The Lost Origin

El orígen perdído

by Matilde Asensi, 1962–

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Table of Contents

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Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
—Arthur C. Clarke

Chapter I

The problem that I could just make out that afternoon, while standing motionless in the dust, the shadows, and the scents of that old and closed building, was that being a progressive urbanite, skeptic, and technologically-developed man from the beginning of the twenty-first century made me incapable of taking into consideration anything that fell outside the purview of the five senses. At that moment, life for a hacker like me was only a complex system of algorithms written in a programming language for which there was no manual. That is to say, that afternoon I was one of those who believed that to live was to learn every day to run your personal unstable computer program without the opportunity for prior studies or tests or essays. Life was what it was and, what's more, very short, so mine consisted of keeping permanently busy, without thinking about anything that didn't have to do with what I was doing in every moment, especially if, as at that time, what I was doing was, among other things, a crime punished by law.

I remember that I stopped for a second to consider with astonishment the worn details of that set that, in a time that to me seemed very distant (twenty or maybe thirty years), had gleamed and hummed with the lights and the music of live orchestras. Although the last hours of that day in late May still hadn't completely passed the sun already couldn't be seen from behind the buttresses of the old Miramar television studios in Barcelona which, although closed up and abandoned, were again about to serve, thanks to my friends and me, what had been their original purpose. Looking at them from the inside, as I did, and listening to the echo of the famous voices that would always inhabit them, it

seemed impossible to think that in a few months they would be converted into one more luxury hotel for tourists.

At my side, Proxi and Jabba worked to mount the equipment over a veteran wooden grandstand with peeling paint on which the splendor of the lamps from the street fell with difficulty. Proxi's pants, black and marked with ash, barely covered her ankles and those sharp little bones, those ridges, threw enormous shadows over her legs, long and contoured, thanks to the neon flashlights that were resting on the dais. Jabba, one of Ker-Central's best engineers, connected the camera to the portable computer and to the signal amplifier skillfully and quickly; despite being so large, stocky, and gelatinous, Jabba belonged to that race of intelligent guys used to being in the air and the sun, who, besides having been hardened in a thousand battles against code, still retained something of the confidence of the primitive man in the modern man.

"I've finished," Jabba told me, raising his gaze. His eyes, nose, and mouth were crammed into the center of the circle of his round face. He had pushed the strands of his long red hair behind his ears.

"Are the connections operational?" I asked Proxi.

"In a couple of minutes."

I looked at my watch. The hands, which stuck directly out of the bearded Captain Haddock's nose, showed five till eight. In a little more than a half hour everything would be finished. At the moment, the parabolic antenna was already oriented, and the access point ready to open so all that remained before I could start working was for Jabba to finish mounting the wireless connection.

At that moment I discovered what it was that for a while now had seemed so familiar about that set: it smelled the same as the attic in my grandmother's house in Vic, a smell of old furniture, mothballs and oxidized metal. I hadn't talked to my grandmother for a long time but that was not my fault because whenever I decided to go see her she was leaving on a trip to some remote part of the globe in the company of her crazy friends, all of them widows in their eighties. Surely she would have loved to visit those old Miramar studios because in her time she had been a passionate follower of Herta Frankel's show with her little dog, Marilyn.

"Okay," announced Proxi. "Now you're in."

I sat on the moldy floor with my legs crossed and rested the laptop between my knees. Jabba settled in next to me and leaned in to watch the entry process on the screen. I slipped into the TraxSG Foundation's computers using my own version of "Sevendoolf," a well known Trojan horse which, using back doors, allowed entrance into remote systems.

"How did you get the passwords?" Proxi wanted to know, positioning herself on the other side of Jabba and adopting the same posture. Proxi was one of those women that one never knew how to look at. Every part of her body was perfect in and of itself and her face, framed by brilliant short black hair, was very attractive, with a cute sharp nose and big dark eyes. Nevertheless, the combination lacked harmony, as if her feet belonged to a different body, her arms a couple of sizes bigger and her waist, although slender, too big for her narrow hips. "By brute force?" she ventured.

“I’ve had my home computers doing tests since this whole business started.” I replied, smiling. Never, not even under the effects of Pentothal, would I reveal my most valuable secrets to another hacker.

The system, which worked with a Microsoft SQL Server and used Windows NT for its local network, didn’t have the smallest security measure at its disposal. That network didn’t even have an updated antivirus. The last update was from May of 2001 exactly a year before: It was depressing to pirate in such conditions especially after the effort invested in an operation of that magnitude.

“They’re completely irresponsible…” For a good hacker, a life-long one like Jabba, there were things that were neither humane nor technically conceivable.

“Careful!” Proxi suddenly warned me, leaning over my shoulder to better see the monitor. “Don’t touch any files. They’re probably full of viruses, worms, and spyware.”**(1-1)**

Proxi, who in real life worked in Ker-Central’s Security Department, knew in gory detail the terrible consequences of a few lines of malicious code. In fact, it was not even necessary to open those cyber-poisons to activate them; it was enough to pass the cursor inadvertently over them.

“There’s the folder of logos,” Jabba pointed out, touching his index finger to the plasma screen which rippled like a pool of oil.

He hadn’t had to work too hard to find it. The engineer responsible for TraxSG’s computer system, based on very good criteria, had baptized said subdirectory as “Logos,” and afterwards, I supposed, had gone to drink some beers to celebrate his great intelligence. I would have liked to leave him some congratulatory message, but I limited myself to examining the contents of the computer and transferring a new set of logos that would be substituted for the famous designs of TraxSG—the name written vertically with lettering in different fonts, sizes and colors—allowing the phrase “no fees, no corporate thieves” to be read every time someone from the Foundation turned on a computer, started a program or simply wanted to log off. I also sent a executable file which would remain hidden in the depths of the machine and that would renew the modifications every time someone tried to erase them in such a way that it would cost them a lot of time and money to recover their original brand. This file, among other things, would print on all documents a pirate skull over two crossbones and, again, the phrase “no fees, no corporate thieves.” Lastly, I made a copy of all the documents that I found relating to the cursed fees that the Foundation had managed to impose on software manufacturers, and I distributed them generously over the internet. All that was left was to launch on the net, from those Miramar studios, and for as long as it took them to find the broadcasting equipment and turn it off, the campaign designed by us, asking for the boycott of all TraxSG products and encouraging people to buy the same products in foreign markets.

“We should go,” Jabba warned with alarm, looking at his watch. “The security guard will pass through the hall in in three minutes.”

I closed the laptop, left it on the floor and stood up, shaking my jeans. Proxi covered the dais with a thick canvas that would hide the equipment from the eyes of possible viewers; that cover would not keep it from being discovered, sooner or later, but at least it would give the protest a few days. It was going to be fun to see the news in the papers.

Taking advantage of the last few seconds of our stay there, while Proxi and Jabba worked to pick up the scraps of hardware, I took a small can of red spray paint out of my pack, put the Harcore valve on it for large thick strokes, shook it until I heard the little metallic clicks inside that meant the mixture was ready, and with a good dose of personal vanity, I drew on one of the walls a very large sphere in whose interior I traced a long and dramatic loop, filling it up horizontally, and signed it with the nickname by which I was known: Root. This was my tag, my personal signature, visible in many supposedly impregnable places. If, on this occasion, I hadn't included it on the TraxSG's computers—I always left it in pirated places, real or virtual—it was because I was not alone and I was not working by myself.

"Let's go," Jabba urged, heading with a light stride towards the doors of the studio.

We turned off the flashlights and with only the light from the small emergency bulbs for a guide we crossed hallways and went down the staircases quickly and stealthily. The transformer casing that housed the studio's ancient electric grid was located in the basement. There, on the floor, obscured by our spelunking tools, a sheet of iron led to the strange subterranean world hidden beneath the asphalt of Barcelona: Connected at various points to the more than fifty miles of subway and train tunnels, the colossal framework of sewer corridors that joined with all buildings, centers, and official institutions of the city could be found. Like New York, London, or Paris, Barcelona hid another city in its guts, a city just as alive and full of mysteries as the one above, the one which received the light of the sun and the waters of the sea. This hidden city, besides having its own populated centers, its own native vegetation, its own animals and its own police force (the so-called "Underground Unit,"), also had its numerous tourists that arrived from all parts of the world to practice a sport—illegal, naturally—known as urban spelunking.

I took off the elastic band holding my hair and fit the helmet on my head, pulling the chinstrap forward. Our three Ecrin Roc helmets had LED[1-2] headlights held in their clips, which produced a much whiter light than normal ones and were much less dangerous in case of gas leaks. Also, if one of the LEDs blew out there would always be others working so you would never end up completely in the dark.

Like a perfectly synchronized military operation, we turned on the gas detectors, lifted the iron sheet with the forged mark of the electric company off the floor and set out through a long vertical passageway that descended straight down for a long stretch, causing an oppressive sense of claustrophobia—especially for Jabba, who was the largest of the three. The incredible length of the passageway was due to the fact that the Miramar studios had been erected on one of the two mountains of Barcelona, Montjuïc, so they were at a high altitude compared to ground level. Like almost all pipes of this kind, a quarter of the space of the passageway was filled with electric cables whose anchorages in the cement we used to climb down. So we were wearing some uncomfortable insulating gloves which further hindered our descent.

We made it at last to the service tunnel that joined Zona Franca with Catalonia Square. Underground, if there's something really impressive, it's not the snakes,

or the rats or the ghostly people that you may find on your way; what really makes your heart pound and twists your stomach is the overwhelming silence, the absolute darkness and the intense smell of sticky humidity. There, surrounded by emptiness, any small sound multiplies and distorts infinitely and all places look the same. In Paris, a couple of years before, despite the fact that we were accompanied by a guy from the French Group of Urban Spelunking who knew the guts of the city like the palm of his hand, my team had gotten lost for six hours in the icy medieval sewer that pierces the eastern arm of the Seine. It had never happened to me again, but the experience was dangerous enough to force me since that day to take all possible precautions.

We descended a little further, using one of the steep shafts of the sewer system, but at the level of Hospital Street after changing course at the collectors' junction of Liceu Station—where, incidentally, my tag was drawn right beside the steps that led up to the old boiler room—a tiny trap door, dirty and corroded by rust, allowed us access to the network of subway tunnels. Few people knew, or remembered, that in the mid-seventies a pedestrian walkway had been built between Liceu Station and Urguinaona Station with the idea of connecting Lines 3 and 4 and relieving the crowded and labyrinthine state of the central station of Catalonia. Thirty years later, that path was only used by us and by about fifty underworld city-dwellers who had made a habitual residence of that dirty and unsanitary cesspool. They were mostly silent and ageless people, among whom were all kinds of strange specimens.

In the center of that walkway that stank of urine and grime was the old metal door that gave way to a lower level of corridors. As soon as we got to the bottom of some metal stairs we headed towards the mouth of the tunnel in front of us. We went single-file for about a hundred yards along the right side of the tracks with our ears open in case a train approached (which would not have been at all strange, since we were walking along a stretch of Line 4), and we stopped in front of a narrow chink that could barely be seen in the blackened wall. With the key that I kept in one of the pockets of my jeans, I released the padlock and opened it, and once we were inside, Jabba shot the iron bolts that made it impregnable from the outside. The solid metal trap door opened at our feet allowing us to see the vertical fifty-foot drop through which we had to descend. That was always the last diversion on our outings. We hooked the descenders to our front carabiners, and we descended together at top speed, using the lines permanently installed in the opening. Of course, whenever we had to go up we took the stairs.

At last, with a clatter we put our feet down on the floor of the old abandoned tunnel in which we had our "100 series." No one besides us three knew of the existence of that passageway. It belonged to one of the first suburban railway lines of the city built a little after 1925 for the Compañía del Gran Metro de Barcelona. It was Y-shaped and the fork was located at Aragó Street, right where I lived and where my software company, Ker-Central, was located. Enjoying the draft that came in through the gutters of the vault, we went about relieving ourselves of our spelunking gear while we moved easily up the cavern, so wide it would have allowed for two large trucks to pass next to each other. Around us everything remained dark, since it was always night there and always autumn, but we were in safe and familiar territory.

Fifteen hundred feet above us we had found the giant red poster in which the actor Willem Dafoe, advertising a brand of whiskey, was saying the so-profound phrase *Authentic Begins with You*. At the insistence of Proxi, we had "acquired" it in the very Passeig de Gràcia Station that was at this very moment above our heads since, according to her, it went perfectly with our activities in the "100 series." Jabba, following an undeniable impulse born of his past as a graffiti artist, had painted over the actor's monumental forehead the word *Bufanúvols*,[1-3] and had remained perfectly calm while he had listened to the telling off that Proxi had given him.

Right at the fork of the tunnel, almost touching the ticket booth of Paseig de Gràcia Station, was a dignified passenger carriage that had been abandoned when that line of Metropolitan Rail had closed. The day we discovered it had been our lucky day. Stranded on its rails for at least forty years, the "100 series"—as proclaimed the metallic plates of its sides—had spent decade after decade falling into ruin without anyone remembering its existence. Made entirely of wood, with numerous oval windows, a white interior which still housed the lengthwise seats and lit by small incandescent bulbs that still hung from the ceiling, it would have deserved to be in any museum of trains in the world, but, lucky for us, some incompetent functionary had left it to sleep the sleep of the just, changing with the years into a refuge for rats, mice and all kinds of other vermin.

We had spent a long time removing the grime, sanding, varnishing and polishing the wood, reinforcing the supports and joints, burnishing the metal; and when it was blindingly shiny and sturdy as a rock we filled it with cords, computers, monitors, printers, scanners, and all kinds of radio and television equipment. We lit that part of the tunnel and the inside of the carriage and we filled a small refrigerator with snacks and drinks. Several years had passed since then in which we had added new comforts and more modern equipment.

Right after we went inside, before I had time to take my backpack off, the telephone to which I'd forwarded calls from my cell started to ring.

"What time is it?" Proxi asked Jabba, who was just barging into the carriage.

"Almost nine," he replied, looking anxiously at the lit computer screens. He had left a program running which was trying to break, by brute force (trying millions of possible alphanumeric combinations from data bases), the passwords to some system architecture files.

The telephone screen told me it was my brother who was calling. I took off the turtle-neck black sweater, pulling it over my head as fast as I could, and answered while I put my hair back up in the elastic band.

"What's up, Daniel?"

"Arnau?" That feminine voice was not my brother's, it was my sister-in-law Mariona's.

"It's me, Ona, what's up?" Proxi put an open can of juice in my hand.

"I've been trying to find you for hours!" she exclaimed in a sharp voice. "We're at the hospital. Daniel has gotten sick."

"The boy or my brother?" Mariona and Daniel had a one-year-old son, my only nephew, who had the same name as his father.

"Your brother!" she yelled impatiently. And, as if my confusion were an incomprehensible stupidity, she clarified: "Daniel!"

For a moment I was paralyzed, unable to react. My brother had an iron constitution; he never even caught a cold when everyone else was going around with a tissue in one hand and several degrees of fever so I couldn't get the idea through my head that he could be in the hospital. So… An accident. With the car.

"We were at home," Mariona started to explain, "and suddenly he seemed confused, not there… He would only talk nonsense. I got really scared and called the doctor and he, after examining him for a while, called an ambulance to take him to the hospital. We got to the ER around seven at night. Why weren't you answering your phone? I've called you at home, at the office… I've called your secretary, Lola and Marc, your mother…"

"You've… called London?" I was so astonished I couldn't find words.

"Yes, but your mother's gone out. I talked to Clifford."

By then, Proxi and Jabba had placed themselves at my back, hanging on my conversation. You didn't have to be a genius to notice something serious was going on.

"Which hospital are you at?"

"At La Custòdia."

I looked at my watch, in shock, and calculated how long it would take me to get there. I needed a shower, but that was the last thing on my mind. I had clean clothes in the "100" and could be in the garage in five minutes, get the car, and be in Guinardó in another ten.

"I'm on my way. Give me fifteen minutes. Is the boy with you?"

"What else was I supposed to do?" Her tone held an sharp tone that showed hostility.

"I'm leaving right now. Relax."

Proxi and Jabba remained motionless, looking at me, waiting for information. While I changed my sweater, sneakers, and jeans, I told them what my sister-in-law had said. Without hesitation, they offered to stay with little Dani.

"We'll go home as soon as Jabba finishes," Proxi said, "but if you need us beforehand, all you have to do is call."

I left the "100" in a flash, crossed the tunnel to the opposite end and went up the vertical stairs that led directly to the cleaning cupboard in the basement of Ker-Central. Once there, I quickly closed the iron cover and went out into the garage, crossing it at a run until I got to my car, the burgundy Volvo parked next to Jabba and Proxi's red Dodge Ram, the only two cars remaining on the premises at this time of night. Taheb, the watchman, who was placidly eating dinner in front of a small television inside his bulletproof glass cabin, followed me with his eyes, impassive, and luckily seemed to decide to open the security gate and let me out without subjecting me to one of his usual discourses on the political situation in the Sahara.

When the tires touched the pavement I noticed that it was the worst time of day for driving in the city. Hundreds of people trying to get home and have dinner in front of the television flooded Aragó Street with their cars. I felt my blood pressure rise and began the transformation that turned me from the peaceful citizen I still was to the aggressive driver incapable of putting up with the smallest insult. I followed Consell Street to Roger de Llúria. I had to run a red light at the corner of Passeig de Sant Joan and Travessera de Gràcia because of a Skoda coming up

behind me at top speed and on Secretari Coloma I was caught in a monumental traffic jam that I took advantage of to call my brother's cell and tell Ona that I would be there soon and that she should come look for me outside.

The gray mass of the old building that was La Custòdia was very depressing. It looked like a pile of cubes full of tiny holes. If that was all an architect could come up with after so many years of study, I told myself as I looked for the entrance to the parking garage, he might as well have dedicated himself to digging trenches. Fortunately, a large quantity of cars was leaving at that very moment—it must have been time for a shift change—so I was able to park quickly, freeing myself of the necessity of driving around in circles in that undignified paradigm of vulgarity. I'd never been in that hospital before, and I had no idea where to go. Luckily, Ona, who was waiting for me, had seen me park, and with little Dani asleep in her arms, started over while I was getting out of the car.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," she murmured, while, leaning to one side so she wouldn't wake the boy, she gave me a kiss and smiled sadly. Wrapped in the folds of a small blue blanket, Dani rested his head on his mother's shoulder with his eyes closed and his pacifier in his mouth. His hair, scandalously blond and very short, stuck up so much that, depending on how the light hit it, it looked like a flashing electrical aura. In this he took after his father.

"And my brother?" I asked, walking with her toward the steps at the entrance.

"They just took him up to the floor. The neurologist is still with him."

We crossed through the doors of the immense building and went through hallways and more hallways with the paint chipping on the walls until we got to the elevators. The original marble overlay of the floor was no longer visible since where the stone wasn't totally worn away you could see globs of something that looked like black rubber that made the wheels of the stretchers the orderlies pushed jump into the air. Every corner had a sign pointing to undesirable places: SURGERY, RADIATION, REHABILITATION, DIALYSIS, LABORATORY, OPERATING ROOMS. Not even the squeaky elevator we crammed ourselves into with fifteen or twenty people, very similar in size and shape to a shipping container, was free of that odor of God-knows-what that's so characteristic of hospitals. Cold white neon lights, labyrinths of paths and stairways, giant doors with mysterious letters (ASU, CT, EEG), people with lost looks and expressions of anxiety, worry, or pain wandering from place to place as if time didn't exist… And, in fact, time didn't exist inside that body-repair shop, as if the nearness of death stopped the clocks until the doctor-mechanic gave his permission to keep living.

Ona walked next to me, resolutely weighted down with Dani's bag of supplies and the almost twenty-five pounds of her son. My sister-in-law was very young; she had recently turned twenty-one. She had met Daniel during her first term of college in the Introduction to Anthropology class my brother was giving that year at the university, and they moved in together shortly after that, partly for love and partly, I suppose, because Mariona was from Montcorbau, a small town in Aran Valley, and it must not have been very comfortable for them to share their intimacy with the other four Aranesan students who shared Ona's apartment. Before that, Daniel had lived with me, but suddenly, one day, he had appeared in the door of the living room with his computer monitor under his arm, a backpack on his shoulder, and a suitcase in his hand.

“I’m going to live with Ona,” he had announced with a happy expression. My brother’s eyes were a very surprising color, an intense uncommon violet. Apparently he had inherited them from his paternal grandmother, Clifford’s mother, and he was so proud of them that he had been very disappointed when his son Dani’s eyes, when they had lightened, had stayed simply blue. To highlight the different genetic combinations we came from, mine were dark brown, like coffee, like my dark hair, although that’s where the physical differences ended.

“Congratulations,” was all I had said in reply that day. “Good luck to you.”

It’s not that my brother and I didn’t get along. On the contrary; we were as united as two brothers could be who loved each other and who had grown up practically alone. The problem was that, both of us being sons of Eulàlia Sañé (once the most talkative woman in Catalonia and, for the last twenty-five years, of England), we had no choice but to turn out quiet. And in any case, during the course of life, one learns, experiments, and matures; but as far as change goes, what is referred to as change, people do not change much because they are at every moment the same as they always have been.

My father died in 1972 when I was five years old, after being bedridden for a long time. The only memory I have is an image of him sitting in an armchair, beckoning to me with his hand, but I’m not sure it’s real. Shortly after, my mother married Clifford Cornwall and Daniel was born two years later, shortly after my seventh birthday. They gave him that name because it was identical in both languages, although we always pronounced it like in English, putting the stress on the “A.” Clifford’s job in the Foreign Office required him to travel incessantly between London and Barcelona where the General Consulate was, so we kept living in the same house as always and he came and went. My mother, for her part, kept herself busy with friendships, her social life, and continuing to be—or considering herself to be—the spiritual muse of the ample group of my father’s old work friends from the university, where he’d been head of the Department of Metaphysics for twenty-some years (he had been much older than my mother when they had married in Mallorca, where he was originally from), so Daniel and I had a very solitary childhood. Every once in a while they sent us off to Vic for a few months with our grandmother until they noticed that I was starting to bring home horrendous grades from school, from having missed so much class. So they enrolled me in boarding school at La Salle Academy, and my mother, Clifford, and Daniel went to live in England. At first I thought they were going to take me with them, or rather that we would all go together, but when I noticed that it wasn’t going to happen, I had no trouble coming to terms with the fact that I would have to learn to survive alone, and that I couldn’t trust anyone other than my grandmother who waited for me every Friday afternoon like a post at the exit of the academy. When I started my first business, Inter-Ker, in 1994, my brother, desperate to separate himself from our mother’s apron strings, returned to Barcelona to study Spanish Language and Literature and after that, a graduate degree in Anthropology at the Autonomous University. Since then, and up to the day he had left, saying “I’m going to live with Ona,” we had lived together.

Despite his being as introverted as I, people in general appreciated Daniel much more for his affability and sweetness. He spoke little, but when he did everyone paid attention and thought they’d never heard anything so opportune or

interesting. Like his son, he almost always had a smile on his face, while I was surly and taciturn, incapable of maintaining a normal conversation with anyone in whom I had not placed all of my trust many years previously. It's true I had friends (although more than friends they were in reality close acquaintances), and, for business, I maintained relations with people all over the world, but they were as strange as I, little disposed to communicate or only doing so via a keyboard, with lives that almost always took place under artificial light and who, when they weren't in front of a computer, dedicated themselves to hobbies as eccentric as urban spelunking or role-playing games, collecting wild animals or studying fractal functions,[1-4] much more important, naturally, than any living person close to them.

"…and kept repeating that he was dead, and that he wanted me to bury him." A small sob escaped from Ona's throat.

I came suddenly back to reality, finding myself blinded by the neon lights, as if I had been walking with my eyes closed. I hadn't heard anything my sister-in-law had been telling me. My nephew's blue eyes now looked at me attentively from his mother's shoulder, and from the edge of his pacifier dripped a thin string of drool that hung from a sleepy smile. Really, more than looking at me, what my nephew was contemplating was the small earring that gleamed on my earlobe. Since his father had an identical one, to the boy it was a familiar element that identified us.

"Hi, Dani!" I murmured, caressing his cheek with my finger. My nephew's smile widened and the drool flowed freely onto Ona's sweater.

"He woke up!" his mother exclaimed sadly, stopping in the middle of the hallway.

"Marc and Lola have offered to stay with him tonight," I told her. "Is that okay with you?"

My sister-in-law's eyes widened, showing infinite gratitude. Ona had light brown hair and wore it very short, arranged in such a way that it always seemed comically disheveled. A substantial orange-dyed streak framed her right cheek, making her freckles and the intense white of her skin stand out. That night, however, more than a fresh and attractive young woman, she seemed a frightened child in need of her mother.

"Oh, yes! Of course it's okay!" With an energetic movement, she sat Dani up and held his face close to hers. "You're going to Marc and Lola's house, darling, okay?" she asked him, showing immense joy, and the baby, without knowing he was being manipulated, smiled, enthralled.

Despite the hospital being full of signs prohibiting the use of cell phones, it seemed that no one there knew how to read, least of all the hospital's own staff so, without worrying too much about it, I took mine out and called the "100" directly. Jabba and Proxi had been about to leave. My nephew, who had a special predilection for those small artifacts that people stuck to their faces before beginning to speak, stretched out a hand without warning, trying to take it from me, but since I was faster and he couldn't he got angry and gave a loud grunt of protest. I remember at that moment I thought that a hospital was not the ideal place for a child: first, because his shouts could bother the sick people, and second, because the air in those places was so loaded with strange illnesses…or so it seemed to me.

To remove my cell phone from Dani's line of sight while I talked with Jabba and Proxi, Mariona sat down in a green plastic chair next to a vending machine filled with bottled water and played with the little boy, offering him a packet of tissues which, fortunately, seemed to interest him very much. The other chairs making up the row of seats were broken or stained, giving the lamentable appearance of ruin. It was said there was no better medical care or better doctors in the area than at the public hospital, and surely it must be true, but in terms of decor and hospitality it couldn't compete with the private one.

"They'll be here soon," I told her, sitting next to her and giving my nephew the small phone with the keyboard locked. Ona, who had seen my brother's phone fly through the air and crash into the ground on various occasions, tried to intervene, but I insisted; Dani suddenly ceased to exist for all intents and purposes, entertained by the precious toy.

"If Lola and Marc are coming to take him," my sister-in-law explained, nodding at the boy, "we can wait for them here in case the doctor comes out and wants to talk to us."

"Daniel's on that floor?" I asked, surprised, and turned my head toward the opening of a long hallway to our left with the word "Neurology" written over its entrance.

Ona nodded. "I told you already, Arnau."

She'd caught me red-handed, and I couldn't hide it. Nevertheless, I couldn't help the automatic gesture of stroking my goatee, and when I did so I noticed that the hair was rough and clotted from the humidity in the sewer.

"Sorry, Ona. I'm… disconcerted by all of this." I took in the space with my gaze. "I know you'll think I'm crazy, but… could you tell me everything again, please?"

"Again?" she asked, surprised. "It seemed like you weren't listening. Okay… Let's see. Daniel came home from the university around three-thirty. The boy had just gone to sleep. We talked for a while after eating, about… Well, we're not doing very well with money and, you know, I want to go back to school, so… Anyway, Daniel shut himself in his office like always and I stayed in the living room reading. I don't know how much time passed. This lump…" she said, referring to Dani, who was about to throw my phone at the wall to see how it sounded. "Hey! No, no, no! Give me that! Give it back to Arnau!"

My nephew obediently stretched out his hand to give it to me, but changed his mind at the last instant, elegantly ignoring the nonsense his mother was asking of him.

"Ok… So what happened was that I fell asleep on the sofa." Ona hesitated, trying to get the chronology of events straight in her head, "and all I remember is that I woke up because I felt someone breathing on my face. When I opened my eyes I was startled to death: Daniel was in front of me, looking at me expressionlessly, like in a horror movie. He was on his knees, less than a hand-breadth away. It was a miracle I didn't scream. I told him to stop messing around because it wasn't funny and, as if he hadn't heard me, he tells me that he's just died and he wants me to bury him." Under Ona's eyes two dark puffy circles had appeared. "I gave him a push so I could stand up and jumped off the sofa. I was so scared, Arnau! Your brother didn't move, didn't speak, he had a vacant expression as if he really were dead."

“And what did you do?” It was hard for me to imagine my brother like that. Daniel was the most normal guy in the world.

“When I saw it wasn’t a bad joke and that he really wasn’t reacting, I tried to find you but I couldn’t. He sat down on the sofa, with his eyes closed. He didn’t move again after that. I called the number for emergencies and… That’s when they told me to bring him here, to La Custòdia. I explained to them that I couldn’t get him up, that he weighed seventy pounds more than I did and that he was falling forward as if he were a rag doll that if they didn’t come help me he’d end up on the floor with his head split open…” Ona’s eyes filled with tears. “Meanwhile, Dani had woken up and was crying in his crib… My God, Arnau, what a nightmare!”

My brother and I were the same height, almost six three, but he weighed a good two hundred and twenty pounds, owing to his sedentary lifestyle. It would have been difficult for my sister-in-law to lift him from the sofa and move him anywhere; it had been enough for her just to keep him upright.

“The doctor took a half hour to get there,” she continued, tearfully. “In that whole time, Daniel only opened his eyes a couple of times and it was to repeat that he was dead and that he wanted me to shroud and bury him. Like an idiot, while I pushed him against the sofa so he wouldn’t tip over, I tried to reason with him, explaining to him that his heart was still beating, his body was still warm, and that he was breathing normally, and he answered that none of that meant he was alive because he was inarguably dead.”

“He’s gone crazy…” I murmured bitterly, staring at the toes of my sneakers.

“Well, that’s not all. He gave the same explanation to the doctor, with some added detail like he didn’t have a sense of touch, or smell, or taste, because his body was a corpse. Then the doctor took out a needle from his case and very gently, so as not to hurt him too much, pricked his finger.” Ona paused for a second, then she shook my arm to get my attention. “You won’t believe it: he ended up stabbing the whole needle into various parts of his body and… Daniel didn’t even make a sound!”

I must have looked dumbfounded, because if there was one thing my brother couldn’t handle, ever since he was little, it was shots. He would faint before the apocalyptic vision of a syringe.

“So the doctor decided to order an ambulance and bring him to La Custòdia. He said he should be examined by a neurologist. I got Dani ready and we came here. They took him inside, and we stayed in the waiting room until a nurse told me to go up to the floor, because they had hospitalized him in Neurology, and that the doctor would speak with me when he’d finished examining Daniel. I tried to find you everywhere. By the way…” she said pensively, hugging the child to her chest despite his irate protests, “we should call your mother and Clifford.”

The problem wasn’t calling them; the problem was how the hell was I going to get my phone back without my nephew throwing a huge tantrum, so I began a cautious approach, waving my car keys in the air, until I noticed that both my nephew and my sister-in-law were ignoring me and focusing their gaze on a spot behind my back. Two guys with funereal expressions were coming toward us. One of them, the older one, was dressed in street clothes with a white coat on top; the other, small and wearing glasses, wore the complete uniform, including the clogs.

“Are you family members of Daniel Cornwall?” the latter asked, pronouncing my brother’s whole name with a correct British accent.

“She is his wife,” I said, standing; the older one came up to my shoulder and the other was completely below my sightlines, “and I’m his brother.”

“Good, good…” the older one exclaimed, hiding his hands in the pockets of his coat. That gesture, which bore a certain similarity to that of Pilate, didn’t please me. “I’m Dr. Llor, the neurologist who examined Daniel, and this is the psychiatrist on call, Dr. Hernández.” He took his right hand out of his pocket, but it wasn’t to extend it to us, but to point the way toward the entrance to the floor. Maybe he didn’t approve of my image, with the earring, the goatee, and the ponytail; or maybe he found Ona’s orange streak deplorable. “If you would be so kind as to come into my office for a moment, we can speak comfortably about Daniel.”

Dr. Llor situated himself unhurriedly at my side, letting the young Dr. Hernández accompany Ona and Daniel a few steps behind. The whole situation had something illusory about it, something false, like virtual reality.

“Your brother, Mr. Cornwall…” Dr. Llor started to say.

“My name is Queralt, not Cornwall.”

The doctor gave me a strange look. “But you said that you were his brother,” he muttered in irritation, like someone who’d been vilely deceived and who was wasting his valuable time on an outsider.

“My name is Arnau Queralt Sañé, and my brother is Daniel Cornwall Sañé. Any other questions?” I offered sarcastically. If I had said that Daniel was my brother, why this ridiculous suspicion? As if in the whole world there existed only one unbreakable family model!

“You’re Arnau Queralt?” the neurologist asked, surprised, suddenly stuttering.

“Last time I looked I was,” I replied, pushing a bit of hair which had come loose from my ponytail, behind my ear.

“The owner of Ker-Central?”

“I would say so, unless something unexpected has happened.”

We had arrived at a green-painted door that exhibited a small plaque with his name on it, but Llor didn’t invite us in.

“My wife’s nephew, who’s a telecommunications engineer, used to work for your company.” By his tone I guessed that the roles had just been changed: the weird-looking guy wasn’t just some slob anymore.

“Really?” I replied disinterestedly. “So, what about my brother?”

He leaned on the door handle and opened it obsequiously. "Please, come in.”

The office was divided into two distinct areas by an aluminum partition. The first, very small, had only an old school desk full of folders and papers on which rested an enormous sleeping computer; the second, much larger, exhibited a formidable mahogany desk below the window and, on the other side of the room, a round table surrounded by soft armchairs upholstered in black leather. There was no room left on the wall for more photographs of Dr. Llor with celebrities or framed press clippings in whose titles his name stood out. The neurologist, giving Dani a pat, pulled out one of the chairs from the table so that Ona could make herself comfortable.

“Please…” he murmured.

The diminutive Dr. Hernández positioned himself between Ona and myself, dropping onto the table, with a dry thump, a bulky folder that he had been carrying under his arm. He didn't seem very happy, but really, no one was in that place so what difference did it make?

"The patient Daniel Cornwall," Llor began in a neutral voice, extracting a pair of glasses from the front pocket of his coat and pushing them on, "presents an unusual set of symptoms. Dr. Hernández and I agree that it could be something similar to an acute depression."

"My brother is depressed?" I asked, shocked.

"No, not exactly, Mr. Queralt…" he clarified, looking at the psychiatrist out of the corner of his eye. "You see, your brother presents a very confusing profile of two pathologies that do not usually occur at the same time in one patient."

"On the one hand," Dr. Hernández, who was badly hiding his excitement at having such a strange case on his hands, interjected for the first time, "he seems to suffer from what the medical literature calls Cotard delusion. This syndrome was diagnosed for the first time in 1788 in France. Individuals who suffer from it believe irrefutably that they are dead and they insist, sometimes even violently, on being shrouded and buried. They don't feel their bodies, they don't respond to external stimuli, their gazes become opaque and vacant, their bodies go completely limp… Basically, they are alive because we know they're alive, but they react as if they really were dead."

Ona began to cry silently without being able to control her sobs and Dani, scared, turned toward me looking for support, but when he saw me so serious he burst into tears as well. If Jabba and Proxi didn't get here soon to pick him up, this was going to end badly.

Since the boy's crying got in the way of the conversation Ona, trying to calm herself, stood up and began pacing back and forth to comfort Dani. At the table, none of us said anything. At last, after several interminable minutes, my nephew stopped crying and seemed to go to sleep.

"It's very late for him," my sister-in-law whispered, carefully returning to her seat. "He should have been asleep a while ago and he hasn't even had dinner."

I crossed my hands on the table and leaned toward the doctors. "All right, Dr. Hernández," I said, "and what solution is there for this Cotard delusion or whatever you call it?"

"Sir, solution, solution…! I recommend hospitalization and the administration of psychopharmaceuticals and the prognosis, with medication, tends to be good although I won't lie to you, in almost all cases there are relapses."

"The most recent studies on Cotard delusion," observed Dr. Llor, who seemed to want to contribute his neurological two cents, "show that this syndrome tends to be associated with a certain kind of cerebral lesion located in the left temporal lobe."

"Does that mean that he's hit his head?" Ona asked, alarmed.

"No, not at all," replied the neurologist. "What I'm trying to say is that even if there is no trauma, there are one or various parts of the brain that do not react as they should or at least as they are expected to. The human brain is made of many distinct parts that all have their respective functions: some control movement, others make calculations, others process feelings, etc. To do so, these sectors use

small electrical charges and very specialized chemical agents. All it takes is one slight change in one of these agents to completely change the way an area of the brain works and with it the way a person thinks, feels, or behaves. In the case of Cotard delusion, CT scans show that there's a change in the activity of the left temporal lobe… here." He accompanied the word with a gesture, resting his hand behind his left ear, not very high or very low and not very far back.

"Sort of like a computer with a broken circuit?"

The two doctors wrinkled their foreheads in unison, unpleasantly surprised by the example.

"Yes, okay…" Dr. Hernández admitted. "These days it's very common to compare the human brain to a computer because both function, shall we say, in a similar way. But they are not the same: A computer doesn't have self awareness or emotions. This is the grave mistake that neurology is leading us toward." Llor didn't even blink. "In psychiatry, the approach is completely different. There's no doubt that there's an organic component to Cotard delusion, but it's also true that its symptoms coincide almost completely with those of an acute depression. Moreover, in your brother's case, we have not been able to find any alteration in the left temporal lobe."

"Nevertheless, since he is my patient," Now it was Hernández who didn't move a muscle in his face, "I've outlined a course of intensive treatments using neuroleptics, chlorpromazine and thioridazine and I hope to be able to discharge him within fifteen days."

"There is, furthermore, another added problem," the psychiatrist pointed out, "which is that Daniel presents, along with Cotard delusion, which is the most striking, evident signs of a pathology called agnosia."

I felt something inside me rebel. Until that moment I had managed to convince myself that everything that was happening was something temporary, that Daniel suffered from a "delusion" which had a cure and that once it was eliminated my brother would return to how he was before. However, it hit me painfully when they added more illnesses. I looked at Ona, and by the contraction of her face, I guessed that she was as distraught as I was. Little Dani, wrapped in the blue blanket and cuddled by his mother, had fallen at last into a deep sleep. And it was lucky he was so asleep because at that moment my phone, still tightly clutched in his hands, began to emit the musical notes denoting a call from Jabba. Fortunately, he didn't even make a sound; he only let out a long sigh when Ona, with some difficulty, managed to extricate it from him.

By asking after Daniel in the ER, Jabba and Proxi had managed to get to the lobby that opened into the Neurology department. After finishing the short chat I told Ona and she, slowly rising, moved towards the door and went out.

"Should we wait for Daniel's wife or should we continue?" Llor asked with some impatience. His tone made me remember something I had read once: in China, in ancient times, doctors only charged their fees if they saved the patient. Otherwise they didn't charge or the family killed them.

"Let's just finish it now," I replied, thinking that the ancient Chinese were really very wise. "And I will talk with my sister-in-law."

The little doctor began to speak. "Along with Cotard's syndrome, your brother also suffers from a very pronounced case of agnosia." He shoved the glasses all the

way up his nose until they were touching his eyebrows and looked anxiously at the neurologist. “As Miquel… Dr. Llor was explaining to you, agnosia, a much more common pathology, appears, generally, in patients who have suffered strokes or cerebral traumas in which they have lost part of their brain. As you can see, this is not the case with your brother nor of patients with Cotard’s, yet Daniel is nevertheless incapable of recognizing objects and people. To give you a clearer idea, your brother, who claims to be dead, lives at this moment in a world populated with strange things that move in absurd ways and make strange noises. If you showed him, for example, a cat, he wouldn't know what you were showing him, just as he also wouldn’t know that it was an animal of some sort, because he doesn’t know what an animal is.”

I rubbed my head with my hands, despairing. I felt a terrible pressure in my temples.

“He wouldn’t be able recognize you,” Dr. Hernández continued, “or his wife. To Daniel, all faces are flat ovals with a couple of black splotches where the eyes should be.”

“What’s bad about agnosia,” added Llor, rubbing his palms together repeatedly, “is that, as it is produced by a stroke or a traumatic loss of brain mass, it has neither treatment nor cure. Having said that…”

He left the phrase in the air, dripping hope.

“The CT scans that we’ve taken of your brother show that Daniel’s brain is in perfect condition.”

“I’ve already told you that we did not even find the temporal lobe dysfunction,” Hernández pointed out, for the first time exhibiting a slight smile. “Daniel only presents the symptoms, not the pathologies.”

I looked at him like he was an idiot.

“And do you want to tell me what the difference is between adding two and two and appearing to add two and two? My brother was normal this morning, he went to work at the university and returned to his house to eat with his wife and son, and now he’s hospitalized here with some symptoms which simulate Cotard’s syndrome and agnosia.” I held my breath because I was ready to let out a string of insults. “Okay, fine! I understand that you’re going to do everything possible to cure my brother, so let’s not argue that point. I only want to know if Daniel will be the same again or not.”

Llor, surprised by my sudden fit of fury, felt obligated to level with me like a life-long colleague or friend:

“Look, as a general rule, we doctors don’t like to box ourselves in, right? We prefer not to give too much hope at the beginning in case things don’t turn out well. If the sick person gets better? Perfect, we’re great! If he doesn’t get better? Well, we warned from the beginning of what could happen.” He looked at me with pity, and, resting his hands on the table, pushed the chair noisily back before standing. “I’m going to tell you the truth, Mr. Queralt: we have no idea what’s really going on with your brother.”

Sometimes, when you are most disconnected from everything, when you least expect something to happen to change your life, destiny decides to play a dirty trick on you and it hits you in the face with an iron glove. So you look around yourself, disconcerted, and you ask yourself where the blow came from and what

exactly happened to make the ground sink from beneath your feet. You'd give anything to erase what has happened, you long for normality, your old habits, you'd like everything to go back to the way it was before… But that before is another life, a life to which, incomprehensibly, you can no longer return.

That night Mariona and I stayed with Daniel. The room was very small and there was only one reclining chair for a visitor, a chair that was so decrepit that it puffed its foam-rubber stuffing into the air from its various tears. Nevertheless, it was the best room on the floor and it was private, so we still had to be grateful.

My mother called shortly after the meeting with Llor and Hernández. For the first time in her life, she managed to remain silent for a good while and pay attention without interrupting continuously to demand her turn to speak. Really, she was paralyzed. It was not easy to explain to her what the doctors had told us. For her, everything that was not an illness of the body was unimportant so she had to make a huge effort, clear her mind, and accept the idea that her youngest son, despite being a well-built man with an iron constitution, had become mentally ill. Finally, with a shaky voice, and after asking me an infinite number of times not to tell Grandma anything, under any circumstances, if she called, she announced that Clifford was already reserving tickets for the flight leaving Heathrow at seven twenty-five the next morning.

We didn't get any rest at all that night. Daniel kept opening his eyes and speaking without pause in long and well-constructed, though erratic and delirious, sentences: Sometimes he would expound at great length on topics that must have to do with his subject, such as the existence of an obscure primeval language whose sounds were innate to the nature of beings and things, and at other times, he would explain in minute detail how he prepared breakfast in the morning, cutting the bread with a knife with a blue handle, collecting the slices with his left hand, programming the toaster for two minutes and the microwave for forty-five seconds to heat the cup of coffee. There was no doubt that both of us had come out just as methodical and organized as Grandma Eulàlia, from whom (in lieu of a proper mother) we had learned almost everything. But my brother's favorite topic was death, his own, and he would anxiously ask how he was going to be able to rest if he could not feel the weight of his body. If we gave him water, he drank, but he said he didn't feel thirst because the dead don't feel thirst, and on one occasion, when he brushed the glass with his fingers, he was startled and asked why we were putting that cold thing in his mouth. He was like a boneless puppet who only wanted to rest six feet underground. He didn't know who we were or why we bothered to get close to him. Sometimes he would stare at us and his eyes looked as dead as the crystal eyes of a doll.

At last, around seven in the morning, the sun began to illuminate the sky. Ona's parents arrived a few minutes later and she went with them to have breakfast, leaving me alone with my brother. I would have liked to lean in close to him and tell him: "Hey, Daniel, get up and let's go home!" And it seemed so possible, so feasible, that I placed my hands several times on the armrests of the chair to get up. Unfortunately, on each of these occasions, my brother suddenly opened his eyes and spit out such a string of nonsense that I ended up exhausted and disheartened. A little while before Ona and her parents returned, he began to talk in a monotonous voice, staring at the ceiling, about Giordano Bruno and the

possible existence of infinite worlds in the infinite Universe. Watching him affectionately, I told myself that his craziness, his strange illness, could in a sense be compared with one of those pages of perfect code that one writes few times in one's life: both contained a certain kind of beauty that could only be seen beneath a disagreeable surface.

Since I had to go by home before going at eight o'clock to the airport, without having slept, I left the hospital. I was tired and depressed and I desperately needed a shower and fresh clothes. I did not like the idea of going by the office so instead of using one of the three business elevators, I used my private one. This elevator, controlled by a computer that recognized my voice, only had three stops: the garage, the ground floor (where the reception desk and the lobby of Ker-Central were) and my house, situated on the rooftop of the building, surrounded by a five thousand square foot garden protected by opaque screens of isolating material. That was my personal paradise, the most difficult to realize of all the ideas I had had in my life. In order to build it, it had been necessary to move all the refrigeration, heating, and electrical installations to the top floor, the tenth, and to cover the floor of the roof with layers of waterproof material, thermal insulation, porous concrete, and workable earth. I had hired a team of landscaping and gardening professionals from the Barcelona School of Architecture and the American company that constructed the living space—a two thousand square foot chalet, with only one floor—specialized in ecologically friendly materials, home automation, and intelligent security. The project had cost me almost the same as the rest of the property, but it was without a doubt worth it. I could claim, without lying, that I lived amidst nature in the center of the city.

When the doors of the elevator opened, I found myself at last in the living room of my house. The light streamed in through the French doors through which I saw Sergi, the gardener, leaning against the oleander bushes. Magdalena, the housekeeper, was already vacuuming in some room in the back. Everything was clean and orderly, but the sensation of strangeness that I felt inside stuck to the walls and objects just by me looking at them. I didn't feel that relaxing stir that went through me every time I arrived. Not even the water from the shower could wash the grime of unreality down the drain; neither could breakfast, nor the telephone conversations with Jabba and with Núria, my secretary, nor the drive to El Prat with the windows rolled down, nor seeing my mother and Clifford for the first time in five months, nor, of course, seeing again, now beneath a brilliant sun, the old mass of La Custòdia, ascending its steps, getting into one of the giant squeaky elevators, and returning to the room containing my brother.

Around twelve in the afternoon I left Ona, Dani (Proxi had brought him first thing in the morning to the hospital), and Ona's parents in front of the entrance of their building, on Xiprer Street, and I returned to my own house. On the way, my phone started to ring as on any normal day at that time. But I didn't answer; all I did was block it so that only calls from my family and from Jabba, Proxi, and Núria came through. The business world would have to stop for a while. I was like a processor fried by an electrical surge. I only remember that after getting out of the elevator, I dropped Clifford's and my mother's bags in the hall and I fell like a lump on the bed.

The telephone was ringing. I couldn't move. At last it stopped and I went back to sleep. Seconds later, again, it began to ring. Once, twice, three times... Silence. Everything was dark; it must be nighttime. The damn thing kept at it. I sat up suddenly in bed, with my eyes very wide. Suddenly I remembered... Daniel!

"Light!" I exclaimed; the lamp at the head of my bed lit up. The clock on the night table showed that it was ten after eight at night. "And speaker phone."

The system emitted a soft click to let me know that it had picked up the phone for me and I could speak.

"It's Ona, Arnau."

I was dazed and disoriented. I rubbed my face with my hands and shook my hair, stuck like a helmet to my head. The remaining lights in the room automatically began to gradually turn themselves on.

"I fell asleep." I mumbled by way of a hello. "Are you at La Custòdia?"

"I'm at home."

"Okay, give me a half hour and I'll pick you up. If you want, we can have dinner there, in the cafeteria."

"No, no, Arnau," my sister-in-law quickly declined. "I'm not calling about that. It's that... well, you'll see, I've found some papers on Daniel's desk and... I don't know how to explain it to you. It's very strange and I'm very worried. Could you come take a look at them?"

My brain felt swollen. "Papers? What papers?"

"Some notes of his. Something very strange. I'm probably imagining things, but.... I would prefer not to tell you over the phone. I want you to see it for yourself and give me your opinion."

"All right. I'm on my way right now."

I was as hungry as a wolf, so while I showered and dressed I devoured, bit by bit, the dinner that Magdalena had left prepared for me. I spent a while deciding whether I should wear jeans like always, or perhaps some other pants that were more comfortable for spending the night in the hospital. In the end, I decided on the latter; jeans are almost a way of life, but, when it comes down to it, are very stiff, and at five in the morning, they can become perverse instruments of torture. So I put on a sweater, the black pants from one of my business suits, and some old leather shoes I found in the closet. Luckily, I still didn't need to shave, so I put my hair back and I was ready. I got a jacket out of the closet, put my phone in one of the pockets, grabbed my backpack, slipped my laptop inside in case I was able to work for a little while that night, and went to my brother's apartment.

