help but reciprocate. She was no longer the shy and unassuming girl she had once been, but a confident woman, now a colleague, whose dark eyes lit up when she bounded down the slope and gave him a hug. He remembered the splay of freckles dotting the bridge of her nose.

"Look at you," Reaves had said. "All grown up."

"I can tie my own shoes now and everything." She smirked. "You haven't aged a day, Dr. Reaves."

He tried not to blush.

"It's Brendan to you now, Dr. Dinh." His relationship with Phuong had always been somewhat unique. She'd been closer to his age than that of her classmates, and had been driven by an inner fire that often eclipsed his own. As the daughter of an American soldier who had quite possibly died somewhere in these very hills, she had been raised in poverty by a single mother who spoke only Vietnamese, yet she had risen above her circumstances thanks to the desire to better understand the two dichotomous worlds that she felt both a part of and alienated from at the same time. It gave

Reaves no small pleasure to see that she was now totally in her element. "I can't tell you how proud I am that you're doing exactly what you set out to do."

It was Phuong's turn to blush.

"We're burning daylight," she said. "We have a long hike ahead of us."

He donned his backpack and followed her into the jungle on a path the trees seemed desperate to reclaim even as they traversed it. During the three-hour hike in the dim twilight provided by the dense canopy, they had caught up with each others' lives and the accomplishments of the intervening years while swarms of insects hummed and buzzed around them, finches and wrens chirped, and snub-nosed monkeys screeched. He'd been somewhat embarrassed to explain why he had left his post in Washington State to work exclusively for GeNext. It still felt like a betrayal of the anthropological tenets he had preached to his students, but Phuong understood. After all, she was one of the select few who'd seen the remains beneath Casa Rinconada, a sight that no one who witnessed it would ever forget. GeNext had given him the opportunity of a lifetime. He had carte blanche to travel anywhere in the world, to dig wherever he wanted, without having to beg for grants or even give a second thought to the financial side, and rather than focus on the evolution of a single society, he had the unprecedented chance to broaden his scope to encompass the entirety of the human species.

He approached the hole in the ground slowly, taking in even the most seemingly insignificant sights and sounds with each step. This was the part that he loved the most, those first eager steps toward discovery held captive by the earth for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, as if patiently waiting for the perfect moment to reveal her secrets. Or perhaps for the perfect person to whom to reveal them. Still, what if he hadn't instigated the dig or troweled out the loam one scoop at a time? It still belonged to him. Of that there was no doubt. It called to him like a mother's song only remembered subconsciously through the memory of a child.

His hands trembled as he shed his backpack and withdrew his digital camera.

"We discovered it almost by accident," Phuong said. "A monsoon swept through here just over a month ago. The rain exposed the hint of a brick wall built into the hill. It took a while to clear the dirt from around it, but after that, the bricks were easy enough to unstack."

"What am I looking at?"

Reaves walked a slow circle around the clearing, taking pictures of the *linga* from every possible angle.

"It's a *Sivalinga*, which symbolically represents the god Shiva himself. The Champa built these all across the countryside before they abandoned the region in the early fifteenth century to the Viet. The one's similar to those back at the ruins where you met me, only much more elaborate. The chamber beneath it, however, is completely unique."

"The photographs you sent me...they were taken down there?"

Phuong nodded and gestured toward the shadowed orifice. Reaves couldn't quite read the expression on her face.

He leaned over the hole and took several quick pictures. The flash limned decomposing brick walls crawling with roots and spider webs, and a decrepit stone staircase leading downward into the pitch black. He removed his flashlight from his pack and followed the beam underground. Dust swirled in the column of light, which spread across the brick-tiled floor riddled with moss and fungal growth a dozen steps down. He smelled damp earth and mildew; the faintly organic scent of the tomb. His rapid breathing echoed back at him from the hollow chamber.

When he reached the bottom, he snapped several more shots. The brief strobes highlighted stone walls sculpted with ornate friezes, a scattering of bones on the ground, and a central altar of some kind, upon which rested what he had traveled all this way to see in person. He walked slowly toward it, taking pictures with each step. The carvings on the wall were savage. Each depicted a malevolent

Shiva lording over a scene of carnage with his adversaries lifeless at his feet or suspended from one of his many arms. The bones on the floor were broken and disarticulated and heaped into mounds, aged to the color of rust, and woven together by webs that housed the carcasses of countless generations of insects.

His heart rate accelerated. This chamber was similar in so many ways to the one back in Chaco Canyon, which had dominated all of his thoughts during the last five years.

He finally brought the flashlight to bear on the altar.

“It gives me the chills every time I see it,” Phuong said.

