

FREE FALL TO BLACK

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WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN A CITY OF MORE THAN A HUNDRED THOUSAND people was now a jungle wasteland. From the peak of the La Danta pyramid, 230 feet above the stony ground below, the air felt thin, the sun burned my exposed skin, and the view of flat green canopy was endless.

“Hard to believe we’re on top of the largest pyramid in the world,” the voice next to me said.

Scarlet Roberson, my associate at e-Antiquity, looked out over El Mirador. The former Mayan city had been larger than modern Los Angeles.

“Buck?” she said.

“Where’d they go, Red?”

She leaned over the edge of the flat stone surface and peered down toward our base camp.

“Everyone’s still here—”

“Two thousand years ago, El Mirador was the center of the Mayan world, and then—poof, gone.” My voice sounded faint in the breeze. “What happened?”

Scarlet stood with her hands on her hips. “We’re not here for the Mayan people, we’re here for their missing treasury.”

I turned to face her. The dimple in her right cheek was pinched. Her green eyes were squinted—the sun was behind me—and her red ponytail fluttered in the breeze.

“Right,” I said. “And we’ll have to think like they did to figure out where they stored their riches.”

“You bring a Ouija board? Tarot cards? Divining rod?”

I squeezed her arm. “I don’t need any of that.”

“I hope you’re right, Buck. You know the cost of this expedition is freaking Jack out more than any one we’ve ever done.”

“That’s because our CEO’s become more of a glorified bean counter than ever,” I said. “Doesn’t matter, he’ll be happy. El Mirador has the potential to be the greatest find in history.”

“We’ve been here for a month. The news people are getting antsy. Predicting success with all that certainty may have been a little too bold.”

“I’m feeling bold. I’m feeling like a conqueror, dammit. And the way e-Antiquity’s stock has been kicking ass, when I...when *we* pull this off, we’ll be the talk of every newspaper in the world.”

Her gaze panned over the many stone structures below us and stopped on the opposite side of the clearing where our large safari tents were pitched.

“The ministry officials won’t keep one of their top archeological sites closed for much longer—even for us,” she said.

“I can feel it, Scarlet. Trust me, okay?”

She nodded slowly, staring up into my eyes.

We stood there another ten minutes studying details of the heavily eroded city center. Many other buildings, from temples to storehouse foundations, peeked out from the thick green vegetation. I was very familiar with the overall site plan and each of the known buildings, but from this height I could also see El Mirador’s multiple triadic structures. Historians had concluded that the cluster of three buildings—which typically included one main building flanked on each side by a smaller one—formed triangles in homage to the constellation Orion, which the Mayans considered the seat of creation. I shook my head, baffled—as astronomers had been for centuries. How the hell had the Mayans pulled this off? Especially since the Europeans hadn’t discovered the Orion nebula until 1611.

In the distance I could see remnants of other pre-classical Mayan cities— together with El Mirador they created an even larger triadic configuration. The shape being central to the Mayan DNA, the treasury had to be in a location related to these triadic structures.

I said, “Let’s go review the documents again.”

Going down a pyramid is always more difficult than going up, and my boots scraped loose gravel and moss that tumbled down below me. The sight of pebbles spinning through the air and bouncing off rock steps didn’t stop my brain from working to decode the mystery of the Mayan treasury, any more than did my awareness that most scholars considered it a myth. The Mayans were not known to have worshipped golden idols, precious jewels, or silver. But they’d built a vast

empire with hundreds of thousands of citizens and dominated the region for thousands of years across what today are Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. My gut told me they didn't do all that on sheer will alone, and rulers as powerful as the most noteworthy here at El Mirador, Reino Kan and his heirs, had surely amassed tremendous fortunes in the process. Hell, that was just human nature.

And while the Mayans were many things, they were still men and women when it came right down to it. That, and their being as greedy as people are today, is what I was banking on, and according to Jack Dodson, my co-founder and partner at e-Antiquity, our company had bet the farm on it.

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“YOU KNOW HOW IMPORTANT THIS IS, BUCK.” JACK DODSON’S VOICE crackled over the speaker of my satellite phone. “And while your *gut* is certain about the existence of the Mayan treasury, the market’s very nervous. If we have to raise more equity it’ll reduce the value of our stock, which means our investors will shit bricks.”