Xiprer Street was one of those long tree-lined streets on which you could still find old chalets with people living in them and the neighborhood atmosphere of a small city. You had to drive around in a lot of circles and go up and down a lot of hills in order to get there, but when you thought your problems were over and all that was left was to park the car, you'd discover with horror that the cars were squeezed together in such a way on both sides of the street that it was almost impossible to get from one side of the street to the other without using a can opener. It would have been a miracle if the situation had been any different that night, but, of course, it was not, and I ended up doing the same as always. Which is to say I parked the left half of the car diagonally across one of the block's corners.

My brother's apartment was on the fourth floor of a very old building. I was convinced that some cloned strain of Jabba resided there, the product of some mysterious genetic experiment, because every time that I went, I found myself in the elevator with some almost exact replica of him. It never failed, and the phenomenon ended up worrying me so much that I asked Daniel if he had also noticed it. My brother, obviously, had burst into laughter and had explained to me that there was a very extensive family that occupied various apartments in the building, and that all of its members did hold a certain resemblance to Marc.

"Certain resemblance?" I exclaimed, indignant.

"They're all enormous and red-headed, but that's where it ends!"

"Well, I would say they're identical."

"Don't exaggerate!"

But now my brother was not at home and I could not tell him, as I always did, that I had again found myself in the elevator with one of those clones. The door was opened by my sister-in-law, who, although she was dressed to go out, looked drawn and had bags under her eyes.

"You don't look good, Arnau." She told me with an affectionate smile.

"I think I didn't sleep very well," I replied as I went into the apartment. In the hall that began in front of me and ended in the living room, a diminutive figure came forward with a shaky step, dragging, like Snoopy with Linus, an old blanket with which he was also covering half of his head.

"He's exhausted," Ona told me, lowering her voice. "Don't excite him."

I didn't get a chance to. Halfway there, the blanketed figure decided it wasn't worth the effort and turned around, going back to his grandparents, who were watching television. Since the sofa was visible from the entryway, I waved hello to Ona's parents, while my sister-in-law tugged at my left arm to take me to Daniel's office.

"You have to see this, Arnau," she said, as she turned on the light. My brother's study was even smaller than my closet, but he had managed to fix it up with an enormous quantity of very tall wooden bookshelves overflowing with books, magazines, notebooks, and files. Occupying the center of that chaos was his work desk, covered with unstable stacks of folders and papers, surrounding, like high walls, some annotated manuscripts on which rested a pen, and next to them the closed laptop.

Ona went to the desk, and, without moving anything, leaned over the papers and put a finger on them.

"Go on, read this," she murmured.

I still wore the backpack on my shoulder, but the urgency that came through Ona's voice pulled me toward the table. There, where she was pointing with her index finger, were written some phrases in my brother's handwriting, which, although perfectly understandable at the beginning, became almost illegible at the end:

"Mana huyarinqui lunthata? Do you not hear, thief?

"Jiwañta [...] You are dead [...], anatatäta chakxaña, you've tried to take the stick from the door.

"*Jutayañäta allintarapiña*, you will call the gravedigger, *chhärma*, this very night.

"The others (them) *jiwanaqañapxi jumaru,* all die everywhere for you.

"*Achakay, akapacha chhaqtañi jumaru.* Oh, this world will cease to be visible to you!

"*Kamachi* [...], law [...], *lawt'ata*, closed with a key, *Yäp...*"

Everything after that, as if Daniel had been losing consciousness while his hand kept trying to write, looked like a series of lines written with unsteady strokes and ended abruptly.

I stayed in suspense for a few seconds, and then incredulously re-read those notes a couple more times.

"What do you think, Arnau?" Ona asked, nervous, "Doesn't it seem a little strange to you?"

I opened my mouth to say... I don't know what, but not a single sound came from my throat. No, it was not possible. It was simply ridiculous to think that those phrases were directly related to Daniel's illness. Yes, they described it point by point, and yes, they also sounded threatening, but who in his right mind could accept something as absurd as the idea that the last thing my brother wrote before falling ill could have something to do with what had happened to him? Could we have been going just as crazy as he was?

"I don't know what to tell you, Ona," I stammered. "Really. I don't know what to tell you."

"But Daniel was working on this when...!"

"I know, but let's not lose our heads!" I exclaimed. My sister-in-law rested her hands on the back of Daniel's chair and squeezed it so hard that her fingers were tense and her knuckles were white. "Think about it, Ona. How could that paper be the cause of his agnosia and his cursed Cotard delusion? I know it seems to be related, but that's impossible, it's... grotesque!"

For a few eternal seconds, both of us remained silent, immobile, with our gazes fixed on Daniel's notes. The more I read those letters, the more a worried and suspicious fear grew inside me. And if that business really had affected him? And if he had been so impacted by whatever it was he had been reading and translating that his unconscious had played a bad trick on him, adopting that sort of curse and converting it into a real illness? I didn't want to give Ona's imagination wings, so I abstained from telling her what I was thinking, but the idea that my brother had been able to somatize those words, for whatever reason, got to me. Maybe he was too captivated by that work, or too tired to study; maybe he had overworked himself, dedicating more time and energy to the duties of his career. Everything could, and should, have a rational explanation, as much as those scribbled-on manuscripts seemed to indicate that Daniel had been hypnotized... or something like that. What the hell did I know about stupid witchcraft and enchantments?

I turned my head slowly to look at Ona and discovered that she, in turn, was looking at me with red, tear-filled eyes.

"You're right, Arnau," she whispered. "You're completely right. It's silly, I know, but it's just that, for a moment, I thought that..."

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her to me. She weakly let herself be drawn in. She was broken.

“This isn’t easy for anyone, Ona. Our nerves are shot and we’re very afraid for Daniel. When someone is afraid, they hide in anything that gives a little bit of hope, and you believed that, possibly, if all of this was a product of some kind of curse, with another bit of magic he could be cured, right?”

She laughed quietly and brushed a hand across her forehead, trying to get those crazy ideas out of her head.

“Come on, let’s go to the hospital,” she muttered, smiling and freeing herself from my arm. “Clifford and your mother must be exhausted.”

While she got her things together and said goodbye to her parents and her son, I stayed there, in front of that damned paper that was needling my brain like a swarm of mosquitoes in summer.

We happened to be very close to La Custòdia and it wouldn’t have been worth the effort to take the car if not for that fact that, in the morning, when we would be tired and sleepless, those ten minutes of walking would have seemed an eternity to us.

“What was Daniel working on?” I asked Ona, without taking my eyes off the red light that had just stopped us on Ronda Guinardo.

My sister-in-law let out a long sigh. “On that odious research on Inca ethnolinguistics,” she declared. “Marta, the head of the department, offered him a collaboration around Christmas. ‘A very important study,’ she told him, ‘a publication that will make a real name for the department’… Bullshit! All she wanted was for Daniel to do the dirty work so that later she could take all the credit, like always. You know how it works.”

My brother was a professor of linguistic anthropology at UAB, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, adjunct professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. He had always been a magnificent student, a collector of academic successes, and, having just turned twenty-seven, he could not have gotten farther or done it more quickly. Curiously, despite all of this, he suffered from an inexplicable rivalry with me; nothing exaggerated, of course, but his frequent comments about my business and my money didn’t leave any room for doubt which was why (I thought), he pushed himself as he did in his work. He had had a brilliant future ahead of him before becoming ill.

“Have you called his department to let them know what happened?”

“Yes. I did it this morning before going to bed. They told me I have to drop off his medical leave papers so they can hire an intern to cover his classes.”

We went inside La Custòdia, passing through swarms of silent people. Returning there gave me a strange sensation: It was an alien and sad place that I’d only been in once in my life, yet I felt it like an extension of myself, like familiar territory. Surely, the presence of Clifford and my mother contributed a great deal, but I was sure that it really had more to do with the emotional weight of the situation.

Daniel was exactly the same as he had been that morning when we left. He hadn’t improved at all, my mother explained, but he also hadn’t gotten worse and that was very positive.

“At noon the psychiatrist, Dr. Hernández, came to see him,” she continued to explain, without getting up from the chair. “By the way, what a delightful man!

Right, Clifford? How nice and friendly! He made us feel much calmer, right, Clifford?"

Clifford, without paying her any notice, stayed where he stood next to his son's bed. I supposed that he had hardly moved from there all day. I advanced a few steps towards him and positioned myself at his side, also gazing at my brother. Daniel had his eyes open, but they were still lifeless and he didn't seem to hear anything that was being said around him.

"Dr. Hernández… Diego has assured us that Daniel will get well very soon, and he's explained to us that the medications they're giving him will begin to take effect in two or three days, right, Clifford? Next week we'll have him with us at home again, you'll see! Ona, darling, don't leave your bag on the floor… There's a closet right there. Incidentally, this hospital is horrible! Why didn't you take him to a private clinic? We can't even all sit down!" She protested from the armchair. "Clifford, go on, go see if the nurses this shift are nicer than the others, and if they might bring us a chair. Can you believe they said there were no chairs left on the whole floor? Ridiculous! But you tell me how to say it to one of those… witches dressed in white. What unpleasant people! Right, Clifford? But, why don't you go ask? Surely now they'll bring us at least a stool, a bench, I don't know, a footrest… Any kind of seat would do!"

And yes, yes, they did bring us another seat, a green plastic chair like those in the waiting room, but only after my mother had walked out the door of the neurology floor, vowing not to return until the next day. The nurses must have taken it personally, and honestly, I was not the least bit surprised. I crossed my fingers that Clifford and my mother would remember the access codes to my house, because otherwise I could see myself rescuing them from the police station on Via Laietana.

Ona sat down in the armchair and engrossed herself in a book, and I pulled the chair up to the sort of counter-thing with a fold-out section that sometimes served as a night table and sometimes as a workbench for the staff of the department. I pushed aside the box of tissues, the bottle of water, Daniel's glass, and the eye drops that we had to put in his eyes every so often to keep them from drying out from him not blinking enough. I took out my small computer from my backpack (a high-end ultralight laptop, weighing a little over two and a half pounds), opened it, and positioned it so I would be able to type more or less comfortably, and so there would be space left to set my phone down; I needed to connect to Ker-Central's intranet, the company's private network, to take a look at my email, review pending business and meetings, and study the documents that Núria had left prepared for me.

I worked for half an hour, withdrawing completely from reality, concentrating on resolving as well as I could the urgent matters of the company, and when I least expected it, I heard a very somber laugh come from Daniel's bed. I looked up from the monitor, astonished, and saw my brother with a strange curve on his lips. Before I had time to react, Ona had jumped out of the chair and gone to his side, leaning nervously over Daniel, who kept smiling sadly and was moving his lips as if trying to say something.

"What's wrong, Daniel?" She asked him, caressing his forehead and cheeks.

"*Lawt'ata*," he responded, and laughed again with the same disconsolate sound as before.

"What did he say?" I demanded, disconcerted, drawing closer.

"I don't know, I didn't understand him!"

"I'm dead," said Daniel in a hollow voice. "I'm dead because the Yatiri have punished me."

"For the love of God, darling, stop talking nonsense!"

"What does '*lawt'ata*' mean, Daniel?" I interrogated him, resting a hand on the pillow so I could lean in closer, but my brother turned his head the other way and didn't utter another sound.

"Leave him alone, Arnau," Ona replied, dejected, going back to her book and the chair. "He won't say anything else. You know how pig-headed he is."

But I kept asking myself why Daniel had laughed in such a strange way and uttered those very strange words. What language was that?

"Quechua or Aymara," Ona explained when I asked her. "Probably Aymara. Quechua was the official language of the Inca, but in the southeast part of the empire they spoke Aymara. Daniel had to learn both to be able to work with Marta."

"In just a few months?" I asked, surprised, going back to my chair and turning it to sit facing Ona. The energy administration program of the laptop had turned off the monitor and put it to sleep to save the battery. In a few minutes, if I didn't move the mouse or push a key, it would also turn off the hard disk.

"Your brother has a great aptitude for languages, didn't you know?"

"Even so," I objected.

"Well…" she murmured, pursing her lips and wrinkling her forehead, "the truth is he's been working very hard since he started collaborating with Marta. I told you before that he was obsessed. He would come home from the University, eat, and shut himself in his office all evening. Anyway, he abandoned Quechua pretty quickly to dedicate himself completely to Aymara. I know because he told me."

"That text, the one you showed me at your house, was it also written in Aymara?"

"I guess so."

"And this project about… Did you say Inca ethnolinguistics?"

"Yes."

"What the hell is that?"

"Ethnolinguistics is a branch of anthropology that studies the relationship between the language and the culture of a people." She explained patiently. "As you know, the Inca didn't have a writing system, so all their traditions were handed down orally."

The idea that I already knew was a big assumption on her part. All of that brought to my mind the discovery of America by Columbus, the three caravels, and the Catholic Kings. If I had had to locate the Inca, the Maya, and the Aztecs on a map, I would have made a terrible mess of it.

"Marta, the head of Daniel's department, is an expert on the subject." My sister-in-law continued to explain with a look of annoyance; there was no doubt at all that she liked that woman Marta as much as a kick in the stomach, and that she loathed Daniel's collaboration with her. "She's published a multitude of studies,

she works with specialized magazines from all over the world, and she is invited to every conference on Latin American anthropology. She is a very important figure, as well as a stuck-up and arrogant old lady." She crossed her legs with an air of self-satisfaction and looked at me. "Here in Catalonia, apart from heading the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at UAB, she directs the Centre d'Estudis Internacionals i Interculturals d'Amèrica Llatina, and is the president of the Institut Català de Cooperació Iberoamericana. Now you can understand why Daniel had to force himself to work with her: Rejecting her offer would have meant the end of his career as a researcher."

My brother shifted restlessly on the bed, turning his head from side to side and shaking his hands in the air as if he were flapping his wings. Every now and then he would again mutter the inexplicable word that he had uttered before: *lawt'ata*. He must be repeating it for some reason, but if such a reason existed, only he knew it. He said *lawt'ata* quietly and shook himself restlessly; he said it again and laughed; then he quieted for a while only to, later, start again.

"Okay," I nodded, passing my hands over my rough cheeks. "But, setting aside this Marta woman, explain to me what exactly the work consisted of."

My sister-in-law, who had left her book open over one of the chair's armrests, picked it up lazily, put the bookmark between the pages, and closed it, letting it fall haphazardly into her lap.

"I don't know if I should…" she declared, unsure.

"Ona, I'm not thinking of stealing Daniel's and the department's ideas for myself."

She laughed and pulled down the sleeves of her sweater until she succeeded in hiding her hands inside them.

"I know, Arnau, I know! But Daniel warned me many times not to tell anyone anything."

"But you must see…. I'm just trying to understand what's happening to him."

She remained absorbed in her thoughts for a few seconds and, at last, seemed to make a decision.

"You won't say anything, right?" She wanted to know before revealing the big secret.

"Who do you think I'm going to talk to about Inca ethnolinguistics?" I laughed. "Do you really think that something so boring could interest any of my friends?"

She laughed as well, realizing what nonsense she had said.

"My God, no! They would have to be some very unusual friends!"

"Well you've answered your own question, and now explain to me what it was Daniel asked you not to tell anyone."

"It's a little bit of a complicated story," She began, and crossed her arms over her chest without taking her hands out of her sleeves. "A friend of Marta's, Professor Laura Laurencich-Minelli, full professor in the Department of Pre-Columbian Civilizations of the University of Bologna, Italy, had heard at the beginning of the nineties of some mysterious documents from the seventeenth century found by accident in a private archive in Naples, the so-called Miccinelli documents. From what Daniel told me, those documents contained a lot of strange and surprising information about the conquest of Peru, but the most extraordinary thing about it all, the reason why Professor Laurencich-Minelli

immediately contacted her friend Marta Torrent, was that they contained the necessary key to interpret a forgotten system of Incan writing that would prove the Inca were not a backward civilization without an alphabet."

What Ona had just told me must be something without a doubt extraordinary, because she was eying me, waiting for an enthusiastic reaction that I obviously didn't have.

"Did you hear what I said, Arnau?" She inquired, perplexed. "The Miccinelli documents show the falseness of the accounts of the Spanish, affirming with unquestionable evidence the existence of a written language among the Inca!"

"Oh, wow, that's… great!" I managed to say, without really understanding what she was talking about.

Fortunately, she noticed my ignorance and tried to throw me a line to rescue me from my confusion. It was evident that she was passionate on the subject; no wonder, I remembered, she had started her degree in that major, and, from what she had confessed to me the day before, had intentions of finishing it.

"You see, Arnau, proving that the Inca had writing is like discovering that man didn't descend from the apes… Something unthinkable, incredible, and awesome, do you understand?"

"Well, Darwin's theory continues to be just a theory," I remarked. "If, by now, they had been able to prove it, it would be Darwin's law."

My sister-in-law lost her patience. She was very young and had too short a fuse to put up with the silliness of others. But the truth was, the subject of Darwin had always interested me: Was it not surprising to think that no one had found even one of his thousands of alleged missing links that would have been necessary to prove the theory of evolution, and not just the those in the evolution of human beings, but also of all kinds of plants and animals? That meant something, and to me it seemed very odd.

"Do you want me to keep telling you what Daniel was working on or not?" she exploded. "Because, if you're not interested, I'll shut up."

Sometimes it's better to turn the computer off than to smash it on the ground. Ona was just a child dealing with a lot of problems, the worst of which was lying on the bed in the middle of the room.

"Please continue," I responded kindly, "I'm very interested. All I ask is that you understand that I don't have any idea about these things."

She laughed, relieving the tension that reigned it the room. My brother had also calmed down and seemed to be sleeping.

"You poor thing," she joked without any malice, "Daniel always says that you're living proof that not studying is very profitable."

I smiled, resignedly lowering my head. I had heard that sentence many times from my brother. When I was sixteen, my mother, who already lived at that time in London, gave me my first computer, a small Spectrum with which I started to program in BASIC. I made very simple applications, which I sold, with slight modifications, to a score of companies that were starting up in the strange field of computer programming. Shortly after, I bought an Amstrad, and almost immediately, a 286 clone with a graphics card. The demand from companies and government organizations for computer programs did nothing but grow. I was one of the pioneers of the internet which at that time was not, even by a long shot, the

well-known World Wide Web born in 1991, but just a chaotic global network of local networks that communicated within it with crazy protocols and frustrating results. In September of 1993, investing all the money I had earned as a programmer, I started up the first internet provider in Catalonia, Inter-Ker, and began an HTTP[1-5] web design service. At that time, no one knew anything about the internet. It was all new and strange, a world made by autodidacts who learned as we went along, resolving problems with the touch of a key. The business worked well, but it was clear that it didn't have a future: the World Wide Web was wild territory, and in a very short time it would become necessary to come to blows with other settlers for a few crumbs of the cake. So when I sold Inter-Ker in 1996 I decided to start a financial page, a portal that offered all that information (currency exchange rates, bank data, interest rates and loans, tables of investments and trade, etc.) that the businesses I had programmed applications for had to laboriously obtain from different avenues. It was called Keralt.com, and it was an immediate success. After just one year, I began to receive buying offers from the most important banking companies in the world. In 1999, on my thirty-second birthday, I became one of those guys that in North America they call ultra-rich, when I sold Keralt.com to Chase Manhattan Bank for four hundred sixty million dollars. My story was neither the only story like this nor the most well-known. Beating me in profit, for example, were Guillermo Kirchner and the Casares siblings, María and Wenceslao, of Argentina, who sold seventy-five percent of their Patagon.com portal to Banco Santander Central Hispano for five hundred twenty-eight million dollars. When it came down to it, the important thing about that transaction wasn't all the money I received so much as the fact that they had bought an idea from me, only one of the many I could think up, so, with the dollars well invested, a few months later I began construction on my house, and I started Ker-Central, dedicated, on one hand, to programming internet security applications—antivirus software and firewalls—and on the other, to financing innovative projects in the field of artificial intelligence as it applied to finances (for example, the creation of neural networks for the advanced prediction of share prices). Ker-Central received these projects, studied them, and if they met the requirements and satisfied the advisory committee, produced and financed them, taking, obviously, a very high percentage of the profit. What no one in my family seemed to understand was that all of that had cost me many years of hard work, of struggle, and of lack of sleep. In their eyes, fortune had smiled on me because of some whim, and because of this my luck was just that, luck, and not the product of an effort like that which Daniel had expended in order to get where he was.

"The Miccinelli documents," continued Ona, with a smile still on her lips, "written by two Italian Jesuits, missionaries in Peru, were comprised of thirteen folios, one of which, folded, contained a *quipu* that…"

"What's a quipu?" I interrupted.

"A quipu… Well, a quipu…" She seemed unable to find adequate words. "A *quipu* is a thick wool cord from which hang a series of colored strings full of knots. Depending on the arrangement of these knots, their thickness, and the distance between them, the meaning varied. The Spanish chroniclers maintained that Incan *quipus* were accounting tools."

“So the quipo was a kind of abacus,” I suggested.

“Yes and no. Yes, because it really did allow the Inca to keep track, in minute detail, of the taxes, weapons, the population of the empire, agricultural production, etc., and no, because according to references found in minor documents and in Guamán Poma de Ayala’s chronicle, discovered in 1908 in Copenhagen, the *quipus* were something more than simple calculators: they also related historical, religious, or literary occurrences. The problem was that Pizarro and the successive viceroys of Peru made it their business to destroy all the *quipus* they found, which were many, and to massacre the *Quipucamayocs*, the only ones who knew how to read those knots. Their interpretation was lost forever, and the only thing that remains is the obscure memory that the Inca controlled the administration of the empire with some exotic tangled strings. Whenever a *quipu* was found in some burial site, it was sent directly to be shown as a curiosity in some museum. No one knew how to read it.”

There were some quick knocks at the door, followed by the entrance into the room of a nurse with enormous bulging eyes and a hoarse voice who carried in her hand a tray full of medications.

“Good evening,” she greeted us with a friendly manner, heading rapidly toward Daniel. Since the side table was occupied by my laptop and my cell phone, she left the tray on the bed. “It’s time for his medication.”

My sister-in-law and I returned the greeting, and, like the audience at a play watching the actors on stage, we stayed in our seats and followed her with our gaze. We knew the ritual from having seen it the night before. After making my brother ingest the chlorpromazine tablet and the thioridazine drops, with much effort due to his lack of cooperation, she put the mercury thermometer under one of his arms, and around the other, she wrapped the blood-pressure cuff. All of this she did with agility and skill, without error, moving with the dexterity that comes from many years of experience. Having concluded this first phase, she moved on to a second that we did not know:

“Do you want to go for a walk, Daniel?” she asked in a loud coarse voice, literally putting her face against my brother’s, who now had his eyes open again.

“How can I want to if I’m dead?” he responded, loyal to his new creed.

“Would you rather we sat you in a chair?”

“If only I knew what a chair was!”

“I’ll help him up,” I said, getting up. I couldn’t take any more of that absurd conversation.

“Don’t bother,” the nurse told me, lowering her voice and gesturing me not to move. “I have to ask him these questions. We have to test his progress.”

“It doesn’t seem as though there is any…” murmured Ona, sadly.

The nurse gave a sympathetic smile. “There will be. It’s still early. Tomorrow he will be much better.” Later, turning back to me as she released the cuff from my brother’s arm and collected the thermometer and the rest of her things, she said: “Insist on asking him if he wants to take a walk. Do it every time you put the drops in his eyes. He has to move around.”

“I don’t have a body anymore.” Daniel declared, looking at the ceiling.

“Yes, you do, dear, and a very nice one!” she exclaimed happily as she went out the door.

Ona and I looked at each other, trying to contain our laughter. At least someone was in a good mood in that dreadful place. My sister-in-law's face, however, changed quickly:

"The drops!" she said guiltily.

I nodded and picked them up from the bedside table, handing them to her. My laptop had turned itself completely off and my phone had automatically disconnected from the internet.

Talking to him, saying a continuous stream of sweet things to him, Ona put the fake tears in my brother's violet eyes. I observed them intently, reaffirming for the thousandth time my unbreakable decision never to be part of an emotional community of two. I couldn't take the idea of tying my life to that of another person, even for a short time, and if, dragged by circumstance, at some time I had been crazy enough to do it, I always ended up tired of putting up with nonsense and desperate to get back my space, my time, and my supposed solitude, in which I was very comfortable and very free to do whatever I felt like. Like the title of that old Manuel Gómez Pereira movie, I always asked myself why they called it love when they meant sex. My brother had fallen in love with Ona and was happy living with her and their son; I simply liked my life exactly as it was and I didn't contemplate the need to be happy, something that seemed to me like an aspiration foreign to reality and an unfounded fiction. I contented myself with not being miserable and with enjoying the temporary pleasures that life offered. That the world made sense through happiness sounded to me like a cheap excuse not to confront life head-on.

When Ona returned to her chair, I went back to the business of quipus. Something told me that some knots had to be untied.

"You were telling me before about the Miccinelli documents and the Incan writing system…" I reminded my sister-in-law.

"Ah, yes!" she remembered, bringing her legs up into the chair and crossing them Indian-style. "Okay, so the thing is, while Laura Laurencich-Minelli studied the historical and paleographic part of the documents, Marta Torrent studied the *quipu* that came sewn into the folded folio, and in doing so she discovered that there was a direct correlation between the knots and the quechua words that appeared written above the cords. She deduced, obviously, that she had before her a new Rosetta Stone, which would allow her to find the lost key to deciphering all of the *quipus*, but it would take years, so, with permission from the owner of the Naples archive, Clara Miccinelli, she made copies of everything and brought them with her to Barcelona."

"And, once here, our dear Marta got to work and began to unravel the mysteries of that old writing system," I commented, "but since it was a titanic undertaking, she looked for help among the best-qualified and most intelligent of her professors, and she chose Daniel, to whom she immediately proposed a collaboration on the project."

Ona's furious expression returned.

"But, Ona…" I hesitated, "Dr. Torrent didn't do anything other than offer Daniel a unique opportunity. Imagine if she had offered it to someone else! I don't understand why it bothers you so much that she thought of Daniel for something so important."

“Marta Torrent only offered Daniel the hard work of the project!” my sister-in-law said, irritated. “Your brother was very clear on that, he knew from the beginning that she would exploit him, and that later, when it came time for recognition and academic merits, he wouldn’t even get a thank you. It’s always like that, Arnau! He was killing himself working outside of class time so that she could receive, comfortably seated in her position as head of department, updates on the progress he was making.”

I was somewhat surprised by that energetic response. Things must be very bad at the university for Ona to express herself like that. Normally my sister-in-law was an agreeable and mellow young woman. It’s not that I hadn’t heard of the abuses that went on in the departments, but I never would have suspected that my own brother was one of those poor unfortunates being leached off of by his superiors. Still, it was the manner and not the meaning of Ona’s words that shocked me.

Daniel, probably incited by the tone of our conversation, suddenly became violently agitated and began to tirelessly repeat the word which, that night, had obsessed him:

“*Lawt’ata, lawt’ata, lawt’ata…*”

“There’s still one more thing I don’t understand, Ona,” I mentioned thoughtfully. “If Quechua was the official language of the Incan Empire and the *quipu* of Naples also came with the key in Quechua, why did Daniel abandon the study of that language in order to devote himself completely to Aymara?”

My sister-in-law arched her eyebrows and looked at me with very wide, disconcerted eyes.

“I don’t know,” she declared at last, in a dispirited voice. “Daniel didn’t explain it to me. He only told me that he had to focus on Aymara because he was sure that’s where he would find the solution.”

“The solution to what?” I objected, “To the quipus in Quechua?”

“I don’t know, Arnau,” she repeated. “I just now realized.”

When I was writing the code for some application, as simple as it might be, I never made the mistake of supposing that among the thousands of lines I was leaving in my wake, there was no hidden fatal mistake that would impede the function of the program on the first try. After the effort of conceiving the project and developing it over a period of weeks or months, the hardest and most passionate work still remained: the desperate search for those imperceptible structural failures that ruined the immense, expensively-erected building. Nevertheless, I never faced the code empty-handed since while I wrote routines and algorithms, a sixth sense kept me aware of where those dark areas were that probably would later be the source of all problems. And I never doubted the truth of those intuitions. When, upon finishing a program, I applied the compiler to test the function, it always ended up confirming the connection between the final errors and those dark areas. Looking for them and finding them was much more interesting than correcting them, because correcting was something simple and mechanical, while discovering the problem, chasing after it, following a feeling or a suspicion, had its element of the heroic, of Ulysses trying to get to Ithaca.

As if my brother were an application with millions of lines, my valuable sixth sense was warning me of the presence of dark areas related to the errors in his

brain. The problem was that I had not written that supposed program that represented Daniel, so despite my suspicions of the existence of those incorrect data, I didn't have a way to find out how to locate and repair them.

I spent the rest of that second night working and attending to my brother, but by the time light began to enter through the window and Ona had waked, I had already come to the decision that I would throw myself completely into the business of clarifying (if my sixth sense was right and if it was feasible) the possible correlation between Daniel's agnosia and Cotard's, on one side, and his strange research project, on the other. If I was fooling myself, and, as I had told Ona that afternoon, everything was a product of our nerves and the fear we felt, the only thing I had to lose was the time invested, and if, moreover, over the coming days Daniel responded to the treatment and was cured, would he be enough of an idiot to reproach me for chasing after a surely ridiculous hunch? Well, maybe he would, but it didn't matter.

When we arrived on Xiprer Street I went up with my sister-in-law to her apartment to pick up the paper written by Daniel, because I wanted to study it that afternoon, but when I left, I left loaded with a mountain of books on the Inca and with the folders of research documents about the quipus.

I went to bed around nine-thirty in the morning, wiped out, with irritated eyes, and exhausted like never before in my life. Owing to the change in my sleep schedule and to having sat up all night, I suffered from jet-lag without having crossed the Atlantic, but even so, I told the system to wake me at three in the afternoon, because I had a lot to do and very little time to do it.

I was deeply asleep when Vivaldi, Allegro from Concerto for Mandolin, began to sound throughout the house. The central computer selected, from among my favorites, a different melody for every day, depending on the time of year, the time of day that I was waking up, and the weather outside. My entire house was constructed around my personality, and over the years a strange symbiosis had been produced between the artificial intelligence system that regulated it and myself. It had learned and perfected itself on its own, in such a way that it had become a kind of telepathic majordomo obsessed with serving me and attending to me like a mother.

The curtains of the wide French windows that looked out on the garden were softly opening, allowing a tenuous ocean green light to come in, while the screen that completely covered the back wall reproduced a visualization of Van Gogh's L'église d'Auvers-sur-Oise. It was still daytime and I still felt terribly sleepy, so I squeezed my eyelids shut, put the pillow over my head, and bellowed: "Five more minutes!" causing the sudden death of the special effects. The bad thing was that Magdalena, the housekeeper, immune to the voice recognition system, was already coming through the door with the breakfast tray.

"Do you really want to keep sleeping?" she asked, taken aback, while she walked noisily over the wood, dragged chairs, opened and closed the closet doors, and started up the music again by pushing the button on my night table; if she didn't dance on my head it was because she was more than fifty years old, but she would have had she been able. "I thought maybe you didn't like the dinner I prepared, so I've brought you the same breakfast as always: orange juice, tea with milk, and toast."

“Thanks.” I mumbled from beneath the pillow.

“How was your brother last night?”

I didn’t know what the hell she was doing, but the squeaks, thumps, and various noises continued.

“The same.”

“I’m sorry,” she said in a pained voice. Magdalena was already working for me when Daniel was still living with me.

“Today we should start to see the results of the treatment.”

“Your mother already told me this morning.”

Bam! Garden doors opened wide and a draft of cool air entered like a hurricane into the room. Why the hell did I have a temperature control and air circulation system in the whole house? According the Magdalena, for no reason. Good thing the day was nice and it was almost the beginning of summer; even so, I began to sneeze over and over, which ended up waking me up completely when I found myself needing to retrieve a tissue from the box on the night table. Being a technologically evolved urbanite had its inconveniences, and one of them was the acquired incapacity to face nature bare-chested, as I was at that moment, since I was only wearing my pajama shorts.

I ate my breakfast quickly while looking over the selection of headlines that Núria sent to the screen in my room every morning, and just as I was, without even washing my face, I headed toward the study—ample concept that encompassed office as well as video game room—ready to give myself a crash course on Incan culture.

“Find Jabba,” I told the computer, as I walked down the hall. A second later, Jabba’s neutral voice greeted me when I entered the study. “Are you downstairs?” I asked, sitting in my chair and picking up a paper clip which I started to twist between my fingers.

“Where else would I be?” he retorted.

“I need your help and Proxi’s.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, alarmed. “How’s Daniel?”

“This morning he was the same. No change.” My loose, disheveled hair was bothering me, so I twisted it up on my head and contained it inside an old Barcelona Dragons cap. For a month, I’d had the tickets for the game that coming Saturday against the Rhen Fire of Düsseldorf, in the Olympic Stadium in Montjuïc, but the way things were going, I very much feared that I wouldn’t be able to attend. “I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“I have a ton of books in front of me that I have to look through before going to the hospital.”

“I don’t suppose you’d want me to read them for you.”

“Don’t be dense. That’s not it.”

“So get to it, I have work to do.”

“I release you from it. You have the afternoon off, and Proxi too.”

“Great. Just so happens we’ve been needing to buy a sofa. Thanks, bye.”

“Wait, you ass!” I yelled, smiling. “You can’t go.”

“Oh, no? So why’d you give me the afternoon off?”

“So you can research something for me. I need you and Proxi to find everything there is on the internet about an Incan language called Aymara.”

The profoundest of silences reigned in my study, so profound that it was almost a deep hole. I started to drum my fingers on the desk as an auditory signal of impatience, but even then he didn’t answer. At last, I lost my patience.

“You there, you idiot?”

“No,” he responded without hanging up.

“Come on! It’s not that hard!”

“Oh, no?” he exclaimed in his bellowing voice. “But I didn’t even understand what you said! How in the hell do you want me to research it?”

“Because you’re good. We all know that.”

“Come on, don’t try to flatter me.”

“I need you to research it, Marc, seriously.”

The silence of before returned, but I knew I was winning the battle. I heard a long sigh come through the loudspeakers.

“Explain to me again what it was you wanted us to look up?”

“The Inca, the inhabitants of the Incan Empire…”

“The Latin American Inca.”

“The same. Okay, so those guys spoke two languages. The official one of the empire was Quechua, most common among the populace, and the other, Aymara, was spoken in the Southeast.”

“What Southeast?”

“How should I know!” I snapped. Did Jabba think I was an expert on these matters? It was all gibberish to me! “The Southeast of the Incan Empire, I guess.”

“Okay, so you want to know everything about the Aymara language that was spoken in the Southeast of the Incan Empire.”

“Exactly.”

“Fine. Well, I hope you have a good reason for making Proxi and me spend our afternoon researching the Aymara language spoken in the Southeast of the Incan Empire, because otherwise I will sink your company and make them lock you in prison.”

The words of a hacker should never be taken in jest.

“I have a good reason.”

Did I?

“Ok. I’m going to find Proxi and we’ll get to work in the ‘100.’”

“All right. Call me when you finish.”

“By the way, you haven’t asked me about how the campaign against TraxSG turned out.”

I’d forgotten completely about it! I had my mental hard drive formatted from Monday.

“How has it been going?” I asked with a mischievous smile on my lips.

“Great. It’s in all of today’s papers. The TraxSG people are going to sweat blood to get out of this looking good. And they have no idea of the origin of the boycott.”

I laughed. “I’m glad. Let them look. All right, I’ll be waiting for your call.”

“Sure. Bye.”

I was alone again in my study, and in silence… Well, not exactly alone, since I always had the discreet presence of the central computer with me. At first I had

considered giving it an appropriate name, something along the lines of Hal, the crazy computer from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or Abulafia, the poor computer from *Foucault's Pendulum*, by Eco, or even Johnny, for Johnny Mnemonic, but I never finished deciding, and I didn't christen it in any way. If it had been a dog, I would have called it simply "Dog," but it was a powerful system of artificial intelligence. It was finally established that without saying any name at all, any order given in a loud voice that was not clearly meant for Magdalena would be directed at the system.

I threw a melancholy glance at my fantastic collection of DVDs and at my video game consoles, abandoned on the small rattan table, and reached for the pile of books that I'd brought home from my brother's apartment. By my own choice, my study was as much like the cabin of a space ship as it could be (another concession to my playful spirit). Aside from the giant screen, which, like in the rest of the rooms of the living space, completely occupied one of the walls, I had a set-up similar to that of the "100," although with only three monitors, a couple of keyboards, some stereos, two printers, a digital camera, a scanner, a DVD player, and my game consoles. Everything was the color of stainless steel or an impeccable white, with chairs, tables, and bookshelves made of aluminum, titanium, and chrome. The lights were halogen, with a light blue hue so cold that they lent the study the air of a cave carved out of ice. The long rows of books on the shelves and the small low rattan table were the only colorful exceptions in the interior of that apparent iceberg, but I was in no way going to give up having some of my books there, and, of course, the table, which was a keepsake from my old house, and which I was not prepared to get rid of.

With a snort of resignation, I opened the first of Daniel's history tomes and began to read. After I good while, I opened another, and one hour later, another. The truth is, to begin with, I didn't understand much and I wasn't someone you could call stupid, exactly. The historians who had written those brainy works had insisted on not figuring time in the normal way, and talked of "Horizons" instead of ages—"Early Horizon," "Middle Horizon," "Late Horizon," and their intermediate periods—with the result that, at least for a non-expert like myself, it was impossible to place what they were describing in a familiar moment in history. When, at last, I found a chart clarifying the dates it turned out that the Incan Empire, one of the most powerful empires of the world which had grown to have thirty million inhabitants and to occupy a territory that extended from Colombia to Argentina and Chile, covering Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, had lasted less than one hundred years, and had fallen into the hands of a miserable Spanish army of barely two hundred men, under the command of Francisco Pizarro, a guy who, incredibly, didn't know how to read or write, and had been a swineherd in his native Extremadura, which he had wasted no time in leaving in search of fortune.

Pizarro had left Panama in 1531, commanding an expedition of several ships that headed south from Central America down the Pacific coast, discovering lands on the way and founding cities on the islands and coasts of Colombia and Ecuador. No one who wasn't an original inhabitant of those places—that is to say, no one who wasn't an Indian—had crossed the Andes yet, nor would they until many years later, just as no one had crossed the Amazon jungle or seen Peru, Bolivia, or Tierra del Fuego. The conquest of the New World was achieved,

basically, from the narrow waist of the continent (from Panama, then called Tierra Firme), extending up and down the coastline; so everything Pizarro saw from his ship in the sixteenth century as he made his way toward a mysterious Incan Empire resplendent with the gold he'd heard spoken of by the natives, was Terra Incognita, parts unknown.

Apparently the term "Inca" referred only to the king. In other words, calling the whole population of the Empire "Inca" had been a mistake on the part of the Spanish. Among its inhabitants, the state was known as Tihuantinsuyu, the Kingdom of the Four Regions, and began in the year 1438 under the rule of the Inca Pachacuti, the ninth of the merely twelve Inca that had existed before Pizarro arrived in 1532 and took it upon himself to vilely kill him who would be the last of them, the Inca Atahualpa. Before the Inca Pachacuti, memory was confused and incomplete, since, according to the assertions of all historians, it was totally impossible to reconstruct what had occurred, given the lack of written documents in Andean cultures. Of course, archeology had revealed, and kept revealing, a large part of that obscure past, leaving very clear the millennia-long period that had passed since the first settlers crossed a frozen and passable Bering Strait and colonized the American continent… Or hadn't it been like that? Well, no, because the latest discoveries spoke of great migrations arriving by sea from Polynesia. Or hadn't it been like that either? It was unclear, because Professor Anna C. Roosevelt, director of the Department of Anthropology of the Field Museum of Natural History of Chicago, had just discovered a site in the Amazon where there were items of human manufacture that had been there for a few thousand years more than they ought to have been, and that pretty much put an end to the previous theories. Anyway, the problem was that archaeological revelations also differed a great deal on the essentials, leaving things just as uncertain and fuzzy as they they had started out. One by one, researchers and scholars ended up recognizing at some point in their books that, really, nothing was certain and that the data mentioned up till that point could change with the next archaeological discovery.

Neither was there any agreement in the general suppositions taken from the mythology and legends collected by the Spanish, but mostly it could be said that the final version was something along these lines: Around the year 1100, an insignificant and warlike group of Inca set out from the Southeast, from the highlands of the central range of the Andes, toward the valley of Cusco, in the North, where for the next 300 years, they fought endlessly with the tribes that inhabited the area, until they achieved absolute power. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, they began what was to be known as Tihuantinsuyu, which ended at the beginning of the sixteenth century, with Pizarro. Or in other words, not much gained by so much effort.

As far as religion went, as a supreme deity, the Inca worshiped Inti, the Sun, of whom they considered themselves to be children, although since the reign of the famous Inca Pachacuti, this role was transferred, more or less, to Viracocha, causing the two gods to be confused with each other. Viracocha was a somewhat strange god whom the people called "the old man of the sky," but who had, nevertheless, emerged from the waters of Lake Titicaca, proceeding to create humanity twice over because he hadn't liked the result of the first attempt: He

sculpted a race of giants from a rock and gave them life, but they immediately began fighting amongst themselves, and Viracocha destroyed them. Some said that he did it with columns of fire that fell from the sky, and others that he drowned them in a terrible flood, but either way the world had remained in the dark after such a hecatomb. With the firstborn destroyed, while Viracocha went about illuminating the world again by taking the sun and the moon from Lake Titicaca, the second human race built and inhabited the nearby city of Tiwanaku (or Tiahuanaco), the oldest archaeological ruins in all of South America. There were dozens of different versions, but, setting aside whether or not the second race had had a place before or after the flood—a milestone that also seemed amply reflected in all the Andean legends—what stood out the most was the small detail that Viracocha had been a little man of medium height, white skin, and the owner of a beautiful beard. The part about the white skin didn't have much explanation, of course, but the part about the beard completely disconcerted researchers, because, without question, all native Americans had always been completely beardless. For this reason, when Pizarro and his men, white-skinned despite the grime, and certainly bearded, made their appearance in Cajamarca, the Inca were so perplexed that they confused them with gods.

Finally, as the legends told, with infinite variations, Viracocha had sent his own sons, Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, northward to found the city of Cusco, capital of the Empire, and to give rise to the Inca civilization. The direct descendants of those children of Viracocha were the authentic Inca, the kings or members of the royal family, in whose veins ran a precious solar blood that had to be maintained at any cost, for which reason they often formed marriages between siblings. They called these sovereigns and aristocrats—men and women—*Orejones*, because tradition dictated that they pierce the earlobes of young people of this lineage in order to differentiate them from other social classes. When the holes were sufficiently stretched, they inserted into them large gold discs in the shape of the sun, a decoration that symbolized the origin and high status of the person.

As I got to know the history and defined a timeline of events in my mind, I could start to fill in that first general outline. It was as if I were painting a large picture. I was already able to sketch in charcoal the entire scene with its correct perspective on the white canvas; however, I was still lacking the colors, but I wasn't going to be able to take the time to look for them: Reading without rest had taken me all afternoon, and at eight o'clock the computer reminded me that I had to eat dinner and get ready to go out.

Reality fell on me all at once. I blinked, stunned, lifting my gaze from the books, and it occurred to me in a flash that not only did I have to shower, dress, and eat something, but that Proxi and Jabba were in the "100," and that Ona was waiting for me to arrive at her house in less than an hour. But, since I didn't want to leave the reading until the next day, I grabbed another backpack from the hook by the door and shoved inside it those volumes that I still hadn't examined, and that for obvious reasons were those that looked most tedious and soporific: *The New Chronicle and Good Government* by Guamán Poma de Ayala—the book that Ona had told me about the night before—; *Royal Commentaries of Peru*, by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega; *The Chronicle of Peru*, by Pedro de Cieza de León; and

Narrative of the Incas by Juan de Betanzos. The bag, generously fattened, weighed a ton.

While I was eating, my mother called me to ask how long we would be. Clifford was not well, it seemed, and they wanted to go home soon.

"Your brother hasn't improved at all," she explained in a voice that hinted at some worry. "Diego says that today was still too soon to see results and that we would have to wait a little more, but Clifford has gotten nervous and he has one of his migraines."

No one in the family would dare to mention it out loud, but that didn't keep it from being significant that those terrible migraines of Clifford's started shortly after his marriage to my mother.

"Who's Diego?" I asked, swallowing the strip of sole I'd just put in my mouth, without bothering to chew it.

"Daniel's psychiatrist, Arnau! When it comes to what's most important, you're always in the clouds, darling," she reproached me once again, and all because I was incapable of memorizing the names, surnames, and lineages that she liked so much and that she dominated like a virtuosa, despite her long absence. "Miquel has also been by, Dr. Llor, you remember? the neurologist. Oh, what a good man! Right, Clifford? Poor thing... he can't even answer me because of his headache! You know, Miquel has asked after you a great deal and he told us that his wife's nephew used to work in Ker-Central, and... Well, Clifford is asking me to hang up. Don't take too long, you and Ona, okay? We're tired and we'd like to go to bed soon. By the way, Arnie, how do I tell that machine that governs your house not to turn out the light on your night table while I'm reading? Because, last night... Yes, I'm hanging up, Clifford, I'm hanging up! You can explain it to me later darling. Don't take too long."

By the time the system cut communications, I had already finished my dinner and was getting into the shower. Puzzled by Proxi's and Jabba's silence, since they had shown no signs of life the entire afternoon, I made off with the goods and shot off toward the garage. At a quarter to nine, I arrived at my brother's apartment, but this time I didn't have to look for a parking space because Ona was waiting for me at the door with her arms crossed. She had put on a black sweater and a skirt with a wide leather belt. During the brief journey to La Custòdia she told me that she'd barely been able to sleep a couple of hours all day because of Daniel's medical leave papers, since, first, she'd had to go to his doctor to get them, and then she'd had to head over to Bellaterra to give them to the secretaries' office at the college.

Clifford really looked terrible when Ona and I went into Daniel's room. His skin exhibited a worrying green tone, and two large dark bags were swelling beneath his eyes. My brother wasn't looking his best that night either: He urgently needed someone to give him a shave, and it seemed to me he was somewhat emaciated, with his cheeks sunken and the bones on his forehead very pronounced. By contrast, my mother seemed to be just as healthy and stupendous as always, loaded with energy and vigor, and, according to what she said, that was taking into account the constant visits of the day (life-long friends, lesser friends, acquaintances, acquaintances of acquaintances...) and her intense private war with the nurses and orderlies of the floor which was in full swing. Miquel and

Diego (Dr. Llor and Dr. Hernández) had also participated in the active social life of the room, and my grandmother, without anyone knowing how she had found out, had called from Vic to ask about her grandson and to announce that she would arrive first thing in the morning the next day.

"And of course, with all that din," my mother concluded, looking pityingly at her husband, who languished silently on the plastic chair, "Clifford is feeling awful. And my little Dani, Ona? Do you think tomorrow I could see him for a little while? Of course your parents are just as tired as we are…! A child is very tiring. Surely, with him, there's no time to rest all day! I'm thinking…" She grabbed her chin with her hand to indicate that her reflection was really profound, "that, if my mother also stays at Arnau's house, she could look after Dani, don't you think, Clifford? It would be a fantastic solution."

"Mom, Clifford isn't well, he looks bad," I told her. "You should go."

"You're right," she said unconcernedly, getting up. "Let's go, Clifford. By the way, Arnau, explain to me what I have to do for your house to obey me. These new technologies are hopeless! I can't make them work. You couldn't have a normal house, like everyone else? You know you're an odd one, son. Who could have told me you'd end up dedicating yourself to all this childish nonsense with computers and video games…! You'll never grow up, Arnie." She reproached me; she didn't have any idea what I really did in the company, nor was she interested in knowing. "Come on, tell me what I have to do, because otherwise I'll end up having to go to a hotel: When I enter a room, that so-intelligent system doesn't turn on the lights; if I want to shower, the water comes out cold; the closet doors won't open, and the television channels keep changing. This morning, while I was dressing, a drum roll started that only stopped when Magdalena arrived and…."

"Mom," I interrupted in a firm voice. "Take Clifford."

"You're right. You're right. Let's go, Clifford."

How could she still feel like talking after having spent the whole day in conversation with all those people?

"But you're not going to tell me what to do about the thing with your house?" she insisted, before going out.

"Yes," I responded. "Try to keep your mouth shut. You're driving the computer crazy."

She stood in suspense for a few seconds, and, at last, burst into a happy laugh.

"Arnau, Arnau! You're terrible, you know!" And, saying this, disappeared from sight while Clifford said goodbye with an affectionate nod and closed the door.

"Finally!" exclaimed Ona, who had stayed close to Daniel since we had arrived. "I'm sorry, Arnau, but your mother is exhausting."

"You're telling me!"

