

THE AQUARIANS

2012 - A New Era Begins

Preface

Mayans of the classic period (250 to 900 AD) were prolific writers of books. Tragically, those books, which conveyed precise information about the culture's history, mathematics, astronomy, and prophecy, were burned by the thousands at the hand of Hernan Cortez and his fellow Spanish Conquistadores in the early 1500s.

Along with more valuable plunder, four of those ancient manuscripts, or codices, were spared and sent to the King of Spain as novelty gifts, where they were displayed in various locations throughout Europe. Eventually, one of the rare books found its way to Vienna, where it was procured by a private collector and donated in 1740 to the Royal Saxon Library of Dresden, Germany.

The 800-year-old Dresden Codex, as that particular Mayan textbook is now called, is best known for its incredibly accurate astronomical predictions and dire prophetic visions of the future. On the last page of the codex—a page symbolized by the arrival of a celestial water-bearer—the Mayans wrote of a day when time as we know it would cease to exist.

That day is almost here.

Prologue

April 7, 1993—Key Largo, Florida

Tapping her fingers to the classic rock blaring over the stereo, Rebecca Larson looked at herself in the rearview mirror of her VW camper van and smiled. A long and bitter winter had driven her into a melancholic funk, and she knew that a week in the sun with her girlfriends was just what she needed to break the spell.

She rolled down the driver's side window and let the warm morning air blow through her long mane of blonde hair.

Her three passengers, all Duke University sophomores like Rebecca, bobbed their heads in unison to the music.

A wood-paneled station wagon full of teenage boys passed from the left as both vehicles headed south on Florida's Highway One. "Spring break!" they shouted and pumped their fists in the air.

"Spring break!" Rebecca and her friends hooted in return.

"Where you comin' from?" one of the boys asked.

"North Carolina," Rebecca answered. "How about you?"

"Michigan. Goin' to Key West?" he yelled right before the station wagon accelerated to make room for an oncoming truck.

Rebecca nodded with a wave then rolled her eyes when another boy suddenly yanked his pants down and pressed his naked posterior against the car's rear window.

When the girls drove across the bridge connecting the continental United States to Key Largo, she whooped and did a drum roll on the van's steering wheel. "This is it, ladies. We're officially off the mainland and in the Florida Keys."

From the passenger seat, Penny, who was Rebecca's roommate at Duke, raised her hands and slapped them against the roof. "Only a hundred more miles before our first margarita at Sloppy Joe's."

"Duval Street, here we come," squealed another from the back.

Resting her sunglasses on top of her head, Rebecca took in the wide-open expanses of mangrove trees, white sand, and deep turquoise water all around her.

"Wow, this place is beautiful. And there's so much *space* between everything."

The other girls, who had all grown up on the eastern seaboard and made numerous trips to the Keys, were less impressed.

“Is it really that crowded in California?” Penny asked. “On *Baywatch*, the whole place looks like a picture postcard.”

“Are you kidding? That’s only because they film that show in front of a protected marine preserve.” Though her information was firsthand, Rebecca chose not to mention that her knowledge came from personal experience as a bikini-clad extra in many episodes of the popular television program. “Seriously,” she continued, “California oceanfront property like this would be crammed with shopping malls and million-dollar McMansions. That’s why I ended up going to Duke. I just had to get away from the whole Southern California cliché for a while.”

“Oh, I thought you went to Duke because it’s the *best damn college* in the whole United States! Go Blue Devils, *yeah!*” Penny hooted.

“Well, that, too,” Rebecca laughed. “And their psych department *is* awesome.”

“Psych,” Penny clucked and lowered the radio’s volume during a commercial. “How’s that going, anyway?”

The question blew like a sudden squall over Rebecca’s brightening mood. Her deep brown eyes—uniquely dabbled with irregular flecks of brilliant gold—became fixed on the open road. “It’s going fine, I guess,” she sighed, slumping her shoulders. “But I don’t know. I’m just not sure that psychology is really my thing anymore. And if it isn’t, then I honestly have no clue what I want my major to be.”