“Remember the tenth grade, Jack?”

“What are you talking about?”

“When we created the largest volcano in the history of the DC area for our science project, and the school wanted to shut us down?”

A brief chuckle tickled my ear. “With the scuba tank, road flares, and liquid asphalt they thought would blow up the gymnasium? Yeah, I remember.”

“When Principal Smoller threatened to expel us if we detonated Mount Vesuvius, you called the local TV station and they rushed out to cover our *Guinness Book of World Records* event.”

“They actually thought it was really a world record—”

“They thought it was, because you were so convincing,” I said. “You’ll keep the investors calm, Jack. You always do.”

“Just figure it out before I run out of bullshit,” he said.

“You? That’s not possible, buddy. You’re so full of shit the blue eyes you were born with turned brown.”

With that I turned the phone off.

I glanced around the inside of the safari tent I’d dragged all over the globe. So many locations, so many calls to provide Jack with ammo to reassure investors that all would be fine. Its wood floor shined with the luster of an Aspen boutique hotel. I smiled in appreciation of the global team comprising my handpicked men, taking care of every detail without reminders. For which they were handsomely paid.

It wasn’t yet dusk. The canvas walls were still rolled up, and the gentle breeze wafting the canvas ceiling made it sound like a luffing sail in light wind. My king-size bed was made with blankets folded neatly on the end, ready to grab if the night air had a chill or I was without companionship.

Scarlet walked up the steps into the tent, having showered and changed into shorts and a sleeveless top that accentuated her curves. She held up a bottle of Zacapa Centenario rum in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other. She plopped into one of the two campaign chairs and leaned over the table where the many maps, documents, notes, and photographs of antiquities were laid out.

After leaving her papers on the bed she took ice from the bucket and dropped it in a crystal glass, then poured amber liquid over it from the nearly full bottle.

Behind her on a closed canvas flap was a map for El Mirador and all its buildings—at

least those that had been surveyed so far. Triangular shapes jumped out from multiple locations, and their symmetry nagged at me.

“Buck, the men surveyed another section of the northeast region this afternoon.” She pointed to the folder on the bed. I knew that inside would be hand-drawn maps showing distances and identifying buildings by exact shape and measurements.

“They didn’t find anything.”

I puffed out a long breath as the cook brought in a tray of food.

“You two need to eat before it’s gone.” The sixty-something chef had traveled with me the better part of two years. His long gray beard and shaggy gray hair, parted down the middle the way John Travolta wore his in the 1970s, framed a face with red cheeks and brown eyes that had been known to twinkle.

“Thanks, Cookie,” I said.

He spun on his heel and glared at me. He shoved his open hand forward.

“Name’s Stu, Stu Berry, pleased to be of service.”

“I’m afraid if I call you Stu, you’ll think it’s a request.”

“Very funny. Just stick the tray outside and I’ll pick it up so that damn jaguar doesn’t come sniffing around again.”

As if on cue, we heard a distant roar.

“Too late, Cookie. He’s already smelled your chow.”

White teeth flashed a big smile from the bush of gray beard.

“I’ll load my rifle. A jaguar head will be the perfect addition to my den back in Utah.”

With that he was gone, and soon after so was the food he'd brought us. Scarlet refilled my glass and undid another button on her shirt front.

"I'd better review what the men found today," I said. I meant it, though I was feeling a bit hazy and Scarlet was now sitting next to me on the bed.

The new surveys were of a thousand-foot section in the northeastern edge of the city. There were two additional triadic groupings, with apparent paths or roads noted and foundations labeled as dwellings. Darkness came, and I realized the men had lowered the rest of the canvas flaps and buttoned down my tent while we were eating. We'd been too focused to notice. Candles and propane lights now flickered.

I reached to pour more rum and was surprised to find the bottle nearly empty. It wasn't just the candlelight causing a haze.

More buttons had somehow come undone on Scarlet's top.

"Not tonight," I said. "I need to focus."

Her fingers were fiddling with my shirt buttons.

I took her hand. "No, Scarlet."