My sister-in-law leaned over my brother and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. It struck me to discover that she hadn't dared to do it before in front of her in-laws. Daniel, nevertheless, turned his head brusquely toward the window, shying away from the contact.

"Know what?" I said, going to Ona, who was paralyzed from the disdain. "Let's get him up and shave him."

But Ona didn't react, so I took her arm and gently shook her.

"Come on, Ona. Help me."

When, after innumerable attempts and struggles, we managed to seat Daniel on the edge of the bed, some knocks sounded at the door. My sister-in-law and I looked in the direction of the sound, expecting to see the night nurse come in, but instead, the knocks sounded again.

"We're not expecting anyone, right?" she murmured.

"No," I agreed. "And I hope it's not Miquel or Diego."

"Come in," she invited, raising her voice.

I was dumbfounded when I saw the figures of Proxi and Jabba appear in the door. The painful impression that it caused in them to see Daniel turned into a rag doll and stuffed into those horrible hospital pajamas was immediately clear on their faces.

"Come in," I told them, gesturing with my hand for them to come inside.

"We don't want to bother you," mumbled Jabba, who carried a thick document case full of papers under his arm.

"You're not bothering us," my sister-in-law assured them, smiling. "Come in, don't just stand in the door."

"It seems we've caught you at a bad moment…" Proxi remarked, without taking a step.

"Well, we were going to…" I stopped cold because it suddenly occurred to me that Lola and Marc wouldn't have made a surprise visit to the hospital at that hour without a good reason. "Is something going on?"

"We just wanted to show you a few things," Jabba declared, embarrassed, giving the voluminous folder a few taps, "but we can leave it until tomorrow."

Their expressions, however, indicated the opposite and that whatever it was they had come expressly to show me was very urgent.

"Is it about the TraxSG boycott?"

"No, that's still going well."

Or rather, it was about the Aymara language that was spoken in the Southeast of the Incan Empire.

"Do you mind if we lie Daniel back down?" I asked my sister-in-law. "I won't be long."

"Go ahead" she assured me, lying my brother back down carefully; it was easier to lie him down than to get him up. "Go with them. Don't worry."

But I was worried, and not exactly about Daniel.

"We'll be in the cafeteria on the ground floor," I told her. "Call my cell if you need me."

Immediately upon exiting into the hall and slowly closing the door behind me, I glared at those two.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Didn't you want to know everything about Aymara?" Proxi asked abruptly, with a frown; once outside of the room they stopped beating around the bush.

"Yes."

"Well, get ready!" declared Jabba, initiating the walk toward the floor's exit. "You don't know what you've gotten yourself into."

"What is he talking about?" I asked Proxi.

"You'd better wait for us to sit down. Friendly advice."

We didn't speak another word until we got to the cafeteria, and we made the whole trio walking quickly behind Jabba who seemed to be driven forward by a fuel-injected engine.

Despite there not being a lot of people all the tables were occupied by solitary family members of sick people, who ate with their gazes fixed on the trays in front of them. The food, available in big aluminum serving trays fitted into the bar, looked unpleasant beneath the heat lamps, as if they had prepared it using leftover prison food. Nevertheless, the dining people—mostly women of a certain age, educated in the belief that illness and death were not things for men—ate it in silence, accepting the inconveniences of a family member's hospitalization with resignation.

At the back of the large dining room, a waitress dressed in a ridiculous white and blue striped uniform wiped a damp towel over a Formica tabletop that had just been abandoned by one of so many old ladies. Carrying the tray on which wobbled the drinks we had just bought, we headed in that direction and took possession of the table under the waitress's unfriendly gaze.

"Okay, let's see. What terribly serious thing have you discovered?"

"No, not serious," Proxi clarified. "More strange."

Jabba opened the document case and took out a bundle of papers which he unloaded onto the center of the table.

"Here," he said. "Take a look at this."

"Come on," I replied, returning the sheets to him. "We're not in a work meeting. Tell me about it."

He seemed not to know where to begin; he threw long looks at Proxi and tugged at his red hair.

"At first we didn't find anything strange," she began, more decided. "When Jabba explained what you wanted I thought you'd really gone crazy, but since I always think the same thing when you have one of your ideas, it wasn't too much of an insult… Anyway, your ears would really be burning."

Jabba nodded repeatedly.

"Anyway," she continued, "we went to the '100' and got to work. It seemed like a convoluted business, but when we broke it down as if it were a programming strategy problem, it got a lot simpler. We had several key words: Aymara, Inca, language… There was an abundance of information on the web about the subject. Aymara is a language that's still spoken in a large part of southern Peru and in Bolivia, and its speakers, the Aymara, are a peaceful Andean people, with a little over a million and a half individuals, who used to form part of the Incan Empire. Apparently, although Aymara has existed alongside Quechua for centuries, they're not sister tongues, that is to say, they do not belong to the same linguistic family."

"Really, Aymara doesn't…" Marc started to say, but Proxi stopped him.

"Hold on, we're going to make him dizzy!"

"Fine."

"Listen to me, Root."

"I am, Proxi."

"Aymara… Okay, are you familiar with all that stuff about the origin of languages and all that?"

"Are you talking about the tower of Babel?"

They both looked at me strangely.

"Something like that. Linguists think that the five thousand languages that exist on the planet today probably had a common origin, a kind of original proto-language from which all the others are derived, including those which were lost forever. This proto-language would be the trunk of a tree with a lot of branches sprouting from it, and on each branch, another, and so on up to the five thousand languages of today, which are grouped in large linguistic families… Understand?"

"Perfectly. Now, tell me about Aymara, if you don't mind."

"Stop being an ass and listen to her!" Jabba demanded.

"This original proto-language…"

"The language of Adam and Eve?" I joked, but Proxi ignored me.

"…is known as the Nostratic language, and it's thought to have existed about thirteen thousand years ago. Great minds from the best universities of the world have been busting their brains for the last fifty years trying to reconstruct it."

"Very interesting," I said, bored.

"Well, you're about to find out just how interesting it is, moron," spit Jabba. "There's a whole line within linguistics that works on the theory that Aymara could be that first mother tongue. The trunk… You get it?"

I was shocked, and my face must have reflected it, because my friend's bad mood disappeared.

"In fact," Proxi said, reclaiming the narrative; her eyes gleamed in a strange way, "Aymara is very far from being just any language. We're talking about the perfect language, a language whose logical structure is so extraordinary that it seems more the result of a preconceived design than that of a natural evolution. The Aymara called their language *Jaqui Aru* which means *human language* and the word *Aymara* means *people of ancient times*."

"Listen to this…" Jabba said, rifling desperately through the documents he had on the table; at last, after a lot of digging, he found what he wanted and looked at me triumphantly. "The guy who wrote *The name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco, is apparently one of the finest semiologists in the world, and he has a book called *The Search for the Perfect Language*, in which he says: 'In 1603, the Jesuit Ludovico Bertonio published his *Arte de lengua Aymara* (which he supplemented in 1612 with a *Vocabulario de la lengua Aymara*). Aymara is a language still partially spoken by Indians living in Bolivia and Peru, and Bertonio discovered that it displayed an immense flexibility and capacity of accommodating neologisms, particularly adapted to the expression of abstract concepts, so much so as to raise a suspicion that it was an artificial invention. Two centuries later, Emeterio Villamil de Rada described it as the language of Adam, the expression of "an idea anterior to the formation of language", founded upon "necessary and immutable ideas" and, therefore, a philosophic language if there ever were one (*La lengua de Adam, 1860*)."[1-6] Jabba looked at me triumphantly. "What do you say to that, huh?"

"But it doesn't end there," Proxy swiftly pointed out.

"No, no, not in the least! Eco then continues to explain the characteristics that could allow Aymara to be classified as a perfect language, although without completely committing himself to the idea that it's an artificial language."

"But what do you mean, an artificial language!" I exploded. "That's ridiculous!"

“To help you understand,” Proxi said patiently, “there are a bunch of scholars around the world who all agree that Aymara is a language that seems designed according to the same rules that are followed today in the writing of computer programming languages. It’s a language with two basic elements, roots and suffixes which by themselves have no meaning, but which, joined together in long chains, create all meanings… Just like a mathematical language! What’s more,” she added hurriedly, when she saw I was opening my mouth to object again, “the Bolivian Professor Iván Guzmán de Rojas, a systems engineer who’s spent many years working on this subject, claims that combinations of Aymara suffixes obey a regularity with properties of algebraic structure, a kind of ring of polynomials with such a quantity of mathematic abstraction that it’s impossible to believe it’s a product of natural evolution.”

“Remembering, of course,” added Jabba, “that Aymara hasn’t evolved. Incredibly, that damned language has stayed almost intact for centuries or millennia… About thirteen millennia, if it’s really the Nostratic language.”

“It hasn’t varied at all, it hasn’t changed?” I asked, surprised.

“Apparently not. It’s taken some words from Quechua and Spanish in the last few centuries, but not very many. The Aymara believe that their language is sacred, a kind of gift from the gods that belongs equally to everyone, and that it shouldn’t be modified under any condition. What do you think?”

“Viracocha gave them their language?” I asked, without letting my guard down.

“Viracocha?” asked Proxi, surprised. “No, no. Viracocha doesn’t appear anywhere in Aymara legends. At least not that we’ve read, right Jabba? The Aymara religion is based on nature: fertility, livestock, the wind, storms… Living in harmony with nature means being in harmony with the gods, of which they have one for each natural phenomenon, although Pachamama, Mother Earth, is above all of them, and if I remember correctly, in ancient times they also had one called Thunupa, god of… of what, Jabba?”

“Of the rain or something like that?” he suggested, uncertain.

“That’s it. Of the rain and lightning. It could be that because of the Inca’s influence, they believe in Viracocha, I don’t know,” Proxi continued. “What they do claim is that they’re the direct descendants of the builders of Tiwanaku, a very important city next to Lake Tititcaca, which was already in ruins when the Spanish discovered it. Apparently, Tiwanaku was some kind of religious monastery, the most important sacred center of the Andes, and its governors, the Capacas, were astronomer-priests.”

“The problem is, no one knows anything,” Jabba pointed out. “Everything’s more or less unfounded theories, imaginings, and suspicions.”

“Well, it’s the same with the Inca,” I said, remembering my reading from the afternoon. “I can’t understand how we, in the twenty-first century, are still so incapable of explaining certain things.”

“The thing is, no one’s interested in this, Root,” Proxy sadly pointed out. “Only a few oddballs like your brother. Because all of this is for Daniel, right?”

I shifted in the chair, a little nervous, and took advantage of those few seconds to decide whether or not to tell them about my silly suspicions.

“Spit it out,” ordered my stout friend.

I stopped beating around the bush. I began to tell them everything I knew, without leaving out a single detail, offering them facts and not opinions, so that their judgment, more impartial than my own, might help me to get out of this confusing tangle of nonsense I'd gotten myself into. Their expressions, while I explained the story of the Miccinelli Documents, the *quipus*, and the curse written on the paper found on Daniel's desk, made me uncomfortable. They knew me as someone with a good analytical mind, capable of devising the most complex project in a couple of seconds, and of finding a logical needle in a haystack of incoherencies, so, through their eyes, I was seeing myself as an authentic moron. When I at last closed my mouth, and grabbed my drink and pulled it closer for something to do, I was sure of having fallen forever into the darkest abyss of ridiculousness.

"You're not yourself, Root," Jabba told me.

"I know."

"I was thinking the same," added Proxi.

"I get it."

"I would have expected much more from you. Much more."

"Okay, Jabba, I get it."

"No, Root. Jabba's right. You've made the worst analysis of your life."

"He's afraid."

"Obviously."

"Okay, that's enough!" I exclaimed, laughing nervously. "What in the hell is going on here?"

"You don't want to see it, my friend. It's right in front of your nose and you don't want to see it."

"What is it that's right under my nose?"

"Daniel deciphered the quipu's code and translated the curse. You're losing your hacker sense." He pushed back his red hair, which was paler under the white neon light, and observed me smugly.

"I told you already," I protested, "the *quipus* were written in Quechua, and my brother only knew Aymara."

"You've checked?"

"What would I have to check?"

"If the curse was in Aymara," Proxi prompted.

"No, no I didn't."

"So why are we still talking?" argued Jabba, annoyed.

Proxi gave him a censuring look and then told me:

"Daniel had to have found something that made him change from Quechua to Aymara. You said he told Ona that the solution was in this last language. The question is… the solution to what? Probably to some *quipu* that wasn't responding to the rules he'd found in Quechua. Did you look through everything in your brother's office?"

"No. But I brought a lot of material home with me. I'll take a look tomorrow."

"See how you're not yourself?" insisted Jabba, clicking his tongue in disapproval.

"Let's also not forget two other little details," continued Proxi. "First, Aymara is a strange language that may have something more that a simple likeness to

programming languages. Aren't you forgetting that witches, wizards, all those sorts of people used strange words to pronounce enchantments? Mary Poppins, for example… I'll always remember:

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!" she shamelessly intoned in a voice like Julie Andrews.

"And more recently, Harry Potter," Jabba put in.

"Oh, that's great!" exclaimed Proxi dreamily. "*Alohomora! Obliviate! Relaxo!*"

This was my best mercenary, the fabulous expert engineer I paid a fortune to every year to find security flaws in our programs and holes in the competition's programs?

"And also *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*."

"Go on!" I shouted. "Go ahead, encourage this lunatic!"

"*Treguna, Mekoides, Trecorum Satis Dee…*" she singsonged, without noticing that everyone in the cafeteria was watching her with a smile on their lips. "*Treguna, Mekoides, Trecorum Satis Dee…*"

"Enough already! I get the idea, seriously. The words. It's perfectly clear."

"But there's something else," Jabba continued. "Tell him, Proxi."

"While we were looking for information on the Aymara and their language, we found a very strange document about some ancient doctors who cured people with herbs and words. Apparently, they had a secret magic language. We thought it was just one of many superstitions, and we didn't pay any attention, but now…"

"Here's the paper!" Jabba said, separating one sheet from the pile. "The Yatiri, direct descendants of Tiwanakan culture, were revered by the Inca, who considered them to be of noble stock. They were Aymara, of course, and among their own people they were honored as very knowledgeable sages or philosophers. 'Many ethnolinguists claim,'" he read nervously, "'that the language used by the Yatiri was none other than the secret language Orejona Incan nobles spoke amongst themselves, employing common Quechua with the rest of the population.'"

"Yatiri!" I blurted, alarmed.

"What is it?" Proxi asked.

"It's what Daniel said yesterday! He said he was dead because the Yatiri had punished him! He kept repeating another word as well: *lawt'ata*."

"What does it mean?" Jabba wanted to know.

"I have no idea. I'll have to look it up."

"Before you would have done that immediately."

"Try to be understanding, Jabba," Proxi interceded. "His brother is sick and has been hospitalized for two days."

Marc snorted. "For that, he's excused. But he's turning into a computer without an operating system, a keyboard without a Return, a sad monochromatic green monitor, a…"

"Marc!" Proxi reprimanded him. "That's enough."

But Jabba was right. My brain wasn't functioning with its usual clarity. Maybe it was true that I was afraid to go out on a limb and end up looking like an idiot. I was on a very slippery slope, still halfway between my world, rational and orderly, and my brother's world, confusing and enigmatic. I had gone toward the future, while he had gone toward the past, and now, not only did I need to change my way

of thinking and my set of values, but I also had to break with some basic preconceptions and follow a hunch that wasn't based in reality, but in strange historical vagaries.

"Leave all this material with me. I'm going to study it tonight, and tomorrow I'll examine what I picked up from my brother's apartment very carefully. I'll also go by there to look over what I left. If in a couple of days Daniel still hasn't improved," I declared, looking at them with determination, "I'll go speak with the head of his department who gave him the job, and I'll ask for her help. She has to know more than anyone about all this."

Chapter II

To our despair and the doctors', Daniel did not improve at all over the next two days. Diego and Miquel were so perplexed by the inefficacy of the drugs that they decided late on Friday to change his treatment despite what Miquel admitted in front of my mother, that since we hadn't seen any progress at all by then, he harbored certain doubts about the rapid and complete recovery of my brother. We could still hope for a slight improvement around the end of next week or the beginning of the one after. Maybe he was getting better and Miquel was exaggerating just in case, preparing us for the worst, but whatever his reasons, he left us devastated, most of all Clifford, who aged ten years in just a few minutes.

My grandmother's presence relieved much of the tension the family suffered since within a few hours of her arrival, she had organized the shifts in such a way that we could reconstruct our lives almost with normality except for a few small adjustments that didn't bother anyone because they meant being with Daniel. My grandmother was a strong woman, sturdy as an oak, with a great administrative capacity and an infinitely better-furnished head than my mother's, with whom my grandmother always stood firm when she got out of hand in her presence. She quickly took charge of the night's vigil, sending Ona and me back home to sleep at the correct hour. I couldn't help but suspect that there would shortly be a crowd of friends and acquaintances in the hospital cafeteria, and that the place would soon look like the plaza in Vic on a Sunday morning after mass.

I had an appointment at one o'clock with Marta Torrent in her office at the University. It was Saturday morning—the same Saturday, June 1st, on which the Barcelona Dragons played the Rhein Fire of Düsseldorf—and the weather was splendid, one of those bright mornings that invite you to go outside for a walk with the excuse to buy a good book or a good CD. While I navigated my car through the tunnels of Vallvidrera toward the Autonomous University with my sunglasses pushed close to my eyes, I kept trying to find the key that would make sense of the pieces of the mystery that I'd found among the papers and in my brother's office. I hoped with all my heart that the professor would be able to help me solve it, because I was even more confused than I'd been the night I'd talked with Jabba and Proxi in the cafeteria.

On the day after that conversation, I had returned to the apartment on Xiprer with the books and the documents that I'd taken, ready to work as many hours as I had to until I understood what the hell Daniel had gotten himself into.

After searching drawers, shelves, folders, and all that fell into my hands in Daniel's office, I made a new classification system, by piles, in which I separated everything Inca from everything Aymara, and within them, everything that had to do with history on one side, and with language and writing on the other. Then I made one more pile with everything that didn't fit into those categories, and the material in that pile was so abundant that I also had to distinguish between written documents and graphics (there were diagrams, maps, photographs, photocopies of photographs, and sketches drawn by my brother). My distribution may not have been the most orthodox, academically speaking, but it was the only criterion that I could use at that moment.

The first thing that called my attention was an image of an elongated skull in whose eye-sockets remained dried parts of the eyes. Apart from the disagreeable impression given by that sinister gaze, the shape of the bones disconcerted me. Instead of the usual roundness beginning in the forehead and ending at the nape of the neck, that skull was elongated upward like the pointed cap of a penitent, with a conical shape of excessive proportions. Next to this image, other similar ones indicated that the subject had preoccupied Daniel. In the same folder I also found the photograph of a stone wall with a multitude of heads sculpted in relief and very eroded with time, as well as the digitalized and blurry enlargement of a strange little man without a body, all head (from which sprouted skinny arms and legs like a frog's), adorned with a thick black beard and an enormous red hat. Heads and more heads… another enigma without a place in the world. To finish off, I found the folded enlargement of a great face worked in stone, rectangular in shape and with big round black eyes, which I could have sworn I had seen a thousand times in my life, but which I was completely unable to place. It must be Inca, without a doubt, but since my brother hadn't made any note about it, it could just as easily be the logo of some commercial brand as it could be a sun—which is what it reminded me of, since rays came out of its face—sculpted on some wall in Cusco, Machu Picchu, Tiwanaku, Vilcabamba or any of the innumerable ruins spread out around the territory of the old Empire that had started to become familiar to me.

I also found, among other equally useless things, a drawing made by hand (with a red marker) by Daniel himself, showing a schematically represented stepped pyramid with three levels, in whose interior was a kind of square urn, with four long necks with feline heads sticking out of it in front, and six that ended in birds' heads sticking out on the sides and the base. Inside the urn stirred a small serpent with horns. My brother had noted on the bottom: "Chamber," and had repeatedly underlined it.

Another subject that seemed to obsess Daniel was that of Incan fabrics. In another folder, he had dozens of pictures of exceptionally-colored cloths decorated with minute squares and rectangles. Each of these small geometrical shapes had a different design inside, and, seeing all of them together, one's gaze was lost in those innumerable lines and columns of boxes. The cloths were very different from each other, despite being of the same style, a style that could also be seen in six or

seven photographs of ceramics—vases and urns—that he kept in a separate folder. They didn't have even the smallest written reference to what each thing could be, so I wasn't any better off than before.

In all that sea of useless information, a couple of big photocopies, which showed up folded inside another unmarked folder, stood out. They were copies of ancient maps, very tattered, that were incomprehensible to me. On the first of them, after working at it a great deal, I recognized, on the right, the shape of the Iberian peninsula and the western coast of Africa, both filled with numerous little human and animal figures, nearly indistinguishable, over which ran (and crossed) lines coming from several compass roses of various sizes. Now that I was better situated in the geography of the image, I deduced that the shape on the left was the American coast, with its rivers and tributaries, many of which branched off from a mountainous spine, the Andes, which was where the design on that side ended, since the profile of the Pacific coast was missing, replaced by a long paragraph written in minute Arabic lettering. On the second of the maps, sketched over a kind of sheet of frayed edges, a large lake was depicted, surrounded by marks that looked like ant foot prints, and in an important position to the south of the lake, the coarse layout of a city beneath which could be read, with some difficulty because of the excessive elaborateness of the old spelling: "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians," and underneath, "Two monthes by land," and underneath that, in small lettering, "Seye I, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, that it is truthe. In the City of Kings on the Twenty-Second of February of One Thousand Five Hundred and Seventy-Five."

Things were beginning, at last, to get on the right track: Yatiri was a word that I knew and that my brother employed frequently in his delirium. I would have to study the Yatiri more, I told myself, because they seemed to enjoy a protagonists' role in history, and furthermore, and this was the curious part, according to that old Spanish nobleman, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, they had their own path, which, after two months of walking it, would take you God knows where.

The bulk of Daniel's library was made up of books on anthropology, history, and various grammars. On the shelves closest to his desk, on both sides, he had comfortably arranged the volumes about the Inca and a bunch of dictionaries, among which was the one published in 1612 by the Jesuit Ludovico Bertonio, *Vocabulary of the Aymara Language*, and the one by Diego Torres Rubio, *Art of the Aymara Language*, from 1616. It was time to find out what the hell "*lawt'ata*" meant. After driving myself crazy for a while (because I had no idea how it was really spelled), I managed to locate the term by looking, one by one, at all the words that began with the letter "L," and that's how I found out it was an adjective and that it meant "locked with a key," which brought me back to the message of the supposed curse, in the last line of which, I remembered, appeared those words. Of course that didn't end up solving anything, but at least I felt I had cleared up a mystery. I had yet to take a look at the old Spanish chronicles because, for reasons other than an immense lack of interest, I had dedicated all my time to studying linguistics, and more specifically, Aymara linguistics, making the odd incursion onto the net in search of more precise information about the language.

Everything that Jabba and Proxi had told me came up short next to what Aymara really was. It was clear that I didn't know as many languages as Daniel, and that if you took me out of Catalan, Spanish, and English, I would be as disoriented as a newborn, so I could make few comparisons with other natural languages. But what I did know were programming languages (Python, C/C++, Perl, LISP, Java, Fortran…), and they were more than enough for me to see that Aymara was not like any other language. In no way could it be, because it was an authentic programming language. It was as precise as an atomic clock, without ambiguity, without any uncertainties in its wording, without room for imprecision. Not even a pure diamond, superbly worked, would have been its equal in the properties of integrity, exactness, and rigor. In Aymara, there was no room for those silly phrases that made us laugh as children because of the incongruities they contained, like "the chicken is ready to eat," for example. No, Aymara did not allow for this kind of linguistic absurdity, and it was also true that its syntactic rules seemed to be constructed based on an invariable series of mathematical formulas which, when applied, yielded a strange logic of three values as a solution: true, false, and neutral, unlike any natural language known, which only responded to true or false, according to the old familiar Aristotelian conception. Hence, in Aymara, things could be truly and unequivocally neither yes nor no, nor on the contrary, and apparently, there was no other language in the world that allowed such a thing; which, in a way, was to be missed, since part of the richness that languages acquired with centuries of evolution stemmed specifically from their literary capacity for confusion and ambiguities. So, while the Aymara people who still employed this language in South America felt proud of it, and they were marginalized as poor and backward natives without culture, their language proclaimed to the four winds that they came from a much more advanced civilization than our own, or at least one capable of creating a language based on high-level mathematical algorithms. It did not at all surprise me that Daniel had ended up fascinated with these discoveries, and that he had abandoned the study of Quechua to dedicate himself completely to Aymara; what did really impress me was that he hadn't turned to me to help him understand those concepts, so abstract and so distant from the material that he knew and had studied. From what I remembered, he had asked me on various occasions to write him some simple and very specific programs to save, classify, and recover information (bibliographies, statistical data, image files…), but even those small applications seemed complex and difficult to manage to him, so I very much doubted that he would have been able to recognize on his own the similarities of Aymara to modern and sophisticated programming languages.

Nor did I find any mention of the famous *quipu* in Aymara imagined by Jabba and Proxi. On one hand, as far as material on *quipus* went, I only located a thick file that contained the copies of the Miccinelli Documents, but it inspired the feeling, based on the place where it was found entombed and on the fine patina of dust that showed inside the covers, that Daniel hadn't touched it in a long time; on the other hand, if that bunch of cords with knots, or even better, its graphical reproduction, could be found somewhere in that office, it could only be on my brother's laptop, the shiny IBM that I had given him for Christmas and that still remained connected to the electrical grid, feeding an already sufficiently charged

battery. I pushed the power button, and the small hard disc immediately came to life with a soft purr and the screen lit up from the center outwards, showing the short lines of system file instructions before exhibiting the blue Windows screen. I settled into the chair, waiting for the process to finish, and while I rubbed my tired eyes, an unexpected glitter of orange light warned me of some abnormal process starting up in the operating system. Blinking nervously to focus my eyes after the rubbing, I came face to face with a surprising request for a password. It didn't mean the BIOS password, nor the useless Windows network password; it was a completely different program that I'd never seen before and that, based on its design, seemed to have been written by some astute programmer, who obviously had not been me. I was frozen. Why did my brother need such protection on his computer?

The program gave no clue about the length and type of password required, so I restarted Windows in error test mode to see if, by doing so, I could skip the damned request. My surprise grew upon discovering that not even with this trick or other similar ones—through the BIOS—could I bridge the barrier, and that since I couldn't, the door was going to remain closed until I was better armed to open it. There existed a million ways to break that ridiculous security measure, but to do so, I had to take the laptop home and apply a few basic tools to it; so, to avoid going to so much trouble, I decided to try first using logic, since I had the absolute conviction that it was going to be very easy for me to figure out the password. My brother was not a hacker and did not have the need to give himself extreme protection. I was sure that he had acquired that software from some computer magazine or from some work colleague which assured me right from the start that I could break the encryption in a flash.

"Ona!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, turning my head slightly. I immediately heard a happy squeak from my nephew who must have been suffering at having to stay away from the office. His footsteps, quickly drawing close in the hallway, alerted me to danger. "Ona!"

"Come here, Dani!" said the voice of my sister-in-law who had followed behind my nephew to intercept his advance. "What is it, Arnau?"

"Do you know the password to Daniel's computer?"

"The password?" she asked, surprised, appearing in the doorway with Dani in her arms, who struggled to get loose and get to the floor. "I didn't know he had put a password on it."

I arched my eyebrows and looked again at the orange screen. "And what do you think it could be?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea, really. Keep still, Dani, please…! I imagine that he didn't want anyone from the department to pry into his work while he was giving a class." She held down her son's two hands, since he was pulling her hair in order to gain freedom, and she moved away toward the living room. "But I don't think it will be an insurmountable obstacle for you, right?"

It shouldn't be. Statistically, almost seventy percent of the passwords that people used were alphabetical, which is to say, made up of only letters, and were generally proper nouns, names of people or places or objects. The length of the alphabetical password was usually no longer than eight characters, almost always being between six and eight, and it was rare for people to use capital letters. So, if

you were somewhat familiar with the person whose password you wanted to find out, sooner or later you'd end up running into the solution by trying the names of his family members, of his interests, of his place of birth or residence, etc. Nevertheless, after trying unsuccessfully several times, I discovered that Daniel seemed not to be included in this unwary seventy percent: None of the words that I used worked, and that was taking into account that I thought I knew him well enough not to leave anything important untried.

I decided to try with the basic rules of numerical passwords. Almost one hundred percent of them had invariably six digits, and not because people liked numbers of this length, but because they used the dates of the birthdays most significant to them. I tried Daniel's, Ona's, our mother's, Clifford's, Dani's… and, finally, desperately, I went through the silliest passwords that are so frequently found on the net: "123456," "111111," and other such simple sequences. But they didn't work either. There was nothing left for me to do but to take the laptop home and entertain a new feeling of respect for my brother who I had up until that moment considered a clumsy and unimaginative computer user.

Nevertheless, I began to suspect how wrong I had been when, already in my study at home, I discovered that none of the attacks waged with the potent password cracking programs had the least effect. My dictionaries of passwords were as complete as they could be and the programs used brute force in combination with an incomparable calculating power, but that small application kept refusing to provide me with the key to access the computer. I was really confused, and I could only manage to think that Daniel had used a really long word in Aymara, which would make its identification almost impossible. After a couple of hours, there was not much left to do but go through it, decoding it incrementally, based on random combinations of letters or numbers or of letters and numbers together, but if I didn't want to dedicate the rest of my life to it, I would have to put all of the computers of Ker-Central to work at once and cross my fingers that the process would not prolong itself indefinitely. The problem was that many of the company's machines kept processing tasks during the night, so I programmed the system from home so that it would only use the available computers and the dead time of the active ones.

That Saturday morning, while I drove toward the university, I still hadn't obtained the password, but it couldn't take much longer, and with that hope I headed to my appointment with the professor as I enjoyed the sun, the light, and the feeling of normality that the road and my car returned to me. I had left my hair, which already fell past my shoulders, loose, and I had put on one of my new suits, the beige one with a Tunisian collar, and leather shoes. If that woman was as hard as Ona said, my appearance should be that of a serious and respectable businessman.

The Autonomous University was a place I liked a great deal. Whenever I arrived there for some meeting with the Artificial Intelligence Research Group people, I felt I had found myself in some kind of great city, modern and cozy, with professors and students wandering around its sidewalks and gardens, and spreading out with their books on the grass, seeking the shade of the trees. In winter, frost or snow covered the green areas in the morning until the midday sun left the land bright and waterlogged; but in spring, numerous groups could be seen holding

classes outside, under the sun's rays. The only thing that did not appeal to me about that place was a certain kind of building, like those found in the oldest faculties, which had been constructed following the sad architectural style of the seventies, by such lovers of ugly eyesores made of cement, aluminum, and glass that they left the tube-veins of their structures exposed.

I rejected those thoughts with a shake of my head and decided to ask around so I wouldn't have to wander from one side of the campus to the other all day, although, as was bound to happen, I ended up getting lost, since the abundant signs on the Bellaterra campus, rather than orienting, led astray. It was a good thing I had time to spare, because on one occasion I found myself leaving campus in the direction of Sabadell, and on another, toward Cerdanyola. At last I found the underground parking garage and could leave the car, beginning an agreeable walk, briefcase in hand, toward the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, where the Department of Social Anthropology and Prehistory in which my brother and Marta Torrent both worked.

Unfortunately, that faculty was one of the old ones, so I found myself passing through long grayish halls (covered in various posters and graffiti) in search of some caretaker who could lend me a hand. I was unsuccessful, perhaps because it was Saturday, but I stumbled onto a group of students who were coming out of an exam, and they showed me how to get through that labyrinth. I went up stairs, twisted through halls, passed through where I had already been, and, finally, in the B building, I found myself in front of a door just as insignificant as the others on which a plaque announced that by way of a difficult navigation without a compass, I had managed to arrive at the right port. I took my left hand out of my pocket and knocked softly on the wood. Behind it I could hear voices and noises, so indifference was not the response I expected, but that was exactly what I got in exchange for my knock. The second try convinced me that there was nothing to be done; no one was going to open the door for me, so I had two options. I could simply open it or I could resume my knocking with much more energy. And that's what I did. Without wasting any time, I knocked with so much force that behind the door the silence became automatically deeper and some light steps came to receive me. When the door was open, I saw four or five people who, completely motionless, watched me expectantly.

"Yes?" was the only greeting I was extended by the skinny girl with short black hair who had opened the door for me. She and the other women present examined me from head to toe, while small smiles appeared in their eyes, but didn't reach their lips. Although I was already used to seeing that reaction in almost all women who were neither friends nor family that didn't keep me from liking it whenever it I saw it. Humility is not negating one's good qualities—that's hypocrisy—but recognizing and accepting them.

"I'm looking for Marta Torrent."

"Dr. Torrent?" repeated the girl, adding the academic title, in case I had forgotten it. "Who's asking?"

"I'm Daniel Cornwall's brother. I have an appointment with her at…"

"Daniel's brother!" various voices exclaimed in unison, pronouncing the name as it's said here, with the accent on the last syllable. And, as if that name had been an unbeatable referral, they all got up from their seats and crowded around.

“You look a lot like your brother… But in brunette!” a young woman with a pronounced chin and long bangs blurted out while she extended her hand to me. “I’m Antonia Marí, a colleague of Daniel’s.”

“We all are,” said a small man with nickel glasses and gray in his very receding hairline. “Pere Sirera. Nice to meet you. I was the one that spoke with you when you called asking for an interview with Marta.”

He held out his hand as well and moved aside for the next one.

“So you’re the computer fat cat, huh?” demanded a woman of some forty years as she came toward me, her throat sticking out from inside an outlandish flowered dress in the style of Josephine Bonaparte. “I’m Mercè Boix. How is Daniel?”

“The same, thanks,” I replied, returning the greeting.

“But what has happened to him exactly?” insisted Mercè.

“We know that Mariona came to bring the medical leave papers, but Dr. Torrent hasn’t explained anything to us,” said the girl who had opened the door, closing it at last and incorporating herself into the group.

“All she said was that he’s hospitalized at La Custodia and that there wasn’t any accident,” Pere Sirera said slowly. He seemed to be thinking that perhaps an interrogation wasn’t a good idea. And he was right.

“Can we go see him?” Mercè wanted to know.

“Well…” How many of them were friends of Daniel’s and how many were his enemies, rivals, or adversaries? Who was actually worried and who was anxious to know whether he or she would have time to fill his position before he came back? “At the moment he’s not receiving visitors…” I cleared my throat. “He fainted. He lost consciousness and they’re doing some tests. The doctors say that he will be able to return home this week.”

“I’m happy to hear it!” Josefina Bonaparte declared with a smile. “We were very worried.”

I tapped my pants lightly with the stiff leather briefcase, communicating my impatience. I wanted to see the professor and I couldn’t spend the rest of the morning chatting in that kind of communal lounge full of tables, chairs, and cupboards.

“I have an appointment with Dr. Torrent,” I mumbled. “She must be waiting for me.”

“I’ll take you,” said Antonia, the one with long bangs, heading toward a narrow hallway that was almost invisible behind some high filing cabinets.

“Send our regards to Daniel!”

“Of course. Thank you,” I muttered, following my hostess.

A poster with the hunchbacked image of a Neanderthal and the slogan “From Monkey to Man. Seville. The Sixth Conference on Evolutionary Anthropology” appeared stuck to the door of the professor’s office. Antonia knocked lightly a couple of times on the wooden door and opened it halfway, sticking her head in through the crack.

“Marta, Daniel’s brother is here.”

“Tell him to come in, please,” she granted in a deep, modulated voice, so musical it seemed like I was listening to a radio announcer or an opera singer. But the voice tricked me, because when the girl with bangs moved aside to let me pass, I discovered that Ona had not exaggerated in regards to the age and character of

Dr. Torrent. The first thing I saw was short hair on the verge of being completely white, and, between this and some white eyebrows, a terrible furrowed brow that put me on guard. Certainly, the scowl disappeared when her eyes—covered by some modern glasses with blue frames, very narrow and attached to a metal chain that hung from the frames—left the papers they were examining to focus on me, but I had already gotten a disagreeable impression that I wouldn't let go of for a long time. If Ona had said she was a witch, she must be right, because that was my first impression too.

In a friendly way, although not exaggerated, she took off her glasses, stood up, and walked around her desk, stopping halfway without the slightest gesture of greeting. Nor did she smile; it seemed as if she were indifferent to me, and that interview only one of the many inconveniences that her job entailed. I had to concede one thing: She dressed with an elegance that did not belong to someone whose profession was study and research. I had always imagined that female university professors of a certain age tended not to be very well put together, but if that were the case, this Torrent woman—who must be about fifty, with a small slender body—didn't fit the pattern. She wore a suit with a suede jacket, very high heels, and a pearl necklace and matching pearl earrings, and a wide silver bracelet as her only accessories. I didn't see a watch anywhere. One thing was certain: She must go out every day to soak up the UV, because she was brown, truly brown, and very much so, to the point of not needing makeup.

"Come in, Mr. Cornwall. Have a seat, please," she said with that beautiful voice that seemed to belong to someone else.

"My name is Arnau Queralt, Dr. Torrent. I'm Daniel's elder brother."

If the difference in surnames surprised her, she didn't show it; she limited herself to returning to her seat in her armchair and staring fixedly at me in the hope that I would open the discussion. Unfortunately, like a good hacker, my set of social skills—not intellectual skills or work skills—was minimal and my resources came exclusively from determination and force of will, so I left my briefcase on the floor next to me and stayed silent, asking myself where I should begin and what I should say. The bad thing was that the silence lasted a long time, because Dr. Torrent was, of course, a hard woman, with a greater than normal coolness, capable of remaining undaunted in a situation that was becoming more awkward with each second.

"I hope I'm not bothering you too much, Dr. Torrent." I said finally, crossing my legs.

"Not at all," she murmured, relaxed. "How is Daniel?"

She also pronounced my brother's name with the stress on the last syllable.

"Exactly the same as the day he got sick," I explained. "He hasn't improved."

"I'm sorry."

It was in that exact moment, not a second before or a second after, that I discovered that I was in the office of a lunatic and what was even worse, in her hazardous company. I don't know why, but up until that moment I had been centering my attention exclusively on the professor without noticing that I had entered into the psychiatric cell of a dangerous crazy person. If my brother had hundreds of books and folders in his small office at home, that woman, enjoying double or triple the space, had the same literary congestion, but on top of that, in

the spaces that remained, the most delirious objects that could be imagined were stuffed: flint-tipped spears, crudely painted ceramic jugs, broken pots with three feet, vases with bug-eyed human faces, strange granite sculptures of people and animals, fragments of crude textiles hung high on the walls as if they were refined tapestries, large blades of chipped knives, anthropomorphic idols with some curious little hats like shakers for playing dice, and, in case the room was missing something, on a pedestal in a corner, a small dried mummy huddled into itself, looking up at the ceiling with a distorted expression and an unfinished scream. If I had been able, I would have done the same as the mummy, because on top of everything, hanging from invisible nylon threads, halfway down from the ceiling there balanced a couple of beautiful skulls—with elongated craniums!—moved by gusts from the air conditioning.

I suppose I must have given a good start in the chair because the professor, by way of a laugh, expelled a puff of air through her nose and gave a slight grimace of a smile. Didn't the Ministry of Health have a strict legislation regarding the obligatory burial of cadavers, or at least regarding their conservation in museums?

"What did you wish to discuss with me?" she asked, already having regained her composure, as if there weren't an entire cemetery around us.

I was almost incapable of uttering a single word, but I guessed that the strange decoration formed part of a private game in which only she had fun, and I controlled my expression and my voice in such a way that, at least in that instance, she didn't get her trophy.

"It's very simple," I said. "I don't know if you're aware, but my brother is suffering from two pathologies, one called agnosia and one called Cotard delusion. The first doesn't allow him to recognize anyone or anything and the second makes him believe he is dead."

Her eyes opened wide, incapable of disguising her surprise, and I thought that the point went to me that time.

"My God!" she whispered, shaking her head as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "No… I didn't know… I didn't know anything about all this." The news had affected her a great deal, so I deduced that she must like my brother a little. "They informed me from the secretary's office of the faculty that we already had the medical leave papers, but… they didn't read the diagnostics to me, and Mariona didn't give me many details either."

When she spoke, the doctor showed a very white row of irregular teeth.

"He seems not to respond to the medications, although yesterday they started to administer a different treatment and we still don't know what will happen. Today, of course, there haven't been any changes."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Queralt." And she seemed to really mean it.

"Yes, well…" While I picked up the briefcase from the floor with my right hand, with my left hand I pushed my hair back out of my face. "The main thing is what Daniel says in his delirium. He spends all day and all night saying strange words and talking about weird things."

She didn't move a single muscle of her face. She didn't even blink.

"The psychiatrist who's in charge of his case, Dr. Diego Hernández, from La Custodia, and the neurologist, Miquel Llor, don't explain the origin of these hallucinations very well, and they think they may have some relation to his work."

“Mariona hasn’t told you?”

“Yes. My sister-in-law has explained to us, more or less, what the research Daniel was doing for you consisted of.”

She remained undaunted, glacially accepting that accusation. I continued:

“Nonetheless, the doctors think that it could be related to something more than just the pressure suffered from an excess of work. His delirious rants in a strange language…”

“Quechua, certainly.”

“…seem to confirm it,” I continued. “Maybe there was something, a certain aspect of the research that worried him, some circumstance that, in a manner of speaking, ended up short circuiting his brain. Dr. Llor and Dr. Hernández have asked us to find out if he’d had problems, if he had run into some specific difficulty that could have had a strong effect on him.”

Since I had decided to arrange that interview, I had excluded the possibility of sharing my true (and, I kept thinking, ridiculous as well) fears with the professor, so I had put together a relatively plausible alibi in which I had no choice but to involve the doctors.

“I don’t know how I can help you with that,” she stated in a neutral tone. “I don’t know the details you’re asking me for. Your brother kept me informed only on a very occasional basis. I can tell you that during the last month he didn’t come to see me once. If you’d like, you can confirm as much by consulting my agenda.”

That small detail made Daniel’s extreme secrecy stand out even more.

“No, that’s not necessary,” I declined, opening my briefcase and extracting some of the documents that I’d found in my brother’s office. “I only need you to inform me a little about this material I brought.”

An electrical current suddenly went through the room. Without lifting my head I could sense that the professor had stiffened in her chair and that a spark of aggression ran through her body.

“These papers are part of the research your brother was doing?” she asked in a sharp tone that twisted my stomach.

“Well, you see,” I declared, keeping my reaction in check and my pulse steady while I held those copies in front of her, “I’ve had to study Daniel’s work in detail all this week to try to answer the questions the doctors have asked us.”

The professor was as tense as a violin string, and I thought she wouldn’t hesitate to take one of those knives from the shelves and use it to cut out my heart and eat it while it was still warm. I think every suspicion and possible betrayal went through her head at the speed of lightning. That woman wore, very visibly, the stigma of unhappiness.

“Excuse me a moment, Mr. Queralt,” she said, standing and stepping out from behind her desk. “I will be back in a moment. By the way, what did you say your name was?”

“Arnau Queralt,” I replied, following her with my gaze.

“What do you do, Mr. Queralt?”

“I’m an entrepreneur.”

“And what does your business do? Manufacture something?” she asked, already at the door, about to leave me alone with all the dead in the room.

“You could say that. We sell technological security and develop artificial intelligence projects for internet search engines.”

She let out a very false “Oh, I see!” and left hurriedly, closing the door with a bang. I could almost hear her through the walls: “Who the hell is this guy? Does anyone know if Daniel really has some brother with a different last name who works with computers?” And I must not have been very wrong in my suspicions, because a murmur of voices and laughs came through the thin walls, and though I didn’t manage to understand the words, the tone of the conversation, together with the professor’s fears, and most of all, the way she kept looking at me when she returned (examining my features one by one to see if there was a resemblance), confirmed my suspicions. I couldn’t accuse her of being excessively suspicious: The papers that I’d brought in the briefcase formed part of her own research project, a project of huge academic repercussions, according to Ona, and when it came down to it, I was a complete stranger who had come asking questions about something that didn’t matter to me in the least.

“Pardon the interruption, Mr. Queralt,” she apologized, her aplomb recovered, as she returned to her seat without taking her eyes off my face.

“No problem,” I returned with a friendly smile. “As I was saying, I only need you to give me some instruction. But first, let me assure you: I wouldn’t want you to worry thinking that I’m going to use this material inappropriately. All I want is to help my brother. If all this can be of some use, then great; if not, at least I will have learned a couple of interesting things.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

Right! And my name isn’t Arnau.

“In that case, can I show you some images?”

“Of course.”

“First, could you explain to me why the skulls you’ve hung from the ceiling have that pointed shape?”

“Ah, you’ve noticed! Most people, after discovering them, don’t look up again and then endeavor to leave my office as soon as possible,” she smiled. “Just for that reason alone, they’re worth their weight in gold, although really, they’re part of the department’s educational material, like that mummy there,” and she indicated it with a look, “but for me they work as a perfect repellent for flies and mosquitoes.”

“Really?” I asked, astonished. She looked at me incredulously.

“No, man, no! It was a manner of speaking! By flies and mosquitoes I meant disagreeable visits and tiresome students.”

“Ah, like me!”

She smiled again without saying anything at all. She had made herself perfectly clear. I looked up again to examine the skulls and repeated my question. After a small sigh of resignation, she opened one of the drawers of her desk and took out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. On the desk she had a small cardboard ash tray adorned with the logo of a well-known chain of cafés which showed that her smoking habit was clandestine, something whose traces must be made to disappear quickly. Besides the pitiful ash tray, her desk also held some folders and the papers she had been examining when I arrived. The only personal object was a silver frame of medium size whose photo only she could see. Where might

she keep the computer? An office without one was no longer conceivable, especially the office of the top personage of a university department. That woman was as strange as a whistle with a coaxial cable.

"Do you smoke?"

"No. But the smoke doesn't bother me."

"Wonderful." I was sure it would have been all the same to her if it had bothered me; we were in her office. "Does your interest in the skulls have something to do with what you have in the briefcase?"

"Yes."

She nodded slightly, as if taking in my response, and then declared:

"Very well, let's see… The deformation of the cranium was a custom of certain ethnic groups of the Incan Empire who used it to distinguish the upper classes from the rest of society. The deformation was obtained by applying some splints to the heads of babies, holding them tightly in place with cords until the bones adopted the desired appearance."

"What ethnic groups had these practices?"

"Oh, well, really, it was a custom that predated the Inca. The earliest of the deformed skulls that have been proven authentic were found in archaeological sites of Tiwanaku, Bolivia." She paused for a second and looked at me, doubtful. "I'm sorry, I don't know if you've heard of Tiwanaku…"

"I hadn't heard of almost any of this until a few days ago," I assured her, uncrossing and recrossing my legs again the other way, "but recently I don't think I've spoken of or read about anything else."

"I can imagine…" she exhaled the smoke from her cigarette and leaned back, reclining in the chair with her hands hanging from the edges of the armrests. "Well, Tiwanaku is the oldest culture of South America, and its political-religious center was the city of the same name, situated near Lake Titicaca, today divided in two by the border between Bolivia and Peru."

From the waters of Lake Titicaca, I remembered, the god of the Inca, Viracocha, had arisen to create humanity, who had in turn built Tiwanaku. But I'd also seen another lake—another lake or the same lake—on the map drawn by Sarmiento de Gamboa, the one with "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians. Two monthes by land." I would go back to that later. Now I wanted to finish with the skulls and heads.

"You were telling me," I prompted, wanting her to pick back up where she had left off, "that the inhabitants of Tiwanaku were the first to deform the heads of newborns to distinguish some social classes from others."

"Right. Other cultures did it as well, but it was an imitation and never the same. The Wari, for example, would flatten the base of the skull, and on the eastern coast of Titicaca they would sink the forehead, making the temples stick out."

"Wari? What's Wari?" I asked.

I know she was about to tell me to get lost, since giving a class to children was beneath her and boring besides. I could understand her. It was as if someone had asked me how to close an application in Windows.

"The Wari Empire was the Tiwanaku Empire's greatest enemy," she repeated in a tone of having explained it a million times. "It's thought that Tiwanaku began around the year 200 BC with some primitive settlements from a culture called Pukara, a people about whom we know almost nothing, including whether or not

they really founded Tiwanaku, a hypothesis that, by the way, seems more and more improbable… Anyway, nine centuries later, those settlements reached the level of empire. Wari appeared later, in the Ayachucho Valley in the north, and for unknown reasons, challenged Tiwanaku, which seems to have been an eminently religious culture, ruled by some kind of sacerdotal caste. What's certain is that we know little of the Wari. The Inca never mentioned them. Incidentally, I don't know whether you know that calling all the inhabitants of the empire 'Inca' is a mistake, the Inca were the kings and were considered to be the descendants of a divine lineage originating in Tiwanaku."