“Listen,” Penny interjected. “*None* of us are sure if we’re going to stick with our majors. Besides, what do you care? With your looks and that body, you’re just going to marry some rich movie producer or stockbroker back in California and be set for life anyway.”

Penny’s remark did nothing to lift Rebecca’s sagging spirit.

“Hey, look,” came a shout from the backseat. “Dolphins!”

Rebecca had seen dolphins many times while surfing back home in California. Instinctively, she began to scan the ocean’s horizon for telltale dorsal fins slicing through the surface of the water.

“No, over there,” Penny said, pointing to the opposite side of the highway where a gigantic and gaudy billboard urged, “*Come Swim with Our Dolphins. Everyone Welcome!*”

“Pull over,” Penny ordered. “I want to check it out.”

Rebecca downshifted and veered the van into a gravel driveway directly below the sign. Before she knew it, the other girls had shepherded her through the doors of a small, white stucco building that served as headquarters for the Human-Dolphin Swim Foundation.

“Are you serious? How much is it?” Rebecca asked no one in particular.

Penny nudged her up to the sales counter to sign up for a swim. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, whipping out a credit card and slapping it down onto the counter. “Dad gave me this card for just this type of unexpected emergency.”

After reading and signing the foundation's reliability-release forms, the four girls followed a young woman to a small lagoon at the back of the building.

Roughly one hundred yards square, the lagoon was divided by floating boardwalks into four separate enclosures. Each one contained a water-level platform that provided access to the dolphins.

Rebecca took note of the other tourists who had come to swim with the dolphins while making her way over to her group's assigned platform. In the first pool, three elderly women frolicked with a pair of midsize bottlenoses. In the second pen, another group of college-aged students donned masks and snorkels in preparation for going in.

But the group occupying the enclosure adjacent to where she and her friends would be swimming caught and held her attention the most. Rebecca studied the people gathered on the platform: a middle-aged man, two young women, and a young boy about eight or nine years old. The child's hands were bent down toward his forearms and his eyes were fixed in a stare of unfocused detachment.

The boy sat in swimming trunks—his frail body contorting and twitching—while a man and a woman Rebecca presumed were his parents anxiously watched from a bench behind the platform.

"What's going on over there?" Rebecca asked the woman in charge of her group's session.

"Oh, that's Dr. Davidson," the guide replied. "He works with autistic kids and the dolphins here a few days a week."

Doctor? Autistic kids? Dolphins? What could those three things possibly have in common? With increasing intrigue, Rebecca monitored the activity as the boy, Dr. Davidson, and his two assistants interacted with a lone bottlenose dolphin answering to the name of Bea.

"Bea's happy to see you again today, Tommy," Dr. Davidson said with a broad, compassionate smile. "Isn't that right, Bea?"

Responding to a nearly imperceptible twitch of Dr. Davidson's index finger, the dolphin lifted her head out of the water and nodded enthusiastically.

"And I'll bet you're ready to go back in the water with Bea, aren't you, Tommy?"

The boy began twisting his body with sudden agitation and spewing unintelligible, guttural noises.

His mother sprang from the bench and rushed toward the platform. "Dr. Davidson, you know that Tommy can't speak," she pleaded in a heavy British accent. "Please don't upset him so!"

"We are all quite aware of Tommy's limitations," Davidson replied. He gently cradled Tommy's head between his large hands then looked directly into his eyes.

"Tommy, do you want to swim with Bea?"

Again, the boy produced nothing more than frantic, garbled sounds.

"I'll take that as a yes," Dr. Davidson replied.

With the help of his two assistants, the doctor slowly eased the boy into the warm, shallow section of the lagoon. The three held him there securely in a face-up floating position.

Seemingly on cue, the large dolphin approached Tommy. When she got close enough for the knuckles of his clenched hand to make contact with her taut, rubbery skin, she stopped and hovered motionless at the surface.

Not caring that she had fallen behind her group, Rebecca felt herself being pulled into the surreal interaction.