She sat back. "That's not what you said last night. Or in Porto Bello, Cartagena, Morocco—"

"I'm not looking for a relationship, you know that."

"It's okay." She glanced to the mirror and we both caught her reflection.

"Whatever happens in the jungle stays in the jungle."

"I need to keep focused. Maybe someday things'll be different."

She finished undoing my shirt buttons—now I was lying flat. When she lay down hard next to me, the sound of paper crumpling made me turn my head, then

slide my arm along the bed to push the papers, the engineering surveys, and the documents onto the floor where they landed with a thud.

Her hand was on my chest, her breath hot on my neck. Semi-comatose in a rum fog, I was still aware of my shirt slipping off, followed by my pants, and then her hot body pressed against mine. I rose to the occasion, and we rolled around clumsily until we were spooning.

The heat of the jungle night felt cool compared to the cauldron brewing between our bodies, and even as I was lost unto her, a small voice inside my head kept whispering: "You'll never figure El Mirador out."

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THE SUN BEAT THROUGH THE PLASTIC WINDOW and cut across my face like scalding water. My eyelids pressed tight as I rolled away and pulled my numb arm from under Scarlet. Her creamy skin glowed, her red hair ablaze against the white sheet. I could hear jungle sounds through the canvas walls, plus the voices of men talking and the scrape of metal as a cart was dropped onto a tow hitch. The air was aromatic with burning wood and cooking food. We'd slept in, and my head ached, but worse, my mouth was dry as dirt. I smacked my lips prospecting for saliva.

The research materials for our expedition were strewn across the floor. I could see the new survey from yesterday atop a detailed map of the area around El Tigre, the second largest pyramid on the site. The drawings and maps were at odd angles, adding to the chaos—

I raised up on my elbow. *Chaos theory?*

A different approach. Chaos theory used random systems to detect small differences suggesting slight anomalies in what were considered predictable

outcomes. When problems seemed unsolvable, or the obvious equations didn't add up, chaos theory occasionally provided an effective method of breaking challenges.

Should we reconsider all the fixed dynamics we'd studied for months? The idea of thinking outside the box, inspired by the scattered papers on the floor, now had me licking my cracked lips.

My gaze rose to the site map attached to the canvas wall, followed its contours, and hesitated on each shape. El Tigre pyramid was at the far western edge, cockeyed on its latitude and facing southeast toward the La Danta pyramid on the far eastern edge. The two pyramids—the central structures of El Mirador—were connected by a straight line, the *Calzada* Danta, or Danta Road to us non-Spanish speakers. Other archeologists had concluded that the straight line between the two pyramids was based on the one at a similar angle between two of the main stars in the Orion constellation. I reached down and rooted through the papers for my star map of Orion, having studied it many times for clues.

Popular thought held that the builders had sited La Danta in El Mirador's configuration to a location that corresponded to the star Betelgeuse in Orion. The largest star in the constellation, Betelgeuse was some thousand times greater than our sun. From La Danta, my eyes followed an imaginary line, like the one in Orion's Belt, toward the equivalent location of Alnitak, a medium-sized star on the left side of the constellation, and all the way to the El Tigre pyramid. But as I studied the constellation map and compared it with the aerial shot of the El Mirador, my breath caught. The line was at a slightly different angle from that of Orion's Belt.

I sat up and swung my feet over the side of the bed, my mind moving faster than the blur of hangover could restrain.

Chaos theory.

“Buck?” Scarlet’s voice was raspy. “What’re you doing?”

“If the Danta Road led to the ruins of Guacamaya, which is situated on the same angle as the one between Betelgeuse and Alnitak,” I said, “then La Danta pyramid may actually equate instead to the bottom right star in the constellation, which is the star Rigel.”

“What are you talking about?”

I jumped out of bed naked, yanked down on the rope on a side flap of the tent to roll it up, and wrapped the rope around a hook.

“You don’t have any clothes on!”

I could hardly keep still. “That would mean that all the previous thinking about El Mirador and Orion has been wrong!”

Scarlet sat up with the sheet covering her breasts.

“What’re you saying?”

I bent over the bed. “What’s considered the center of the constellation Orion?”

“The middle star in the Belt.”