"Yes, I knew all that. So," I summarized, "the privileged classes of the Andean cultures predating the Inca deformed their skulls in one way or another to emulate the Tiwanakans, who were some kind of arbiters of fashion, but you haven't told me the origin of these conical skulls." And I pointed at the ceiling. "Are they from Tiwanaku?"

"Yes, actually, they're from Tiwanaku. The occipital frontal deformation, which produces that conical shape, was historically the first that was done and was exclusive to the Tiwanakans."

"And the Inca? Did they also practice this deformation?"

"No, the Inca did not. The only ones that continued it were the Colla, the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of Tiwanaku."

"The Colla?" I already in a state of mental disarray that was impossible to clear. "But weren't the Aymara the descendants of the Tiwanakans?"

"The Colla and the Aymara are the same people. Colla was the name that the Spanish gave them because their land, the Altiplano region that surrounded Titicaca, was called Collao in Spanish, because the Inca had previously christened it as Collasuyu. This area also included the heights of Bolivia and the north of Argentina. These skulls that you see above you are from Collasuyu, specifically, as I've told you, from Tiwanaku."

Clearly, everything was simple in the history of the American continent. First there were—or not—the Pukara, from whom originated—or not—the Tiwanacans, who in turn were the Aymara, but also the Colla, although now they were again called Aymara. This, at least, I understood, so I glued it to my memory before it fade like a dream.

Faced with the danger that things would continue to complicate themselves indefinitely, I decided that that was enough of deformed skulls and without considering it further, I extracted a stack of Daniel's photocopies of the stone wall with the multitude of heads in relief and handed it to the professor who put out her cigarette in the flimsy little ash tray as if she were killing the butt. After a preliminary glance, the look on her face expressed annoyance.

"Do you know what this is, Professor?"

"Tiwanaku," she said, a little exasperated, putting on her glasses with a quick gesture and carefully examining the paper; I don't know why her response didn't surprise me much. "The so-called tenon heads, that is to say, anthropomorphic stone heads encrusted in the walls. They're found on the walls of Qullakamani Utawi, known as the Semi-Subterranean Temple, a large open patio located near the Kelasasaya. You already know that Tiwanaku is an architectural ensemble in

which the remains of some sixteen buildings are still visible which barely represents four percent of the total. The rest is located underground."

I didn't know what could have caused that patent unease that the professor politely suppressed. While I gave her the digitalized enlargement of the little man without a body, the bearded ancestor of Humpty Dumpty from Alice in Wonderland, I made a mental note that I shouldn't ask her anything else about Tiwanaku; what I wanted to know, I would search for on the internet, especially pages with photos.

"I don't know what this is," she told me, looking at me over her glasses. "I've never seen it before in my life."

"It's not Inca?" I asked, surprised.

She looked at it with great attention, bringing it close to her face and moving it away again, by which I deduced that the glasses must work only intermittently, like a loose light bulb. That, or she desperately needed an eye exam.

"No, it's not Inca," she assured. "Not Inca, or Pukara, or Tiwanakan, or Wari, or, of course, Aymara."

"And you don't have any idea as to what its origin might be?"

She went back to looking at it attentively and pursed her lips as if she were going to give a kiss, extremely concentrated, and stayed like that for a few seconds. Sadly, the expression dissolved and I swallowed my laugh as if I had swallowed a piece of gum by accident.

"I can only tell you that it's too figurative. The figure is perfectly drawn, with very vivid colors and shadows and gradations that give it volume. The beard situates it clearly in Europe or Asia, and because of these qualities, it can't be earlier than fourteenth century. It certainly forms part of a much larger representation, since the edges cut off what seems to be a landscape of stones and branches. The only thing that seems vaguely familiar is that red hat which might be similar to the typical Colla hats that covered their deformed skulls. Look at those idols," she told me, pointing at the statues wearing conical hats. "If you like, you can also examine them in much more detail in Guamán Poma de Ayala's work, *New Chronicle and Good Government.* Your brother must have a copy."

"Yes, as a matter of fact," I said while I took back the little man with one hand, and handed her the photocopy of the square face with solar rays with the other.

"Tiwanaku," she repeated after one glance, and again her face twisted into the same expression, and her voice, so peculiar, adopted a dark tone. "Inti Punku, the Gate of the Sun. For centuries it was thought that the figure crowning the piece was a representation of the god Viracocha. Discoveries of the Wari have shaken that hypothesis, and now the prevalent idea is that he is an obscure Staff God worshiped by both cultures."

"No wonder it seemed so familiar," I commented, leaning slightly over the desk to look at the upside-down image. "The Gate of the Sun. It's very famous."

She stood up as if some important idea had occurred to her and went to one of the shelves from which she extracted a very large book that she placed on the desk in front of me. It was a volume of photographs, one of those that barely have any text, in whose open pages I could make out, as soon as she moved away, on the left, a picture of a block of stone with an opening for a door, on the upper part of which were three carved horizontal bands broken by a large central figure whose

face was, without a shadow of doubt, the same one Daniel had blown up in the photocopy. On the right hand page the same figure could be seen in complete detail, much larger, so that I not only recognized its face but also, unexpectedly, what was under its feet—if a couple of little stumps coming out of its waist could be considered feet—and what was there was none other than the three-level stepped pyramid that my brother had drawn with a red marker. Why had Daniel enlarged the head specifically, and drawn the Staff God's floor in red?

"That's the Gate of the Sun which is called Inti Punku, and in Aymara Mallku Punku, or Gate of the Chief," she explained. I wasn't looking at her at that moment, so I couldn't see her expression; nevertheless, her voice kept filling itself with shadowy tonalities heavy with anger, which obliged me to raise my eyes from the book to discover with surprise that her face was as imperturbable as a statue's, and that only her hands were contracted with the tension. "It's the most famous monument of the Tiwanaku ruins. It's made from a monolithic block of volcanic stone weighing more than thirteen tons and measuring some nine feet high by twelve wide and twenty inches thick. The carving of the stone is perfect, precise… Archaeologists and experts still can't explain how it could have been made by a people who didn't even have the wheel, or writing, or iron, or, what is more surprising still, the number zero, so necessary for astronomical calculations and architecture."

Maybe the professor was a hard woman, maybe even a harpy, certainly Ona was not wrong in her opinions and commentaries about her, but I also would have added that she was completely mad. In a matter of minutes, she had gone from tautness to normality and back again to tautness without any reason that I could explain. Dr. Torrent couldn't hide her pronounced bipolar character, and she couldn't do it because, although she controlled her movements and expressions, her voice, so deep and distinctive, gave her away. That was her Achilles' heel, the crack that made the wall crumble. Looking for a logical reason that could have provoked her dark mood, I thought that perhaps I had drawn out my visit too long and that it would be a good idea to leave as soon as possible. At that moment, she fixed her icy eyes on me, and her look was so glacial that I was ready to make my escape by backing humbly toward the door and making reverences like Chinese courtiers when leaving the company of the emperor.

"What else do you have in that pile of papers?" she asked abruptly.

"Do you want me to tell you, or would you prefer to see for yourself?"

"Let me see it," she ordered, extending her hand for me to give her the sheaf of documents. There was not much left to examine: Besides the photographs of Tiwanakan skulls, which she had not yet seen, all that was left was the drawing of the stepped pyramid, the reproductions of the textiles and urns decorated with rows and columns of squares, and the photocopies of the maps, the one with the compass roses and the one by Sarmiento de Gamboa. Nevertheless, she occupied herself for a long time looking at everything as if it were new to her and enormously interesting. After five or six interminable and boring minutes, she opened one of the drawers in her desk and took out a big magnifying glass like Sherlock Holmes' but made of dark wood and profusely carved, and it immediately occurred to me it must be worth a mint. Such an object couldn't easily be found in Barcelona's antique shops. With her glasses resting in a wrinkle on her forehead

and her gaze focused through the lens, she was contemplating the old maps with an unusual interest, to the point of making me think I had made the biggest mistake of my life by arranging that interview. If my brother was cured by the new treatment, and that woman, because of what I had done, took possession of his research materials, I would have made an unimaginably large mess of things, and it was even possible that my brother would stop speaking to me for the rest of his life… or mine, depending on who died first.

At last, after a long time, Dr. Torrent let out a long sigh, set the magnifying glass and the papers on the desk, and took off her glasses to look me directly in the eye.

"You found all this in Daniel's house?" she asked, modulating her radio announcer's voice in such a way that it reminded me of the hiss of a snake (or at least how the hiss of a snake sounded in movies).

"In his apartment, yes," I admitted, prepared to run out of there with all the documents.

"Let me ask you something… Do you think all of this has something to do with the illnesses your brother is suffering from?"

I clicked my tongue before answering that very direct question, and, in this short interval, barely a few tenths of a second, I decided that I shouldn't say even half a word more about anything.

"I've already explained to you that the doctors want to know if Daniel could have had problems with work."

"Yes… But I'm not referring to that exactly." She put both hands on the edge of the desk and stood. "You see, this material, taken as a set, reveals that your brother was following a very different line of research than the one I entrusted him with. I wouldn't like for you to take it the wrong way, by no means, but in some way that I can't even imagine, Daniel borrowed all the documents from this very office. Without telling me."

Was she insinuating that my brother had robbed her? What an idiot! I also got up from my seat and faced her. Despite being separated by the wide desk, my height allowed me to look down at her with all the cold disdain I was capable of. And I was capable of a great deal in situations like that one. For a fraction of a second, I involuntarily directed my gaze toward the framed photograph that sat on the desk, now exposed to my eyes with complete clarity, and the image of a smiling older man with a beard with his arms around the shoulders of two twenty-something boys glittered in my retinas. The typical American-style happy family. And Doris Day dared to insult my brother, the most honorable and decent person I'd known in my life. The only thief there was the professor herself, who wanted to take possession of Daniel's work, using the dirtiest of tactics.

"Listen, Dr. Torrent," I pronounced threateningly. "I'm not often in the habit of losing my temper, but if what you are saying is that my brother Daniel is a thief, this conversation between you and me is going to end very badly."

"I'm sorry you're taking it this way, Mr. Queralt… I can only tell you that you are not going to take these documents with you again." The professor had guts. "If Daniel were well, I would have a very long conversation with him and I'm sure that we would resolve this unfortunate business, but since he is ill, I must limit myself to recovering what is mine and asking that you be respectful, and that for the good of your brother, you keep completely silent about this matter."

I smiled, and with a quick grab, I recovered the documents that she had left on the desk, supposedly out of my reach. I had never put up with nonsense and even less with insults, and if some idiot thought he (or she, in this case) could trick me and keep me from doing whatever I liked, then that person was completely, lamentably wrong.

"Listen carefully, Professor. I didn't come here with the intention of having an argument with my brother's boss, but I will not allow you to make up a story in which Daniel is a thief and you a poor robbed victim. I'm sorry, Ms. Torrent, but I'm leaving with all of this." And, saying so, I replaced all the photocopies and reproductions in my briefcase, then headed toward the door. "When my brother is feeling better, you and he can resolve this matter. Good day."

I opened the door with a brusque gesture and went out, slamming it behind me. There was no one left in the department. My Captain Haddock watch showed that it was almost half past two in the afternoon. Time to eat, and, why not, time to spit all the insults I knew about that idiot whose ears would be burning for the forty minutes it took me to arrive home and permanently erase her from my life.

I didn't go to the game, nor did I feel a need to. I spent most of the afternoon in the hospital with Daniel, and then I went to dinner with Jabba, Proxi, and Judith, a friend of Proxi's whom, years before, I had dated for a few months. Judith was an outstanding person one could certainly confide in, but even if that had not been the case, it wouldn't have mattered, because, before meeting in the restaurant, Proxi had already told her everything there was to tell. That being the case and considering the incidents that had occurred, I vented to my heart's content, criticizing the professor and, by making fun of her, ended up getting over my bad mood. The only bad thing about the night was that if I hadn't had my house full of people claiming to be my family, Judith would have stayed with me, since we still had good chemistry and neither of us liked to waste opportunities. But, in the end, it wasn't my lucky day and that's as far as things got. To make myself feel better and since I wasn't tired, at two in the morning, after making sure the company's computers were still looking for the Daniel's damned password, I decided that it was as good a moment as any to risk at last the Spanish Conquistadors' cursed chronicles. It was no longer just a matter of proving an outlandish theory; it had become a challenge to me, a matter of loyalty to my brother. I had failed him by exposing his work to his boss's rapacity, and I had to compensate him in some way. If he ended up getting better, whether by the magic of words that Jabba and Proxi (and also Judith, who joined enthusiastically in the idea) spoke of, or by way of Diego and Miquel's medications (which was more likely), I wanted to have something interesting to offer him, an idea he could explore, a dream that, who knew, might win him the Nobel prize someday, which would really humiliate his stubborn boss.

I began, obviously, with *The New Chronicle and Good Government* written by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala at the beginning of the seventeenth century. I felt my heart sink upon facing the three volumes that formed the immense work of that Indian of the Peruvian nobility who thought he could touch the pious and Christian soul of King Philip III of Spain by telling him the truth about what had been going on in the old Incan Empire since the first years of the conquest. That, at least, was what the introduction related, as well as the hazardous journey of the

manuscript until it was discovered in Copenhagen at the beginning of the twentieth century. I took a couple of disheartened sips from my bottle of water and took a quick look at some notes that my brother had left folded between the pages of the first book. Luckily, Daniel had written those drafts with the computer—printing them on the backside of used paper from the Division of Social Anthropology—saving me from one of the two main obstacles I had been afraid to face: deciphering his handwriting and understanding the content. As soon as I began to read, I lost track of everything around me, and in that very instant, without noticing, I stopped walking blindly and began to run, stepping in Daniel's footprints, on the path that he had explored alone only a few months before.

Apparently, beginning in the precise moment in which Columbus discovered America in 1492, the Spanish kings had been faced with a surprising legal dilemma: They were obliged to justify the necessity of the conquest and the subsequent colonization of America because otherwise the legislation of the era (like that of today) would not allow the State to destroy and usurp, with no rational, that which did not belong to it. There was something called Natural Law which protected the right of all peoples to sovereignty over their lands. So the most erudite Castilian lawyers of the sixteenth century had to wrack their brains to come up with lame excuses and unfounded motivations that would allow them to unquestionably claim that the West Indies didn't belong to anyone when Columbus had landed on their coasts, because the indigenous found there were not legitimate nor did they have true kings who could certify that the territory was their natural property. To that effect, in 1570, the new viceroy of Peru, Don Francisco de Toledo, carrying out a mandate from Phillip II, ordered a General Visit to the entire territory of the Viceroyalty with the purpose of preparing reports that demonstrated that the Inca had stolen the land from some wretched, uncultured, and savage indigenous peoples, who, since then, had suffered under their tyranny, which "legally" justified the appropriation of the Incan Empire by the Spanish crown. This of course caused great outrage at the falsification of information and the distortion of the history that the visitors heard from the inhabitants of the Empire, who were really civilized, well-nourished, and for the most part happy, and who were strangers to money because they didn't need it, had food reserves for more than six months in all towns, and who didn't establish big social differences between men and women, even if each gender had distinct tasks.

My eyes stopped without warning at a curious phrase: "In the General Visit ordered by the Viceroy, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa acted as historian and Lieutenant General. He spent five years traveling exhaustively throughout colonial Peru, gathering social, geographical, historical, and economic data from the oldest indigenous people of each place." Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa? The same Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa of "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians. Two monthes by land…?" I felt so euphoric that I couldn't help standing and moving my body a little to the beat of a non-existent and silent samba. I had a piece of the puzzle! Things were beginning to fall into place. It was a Pyrrhic satisfaction, but it was more than I had before.

Following my intuition, I did a quick internet search on said Pedro Sarmiento, and little to my surprise, I discovered that the guy had been someone very

important in the sixteenth century, a prominent figure, who, in the content of the pages I went over, appeared as navigator, cosmographer, mathematician, soldier, historian, poet, and scholar of classical languages. Not only had he explored the Pacific and discovered more than thirty islands, among them the Solomon Islands, but he was also the first governor of the provinces of the Strait of Magellan; he took part in the wars against the Inca rebels; completed the General Visit for the Viceroy of Peru; invented a navigational instrument called Jacob's staff, which was used to approximately calculate longitude (a measurement unheard of in his time); he wrote *History of the Incas*; and, moreover, was kidnapped by the pirate Richard Grenville and taken to England where he made friends with Sir Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth with whom he communicated in perfect Latin. But, in case something was lacking for a character like this, on two occasions he had to face the Sacred Inquisition which was ready to burn him alive in any public square in Lima (then called City of the Kings) as a sorcerer and astrologer, or, a little more specifically, because of the fabrication of some gold rings that brought good luck. Accused of necromancy and of "magical practices with instruments," he had to make a galloping escape and take refuge in Cusco; and ten years later, on exactly the same charges (with the difference that, this time, they were regarding an ink capable of causing love or any other sentiment in whoever read what was written with it), ended up in the secret prisons of the Holy Office.

Okay, so I had gotten to the point of being able to explain the map that Daniel had photocopied, or at least of being able to place it very precisely in history, since Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa finished the General Visit in 1575, five years after it began, and he traveled (or was taken) to the City of Kings, where, early that same year, he was judged by the inquisition and imprisoned in July. Sarmiento claimed to have completed the map of "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians" on the twenty-second of February, and, according to a document of the Tribunal of the Sacred Inquisition of Lima,[2-7] in the inventory of objects confiscated from Sarmiento on the thirtieth of July by the High Sheriff of the Holy Office, Don Alonso de Aliaga, appeared "three canvases painted with lands and Indian places."

According to my brother's cryptic notes, those canvases left for Spain many years later, along with other objects and documents belonging to Sarmiento de Gamboa, and remained in the Archive of the Indies in Seville for almost a century, reappearing briefly in the Contracting House of this same city before culminating their journey, God knows why, in the Hydrographic Deposit in Madrid, where they apparently were at that very moment, and where, I deduced, Daniel had found them.

All I had left to do was guess which was the lake where the "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians" started, but that was the easiest of everything that I had done that night, because all I had to do was find a map of the Bolivian high plains region on the internet to discover that the outline of Lake Titicaca corresponded exactly with that drawn by Sarmiento de Gamboa, and that the great city he had traced to the south fit like a key into the location of the ruins of Tiwanaku. What was no longer very clear was the path's route which, leaving from there, descended some twelve thousand some feet from the altitude of the city and entered into the jungle, running parallel to the course of a nameless river that I couldn't identify on the map on my screen due to the complexity of the tributaries which, like the

circulatory system of the human body, wove, braided, and crossed each other until they formed a jumble of threads of water, impossible to separate. The drawing was crudely interrupted by the tear that I at first had taken for a sheet of frayed edges, so it also wasn't really possible to know where that path of ant footprints buried in the Amazon led. In any case, it was all the same to me, because it wasn't significant to my search; what was significant was what I had already found, and that was the fact that sometime in those five years that Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa was traveling Peru and writing the reports of the General Visit he met the Yatiri in Tiwanaku and drew a map that my brother had considered important, and immediately after he finished the map, the Inquisition locked him up for making a magic ink. Again I was running into the magic of words, the Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious that Proxi liked so much.

It was clear that my brother had left those notes inside the first volume of *The New Chronicle and Good Governmen*t because they were related to it in some way, apart from the fact that the Indian Felipe Guamán had felt the necessity to write almost twelve hundred pages to refute the lies in the reports from the General Visit, so I got up my nerve, looked at the clock—it was almost four in the morning—and faced the reading. I wasn't sleepy, but even if I had been I would have woken up anyway just by looking at the prodigious illustrations of that book. Used to modern digital images, designed with a computer, with moving vectors and millions of colors, capable, even, of virtually recreating reality, the shock of Guamán Poma's crude drawings in black ink was brutal, devastating, as if an electric shock had formatted the hard drive of my brain, leaving me defenseless in the face of those crude paintings—of which there were a total of four hundred, interlaced with the text. It was like a comic, where action unfolds in the cartoon squares, the only difference being that Guamán Poma's work was almost four hundred years old.

What first got my attention was a drawing in which Viracocha (in Guamán's Quechua, Vari Vira Cocha Runa) was depicted, dressed in leaves, under a bright sun with a jovial face, like one of those smileys or emoticons on the internet to express moods or attitudes quickly and simply, using punctuation marks. From what I could see, all those suns that Guamán had painted had faces, and all of them manifested their impression of what was shown in the scene with emoticon expressions. But the most significant thing about the drawing was the little beard that had been given to Viracocha to indicate his divine rather than Indian origin: four hairs in the mustache and a goatee like mine. Another image that stood out was that of the shield with the first royal coat of arms of the Inca. It was clear that the shape was a copy of Spanish shields rather than that of a rectangular *walqnanqa*, but there was something clever in that mix of a quartered field with a cross, enclosed with decorations of baroque loops, with those ingenuous portraits of a bearded sun called Inti, a moon called Quya, a star with sixteen points, Willka, and an anthropomorphic idol placed on a hill.

Astonished by this iconographic excess in black and white where every scene was a world of details to lose oneself in, I was without peripheral vision, completely ignoring the phosphorescent yellow color of the parts highlighted by my brother just as I would have blithely ignored a red light had I been driving. There are images, or kinds of images, music, scents, flavors, or textures that have the

powerful capacity to pull us out of the real world, so it was not until I had recovered from the shock that I discovered that Daniel had again shown me the path, highlighting the important words, phrases, or paragraphs in bright yellow.

The first mark I could find was located next to the drawing of another baroque coat of arms with the second royal symbols (a bird, some kind of palm, a tassel, and two serpents). A phrase stood out which said that "they," the Inca, had come out of "the Lake of Titicaca and of Tiauanaco" and that, leaving the "Collau," the eight original "Ynga" brothers and sisters had arrived in Cusco and founded the city. In the following paragraph, Guamán Poma, with the bilious collaboration of Daniel C., asserted no more and no less than that all those who had "ears" were called Inca and the rest were not. For a moment I was disconcerted by the idea that the some twenty-nine million inhabitants of Tihuantinsuyu who were not royalty could have been earless, but I immediately remembered the legend that said the direct descendants of the children of Viracocha made up the "Orejona" royalty, who distinguished themselves from those who did not have royal blood by inserting large gold discs in their earlobes. And that really was the case, because on the next page, skipping the page with the second coat of arms, appeared the first Inca, Manco Capac ("Capac" meant powerful), with a round piece on either side of his head like enormous ears. I suddenly remembered a curious detail. Hadn't Proxi said the astronomer-priests that governed Tiwanaku were called "Capaca?" Could Capac be a derivation of Capaca? There was only one way to find out and that was by using the dictionary by Ludovico Bertonio that my brother had… at his apartment. The only thing I could do was look it up on the internet, but luck was with me and it didn't take me long to find free access to the dictionary through the virtual library of the University of Lima, Peru, and a Bertonio transcribed to the language of webpages confirmed that "Capaca" really did mean King or Lord although he added that it was a very old word (a claim he made in 1612) and that it was no longer used. So perhaps the Incan legends had some truth to them and Manco Capac, or Capaca, and his sister-wife, Mama Ocllo, really did originate in Tiwanaku and go north from there to found Cusco and the Incan Empire.

Manco Capac was shown elegantly dressed. He wore a great cape over his clothes, a band around his head with a decoration in front, open sandals with laces ending below his knees, and, in his hands, a curious sunshade and a lance. But what most got my attention were the decorations on his clothes: a band of three lines of small rectangles like those in Daniel's photocopies of textiles, horizontally crossing the fabric at the waist. This time, however, I looked more closely and discovered that inside them were minute stars, small rectangles, elongated tildes, diamonds with dots in the middle… The motifs were each repeated three times diagonally, and I wondered what was so incredible about these textile designs to inspire my brother to collect them.

I was startled by the light from the large wall screen which suddenly came on to inform me that my mother had just woken up. As I turned to see, the image divided in the middle, and in the right hand window, poorly illuminated, she could be seen jumping out of bed in her discreet green satin nightshirt. My house was obviously equipped with all sorts of motion sensors, but the identification system could also perfectly distinguish between each of my family members.

I sighed, feeling a growing wave of desperation as I watched her advance through the halls like the Titanic toward the ice. Even when I saw her gaze on my neck, and her image in the screen told me she was directly behind me in the doorway, I still held onto the useless hope that she would go another way and disappear.

"Might I ask what you're doing at this hour?" she rebuked me, moving a little farther into the room and stopping in front of the screen where she could see herself, hands on her hips, in the green nightshirt, her hair sticking up, with a look of irritation on her face. "And might I ask why you're spying? I don't remember having taught you to spy when you were little!"

"I'm reading."

"Reading?" She asked, indignant. "You just wait, in the end I'll have to do what I did when you were ten! Turn off the light or I'll turn it off for you!"

I laughed. "Then I'll just turn on a flashlight, like I did then."

She smiled as well. "You think I didn't know?" she asked, drawing up a chair and making herself comfortable; the night was lost. "I still remember the batteries, wires, and those tiny bulbs you used to use to make flashlights to read with under the covers. You know your brother copied the idea from you? When we lived in London and you were in school at La Salle, he would do the same, except that you read comics and he read real books. He was so smart for his age…!" Have I already mentioned that Daniel was my mother's favorite son? "Chaucer, Thomas Malory, Milton, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonathan Swift, Byron, Keats…"

"Come on, Mom. I've always known how intelligent my brother is."

For her, culture was reduced to the field of the humanities. What I did had never achieved the category of "respectable," and, of course, would never be anything other than an adolescent pastime. My mother thought more highly of a cobbler or a house painter than of me; at least the cobbler and the painter did something useful. Of course, from that perspective, Daniel always came out ahead: anthropologist, professor at the university, scholar, with a wife and an adorable son. What title did I have? What was this internet thing? Why was I still unmarried and uncommitted? Why didn't I give her grandchildren? On her last visit she had made it very clear that, for all the money I had, I would always be the biggest failure of her life, and I got the impression she was about to repeat that disagreeable commentary at that very moment.

"You have to do something at once, Arnie," she affectionately reproached me. "You absolutely cannot keep this up. You're already thirty-five years old. You're a man, and it's time to make important decisions. Clifford and I have thought of making out a will… Yes, I know it's still early, but Clifford is very determined, and I, obviously, am not going to refuse. That would be silly, don't you think? I'm telling you because we've thought of giving Daniel a larger part than you… I hope it doesn't bother you, darling. He doesn't have as many resources as you have, and you know professors don't make much money. Besides, he has a son, and probably will have more because both he and Ona are still young. So…"

"It doesn't matter to me, mom," I agreed, convinced. What else could I do? Besides, from what I knew, my mother had been helping him for a long time with small amounts of money every month and paying the mortgage on the house on Xiprer Street. I took it as a given that my brother would receive more than I,

although I couldn't help but see Clifford behind the whole thing. Clifford was a good man and we both appreciated each other, but Daniel was his son and I was not. In any case, I fortunately did not need the money, and my brother, whether or not he recovered, could always use it.

"Naturally, if you had children, this question wouldn't even have come up. For us, both of you are exactly equal. You know that Clifford loves you. But, of course, while you remain single, there's no question. In any case, we aren't going to die, of course. Not yet. Now… I'll tell you another thing: If, in a few years, you find a nice girl like Ona and you marry, or get together, as they say, and you have children, that's that, the will can be redone with no worries."

I couldn't get over my astonishment.

"Are you saying that if I marry and have children you'll leave me more inheritance?"

My mother always managed to disconcert me. Did she think that with that completely useless argument, she could make me change my life? The labyrinth of her thoughts was an absolute jumble.

"Of course! Do you think that I of all people would be so unfair as to discriminate against my grandchildren from one son in favor of those from the other? Never! For me they would all be completely equal! How could you think such a thing? Arnau, please! It's like you don't know your mother, son!"

We hadn't even been talking for five minutes and I was already dizzy and had a terrible pain in the pit of my stomach.

"Come with me, Mom," I told her, standing and holding out a hand to her as if she were a small girl. In fact, she had only just recently turned sixty, and she was very well preserved, much better than Dr. Torrent, for example, who, with that white hair, looked old; my mother, thanks to the gym, plastic surgery, and dye, looked barely fifty.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as she stood to follow me.

"To the kitchen. I'm going to make myself some tea and you will have a glass of hot milk."

"Skim!"

"Of course. And after," I whispered, moving through the hall, taking her by the hand, "you will go to bed and let me work, okay?"

She let out a happy little laugh (she loved it when Daniel and I treated her like that) and docilely allowed herself to be led, without saying a word.

I gave thanks to Viracocha when I saw her drink the milk without saying another word and give me a quick kiss on the cheek before vanishing again into the half-light. It was five thirty on Sunday morning. I felt tempted to go out into the garden and contemplate the sky, but Guamán Poma was waiting for me and there wasn't much night left ahead of me. I couldn't go to bed without knowing a little more.

When my mother went back to bed, the system erased the images from the cameras in her room from the wall screen. Knowing that daytime could come without me noticing, I told the computer to let me know when it was seven o'clock and asked it for information about the progress of the search for Daniel's password. The response was projected on the giant wall screen, as well as on the three monitors I had distributed throughout the study: the password must be a

chain longer than six digits, since no shorter combination had worked. I typed a couple of orders to get a screenshot of the process and check to see what kind of sequences the system was testing at that moment. Some fifty seven-character words appeared on a black background, alternating capital with lower-case letters, numbers, spaces, and special characters (exclamation points, parenthesis, hyphens, quotation marks, brackets, tildes, all sorts of punctuation, all sorts of accents, etc.). The situation got more complicated by the minute, because combinations with nine or ten characters could tie up all of the system's resources. If the password didn't appear soon, I would have to ask for help.

I swiveled the seat, and, pulling hard with both hands on the desk that held the books, I slid up to it, skating on the chair's little wheels, to keep looking at drawings, as the phrases highlighted by my brother became clearer.

The second Inca, Cinche Roca, appeared two pages after his ancestor, dressed very similarly, and, naturally, with his big ears very visible. The various lines highlighted on the adjacent page gave me some valuable information: Guamán Poma said of Ciche Roca that he had governed Cusco, and conquered all the *orejones*, and won all of Collasuyu with very few soldiers, because the Colla were very "weak and pusillanimous, useless people." A son of this Inca, Captain Topa Amaro, "conquered, killed, and removed the eyes" of the most important Colla, and, so that there would be no doubt as to how he did it, Guamán Poma illustrated it in detail with another picture, in which the captain was shown with some large tongs in his hands, poking the eye of a poor captive, who was kneeling before him and who wore on his head a curious hat like a stylized flowerpot. So that was a Colla-Aymara! I told myself, examining him with great curiosity. The truth was, it seemed like I had known him my whole life.

About Cinche Roca Inca (the royal title came after the name), the chronicler had still more revealing facts to report. Minutely describing his clothing, Poma de Ayala said that the *awaki* of his dress, the design that could be seen in the drawing, had "three seams of *tukapu*," or, in other words, three lines of small rectangular forms filled with marks that were very similar to those special characters on the computer.

I swiveled the seat, slid quickly to the keyboard, and did a general internet search on *tukapus*. To my disappointment, there appeared only two documents which turned out to be the same thing, one in English and one in Spanish. It was a study titled *Guamán Poma and His Illustrated Chronicles: From a Century of Scholarship to a New Era of Reading*, by Dr. Rolena Adorno, Professor of Latin American Literature at the University of Yale, in the United States. The work was overwhelming due to its erudition and depth. I read it attentively, and, among many other interesting things that Dr. Adorno said about Guamán, I found a paragraph in which she referenced the work on *tukapus* by a man named Cummins, who insisted that the chronicler revealed very little about the secret meaning of those abstract textile designs and even less about the encoded secret of, for example, the abacus that appeared in the drawing of the *khipukamayuq*, the Inca secretary who kept track of the *khipus* that recorded dynastic and statistical information. To understand that the *khipus* were the *quipus*, which is to say, the cords with knots that Ona told me about in the hospital, wasn't too hard; I was already getting used to seeing the same word written a million different ways, but

it took me a little longer to notice that the *khipukamayuq* was the *quipucamayoc* that my sister-in-law had also told me about. That idea brought me, obviously, to another similar one: if *khipus* could be *quipus* and *khipukamayuq* could be *quipucamayoq*, why couldn't the *tukapus*, or rather, the little boxes full of little symbols that appeared on textiles, be *tucapus* or *tucapos* or *tocapus*? Nevertheless, when I did the search on the first option, there only appeared a few documents of little use, and the second alternative gave still fewer results, so I only had the third left before giving up. But that time luck was with me: more than seventy pages had the word "*tocapus*," and I took it for granted that one of them would explain to me why my brother was so interested (more than Rolena Adorno and that Cummins guy) in those curious Andean textile designs that seemed to have some secret meanings which Guamán Poma hadn't wished to reveal.

Fortunately, I had barely skimmed my eyes over the titles of the first pages when I ran into a familiar name: Miccinelli, Miccinelli Documents… Could those be the same manuscripts discovered by Dr. Torrent's friend in a private archive in Naples, the ones that contained the *quipu* of knots that my brother was working on? Of course, there was no doubt! I clicked the link, loaded the page, and there it was: "Acts of the colloquium *Guamán Poma and Blas Valera. Andean Tradition and Colonial History:* New fields of research" by Professor Laura Laurencich-Minelli, head of the Department of Pre-Columbian Civilizations of the University of Bologna, Italy. And what did Professor Laurencich-Minelli have to say about the textiles with bands of *tocapus*? Wasn't she in charge of the *quipus*? No, I remembered, it was Marta Torrent, and, by delegation, my brother Daniel who were in charge the *quipus*; Professor Laurencich-Minelli was studying the historical and paleographic part of the documents.

The Miccinelli Documents, discovered in the mid-eighties, were two Jesuit manuscripts, *Exsul Immeritus Blas Valera Populo Suo* (The Unjustly Banished Blas Valera to his People), and *Historia et Rudimenta Linguae Piruanorum* (History and Elements of the Peruvian Language), written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and bound in one single volume in 1737 by another Jesuit, Father Pedro de Illanes who, shortly afterward, sold it to Raimondo de Sangro, Prince of Sansevero. The ephemeral King of Spain, Amadeo I (1870-1873), of the house of Saboya, probably caused them to wind up in the possession of his grandson, the Duke Amadeo de Saboya Aosta, who gave them to Mayor Riccardo Cera, uncle of the current owner, Clara Miccinelli, in whose private archive, the Cera Archive, she herself found the documents in 1985. Part of the second manuscript, *Historia et Rudimenta Linguae Piruanorum*, was written in Lima, between 1637 and 1638, by the Italian Father Anello Oliva, who added three half-folios in which was painted the literary *quipu,* Sumac Ñusta, and folded several knotted wool cords that made up part of the same. Without a doubt, this was the *quipu* that Daniel was studying on behalf of Dr. Torrent.

The subject was serious: The documents came right out and said that Guamán Poma was the pseudonym adopted by a mestizo Jesuit named Blas Valera (writer, expert linguist on Quechua and Aymara, and historian), and that the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Royal Commentaries* was plagiarized from an unedited work written by Valera himself and entrusted to de la Vega during the time Valera spent on trial with the Inquisition for being the leader of a group that, apart from trying

to keep the Incan culture alive, accused the Spanish of the gravest exploitation, theft, and unimaginable crimes against the Indians. But, what was even worse, the documents categorically stated that Francisco Pizarro had vanquished the last Inca, Atahualpa, not in a genuine battle, as history claims happened in Cajamarca but by poisoning his officials with muscatel wine mixed with sandarac which, apparently, was what arsenic was called back then. Professor Laurencich-Minelli accompanied each of these claims with an ample battery of cited works to prove and substantiate them, but as interesting as the subject was, what I needed were references to the enigmatic *tocapus*, not yet another handful of mysteries.

At last I got to the part of the essay that had what I was looking for, and, just by reading the subheading of the section, I knew why my brother, a linguistic anthropologist, had become so interested in Incan textiles and designs. Really, at that point, it shouldn't have been so difficult for me to figure it out, given the general direction of the information, but to a landlubber all seas look the same because of the simple fact of never having sailed them. The subheading read "Writing through Q*uipus* and Textiles," and from that alone I already should have felt like a raving idiot, not just because of my blindness, but also because of something that now seemed crystal clear: the professor knew the subject of *tocapus* just as well as she knew that of *quipus*, because she must, with good reason, know what I knew by then—or more—she'd had her hands on the Miccinelli documents, and the author of that essay I was reading was her friend and associate.

So, okay, according to what Dr. Torrent's friend said, the Miccinelli documents claimed that both the knotted *quipus* and textiles with *tocapus* were like our books, and, although she put much more emphasis on *quipus*, in one phrase she mentioned the need to carefully study the illustrations of *The New Chronicle and Good Government* by Guamán Poma-Blas Valera, because, "on their most secret level," they contained texts written with the *tocapus* drawn as decorations on the clothing which, making use of the necessary human and technical means, could be deciphered.

Pensive, I returned to the Guamán book (if that was truly the name of its author) and thoughtfully went back over the images that had so impressed me. I looked at those bands of *tocapus* on the clothing with new eyes as if I were looking at a wall full of Egyptian hieroglyphs that, even though I couldn't read them, were still a written language made of words and replete with ideas. I only had one more question, and the truth was I didn't feel capable of resolving it that night: What language could *tocapus* be written in? There was no longer any doubt that the knots were used to write in Quechua, the language of the Inca and their subjects, but I got the impression that the same was true of the *tocapus*. Two writing systems, equally mysterious, for the same language? So, where in the world did Aymara enter into the story?

"Email to Jabba," I declared listlessly, without moving. The monitors went white and the black cursor blinked at the beginning of a screen for messages written through the voice recognition system. "Good morning to both of you," I began to dictate; the words appearing mechanically on the screens. "Look at what time it is when I'm sending this email and guess the night I've had. I need you to keep researching more things about the Aymara language. In particular any

relationship between Aymara with something called *tocapus*." The machine stopped after "called." "Spell: 'T' as in Toledo, 'O' as in Ourense, 'C' as in Caceres, 'A' as in Alicante, 'P' as in Palencia, 'U' as in Urgell, and 'S' as in Seville." The word appeared immediately, correctly spelled. "Memorize: *tocapu*. Meaning: Incan textile design. Plural: *tocapus*. Continue dictating email to Jabba. I'm only interested in Quechua if it appears in relation to *tocapus* and Aymara, otherwise no. I'll get up at noon, and in the afternoon I'll be in the hospital with Daniel if you want to find me. In another message I'll send you part of the material that I haven't managed to decipher in case you can also lend me a hand with that. Happy Sunday. Thanks again, Root. End of message for Jabba. Normal encryption. Normal priority. Send."

I took the photocopies of the map with the compass roses and of the little bearded man with no body (Humpty Dumpty) out of the leather briefcase, and ran them through my most powerful scanner to give them as highest resolution possible. The resulting files were huge, but so much the better because that way Jabba and Proxi wouldn't have any added problems from loss of definition.

"Select images one and two," I concluded, sprawling in the chair and resting my face on my left fist. "Email to Jabba. Attach selected files. End of email to Jabba. Normal encryption. Normal priority. Send."

The monitors turned off, and I, still in front of *The New Chronicle*, kept mechanically turning pages until I found another paragraph highlighted in yellow; but at that moment the monitors lit up again, with a system message reminding me that it was seven in the morning; then, masterfully fading out, they showed one of my favorite paintings: Harmatan, by Ramón Enrich. As if that reminder had made some internal alarm go off, I automatically felt an infinite exhaustion and the numbing of all the muscles in my body. How long had I been sitting there, navigating between notes and books? I no longer remembered what time I had started. While I yawned noisily and stretched out to my full length in the chair, straight as a rod, I thought of the innumerable sleepless nights I had spent sitting in front of the computer, hacking systems. Those had been impassioning challenges that, once achieved, had left me with my ego in the clouds, my vanity in hyperspace, and with a self-satisfaction that couldn't be compared with anything else in the world. So, that night, despite the tiredness (or maybe because of it), I felt just as omnipotent, and in a final delirium before falling into bed overcome by sleep, I decided that from that moment on, I would change my tag to some acronym of Arnau Capac Inca, or Powerful King Arnau.

It sounded truly good. As good as the soft and somewhat sad piano piece by Erik Satie that lulled me to sleep, Gymnopédie No. 1. Satie always said that Gymnopedie meant "dance of nude Spartan women," but almost everyone was sure that he had made that up. More than naked women, it reminded me, really, of the thousands—or millions—of people who died in the Americas fighting against the tyranny and oppression of the Spanish crown and the Spanish church.

When I awoke at noon, I heard strange noises in the house. At first I supposed it must be my grandmother who had gotten up early, but my grandmother was a very considerate woman and would never have caused such a racket while someone was sleeping. Of course, it could be my mother, who never bothered with such considerations, but my mother and Clifford must have been in the hospital since the first light of morning; so, of the list of possible culprits, the only that

remained were Magdalena and Sergi, the gardener, who were automatically excluded because it was Sunday. I went through that step by step Sherlock-style reflection more asleep than awake, but there's nothing like good logical reasoning accompanied by a background of explosions to succeed in waking up the most exhausted of minds.

I jumped out of bed, and, with my eyes closed, I groped down the hall, stumbling toward the origin of the racket. Good thing, I thought, that my grandmother slept like a log. Medical science says that people of advanced age need fewer hours of sleep than young people, but, with her more than eighty years, doña Eulàlia Monturiol i Toldrà, all intelligence, like one of those bright quartz crystals full of edges, slept her ten or eleven hours every day, and nothing, not even spending the night looking after one of her grandchildren in the hospital, would alter that healthy habit. She claimed that her great grandmother, who had lived to one hundred and ten, had slept even more, and that she expected to easily surpass that age. My mother, horrified by such a waste of life, harshly reprimanded her and advised her to reduce her time sleeping to the seven hours recommended by specialists; but my grandmother, stubborn like no other, said that modern doctors had no idea what quality of life was, and that, from spending so much time struggling with illnesses, they had forgotten the basic standard for good health, namely, to live like a king.

I squinted with an effort when I got to the spot where the noise was coming from and discovered Jabba and Proxi lying on the floor of my study, surrounded by cords, towers of computers—which I identified as having come from the "100"—and diverse bits of hardware. I had forgotten that they also had free access to my house.

"Oh, hi, Root!" Jabba greeted me, pushing red locks out of his face with his forearm.

I said a very rude word and cursed them repeatedly as I went into the study and jabbed the sole of my right foot on a sharp little USB port multiplier which made me keep spitting curses.

"Stop that right now!" was the first coherent thing I said. "My grandmother is sleeping!"

Proxi, who hadn't paid the least bit of attention to me during my explosion of profanity, raised her head from whatever she was doing, and looked at me, frightened, stopping everything.

"Stop, Jabba!" she cried, standing. "We didn't know, Root, really. We had no idea."

"Come with me to the kitchen, and while I have breakfast you can tell me what the hell you were doing!"

They followed me docilely through the hall and entered the kitchen ahead of me, looking contrite. I closed the door quietly so we could talk without bothering anyone.

"All right, go on," I said acridly, moving toward the shelf where I kept the glass jars and spices. "I want an explanation."

"We came to help you…" Proxi started to say, but Jabba interrupted her.

"We know where your big-headed little man came from."

With the jar of tea in my hand, I pivoted like a pinwheel to look at them. They had sat down on opposite sides of the kitchen table. I didn't have to ask them: The expression on my face was a giant question mark.

"We know almost everything." My supposed friend was showing off, with an air of smugness.

"Yes, it's true," Proxi corroborated, adopting the same attitude. "But we're not going to tell you, because you haven't offered us anything, not even a little of that coffee you're going to make for yourself."

I sighed.

"It's tea, Proxi," I announced, as I put the exact quantity of water in the small glass pitcher. The taste for tea had been imposed on me by my mother, who had imposed the habit on all of us since she went to live in England. At first, I hated it, but with time, I ended up getting used to it.

"Oh, then I don't want it!"

I waited for the little bubbles to settle, so I could be sure the amount of water was correct, and, when I saw there was not quite enough, poured a thin thread that bounced from the mouth of the bottle of mineral water.

"I'll make you a coffee," Jabba told her, standing and heading toward the Italian espresso maker that he saw on one of the shelves. "It sounds good to me too. Right after we finished eating," he told me, "we came right over here."

"Help yourself," I muttered, while I put the pitcher in the microwave and programmed the time on the digital screen. Jabba filled the bottom reservoir of the espresso maker with water from the tap. He was a compulsive coffee drinker, but even in this he completely lacked a discerning palate. "Who's going to tell me everything?" I insisted.

"I'll tell you, relax," Proxi replied.

"Where's the coffee?"

"The coffee's in the glass jar that's next to the empty spot left by the jar of tea. Do you see it?"

"Your egghead, Root," continued the security mercenary, "it's one of the tiny pictures on the map you sent us last night."

"More like this morning," I objected, oblivious to the information I had just received.

"Fine, this morning, then," she conceded, while the man in her life heaped Jamaican coffee into the espresso maker's little filter cup, and compressed it for all he was worth before screwing on the top part. I pressed my lips together and told myself it would be better to look away if I didn't want to end up fighting with that savage.

And so, I paid attention to what Proxi had said.

"The little bearded man was on the map with the Arabic lettering?" I blurted, absolutely perplexed.

"He's just above the ridge of the Andes!" Jabba specified, laughing. "With his little feet on the peaks where Tiwanaku should be!"

"Of course, he's very small; you can barely make him out. You have to look very hard."

"Or look with a very large magnifying glass, like we did."

"That's why Daniel made a digital enlargement."

I remained speechless for several seconds, but then, despite the beeping of the microwave, I left the kitchen in a flash and went back to the studio, looking for the folder where I had stored the damn map after scanning it. I jumped over the loose objects that were scattered on the floor and retrieved it anxiously, unfolding it. Yes, that spot was indeed the big-headed little man. But I couldn't make him out very well.

"Light, more light!" I exclaimed like Goethe on his deathbed, and the system immediately strengthened the intensity of the light in the study. There he was. There was the cursed Humpty Dumpty, with his black beard, his Colla hat, and his frog legs! He was so small that he was barely visible, so I took out Daniel's enlargement and examined it as if it were the first time I was seeing it. It was 'my egghead,' indeed! It had been right in front of my nose the whole time.

"Grab the map and come to the kitchen," Proxi demanded from the door.

Jabba remained standing in front of the stovetop, contemplating the espresso pot as if the fire necessary to heat the water came from his eyes.

"Have you already seen it?" he rushed to ask when we had closed the door again.

"This is incredible!" I exclaimed, shaking the sheet of paper like a fan.

"Isn't it?" Proxi agreed, going toward the microwave. She wore some very tight-fitting flowered leggings, with a thick flannel shirt on top, unbuttoned and showing a white tank top underneath against which glittered the beads of several necklaces. "Go on, sit down. I'll finish preparing this sickening tea."

I was truly grateful. Even though she thought it was disgusting, Proxi always made very good tea.

"Right," Jabba declared, "now, clean out your ears and listen closely to what we're going to tell you. If the Aymara thing was intense, this is unbelievable."

"Which is exactly why we've decided to help you."

"Yes, you see, all of this is too much for you, Root. Too many things, too many books, too many documents… Proxi and I have come to the conclusion that the matter requires the combined efforts of our three heads. So, assuming that you won't decline, we're going to take a week's vacation from Ker-Central and come here every day to lend you a hand."

"Will we really need that much time?" I interrupted. "Besides, don't forget I have a house full of people."

"Why do we work for this guy, Proxi?" grumbled Jabba, resentful.

"Because he pays us a fortune."

"True," he lamented, lifting the lid of the Italian espresso maker to see how it was coming along.

"And because we like him," she continued, finishing pouring the hot water into the porcelain teapot, "because he likes the same things as we do, because he's as crazy as you are, and because we've known each other for… How long? Ten years? Twenty?

"He and I, our whole lives," I pointed out, although that wasn't exactly the case. "You just got here three years ago, when I started Ker-Central."

"Right. Clearly, it's been a very long three years."

I had found Jabba on the net. Despite the fact he hadn't lived that far away (he was from a small town in Girona), we had spent years programming and pirating

together without meeting each other face to face, carrying out famous exploits, which we had kept secret, not like those second-rate hackers who always go around bragging about their small triumphs without remembering that loose-lips-sink-ships. We were both weird guys without the need or desire for much contact with flesh and blood people, maybe because of shyness, or, who knows, maybe because of a passion for technology and computers that made us feel different from others. I hadn't known his real name until I hired him to work at Inter-Ker in 1993. I could have said without lying that the husky adolescent, big and red-headed, who had come into the bar where we had arranged to see each other that afternoon for the first time, was the best friend I'd ever had and I was without a doubt also his. But until that moment, we had never seen each other's faces. We had spoken little. I told him about my plan for the business, and he told me that yes, he would work for me, as long as he could continue his studies. He was five years younger than I, and his parents, who were farmers, were stuck on the idea that he go to college, even if they had to drag him there by his ear. And so had begun the second stage of our friendship. When I sold Inter-Ker, he had followed me to Keralt.com, and after that to Ker-Central, at that point as a computer engineer, and it was then that we both had met Proxi who had come to work in the security department a few months after the business was started. What they had together was what you could call love at first sight. My old friend had gotten all silly, went nuts, had turned into a bit of an idiot for that scrawny and disconcerting computer technician who ran circles around us in resourcefulness. But she hadn't been left behind. Although she hadn't had to try very hard, she had pursued him shamelessly until the poor man hadn't been able to take it anymore and had fallen defeated at her feet. They had found their perfect match in each other, and since then—three years ago—they hadn't separated at all except to work in different offices at the company.