“Bea loves being touched like that,” Dr. Davidson said quietly to Tommy, but otherwise let the encounter unfold on its own.

After a few minutes spent floating at Tommy’s side, the dolphin eventually maneuvered herself so that the tip of her snout rested gently against the top of his head.

As they watched, Tommy’s parents were noticeably unnerved by what they were seeing.

“Is...is this what’s supposed to be happening?” his mother queried with more than a trace of alarm in her voice.

Dr. Davidson placed a finger on his closed lips, and in the ensuing quiet, they could all hear the steady, high-pitched hum Bea was emitting into the child’s skull.

Rebecca froze in awe.

As he lay there floating in the water, an undeniable expression of joy began to take hold of Tommy. His gaping mouth curled upward at the edges, and his eyes no longer appeared to be staring at nothing, but rather at something only he could see.

But it was the boy’s hands that made Rebecca gasp. “Oh my God,” she mouthed silently, stunned by the sight of the boy’s clenched fingers slowly beginning to open and relax.

“This can’t be happening,” Tommy’s mother said, the color draining from her face.

Not long thereafter, Bea unceremoniously terminated the session by swimming off to the far corner of the enclosure, though no one else moved for a long time.

With a knowing smile, Dr. Davidson took in a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. “I’d call that a productive short session,” he said to no one in particular. “How ’bout you, Tommy?”

To everyone’s shock and dismay, Tommy began to writhe once more in the arms of his assistants. Pained grunts and moans erupted from deep inside him.

Tommy’s mother bolted to the edge of the platform. “Dr. Davidson, what’s wrong?” she begged. “Why is he so upset?”

The growling, indecipherable vocalization started like every other he’d ever made. But this time something was different. With the sound forming deep in his throat, Tommy pressed his lips tightly together in an obvious effort to shape it. He closed his eyes with forced concentration, and with the veins in his neck bulging, he pushed the word out.

“Buh, Buh ... Bea!” he wailed at the top of his lungs. “Bea!”

Rebecca felt suddenly weak.

“Bea!” Tommy yelled again ferociously, slapping the water with his open hands. “Bea!”

The dolphin, responding to his call, casually resumed her place at his side.

“Bea,” Tommy said with an immediate sense of calm and relief. “Mmmmy Bea.” In shock, Rebecca lowered herself unsteadily into a sitting position on the dock, holding her face in her hands as tears began to stream down her cheeks.

Oblivious to the events that had just transpired, Penny doubled back to find her friend. “Rebecca! What’s going on? Are you okay?” she asked, sitting down and wrapping her arms around Rebecca’s trembling shoulders.

Rebecca could not find the words to express what had just taken place, but one point had suddenly become patently clear to her. “Penny,” she said, slowly lifting her head. “You know how we were just talking about me not knowing what I wanted my major to be?”

“Yeah?” Penny replied in complete confusion.

“Well,” she paused, “now I do.”

Uttering those three little words, Rebecca knew she had just committed herself to a future she could not have even imagined less than an hour ago.

July 20, 1999—Newport Beach, California

Born into a family dynasty that owned the largest yacht brokerage in Newport Harbor, Ryan Ericson had lived a charmed life—a life his friends and family were convinced he was about to throw away.

“You can’t be serious,” his father, Glen, scoffed over his mid-afternoon martini. The two men sat at their usual table in the Pirate’s Den, Newport Harbor Yacht Club’s private bar.

“Listen, Dad,” Ryan began, his blue eyes dancing with confidence. “You know I love the marine industry and that I’ll never completely leave it, but I’m almost thirty years old. I need to know that I can make a success of myself on my own.”

“But you *have* done it on your own, Ryan. You think just anybody can sell fifteen million dollars worth of boats a year? Christ, we’re talking over half a million dollars in commissions. Don’t tell me you’re willing to walk away from that for some cockamamie scheme.”

Ryan leaned back in his chair and sighed while their waitress delivered two identical orders of club sandwiches and fries. “I realize this doesn’t make much sense to you right now, but I got that journalism degree at USC for a reason.”