I glanced at the star map. “Alnilam. The brightest star in the constellation—two hundred and fifty thousand times brighter than the sun—”

“Hey, d’you mind lowering the flap?”

“Nice ass, Buck!” Cookie was outside, pointing at me, and the crew, gathered for breakfast, were all laughing. When I yanked the rope again the canvas wall dropped.

“So what’s the point?” Scarlet said.

I bent down and grabbed the aerial map of El Mirador.

“If we misconstrued the Danta Road as matching the location of the bottom line of the constellation, and the imaginary line’s actually south of that, between El Tigre and Guacamaya, and the Danta pyramid is really Rigel—which makes sense, since Rigel and Betelgeuse are the two largest stars, and they match the two largest structures here—then Alnilam is actually further north.”

“But...” Her eyes had grown wide. “That would change everything.”

“My point!” I showed her the aerial map and dragged my finger from the point we’d thought corresponded to the center of the constellation in relation to the city, then up to an area of dense green foliage which, if my new theory was correct, would have been the approximate location corresponding to the actual center of the constellation.

Rummaging through the papers, I found the previous day’s survey. I extrapolated a couple of locations on the survey and aerial, then ran my finger to a spot between two triadic formations that would correspond to the approximate center of the constellation.

“Right here.”

“There’s nothing on the survey but jungle—”

“Exactly! Now get some clothes on and let’s go check it out!”

4

IT HAD TAKEN FOUR HOURS TO LOAD THE GEAR AND CREW, get to the closest point on the road to what I was now referring to as the Alnilam site, and hack through the jungle toward the area between the two unnamed triadic structures.

“Cody, I want you to find me this point right here.” I pointed on the aerial photograph to where I’d overlain the constellation Orion.

We’d recruited Cody Summers, my lead engineer for the past three years, out of Virginia Tech for his brilliance and his exuberant desire to find treasure, as opposed to designing sanitary lines for housing developments. He gave me a look. Short, plump, and constantly drenched with sweat, he was never deterred yet often wanted to challenge my hypotheses. That look meant one of those moments was coming.

“But—”

“This may be contrary to everything else we’ve done so far, but I had an epiphany this morning.”

He glanced at Scarlet, then back at me. “You mean when you were hopping around naked?”

“Sometimes inspiration hits at inopportune times.”

He risked another glance at Scarlet. “I’ll say.”

With no further debate Cody instructed the men to set up their tripod-based, motorized, robotic, total stations and surveying tools, all connected to a laptop he carried in his backpack.

Scarlet and I watched from the tailgate of our Land Rover while the men used the sophisticated surveying equipment to triangulate their way toward the Alnilam end point.

“I hope you’re right about this, Buck.”

“I can feel it in my gut.” I watched the men, anxious to get digging.

Scarlet nudged me. “Have you noticed those guys?”

Our small press corps had turned out in full. Three journalists, one from the *New York Times*, one from *National Geographic*, and one from *Nuestra Diario*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Central America. The guy from the *Times* also had a photographer. Collectively, they looked more excited than we’d seen them since their arrival weeks ago.

“Piranhas. They smell blood.”

“Which is good,” she said. “It wasn’t easy to convince the *Times* and *National Geographic* to join us here.”

I turned to look into Scarlet's eyes.

"Rhodes Scholar, Oxford-trained archeologist, *and* public relations guru.

You're a real prize, Red."

When she turned away I realized she might have preferred something more personal, but now wasn't the time. We were on a fresh thread, and it felt to me like it was about to pull all the loose ones tight.

Cody took off his VT hat to wipe his forehead. "Okay, y'all, we have an intersection of points that marks your spot. We staked it."

"Machetes and shovels," I said.

Scarlet shrugged. "The press was hoping for something more out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*."

I jumped off the Rover's tailgate. "If it were just hidden in some cave it would've been discovered long ago." I smiled. "Let's go make history."

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THE SPOT CODY HAD IDENTIFIED WAS DEEP IN THICK JUNGLE. Our local team of men whipped their machetes to make quick progress through the surrounding scrub, undergrowth, and saplings until they'd cleared a circular site approximately fifty feet across. With that done, they raked the clearing down to dirt to uncover a small stone pyramid, one foot square and three feet from the stake the survey team had placed in the center of the Alnilam site.