"Anyway…" she was saying, bringing me the cup and the brimming teapot, "the thing is, Root, we're going to give you a week of our limited and always short yearly vacations to find out what Daniel had gotten into, because, the more we find out, the stranger everything becomes."

"I accept your offer," I declared, watching as Jabba grabbed the coffee maker by the handle and pulled it roughly off the stovetop, "but, why here, at the house? Why not in the '100'? We would be more comfortable."

"Comfortable, he says!" he joked, pouring a stream of the steaming and aromatic concoction into two small cups.

"When you called Jabba to ask him to research the Aymara language, you told him you had a ton of books to go through."

"And we've already seen how you have the study. We can't take all that to the '100'!"

"How much of the history have you read?"

"Little, very little," I admitted, centering the cup on the saucer.

"We have to work here, because there's no space in the '100' for so many books, papers, and folders. There's not a single free table. And so we don't have to fight over computers, we've decided to bring a few from downstairs and connect them to the system."

When Proxi finished speaking, the three of us were comfortably seated at last. Sliding it over the wood, I brought the cursed map with the compass roses and the Arabic lettering toward me.

"Fine, fine…" I muttered, looking at the tiny Humpty Dumpty. "Tell me what you've found out."

"That scrap of paper," began Jabba, "is a reproduction of what's left of a large world map drawn in 1513 by a famous Turkish pirate named Piri Reis."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"How do I know?" he grumbled. "Well, because Proxi and I have gone to the trouble of visiting every page on ancient cartography on the web. Really, there aren't as many old maps left as you might think. There are a lot from the last two or three centuries, but if you go further back, the number is so much smaller that you could count them on your fingers."

"Once we knew that it was the map by Piri Reis, we started to search for everything there was about him."

"And, as hard as you try," Jabba announced, "you'll never guess what we found."

"At one of the URLs there was a list of the objects, people, and animals that appear on the world map, and a reference to your *egghead*, described as a bearded monster without a body, demonic in nature."

"In other words, you didn't actually find him using a large magnifying glass."

"We did too use the magnifying glass!" Jabba protested, quarrelsome, "although, I'll admit, only after knowing he was there. But finding him on the map was like looking for a piece of a puzzle in a bag with another five thousand pieces."

"Well, probably not that many," Proxi put in, "but it was hard enough."

"And now we're going to tell you a story. The strangest story you've heard in your life. But, careful!" he warned, pointing both index fingers in the air, "in this story everything is true. Up to the last detail. We're not talking about Hobbits or Elves. Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed, on tenterhooks. But it was Proxi, not Jabba, who told me, after taking a small sip of coffee and setting the cup on the saucer.

"After the fall of the Ottoman Empire…" she began.

"Look at her, it's like she's been doing this her whole life," Jabba said, pretending great admiration.

I laughed and nodded firmly.

"Did you say Roman or Ottoman," I demanded ingenuously.

"You're a couple of imbeciles," she declared, disgusted. "The most imbecile imbeciles in the world. Upon the fall of the Ottoman Empire, after the First World War, the governors of the new Republic of Turkey decided to rescue the valuable treasure that had remained hidden for centuries in the giant palace of Topkapi, the old residence of the sultan, in Istanbul. Making an inventory of the funds, in November of 1929, the director of the National Museum, Halil something, and a German theologist named Adolf Deissmann discovered an old incomplete map painted on gazelle leather."

"As you can see, she's spent the morning studying," commented a person who, immediately after, got a good smack on his red head.

I kept my mouth closed, in case there were more of those to be given out.

“As this ignoramus has already told you,” she went on, impassive, “it was what remained of a large world map made by the admiral of the Turkish fleet, cartographer and famous pirate Piri Reis in 1513. The map represented Britain, Spain, Western Africa, the Atlantic ocean, part of North America, South America, and the Antarctic coast. That’s to say, exactly what you see in this reproduction.”

I squinted to focus my gaze and looked for all the places she had mentioned. Of course, the Atlantic, which amply occupied the center of the image with its pale blue color, was shown perfectly clearly, full of little ships, compass roses, lines, islands, etc. Britain, however, couldn’t be seen anywhere, but I refrained from mentioning it. On the right, Spain could be seen with no problem, and underneath it, the western coast and potbelly of Africa with what looked like an elephant surrounded by the three magi seated with crossed legs drawn in it interior. North America was a vague coastline stuck to the left edge of the supposed gazelle leather, as if it were leaning to that side and had been lost to sight because of the circumference of the Earth, but South America was perfectly recognizable, with its major rivers, its Andean mountain range (its little man with the hat and the red beard), its little animals… Only the Southern tip of the continent seemed strange, because where the strait of Magellan should be, uniting the Atlantic with the Pacific, the land curved around without a break and went back toward the east, as if looking for the southern tip of Africa, from which I deduced that it must be the Antarctic coast, although incorrectly represented. But, okay, despite all that, I could say that Proxi was more or less right.

“See anything strange?”

“Well, yes,” I said, very convinced, putting my finger over the missing strait of Magellan, “this is wrong. Also, North America is crooked. Oh! And this African elephant is too skinny, it barely has a belly. It looks like a greyhound with a trunk.”

“That’s all true, Root,” Jabba encouraged me, united in the face of a common adversary, “but there’s much more. Remember everything you know about Pizarro and the Inca, everything about the discovery of Peru.”

“Don’t give him any more clues, Judas,” huffed Proxi.

“Give him a break, woman!” he implored.

While they continued their chatter, I looked again at the South America on that map by Piri Reis. What was strange about it? Of course, Humpty Dumpty wasn’t very normal, but the llama next to him was very well drawn, as were the rivers and the mountains. What was I missing? Let’s see… Pizarro conquered the Inca in 1532, in Cajamarca, a thousand miles north of Cusco, possibly poisoning those noble *Orejones* and capturing the last of their monarchs, Atahualpa Inca, whom he killed shortly after. That marked the beginning of the Viceroyalty of Peru and the systematic destruction of the old empire, the establishment of Christianity and the Inquisition, the composition of the first chronicles… What the hell wasn’t I seeing?

“Nothing occurs to you?” Proxi asked.

“Well, no, the truth is that it doesn’t,” I muttered, without pausing in my search, slowly stroking my goatee, while, like an applied student, I leaned over the large photocopy.

“Come on, Root!” Jabba encouraged, in my corner.

“I’ll repeat the crucial bit: The map was drawn in 1513.”

“And what about it?” I asked, annoyed; but it was more a protest than a real question. I didn’t want help, I wasn’t asking for a solution, and both of them knew it. Apparently, I had the necessary information in my head to resolve the enigma, so I should let my intuition guide me, as if I were working on one of those dark areas of code where only hunches can take you to the right place. I was once again an intrepid Ulysses trying to guide my ship to Ithaca, a daring hacker struggling to open something that was *lawt’ata*, “closed with a key.”

Even if Proxi irritated me, thanks to her, I knew that I should start with the dates. I had two: 1513, the year of the map, and 1532, the year that Pizarro arrived at last at Cajamarca and began the conquest of the Incan Empire. Between 1513 and 1532, there was a difference of nineteen years… oddly, in favor of the map. According to what little I knew, when Pizarro left Panama in 1531, no one had seen Peru yet, or Bolivia, or Chile, or Tierra del Fuego. Which made it impossible in 1513 for them to know the shape and length of the ridge of the Andes and the courses of the big rivers, and, of course, it was equally impossible for anyone to have ever seen the region of Lake Titicaca and Tiwanaku, and, even more so, for them to have known of the Colla and their taste in hats.

But, even more strange, that map was drawn in 1513, by a Turk! It could be that Columbus wasn’t the original discoverer of the American continents—some doubts remained, with that story about the Vikings—but, the Turks? Come on!

“This map is fake,” I stated, convinced. “This map is chronologically incorrect. Therefore, even if it really is old, it can only be a moth-eaten falsification.”

My two attentive spectators laughed with satisfied pride. Proxi’s eyes narrowed to two thin lines of lashes.

“I knew you’d figure it out!” she exclaimed.

“So, is it really a fraud?” I asked, arching my eyebrows, surprised by how easy it had been.

“Fraud, indeed!” Jabba scoffed. “The map is authentic! Drawn in Gallipoli, near Istanbul, by the very same historic Piri Reis, in 1513.”

“No. It can’t be.”

“Didn’t I warn you that in this story, everything was true down to the last detail? I told you: ‘We’re not talking about Hobbits or Elves.’ Am I right?”

“But it doesn’t make sense!” I objected, beginning to get mad. “In 1513, no one knew what the terrain of the new world was like. I’d even swear they still thought they’d arrived in India-India, the one in the Orient.”

“You’re right! And there, exactly, is the crux of the matter. How could that map have been made? The fact that it’s not a fake is proven by how well-known and cataloged it is by specialized organizations not to mention the multiple historical investigations that have been done to corroborate everything that has to do with it, with its author, and with the large amount of information that Piri Reis himself provides in those plentiful notes you can see scattered all over the design, written in Ottoman Turkish, with Arabic letters.”

“Now this is turning into nonsense!” I exploded. “Again with the magic games? Please! This world map is false and there’s nothing else to say. It must have been drawn several years after what Piri Reis claims.”

“Years after, huh?” Proxi shot back, very pleased with herself. “So why has it been accepted as authentic by all the cartographic organizations in the world? Why have the experts, despite the inconvenience of its existence, been unable to show that it’s a falsification? Only you, Arnau Queralt, dare to make such a claim. Really smart!”

“Okay, fine! Let’s say it’s authentic! Explain to me how in the hell this Piri Reis managed to draw the Andes when they were still unexplored.”

I could accept, with reservations, that Aymara was an algorithmic and mathematical language, because we were still talking about something quantifiable and serious, but I had been taught to consider any absurd myth, any erroneous concept with the slight scent of heterodoxy, worthy of contempt. If I had lived in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, maybe Piri Reis’ map would have been enough for me to strike up a libertarian crusade against the official version put forth by a repressive church, like Giordano Bruno did, for example, with that theory of the infinite Universe that Daniel spoke of in his delirium. But I lived in the Age of Science, in the Era of Scientific Positivism, which was dedicated to clearly marking the limits of what was acceptable, through logic and verification. It had taken us too many centuries to free ourselves from the shackles of superstition and ignorance to give fuel to the fire of ridiculous fantasies now.

Jabba, nervous, stood up and began to pace around the kitchen. His jeans were as old and shabby as his blue shirt—bought at Bergdorf Goodman, Fifth Avenue, New York—was impeccable.

“Let’s take it one part at a time,” he proposed, mechanically adjusting the waist of the tattered pants. “Piri Reis’ map contains many secrets, not just the discrepancy of the dates. Maybe by analyzing all of them, we can find something that gives us some clue. Get out the crib sheet, Proxi… The big-headed guy isn’t there by coincidence, and it wasn’t for nothing that Daniel was saving a copy of the world map.”

“And doesn’t it seem really strange to you that a Turk, and a pirate for that matter, would draw the American continents in 1513? Come on! Not even if Columbus had taken him along in his caravel!”

“You’re partly right about that,” Proxi agreed, using her palms to smooth a square of paper she’d extracted, folded, from the front pocket of her flannel shirt. “The area around the Antilles is copied, as he himself states, from a map by Christopher Columbus. In one of the inscriptions, he admits to having used four contemporary Portuguese maps, some older maps from the time of Alexander the Great, and some others based on mathematics.”

“There you have it!” I proclaimed triumphantly. “There’s nothing weird about Piri Reis’ world map!”

“Setting aside the question of what sources he used,” she continued, unperturbed, “which, if you notice, are not what you would call very concrete. The following aspects of the fragment recovered in Topkapi Palace should be highlighted, namely: The Malvinas appear on the map, and they were not officially discovered until 1592. The Andes are shown, although, as we know, Pizarro didn’t set foot on them until 1524, in his first and incomplete exploration southward. There is a drawing of a llama, a mammal undiscovered in 1513, and also the exact starting point and course of the Amazon river. At the equator, two large islands

that don't exist today rise from the sea; modern submarine soundings have proven the presence in those places of two mountain peaks belonging to the range that crosses the bottom of the Atlantic from north to south, and the same thing applies to a group of islands that were not discovered until 1958, beneath Antarctic ice."

I was seized by a sensation of general rigidity. In that kitchen, not even the air was moving. I think that even the system, always listening, was paying special attention at that moment.

"But that's not the best thing about Piri Reis' map," Proxi declared, lifting her eyes from the paper and looking at me expressionlessly. "I still haven't gotten to the most surprising part. As you yourself noticed, Root, the extreme south of Tierra del Fuego doesn't end to let the sea through, connecting the two oceans by way of the strait of Magellan. On Reis' map, the extreme southern tip of the continent is elongated, and connects, by way of a land bridge, to a strange Antarctica without ice. Well, when the map was discovered in 1929, this bit of information was considered to be just another of its imprecisions, a product of the ignorance of the era in which it was made. However…"

"However?" I prompted.

"However, acoustic soundings taken of the area by oceanographic ships have demonstrated that the land bridge uniting South America and Antarctica exists exactly as it is shown on Riri Reis' map, although now it's below sea level. Apparently, it was before the last Ice Age that it was uncovered by water and traversable. Setting aside the fact that the last Ice Age lasted, as they say, two and a half million years, with its variations and warm periods in the middle, the important thing is that it ended about ten or eleven thousand years ago. So, speaking figuratively… or maybe not," she qualified, "Antarctica is a peninsula of the American Continent."

I mumbled something nonsensical while I energetically rubbed my face with my hands and Jabba let out a sarcastic choked little laugh.

"But the surprise caused by the map reached its apex when, with the help of satellite technology, it was discovered that beneath the Arctic ice there was also solid land, a fact that was not known until 1957, and it turned out that the coastline, the mountains, the bays, and the rivers that appeared in infrared photographs taken from space coincided, exactly, with what you see here, drawn by the hand of our friend, the Turkish pirate. There are no mistakes. Piri Reis copied Antarctica from other maps, there's no doubt, but from some maps that must have been astonishingly old, because they reflected this continent, not as it was ten thousand years ago, but as it was before being covered by ice."

I pursed my lips, perplexed, and an eternity passed before I was able to put two words together.

"And of course," I stammered finally, "since the map was discovered in Istanbul in 1929, that eliminates the possibility of a falsification made with the data obtained by satellite in 1957."

"Yes, that's eliminated," Jabba confirmed without stopping his pacing. "Go on, Proxi, there're still a couple things more."

"More?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, but hold your horses… I'm almost finished." She brought the cup to her lips and drank, although her coffee must have been cold. "That damn world map

uses a measuring system called *eight winds*. Don't ask me what it is, because I haven't been able to understand it although I've tried. All I know is that it works by using a compass to center the different parts of the map in twenty-something degree angles or something like that. The thing is that he uses this apparently arcane system, as well as a Greek measurement called a stadium, which is equivalent to 607 feet. Once it has been adapted to modern geographical measurements, the world map is—pay attention," and she touched the index finger of her right hand to the middle of my stunned forehead—"absolutely exact in all its proportions and distances. Although, at first glance, it may seem deformed and unrealistic to you, full of geographical inaccuracies, it turns out that it's as precise as the best of our modern maps, and it reflects perfectly the latitude and longitude of all points on the globe. Latitude has been understood and used since time immemorial, because all it requires is the help of the sun, but longitude couldn't be calculated until the eighteenth century, really, until…" she looked at her notes, "until 1761, that is, because it requires knowledge of spherical trigonometry and geodesic instruments, things that didn't exist until that date. However, Piri Reis, or the old maps he copied from, accurately portrayed the terrestrial meridians, and their calculations were absolutely correct, which clashes with what we know today."

She carefully folded her little paper and put it back in the pocket of her shirt, ending her explanation.

My head was spinning, trying to find some sense to everything. We were flying through some very turbulent skies without a parachute, and we had very little time left before the plane went down and we were dashed to pieces on the ground. How in the hell had Daniel gotten into such a story? What had my brother, my sensible and rigid brother, been doing wandering through this wasteland?

"Do you know why we programmers are such bad lovers?" Jabba asked, sitting down again in front of his empty coffee cup.

"Maybe you're a bad lover," I disagreed, preparing myself to listen with resignation to a new and terrible joke about programmers. But Jabba was already into it.

"Because we're always trying to do the work as fast as possible, and when we're finished, we think we've improved on the previous version."

"No, please, no!" I moaned, throwing myself over the table with a gesture of desperation, which made Proxi crack up.

We were decompressing. The accumulated tension, added to the bewilderment, brought us close to that state in which the unbearable pressure has to be let out by opening the valves. I looked distractedly at my watch and saw that it was a quarter till six in the evening.

"My grandma's about to wake up," I said, with my cheek against the wood.

"And?" Jabba snorted. "Does she bite now or something?"

Proxi kept laughing without reason, as if doing so cleared the fog in her brain.

"Don't be an idiot. It's just that I should already be at the hospital."

"Go, then. We'll keep working in your study."

"What time will you be back?" Proxi asked, crossing her arms and settling into her chair.

“Soon. Really, it’s not necessary for me to be there. Ona, my mother, Clifford, and my grandmother are a compact and well-organized team. But I want to know how Daniel is doing.”

“Well, then,” crooned my grandmother’s voice from the door, making Jabba jump and me stand up suddenly, “come with me, and you can see him and then come back.”

We hadn’t heard her enter, and suddenly she was there, standing and looking at us, with her white hair perfectly coiffed, in her elegant colored robe and her matching slippers.

“Grandma! How did you manage to get up without the system noticing?”

Doña Eulàlia Monturiol went toward the coffee maker with the bearing of a queen.

“But, Arnauet,” my grandmother had called me Arnauet since I was small, “it’s just a common motion detector like I have in my house, for burglars. All you have to do is move slowly.”

Jabba and Proxi couldn’t contain their laughter.

“Well, you must have had to move very slowly!” I protested.

“Not at all, I have it very well figured out. You should increase the sensitivity.” And she smiled, satisfied, while she poured herself to a big cup of coffee with milk which she then put in the microwave. “Hello, Marc. Hello, Lola. Pardon me for not having wished you good afternoon.”

“Don’t worry about it, Eulàlia,” Proxi replied amiably. “You have a beautiful robe. I like it a lot.”

“Really? Well, if you knew how cheap it was!”

“Where did you buy it?”

“In Kuala Lumpur, two years ago.”

Proxi looked at me, enchanted, briefly arching one of her eyebrows.

“So, Grandma,” I broke in, to keep on topic, “you were saying that I should take you to the hospital, stay for a while, and come back.”

“Well, of course,” she agreed, with nod of her feathered curls. “I don’t know what you guys are up to, but, by the looks on your faces, it must be very interesting.”

Proxi opened her mouth, but she only exhaled a soundless puff of air, because the kick I gave her under the table—and that’s considering I was barefoot—cut off the words she was about to say.

“It’s work for the company, Grandma.”

She turned to me, carrying her napkin, her cup of coffee with milk, and her tin of cookies, and I began to shrink under her gaze as she neared the table.

“When will you learn, Arnauet,” she pronounced sharply, sitting down, “that you can’t lie to your grandma.”

“I’m not going to explain anything to you, Grandma!” I warned her, puffing up again.

“Have I asked you to? I’m only repeating what I’ve always told you: Your grandma has x-ray vision.”

“Ah… You got that from some movie, right Eulàlia?” Jabba interrupted, as impulsive as always.

My grandmother laughed while she nibbled a cookie.

“Hey, come on, get out of the kitchen and let me have breakfast in peace!”

But she couldn't contain her laughter, and we heard her cough, choking, while we went down the hall to the studio.

"When I'm with your grandma, Root," Jabba commented, perplexed, "I feel like I'm ten years old again."

"You've got to keep her on a short chain," I concluded. "If you don't keep her in check, she ends up making you dance to whatever beat she wants."

"She's a very dangerous sweet old lady!" Proxi laughed. "But you have her under control, right, Arnau?"

"Well, yes." I acknowledged. "It's been difficult, but yes."

"Clearly… Why don't we go to the garden?"

"What for?" Jabba wanted to know.

"To get a little air, clear our heads."

"We could go down to the game room of Ker-Central and use the simulator for a while. You interested, Root?"

"We're not going to play with the simulator!" Proxi sharply refused. "We already play enough during the week. I need to breathe fresh air and see a little bit of sky. My brain is bogged down."

"You guys go," I said. "I, meanwhile, will shower and get dressed."

"But you're fine like that. I don't see why…"

"Proxi…" Jabba scolded.

"We'll wait for you in the garden."

I left them, smiling, ready to stand under the water for a long time. The monitor in the bathroom insisted on repeatedly showing me my grandmother searching each and every cupboard and drawer in the kitchen. I don't know what in the hell she was doing, but it couldn't be anything good. Jabba and Proxi, for their part, were walking calmly, holding hands, chatting as if nothing worthy of mention had happened in their lives in the past few days. Seeing them, you wouldn't know that they had faced two mysteries of the proportions of the Aymara language and Piri Reis' map. At that moment, I stopped feeling the small darts of hot water, despite the fact that the water pressure was intense.

The whole thing was crazy. All of it. Could it be that we were becoming paranoid? A strange curse written in a language of mathematical design; a mysterious people, the Aymara, who spoke that language, and who seemed to have been the origin of the Incan Empire; a map whose existence should be impossible, drawn by a Turkish pirate, with an enormous and monstrous head over the Andes, which hadn't been discovered yet; a lunatic professor who accused my brother of being a thief; two strange mental illnesses, with only superficial symptoms, which seemed related to the strange curse. Full circle. We were returning to the beginning, sidelining the *quipus*, the *tocapus*, the Yatiri, the cranial deformations, Tiwanaku, the Staff God of Tiwanaku, his head, his pedestal, Sarmiento de Gamboa… That is to say, everything that came after *lawt'ata*. If only Daniel could tell me something! If only my brother could lend me a hand, show me a little light in that darkness! What had he said that first night when Ona and I had stayed with him in the hospital? He had spoken of a language, the original language, of that I was almost sure, but I couldn't remember his words. At that moment, I had thought he was delirious, and I hadn't paid attention. Resting my hands against the mosaic of the shower, I squeezed my eyes

shut and wrinkled my forehead in a vain attempt to pull from my memory those few phrases that had come to seem so important to me, only six days later. It had something to do with the sounds of that language, but what?

While I dried off and got dressed, I kept circling around that elusive memory, brushing it with the tips of my fingers without managing to catch it. And then the phone rang. I examined the screen in my room, and could see the number and the name of the person who was calling me, but I didn't recognize either. I had never heard of Joffre Viladomat something-or-other.

"Ignore the call," I told the system, while I used a shoe horn to put on my sneakers without having to undo the knots and laces. But thirty seconds later, Joffre Viladomat insisted. "Ignore the call," I repeated, and the computer made a busy tone for the second time. But even then, Viladomat didn't give up. I suppose that if the circumstances had been different, I would have ordered a systematic block on all calls coming from that number, but I must have really had my guard down, because, on his third attempt, although I was irritated, I answered. I froze when I heard the unforgettable contralto voice of a completely detestable woman.

"Mr. Queralt…" Why did nature bestow instruments as perfect as that voice on people as vulgar as that professor? "Good afternoon. This is Marta Torrent, the director of your brother's department."

"I remember you perfectly, Dr. Torrent. What do you want?"

I couldn't get over my astonishment.

"I hope you don't mind that Mariona gave me your phone number," she said with perfect modulation.

"What do you want?" I repeated, ignoring her pomposity.

She was silent for a second. "I see that you are annoyed, and honestly, I think you have no reason to be. It is I who should be angry, yet I am calling you."

"Dr. Torrent, please, just tell me what it is you want!"

"Very well… Look, I can't leave the material you showed me yesterday in my office in your hands. You think that I'm trying to steal Daniel's research, but you are very wrong. If we could speak more comfortably…"

"Excuse me, but it seemed to me that you were accusing Daniel of being a thief."

"Only part of the documentation is mine, I recognize it; the other part belongs completely to Daniel, although it is obvious that he obtained it later. This is a very delicate situation, Mr. Queralt; we're speaking of a very important project that has taken many years of research. I would like for you to understand that if just one of the papers you have in your possession gets lost or falls into the wrong hands, it would be a catastrophe for the academic world. You are a programmer, Mr. Queralt, and you cannot imagine, not by a long shot, how important that material is. Return it to me, please."

It was not just her voice that was like a radio announcer's; her manner of expressing herself was, as well. But not even her voice or her expression could hide the urgency that overwhelmed her. The professor was in a hurry to get her hands on the documents.

"Why don't you wait for Daniel to get better?"

"Will he get better?" she asked ironically. "Do you honestly believe that he will get better? Think about it carefully, Mr. Queralt."

Marta Torrent had just crossed the line again and that time, definitively.

“If you want the documents, file a lawsuit!” I spit with rage, pushing the escape key to cut off the call. “Block all calls that come from this number,” I rumbled, “and also all those that come from the owner of the number, whoever it is; those from Marta Torrent and those from the Department of Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Bellaterra.”

I left my room in long strides, asking myself why the hell I had to be involved with people like her. Supposing that Daniel really was a thief, something that I could in no way believe, and supposing that everything that witch said was true, wasn’t there some other way to claim the documents? Did she have to insult my brother, call me at home on a Sunday afternoon and insinuate that Daniel was never going to get well? Who the hell did that woman think she was? Did she have no conscience? I had meant the lawsuit thing very seriously. Only if I received a subpoena would I begin to believe her, and even then, I very much doubted that I would be able to come to even remotely suspect my brother Daniel of being capable of appropriating research materials that did not belong to him. To think! When we were little, whenever he took something from me, he would leave a note! My brother was incapable of stealing anything, of profiting off of anything that was not his, and of that I was completely certain, so the only possible conclusion was that Dr. Torrent had seen something in Daniel’s documents that had interested her a great deal, something for which she was willing to wound, insult, and lie like a scoundrel. She might have been able to convince Ona—her or any other person with less of a strong personality than myself—but the professor had had the bad luck of running into me, and it was going to be very difficult for her to lay claim to my brother’s work. One does not become the director of a university department by having a heart of gold. Only the climbers, the real sharks, are capable of prospering in very competitive environments, and good people, like my brother, tended to be their victims, the steps they had to tread on in order to rise. I had gone to her looking for help, and all I had done was wake up the monster. I should never have brought Daniel’s materials to light, but it was too late to regret it now. Now I had to figure out, as quickly as possible, what the professor had seen in the papers to so awaken her ambition.

On Monday morning I woke up at eight ready to begin a long hard day of work. But I didn’t feel the normal laziness of just any beginning of the week. In fact, almost nothing was the same as before Daniel took ill. That morning, I didn’t have to go down to my office and listen to Núria recite the string of interviews and meetings scheduled for the day, while I took possession of my chair and the system connected me to sources of global economic and stock market information. I didn’t have to hold video conferences with New York, Berlin, or Tokyo, and I didn’t have to meet with expert technicians and programmers of systems, neural networks, genetic algorithms, or diffuse logic. My only obligation was to have a relaxed breakfast in the sun and wait for the arrival of Jabba and Proxi which we had agreed upon for nine o’clock, last night, before they had left for their house, leaving my study a disaster area, to be frank.

My grandmother arrived punctually from the hospital while I was sipping my tea in the garden and enjoying the nascent morning. From the way she stomped, panted, and talked to Magdalena and Sergi as she came inexorably toward where I

was sitting, I guessed that her mood was scrambled and her hard drive was blocked.

She came into the garden like a hurricane, still taking off the thick jacket she liked to wear at night in the hospital. Her annoyed expression changed when she saw me, and she gave me the hint of an affectionate smile, still broken by a series of clipped sighs.

"I should have been satisfied the day I brought your mother into the world!" was the first thing she said while she took a seat at my side and touched her hand to my stubbly cheek by way of a greeting.

"You shouldn't take her seriously, Grandma," I exclaimed while I shook off my laziness, stretching my arms toward the splendidly blue sky. It had been proven that whenever my mother and grandmother spent a couple of days together, World War III started. In this case the beginning of the hostilities had been somewhat postponed because they'd barely seen each other, but in the end, and as was to be expected, the opportunity had presented itself in one of their brief encounters when they were changing shifts. "You know how she is."

"Which is exactly why I say it! Lord, how could I have had such a silly daughter? I realize that her father was a bit harebrained, but he always had his head in the right place. Where in the world did that girl come from? If you only knew how many times I've asked myself that!"

The girl, as she said, had already passed the threshold into her sixties.

"How was last night?" I asked, to change the subject.

My grandmother lowered her gaze to the teapot and sadly straightened the corner of my napkin.

"Daniel was very restless," she replied. "He didn't stop talking."

We remained in silence, watching Sergi walk discreetly by the oleanders.

"Do you want anything?" I asked.

"A glass of hot milk."

"Skimmed?"

"God, no! Might as well drink dirty water! No, whole milk, like always."

I didn't have to bother to go ask for it. The system would transmit the order to Magdalena,wherever she was in the house.

"Well, last night he was very calm," I commented, remembering my brief visit.

"Last night, yes," she agreed, fluffing her flattened hair with a tired gesture, "I don't know what happened to him after that, but we couldn't make him sleep, not even with those pills they give him. It was horrible."

"Did he move around?" I wanted to know, hoping.

"No, no, he didn't move around," my grandmother murmured sadly. "He was obsessed with his burial. He wanted us to shroud him and bury him. It was a good thing that when I explained to him that those things aren't done anymore and that now the dead are burned, he didn't keep insisting. Why is it that he has such a strange mania?"

"It's Cotard's syndrome, Grandma."

She made a strange grimace with her mouth and looked at me, rejecting my words, shaking her head slowly.

"Tell me something, Arnauet…" she hesitated. "That thing that Lola, Marc, and you are doing, it has to do with Daniel, right?"

A ray of sun moved slowly toward my cup, and suddenly jumped from there to my eyes with a flash. Narrowing my eyelids, I nodded. She sighed again.

"Would it do any good for me to tell you what your brother says at night, or would that be silly?"

What a clever, intuitive woman! She always managed to surprise me. I smiled as I pushed the hair out of my face.

"Tell me, genius." And I leaned over to give her an extravagant kiss on the forehead. She batted at the air to push me away, but didn't even graze me.

"I'll tell you on the condition that you let me smoke a cigarette, without making my life difficult."

"Grandma, please!" I protested. "At your age, you shouldn't be doing those things!"

"At my age is exactly when I can do them!"

And without saying another word, she took out a beautiful leather cigarette case and pulled out a cigarette with a gold-colored filter.

"Young people today don't have any idea of what's good."

"Don't preach to me."

"Am I talking about religion? I'm talking about enjoyment! Besides, if you're going to pester me, I'm going to my room for some peace. I won't tell you anything about what Daniel says."

I swallowed my protests, and, with my forehead crinkled to make my displeasure clear, I watched her exhale the first cloud of smoke. The weird thing was that she had started smoking very late in life, around sixty, influenced by her crazy friends, and never was there a meal or celebration at which she didn't take out her cigarette case at the end.

"Mariona has explained to me that these weird words he says are in a language he was working on for the university," she began, leaning back in the wicker chair. "Quechua, she said, or Aymara. I'm not sure. Don't ask me to repeat them to you because I wouldn't be able to. But he also talks a lot about a chamber that's beneath a pyramid, especially when he's most nervous. Then he talks about that chamber and says the original language is hidden there."

I sat up suddenly, resting my elbows on the table, and stared at her. "And what does he say about that original language?"

My grandmother seemed surprised by my reaction, but quickly lost her gaze again in the bushes surrounding us.

"He talks a lot about that, but the truth is, I thought it was nonsense. Anyway, what he keeps repeating is that the original language is made of strange sounds that have natural properties, or something like that." She flared her nostrils and pressed her lips together, trying to discreetly swallow a yawn. "He also says that those sounds are in the chamber, that the chamber is beneath a pyramid, and I think I understood, although I'm not sure, that the pyramid has a door on top." She sighed bleakly. "How sad, my God! My poor grandson Dani! Do you think he will get better?"

Magdalena appeared in the doorway that opened into the living room, carrying a tray with a glass of milk on a saucer. Behind her, framing her like a giant shadow, came Jabba with Proxi at his side dressed in some stretchy jeans that made her long legs seem much more endless and slender. Both wore their hair strangely

polished, as if they had poured gallons of gel onto it, and since Jabba's was very red and Proxi's very black, the contrast was, at the very least, odd.

"Good morning, good morning!" exclaimed Jabba, dropping, abundant and expansive, into one of the wicker chairs, which creaked as if it were going to break. Good thing it was sturdy and had good thick canvas cushions. "It's great not to have to go to work!"

Proxi situated herself between my grandmother and me, with her back to the sun, without taking her astonished gaze off the cigarette my grandmother was smoking, from which the smoke trailed in soft spirals.

"Are you just getting back from the hospital, Eulàlia?" she asked her.

My grandmother smiled faintly. "Just now, but if you don't mind, I'm going to sleep." She went about the business of slowly getting to her feet, as if her body weighed a ton. "I know it's very rude of me to leave when you've just arrived, but I'm very tired. Daniel has had a bad night. You tell them, okay, Arnauet?"

"Don't worry, Grandma. Sleep well."

"Sleep well, Eulàlia," Proxi said.

"Good night, kids," muttered my sleepy ancestor, taking the glass of milk and the rest of her dose of tar and nicotine with her.

"Do you want breakfast?" I asked them, once my grandmother had disappeared inside the house.

"No thanks, Root. We've already eaten." Proxi explained. "Besides, you wouldn't have enough food to offer this troglodyte. He eats everything in the morning."

"Daniel had a bad night?" Jabba asked, wanting to quickly change to subject. The thick layer of lipids that kept him warm was something very intimate to him. In fact, his older brother had started to call him "Jabba" after having watched *Star Wars* and seen the enormous flabby worm of the same name that ran the intergalactic mafia and chased Harrison Ford (Han Solo) to make him pay the money he owed.

"He's been very restless," I explained, turning my seat until it was facing the sun. It was very pleasant to feel it like that, in the garden at home, without being in a hurry to go downstairs to the office. "But he hasn't recovered his ability to move. But my grandmother told me some of the things he mumbles in his delirium, and it seems to me that my brother's brain isn't as lost as everyone thinks."

"What things are those?" Proxi asked, interested.

"He talks about the original language."

"What?!" Jabba shouted, pulling his chair over next to me. "About the original language, about Aymara?"

"No, he doesn't mention Aymara. He only claims that there's an original language made up of natural sounds. The first night he was in the hospital, he said something similar in front of Ona and me, but until now, I haven't been able to remember his words. Daniel literally said that there was a primeval language whose sounds where inherent in nature and living beings and objects."

"Aymara?" insisted the stout mafia worm.

"No, I told you he doesn't say anything about Aymara!" I shouted, annoyed.

"Ok! But I'm sure he means Aymara."

"And what else does he talk about?"

“Are you ready for this? Okay, well, my grandma says that Daniel keeps repeating that those sounds are hidden in a chamber, that the chamber is beneath a pyramid, and that the pyramid has a door on top.”

Such a silence fell in the garden that you could almost hear, despite the protecting screens, the hushed noise of the traffic coming up from the street. As if driven by a common impulse that materialized itself in significant looks, we stood at the same time, without saying a word, and went to my study. There was a picture drawn by my brother that we should take a look at, one which depicted a stepped pyramid with three levels, a horned serpent in the middle, and the word “Chamber” written beneath it. I already knew, because I had seen it in Dr. Torrent’s office, that that pyramid was none other than the pedestal on which stood the Staff God of the Gate of the Sun, in Tiwanaku, which meant that we already knew exactly where the chamber with the serpent inside the pyramid was; the only thing wrong was that the door wasn’t at the tip. Of course, it could be a symbolic drawing, something like a map; in which case, the aforementioned pyramid could be found beneath the Gate of the Sun.

“Well…” Proxi murmured under her breath, after examining the sketch, “I think the pieces keep coming together. We should get through the business of the chronicles before noon.”

We obeyed like lambs. While I picked back up the three tomes of *The New Chronicle and Good Government*, Jabba took charge of the two impressive volumes of the *Royal Commentaries of Peru,* and Proxi of *The Chronicle of Peru* by Pedro de Cieza de León, and *Narrative of the Incas*, by Juan de Betanzos. They sat in a couple of ample armchairs and I in my usual place of work in front of the desk. At that moment, it might seem stupid to have connected so many computers, because even though they were on all they were doing was waving the logo of Ker-Central in unison, but what other recourse could have occurred to a bunch of computer programmers preparing themselves for hard work, facing outlandish and unfamiliar subjects? At times I thought that it was not blood that ran through my veins, but a stream of bits (smalls units of information similar to our neurons) and that my physical material was made up of lines of code. I always said jokingly that my body was the hardware, my mind the software, and my sensory organs the peripherals that let information in and out. Had there ever existed a world without computers? What were people like before being able to connect to each other through the internet? Did they survive in the Middle Ages without cell phones? Didn’t the Inca have cable or DVDs? How strange the past was! Especially because those people hadn’t been so different from us. Nevertheless, despite our technological advances, the world that luck had put us in was very absurd, and our era was so plagued by senselessness—terrorist attacks, wars, political lies, pollution, exploitation, religious fanatics, etc.—that people were no longer capable of believing that extraordinary things could happen to them. Well, there we were to demonstrate that yes, they really did happen, and what else could we do but let ourselves be pulled along by them?

I spent all morning looking at Guamán’s chronicle, page after page, and absorbing myself in the drawings, looking, with help from the index, for the smallest reference to the Colla, the Aymara, and Tiwanaku (which was written in that edition as Tiauanaco, a name which I added to the collection: Tiahuanaku,

Tiahuanacu, Tihuanaku, Tiaguanacu y Tiahuanaco), but I didn't find any more phrases underlined by my brother or any more significant information, although I did find many oddities that had nothing to do with our research: the detailed description of the tortures and punishments imposed on the Indians by the governors or by the Church were worthy of the best horror movie, and the precipitous social and racial division brought on by the appearance of all possible combinations of Spanish, Indians, and "Blacks from Guinea" was incredible.

But if I hadn't found anything really useful, Proxi got through Juan de Betanzos empty handed in less than half an hour, and Jabba hardly had more luck with Garcilaso. The Inca de la Vega seemed to be confusing the Aymara with another, very different people, located in a place called Apurímac, very far from the Collao, from Lake Titicaca, and from the Colla; he only mentioned them in reference to the defeats they suffered at the hands of the Inca or to express his pious shock at how very free their women were to do what they liked with their bodies before they married. The information he gave about Tiwanaku only dealt with the buildings and the design of the place; he limited himself to talking about the megalithic dimensions of the blocks of stone they used: "stones of an extraordinary bigness; and what is most wonderful to consider, is how or in what manner they were brought thither by force of Men, Who had not yet attained to the knowledge of Engines fit for such a work, and from what place they were brought, there being no Rocks or Quarries but such as are at a far distance from thence… and what is more strange, there are in diverse places great Portals of Stone, and many of them whole and perfect, made of one single and entire Stone…which pedestals, as well as the Arches of the Portals, were all of one single Stone: And then we may consider how great those Stones were before they were shaped, and what tools of Iron were requisite for such a labor." Then, with all the nonchalance in the world, he admitted to having copied the information from Pedro de Cieza de León's Chronicle, which Proxi was working on at that moment. The only odd fact—or illuminating, depending on how you looked at it—that Jabba found in Garcilaso was a phrase in parentheses that came up at the beginning of book VII in which the author, descendant of the *Orejones* on his mother's side, explained that the Inca had ordered that all the inhabitants of the Empire be forced to learn the "general language"—in other words, Quechua—to which purpose they put teachers in every province. Then, just like that, he states: "(Besides which the *Incas* had a Court-language appropriated to themselves, which being esteemed the holy and divine Speech, was not to be profaned by vulgar Tongues.)"

"I could swear," murmured Jabba, pensive, "that we've already read something about this."

"Well, of course," I agreed, and Proxi nodded. "You yourself told me that when you were looking for information on the Aymara and their language, you found a document that said the language the Yatiri used to cure illnesses was the secret language the *Orejones* spoke amongst themselves."

"Ah, of course!" he said, hitting himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. "I'm such an idiot! The Yatiri!"

"I'm dead because the Yatiri have punished me," my brother's voice repeated at that moment inside my head. And, all at once, without really understanding how, I made a shocking association of ideas at the speed of light: The Yatiri, those

Aymara of noble lineage, direct descendants of the Tiwanakan culture, revered by the Inca and considered by their own people to be great sages and philosophers, were also, curiously, strange doctors who cured with words, like witches, since they apparently possessed a secret magic language that they shared with the *Orejones*, those of solar blood and all that. If they cured with words, why couldn't they also cause illness with words? And if by chance the divine language that Garcilaso spoke of was none other than Aymara, the perfect mathematical language, the original language, whose sounds came from the very nature of beings and things? But why would the Yatiri punish Daniel?

"The pieces keep coming together one after another," observed Proxi again, not having noticed my brief absence. "Do you know what I think? I think everything we're finding points at only two things: Tiwanaku and the Yatiri. Let me tell you the gist of what Cieza de León says."

But my brain kept on working in the background: Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa traveled around Peru from 1570 to 1575, writing his reports from the General Visit, and sometime during those five years, he met the Yatiri in Tiwanaku—although the city was already only a collection of ruins—and drew a map which included a path that began in Tiwanaku and ended in the jungle, leading to some surely important place. And, just when he had finished the map, the Inquisition accused him of practicing witchcraft and locked him up in the secret jails of the Holy Office in Lima for formulating an ink that could provoke any kind of feeling in whoever read what was written with it.

"They named Cienza Official Chronicler of the Indies in 1548," Proxi explained, by way of an introduction, resting the soles of her shoes on the edge of the old rattan table, "and after that, he dedicated himself to visiting the most important places in Peru and recording every last detail of everything he saw and heard."

"Does he also tell how liberal Colla women were before marriage?" I asked sarcastically.

"That too," Proxi admitted without enthusiasm. "And that's even though he wasn't a priest. Good thing I was born in this era!" she exclaimed loudly. "I think I'd die if I had to put up with so much macho reactionary BS."

"Okay, and what else does he say about the Colla?" Jabba quickly broke in, before the curses turned in his direction.

"Well, that they deformed their heads, for example."

"Really?" That subject interested me very much.

"Listen: 'These people wear woolen caps called *chullos* on their heads. Their heads are very long, and flattened behind, without occiput, because they are pressed and forced into what shape they choose during childhood.'"

"The hat is called a *chullo*!" I exclaimed, beaming.

"What's *occiput?*" Jabba wanted to know.

"The back part of the head," Proxi explained.

"There's something that doesn't line up," I said. "Why does he say that all the Colla shaped their heads starting at a young age? The professor told me that the cranial deformation was only used by the upper classes, as a sign of distinction."

"Everyone says something different about that," grumbled the mercenary. "Every archaeologist and every anthropologist has his or her own different version of the facts, and so, with all that hodgepodge, historians put together a kind of

general theory that doesn't address certain sorts of questions, to keep from getting boxed in."

"And why don't they agree?" Jabba protested. "Our life would be easier!"

"You can't expect pears from an elm, Marc," I declared. "If you want, I'll tell you again about all the bad blood they've stirred up with the Miccinelli documents."

"No, thanks," he made himself answer, looking terrorized. "Proxi, quick, go on with what you were saying about Cieza."

"Let's see, where was I… Here. Look, I'll give you a summary, and then we can really delve into Tiwanaku, all right? Okay, the Colla told Cieza de León they were descended from a very ancient civilization, from before the flood, but that they didn't know much about those ancestors. They assured him they had been a very large nation, who, before the Inca, had large temples and had really venerated their priests, but then they abandoned their old gods and worshiped Viracocha, who one day came out of the great Lake Titicaca to create the sun and end the darkness the world had been plunged into after the flood. Like the Egyptians, they venerated and mummified their dead, and they raised important stone edifices called *chullpas*."

"And what does he say about Tiwanaku?" I asked, seeing that Proxi had finished her summary.

She lowered her eyes to the book, flipped a couple of pages back and forth, looking for something and when she found it, smoothed out the pages with the palm of her hand and began to read:

"'There are other things to be said concerning Tiahuanaco, which I pass over, concluding with a statement of my belief that this ruin is the most ancient in all Peru. It is asserted that these edifices were commenced before the time of the Yncas, and I have heard some Indians affirm that the Yncas built their grand edifices at Cuzco on the plan which they had observed at the wall near these ruins.'"

"How he talks! I don't understand a thing!"

"Shut up Jabba! Keep reading, Proxi, please."

"'I asked the natives, in presence of Juan de Varagas (who holds them in *encomienda*), whether these edifices were built in the time of the Yncas, and they laughed at the question, affirming that they were made before the Yncas ever reigned, but that they could not say who made them. They added that they had heard from their fathers that all we saw was done in one night.'"

"What in the world could he have meant?" roared Jabba, who shifted in his chair like a beast in its cage.

"That the Colla claimed Tiwanaku was constructed long before the arrival of the Inca and that, according to their ancestors, all the buildings were raised in one night."

"Cieza," Proxi, imperturbable, continued, "also gives a detailed description of the ruins exactly as he saw them on his visit."

"Do you have some map of Tiwanaku, Root?"

"I haven't needed one until now."

"Well, if we have to locate the Gate of the Sun and understand what Cieza says, we should download one from the internet."

"Later we will," I told him without moving. "It's time to eat."

His face lit up, and he tried to jump from the chair as if he were starving to death, but the short arpeggio accompanying the message that appeared on the screens cut off his attempt.

After almost four days of incessant searching at top potency, the system had just finished completing the password for Daniel's computer.

If someone had told me that my brother would someday be the president of the United States, I wouldn't have believed them. If they had sworn it, certified it, and shown me documents accrediting such a success, in the end I would have had to accept it, of course, but I would have maintained my reservations until the day he took office, and even then I would have thought it was a strange dream that I would wake up from.

Well, that's exactly what I felt when I had before my eyes the password chosen by my brother to protect his computer:

(–`Dån¥ëL´ –)

Twelve characters, no more no less, double the normal number, and, what's more, the most unpredictable and impossible to guess. No one used that kind of password, no one had that much imagination—or that much prudence—no one was, in short, that recherché, especially because few applications allowed you to use chains that long, much less typographical symbols that peculiar. Only very sophisticated programs or flimsy little programs written by mediocre hackers, allowed such cryptographic exhibitionism, but, even more than the fact that the program allowed it, what impressed me was that Daniel had come up with that fantastical and technologically prudent display so unlike him. Live and learn…

Jabba and Proxi couldn't believe their eyes. Both expressed, first, their great astonishment, and second, their absolute certainty that Daniel had not invented that password.

"No offense, Root," Proxi told me, like an expert on the subject, dropping a hand on my shoulder, "but your brother doesn't have the computer skills necessary to be familiar with these ASCII passwords.**(2-8)** You know, I'd bet my life he copied it from somewhere, and I'm sure I'd still be alive in the morning."

"Either way, it's the same," I stammered, still stunned by the discovery.

"Yes, of course. That's the least important thing right now," Jabba agreed, hoisting up his pants as far as his belly allowed. "What we have to do now is save a security copy of the password and go eat."

Of course, we didn't pay him the least bit of attention, so he stayed there, proclaiming his hunger to the desert while Proxi and I delved into the guts of the laptop with a strange feeling of insecurity as to what awaited us there. Once I had control of the computer, I skimmed the contents of the hard drive, and what got my attention was the large quantity of storage that was occupied by the few folders in the root directory, but the mystery was solved when I found inside those folders the subdirectories infinitely split with innumerable image files and giant applications (one of which was the password barrier) that we quickly moved to the central computer, so that we could tear into them with six hands from different terminals.

When any computer program is used, it's generally run in its executable form which is to say, translated to the cold binary language that the computer employs: long series of ones and zeros whose meaning is impossible for a human being to understand. To accomplish this, intermediate languages are used, languages that, in the form of algebraic code, tell the computer what the programmer wants it to do. In that code there are usually comments and explanations inserted that the processor ignores when it's time to complete a task and that serve to help other programmers understand the function of the application and to facilitate the work of revision. So, when we had the password program in front of us, we understood that we were looking at something completely unexpected.