“I know that, and your writing’s worked out great as a sideline. Don’t you sell every article you’ve ever written for all those magazines?”

“Yeah, but writing articles for boating magazines doesn’t require a whole lot of creativity. I need to do something that I can really sink my teeth into,” Ryan explained. He took a huge bite out of the triple-decker sandwich.

“You don’t have to quit the brokerage to do that. Can’t you ease yourself into this new thing without totally abandoning your only source of income?”

“Listen, I know I won’t be making the kind of money I’ve made in the boat business, but I don’t plan on this being a loser, either.”

“Plan? How can you even talk about a goddamn plan when you don’t know the first thing about producing a television show?” His father slammed the martini glass down hard enough to chip its delicate base. Had there been any other members in the dark, rustic bar, they would have been privy to some prime yacht-club gossip.

“Come on, Dad. It’s local cable. *Anything* I do is going to be better than the homemade crap on there now, right?” Standing his ground, Ryan gave his thick mahogany hair a flip. “Besides, the charm of the show is that it’s not *supposed* to be too polished.”

Glen could see he was getting nowhere. “All right,” he acquiesced. “Let’s hear the whole thing one more time.”

Disarmed by Glen’s sudden willingness to listen, Ryan took a big gulp of his martini, bit off half of the olive skewered on a plastic mini pirate cutlass, and began his presentation. “Okay, here’s the pitch: I’m going to host a local entertainment program that’ll showcase all the things there are to do in Orange County—the fine dining, shopping, yachting, surfing, whatever—and I’m going to air it on all the individual local cable networks up and down the coast.”

“Sort of like those infomercials we do for the brokerage,” Glen said.

“Exactly.”

“The ones where we pay for our own air time.”

“Right.”

“So I’m still not getting it. If it takes your own money to both produce *and* air the show, how do you make a profit?”

“From sponsors. I’ll hit up a few selective hotels or car dealerships for a commercial, and they’ll pay every time their ad airs on the show. You think I couldn’t get Fletcher to put an ad together for his Mercedes dealership? Or Hans for all his restaurants?”

“Only because you know those guys,” Glen grumbled.

“Dad, I know everybody in this town! That’s why this is going to work. I could make ten calls right now and have ten sponsors lined up before I shot the first episode.”

“And you think there’ll be enough margin between your outlay and sponsor revenue to actually make some money? And if that’s true, then why hasn’t anybody done this before?”

“They have, but only in a half-assed way. The difference is I’ll be producing a better-looking and more interesting show than anyone’s used to seeing on public access. On top of that, I happen to be really good at separating rich people from their money.”

Glen raised his glass and winked. “That’s true. You definitely have the gift of persuasion. But aren’t you going to miss all this?” He gestured toward the luxurious boats tied up to the club’s docks and moorings. “I mean, you’ve become a real player here in the harbor. The girlfriends, the parties, the beachfront house—you’re going to jeopardize all that on some whim?”

“Well, I don’t foresee this being a permanent move down the ladder. In fact, if it’s as successful as I think it’s going to be, I’ll bet it’d only be a couple of years before I could sell the program to a major network.”

Glen stared down through his drink to the bottom of the glass. “And what was the show’s name again?”

“*South Coast Safari.*”

“That’s right, and you’re like some jungle tour guide.”

“Exactly. Khaki hunting clothes, pith helmet, zebra-striped Jeep, the whole adventure-guide shtick.” The words had become sort of a mantra for expressing his vision to anyone willing to listen.

“And the safari theme is what’s going to make it popular.”

“You got it.”

Glen stewed in silence as their waitress came over.

A leggy brunette as attractive as she was flirtatious, the young woman appeared to be about twenty-five years old. “Can I get you gentlemen another martini?” she asked, her attention and smile overtly fixed on Ryan.