A murmur of excitement passed through the group. The journalists took notes, and the *Times* photographer snapped a couple of pictures.

"Pressure's on, Buck," Scarlet said. "Good luck."

I grabbed a shovel out of the trailer.

"Luck is for the lottery," I said.

I stood for a moment in the center of the clearing to glance around at the men, then began shoveling down through what could be a millennium of organic

debris, a few feet from the stone pyramid. I was quickly soaked in the hundred-degree heat, yet whenever the men offered to assist I shook my head.

The sound of the camera shutter clicking drove me, the lust for headlines almost as strong as the desire for discovery. On the sites we'd pursued, e-Antiquity had achieved nearly a fifty percent hit rate, unprecedented for treasure hunters. In total our finds had yielded hundreds of millions of dollars—most of which had been claimed by the governments where the antiquities were found. Yet the string of successes had given us notoriety, and when we took our small company public, investors followed with dreams of exponential riches. They weren't unhappy, but we'd yet to find "the big one."

As I dug, Jack's words haunted me. We'd bet the farm on El Mirador, and now my Chaos theory had diverted our team into virgin territory.

"You're four feet deep, Buck," Cody said.

"That should equate to approximately a thousand years of organic sediment," Scarlet said.

More camera clicks followed, and all I could see at my eye level were people's feet. When I stopped for a breather Cody handed me a bottle of water.

"Anything?" he said in a low voice.

I shook my head.

"Want me to dig for awhile?" Cody said.

I shook my head again, unable to speak.

After twenty more minutes of digging, a quiet chant sounded in the air around the hole. It took me a moment to understand what the group was yelling.

When I did, though, the chill that ran down my spine and arms made me fumble the shovel.

“Buck! Buck! Buck! Buck!”

The encouragement revived my numb limbs, and before long I was up to my neck in black dirt. My hole had narrowed, and root matter, leaves, worms, and dirt had been the sole product. As if through a tunnel, I heard Scarlet’s voice.

“No rocks or other antiquities in the hole proves that all the fill’s organic, and the deeper Buck goes without hitting rock, then the older the—”

CLUNK.

My shovel hit something hard, sending a shock wave through my tired body. I’d been so committed to my Alnilam theory that I was willing to dig to China to prove it right.

God, please, let this be something important.

I thrust my shovel forward—

CLUNK!

Again—

CLUNK, CLUNK, CLUNK.

Every attempt in a three-foot radius met with solid rock.

“You want help, Buck?” Cody said.

“Throw me a broom.”

Using the broom, then my hands, I exposed gray rock. It was the color of the limestone Mayan structures. By itself, it meant nothing.

Exhaustion and self-doubt threatened. Voices called out from the rim of the hole, asking what I saw. I continued digging, scraping, and brushing away dirt, hoping for something to report—

A circular mark appeared on the stone below me. I brushed a wider circle around it and found more carved lines—I swallowed—more lines appeared. Then the lines came together into a tight angle, with other subtler lines. Teeth.

The rock I'd begun to uncover had a squinted eye and a mouth baring teeth!

“Something's here!”

There was a scramble above me.

I climbed out of the hole, now more than seven feet deep, and without a word our excavation team jumped right in. They barraged me with questions and the photographer clicked away, but I couldn't yet speak coherently, both exhausted and desperate with thirst. Scarlet handed me water, and everyone waited until I looked up.

My face had to be covered in dirt, but my smile created a domino effect of smiles.

“I'm very confident...that I've just made...a major...discovery.”

The journalist from *National Geographic* shouted, “Why so confident?”

I dropped to one knee and used a stick in the dirt to sketch out the carving I'd found—a serpent's head with exposed fangs.

“You recognize that?”

“The symbol of Reino Kan?” the journalist from the *National Geographic* said.

“Very good. The Serpent King was the supreme leader of El Mirador at the height of the city’s strength. We know no details about his death or his heirs’ deaths, but we know their dynasty flourished between 600 BC and 100 AD.”

When I stood up, I was looking down at the chunky journalist, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“Wasn’t long after that,” he said, “the Mayan people lost faith in the leaders here at El Mirador and abandoned the city.”