A computer program has many similarities to a piece of music, a book, a movie, or a gourmet dish. Its structure, its rhythm, its style, and its ingredients allow the author behind it to be identified, or at least understood. A hacker is none other than a person who practices computer programming with a certain type of aesthetic passion and who identifies with a certain kind of culture that can't just be reduced to a way of being, dressing, or living, but also to a special way of seeing code, of understanding the beauty of its composition and the perfection of its function. For a program's code to possess this beauty, it only has to fulfill two elemental rules: simplicity and clarity. If you can make the computer execute an order with only one instruction, why use a hundred, or a thousand? If you can find a brilliant and clean solution to a concrete problem, why copy bits of code from other applications and cobble them together with patches? If you can classify the functions one after the other in a clear way, why complicate the code with jumps and turns that only serve to slow down its functioning?

Regardless, what we had in front of us was the dirty work of one or several inexpert programmers who had taken scissors to other applications and had stuck thousands of lines of useless code into a program that, almost by miracle, worked well. It looked like one of those high school papers that were written by copying entire pages from books and encyclopedias until they rendered a legible pastiche adorned with a lavish conclusion.

"What the hell is this junk?" Jabba cried, shocked.

"Have you seen this code's comments before?" Proxi asked, touching her screen with her index finger.

"It seems familiar…" I muttered, biting my lips. "It's very familiar. I've seen this before."

"Me too," the mercenary confirmed, punching the cursor to scroll up and down quickly.

"I could swear that it comes from the East," I ventured. "Pakistan, India, the Philippines…"

"Philippines," Proxi said without any hesitation. "From AMA Computer University, in Manila."

"Remind me to give you a raise."

"When, exactly, do you want me to remind you?"

"It was just an expression."

"No, no, none of that!" Jabba wasn't going to let the opportunity pass. "I heard what you said."

“Fine, whatever, okay!” I babbled, turning my seat to face them. “We’ll talk about it when we finish with this business, really. Now, give me more information on the programmers, Proxi.”

“Students from the last IT class. AMA Computer University is the most prestigious in the Philippines; it’s located in the financial district of Makati, and from its classrooms have come authentic geniuses like the deplorable Onel de Guzmán, author of the virus “I Love You,” that infected forty-five million computers all over the world and that had me working like crazy for a month to keep our systems from getting infected. These kids program to pay for their school or to get work in the West. They’re clever, they’re poor, and they have access to the internet. They need to make money and get noticed.”

“And how did Daniel get a program like this?”

“I’ve done a search on the code’s comments, looking for clues.” Jabba announced, “but there’s nothing, and I really doubt it’s published in some computer magazine because they tend to be very careful about what they take. The name of the program doesn’t say much either: *JoviKey*... Maybe *Jovi’s Key?* Impossible to know. The only thing that occurs to me is that Daniel could have found it on the internet, but that seems unlikely to me because the programs they put on the internet for free tend to have a copyright, and this one doesn’t.”

“And that’s not normal,” Proxi commented, lifting her finger in the air like a Christ Pantocrator.

“No, no, it’s not,” I admitted, perplexed.

Unwillingly, around three in the afternoon we took a break to eat on the terrace, but within a half hour we had returned to the office to continue weeding through the content of the laptop. Magdalena brought us our tea and coffee in the study, and we passed the afternoon in a blur, opening applications, studying them, and examining photographs and texts.

And there everything was. We had not been wrong. We had followed precisely in Daniel’s footprints, reproducing in one intense and difficult week what he, completely alone, had researched for six months. But his efforts had been worth it, because the discoveries we found in the stored documents were really impressive. He had done a brilliant job, an immense undertaking, so it wasn’t strange that he had ended up exhausted and with his nerves shattered.

According to what we deduced from his chaotic notes and sketches, my intelligent brother, while working on the Quechua *quipu* from the Miccinelli Documents that Marta Torrent had given him, had run into a million and one large obstacles that convinced him that the language normally used to write with knots was not pure Quechua. Researching, he discovered in Garcilaso de la Vega a reference to the secret language of the *Orejones* which, although it had influences and borrowings from Quechua, turned out to be basically Aymara. Starting at that moment—and as we three would later on—he discovered everything that was strange about that language, so he abandoned the cords to concentrate on the *tocapus*, the little squares featured in textile designs, since his reading of Guamán Poma and the other chronologists led him to believe that this was the writing system of the “Sacred Tongue,” as he called it. He studied hard, and the more he learned, the more sure he was that the whole thing encompassed an ancient mystery related to the power of words. He discovered the Yatiri, discovered

Tiwanaku, and, to our surprise, discovered a strange veneration of heads on the part of the Aymara, which he connected to the aforementioned power of words. Which led him to dedicate himself to collecting photographs of deformed skulls, and is why Piri Reis' map had got his attention. Daniel supposed that, in ancient times, perhaps several millennia BC, the Aymara (or Colla, or Pukara) had worshiped some god that looked like the big-headed Humpty Dumpty; and so he had set out to uncover the age of the map in order to discover at what moment in history the Aymara had developed their devotion to a megalocephalic god which he identified with a later and more humanized Staff God even though he wasn't sure that that representation really symbolized a god, as everyone said, much less Viracocha, who he claimed was an Incan invention created very close to the time the Spanish arrived.

He must have made numerous attempts to interpret the texts written in the *tocapus*, because there were hundreds of scanned pictures of textiles and ceramic objects with that decoration. He had desperately collected more and more examples, looking for the key that would allow him to confirm that those geometrical designs really were a writing system. The subdirectories with those digital pictures were interminable, and the system they were filed under seemed not to make the least bit of sense, since their names were made of long strings of non-consecutive characters.

But then we found the computer program that finally revealed the key to him. It was called "JoviLoom" (maybe "Jovi's Loom?") and, like its twin, "JoviKey," it lacked a copyright, and was made of millions of instructions, obviously stolen, and on top of that, it was badly structured and even more badly linked together; although, again and unexpectedly, the monstrosity worked, and invaded, all by itself, almost the whole hard drive. We would have needed a few more heads and several weeks of work to be able to examine the whole thing. However, with the investigation that we did we had enough, and our first and obvious conclusion was that those Filipino hackers were admirers of Bon Jovi, the famous hard rock band from New Jersey.

"JoviLoom" was basically a data-base management program. So far, completely normal. Also unremarkable was that it managed images rather than sequences of information, because there were hundreds of programs that did the same thing. Again, all in order. The strange thing was that upon opening it two vertical windows came up next to each other; the one on the left looked at first like a list of samples of more than two hundred little *tocapus* arranged in rows of three, which could be selected one by one with the cursor and dragged to the window on the left, to reproduce the design in any material. Then, after confirming that you'd finished "weaving" the text you wanted, the program converted the image into a continuous line of *tocapus*, and searched this string looking for identical chains. If it found two that were the same, it separated the line into pieces, starting with the first letter (or *tocapu*) in the chain (or word) found and restarted the search beginning with the second *tocapu* of the design. What "JoviLoom" was doing, in short, was something similar to what was done in that game called alphabet soup, looking for sequential coincidences, be they vertical, diagonal, or upside-down. So, for example, in a rectangular cape decorated with a certain number of *tocapus*, innumerable combinations and permutations could be extracted, giving a series of

matrices as a final result (just like in the game) that encompassed the supposed words that it found and that "JoviLoom" relocated and separated, according to a logical order based on their original placement. Once the text was composed in this way, meaning once it was adapted to the Latin grammatical form, all that was left was to translate it, but "JoviLoom" didn't do that; it limited itself to generously offering a chaotic version made up of Aymara roots and suffixes in apparent tumult. Apparently, one single *tocapu* could represent a letter (only consonants, incidentally) or a syllable of two, three, or even four letters, or even a whole word, from which we deduced that each of them could have a symbolic meaning, representing a concept or thing, and a phonetic meaning, representing a sound. But "JoviLoom" also sometimes put together two or three *tocapus* when it was supposed to offer one suffix or root.

"It seems to me," Jabba began, very invested in his role, "that they must be compound words, like *kickoff* or *milestone*."

"Stop thinking so hard, smart-ass!" Proxi ordered.

If we wanted, "JoviLoom" also offered a printed version of the result, but, given what we knew about Aymara, it was all the same to us.

"And if this absurd handful of consonants isn't Aymara?" I asked, suddenly alarmed.

"And what the hell else would it be?" Jabba replied.

But after that, doubt fell on us in the form of a heavy silence. We were aware that we were trapped, because we didn't have any way of confirming whether or not that gibberish without vowels corresponded with the language of the Colla. And at that inopportune moment, my grandmother had the idea of coming in to say goodbye before heading to the hospital, so the poor thing left without anyone bothering to acknowledge her in any way other than grunting at her.

Fortunately, a little while later, we found, in the files stored in one of the program folders, a bunch of alphabet soups already divided and, next to them in text files with the same name, their version in Latin characters, made up of words which had been reconstructed and completed by Daniel, and to our surprise, the resulting writing was indeed Aymara. Of course, these reconstructions were still pure gobbledygook to us, but at least now we could look up some terms in the dictionaries by Ludovico Bertonio and Diego Torres Rubio, and understand what they meant. Furthermore, some of those files were also translated by my brother, but, considering their content (for example, "*mayan marcapa hiuirinacan ucanpuni cuna huchasa camachisi,*" or the equivalent "from the dead man in his village the mortals in that always some sin is realized"), we decided that we were the ones who had arrived at an impasse that day, especially since night had fallen and Clifford and my mother had been waiting for an hour for us to get there so they could have dinner.

However, despite the fact that the day's work had been extremely fruitful, we made the most spectacular discovery the day after, on Tuesday, shortly after beginning our work. Almost by coincidence, we came across a very large document entitled "Tiwanaku.doc" in Daniel's computer, filed incomprehensibly in one of the packed subdirectories of images, and it did not surprise us to discover that it was a strange collection of translations of Aymara texts, the originals of which, we deduced, must be in the vast photographic collection of textiles and ceramics. The

fragments were of different sizes, some very long and others small, only one or two lines long, but all of them spoke of a mystic and sacred place called Taipikala, so at first we didn't understand why in the world the file was named Tiwanaku. Taipikala, according to Daniel, meant "stone in the center" or "central stone," and there, in Taipikala, the first human being had been born, the son of a goddess, Oryana, who had come from the sky and of some kind of earthly animal. After giving birth to seventy children thereby completely fulfilling her strange mission, the goddess left, returning to the depths of the Universe from which she had come. But her numerous descendants—apparently, giants who lived for hundreds of years—constructed Taipikala in her honor and continued to worship her there for millennia until a terrible cataclysm (so large it made the sky, the sun, and the stars disappear), and afterwards a flood that drowned the "central stone" and almost the entire population in water, ended forever the race of giants, whose sickly and weakened descendants began to grow less tall with each successive generation, and to die sooner. But since they preserved the teachings of Oryana, and knew how to use the sounds of nature and to speak the sacred language, they continued to be Yatiri.

I think it was at that point that we began to understand how it all connected. If we cut through the myth and kept certain significant facts, the legend collected in dispersed fragments of *tocapus* ended up confirming what we had discovered on our own. We also accepted that Taipikala had all the features necessary to be Tiwanaku, and we further corroborated that with the information that came next.

A long time after the flood, Willka, the sun, reappeared at last, coming out of the darkness from a point in the center of the great lake called Kotamama (Titicaca?) next to Taipikala. There he was seen for the first time, and the exhausted—and probably freezing—human beings, fearful that he could disappear again, worshiped him in all possible ways, offering him ceremonies and sacrifices of all kinds imaginable. The city of Taipikala was reborn slowly from its ashes, under the rule of the wisest Yatiri, called Capacas, who made the worship of the sun the central axis of their new and fearful religion. Willka couldn't disappear again; the continuity of humanity depended on it. If Willka left again, they would die, and with them, as they had been about to find out, nature in its entirety. So the sun became a god and Taipikala his city-sanctuary. There, with much ceremony, they tied Willka to the stone of solstices, the so-called "stone to bind the sun," with a long thick gold chain that fastened him to space-time. Despite all that, every once in a while the sun got loose from the chain and disappeared, and terror invaded the inhabitants of Taipikala. But the Capacas would again fasten him to the stone and prevent him from leaving. They didn't forget Oryana, but she wasn't there anymore, and Willka was, practically and immediately, much more important and necessary. To fill the role of important and necessary, they also had Thunupa, another new god, born of the fear that symbolized the power of water and of the lightning that announced a storm. Thunupa wasn't as significant as Willka, but they complemented each other in the task of preventing a new disaster. Moreover, after the flood, the rainy seasons had changed in a strange way, and the past abundance of crops had not returned. Willka and Thunupa, the sun and the water, were the fundamental gods of the pantheon of Taipikala.

The Yatiri became the depositories and guardians of the ancient wisdom, and with that they soon found themselves at the summit of social and religious power. The world had changed a lot; even Lake Kotamama, which used to come up to the docks of Taipikala's port, now was a considerable distance away; but they still had the capacity to heal illnesses and keep the sun in the sky day after day. Soon they made up a separate caste: They spoke their own language, studied the heavens in detail, had the power to predict events, and taught how to move water from the great lake to the distant crops in order to reap large harvests, despite the cold which had plagued the region since the flood. The most sacred place in Taipikala was the Pyramid of the Traveler, a place separate from the other buildings, in which were kept some great plates of gold on whose smooth surfaces was written, so that it never would be forgotten, the memory of the creation of the world, the arrival of Oryana, the history of the giants, the flood, the rebirth of humanity after the return of the sun, and everything the Yatiri knew about the Universe and about life. The Pyramid of the Traveler also contained important drawings showing the heavens and the Earth before and after the cataclysm as well as the very body of the traveler and his supplies for traveling the worlds awaiting him in the great beyond until his return. All this was thought, apparently, to help a later Humanity in case another catastrophe were to occur.

Although reading all those Aymaran legends was very entertaining, we had to recognize that they were only fables for children and that they didn't give us any really interesting information. Many fragments of text among those carefully collected by my brother praised the wisdom, the valor, and the extraordinary powers of the Yatiri and their Capacas; but, given that all the information came from textiles and ceramics dating from much later, it was obvious that it all had to have been colored by myth and by the beauty lent by nostalgia, so it wasn't any help to us. True, the Yatiri did a lot of things, but so what? Good for them. Period.

But when Proxi was already beginning to mutter curses against Taipikala, and Jabba had gone off to the kitchen in search of something to eat, there appeared, at last, the first really useful fragment: The Yatiri, priests of Willka and direct descendants of the giant offspring of Oryana, possessed a sacred blood that could not be mixed and were therefore required to reproduce only amongst themselves.

"Damn, that's good news!" Proxi exclaimed, filled with sudden satisfaction. "The Yatiri caste wasn't only men!"

"Clearly there were women," Jabba accepted, as he worked on devouring a bag of cookies. "But until now, no document has mentioned it."

"That's always your mistake!" And Proxi pointed her finger accusingly as both of us. "You take it for granted that words that aren't gender-specific only refer to men."

"That's not true," I snapped. "It's because Daniel puts the plural masculine article in front of 'Yatiri.'"

"And what's Daniel?" she growled, scornful. "Another man! It never fails. Do you remember, Jabba, what we read about the use of gender when we were looking for information on the Aymara?"

Jabba nodded with his mouth full, without stopping his frenetic chewing. She continued:

“In this perfect tongue, there exists no grammatical difference for the gender of people. There is no ‘she’ or ‘he,’ nor ‘her’ or ‘him,’ nor ‘his’ or ‘hers.’”

“It’s… the same,” Jabba mumbled, spitting particles of mashed up cookie into the air.

“Adjectives don’t have gender either,” Proxi continued. “There’s no way of differentiating between *new* or *pretty* for a woman or a man.”

“It’s… the same word.”

“Exactly! So the word *Yatiri* could refer to men, or it could just as well refer to women.”

“Even so,” I dared to comment, even at the risk of dying in the attempt, “it’s not what matters right now. Okay, there were women among the Yatiri, but what really is interesting to me is that business about sacred blood that couldn’t be mixed. Don’t you remember the *Orejones*?”

Jabba, who had his mouth full, almost choked when he tried to reply. After clearing his throat a few times, pounding his chest with his hand, and setting the bag of cookies on the table to distance himself from temptation, he said, frowning:

“But, haven’t you noticed that it’s the same story you told me about Viracocha, but without Viracocha? All that about the two human races, the one of giants, that he destroyed with columns of fire and with the flood, and the other, that the Inca were descended from. The legends coincide down to the thing about the sun. Didn’t you say that Viracocha made it come out of Lake Titicaca to illuminate the sky after the flood?”

I let out a curse, censuring my lack of reflexes. Jabba was right again and I was late arriving at the conclusion, but I hid it by looking at the laptop screen, as if it were surprise that had loosened my tongue.

While both of us continued our reading, Proxi went to work on another of the nearby computers. I saw her working with different search engines, while the story my brother had put together with his selection of texts written with *tocapus* moved forward. We didn’t ask her what she was doing, because when she found what she was looking for, she would tell us.

At some point in history, continued the chronicle woven by Daniel, there was a spectacular earthquake on the Altiplano, which took the lives of hundreds of people and destroyed the most important buildings of Taipikala, already weakened by time and by the ancient cataclysm and the flood following it. The destruction was complete. Given the magnitude of the disaster some important decisions had to be made which caused a great quarrel among the governing Capacas. The long poem or song recounting the event—almost two pages of verses, with apt and repetitive refrains—didn’t explain the reasons for the altercation but remembered how painful the clash had been and how worthy and honorable the factions that took part in it. The fight ended with the exodus from the city of a large group of Capacas, Yatiri, and peasants, who went north over the mountains. At last, after a long time, they arrived at a rich and sunny valley, and the Capacas decided that it was a the right place to found a second Taipikala, which they named Cusco, the “belly-button of the world,” to give it a similar meaning to “the central stone.” But things didn’t work out as they had predicted and the need to go to war constantly with neighboring villages ended up causing the rise of a military leader: the Yatiri Manco Capaca, also known as Manco Capac. None other than the first Inca.

Reality and legend again came together before our eyes as we got to know the Aymara version of history. But there was still more: Those Capacas of Cusco who kept their role as priests and healers came to call themselves, in time, Kamilis, and their origin was apparently lost during the formation of the great empire that came after. They fused with (or were confused with) some doctors called *kallawayas* who treated the Incan Orejona nobles and who were reputed to have their own language, a secret language that no one understood and that they used as proof of identity. Their trail went hopelessly cold, while the texts dealing with the Yatiri of Taipikala recorded their continued existence despite the great difficulties they had to face. The city was never again the same as before the earthquake. Its inhabitants and the peoples who had lived in its vicinity dispersed little by little, and small sovereign states popped up (Canchi, Cana, Lupaca, Pacaje, Caranga, Quillaca…) like Taifa kingdoms.

"I have it!" Proxi exclaimed. "Listen to what I found in a Bolivian journal: 'The indigenous people called it Tiwanaku. They told that one day, a century before, the Inca Pachakutej was contemplating the ancient ruins, and, seeing a messenger arrive, said to him: Tiai Huanaku (sit down, guanaco). And the phrase coined the name. Possibly, no one wanted to tell the new conquerers that the name of the city lost in time was Taipikala (the stone in the middle). Let alone that it was said that is was there that the god Viracocha began creation, and that it was the stone in the middle, but in the middle of the Universe.'"**(2-9)**

"I think Garcilaso de la Vega also mentions that nonsense about 'Sit down, guanaco.'" Jabba commented disdainfully.

"Okay, so we've confirmed," I said, "that Taipikala was the original name of Tiwanaku, although that was pretty obvious."

"I only have to check one detail," Proxi announced, returning to her computer. "I want to be sure that Taipikala-Tiwanaku had a port on Lake Titicaca."

"It's going to be hard to find something like that," I observed. "Especially because of the change in the lake's name."

"Harder than any of what we've found up till now?" she asked with an ironic smile. Her beautiful dark eyes sparkled with intelligence. I could understand what Jabba had seen in her regardless of the strange curves and angles of her figure.

"No, not harder than that," I replied.

"Well, come on, then, let me work in peace for a while."

"But you're missing everything on the Yatiri," Jabba warned her, picking the abandoned bag of cookies back up.

"You can tell me later."

The Yatiri who had stayed in Taipikala after the earthquake had to reorganize the life of the city, since it was no longer any more than a memory of what it had been. They fought to keep their old wisdom and adapted to life in the ruins. They repaired some temples enough to be fit for ceremonies and some estates enough to live in, but they could no longer move the large stones as easily as their ancestors, the giants, had done, so Taipikala no longer gleamed under the light of the sun, even though the plates of gold and silver remained on its doors and walls, and all the precious stones in its stelae, reliefs, and sculptures; neither did its floors or terraces, green and red in its time of splendor, gleam as they had before, because now the place was practically abandoned. The Yatiri took refuge in their studies of

the heavens and continued with their research. They continued to practice healing with words and foretelling the future which let them know before anyone else that a great invading army was about to arrive and their world had ended. So they prepared for the event.

"If only all this were true, my friend!" Jabba murmured at my side.

"And if it were?"

"How many history books would have to change!" he said, and let out a laugh so loud that I was afraid he'd wake my grandmother.

"I'd be more worried about including the giants in course materials."

"Okay, fine. It's all lies. Is that better?"

I didn't say anything, but I smiled. Deep down, and despite everything, I'd always been powerfully attracted to the idea of becoming a Zapatista, and it couldn't be denied that I was a true hacker by nature; so changing all the history books and having school children study giants, Piri Reis' map, and anything that made the established truth look ridiculous seemed like a great idea to me.

We were running out of the texts that Daniel had translated and organized (the file was some thirty pages long, and we were on page twenty-five), but as the end approached, things started to get more interesting. A long passage explained that in the face of a repeated warning in the stars that a large enemy army was approaching, the Yatiri of Taipikala decided to hide among the populations of the nearest Colla kingdoms, passing themselves off as peasants and merchants. But before abandoning the walls of Taipikala for good, they had to do something very important that was explained in previous fragments. The crucial task was to hide the Traveler. They couldn't go away without leaving him well protected—him and everything important in his tomb, which was a lot—because, to make matters worse, the pyramid and the sepulchral chamber appeared clearly depicted in the reliefs on the door of the building. So they removed said door, substituting an unadorned one, and they went to work for two years, raising a hill of earth and stones to hide the pyramid; but when they finished the task at last, two rains of stars fell one night from the sky—the second was much larger than the first—which left important sparkling stelae warning the Yatiri of the arrival of a second army that would defeat the first and change the world forever. Then they wrote all of this down on golden plates that also said where they would hide until the destruction passed. They accessed the chamber again via one of the two passages that opened into the pyramid from places that only the Yatiri knew and left the plates there and sealed everything again, adding more protections and defenses. They would try to keep Willca from disappearing again, but if he did, the surviving humans would be able to find their legacy.

And then, the Incap Rúnam arrived…[(2-10)]

"They must be the Inca, obviously."

"They must."

The Yatiri, mixed in with the people of the conquered populations and cities, saw their arrival. At their command was Pachacuti (or Pachakutej, as the Bolivian journal called him), the ninth Inca, very tall and round-faced, dressed in red clothing that had two long seams of *tocapus* running from neck to feet, and covered with a large green cape. Taipikala lost its name and began to be called Tiwanaku, for reasons unknown. That's what the Incap Rúnam called it, and

that's how it stayed until the arrival of the Viracochas,[2-11] the white-bearded men who spoke a strange language that sounded like a stream falling on a bed of stones. The people felt a terrible fear of the Viracochas, ambitious beings who stole gold, silver, and precious stones, who enslaved and killed men and children, and raped women. Like the Incap Rúnam years before, who brought Viracocha, the Spanish also brought their own god, but they forced him on the people with the whip and club, destroying the old temples, and, using their stones, building churches everywhere.

"This magnificent period," I commented, following the thread of my thoughts, "must have been when Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa ran into the Yatiri on the Collao, around Tiwanaku. So we're talking about the year 1575."

"Forty years after Pizarro killed the last Inca in Cajamarca and conquered the empire," Proxi said.

"Exactly."

But even worse than the slavery, the tortures, and the new religion were the infectious fevers that began to decimate the population after the arrival of the conquistadors. Wherever the Spanish went, the native people died by the thousands, attacked by mysterious illnesses the Yatiri had never seen before and could not cure. They also began to die, and then, before there was no one left who preserved the ancient wisdom, they decided to move forward with the purpose that had driven them to leave Taipikala, and one day, they simply left. No one knew where, but a couple of short poems expressed the joy the Aymara felt because the Yatiri had managed to get to safety.

And that was all. Daniel hadn't added anything else. We looked and looked again on the hard drive, in case there was more information stored there, but we found no other significant document. We didn't even find the "JoviLoom" transcription of the curse which surprised us a great deal.

"Do you know what my mother explained to me when I was small?" Jabba asked Proxi (who was still doing her own thing) and me. "That we weren't as savage with the Indians of South America as the English were with those of North America; that the only thing we did was have mestizo children, and that's why, in the North, where they killed them there are only a few left in the reservations, while in the South they still live happily as good Christians in their own countries."

Although Jabba's mother was from Madrid, mine had also told me the same tale when I was small. That harebrained idea of our mothers' was doubtlessly the result of the Spanish nationalist and Catholic propaganda from the Franco era. It must have been an argument repeated over and over for a long time to silence our consciences. If the English were worse than we were, then the Spanish weren't so bad; we could even, by comparison, have been good and done a great job at it. Catalonia didn't participate alongside Castile in the conquest of America—the king of Castile, logically, wanted all the riches, since he had discovered the continent—but from the beginning, since the second voyage of Columbus, the Catalans, Aragonese, and Valencians had traveled to the Indies and established themselves there.

"What do you think of this whole story about the Yatiri, Jabba?" I asked, smoothing my goatee with my hand.

“I don’t know… it’s…” He looked pensive for a moment, and then arched his eyebrows, trepidatious. “Wait a minute! We’re not going to have to go to Tiwanaku to look for the Pyramid of the Traveler, are we?”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Now that you mention it…” I replied.

His face fell. The idea of getting on a plane paralyzed him. He flew, of course; he would travel to anywhere in the world without refusing or making excuses, but with the absolute certainty that he was going to die, that he would never again set foot on solid ground. For him, every airplane trip was a resigned acceptance of death.

“We should study Tiwanaku in detail,” I proposed, “and find the Pyramid of the Traveler. Maybe they opened it centuries ago, and now there’s nothing in it!”

“Maybe.”

Proxi cleared her throat noisily and forcefully. “How many maps of Tiwanaku do you want?” she said.

“How many do you have?” I asked her, leaning over the keyboard of my computer. Jabba did the same with another computer.

“Three or four very passable ones. The rest are worthless.”

“Send them to the printer.”

“Let me retouch them a little first. They’re really small and low resolution.”

“I’ll read everything there is on Tiwanaku,” I told Jabba. “You look for Tiahuanacu, Tiahuanaco, and all other possible variations.”

“I’ll help you,” put in the mercenary.

The laser printer was spitting out the pieces of the second map when Magdalena told us the food was ready. We had been at it for couple of frenetic days, and we still had an impressive amount of work to do: The internet search for Tiwanaku had turned up more than three thousand three hundred documents to look through, and Jabba and Proxi hadn’t had any more luck. We would either have to start applying filters or grow old in the attempt. But, before doing anything else, we had to eat.

With coffee steaming in our cups, we returned to the study knowing that we had a long afternoon ahead of us. We went back to our school years, manually rebuilding the maps with glue and tape, and, once they were restored, we stuck them to the walls with tacks to get a better idea of what the archaeological complex looked like. Crammed together in the center, with north at the top and south at the bottom, there were three principal monuments: The most important of the site, the biggest and most majestic, was Akapana, a giant seven-stepped pyramid, with a base measuring more than six hundred and fifty feet long and slightly less wide, of which now almost nothing remained, only ten percent of the original stones. According to experts, it had served as a deposit for water and materials, and also to celebrate religious rites, although in other places we read that its principal function was that of astronomical observatory. Recently, archaeologists had discovered in its interior a complex network of strange zig-zagging canals which they identified as crude plumbing, although, of course, it was again just a hypothesis. At first we thought that Akapana could mean Traveler, but we were disappointed, because its literal translation could mean anything from “from here it is measured” to “here is a wild white duck.”

“I wish we had Daniel to lend us a hand!” Proxi sighed.

“If we had Daniel, we wouldn’t be doing all this,” Jabba replied, and I nodded.

Above Akapana, to the north, were two more structures: one, the very small one on the right, was the Semi-Subterranean Temple—the one with the walls covered in tenon heads—and the other, much larger, called Kalasasaya, was a ceremonial temple with an open roof, built of red sandstone and green andesite, measuring three hundred some feet long by three hundred some feet wide, built as a sort of platform on the ground and enclosed by a retaining wall, inside which was a large rectangular patio that was accessed by going down six steps hewn from one single rock. Apparently, this enormous temple was constructed of blocks more than sixteen feet high and weighing a hundred tons which, according to the official page of the Museum of Tiwanaku, had been transported from distances of up to one hundred ninety miles.

“Wow…! How could they? But they didn’t have the wheel!”

“Forget it, Proxi,” I told her. “We don’t have time to solve so many mysteries.”

“Well, all of this reminds me of the pyramids of Egypt,” Jabba remarked. “The same gigantic stones, the same mystery about how they were moved, the same kind of construction, the unfamiliarity with the wheel…”

“And sacred blood,” I said, teasing. “Don’t forget the sacred blood. The Egyptian Pharaohs married their siblings because they also had to preserve the purity of their blood, and they also believed themselves to be children of the sun. What were their names? Horus? Ra?”

“That’s right, laugh! But he who laughs last, laughs longest!”

“Well, listen to this…” murmured Proxi, who was staring at her screen.

“Something else weird?” I asked.

“I’ve found information on a certain Arthur Posnansky, a naval engineer, cartographer and archaeologist, who wrote more than one hundred works on Tiwanaku during the first half of the twentieth century. This archaeologist studied the ruins over the course of his life and came to the conclusion that they were built by a civilization with technology and knowledge very advanced compared to ours. After measuring, mapping, and analyzing the whole site, applying complex calculations and using the change in the position of the Earth in its orbit around the sun, he came to the conclusion that Tiwanaku had been built fourteen thousand years before, which would fit with the history told by the Yatiri.”

“I suppose that academic archeology completely rejects that theory,” I commented.

“Naturally! Academic archeology can’t accept the idea of a superior culture ten thousand years ago, when man is supposed to have dressed in furs and lived in caves to protect himself from the cold of the last ice age. But there’s a large group of archaeologists who not only accept the theory as a good one, but defend it come hell or high water. Apparently, this Posnansky, who died a long time ago, is still quite the celebrity in Bolivia.”

“Could it really have been built fourteen thousand years ago?” Jabba asked, amazed.

“Who knows…” I replied. “In Tiwanaku, everything is very strange.”

Once you went down the stairs of Kalasasaya Temple and crossed through a big doorway of solid rock, very deep inside, on the right, you could make out the

silhouette of the Gate of the Sun, with the relief of the Staff God and the supposed depiction of the chamber of natural sounds; but we unanimously decided to postpone its examination until we thoroughly knew the other archaeological remains, just to be sure. So, at the bottom of the stairs, in the very center of the patio of Kalasasaya, there was a strange human sculpture called the Ponce Monolith, about six feet tall, which represented a strange being with two square eyes. Certain archaeologists, very definite in their interpretation, claimed that it was the image of a monarch or priest, but the fact was no one knew. On the patio, there were also some odd statues of men of an unknown race, with big mustaches and goatees very similar to mine.

"But does Kalasasaya mean traveler, or not?" Jabba asked impatiently.

"No," Proxi answered. "I just read the meaning: *the upright pillars*."

"Damn."

The small Semi-Subterranean temple, to the east of Kalasasaya, also had stelae representing men with beards.

"I'm beginning to think," Jabba commented, "that there's too much beard around here, yet the American Indians don't have facial hair, right?"

"Right," I replied.

"Well, no one would say that, looking at Tiwanaku!"

Next to Kalasasaya Temple, on the left, there was another small construction, similar in size to the Semi-Subterranean Temple. It was Putuni, "the right place," a rectangular palace of which only a few stone blocks from the facade remained, as well as the entry gate which had been sealed in the past with a great stone, making it impregnable. The conquistadors, seeing so much protection, thought that great treasures were hidden there, and they caused serious damage to it, without finding anything at all, since all that was there was a bunch of hollows in the stone, in the shape of boxes, measuring fifty inches wide by fifty-five inches long and forty high. Despite the almost square shape and the size, the Spanish believed that they were tombs, and Putuni was known from then on as the Palace of Tombs, without anything to prove or disprove such a supposition. It was taken as a given that in each of those hollows there had been a mummy with all the necessary tools for its journey to the afterlife, since the Aymara believed that death was some kind of journey with a round trip ticket back to life, something like reincarnation. For them, a dead person was only a *sariri*, a traveler.

"We have it!" I shouted.

"Don't be an idiot, Arnau!" Proxi rebuked me, with a snort. "We don't have anything. Putuni isn't a pyramid, okay?"

"And what about the traveler?"

"Jabba, please, tell him to shut up!"

"Shut up, Root."

The Pyramid of Akapana, the Semi-Subterranean Temple, the Kalasasaya Temple, and Putuni Palace made up the compact nucleus of buildings in the center of the excavated part of Tiwanaku, but, spread out around it, and in better or worse condition, there were many more, the majority of which weren't even mentioned in the pages about the archaeological complex, or, of course, represented on the maps. Nevertheless, the names of four of those places came up, here and there, with some frequency: Kantatallita, Quirikala, Puma Punku, and

Lakaqullu. We thought, disheartened, that if none of them corresponded with the descriptions given by Daniel in his delirium, we were going to have a serious problem since excavating in Tiwanaku was something beyond our legal and economical reach, and we didn't have time for it.

Of Kantatallita, or "light of dawn," nothing remained but a few vestiges scattered around the place where it should stand, but among them there was a strange door ending in an arch. Various sources claimed that Kantatallita had been a building with four walls oriented to the four cardinal directions, with a central patio which, according to some, had housed the workshop where the architects of Tiwanaku had worked—models of some palaces, decorations, and construction materials had been found there—and, according to others, had been used to celebrate ceremonies in honor of Venus, the brightest star in the sky after the sun and the moon, also known as the Morning Star, because it was very visible at dawn, which harmonized with the name of the place. Furthermore, to confirm this second theory, among the ornamental objects found there, an abundance of allegorical motifs about Venus stood out. In short, maybe it was used as a temple and a workshop at the same time. No one could confirm either.

Quirikala, or Kerikala, "the stone oven," was supposedly the residential palace of the Tiwanakan priests. It had barely been investigated, and all that was left of it were some walls in very bad repair that didn't say anything. Like many of the stones of the rest of the buildings of Tiwanaku, those of Quirikala had also been used to construct old buildings in La Paz and in other nearby cities, and the heaviest had been blasted to pieces so the rubble could be used to build the Guaqui-La Paz railroad (which is how Putuni, Kalasasaya, and the majority of the statues had disappeared).

Puma Punku was another story. It's not as if much of it remained standing either, but it gave the impression of having been a very important place. Puma Punku (the "Gate of the Puma") appeared defined as the second most important temple after Kalasasaya, although the majority of the data described it as a pyramid identical to Akapana, just as gigantic and majestic, with which, from a distance, it would form a kind of couple, because they were more than half a mile apart from each other, with Puma Punku to the southwest. According to archaeological surveys, the pyramid remained almost whole underground, and for that reason, it was possible that it may be recovered some day when the money was there to unearth it. Puma Punku had also had seven terraces, alternately colored red, green, white, and blue, and in its vicinity there must have been a wide grounds accessed by four gates with solar-themed reliefs, similar to the Gate of the Sun, of which only three crumbling ones remained. Among the rubble and fragments that were haphazardly scattered around the place, some of the stone blocks—easily weighing thirty tons—that had formed part of the floor of the grounds could still be seen; these were the most colossal blocks extracted from the quarries of all of South America. But the "Gate of the Puma" held other secrets that made Proxi happy:

"At last!" she proclaimed. "This is what I was looking for!"

"You almost didn't find it, huh?" Jabba teased her.

Part of the perimeter of Puma Punku was surprisingly demarcated by two large port docks that currently led to dry ground and mountainous crags, making the

landscape an incongruous space. Despite the fact that Lake Titicaca was almost twelve miles away, geological studies done in the area had detected important accumulations of marine sediments and fossils of obviously aquatic origin, and the decorations found among the ruins of Puma Punku showed innumerable friezes with fish motifs.

"The history of the Yatiri that Daniel reconstructed is real!" she exclaimed, satisfied. "Lake Kotamama-Titicaca came up to the docks of the port of Taipikala-Tiwanaku. Isn't it fantastic?"

"Repeat it, please!" I laughed. "You've come up with a perfect tongue-twister."

"Simmer down, you fools," the thick smelly worm growled grumpily. "We still haven't found our Pyramid of the Traveler, and all we have left to study is that wreck of Lakaqullu."

"Relax. I'm sure it's there," I felt obligated to say, but when we began to look for information on "the mountain of rocks" (which was the translation of the name), I wished I had swallowed those words: Lakaqullu was, in a manner of speaking, a minuscule promontory lost to the north of the Tiwanaku site, much higher than the rest of the structures, and its only outstanding feature was a doorway worked in stone known as the Gate of the Moon (as an opposite to the Gate of the Sun, although, aesthetically, they didn't have anything in common).

"First requirement, fulfilled," Proxi announced.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Nothing, just some nonsense of mine! Don't mind me."

Although it didn't look at all like it now, Lakaqullu had apparently been the most sacred and feared place in Tiwanaku. Despite there having been no excavations done in the area, a plethora of human bones hundreds of years old, especially skulls, had been found buried at a certain depth in the little hill.

"Second requirement, fulfilled," Proxi announced again.

And she didn't have to say anymore. Jabba and I automatically understood that we were nearing the objective: According to the Yatiri's account, the Pyramid of the Traveler was a way off from the rest of the buildings, and it was the most sacred place in Taipikala. The mention of the skulls was one more point in its favor.

According to experts, the Gate of the Moon was an incomplete work, a state that it shared with Puma Punku and other structures, as if the builders had been in a big hurry to leave, and had abandoned the hammer and chisel overnight. This peculiarity gave it the sad appearance of a simple opening trimmed with a smooth lintel and two stone door posts without reliefs or decorations.

"Third requirement, gentlemen," she announced triumphantly.

"This one I didn't catch," I said nervously.

"The Yatiri left Taipikala in a hurry because they saw in the sky that the Incap Rúnam were coming, and after them, the Spanish. To hide the Pyramid of the Traveler, they erected a hill of earth and stones on top of it at top speed, removed the original door, whose reliefs showed the pyramid and the chamber below, and put another one without decorations at the apex. I don't think they had time to make that one very pretty. By the way, Jabba, since you're closest to the dictionaries, what word did the Aymara use to mean *pyramid?* Or rather, how would they say *Pyramid of the Traveler?*"

“You’re such a pain, darling!” Marc complained, twisting around to reach the books.

“So…” I muttered, “under that promontory would be the pyramid with three floors that’s depicted at the feet of the Staff God.”

“You help Jabba, and I’ll see what I can find.”

When Proxi organized a job, no one questioned her orders, not even the boss (which was me), so I picked up one of the dictionaries and started to look. A while later, and after consulting quietly with Jabba so as not to bother Proxi, we made a new discovery which we explained to the mercenary, when, at last, we saw her brow smooth: the Aymara didn’t use the word “pyramid,” for them, those constructions were mountains, imitations of mountains, and were therefore called as such: hills, peaks, mountains, promontories…

“In conclusion?”

“In conclusion,” I explained, “the word they used instead of pyramid was ‘qullu.’”

“As in Lakaqullu?”

“As in Lakaqullu,” I agreed, “which, besides ‘mountain of stones,’ also means ‘pyramid of stones.’”

“Exactly what the Yatiri did to hide the Traveler: a pyramid of earth and stones.”

“And you, did you find your part?” Jabba asked, in competitive mode.

“Of course!” she exclaimed, beaming. “The Bolivian government has a very good website with a great tourist information page. If you search for Tiwanaku,” she quickly punched a couple of keys to move the article to the foreground, “you can find wonders like this: ‘The Gate of the Moon is located on top of a square pyramid with three tiers.’”

“Nothing else?” I inquired after a pause. “Just that?”

“What more do you want?” she asked, surprised. “You should be happy, kid. We’ve found the only pyramid with three tiers in all of Tiwanaku,” she said, looking at Jabba, “And he asks if the note about the Gate of the Moon says anything else! God, Root, you are so weird!”

“It’s just that this whole mess gets to me.”

“It gets to you?” Jabba asked. “What the hell is it that gets to you?”

“Haven’t you noticed?” I replied, getting up. “This is getting serious! Don’t you see? All this insanity is true! There’s a curse, a perfect language, there are some guys who claim to be descended from giants and who have the power of words… And there’s a damn pyramid with three floors in Tiwanaku!” I finished, bellowing, then threw myself like a lunatic on the folders and rifled through all the papers until I found the one I was looking for, while Proxi and Jabba, frozen, followed me with their eyes. I suppose that what was happening to me was that I had discovered irrefutably that the history we were messing with as if it were a game was something very real and dangerous. “My brother doesn’t have agnosia or Cotard’s…! ‘Can’t you hear, thief’?” I began to read heatedly without lowering my voice. “You are dead. You tried to take the stick from the door. This very night, the others all die everywhere for you. This world will cease to be visible to you. Law. Closed with a key.” I shook the paper in the air. “This is what my brother has!”

I dropped onto one of the armchairs and went quiet. Jabba and Proxi didn’t say anything either. We were all alone in our thoughts for a few very long minutes. We

were not crazy, but we didn't seem sane either. The situation was mad, yet, then more than ever, the fantasy of curing Daniel with those cursed magical arts was coming true. My brother was never going to get better with medication, I thought. There was no medication for cerebral programming written in Aymara code by the Yatiri. The only way of deprogramming him was to use the same language, apply the same magic, witchery, enchantment, or whatever the hell it was that the secret words used by the priests of the ancient Taipikala possessed. For some reason that I couldn't understand, in that text (probably taken from one of the hundreds of textiles with *tocapus* copied onto Daniel's computer, transformed into the Roman alphabet by the damned "JoviLoom" and partly translated by my brother), someone had put a curse to punish a thief who had stolen something that was hidden behind a door… or under a door.

"Hey!" I shouted, rising. "I just got an idea!"

Both of them, their faces seeming more dead than alive, looked at me at once.

"Daniel was working exclusively on material related to Tiwanaku, right?"

They both nodded.

"The curse comes from Tiwanaku! My brother knew about the chamber. He himself left us a drawing of the pedestal of the Staff God, indicating very clearly where the Yatiri's gold holding all their knowledge was. And he knows, because he doesn't stop repeating it in his delirium, that the secret power of words is kept in that chamber. He had discovered the real existence of the Pyramid of the Traveler: The chamber is in a pyramid, he says, and the pyramid has a door on top. Lakaqullu, friends, Lakaqullu! He knew how to get there, and when he discovered it, he ran into the damned curse, the curse that protects the chamber."

Proxi blinked, trying to assimilate my words. "But…" she hesitated, "why doesn't it affect us?"

"Because we don't know Aymara! If we don't know the code, it can't affect us."

"But we have the transcription of the text in Aymara," she insisted, "and we've read it.

"Yes, but I still say it doesn't harm us because we don't know Aymara! The code works with sounds, with those cursed natural sounds. We can read the text in Aymara, but we'll never be able to pronounce it correctly. Daniel could, and did. That's why it affected him."

"Or rather," Jabba stammered, with great effort, "the code really has some kind of virus."

"Exactly! A sleeping virus that's only activated under certain conditions, like those computer viruses that start to erase the hard drive on the anniversary of a terrorist attack or on the Fridays that fall on the thirteenth of the month. In this case, the condition that starts the program is sound, some kind of sound that we aren't capable of reproducing."

"So people who speak Aymara, or anyone who knows Aymara, would be affected," Proxi ventured. "Marta Torrent, for example, right?"

I remained in suspense for a few seconds, unsure of my response.

"I don't know…" I said. "I imagine that, if she heard it or read it aloud, then yes."

"It's a matter of trying it out," Jabba proposed. "Let's call her."

Proxi and I smiled.

“In any case,” I said. “What we have to do is go to Tiwanaku and go inside the chamber.”

“But…! You’re crazy!” Marc exclaimed, jumping in his seat and staring me down. “Have you stopped to think about the ridiculousness of what you just said?”

I gave him a look as cold as ice before responding.

“My brother isn’t going to get better if we don’t go inside that chamber and look for a solution; you know that as well as I.”

“And what will we do once we’re there?” he replied. “Grab a shovel and start digging? Oh, I’m sorry, mister Bolivian policeman, I didn’t know this was a protected archaeological area!”

“Perhaps you don’t remember what the Chronicle said about the Yatiri?” Proxi asked.

Jabba was so nervous that he looked at her without comprehending.

“After finishing the mountain that’s now Lakaqullu, those guys found themselves having to return to the chamber, and they did so, as I remember, through one of the passages that went to the pyramid from places that only they knew, adding, when they left, more defenses and armor.”

“The word wasn’t exactly armor,” I corrected her.

“Fine, whatever it was,” she growled. “I thought I was speaking with intelligent people.”

“And you want us to find those passages?” Jabba asked, incredulous. “I’ll remind you that it’s rained a lot since, and I don’t just mean figuratively.”

Proxi, who up to that point had remained seated, got up and went to the maps of Tiwanaku hanging on the wall.

“Do you know what?” she said, without looking at us. “My job consists of finding failures in computer systems, holes in the security of the most powerful programs on the market, including our own. I’m not saying that I’m the best, but I’m very good, and I know that in Tiwanaku there’s a breach that I can find. The Yatiri were magnificent programmers, but they didn’t hide their code so that it would be hidden forever. What sense would it have made to have written all those gold plates destined for an alleged humanity surviving from a second universal flood?” She put her hands on her hips and shook her head decisively. “No, the entrance to the chamber exists, I’m sure, it’s just hidden, disguised so as not to be discovered until its content is necessary. They left it protected against thieves, but not against human necessity. What’s more, I am certain that access to the chamber is open and available. I would even say that we have it right under our noses. The problem is that we don’t see it.”

“Maybe because we still haven’t analyzed the Gate of the Sun,” Jabba suggested.

“Maybe because we’ll only be able to find it by looking for it there, in Tiwanaku,” I retorted.

A glimmer of bright lucidity flashed in Proxi’s eyes when she turned toward us.

“Come on, let’s get to work!” she exclaimed. “You, Marc, search for all the photographs of the Gate of the Sun you can find and print high definition copies of them; you, Root, search for all the information on the Gate and commit it to memory. I will work on the Staff God.”

Without hiding his satisfaction, Jabba looked at me triumphantly. His choice had been the winner… for the time being, I thought.

Seconds later, my grandmother discreetly popped in to tell us goodbye, but this time we were a little more polite, and we responded with friendly, although distracted, smiles. If I had known at that moment how long it would be before I would see her again, I surely would have stood up to give her a kiss and tell her goodbye, but I didn't know, so she left and I didn't tell her anything. It was a little after six in the evening, and my body was starting to creak like an old chair.

"Why don't we look for some document that mentions, even if it's just in passing, whether the Gate of the Sun could have ever been in Lakaqullu?" Jabba asked suddenly.

Proxi looked him with surprise:

"That's a good idea. I'll do it."

"Use filters to limit the search," suggested Jabba, going over to her and bending to rest his elbows on the table.

"*Tiwanaku*, *Lakaqullu*, and *Gate?*"

"And something else, woman! Add *Gate of the Sun* and *move*, for example, since the Yatiri moved it to a different location."

"Ok. There."

I kept working on my task, searching for everything related to the Gate, which was a lot.

"Only five documents?" I heard Jabba say. "Not a lot, right?"

But Proxi didn't answer. So I turned and saw her move her hand and touch her finger to the screen, pointing at something. I remember that I thought she was going to leave a digital fingerprint the size of a truck. Then, both leaned in unison toward the monitor without saying a word, and remained frozen for a long time, so long that, at last, I got tired of seeing Jabba's bottom in front of my face and I stood up and went over to them.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Now they were the ones who didn't seem to want to speak.

"Hey, I'm here!" I said, going closer. Then Jabba moved back a little so I could see the screen, and I squeezed between them. The first thing I saw was a very benevolent picture of Dr. Torrent, in the foreground, in which she was wearing a slight smile. The page was from a Bolivian newspaper, *El Nuevo Dia*, and the title announced that the famous Spanish anthropologist had just arrived in La Paz to join the new excavations in Tiwanaku. The rest of the article, which was dated that very Tuesday, the 4th of June, said that Marta Torrent, who had been so kind as to respond to the reporter upon disembarking from the plane despite being tired from the long journey, was going to join the archaeological team of Efraín Punku, with the intention of bringing the twin pyramid of Akapana, or at least part of it, into the light. This exceptional woman, anthropologist by profession but archaeologist by vocation, had managed to include Puma Punku's pyramid in the financial structure of the Strategic Research Program of Bolivia (PIEB) thanks to her excellent contacts in the Bolivian government and her impressive influence on the cultural and economic sectors of the country. "We have an enormous job ahead of us that will take several months. Tons of soil will have to be moved," she had said. The Spanish professor, who preferred working in the field to working in the office,

came from a family of archaeologists with a long tradition of exploration in Tiwanaku, like her great uncle, Alfonso Torrent, close collaborator of Don Arturo Posnansky's, and her father, Carlos Torrent, who had spent more than half of his life close to the ruins, trying to reconstruct the pre-Incan period and studying the Gate of the Sun. She had inherited the family passion, and her surname protected her from the many obstacles with which other researchers are so often confronted. Proof of that was the authorization to begin preliminary excavations in Lakaqullu, obtained just a few days previously, by telephone, from Spain. "No one pays attention to Lakaqullu because it's a minor monument, but I've come prepared to demonstrate that everyone is wrong," she said. The reporter finished by saying "She will succeed."