Glen watched the instant chemistry spark between his son and the waitress, admitting to himself that the improbable scheme he’d just heard could have real potential. Ryan’s only job to date had been selling something nobody needed in the first place to people with more money than they knew what to do with. In that moment, Glen began to believe that *South Coast Safari* might actually become a hit.

Chapter 1

October 2004 Ordinarily filled with sightseers bound for Cancun, Tulum, or Chichen Itza, the bus was empty except for its sleeping driver. Parked at the far end of Cancun International Airport's pickup zone, the dirty white vehicle had a piece of paper taped to the side door. On the makeshift sign, two names—*Fletcher* and *Tac-Mol*—had been scribbled crudely with a red marker.

Socio-astronomer Mick Fletcher arrived first, exhausted from the flight from Washington, D.C., which stopped in Mexico City and then continued down to the state of Quintana Roo. Lean, fair-skinned, and still blond and boyish at thirty-five, Fletcher dragged his carry-on bag behind him. He appeared weighed down by his heavy backpack, which was full of celestial reference papers and star charts. Making his way to the bus and confirming his name on the rudimentary sign, he rapped on the windshield with his knuckles.

The driver—a frowning man with weathered brown skin and blue-black hair—woke up and yanked the door open with an exaggerated grunt.

"*Buenos tardes*," Fletcher smiled through his weariness.

"Good afternoon," the driver replied in curt, perfect English.

Fletcher blinked through the sweat dripping down his face and climbed into the vehicle. He had forgotten how oppressively hot and humid the Yucatan could be. "I thought it started to cool down here by October," he said with a grin, attempting to lighten the mood.

After receiving a barely perceptible shrug in response, Fletcher headed to the back of the bus and chose a seat next to a window, which he unlocked and slid down for some ventilation. Then he noticed another man making his way through the bustling herd of tourists.

At first glance, the man, short and thick, looked like he could have been the driver's twin. But as he neared, Fletcher could make out the differences: the wide, hooked nose, the high cheekbones and round face. By comparison, the driver seemed to be a blend of Native American and European ancestry, while the person entering the bus looked like a full-blooded Mayan.

With almost regal dignity, the distinguished traveler stepped into the broiling vehicle, paused for a moment, then said something quietly to the *busero*, whose dour expression instantly turned to respect and reverence. After ambling down the aisle and taking the seat directly across from Fletcher, the Mayan looked deep into Mick's eyes and nodded.

A little uncomfortable with the stranger's stare, Fletcher rummaged for an appropriate greeting. "What, may I ask, did you just say to the driver?"

Appearing to be at least seventy years old, the neatly dressed Mayan sat motionless as stone. "I thanked him for the work he does." His soft and tonal reply had a lulling effect. "I acknowledged his dedication in providing for his family. I reassured him that his life was full of meaning."

Fletcher sat up straighter in his seat. “Why would you say that?”

“Say what?”

“That his life was full of meaning. Do you know him?”

The Mayan arched his eyebrows. “No, but I do know much *about* him. I noticed the picture of his children taped to the dashboard. I noticed the simple wedding ring on his finger. I noticed that his hands were callused and dirty, meaning that he probably has a job working in the fields when he’s not driving this bus. Besides, my friend, whether I know him or not, *every* person’s life has meaning.”

Fletcher turned to look out the window again as the bus lurched onto the two-lane highway. Watching the verdant landscape of palms and tall grasses blur past, he knew he was in for quite an adventure. “I suppose I should’ve read your bio more closely back in Washington,” he said, still looking out the window rather than at the Mayan. “It’s unusual that people with such differing backgrounds would be invited to the same archaeological dig.”

“Yes, it is rather unusual, but science and spirit are not always two dogs yanking at opposite ends of a rope. They can be like two oxen working together, pulling the truth further along with each tug of the yoke.”

Fletcher shifted in his seat to face the man. “Spoken like a true shaman,” he surmised with a subtle tilt of his head. “By the way, my name’s Mick Fletcher. I’ve been studying the Mayan calendar for some time now.” He extended a hand in greeting.