Reaves felt it too, almost as though the object seated on the rounded platform radiated a coldness that was released by the exposure to light.

“Carbon dating confirms that it was sealed in here more than five hundred years ago, about the time that the Champa vacated the area.” She wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered. “It’s just like the others, isn’t it?”

Reaves could only nod as he approached. His beam focused on the skull seated on the dusty platform and threw its shadow onto the far wall, which made the hellish designs waver as though thousands of many Shivas were laughing with a sound his mind interpreted as the crackle of flames.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered.

Fissures transected the frontal bone, the orbital sockets given sentience by the reflected light from the spider webs inside. A large stone had been thrust between its jaws with such force that the mandibular rami to either side had cracked.

And then, of course, there were its teeth.

Kilinailau Trench
South Pacific Ocean
176 km East of New Ireland Island, Papua New Guinea
November 26th
12:13 p.m. PGT

Present Day

The *Corellian* leveled off and Bishop pivoted the light and camera arrays to focus on the chimney through the roiling black smoke, which was really a toxic soup of tiny metallic sulfide particles.

Dr. Tyler Martin could barely contain his excitement. For the last six years, since completing his doctorate in Molecular and Cellular Biology at Dartmouth, he'd been studying microorganisms classified as extremophiles, prokaryotic bacteria that were not only capable of surviving the harshest conditions on the planet, but of thriving in environments that killed all other types of life. They formed the bottom of the deep sea food chain, and provided theoretical proof that life could flourish under any conditions. These were microscopic bugs that functioned in the same capacity as plants on dry land, but while plants used the process of photosynthesis to essentially capture the power of the sun and produce the oxygen necessary to sustain terrestrial life, extremophiles chemosynthesized hydrogen sulfide to generate energy. Some scientists went so far as to speculate that these very organisms he now prepared to capture and bring to the surface were the origin of life on Earth, from which all higher orders of animals evolved. The recent surge in seismic activity offered him the rare opportunity to potentially collect new species that might be forced nearer the oceanic crust from where they dwelled in the deeper strata. Such a discovery would not only afford him the chance to be the first to study them; it would allow him to put his stamp on the entire field.

While extremophiles in general were capable of surviving everywhere from beneath the frozen Antarctic ice caps to the fiery heart of a volcano, it was the facultative thermophilic branch, those that thrived with intense heat and pH levels, but could survive lower temperatures, that intrigued him. Most people weren't even aware of their existence, yet these bacteria were part of their everyday lives. They were used in the manufacture of detergents and perfume, in food processing plants, and to clean up oil spills. There was even a species called *thermusaquaticus*, discovered in a hot spring in Yellowstone National Park, that produced an enzyme called Taq I, which made it possible using restriction fragment length polymorphism technology to create human genomic fingerprints, the kind used in forensic science to match DNA and solve crimes. This enzyme could copy billions of strands of DNA in just a few short hours. That one species alone had already generated more than two billion dollars in royalties for the company that held the patent, which was where GeNext came into the picture. The race was on between biotech firms to harness the power of these bacteria. Research teams were being dispatched all across the globe, to the highest mountaintops, the densest jungles, and in Tyler's case, the deepest oceanic trenches, in the name of progress and profit.

He manipulated the armature to position the bioreactor, which would allow him to maintain the proper temperature and chemical concentrations while agitating the sample to prevent sedimentation.

directly into the black smoke.

“Come here, little guy,” Courtney said. “Stick that head out just a bit farther.”

Tyler glanced over Courtney’s shoulder at her monitor. She had nearly coaxed one of the long worms out of its tube and into a collection bin similar to his. The worm owed its scarlet coloration to the presence of hemoglobin, the very same constituent of blood that flowed through human veins. Courtney was peripherally involved with the creation of a synthetic blood substitute, another multi-billion dollar industry. With shortages in blood banks and the dwindling number of donors, artificial plasma would save hundreds of thousands of lives, and while there was legislation in place to prevent the cloning of human blood cells, there were no such restrictions for this odd invertebrate.

He tilted the bioreactor and allowed the smoke to flow directly up into it.

With a lurch, the *Corellian* canted nose down. A screen of bubbles flooded up across his line of sight.

“What was that?” Courtney asked.

“The water temperature just shot up nearly two degrees,” Bishop said. “Sonar confirms we’ve got ourselves a trembler.”

“It felt like we were hit by a truck.”

“Strap on your seatbelts, kids. These quakes can make maneuvering a little dicey.”

Tyler’s screen filled with black smoke. He lost sight of his armature and the controls became unresponsive. The submersible swung sideways and collided with the chimney, slamming him against his viewport. Through the superheated water, he watched a fissure race across the width of the smokestack.

“Oh, God.”