"She's… in Bolivia!" Proxi stammered, startled.

Jabba spit such a string of insults that the professor's ears must have been burning on the other side of the Atlantic. I wasn't far behind. I said them in Catalan and in Spanish, and even threw out all I knew in English. I felt the blood boil in my veins: The professor's precipitous journey to Bolivia confirmed her intention of taking advantage of the discoveries made by my brother.

"She's gone to look for the chamber," I muttered, full of venom.

"She knows about Lakaqullu…" Jabba said, perplexed.

"She knows everything, that old…!"

"Calm down, Proxi."

"Calm? How can you tell me to be calm, Marc? Or can't you see that she's going to get into the chamber before us? She could leave us with no help for Daniel!"

"Beginning the excavation of Lakaqullu will take her some time," I noted, putting my hands to my head, I don't know whether it was to pull back my hair or to contain my murderous thoughts.

"That's our window to get to Tiwanaku," Proxi said firmly.

Jabba went suddenly very pale and looked shaken.

"Find Núria!" I shouted at the system.

The wall monitor showed several phone numbers as it dialed them simultaneously, until there was a response from one of them. Núria had been at home for two hours, and her voice showed the alarm my unexpected call had caused. I calmed her down, telling her that nothing bad was happening, that I just needed to ask a favor:

"I need you to get me three tickets on the next flight leaving for Bolivia."

"Do you want me to go to the office?" she asked.

"No, there's no need. Connect to the system and do it from home."

"Do you want them for yesterday, or are you going to give me some time frame?"

"For yesterday."

"I thought so. Okay, I'll send you the reservations in a few minutes."

Jabba and Proxi, with serious expressions, had stood and were watching me.

"How long does it take to get to Bolivia?" Jabba asked, with his brow furrowed.

"I don't know," I said, and it was true: I had never traveled to the American continent, "but it can't be long. Just think, if Marta Torrent called me on Sunday afternoon, she must have left for there that very night, or no later than yesterday, Monday, in the morning, and she arrived on time to give an interview that came out in today's paper. Or rather, some eight or ten hours, I guess."

“How little you know about life, Root! You forget one small detail,” Jabba snapped at me, returning to his seat in front of the computer. “At best, there’s a time difference of six or seven hours with the American continent.”

“What Marc is trying to say,” Proxi explained, copying him, “is that, when in Spain it’s nine o’clock at night, in Bolivia the clocks read, approximately, three in the afternoon, and that if Marta Torrent left yesterday morning and arrived eight or ten hours later, you have to add the difference, so the real time of the flight could be some sixteen hours.”

But no, it didn’t take sixteen hours. When Núria called to inform me of the details, it turned out to be much worse. There was no direct flight to Bolivia from Spain. The best option was to go to Madrid in the morning and catch a plane from there to Santiago, Chile, where, if there were no delays, we could board a flight, with layovers, to La Paz. Estimated duration of the trip: twenty-two hours and twenty minutes. The other alternative was to leave from Barcelona to Amsterdam, and catch a flight from there to Lima, Peru, and then another to La Paz. Total: twenty-one hours and fifty-five minutes. Jabba’s face was like one of those Japanese masks that actors wear to represent the evil demon or spirit that comes to Earth looking for vengeance.

“When does the flight leave for Amsterdam?”

“At six forty in the morning. Ah! and you don’t need a visa. Given the good relations between the two countries,” Núria explained, “all you need is a passport, and you can stay there up to three months with only your national ID.”

“Make reservations for Marc, Lola, and me, and find us a good hotel in La Paz, please. And leave the date for the return trip open.”

“How long are you going to be away?”

“If we return…” mumbled Jabba.

“I wish I knew,” I replied.

Chapter III

To describe that long journey with Marc as a nightmare would not do it justice. During the first leg, from Barcelona to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, we didn’t get him to open his eyes even once, or relax the grip of his claws on the seat’s armrests, or, needless to say, utter a single word. He was a stiff lump with an expression of supreme anguish on his face. Proxi, who was already used to it, enjoyed the journey immensely and endlessly proposed new topics of conversation, uncaring of the drama unfolding at her side; but I, who had never in my life traveled on a plane with Jabba, couldn’t stop looking at him, astonished, because of the strength with which he furrowed his brow, squeezed his eyelids shut, pressed his lips together, and held on to the seat. I was fascinated by the spectacle. It didn’t matter to him whether you addressed him or offered him a glass of water: his muscles didn’t relax even for a second. When we arrived at the immense Schiphol Airport, around nine in the morning, he was exhausted from the tension, pale, sweaty, and he had a glassy gaze which looked like that of someone terminally ill. As we looked in some stores and had something to drink in

one of the airport's cafés (our next flight left at eleven), he brightened a little and again became the corrosive and acid Jabba that we knew so well. But it was just a mirage because when the loudspeakers called us to board the KLM flight with destinations to Aruba and Lima he turned back into a stocky salt statue that advanced with the movements of a robot. As bad luck would have it, halfway through the trip, we went through an area of turbulence that lasted at least forty-five minutes. Jabba's teeth began to grind, his arms and his hands tightened even more, and he pushed so hard on the headrest that I thought he would wind up tearing it from its position. I had never seen anyone suffer so much, and I came to the conclusion that, if I were him, I wouldn't get on a plane even if I were drunk, even if my whole life depended on it. Honestly, it wasn't worth it. It was inhumane for someone to have to go through something like that, even more so a big, strong, tough guy like Jabba. There was no reason why everyone should have to enjoy flying.

We had a layover in Queen Beatrix Airport, in Aruba, in the Antilles around three in the afternoon, local time, although it was five hours earlier there than in Spain, and we took off again at four. For the time being, we were on our expected schedule, so, barring setbacks, we would arrive in Peru when the sky was still light. It was strange to travel in the same direction as the sun, having it always next to us, almost in the same position. The day went by, but for us, it was being continuously regenerated. Poor Jabba, who didn't accept the food they offered him, was no more than a human rag doll when at last we stood in Jorge Chávez Airport, in Lima. Fifteen actual hours of flight time was much more than he could handle. His hair was the clay-colored from his sweat and stuck to his head like a helmet.

"But did something happen to him on an airplane that he hasn't told me about?" I asked Proxi, while we got on the bus that would take us to the other terminal. It was cold in Peru, much more so than in Spain, so I pulled up the neck of my jacket and noticed that my breathing was a bit labored.

"No, nothing's ever happened to him," she explained. "Fear of flying doesn't necessarily have a cause. It could have, of course, but really it's an anxiety disorder. Jabba can't control it. I think it's better if you stop worrying about him, Root; you're not going to cure him."

"But… Look at him," I whispered in her ear, so the man in question wouldn't hear. "He looks like the walking dead. And he's been like that since we left El Prat this morning!"

"Listen to me, Arnau," she ordered. "Leave it. There's nothing that can help him. He's convinced that 'airplane' is synonymous with 'death,' and he constantly sees himself, and me, in those last minutes of panic as we fall vertically through the void before crashing into the ground. When we get to Bolivia, it will pass."

"The crazy monkey," I muttered.

"What did you say?"

"I once read that that's what the ancient Greeks called the runaway imagination, that which makes us have fantasies that speed up our heart and destructively obsess us."

"Yes, it's a good definition. I like it. The crazy monkey," she repeated, as she held onto one of the bus's vertical bars, since it was already completely full. The

vehicle started up and crossed the large open tarmac under a light that was already that of evening. We had a little longer than an hour before our next and last flight.

"I should call my grandmother," I said pensively. "I didn't get a chance to say goodbye, and I want to know how Daniel is."

"In Spain it's already past midnight, Root," Proxi said, casting a glance at her watch.

"I know, that's exactly why I'm going to call her. She must be in the hospital now, reading."

"Or sleeping."

"Or chatting in the hallway with someone from her generation, which is most likely."

"I'm dizzy," Jabba remarked at that moment, surprising us.

"It's pure exhaustion," Proxi told him, putting a hand on his face.

After sitting for an hour and a half in a bar without being called to board the flight to Bolivia, we went up to one of the information desks to ask what was going on. And it's a good thing we did, because otherwise we wouldn't have found out that the Taca Airlines plane that should be taking us to La Paz was delayed two hours, due to unspecified technical problems. I took advantage of the time to chat with my grandmother who told me that Daniel was the same as always, with no change for better or worse, and that they were going to change his treatment again. She was very interested in the state of my health, because my breathing sounded labored to her, and when I told her that Jabba was unwell because he suffered from a fear of flying and that he was very dizzy from the nervous tension, she was overly alarmed:

"My God, and you haven't even arrived in La Paz yet!" she exclaimed, worried. "Go to any desk right away and ask for oxygen for both of you," she ordered.

"What in the world are you talking about, Grandma?"

"Altitude sickness, Arnauet, altitude sickness, which is very bad! I'm telling you, because it's happened to me several times. Do me a favor and breathe very slowly and take your time walking. And keep drinking water, two or three quarts each, at least!"

How could the damned altitude sickness not have occurred to us? Because of the rush! It was common sense to remember that when you travel to an Andean country, you get an uncomfortable altitude sickness due to the lack of oxygen in the air, which is very thin. The strange thing was, Jabba climbed ten-thousand-foot-high mountains almost every weekend, although, of course, he was a wreck from the airplane thing.

"If you're embarrassed to ask for oxygen," she concluded, "when you get to La Paz, drink an infusion of coca. Mate de coca, the call it, like the Argentines. You'll feel much better right away, you'll see."

Even though I knew it wouldn't bother her, I abstained from making any sarcastic comments, because I preferred not to imagine my sainted grandmother ingesting alkaloids.

At last, around midnight in Bolivia, we landed at El Alto Airport, in La Paz. The name was very appropriate because it had been built at an altitude of more than thirteen thousand feet, and consequently, the cold was much stronger than what

we could stand, and our clothes were, without a doubt, grotesquely insufficient. It had been almost twenty-four hours since we had left Barcelona, and yet for us it was still the same day, Wednesday, the 5th of June. During the last flight, they had conscientiously informed us of the effects of altitude sickness and explained to us the remedies to combat it, which were the same that my grandmother had told me about. But as we traveled in a private Radio-Taxi to the hotel, located in the city's downtown—oddly, on Tiahuanacu Street—, our state began to take an alarming turn: We felt dizzy, had cold sweats, headaches, a buzzing in our ears, and accelerated pulses. Fortunately, as soon as we were through the door of the hotel, they took charge of us with friendly smiles and expressions of understanding.

"The doctor will be up to see you right away," the receptionist told me, "and room service will take you up some coca mates. You'll see, you'll feel much better. And if you'll allow, I'll give you a bit of advice we give all foreigners: 'Eat sparingly, walk slowly, and sleep alone.' Enjoy your visit to La Paz."

Despite what one might expect, the Bolivians didn't have an excessively thick accent. I was surprised, because I had expected a stronger one, but that was not the case. Of course, they spoke with slang, idioms, and the peculiar habit of pronouncing the "C" and "Z" sibilantly, as if they were an "S," but it was not only not grating, but I can even say it was softer than the accent from the Canaries, for example, which we're so used to. Before long, I didn't even notice it, and oddly, we ourselves developed a special cadence, Catalan-Bolivian, that stayed with us for a long time.

It's true that the harsh coca mate and the Sorochipil, the pills that hotel's doctor prescribed to us, softened the disagreeable symptoms, but they didn't manage to revitalize me enough for me to make myself leave the room until two days later. My body felt as heavy as if it were made of lead, and breathing was an exhausting effort. My grandmother called me frequently to find out how I was, but I could barely give her more than choked groans in response. Proxi, who recovered quickly, came to see me a lot, and told me that Jabba slept so deeply that she couldn't manage to wake him, not even by throwing water on his face. The only thing I can say is that from my sickbed I had a very good understanding of my colleague with whom I felt united at a distance. At least those two days served to adapt us to the time change and to make Jabba forget the discomforts of the journey.

On Friday, we were at last able to go out for a walk in the afternoon. La Paz is a very calm city, with barely any crime other than small time pickpocketing from distracted tourists, so, with our documents and money safe in inner pockets, we strolled calmly through the streets of downtown, enjoying an environment so unlike our own and so full of different smells and colors. There, the general rhythm was slow (maybe because of the lack of oxygen, who knows?), and life transmitted a sensation of completely unfamiliar calm. From almost any street, you could see in the background the distant, tall, snow-covered mountains that surrounded the hollow in which La Paz had been constructed. According to what they had told us in the hotel, the population was mostly Indian; however, in the streets we walked through there was also an abundance of white people and *cholo*s (mestizos), but our surprise was great when we noticed that the ones they called Indians there were none other than full blooded Aymara, descendants of the

ancient lords and masters of all those lands, possessors of an extraordinary language that, incredibly, was scorned as a sign of illiteracy and lack of culture. It was very difficult for us to assimilate these absurd ideas, and we were absorbed looking at any street vendor with dark skin and blue-black hair, or at any *chola* dressed in her wide skirt and her English bowler hat, as if they were authentic Yatiri from Taipikala. I was so enthusiastic that I went up to one of those who sheltered behind a table of souvenirs for tourists and asked him to say some phrases in Aymara to us. The man seemed not to understand me well at first, but then, when he saw the bolivianos,**(3-12)** he launched into a recital of some kind of poetry, that, of course, we didn't understand, but it didn't matter, because—at last!—we were hearing Aymara spoken, the authentic Aymara, and it was the most devilishly harsh language that I had heard in my life: It sounded like the drums of Calanda, but with no rhythm, played irregularly; with strange aspirations and gurgles of air on some syllables, and tongue clicks and explosive emissions of sound from the throat or mouth. For a few seconds we didn't react, incredulous before that cascade of unlikely acoustic effects, and when we reacted, it was to say goodbye to the vendor, who bid us farewell with a friendly "*Jikisinkama!*" (something like "See you later!") and to continue our walk around the vicinity of the Church of San Francisco with the feeling of being under the effects of altitude sickness again. Around us, the storytellers told their fables in the centers of small circles of people who had stopped to listen to them, and the stalls selling fabrics, magical objects, necklaces, figurines, and alpaca hats attracted a growing number of local buyers and tourists like ourselves.

"Those were," Proxi dared to comment at last, very taken aback, "the famous natural sounds?"

The three of us were well encased in our jackets and coats, because, while in Spain summer was taking its first steps into magnificent weather, there, in the Southern Hemisphere, it was the beginning of a harsh winter dry season.

"No doubt they were," I murmured, stepping carefully on the cobbled ground. On the narrow street full of people, a few motorcycles moved at the speed of turtles. La Paz was a city of ocher and brown walls over which were superimposed the attractive colors of the ponchos, skirts, hats, and blankets of the Aymara. On all the streets, the low houses had little railed balconies, full of flowerpots and clothes hung out to dry.

"The original language," Jabba grumbled, looking forward with determination. "The possible language of Adam and Eve, whose sounds are those of nature and are made up of the same elements as beings and things. Well, the hell with the raw material, if that's the result!"

"It seems incredible that that guy could produce those whistles and bangs with his mouth and throat," I added, impressed. "And, besides, they're supposed to be words with meanings. Miserable gibberish!"

"Well, I'm sorry for you two," the mercenary remarked, as she headed toward one of stalls, "but that gibberish is the most perfect language in the world, whether or not it's Adam and Eve's, and it's the authentic programming code that contains the secrets of the Yatiri."

The vender from the stall, who had heard what Proxi had said, brightened visibly and began to gesticulate enthusiastically:

“Listen, have you seen these beautiful products? I’m Yatiri and I can offer you the best llama fetuses and the most effective amulets. Look, look… Do you want medicinal herbs? Sticks of Viracocha? Coca leaves? I can assure you: There are none better in the whole market.”

“You are Yatiri?” Proxi asked, with an ingenuous expression.

“Of course, miss! This is the Witches’ Market, is it not? All of us here are Yatiri.”

“I think we should get a few tourist guide books on Bolivia,” Jabba whispered in my ear. “Either we’re more lost than an octopus in a parking garage, or something here smells suspicious.”

“We’re not here as tourists,” I replied, rubbing my icy nose. “We’re here to go inside the secret chamber of Lakaqullu.”

While I spoke, I was considering buying a stick of Viracocha from the “Yatiri,” not so much from a desire for research as much as to have a present to take back to my nephew when we returned home. The sticks of Viracocha were sad wooden copies of the staffs the god on the Gate of the Sun held, painted in garish colors and with llama wool tassels hanging from one end. I didn’t do it, because I thought that Ona would throw me down the stairs headfirst if I gave her son the perfect weapon for destroying her house.

“Right. No tourism. But I warn you, we’re making fools of ourselves in the meantime.”

In a bus terminal, which is what they called the casual stops of the old *movilidades*, or vans for urban transportation, we found a tourist information stand and we got hold of a map of the city and some informative pamphlets, but it didn’t take long for us to realize that the map was quite useless if the streets didn’t have signs with their respective names, and that the pamphlets barely gave information about what we had in front of us, much less anything about something as necessary as a good restaurant to have dinner at. Despite this, in an overview, we found some facts about the Witches’ Market where we seemed to have been, in which the Yatiri, “Aymara name for healers,” according to the pamphlet, sold traditional products for health and luck. So, on the brink of depression, we decided to enjoy walking a little longer through the labyrinth of cobbled alleys with an unmistakable colonial air, packed with elegant buildings and numerous Andean baroque churches full of odd, very pagan, Incan motifs.

We managed to have dinner at last in the bar of an old hotel called París located on a corner of Murillo Plaza, and we stuffed ourselves with everything they served us, which was a lot, and very spicy: we started with a soup of corn (*maíz*), cassava, and quinoa, which couldn’t have been better, and we followed it with a dish called *paceño*, which had potatoes, fava beans, and cheese, and with a meat *jakhonta* that Proxi and I were barely able to try, and which a completely recovered Jabba, with three days’ worth of appetite, shamelessly polished off. The waitress who served us, and who introduced herself as Mayerlin, recommended that we visit a *peña* nearby, La Naira, on Jaén Street, where, before returning to the hotel, we could drink some mates and listen to Enriqueta Ulloa, a famous Aymara singer, and Llapaku, the best group when it came to Andean folkloric music.

In the street, still full of people, a tumult of voices in Spanish and Aymara could be heard, and over it, the cries of some kids working as ticket sellers, reciting the long routes of the transport vans, to whose rickety doors they clung, hanging

dangerously on the outside, although no one seemed worried about their safety. The merchants of the street markets we had walked through before were going off now to their homes, their backs loaded with bundles that easily doubled or tripled their weight. It was a strange world, where people were not seen speaking endlessly on their cell phones, or running hurriedly from one place to another, or looking away if, by chance, their gazes crossed with ours. No, there they looked straight at you and smiled, leaving you shy and at a loss. Sometimes that which makes things surprising isn't so much what's seen, as different as that might be from one's habitual landscape, as it is what is unconsciously perceived through the other four senses, and all the signals that we received indicated to us very clearly that we were in a different Universe and another dimension.

In the *peña* La Naira, full to bursting, we enjoyed, in a close atmosphere, the beautiful music that Llapaku played with traditional instruments from the heights of the Andes (the *charango*, the *siku* with its double row of reeds, the drums…) and the songs of Enriqueta Ulloa, who had a really monumental voice, vibrant and full of harmonies. Regretfully, we left after a short while because the next day we had to wake up early, but we arrived at the hotel very animated and full of energy to confront what was coming.

Following the directions of one of the hotel's managers, we got up at six in the morning (it was still completely dark) so we could be ready around seven to catch a private taxi to Tiwanaku. The problem with taxis in La Paz is that they're communal, meaning they act like small buses. To avoid it, you have to call some Radio-Taxi company and tell them right off that you're willing to pay however many bolivianos they ask for so that they don't load anyone into the spot next to you. Taking a taxi to the ruins also had its own explanation: the "buses" that made the forty-mile trip were in reality bulky old trucks where you traveled in the company of people, products from the market, and animals, all crammed into the same small space. But if we thought that by traveling in a private vehicle it would be like travelling in our own cars in Barcelona, we were completely wrong: The road was narrow and full of potholes, and our driver insisted on dangerously passing anyone who got in front of us, without caring that we were on the altiplano slopes or that the wheels ground against the very edge of the pavement on the curves. It took us almost two hours to get to Tiwanaku, and when we got out of the taxi, our muscles were stiff from panic and our brains were numb.

But we were there. In Tiwanaku. Or, better yet, in Taipikala, "the central stone," a place we had researched so much we felt as if we knew it like our own homes. The snowy mountains were still surrounding us with their unbelievable peaks, among which stood out Illimani, a sacred mountain more than twenty thousand feet high. I wasn't used to looking through such vast spaces since in the city the buildings pleasantly restrict the view, and at work the computer screens do the same, so so many white peaks in the distance and so much clear sky left me a little stunned. Our taxi driver, who boasted the pompous name of Yonson Ricardo, left us standing at the site's main entrance and promised to return for us when it was time to eat; he would spend the morning in the nearby town of Tiahuanaco, built mostly with stones taken from the ruins.

Thankful for the warm heat of the sun on that frozen morning, we began the gentle ascent toward Taipikala. A barbed wire barrier protected the entire

archaeological site as far as the eye could see. It was going to be difficult to slip inside that place outside of visiting hours. I took out my wallet to pay the admission, and then a small detail suddenly occurred to me:

"And if we come face to face with the professor?" I asked, turning toward Jabba and Proxi, who, under the attentive gaze of the two security guards keeping watch from their posts behind the fence, were trying to get together the coins to pay the fifteen bolivianos each for the tickets.

They looked disconcertedly at me for a couple of seconds, then Jabba shrugged, and Proxi, more pragmatic, took a panama hat hanging from a sales display and put it on my head. In that ticket cabin, as the lettering over the window said, they had all kinds of surprising articles available for tourists, from hats and sunglasses, to umbrellas and sticks that turned into folding chairs.

"Problem solved," she said. "Gather up your mane and hide it under the hat. I don't think she'll recognize you if she's around."

"No, obviously," I replied, irritated. "Especially if I cut off my legs to take a couple feet off my height."

"But, Root, today is Saturday, and no one works on Saturday! Relax, she'll be in La Paz."

"But what if she's here and I run into her?" I insisted.

"Well, then you'll say hi if you feel like it, and if not, you won't," Jabba said.

"But she'll realize we've come looking for the same thing she is," I objected, stubborn. The ticket man started to get impatient.

"Stop being difficult and buy the ticket already!" Jabba said. "She only knows you, and since we've seen her in a picture, we'll notice her before she sees you."

More relaxed by this idea, I paid and crossed the threshold into Tiwanaku. I immediately forgot everything that could have gone through my head since birth. Taipikala was magnificent, immense, impressive… No, really, it was much more than that: It was incredibly beautiful. The wind ran freely through those endless spaces covered in ruins. In front of us, a serpentine path led to the Semi-Subterranean Temple which looked like a square hole in the ground, to the right of which, with inconceivable dimensions, was the elevated platform of the Temple of Kalasasaya, on which we could make out, despite the distance, its more than sixteen foot high, hundred-ton blocks. Everything there was colossal and exuded magnitude and energy, and the wild vegetation that covered it didn't take away even a speck of majesty.

"I'm suffering hallucinations," murmured the mercenary, as we walked toward the Temple. "I think I'm seeing the Yatiri."

"You're not the only one," I whispered.

Without speaking, we walked around the hollow of the Temple, about six feet deep, observing the strange tenon heads that stuck out of the wall. Jabba was the first to detect something strange:

"Look at this…" he exclaimed at the top of his lungs. "Isn't what I'm seeing there the head of a Chinese guy?"

"Yeah, right!" Proxi teased.

But I was looking in the direction Jabba was pointing in, and yes, that head was obviously that of an Asian, with unquestionably slanted eyes. Two or three heads up, there was another that had unquestionably African features: wide nose, thick

lips… After a time spent turning around, looking high and low, we no longer had any doubt that among the one hundred five heads that the little informational book we had bought said there were, all the races of the world were represented: projecting cheekbones, thick lips and thin lips, wide foreheads and narrow, bulging eyes, round ones, almond ones, sunken ones…

"What does the guide say about this?" I wanted to know.

"It gives several interpretations," read Proxi, who had taken charge of the book. "It says that it was probably the custom of Tiwanakan warriors to exhibit here the heads severed from their enemies after battles, and that with the passage of time they had to make them in stone, so they would last. Also that this place could be some kind of college of medicine where they were taught to diagnose illnesses that are supposedly represented by these faces. But when it comes down to it, since there's no proof one way or another, they end up saying that the most likely explanation is that it's simply a sign of Tiwanaku's contact with different cultures and races in the world."

"With black and Chinese people?" Jabba asked, incredulous.

"It doesn't even mention that."

"My son…" I said, putting a paternal hand on my friend's shoulder, "about this mysterious city they haven't the foggiest damned idea so the last one who gives his version of events is a rotten egg. Never mind. As for us, on with our business."

It was a shame, I thought, that Bolivia didn't have enough money available to launch a detailed excavation of Tiwanaku, and it was a shame that some international organization didn't contribute the necessary funds to help the country in this task. Wasn't anyone interested in discovering what was hidden in that strange city?

"And this guy with a beard?" Jabba insisted, pointing at one of the three stone stelae that stood in the middle of the site. It was the highest, and it had the image of a man with enormous round eyes, a big mustache, and a beautiful goatee worked into the stone. He was dressed in a long cape, and on both sides were drawn the silhouettes of a couple of snakes that reached from the ground up to his shoulders.

"The guide says that it's a king or a high-ranking priest."

"The power of imagination! Can't they change up their story? I'm starting to get bored."

"It also says that he has those snakes because they're a symbol of knowledge and wisdom in Tiwanakan culture."

"So that's what the horned reptile inside the chamber of Lakaqullu means."

"Let's get out of here," I ordered, taking the first steps toward the stairs, heading toward Kalasasaya. We were almost the only ones walking around the ruins along with a group of school kids visiting Tiwanaku accompanied by their teachers who were making a tremendous racket a short distance from us. In the face of such human solitude, my fear of running into the professor sharpened: If that woman had so many political resources in Bolivia, a simple call to the police accusing us of stealing archaeological artifacts was more than enough to get rid of us, keeping us from getting to the chamber before her. And it would be her word against ours.

As we cautiously went up the large stairs of Kalasasaya, little by little there appeared before our eyes a familiar and majestic figure that turned out to be the

Ponce Monolith, named for the archaeologist who discovered it, Carlos Ponce Sanjines. However, despite its imposing presence which seemed to rule over the immense terrace of Kalasasaya our gazes and steps went automatically and directly to the distant boundary of the temple, where, on the right, the unmistakable form of the Gate of the Sun could be made out. The whole story had begun there, in the reliefs of that gate, with Daniel's hand-made copy of the three-floored pyramid that served as a base for the Staff God. At that moment, without halting my steps and without being able to help it, I felt a knot form in my throat. How my brother would have enjoyed seeing his ideas set in motion and his discoveries about to be confirmed! I could almost feel him at my side, silent, but with an ear-to-ear smile of satisfaction. He had worked like a slave to reveal the secret of the Yatiri, and when he was about to achieve it he had fallen prisoner to his own discoveries. Some day, when he was better, I would make the journey again with him.

We kept going forward until we got to the great Gate, and, as the distance that separated us from it got narrower, the three of us entered a kind of magnetic field that attracted us with the same force with which gravity stuck us to the ground. Upon seeing that silhouette outlined in the sky, my mind jumped back to the night before our trip, shortly after I had asked Núria to reserve the flights and the hotel.

That afternoon in Barcelona, since we still had time to work a little before we had to eat dinner and Jabba and Proxi had to go home and pack their bags, we resumed our search for information on the Gate which was the only thing left for us to research in Tiwanaku. Marc dedicated himself to looking for images and printing them, Lola to researching the mysterious Staff God, and I to recopying all existing information on the monument.

The professor had told me that the Gate weighed more than thirteen tons which appeared to be confirmed by the internet pages that dealt with the subject. The dimensions were more varied, although they generally rounded it to ten feet high by thirteen feet wide. On the depth, I found no arguments: one and a half feet, unanimously.

The Gate of the Sun opened from nowhere to nothing. Its location was completely made up and no one seemed to know its real origin: Some said, because of its distant likeness, that it was the fourth gate of Puma Punku, the missing one, some that it came from some vanished monument, and some that it came from the Akapana Pyramid… No one was sure, but the real mystery was how a stone weighing thirteen tons had been moved from its place and left to rest, face down, on that Kalasasaya terrace on which it could be found today. The monument had a wide deep crack running from the upper right corner of the opening upward, on a diagonal, breaking the frieze in two. According to legend, a lightning bolt was the cause of that damage, but, although electrical storms were frequent on the Altiplano, it would have been difficult for such a phenomenon to have managed to cause such a fissure in a block of super-hard trachyte. Most likely, it had split by falling face down, but that wasn't clear either.

On the back side of the door there were such perfectly worked cornices and vaulted niches that it was difficult to understand how they could have been made without the help of modern machinery, and the same could be said of the frieze on the main facade, with its impressive Staff God in the middle. The God was Proxi's

subject, but when I was reading the descriptions of the Gate it was very hard to separate what was said about the God from what was said about everything else. That's how I discovered that practically all documents claimed that the little legless figure represented Viracocha, the Incan God, which again reminded me of the absolute misinformation that existed on the subject. Most experts had thrown out this theory a long time ago, according to what the professor had told me, yet few had gotten the message. The Staff God would keep being Viracocha for a long time, and the forty-eight figures that flanked him—twenty-four on each side, in three rows of eight—would continue to be forty-eight cherubs, just for having wings and a knee bent in a pose of running or reverence. It didn't matter that some of them had beautiful condor heads on human bodies: as long as no one could prove otherwise many would continue to see in those zoomorphic figures some little winged genies comparable in every way to angels.

Some of the most well-known archaeologists expounded, without reservation, the strange theory that the frieze was an agricultural calendar and that the figures of the frieze symbolized none other than the thirty days of the month, the twelve months of the year, the two solstices, and the two equinoxes. Maybe it was true, but it required a lot of imagination—or, surely, greater knowledge than my own—to venture such a proposal especially since some of those experts also asserted that the calendar of the Gate of the Sun, on top of being agricultural, might be Venusian, with two hundred ninety days, divided into ten months.

Nevertheless, just when my skepticism and my distrust brushed the limits of what I could put up with, I was given a great surprise. I was reading peacefully when I ran across an affirmation that shocked me. A researcher named Graham Hancock had discovered that on the Gate of the Sun a couple of animals were depicted that had gone extinct many thousands of years before, during a period in which, according to official science, Tiwanaku hadn't yet existed. Apparently, on the lower part of the frieze, on a fourth band of decorations that hadn't caught my attention, two Cuvieronius heads, one on each end of the thirteen feet of the lintel, and in another spot, a toxodon head. The incredible thing about this was that both species had disappeared from the face of the earth—along with many others all over the world—between ten and twelve thousand years ago at the end of the glacial period without anyone knowing why.

I got up from my seat and picked up all the enlargements of the Gate of the Sun that Jabba was printing on the laser printer. Despite distinguishing the forth band, I could make out nothing but some indistinct forms in the reliefs, so, after thinking for a moment, I went to my grandmother's room, hoping to find some of her reading glasses, and I was in luck because she had two pairs inside their cases sitting on the night table. Once I was in the study again with the improvised magnifying glasses, I passed one of them to Jabba, since he was already following my trail like a setter sniffing out his prey. The toxodon, an herbivore very similar to a rhinoceros but without the horn on the nose, we couldn't find anywhere, maybe because we didn't know what to look for, but the two Cuvieronius, which were identical to modern elephants, we found right away, unmistakable with their big ears, trunks, and tusks. They were indeed under the third and fourth columns of little winged genies, counting from the outside. It was awesome to look at them, confirming without question that the Gate of the Sun was more than ten thousand

years old, since it was impossible for the Tiwanakan artists to have ever seen an elephant in their lives, because they had never existed in South America; these could only be Cuvieronius, a prehistoric mastodon whose fossil remains did prove its presence in the continent, up to its sudden and inexplicable disappearance ten or twelve thousand years ago.

"And when do archaeologists say Tiwanaku was constructed?" Jabba asked, confused.

"Two hundred BC," I replied.

"Or two thousand two hundred years ago, right?"

I agreed with a guttural grunt.

"Well, it doesn't fit… It doesn't fit with these animals, or with Piri Reis' map, or with the supposed age of the Aymara language, or with the history of the Yatiri…."

Then, Proxi jumped with enthusiasm in her seat and turned quickly to look at us. Her eyes were shining.

"I'll save you the details and go right to what interests us," she exclaimed. "According to the last studies on the subject, the Staff God could really be Thunupa, remember? The god of the flood, of the rain and lightning."

"Damn! Tiwanaku is a small world, huh?" I said scornfully.

"Those marks he has on his cheeks seem like tears," she continued, "and the sticks would symbolize his power over lightning and thunder. Our friend Ludovico Bertonio gives a very odd bit of information in his famous dictionary: Thunupa, after the conquest, transformed into Ekeko, a god who still has many adepts among the Aymara, because, according to the archaeologist Carlos Ponce Sanjinés,[3-13] the rain, due to its scarcity, has become synonymous with abundance, and Ekeko is the god of abundance and happiness."

"Very imaginative," Jabba grumbled. Proxi didn't even blink.

"So the Aymara still worship Thunupa after so many thousands of years. Isn't that fantastic? The thing is, as you know, the map of the chamber is under the little feet of this god, and…" she drew out the sound and raised her tone, to draw attention to what she was about to say, "it turns out the name of the god has a very special meaning." Her face broadened in a wide smile of satisfaction. "Do you know what *Thunu* means in Aymara?"

"If you let me consult Bertonio's dictionary…" I said, moving as if to get up.

"You can consult as much as you want, but first, let me tell you. *Thunu,* in Aymara, means something that is hidden, concealed like the bulb of a plant underground, and the ending *pa* puts *thunu* in the third person singular. Or rather, Thunupa means that there's something hidden under the figure of the god. The god marks the spot."

Jabba and I remained silent for a few seconds, assimilating the surprising way in which the pieces kept falling into place, one after another.

"Maybe it's that simple," Jabba observed, with doubt in his voice.

"It's not simple!" Proxi exclaimed, still smiling. "It's perfect."

"But it doesn't tell us anything new!" I energetically objected. "We already know the god marks the spot. Where are the entrances to the chamber?"

"Use logic, Arnauet: If everything up to this point has been reflected in the frieze of the Gate of the Sun, the entrances to the secret passages also should appear

there. And if they appear, as can be expected, we've had them under our noses since the beginning, don't you think?"

I looked at her with the wide open eyes of a lunatic.

"Look at this enlargement of the Staff God," she continued, undaunted, holding out a paper to me which I took. "Describe the pyramid with three floors to me."

"Well… Like the name says, it's a pyramid, and it has three floors. Inside, there are a bunch of weird creatures and a square with a horned snake."

"What else?" Proxi prompted, seeing that I wasn't going to say anything else.

"Nothing else," I replied, "but if you want me to describe the god, too, I will."

"Do you see what the god has in his hands?"

"The sticks."

"And where are the sticks pointing?"

"Where should they be pointing?" I muttered, exasperated, but then I realized something. "Shouldn't they be pointing up?"

She smiled.

"But actually, it's as if the god were carrying them upside down: the beaks of the condors, or whatever they are, are pointing…"

"Toward?"

"Down. It's a little strange, isn't it?"

"And what are those upside-down sticks pointing at?" she insisted.

"At those weird things that stick out of… of the pyramid. Wow… You're right," I murmured, returning the paper, which she left on the table.

I was irritated with myself. How could I be such an idiot? I'd been seeing those protuberances on the pyramid since we found my brother's drawing, and though it seemed incredible, I hadn't paid much attention to them precisely because they were so weird. They were a decoration, one more ornamentation. My brain had completely ignored them, because they were inexplicable.

"As you can see, from both sides of the lowest step of the pyramid," she finished, "stick out two horizontal lines, which should represent the floor, but which, oddly, quickly turn upward, drawing a kind of chimney on each side, covered by an outlandish and nonsensical object."

"They look like…" Jabba murmured, examining another reproduction of the god. "Really, I don't know what they look like! Could they be representations of warrior helms?"

"Yes, and also extraterrestrial animals, or space ships," Proxi teased. "Notice that each one has one round deep eye, identical to the eyes of the god. But, well, who cares? Actually, I don't think they're anything other than a mark. Wherever these things show up in Tiwanaku, that's where the entrances to the passages will be. What do you think, Root?"

I didn't remember exactly what answer I had given her that night, but I obviously must have shown myself to be in agreement. All that conversation, held right before packing our bags to come to Bolivia, had come back to me in the short time it took us to cover the distance separating us from the real Gate of the Sun. Maybe the altitude sickness had erased two whole days of my life, but it had inarguably respected that last hour of work in Barcelona. And at last, there we were, in front of the Gate, separated from it only by the rickety wire that protected it. My eyes went right to the central figure of the god which in real life, with its

reliefs, and the shadows produced by the sunlight, looked like a little monster with evil intentions. There was Thunupa, the god of the flood, who hid a secret. His round eyes gazed at nothing, his arms, forming a "V," held the sticks (a dart thrower and a slingshot, said the guide Proxi was carrying), and from his elbows and belt hung human heads. Over his chest, on his breastplate, was repeated the image of the small snake that appeared at his feet, in the secret chamber that we would try to get to even though we weren't exactly sure how. And there was the three-tiered pyramid, full of hallways ending in the heads of pumas and condors, with the two side entrances that looked like chimneys covered in those strange warrior helms that also could be extraterrestrial animals or space ships equipped with eyes.

Jabba, who was pacing ceaselessly back and forth in front of the Gate, gave exclamations of admiration at the sight of his friends, the Cuvieronius-elephants, unmistakable enough to make us rail at the sky because of the indifference they provoked in official science, a science that claimed to be guided by what was empirically verifiable. Fine, there was the inarguable proof that the Gate, at least, had to have been made when those mastodons abounded on the Altiplano—at least eleven thousand years ago, that is. However, like with Piri Reis' map, no one seemed to pay any attention to them. I couldn't keep from asking myself "why" one more time. There had to be some reason. The fear of academic ridicule couldn't be a strong enough motivation to keep the truth from being investigated. Certainly, in the Middle Ages, the Inquisition had punished heresy with death, but now what reason could there be?

"Well, here we are," Proxi said, shooting photographs with her tiny digital camera. We had brought good computer equipment with us, in small sizes that allowed us to work in the hotel if necessary. All we had to do was download the images onto one of the laptops, and we could get whatever enlargements and prints we needed. The truth was, because of the altitude sickness, we still hadn't installed anything, and I began to feel remorseful over the pile of emails that Núria must have sent me and that would be awaiting response.

"It seems unreal," I commented, "that a week ago we hadn't even thought of coming to Taipikala, and today we're here."

"I hope the effort hasn't been wasted," Jabba said resentfully, just as he walked by us in his comings and goings between the Cuvieronius.

"Come on, let's not waste any more time," I declared. "We still have a lot to see."

The truth was, there wasn't much left of Akapana, only a couple of enormous stone terraces coming out of a hill covered in vegetation. We took it on faith that it was a pyramid with seven floors, because there was no clue showing that to be the case. On the top part of the hill, which we climbed from the back, we could see some kind of hole, which was presumably the deposit in which rain water was collected before it was made to circulate through the recently discovered zigzagging canals, whose purpose no one really knew. But if they were going to make channels, why with such a strange shape, if, after all, they weren't going to be seen?

Proxi let out a rude laugh.

"Well, if you think this is a disaster," she warned, "wait till we get to Lakaqullu which can't be much better."

“It will be worse, I’m sure,” I agreed despondently, remembering that Lakaqullu was completely buried under ground.

As the sun ascended in the sky and the morning progressed, the temperature became more agreeable. We ended up unfastening our jackets and taking off our sweaters, tying them around our waists so we wouldn’t get hot. There came a time when I even felt lucky to be wearing the panama hat, and what we were of course infinitely thankful for were the comfortable shoes that allowed us to go up hills, walk on dirt and stones, and easily tolerate the sharp fragments of old carved stone that abounded everywhere. The number of visitors grew along with the heat, and groups could be seen here and there. The noisy school children who had preceded us disappeared from our sight and hearing, surely to complete some sedentary scholarly activity, and in their place, the cicadas started to deafen us with their monotone rattles.

After that, a little over half a mile away from Akapana, the path through the ruins took us to its supposed twin, Puma Punku, where, apart from proving that the ornamental motifs really were marine, and that, since it was so perfect, the stone without a doubt had to have been worked with whatever it was the Aymara used as a mechanical drill, we were met with a little more of the same: total chaos in a sea of gigantic stones. We only ran into something unexpected when we rounded a bend on the hill: a metal fence enclosing an area that was clearly in the process of being excavated. There were people inside the perimeter, all uniformed with panama or cowboy hats or baseball caps, tee-shirts, shorts, and sturdy boots with their socks sticking out the top. There might have been about a dozen people total, going up and down ladders and carrying boxes back and forth. In one end of the fenced area, a big canvas military tent was being erected (the general headquarters, probably) with the emblem of the UNAR, the National Archeology Union.

“What was that about people not working on Saturdays, huh?” I asked sarcastically.

“Shut up and back away,” Jabba muttered at my side, grabbing my arm.

“But what’s going on?”

“She’s there, don’t you see her?” Proxi murmured, turning her back to the camp and walking slowly in the other direction. “She’s the one in the red tee-shirt.”

Before turning to follow my friends, I had time to make out the woman Proxi was talking about, but it seemed impossible to me that she could be Marta Torrent.

“It’s not her,” I murmured, while we walked away with the air of distracted tourists. “That isn’t the professor.”

“I saw her face, so keep walking and don’t stop.”

“Can’t you guys stop being so pig-headed, please?” I exclaimed, once we had rounded the hill and were out of sight of the excavation. “That woman in the red tee-shirt didn’t have the body or the look of a snooty and vain fifty-year-old woman, okay? She was covered in dirt and she had great legs.”

“Didn’t you hear Jabba say we saw her face? Her white hair was even sticking out from under her hat!”

“I’d bet my neck that you two are wrong.”

I remembered an older woman, elegantly dressed in a suit with a suede jacket, shoes with very thin heels, pearl earrings and necklace, a wide silver bracelet, and, over her eyes, narrow glasses with blue frames and a metal cord. Her movements were distinguished, and her voice and manner of speaking a little Gothic. What the hell did all that have to do with that much younger woman, with a cowboy hat, dusty boots, dirty short-sleeved tee-shirt, and old military shorts, carrying boxes like a longshoreman? Please! Not even if she were Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

"Okay, we're wrong, but let's get out of here in case she decides to come over." We walked back toward Akapana as if the devil were behind us.

"Maybe we should leave," Jabba muttered pensively.

"Yonson Ricardo will come for us after fourteen hundred hours," Proxi remembered, repeating the expression the taxi driver had said to us and that had left us breathless, "and we still have a little over two hours."

"But we have his cellular number," I said, also imitating the Bolivian manner of speaking.

"No, we won't leave," she broke in, very decisive. "We'll look for the entrances to the chamber of Lakaqullu, and we'll figure out how to go about it, exactly as we were planning, though we'll pay close attention to whoever comes near us."

At the second intersection of dirt paths, we turned left, heading toward Putuni, the Palace of Tombs. According to the guidebook, that was where the priests of Tiwanaku had lived, in rooms with colored walls located next to the strange hollows in the floor. This information surprised us a great deal, because according to what we had read when we were in Barcelona, the supposed residence of the Capacas and the Yatiri had been Kerikala, the building we would visit next. Anyway, it turned out there wasn't much left to see: That supposed impregnable door couldn't even be seen anymore, the one that had confused the conquistadors, making them believe great treasures were hidden there.

Kerikala was the penultimate disappointment, although I shouldn't call it that, because if we were going to pass judgment on the past, the Acropolis of Athens could be considered a contemptible remnant of what it had been in the height of its splendor. Nevertheless, what was undeniable was that, between the conquistadors and natives, a great job of systematic and tenacious destruction had been done. Maybe the nearby town of Tiahuanaco (especially its cathedral) and the Guaqui-La Paz Railroad had been a source of national pride, or maybe they had a really important social function, but nothing justified the devastation that had occurred in a place as important and irreplaceable as Taipikala.

And at last we arrived at Lakaqullu, situated to the north of Kerikala. We could hardly believe we were really there, although "there" could be summed up in few words: a mound of red earth with four stone stairs that ended in a green andesite doorway so simple and unadorned that it could very well have come from any modern brick factory. Around us, the country was covered in high scrub, right up to the barbed wire fence that surrounded Tiwanaku. Straining our vision a little, we could make out trucks and buses driving on the highway behind the enclosure.

"Is that all?" I asked grumpily. I don't know what I had been expecting, maybe something more attractive, more beautiful, or the opposite, something so ugly that it attracted notice. Of everything we had inspected that morning in Taipikala,

Lakaqullu was the meanest and most miserable. There was nothing there, and when I say nothing, I mean literally nothing.

We were alone facing the stairs. The rest of the tourists visiting the place didn't even bother to get close: It was far away from the rest of the ruins, and really, there wasn't much to see.

"Hey, Root," Proxi said, defiant, "do you have your feet on the ground?"

"Of course. Do you want me to float?"

"Well, under your shoes is the secret that can return sanity to your brother."

I didn't react. Proxi was right: Under my feet, who knows how deep, there was a chamber sealed by the Yatiri before they left into exile, and in that place was hidden the secret of their strange programming language. If my brother had any hope of recovering his life it was, as the mercenary had said, under my shoes. That place was very sacred, the most important place in Taipikala. The Yatiri had left many valuable things there, in the hope of returning someday, or so that they might be of use to a humanity in a time of hardship. And no one knew except us, and perhaps the professor, who had announced with much fanfare that she was ready to show the world that Lakaqullu was an important place.

"Fine," I started to say, full of a new energy. "We'll split up. The signs that will show us the entrance to the chimneys are supposed to be around here."

"The Gate is in the middle," Jabba pointed out, going up the stairs and positioning himself in front of it as he opened his arms and touched the jambs with his hands. "If the pyramid with three floors is square, as we read, and there are two chimneys, as is depicted on the pedestal of the god Thunupa, we should suppose that the orientation is marked by this gate. So, you, Root, go to the right," and he pointed out the direction with his right hand, "and you, Proxi, go to the left."

"Hey, tough guy," she protested, putting her hands on her hips, "and what might we suppose you will be doing?"

"Watching to see if the professor's coming. You don't want her to catch us, right?"

"You have a lot of nerve…!" I exclaimed, laughing as I started to walk in a straight line from the right side of the Gate of the Moon, heading east.

"Don't you know it!" Proxi yelled, moving away in the opposite direction.

I waded into the weeds, which came up to my knees, with an annoying feeling of apprehension. My natural habitat was the city, with its pollution, its cement, and its bustle, and my habitual ground, asphalt. The profound background silence and constant cicada song attacking my ears didn't agree with me, neither did walking in the country, tramping through bushes in which the alarming presence of unknown creatures could be heard. I had never been a child who collected beetles, silk worms, or lizards. In my current house in Barcelona not even a fly or an ant got in, or any other kind of insect, in spite of the garden, because Sergi took great care to prevent it. I was an urbanite accustomed to breathing pollution and climate controlled air, to driving a nice car through crowded streets, and to communicating with the world through the most advanced technologies, so seeing nature live wasn't healthy for my body. Give me a place to stand, and I shall move the world, said Archimedes; give me a bit of fiber optic cable and a computer, and I

will take on the world or I'll change it from top to bottom, but don't make me walk in the country like Heidi, because I'll feel sick.

Okay, so there I was, dragging myself through weeds, with my backbone bent over like a cotton-picking slave, and separating the bushes with my naked hands to examine the dirt ground in search of something that looked like a warrior's helm, an extraterrestrial animal, or a space ship. What a mess.

"You're getting off course, Arnau!" Jabba shouted. "Turn a little to the right!"

"You could be doing this, you ass…" I grumbled through clenched teeth, doing what he said.

I advanced step by step, very slowly, dodging the edges of stones that dotted the land, hidden by the vegetation, trying to keep the huge ants from biting my fingers.