Tac-Mol reached out and held Fletcher’s hand in a firm grip. “I am aware of that, as I did read the information your government sent me about *you*. And I must say that I am quite impressed by your depth of understanding about our ancient calendar.” A relaxed smile spread across his weathered face. “My name is Arturo Tac-Mol, and yes, I am a shaman, albeit one with a specialty of sorts. I am known as a *daykeeper*, or *ajq’ij* in my native tongue. Are you familiar with the term?”

Mick slowly disengaged his hand and attempted to mimic Tac-Mol’s guttural inflection. “*Ahk-eeh?* Sorry, but I am far from fluent in ancient Mayan.” For the first time since leaving the US Naval Observatory in Washington, Fletcher was apprehensive, suddenly feeling like an amateur in the company of a seasoned professional. “You know,” he said, still pondering why an astronomer such as himself had been included in an archaeological team excavating the ruins of Tulum, “there aren’t many secrets left to the calendar. There’s a good chance that I won’t have anything new to offer.”

Tac-Mol nodded. “Mr. Fletcher, we both know the calendar’s most baffling mystery is not that it tracks time so accurately, but that it tells of the day—a day concerning a rare planetary alignment—when time itself will stop.”

Even in the heat, Mick felt a chill wash over him at the sound of those words. “Well, yes,” he replied, no longer comfortable with the probing eye contact. He shifted his attention back to the bus window. “I suppose I am one of the few scientists in the world willing to even entertain such a preposterous notion.”

Through the reflection in the window glass, Mick watched Tac-Mol’s face become fixed with concern behind him.

In the final violet moments of twilight, the bus finally pulled up to the gates fronting the temple complex of Tulum.

Fletcher looked out at the modest assemblage of bleached and crumbling ruins perched at the rim of a cliff overlooking the glittering Caribbean Sea. “Gee, I haven’t been here since college.” His eyes scanned the small array of stepped pyramids and rectangular housing structures clustered closely together. “And yet it doesn’t look any different than it did twenty years ago.”

Tac-Mol looked intent and impressed. “Yet something *must* be different for us to have been invited here.”

With the dust settling from the bus’ arrival on the dirt parking lot, a middle-aged man—tan and sporting a curious bowl-cut of thick brown hair—emerged from a small guard shack at the edge of the lot. He stepped forward and embraced each of his guests. “Señor Arturo and Mr. Fletcher! Welcome back to Tulum, both of you!” he beamed. “I’m George Baylor, and on behalf of the proud state of Mississippi and Millsaps College, I’d like to thank you both for coming and offering your expertise to our project.”

Tac-Mol smiled and wrapped his arms around their host. “It is my honor to be here at your service.”

“That goes double for me,” Fletcher chimed in. “I’ve always admired Millsaps’ Department of Mesoamerican Studies. It’s a pleasure to be included in this expedition.”

“Ah, yes, our mighty expedition!” Baylor let out a satirical belly-laugh. “Can you believe it? Every day this place is overrun with thousands of tourists, and yet Tulum is still offering up new secrets.” Then he leaned in toward his visitors, shifted his eyes back and forth, and lowered his voice. “Shall I show some of them to you?” he asked, reaching into a vinyl tote and handing yellow plastic flashlights to his two guests.

“We’d like nothing more,” Fletcher responded, his expectations quickening.

“Excellent,” Baylor said. “Please just leave your things on the bus. Later on you’ll be driven to your hotel, where I’ve made reservations for dinner tonight. I hope you don’t mind.”

“On the contrary,” Tac-Mol answered politely, “it is much appreciated.”

Fletcher nodded in agreement.

“Very good, then,” Baylor said, marching off in front of the two visitors and motioning for them to follow him. “Come quickly. You must see this.”

Activated by a slight yet invigorating drop in temperature, the jungle surrounding the complex was coming alive in the encroaching darkness. With an exotic cacophony of sound, the resident frogs, birds, and insects combined to provide an unsettling ambience for the newcomers.