The crack expanded and a black cloud billowed up against the glass. A curtain of bubbles cleared his porthole and he saw only a column of churning black water where the hydrothermal vent had once been. Where was the rest—?

Something slammed into the submersible from above, driving them down toward the ocean floor. Chunks of the shattered chimney rained past them on the monitors.

The thrusters whined as Bishop fought to reverse their rapid descent with the weight of the upper half of the chimney lodged against their hull.

“Come on, baby,” Bishop said.

The jagged sea bed raced toward them. They were going to impact head on. The ground cracked like an eggshell, only the crevices glowed red. Magma poured out of the earth. As soon as it met with the water, it began to darken and issue bubbles and ebon smoke. Rock formations crumbled and toppled into the lava in slow motion.

They were going to die.

“Come on, baby. Come on!”

Tyler pressed his hands against the glass as though he could prevent it from shattering or melting the burbling cauldron. He heard screams and vaguely recognized them as his own.

His armature swung across his view, whipping the bioreactor past like a lure on a fishing line.

Another thud against the submersible from behind. The personnel sphere swung upward toward a mile of empty water and he was thrown away from the window. Courtney slammed into him, pounding his back against a rack of equipment. He wrapped his arms around her and tried to shield her with his body.

They were going to die.

He was certain that at any moment the sphere would collapse in upon itself. Would he feel it when his body was compressed to nearly the atomic level?

Bishop stood on top of them and piloted the craft straight up. At least they were headed in the right

direction, but if he didn't level it off quickly, the engine would stall and drop them down to the deaths.

“Come on, baby!”

Slowly, Bishop righted the *Corellian* fifty meters above where Medusa had once stood. All that remained now was a jumble of rubble sinking into the molten abyss. The black smoke no longer funneled but exploded from the crater. Ribbons of magma spread across the field below them. The entire topography had been dramatically altered in less than a minute.

Another shudder and an expulsion of bubbles and scalding water propelled them toward the surface.

The dysfunctional robotic arm hung lifeless in front of Tyler's viewport.

The bioreactor was still clamped in its hydraulic pincers.

*6 km North of the Bilbao Ruins
Escuintla Department, Guatemala
December 9th
2:29 p.m. CST*

Four Years Ago

Bradley didn't see the crevice until he was nearly upon it. After close to half a day of battling his way through the seemingly impregnable forest of ceiba and kapok trees on a path that barely qualified as an animal trail with the weight of his pack on his back, he nearly collapsed to his knees in relief. Roland Pike appeared unfazed by the exertion. He merely set down his rucksack, returned his GPS unit to the side pouch, and removed the hydro bladder, which he passed to Bradley before taking a long drink himself. The branches of the canopy overhead were woven together to hide the sky, save for one shifting gap through which the gray cone of Mt. Fuego rose over them like a thorn prodding heaven's gut. An intricate network of climbing ropes had been strung around the trunks and up into the branches where carabiners glinted through the leaves. The remainder of the ropes, hardly distinguishable from the vines, trailed down into the ground, where a lightning bolt-fracture in the limestone coursed through the detritus. A faint clamor of clattering tools and muffled voices echoed hollowly from below.

A dozen eight-foot-tall obsidian statues surrounded them. The branches of the lower canopy had been cut back and the moss had been scraped away to expose the identical black volcanic stone sculptures. Elaborate headdresses adorned the crowns of their skeletal faces, beneath which they wore collars made of bells. All of them had been turned so that they looked down upon the hole, as though keeping eternal watch. In the email he had received with the pictures of the site, Reaves had identified this disturbing character as Ah Puch, the Mayan god of death, who ruled their version of hell, Xibalba.

His exhaustion replaced by a growing sense of excitement, Bradley shed his burden and walked to the edge of the fissure. A cool breeze gusted up into his face, chilling the sweat that matted his prematurely graying hair. Vines and roots cascaded down through the opening in a vegetative waterfall that reached nearly a hundred feet down to the placid black water. A ring of lights had been affixed to the rock walls of the pit and directed toward the middle, where they hardly penetrated the deep lake, which was part of an underground river system that extended for hundreds of kilometers through a honeycomb of impassable tunnels in the strata. Several men-made-shadows by the fierce halogens stood on the rocky ledge of the pool amid stalagmites nearly as tall as they were. Portable generators provided a humming drone barely distinguishable from the whine of the mosquitoes that had followed them from the Mayan ruins at Bilbao.

Bradley smiled and turned back to Pike, who had already hauled up the harness and held it at the ready.

"You want to go down there, or should I make some sandwiches first?" Pike asked through a faint smile that looked unnatural on his ordinarily impassive face. The diffused sunlight washed out his

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