I nodded, appreciative that he’d done his homework. That meant he’d write a meaningful article on whatever we were about to find. The sound of multiple shovels scraping against rock rose from the hole like smoke from a chimney.

I went on to elaborate. “My hypothesis is that the people lost faith and left because the king, or his heirs, took the wealth with them when they died. I’m banking on the treasury, as I’ve referred to it, being buried with the Serpent King—”

“Buck!” It was Cody. “We found an edge to the stone!”

Back down in the now six-foot-wide hole, I knelt to examine the gap Cody had discovered a foot from the edge of the dirt wall.

“Use that pry bar,” I said, “and give it all you’ve got.”

Two of our Guatemalan crew got in position as Cody and I crawled up out of the way. I gave them the signal and they leaned into the pry bar—the stone moved! They tried again, it lifted a few inches—BOOM! It crashed back down.

I jumped back into the hole and added my weight to the lever—my guts feeling as if they’d split wide open—the stone lifted—dust shot out from inside as if

the space below had been filled with compressed air. We shifted our weight to the right and the stone walked with us—

Cody yelled, “Another foot over!”

“BUCK! BUCK! BUCK! BUCK!”

Louder now, the chant made me clench my teeth and press harder.

“That’s good!” Cody said.

We slowly lowered the seal stone, and I could feel my heart pounding in my jugular vein. The chasm below was a dark void.

“Throw me a light!”

Scarlet slid down the side of the hole holding a light in each hand. She was breathing heavily.

“What do you think?” she said.

“Smell that?” I said.

Her nose quivered like a mouse catching wind of cheese.

“Putrefaction. This tomb’s been closed tight.”

Scarlet broke into the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her face.

“Let’s kick some serpent ass,” I said.

Lying on my stomach, I pointed the light into the depths of the hole—bright colors adorned the walls of the expansive chamber. Reds, yellows, greens, blues, painted images that seemed as fresh as the day the crypt was sealed. The bottom of the chamber was only about eight feet down. I hung onto the edge, silently counted to three, and dropped in—THUMP! I hit and rolled to my right, thudding into something solid.

I shined the light forward—it *was* a cavern.

And it wasn't empty.

Scarlet called down. "What d'you see?"

It took me a minute before I could say anything.

"Come on, I'll catch you!"

She lowered her feet, and I was able to grab her ankles and guide her onto my shoulders. Her light beam slashed through the darkness—

"My God, Buck!"

Dirt rained down from above as Cody and the journalists dropped into the hole, then lowered themselves into the chamber. Each one had the same reaction, if not expressed in the same words.

"Holy crap!" said the photographer from *National Geographic*.

"What the hell?" said the journalist from the *Times*.

"*¡Querido Dios!*" the local reporter said.

The observer from the University of Central America just stared, open-mouthed.

"Son of a bitch!" Cody said.

All our light beams caught on the mummified remains of what I fully expected to be Reino Kan and three other men, all ornamented in brightly covered shrouds, no doubt buried at different times in the family tomb. After a moment I aimed my light past the dead kings into what was a shockingly deep chamber, all of it with the same brightly painted red walls, ornately decorated with images of El

Mirador in its heyday. La Danta appeared central and regal. But there were also illustrations of men fighting—many men—an historic detail of war.

“The walls are so brilliant,” the journalist from *National Geographic* said.

“Painted with the blood of virgins,” I said.

The sound of his mouth sucking air made me smile.

Everyone fell silent.

When we aimed our lights deeper into the cavern a collective gasp broke the silence. Piles and piles of antiquities and riches—gold, obsidian, fabrics, pottery, weapons, more gold, silver, jewels—were piled several feet deep to the end, some fifty feet away. It was a blur of valuables that the king, or kings, had sought to take with them into their afterlife.

“The treasury.” Scarlet’s voice was a whisper.

“Yeah!” I pumped my fist. “Yeah, yeah, yeah!”

Scarlet and I laughed—embraced—and danced a jig while the photographer’s flash strobed staccato shadows onto the bloody walls. Cody jumped between us and the three of us spun around shrieking and laughing until tears filled my eyes.

“You did it, Buck!” Cody said.