Aware that his imagination was being stoked by the chorus of eerie cries and squawks, Fletcher tried to ignore his sense of brewing danger. But as he pushed forward

into the thick growth with Baylor and Tac-Mol, he became convinced that their three-person excavation team was being followed. Swinging his flashlight toward the sound of a snapping twig, he froze when the light's narrow beam landed on a pair of eyes that did not belong to any person in the group.

"George! Someone's following us!" he called out, freezing in place.

Baylor gave a casual glance back, noticed the eyes—black, squinting, old—peeking from behind a tree trunk, and moved on.

"Ah, yes, I should have told you about her. She's a regular here at Tulum. Homeless, rarely talks, and when she does, it's in some virtually indecipherable Mayan dialect. Calls herself Ixchel. Quite harmless, I assure you."

"But why is she following us?"

"Because this is her trail that we are on. She sleeps out here in the jungle during the day, then sneaks back into the temple complex every night."

Tac-Mol slowed his pace. "She's the reason we're here, isn't it? She's the one who discovered whatever it is you're about to show us."

Baylor stopped the procession and momentarily shined his light upon Tac-Mol's face. "Your intuition serves you well, my friend. It was less than a month ago, when a security guard from the temple followed her back into the jungle one morning. Upon his return, he said he had watched her duck into an opening—an opening no one had ever noticed before—cut into the hillside."

Before Tac-Mol or Fletcher could consider Baylor's explanation, they found themselves standing in front of an unassuming archway made up of irregularly stacked stones. The portal was all but hidden behind a tangle of hulking palms and enormous philodendron vines.

Taking their cue from Baylor, the two men entered the archway and proceeded through a low and narrow tunnel that Fletcher accurately guessed was guiding them back toward the temple grounds. Stooped over as they walked along the dark, dank passageway, their movement was slow and labored. When the tunnel finally widened into a subterranean earthen chamber roughly ten feet square and eight feet high, Baylor halted his wheezing guests with a raised hand.

"Where are we?" Fletcher asked. On the far side of the chamber, he could make out an unadorned door comprised of a single slab of polished stone.

Baylor's voice was filled with hushed excitement. "We are in an antechamber. Behind that door is a room situated directly below Tulum's Temple of the Descending God."

"He's referring to the stepped pyramid right above us," Tac-Mol said, addressing his explanation to Mick. "It's a small structure topped with a stucco-relief image of a winged human falling headfirst from the heavens."

Growing more anxious by the minute, Fletcher could not contain himself any longer. "So, what's in the hidden room?"

Baylor stepped aside. "Mr. Fletcher, I give you the honor of going in first."

"Me?" Fletcher gulped, assessing the heavy door. "But how am I supposed to open it? That slab must weigh at least a ton."

In an instructional reply, Baylor used the index finger of his left hand to make a gentle sideways pushing motion in the air.

Fletcher approached the threshold and pressed a single finger against the upper left corner of the door, which then pivoted effortlessly on its axis. When the door stopped moving, two identical entrances roughly three feet wide and six feet tall were created on either side of the slab.

“Incredible!” Tac-Mol exclaimed. “Such precise engineering is extraordinary!”

The men stepped single file through one of the openings. When the beams of their lights fell upon the room’s walls, both Tac-Mol and Fletcher’s jaws dropped open in unison.

“What—what *is* this place?” Fletcher stammered.

“I’m not sure,” Baylor replied. “I was hoping you two might be able to help discover the answer to that question.”

Tac-Mol stood in the exact center of the room—a perfect circle capped by a shallow dome—and marveled at the murals painted over every inch of the surrounding stone’s smooth surface. “I have never seen anything like this in my life!” he enthused, gesturing toward the life-sized human figures depicted in various poses on the wall. Then, when he looked directly overhead, he appeared stunned to see the unique interlocking ring design of the Mayan calendar painted on the inside of the dome. Around the calendar, stars were strategically arranged in an illustrated sky of deep indigo blue. “Mr. Fletcher,” he said, his head still tilted back, “I think I know why you and I were invited to come here.”

Quickly shifting his focus to the ceiling, Mick let his light catch every amazing detail of the calendar. “This can’t be real,” was all he said at first. Then, shuffling toward the center of the cylindrical chamber, he began discerning the placement of particular groupings of stars. “Wait a minute. I know this sky!” he said, his eyes widening in recognition.

Baylor held his breath. He had made some educated guesses of his own, but he needed to hear the conclusion of an expert in the field of astronomy. “Is it ... *December?*” he asked.

Fletcher studied the complex calendar and star positions in the sky. Aware of the calendar’s incredible accuracy and ability to foretell every eclipse, solstice, and equinox since its creation, he felt his skin tighten as he considered the device’s final and most astounding prediction: that the procession of time would stop at a specific date in the future.

“It *is* December,” he confirmed. “And, as you have probably guessed, not just *any* December. We are looking at the night sky of the winter solstice, December 21st, 2012—the final day of the Mayan time-system. You can tell the date by two things: the placement of the constellation Aquarius on the eastern horizon and the perfect alignment of all the visible planets on that night.”

Tac-Mol shuddered. With focused attention, he lowered his flashlight and studied the colorful frescoes—an orgy of deep red, turquoise, ochre, and black—painted on the

walls. “In all my years of studying Mayan artwork,” he said, his voice barely rising above a whisper, “I have never seen anything like these images.”

“I’ve had weeks to ponder the meaning behind the figures,” Baylor said, directing his words to Tac-Mol, “and now I’m anxious to hear your thoughts about them. I find myself drawn to these two in particular,” he added, pointing to an illustration of a squatting woman delivering a baby, while right next to her was another woman stabbing herself in the abdomen with a long-handled knife.

Tac-Mol pored over the drawings and began to detect a theme. Situated next to a gaunt and sickly old man, a young, healthy farmer harvested fruit from a tree. Side by side, a smiling child shared space with a gruesome skeleton of similar size. In another part of the room, the familiar Descending God, the winged figure gracing the temple above, was plummeting, just as a similar winged figure a few feet away was ascending majestically upward. Lastly, a fierce warrior stood beside a naked and empty-handed man. “It’s as if each scene represents a polarity of conditions,” Tac-Mol said before turning his attention back to the doorway. Taking a few steps toward the opening, he appeared absorbed in the paintings gracing both sides of the threshold. “And what of this?” he asked himself aloud, rubbing his chin as he stared at two tall, white columns portrayed on either side of the door. Accenting each pair of columns was a cascade of falling water and a figure of an upright dolphin bowing its body toward the opening.

The columns intrigued Baylor as well. “I would hardly attribute this artwork to the Mayans,” he said, “had I not seen it here myself. And did you notice the images painted on the edge of the door? Two circles—sun and moon—stacked vertically on top of each other.”

“Day and night,” Fletcher volunteered. “Kind of goes with the rest of the polarized imagery in the chamber,” he added, pulling out a small digital camera and snapping a picture of each mural in the room. “Don’t you agree, Arturo?”

But Arturo Tac-Mol had grown silent. Long seconds passed while he cocked his head to one side and then the other, softening his focus and letting his eyes absorb the entire design: the open doorway, the paired columns on either side of it, the stacked circles. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and pensive. “It is a symbol,” he said.

Fletcher stared intently at the artwork. “A symbol? What kind of symbol?”

Arturo Tac-Mol, the shaman capable of seeing things that most people never noticed, showed no shame in admitting the truth. “I do not know,” he replied without taking his eyes away from the odd assembly of geometric forms. “However ...” he mused, seeming to follow some obscure idea.

“However ...?” Fletcher prodded.

“However, there are people who do. I can feel them when I look into the doorway. I can sense the way they are holding this very image in their consciousness.”

Baylor looked confused. “All right, then. How do I go about finding one of these people?”

“You don’t,” Tac-Mol replied, peering into the darkness on the other side of the door. “Right now, seemingly by accident, they are finding each other. And eventually, as their numbers multiply, one of them is bound to find you.”