I must have only covered about a hundred feet when I heard an exclamation at my back and turned around to see Jabba rapidly descending the stairs and running in Proxi's direction. I didn't think twice before I also shot off in her direction like a lunatic with the hope that nothing had happened to her and that all that commotion was because we had found one of the entrances. When I got to them, Proxi was leaning down, with one knee on the ground, using her hand to clean what looked like a small commemorative plaque, one of those that have an ostentatious text engraved on the stone. Jabba also knelt on the ground, and I did the same, panting from the effort of running. There in the middle of the plate was our warrior's helm or space ship, the same drawing that appeared on the three-floored pyramid at the feet of Thunupa. If we hadn't known that all that obeyed a purpose strategically conceived five or six hundred years ago, the plaque would have looked to us like one of so many fragments of stone with which Taipikala was carpeted. Nevertheless, despite barely sticking out of the ground and being hidden by the vegetation and covered in red earth and dead leaves, it was none other than the lock that would allow (or impede) our descent into the chamber of the Yatiri.

"Okay, and now what?" I asked, also cleaning the stone with the palm of my hand.

"Should we try to lift it?" Jabba proposed.

"And if someone sees us?"

"Proxi, keep watch."

"Why me?" she objected, with a cross expression.

"Because lifting stones," Jabba explained, with a paternal sounding tone, "is a job for men."

She stood up slowly and, as she brushed her hands off on her pants, murmured:

"You know, you're idiots."

Jabba and I started to pull up on the plaque, each of us on one side, but that lump of stone obviously wasn't coming up an inch.

"Idiots?" I muttered, stretching and preparing for another try. "Why idiots?"

The second attempt didn't do anything either, so, together, we began to push the stone in one direction, to see if we could manage to move it, since it probably wasn't very deep.

"Because a secret password can be found out using brute force, like we did with the password to Daniel's computer, but a code can only be understood using the

intellect. And I don't need to remind you that the Yatiri worked with code, geniuses. It's a language, and languages aren't learned by memorizing millions of random words, thinking that the ones of the language we want to learn are among them, which is what, basically, you two are doing right now."

A little worn out, I stood to look at her, clutching my lower back.

"What are you trying to say with that whole monologue?"

"That you should stop acting like asses, and start to use your brains."

Okay, it made sense. The whole history we were dealing with was a play of light and shadow, so launching ourselves like animals at the plaque might not accomplish anything.

"And how do we open it?" I asked. Jabba had sat down on the ground with his legs crossed, like a fat Buddha.

"I don't know," Proxi murmured, furrowing her brow and photographing the plaque from various angles, "but everything's on the Gate of the Sun, so it would be a good idea to go back and examine it. It has a lot of details that we still haven't given any attention to."

"The problem is, it's almost fourteen hundred hours," I said, looking at my watch.

The three of us remained in silence, thinking.

"And I'm starving," Jabba announced, as if that were something new.

"Let's go," Proxi resolved. "We'll tell Yonson Ricardo to take us to eat something somewhere nearby, and we'll come back this afternoon."

I leaned over to cover the plaque with the earth we had removed, to hide it, and Marc beat weeds to rearrange them. Then we set off down the path toward the exit.

"Have you noticed that everything we discovered in Barcelona is coming true?" Proxi asked in a tone of intimate satisfaction as we walked by the ticket booth.

We didn't answer. She was right, and it was a fantastic feeling.

Yonson Ricardo was waiting for us right there, with a wide smile on his face, leaning against one of the doors of his Radio-Taxi. Of course he could be content, because without doing hardly anything that day, he was going to make a ton of money. So when we told him to take us to eat close by because we wanted to go back in the afternoon, his face lit up.

Driving like a lunatic for a change, he took us to the town of Tiahuanaco, just a few minutes from the ruins, and he covered the distance in a flash. The town was pretty, with low houses, and a clean, pleasant look. The Aymara vendors, with their voluminous multicolored skirts, their fringed blankets, and their long black braids trailing from under their bowler hats, flooded the streets, selling dried chiles, lemons, and purple potatoes. According to what Yonson Ricardo told us, if the Aymara women wore the bowler hat at an angle, it meant they were single, and if they wore it sitting evenly on their head, it meant they were married.

"Tiahuanaco Cathedral, ladies and gentlemen! San Pedro!" he informed us suddenly, as we passed in front of a small colonial-style church with a lot of bicycles parked next to its railing.

Naturally, we barely had time to glance at it, because by the time he had finished yelling, we were already too far away. I would have liked to visit it to find out whether its stones still had the remains of old Tiwanakan carvings, but Yonson Ricardo, kicking up a great cloud of dust, was already stopping the car in

front of a little ocher-colored house, which, with white letters painted on the facade, proclaimed itself to be “Hotel Tiahuanacu.” On the outside wall was a poster for Taquiña Export, the most famous beer in Bolivia.

“The best restaurant in town!”

Exchanging glances to discreetly communicate the serious doubts we had on the matter, we got out of the car and went into the place. Yonson Ricardo disappeared into the kitchen of the restaurant after introducing us to Don Gastón Ríos, the owner of the hotel, who very amiably accompanied us to a small table and recommended the grilled trout. The sun came in through the windows, and the living-dining room was very full of people who were chatting animatedly, producing an annoying background noise that forced us to talk in yells.

“It looks like our taxi driver gets his commission for bringing the tourists here in the kitchen,” Proxi voiced with a smile.

“In this country, they have to live on their wits,” I said. “They’re very poor.”

“The poorest in all of South America,” she agreed. “While you were sick from the altitude, I was reading the newspapers, and it turns out that more than seventy percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The dictatorial governments they had during the seventies made the foreign debt shoot up above four thousand million dollars, but the worst is that the money wasn’t meant for the country, but, according to this guy[3-14] quoted in an article, almost three quarters of it was deposited in personal accounts in North American banks. So, since then, the Bolivians pay more taxes, have lost their jobs, barely have health care, don’t get an education, etc., and all that just to return some money appropriated by four thieves. The poorest of all, those who live in the most extreme misery, are the indigenous, who don’t have any other option but to dedicate themselves to cultivating coca to survive.”

“I don’t get it,” Jabba roared, angry. “In Spain, if you ask the bank for a loan, they ask for everything including your mother’s baptism certificate. But some country led by shameless crooks asks for multi-million-dollar loans from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank and, hey, no problem: here are your millions, friends, do whatever you want to with them. Now, of course, the people have to shoulder the consequences and pay it back, even if it means dying of hunger. I swear I don’t understand it!”

Indignant and riled up, we kept debating the subject, thinking up solutions that weren’t within the power of three miserable individuals lost in the world, and so we ate some kind of soup with some strange sweet potatoes and a lot of spices, without really noticing what we were eating. When they were bringing out the next course, putting the trout in front of us, the door to the dining room opened one more time to let in a large group of people dressed in tee-shirts, shorts, and sturdy leather boots. And, yes, the professor was at the front, next to a guy with a waxed head, glasses, and a short grayish beard. They were talking animatedly, followed by a troop of young archaeologists who made more of a ruckus than the whole dining room combined. Don Gastón, with a friendliness that dripped respect and devotion, headed toward them and led them to a large table in the back, which seemed to be waiting for them.

I felt my blood run cold. If they saw us, we were lost. My friends had also noticed their arrival, and the three of us were petrified like statues, following the

professor with our gazes. She, fortunately, hadn't seen us, distracted as she was by chatting with Don Gastón and the bald man. They took all the seats around the long table, and, with much enthusiasm, kept on with their racket. They seemed content.

"We can't stay here," Proxi murmured.

We couldn't hear her.

"What did you say?"

"That we can't stay here!" she yelled.

"But we can't leave, either," I warned. "If we get up, she'll see us."

"So what do we do?" Jabba stammered.

But it was already too late. From the corner of my eye, I could see how Marta Torrent moved her gaze, lost in thought, over all the tables in the room, and how, suddenly, she stopped at ours, and then on me, examining me attentively and changing her expression from happy to serious and concentrated.

"She's seen me."

"Fuck!" Jabba exclaimed, smacking the table with his hand.

It wasn't worth the effort to keep acting like children playing at hide and seek. I had to confront that look and return the recognition, so I turned my head, looked at her with the same seriousness with which she was examining me, and weathered the storm with all the coldness in the world. Neither of us made the least gesture of greeting and neither of us looked away. I already knew her game, so this time I wasn't caught unawares. It wouldn't be I who backed down or lost my nerve. And we stayed like that for a few seconds, which seemed, like never before in my life, to go on forever.

When the situation was no longer bearable, the bald man leaned toward her and told her something. Without stopping staring at me, the professor answered him, then stood, pushing the seat back and beginning to walk sideways behind the table. She came toward me, so, like a mirror, I, too rose from my seat, left the wrinkled napkin next to my plate, and moved forward. But not much. Not enough for us to meet each other halfway. She was the one who should come to my territory, so I stopped two steps away, turning my back on Jabba and Proxi. I'm sure that she noticed my intention.

My friends had been right on the money when they recognized her at the excavation of Puma Punku, and it was I who had been wrong, blocked by a preconceived idea about how that woman ought to be and dress. Unfortunately, with her new look, she seemed much younger and more human, much more of a person, and that bothered me. Luckily, she still had that icy expression that gave me back my assurance at having recognized the enemy. Her hair was white and messy, with the circular mark from her hat, and her work clothes took away almost ten years all at once. That surprising transformation didn't escape my notice, especially now that I had her right in front of me, very close. We must have formed an odd image, because her head came up to exactly the height of my neck, yet despite that, she didn't give the impression of being shorter than I. Such was the strength she exuded.

"I knew I would see you around here very soon, Mr. Queralt," she intoned in her deep and beautiful voice, by way of a greeting.

"And I was sure I would find you when I came to Tiwanaku, Dr. Torrent."

We stood in silence for a few seconds, watching each other defiantly.

"Why are you here?" she wanted to know, although she didn't seem to have any doubts on the subject. "Why have you come?"

"I know it's all the same to you," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest, "but, to me, my brother is the most important person in the world, and I'm prepared to do whatever is necessary to help him."

She looked at me strangely, and, surprisingly, showed the beginnings of a smile.

"So then, either Daniel stole more documents from me than what you brought to my office, or you and your friends…" she said, glancing quickly at the table behind me, "are very clever, and have managed to accomplish in few days what has taken others years of hard work."

"I'll let your repeated accusation of theft pass, because it's not worth the effort to argue with you, Dr. Torrent. Time will put everyone in his or her place, and you will be sorry, one way or another, for having insulted my brother like that. By the way…" I observed, stepping aside and using an exaggeratedly polite voice. "These are my friends, Lola Riera and Marc Martí. This is Dr. Torrent, whom I've told you so much about."

Both of them, on their feet, held out their hands, and the professor shook them without changing the sullen look on her face. Really, no one smiled. Then she turned to me.

"As you have said, time will put us all in our place, Mr. Queralt. I don't doubt it. But while it does, and given that I can't know what your true intentions are, let me remind you that any excavation done in Tiwanaku without the necessary legal authorization is a very serious crime in this country, and carries penalties that could keep you and your friends in jail for the rest of your lives."

"Very well, Doctor, but now it is my turn to remind you that in Spain, the theft or plagiarism of academic research materials is also a punishable offense, and that your prestige could be sunk forever along with your position at the university and your good name."

She smiled ironically.

"Don't forget your words," she said, and, turning, slowly moved away with that elegant gait that I had already seen in Barcelona, and that didn't fit at all well with her current appearance.

I moved quickly, returning to my seat, while Marc and Lola remained standing, like those dolls that have a weight in the bottom, and, as much as you push them, always pop back upright.

"Do you mind sitting, already?" I told them, angry. "Nothing's happened here, okay? So come on, let's eat, the trout's getting cold."

"I can't believe it," Proxi stammered, dropping heavily onto her chair. "Christ, did you hear how she threatened us?"

"Did I hear her right?" Jabba hesitated. "I still have my stomach in a knot imagining myself when I'm sixty in a Bolivian prison."

"Come on, don't pay any attention to her! Didn't I tell you what she was like? Did I not warn you? Well, now you've seen it for yourselves! She's willing to do anything to keep us from wrecking her discovery! A discovery that belongs to my brother!"

Marc and Lola looked at me in such a way that I knew the professor had managed to make them doubt.

"Are you sure, Arnau?" Proxi asked. "Don't get offended, please, but… Are you completely sure?"

I clicked my tongue and sighed.

"You know Daniel, Lola. I can't offer you anything beyond that."

She lowered her head, upset.

"You're right, I'm sorry. It's just that that woman talks with such conviction that she could make even the Holy Ghost have doubts!"

"As hard as I try," Jabba added, in low spirits, "I can't imagine Daniel stealing. But I must admit that witch has made me distrust him."

"So are we going back to Tiwanaku, or not?" Proxi asked, looking at me.

"Of course we're going back. Even if we don't get anything today, at least we can keep studying the way to get in."

We finished eating, wrapped in a gloomy silence, and after paying the bill, we left there without looking once in the professor's direction. Yonson Ricardo took us back to the ruins and promised to return at six o'clock to take us back to La Paz. But we were no longer in the same good mood as we had been in the morning. We walked around, dejected and serious, noticing how the cold got more intense as evening fell.

Like injured survivors of a shipwreck, we returned to the Gate of the Sun, and with the daylight dimming, we got to work examining the many details that marvelous work of art hid in its design, especially in the loaded figure of the god Thunupa. Any small detail seemed to be full of significance, but the real problem was that I at least had my mind somewhere else, and it was very hard to concentrate on what we were looking for. My mind wandered, trapped by the malicious look of the god's round eyes, eyes that seemed to dive inside me, making familiar echoes resonate from a past so long ago it seemed unknown. I knew there was a truth there, but I lacked the weapons necessary to interpret it. I felt helpless in my ignorance; I wanted to know why people as normal as Marc, Lola, or I had worshiped that legless being thousands of years ago, why what was now only a figure that attracted tourists had once been a powerful—maybe feared, maybe loved—god, carrier of some inverted staffs that no one knew how to interpret, and why science was so protective of its own image of infallibility and so fearful of accepting truths that escaped its comprehension, or of asking questions that could guide it to uncomfortable responses.

Tired of being on my feet, and also of breathing such oxygen-poor air, I dropped onto the naked ground and sat with my legs crossed Indian-style, facing the same barbed wire, not caring if the giant ants walked up my legs. I was tired of not understanding, and I couldn't have cared less if the professor, or anyone, passed by and saw me sitting on the ground like a rude guest. Jabba and Proxi had moved away to look from a certain distance, but I was sitting almost underneath the Gate, and didn't plan on moving. Wearied by having gotten so far just to end up failing, I looked up at the god as if hoping he would right the injustice.

And he did. It was a spark of comprehension, an epiphany. The spot where I was sitting placed me almost at the feet of Thunupa, and when I looked up, suddenly the perspective of the gate changed, offering me a new image of the god

that unexpectedly clarified everything. How had it not occurred to us before? We had to pray!

"You have to pray!" I shouted, like a lunatic. "Come here, come here! The key is here. You have to pray for the god's help!"

Jabba and Proxi, who were already running toward me, immediately understood what I was trying to tell them, and they dropped to the ground, kneeling at my side, looking upward, raising their eyes to Thunupa, the god of the flood whom you had to ask for help if a similar catastrophe happened again.

"Do you see it?" I cried. "Do you see it? Look at the staffs!"

From our position, the condor beaks that tipped the staffs were piercing the deep round holes that, like eyes identical to the god's, were on the helms, ships, or extraterrestrial animals that covered the chimneys. What we saw perfectly clearly was the god brandishing those sticks and forcefully embedding them into the round cavities.

"That's, that's…" Proxi chanted, fascinated. "As simple as that."

"But we had to pray!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. "Only by kneeling before the god could we discover the message."

"And it makes all the sense in the world," Jabba agreed. "Like you said, Proxi, the Yatiri, when they left, hid the way to get into the chamber only until its contents became necessary. And necessity brings supplication. Besides, look at the position of those little characters in the bands on the sides: they look like they're kneeling, begging. We should have noticed before."

"You're right," I admitted, examining the false winged cherubs. "They were saying what had to be done. How did we not see it?"

"Because we didn't pay attention to them. The Yatiri left everything in sight."

"No, no… Something doesn't fit. This gate is much older," Proxi objected, pensive, "thousands of years older than the arrival of the Inca and the Spanish."

"It's very possible that all this had been planned since the flood," I said, standing and shaking off my pants, "and the sixteenth century Capacas and Yatiri were carrying out a plan thought up thousands of years before. Don't forget that they possessed secrets and knowledge they transmitted from generation to generation, and this could very well be one of those secrets. They were special beings who knew what had happened ten thousand years before, and also knew what they had to do in case of a catastrophe or an invasion."

"We're speculating!" Jabba protested. "Really, we don't even know if we're going to be able to open the entrances, so why so many questions about things we'll never be able to know?"

"Jabba's right," Proxi murmured, also standing. "The first thing is to see if we can embed a staff with a condor beak in the eye of the figure on the plaque."

"As if that were so easy!" I exclaimed, taken aback. "Where the hell?" And suddenly, I remembered. "The staffs the Yatiri in the Witches' Market in La Paz sell!"

"Cross your fingers that tomorrow, Sunday, the cursed market will be open," Jabba grumbled.

"So let's go," I said. "Anyway, today we only came to examine the terrain. We're not prepared to go inside."

“Tomorrow, we have a lot to do,” Proxi confirmed, starting to cross the terrace of Kalasasaya in the direction of the exit, “so call Yonson Ricardo’s cellular phone and tell him to come find us.”

Sunday afternoon we got up late and had a relaxed breakfast before leaving for the market, which, luckily, according to what they told us in the hotel, opened every day. So, walking and enjoying the sun, we headed toward Linares Street, close to the Church of San Francisco, ready to find the Yatiri of the twenty-first century, distanced, apparently, from their authentic origin and their ancestors. The market was so packed with people that we could barely do anything other than let ourselves be taken by the tide, a tide that to our impatience moved with the slowness of a glacier. Those Bolivians should see what a Saturday afternoon in Las Ramblas or Passeig de Gràcia in Barcelona was like.

“Do you want me to read your destiny in the coca leaves, señor?” a Yatiri with a round face and cheeks like apples asked me from her stall. I couldn’t stop fixating on the normality and joy with which coca circulated around there. I had to remind myself that, in that place, it was a product that had been consumed for thousands of years to prevent hunger, tiredness, and cold.

“No, thank you,” I answered. “But, do you have staffs of Viracocha?”

The woman looked at me in an indecipherable way.

“Those are nonsense, señor,” she replied; the human current was pulling me away, “souvenirs for tourists, and I’m an authentic *kallawaya*... a Yatiri,” she clarified, thinking my surprised face came from ignorance, when it was the complete opposite: I remembered very well how the Yatiri’s account of Taipikala explained that the Capacas who left for Cusco and maintained their role as doctors for the Orejona nobility came to be known as *kallawayas*. “I can offer you any kind of medicine that you need,” she continued. “I have herbs to cure all ills, even those of love. Amulets against evil spirits and offerings for the Pachamama.”

“No, thanks,” I repeated, “I only want staffs of Viracocha.”

“Go to Sagárnaga Street, then,” she said amiably. “You’ll find them there.”

“And what street is that?” I asked her, twisting my head to look at her, but she didn’t hear me, attentive to other possible clients passing in front of her stall.

The tables in the stands were loaded with a great variety of products, but all of them had an abundance of llama fetuses, which were quite repugnant in the sunlight. They were like mummified chickens, but with four legs and skin blackened from being dried or smoked. They were being exhibited like trophies, in groups, and the biggest, richest stands were those that had the most, hung up next to cellophane bags containing what appeared to be candy wrapped in bright colored paper, but wasn’t that at all; or next to bottles that imitated those of champagne, with a yellow or red aluminum cap hiding the stopper, and which turned out to be sparkling wine with strange mixes of herbs; or hanging from hooks above huge quantities of little envelopes that gave the impression of containing seeds to plant flowers, but they weren’t seeds, they hid concoctions for performing charms or for escaping them. Basically, you had to see it to believe it. And, in front of each stall was a Yatirikallawaya, happy in his or her knowledge and place in the world, aware of the sacred power of the products he or she sold.

Proxi was taking photographs left and right: first an Aymara boy who sold globes full of water, and then an old woman who was offering multicolored fabrics

with designs very similar to, although not the same as, the *tocapus* that their ancestors had used in ancient times as written communication. Jabba, however, prepared to run every risk, put anything in his mouth he was offered to try, without caring about hygiene or possible side effects. It was not likely that he would get sick, because he had a bomb-proof stomach, but I did not, and just from seeing him suck little bones of an unknown origin and swallow questionably colored pastes, I was starting to feel ill. Luckily, upon turning a corner, we began to see stalls with different articles, more utilitarian objects than things to eat, such as wool hats, short-legged dolls, necklaces, cheap colognes, some very strange little feminine figures…

"Have you seen this?" Jabba asked me, pointing at the ten or fifteen little statues representing a pregnant woman with big ears and a conical head. "Oryana!"

"Do you want a Mother Orejona?" the vendor asked us quickly, noticing our interest.

"Mother Orejona?" I repeated.

"The goddess who protects the home, señor," the Yatiri explained, raising one of those images in the air. "She takes care of home, family, and especially of pregnant women and mothers."

"It's incredible," Jabba muttered in a lowered voice. "They still worship Oryana after thousands of years!"

"Yes, but they don't know who she is, really," I replied, gesturing for the vendor to show me some short-legged dolls; one of those monsters would be the perfect gift for Dani.

"Would the gentleman like an Ekeko, the god of good luck?"

Jabba and I looked at each other significantly, while the vendor put a plastic doll representing a little white man, with a mustache and legs as short as those of the Viracocha of Tiwanaku, in my hand. And it wasn't surprising; after all, according to what we knew, the Staff God was none other than Thunupa, the god of rain and the flood, who had transversed the centuries transformed into Ekeko. The doll had the traditional Andean wool hat, cone-shaped and with ear flaps, and a frightful Spanish guitar in his hands.

"You're not thinking of buying that, are you?" Jabba grimaced.

"I need a present for my nephew," I explained, very serious, paying the vendor the twenty-five bolivianos he asked for.

"What you need is a psychiatrist. The poor kid's going to have nightmares for years."

Nightmares? It's not as if Ekeko was very attractive, really, but I was sure Dani would know how to appreciate its worth, and would enjoy the beauty of destroying it.

"Over here!" Proxi called suddenly, pointing to a stand in which a bunch of staffs of Viracocha could be seen.

On the stall's wooden table, dozens of staffs ending in condor heads were being displayed for sale, and to the great joy of the Yatiri, we bought five, which is to say, all those that measured between thirty and forty inches since those were, to the eye, the dimensions of the Thunupa on the Gate and of his original staffs.

We ate in a restaurant in the area and kept wandering like tourists for the rest of the afternoon until it was time to return to the hotel. We had a lot of work to do so we ordered dinner to be sent up to Jabba and Proxi's room, which was bigger, and we concentrated on the practical aspects of the task we would undertake the next day. But first, I connected to the internet to download my email. I had twenty-eight messages, most of them from Núria, so I read all of them and summed up the replies to all of them in one long email. Meanwhile, Proxi had connected the digital camera to the other laptop and was loading the pictures she had taken in Tiwanaku. She made a life-sized enlargement of the plaque on the ground of Lakaqullu and printed it in fragments on the small travel printer.

If we turned out to be lucky, and it really did work to stab the groove in the warrior's helm with the staff, what came next was a complete mystery, but even so, there were certain details we were clear on: we would go through passageways that no one had set foot in for five hundred years, we would be without light, we might possibly run into vermin or traps, and, most important of all, we would need to take "JoviLoom," because if we made it inside the chamber of the traveler, it wouldn't do us any good to be there if we weren't capable of reading the gold sheets. So the translator was indispensable, and all of the laptop's batteries (the original and the backup ones) should be charged and ready.

We made a list with what we would have to buy the next day before leaving for Tiwanaku, very conscious of the fact that our supplies should take up as little space as possible, so as not to awaken the curiosity of the guards at the gate, those we had seen occasionally checking purses and backpacks. According to the guidebooks, it was common for some unscrupulous tourists to try to take stones with them as souvenirs. The idea of slipping in at night, outside of visiting hours, as we had planned to do at first, was discarded quickly, because after having been there the three of us agreed that it would be suicide to wander in the dark around that stony terrain, running the risk of getting hurt or bashing our heads in. So we would do it in the afternoon, with light, taking advantage of the solitude of Lakaqullu and the site's scanty security.

The next morning, we crossed all of La Paz's downtown, to the luxurious residential neighborhoods of Sopacachi and Obrajes, in the lower part of the city, where there were shopping centers, banks, art galleries, movie theaters.... There, in various stores, we acquired three Petzl LED headlights, another three Mini-Maglites (as slender as a pen and no longer than the palm of your hand), a couple of rolls of caving rope, anti-abrasion gloves, some small Bushnell binoculars, a Silva Eclipse-99 compass, and several Wenger multi-use pocketknives. It might seem counterintuitive that we would find such expensive brands in such a poor and debt-ridden country, but, apart from the fact that Bolivia was a common destination for alpinists, it turned out that because of its nearness to the United States, it had the best and most modern products, long before, even, they arrived in Spain, which we saw with our very own stunned eyes in the computer stores of Sopocachi. Another thing that was different was that they were available for most of the population to buy them—they couldn't, obviously—but there they were, at the disposal of the people of that country who had money and of tourists with funds.

At noon, we returned to the hotel and called Yonson Ricardo to ask him if he could take us back to Tiwanaku that afternoon.

"No, I won't be able to," he told us, without a trace of regret, "because today is a holiday for my team of taxis and it could cause problems for me with the union, but I'll leave you in good hands. My son Freddy will take you in his own car, and you can pay him the same amount you gave me the other day. What do you think?"

It didn't seem very fair, because we had paid the father for a whole day of work and it was already almost halfway through that Monday, and besides, Freddy wasn't a taxi driver, but it wasn't worth making our lives difficult over trifles or for a quantity of bolivianos that, in euros, was negligible, so we accepted.

Freddy turned out to be a more reckless driver than his father, but we were so worried about what we had to do that we almost didn't care if we crashed into some old vehicle carrying animals, or if we tumbled off the road and down the Altiplano. Fortunately, none of that happened, and we landed alive in Taipikala, with our staffs of Viracocha in our hands like silly souvenirs, like visitors who had arrived directly from the Witches' Market. No one stopped us or searched our bags. We paid for the tickets and went in very relaxed, ready to take a look, first of all, at the excavation of Puma Punku to see if the professor was around. And yes, she was: I could see her clearly through the binoculars, sitting in front of a table, writing in a big notebook. So we walked toward Lakaqullu, giving the Semi-Subterranean Temple a wide berth so we wouldn't be discovered.

When we had left Putuni Palace behind us we were alone in the vast extension of terrain that separated us from our objective. There was not a soul to be seen, and the cold wind got stronger when it found no buildings to impede its passage, buffeting the vegetation pitilessly this way and that. We walked in silence, stunned by what was drawing near, by what we were going to do. Jabba and Proxi held hands; I withdrew more and more, and shrunk into myself like I always did when I felt afraid. It didn't scare me to break some rule or another in Spain, or to leave my tag in the most protected and prohibited of places, or to slip into official systems with my computer to achieve whatever purpose I had proposed for myself, but never in my life would it have occurred to me to invade an archaeological monument at the risk of damaging it, and what's more, in a foreign country as was the case now. I didn't have any idea of what could happen, I felt I didn't control the situation, and that made me nervous and scared, even if I didn't show it at all, since my steps were still firm and my expression decided. Sarcastically, I thought that in this the professor and I were very similar: Both of us knew how to hide our true thoughts.

We found the second plaque with the warrior's helm at the same distance from the Gate of the Moon as the first, but to the east. We thought that it would be a good idea to find it before starting to stab staffs, in case it was necessary to pierce both at once. It was exactly the same as the other, although much more damaged, and since we were there, we decided to start with that plaque and not waste any more time. Jabba firmly gripped the smallest staff, the thirty-inch one, and stuck it slowly into the eye of the extraterrestrial animal until the eye's circumference stopped it, and then the plaque, along with ten square feet of the vegetation around it, started to sink slowly and silently, with Jabba and one of my feet on top

of it. Alarmed, we jumped back to get off the small elevator that was disappearing into the depths of the earth, while Proxi let out an exclamation of joy and bent down to look.

"The entrance!" she shouted over the distant sound of stones that was coming from the bottom.

My heart pounded a thousand beats a minute, so, given the scant oxygen available, I felt myself getting dizzy and had to sit down immediately. But I wasn't the only one: Marc, white as paper, dropped to the ground at the same time as I.

"What's wrong with you guys?" Proxi asked, surprised, looking back and forth between the two of us. Since she had knelt down to look, our three heads were at the same height.

"This country's miserable excuse for air!" Jabba blurted, opening and closing his mouth like a fish on the deck of a boat.

"Right," I panted, "blame the air."

We looked at each other and broke into laughter. There we both were, as agile as drunk ducks, while Proxi was radiating enthusiasm.

"We're worthless," Jabba told me, the color returning to his face, little by little.

"I agree."

From the bottom of that hole, there came an intimidating breath of the tomb, a whiff of earthy humidity that turned the stomach. I knelt next to Proxi to look, and saw some dangerously sloped stone stairs disappearing into the shadowy depths. I took the flashlight out of my bag and turned it on: The stairs went so far down that we couldn't see where they ended.

"Do we have to go down there?" Jabba mumbled.

I didn't answer him because the response was obvious. Without thinking twice, I stood, wrapped the strap of the LED headlight around my head, turned it on, and like a miner, I began very carefully to descend that steep and narrow stairway that seemed to lead to the center of the Earth. My whole foot didn't even fit on each step, so I had to step with my feet twisted a little bit sideways so I wouldn't lose my balance immediately. As I descended, the wall facing me became a roof, rising into the air and narrowing the angle it formed with the surface, a change that was going to leave me soon with nothing to steady myself on. I stopped for a few seconds, indecisive.

"What's happening?" Proxi's voice asked from far above me.

"Nothing," I answered, and continued downward as I choked back the desperate cries of my survival instinct. I felt my pulse in my temples and a freezing chill on my forehead. To make my feet continue their descent, I forced myself to think of my brother, there in Barcelona, lying in his hospital bed with his brain charred.

"I don't have anywhere to hang on anymore," I warned. "The shaft has become too wide for me to be able to reach anything with my hands."

"Light up your surroundings."

But, as much as I lit, turning my head from one side to the other, around me there was nothing but space, interrupted, beyond my reach, by walls of stones that fit together perfectly, like those that stood all over Tiwanaku. Luckily, the stairs also began to get wider and longer.

"Is everything alright, Root?" Jabba's deep voice came to me, bouncing off the walls of that shaft.

“It’s fine,” I shouted, but it was one of those phrases that you say when you don’t really have a clear idea.

The descent took longer than I would have liked. Compared to that one, any of the vertical tunnels of the Barcelona’s underground was an eight-lane freeway. My palms were sweaty and I missed my spelunking tools: the smallest slip on that soapy black moss covering everything would end with my bones striking the stones at the bottom, and, if I was still alive, Jabba and Proxi were going to have a very hard time getting me out of there. Which is why I descended slowly, taking all possible precautions, steadying one foot very carefully before placing the other, and with all my senses alert to prevent any loss of balance.

The first sign I had that I was nearing the end was a subtle change in the air: suddenly it turned less heavy, more fluid and dry, and I knew I was nearing a large space. One minute later, my headlight was illuminating the end of the shaft and the beginning of a passage wide enough for the three of us to fit comfortably shoulder to shoulder.

“I can see the end,” I announced. “There’s a passage.”

“Finally this damned staircase is ending!” I heard Jabba thunder.

At that moment, I was stepping down from the last step and lighting the tunnel in front of me. There was nothing I could do but follow it and go forward. Proxi caught up with me, and the sound of Jabba’s feet announced his imminent appearance at our side.

“Forward?” I asked, although it wasn’t really a question.

“Forward,” she replied bravely.

We took the tunnel in the same order in which we had descended. It was very long, almost as long as the shaft, but horizontal and perfectly square. The ground, roof, and walls were also built with big stone blocks fit together. I don’t know what I was expecting to find at the end of that long interminable hallway, but of course it wasn’t what I found. The blood almost froze in my veins from the shock. I noticed Proxi silently position herself next to me and hold onto my arm hard while both of us stood facing a giant condor head that was looking at us with blind eyes from the end of the passage.

“Wow!” she murmured, recovering from the fright. “It’s amazing!”

I heard a sharp whistle and saw a third bright beam on the monster and knew Jabba had arrived and that he was also looking at the enormous head that blocked the corridor some ten feet ahead of us.

“And now what do we do?” he asked warily.

“I have no idea,” I mumbled.

The stone curved down from the top of the tunnel, outlining the forehead of the animal and sliding down to the big round eyes, a pair of perfect circles placed above an enormous beak that fell vertically, tapering almost to the floor. A little of the bottom part of the beak was showing on both sides. Proxi shot several photographs with the digital camera, which automatically calibrated the flash to maximum intensity because of the darkness, and made some impressive flashes.

“Well, we can’t get through there,” Jabba continued.

“We’re about to find out,” Proxi said, very decided, putting away the camera and going to the colossal sculpture which looked like it was going to eat her up in one snap of its beak.

“Wait! Don’t be crazy!” Jabba exclaimed. I turned swiftly to look at them and at that moment of confusion the bright rays of the headlamps danced over the condor and the walls. In the blink of an eye, I thought I saw something next to the bird’s head, so I ignored my colleagues and swept the area with my light again and saw a strange panel of engravings on the wall on the right hand side.

“Oh, oh…” Proxi blurted when she spotted it.

“I hope it’s not one of those Aymara curses,” Jabba said.

“Remember it wouldn’t be able to affect us,” I muttered.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

We moved closer as cautiously as we could, just in case, and we stopped at last in front of five tocapus carved in the rock and bordered by a small frame. At our backs, the giant right profile of the condor’s beak was dreadfully threatening.

“Fine, come on, get out the laptop,” Proxi suggested, with the camera back in her hands, ready to take more photographs. “This has to be translated with “JoviLoom.”

“Let’s just hope nothing bad happens to us!” the cowardly worm said, upset.

Looking apprehensively at the sculpture, I sat on the ground and rested my back against it while I took the computer out of the bag and turned it on. I crossed my legs, and when the system was ready, I launched my brother’s translator program. The two windows opened, and I transferred the five *tocapus* carved on the wall from one to the other, dragging them with the laptop’s small mouse. The first contained a rhombus; the second, a kind of sundial with a horizontal stripe in the middle; the third, something that looked like an elongated tilde, but more curved; the fourth, an asterisk made up of three small lines crossed in the middle; and the fifth, two parallel horizontal stripes, very short, similar to an equal sign.

I confirmed that I was done “weaving,” and the program began its partitions and alignments. It didn’t take long for it to give a strange result: “Six cut in two root of three.”

“‘Six cut in two root of three’?” I exclaimed loudly, surprised.

“A division?” Jabba couldn’t believe what he heard. His eyes were as round as plates. “A division! And what the hell do you suppose we have to do with a ridiculous and absurd division? How does it help us to know that six divided by two equals three?”

“That’s not exactly what it says,” I objected.

“But that’s what it means!”

“We don’t know.”

“Are you going to tell me that…?”

“There’s more here!” Proxi cried from the other side of the condor.

Holding the computer by the cover, I jumped to my feet and ran after Jabba who had bolted over. On the left side of the creature, carved on the wall, were another five *tocapus*, almost identical to the previous ones, also bordered by the same small frame.

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed, going up to the panel. The first, fourth, and fifth *tocapus* were the same, while the second and third differed. When my colleagues’ glances converged on me, questioning, I knew I had to sit on the ground again and introduce the pieces into Jovi’s Loom. The translation turned out to be complete nonsense again: “Six increased in five root of three.”

“Okay, it’s all the same to me if the Yatiri decorated their walls with mathematical formulas,” Jabba said. “The problem is this little birdie,” and he gave the monstrous beak a couple of sonorous slaps, “puts an end to the passage. That’s it. Period. Let’s go back to the surface.”

“Maybe we have to solve some problem,” I reasoned.

“Exactly. And if we’re smart enough to solve it, the condor head will open like a door and we’ll be able to cross to the other side. What a way to help a supposed humanity in trouble! Big bunch of…”

“Listen to me, both of you,” Proxi interrupted, putting an end to the discussion, “we have two clear and simple proposals: on one side, ‘Six cut in two root of three,’ and on the other, ‘Six increased in five root of three.’ The same number, six, is cut in two and increased in five, giving the result of three in both cases. Obviously, there’s something fishy here.”

“Yes,” I admitted, “there is, but what?”

“The difference. It has to be the difference,” she pointed out. “The divergent *tocapus* are the ones that give information.”

“Well, come on,” I encouraged. “Maybe we have to push them or something. Try it and see what happens.”

Very decided, she went up to the panel we were facing and pushed the second and third *tocapus*. Nothing happened.

“Really,” she explained, “they aren’t depressed under pressure. They’re fixed.”

“Let’s try it on the panel on the right,” I proposed.

We headed over there and Proxi repeated the operation. But nothing happened there either.

“The same as the other one,” she murmured. “You can’t press them.”

“And the others?” I asked.

She tried, and then, without coming back, shook her head.

“Let’s go back to the other panel to press the rest of the *tocapus*,” I murmured.

But again we met absolute failure. None of the ten *tocapus* responded to the pressure of our hands. They weren’t loose pieces. They were carved directly onto the wall.

“I don’t understand it…” the mercenary complained. “Now what?”

“Maybe we still have to find something,” I reasoned. “Maybe these two panels are only an example, a sample to show us how to find the solution.”

“Of course, and then we shout it to the wind,” Jabba sneered. “This is absurd!”

“No, it’s not. Let me think,” I replied. “It has to make some kind of sense.”

“But what sense do you think it should make?” he continued to protest. “The idea is that the Yatiri hid their secret so it could be recovered by a destroyed humanity in need, right? Well, this seems like an obstacle course! And besides, who told us it’s a test? We can’t know that!”

“Make no mistake, Jabba,” I explained. “What’s inside there isn’t food. The Yatiri weren’t the Red Cross. There’s no medicine or blankets. What they hid there before they left was knowledge, teaching… If, as we believe, it’s the power of words, of an oral programming code, it makes sense that they put encoded access keys here. Maybe it’s not a test, really. Maybe they’re teaching us something. I think that by resolving this enigma, we’ll learn something that will be of use to us further on.”

“Don’t strain yourself, Root,” the worm teased, putting his hands on his hips and looking at me perversely. “Or haven’t you noticed? If these two panels are an example, there has to be another one where we enter the solution. And where is it, huh?”

“Here!” Proxi yelled from some indeterminate place.

“What the hell?” I began, quickly following Jabba, who was already running in search of Proxi. Luckily, my colleague’s robust back, which was wobbling from the sudden stop, also halted my run, because when we rounded the beak, we would have tripped over the body of the mercenary, who was sprawled face up on the ground with her head under the bird’s head.

“There are nine *tocapus* here,” she said, her voice muffled by the sculpture. “Should I describe them to you, Root, or do you want to come look at them?”

That woman was as reckless as the devil.

“Why don’t you memorize them and enter them into the computer?” I replied.

“Okay. Good idea,” she said, coming out of her hiding place.

“What gave you the idea to stick your head down there, woman?” Jabba rebuked her.

“Well, because it was logical, right? There was a panel missing, and it had to be somewhere. The condor’s head was the only place left.”

“But you threw yourself on the ground without thinking twice. And if they’d put it up there?” he pointed.

“Yes, well, that was the next step, obviously,” she agreed, very calm, taking the laptop from my hands. We watched as she played with the virtual loom, and we saw her sigh deeply before lifting her head to give us a look of stupefaction.

“‘Two cut in two root of one,’” She murmured. “‘Two increased in five root of…’”

“Of what?” I urged.

“Of it doesn’t say. Remember there are only nine *tocapus* and in the two lateral panels there are ten.”

“Well, that’s what we have to figure out,” I said. “And it can’t be too difficult… Really, if we look closely at the four texts available to us, the hidden logic of the key can be guessed. Let’s see.” I picked up the laptop and opened the word processor, then wrote the four premises. “‘Six cut in two root of three,’ ‘six increased in five root of three,’ ‘two cut in two root of one,’ ‘two increased in five root of…’ We’re going to solve for x, okay? Let’s put it in numbers. Let’s suppose Jabba was right when he said they were simple divisions and multiplications. Six divided by two equals three, and six multiplied by five equals thirty.”

“No, the phrase says three, not thirty,” he clarified, meticulous.

“Fine, but there’s a factor we haven’t taken into consideration: according to what the professor told me, the Inca and pre-Incan cultures, despite their great mathematical and astronomical understanding, didn’t know the number zero, so they didn’t have a numeral to represent nothing, the void.”

“Okay, Root, you’re right,” Proxi admitted, keeping us on track, as always. “But the cultures that didn’t know zero, and there were a lot of them, knew how to represent multiples of ten, of a hundred, a million… They just used different symbols, or repeated the same one as many times as necessary. Your theory doesn’t work.”

“It does work,” I insisted, “because we’re speaking of roots, of the irreducible and unalterable part of a word or a mathematical operation, and remember that the Aymara language is made up of roots to which suffixes are added ad infinitum to form all possible words. Look at the phrases: ‘six cut in two root of three,’ ‘six increased in five root of three.’ If you eliminate the zero in the solution of the multiplication by five, the root is the same as in the division by two.”

“Which means adding zeros doesn’t change the numerical root,” Proxi agreed, thinking out loud. “The root is still the same, you use the sign or notation that you use to represent multiples of ten or a hundred.”

“Exactly!” I agreed. “And look at the second operation: ‘two cut in two root of one,’ meaning two divided by two equals one, and ‘two increased in five root of’ x, as we said, or rather two multiplied by five equals ten. Root, therefore, one.”

“The only thing clear to me,” Jabba remarked, “is that if we take out the zeros, dividing by two is the same as multiplying by five.”

“Which seems absurd?” I smiled.

“No,” Proxi declared, “it’s consistent with a numeric symbolism: If you remove the void, the nothing, which is the zero, and you keep the important part, which is the root, what does it matter if you divide or multiply? The result is the same.”

“Okay, fine,” Jabba argued, “but how does knowing that help us?”

Lola, smiling, leaned slightly toward him, and, holding his big head in both hands, gave him a small kiss on the cheek. They weren’t usually very demonstrative in front of other people, so it surprised me.

“Even if it doesn’t seem like it,” she told me, “inside this sumo wrestler’s body there’s a sensible and intelligent soul.”

Then, while the astonished Jabba took his time to react, she stood, and with an agile movement, threw herself headfirst onto the ground again, and got under the condor’s beak, for which she didn’t seem to have the least bit of respect. Once there, she turned face up, and we watched her grope at the stone with great confidence. At first, we didn’t know what she was doing although it was easy to guess, but suddenly, the enormous piece made up of the forehead, eyes, and upper part of the beak lifted in the air with a squeal of rock and metal that sounded like the noise made when two stone slabs rub together, or of an iron bridge under the weight of an advancing truck. Although, of course, what squeaked and ground together couldn’t be iron, because iron was unknown in pre-Columbian America.

Jabba, frightened, jumped so quickly toward Proxi that I couldn’t see his movements; I could only make out what he did afterwards, when he was already dragging her by her feet to get her out from under the head. I, for my part, was completely frozen. The whole scene was surreal: sitting on the ground with my legs crossed, watching Jabba pull Proxi while the mouth of the condor opened like the visor of a helmet in the midst of a deafening noise that wasn’t far from being that of the end of the world. Was it going to devour all three of us? Because I wouldn’t have been able to move to save my life.

But no, it didn’t devour us. It stopped exactly at the height of the roof and stayed there, revealing a new passage, identical to the one we were in. Jabba, pale and puffing like a horse, got in Proxi’s face:

“What the hell did you do, huh?” he shouted. “What’s wrong with you? You could have killed yourself and killed us too!”

“First of all, don’t yell at me,” she replied without looking at him, standing, “and second, I knew perfectly well what I was doing. So come on, calm down, you’re going to make yourself dizzy again.”

“I’m already dizzy! Dizzy from thinking that you could have died squashed by that old stone!”

She, very calm, headed toward the bird’s mouth.

“But I didn’t die, and you didn’t either, so come on, let’s go.”

“What did you do, Proxi?” I asked, following her inside the open beak.

Jabba, furious, stayed where he was.

“The only obvious thing I could have done: if the root of ‘two increased in five’ was one, there was only one *tocapu* among the nineteen that could represent that number, the one shown by the solution of ‘two cut in two root of one,’ so I got under the condor’s chin again, and the *tocapu* that ‘JoviLoom’ said was ‘one’ sunk under the pressure of my hand. You already know what happened next.”

While she was giving me this explanation, we crossed through the bird’s beak and arrived in the new passage. I was getting ready to yell at Jabba to hurry up and come with us already, when I thought I heard a metallic “click,” and, with no further ado, the condor’s beak began to close. Proxi turned, scared:

“Marc!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, but the noise from the stones was too deafening. “Marc, Marc!”

Before the stone visor closed again, my fat friend threw himself through the opening as if he were diving into a pool. For an instant I saw his legs, which were still on the other side, in danger; but without giving us time to react, while Proxi and I took his hands and pulled desperately, a side wall almost three feet thick came out of the left wall and started to close off the head from behind. Luckily, although Proxi had to back up at top speed to keep from being squashed, we managed to give the definitive pull on Jabba’s arm at the last minute, and he came out whole, although dirty and bruised.

I dropped to the ground, exhausted, and stared at the roof of the passage, illuminated by my headlight, whose beam moved with the accelerated rhythm of my respiration. That air, so oxygen-poor, wore us down, turning any effort into a superhuman task that made our hearts leap into our throats.

“Don’t do that to me again, Marc,” I heard Proxi murmur. “Do you hear me? Don’t ever be such an ass again.”

“Fine,” he replied in a miserable voice.

I tried to stand and couldn’t; it was a terrible effort. It wouldn’t have bothered me to stay there a while, resting and recovering my breath, but, of course, who could sit down and rest inside a Tiwanakan pyramid buried underground for hundreds of years, on a hard stone ground that appeared to be full of bugs and had its only exit blocked by a sliding wall and a giant condor head? It was a disagreeable idea, really, so I had to gather all my will power to manage to stay seated on the ground, with my head just a little higher than my bent knees.

And then I knew with complete clarity where I was. In my mind, I pictured the map hidden on Thunupa’s pedestal, on the Gate of the Sun, and remembered that ten long necks sprouted from the central chamber where the horned serpent hid,

four with puma heads on the top and six that ended in condor heads on the sides and the base. Meaning we'd just crossed the first condor head on the right (given that we'd entered through the shaft located to the east of the Gate of the Moon) and we were in the neck. If I wasn't mistaken, after a short ascent to the heart of the pyramid, we would arrive at the walls of the chamber.

"Hey, you two!" I exclaimed, smiling. "If you stop acting like idiots for a bit I'll tell you something very interesting."

"Spit it out."

I explained to them about the condor's neck, but they didn't seem very impressed. Of course it was nothing new: We already knew the pedestal was a map, but it hadn't occurred to me until that moment that the ground we were walking on corresponded to the exact design of what was carved under the Staff God.

"Come on, let's go," I proposed, standing with difficulty. "Now we should find a staircase or something like that."

"I hope it's that and not another of those tests from hell," Jabba croaked.

"What did you just promise me?" Proxi rebuked him, glaring at him.

"Fine, Okay! I'm not going to complain anymore."

"Well, you wouldn't know it by listening to you," I told him, starting to walk.

"I always keep my promises!"

"Let's see if that's true, because my grandma would be more bearable than you."

"I'd swap them right now!" Proxi exclaimed, letting out a guffaw.

And then, as I shouldered my bag, I saw a stone pillar at my right, almost touching the wall. It looked like one of those water fountains they put in parks that are of the right height so that kids can drink (with help) but not play with the water. I went up to it slowly and saw on it, like a book on a lectern, some kind of stone tablet the size of a sheet of paper, randomly peppered with small holes.

Jabba and Proxi came over to look.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Do you think I've been briefed about this place?" I protested, putting the stone on my head. "A hat."

"It looks terrible on you," Proxi remarked, looking at me with expert eyes and then blinding me with a flash from the camera.

"Should we take it with us?"

"Of course," she said. "I say it was there precisely so we would pick it up. Who knows? Likely we'll need it later."

So I stashed it in my bag, and when I lifted the bag back onto my shoulder it felt like its weight had doubled.

We walked for a good while, on the lookout for the smallest detail, but despite my conviction that we would find a staircase or a ramp soon, the passage stayed flat and didn't seem to have any incline at all.

"This doesn't seem right," I murmured after fifteen minutes of walking.

"It doesn't to me either," Proxi agreed. "We should be going up the neck of the condor to get to the exterior wall of the chamber, yet we've been walking horizontally for a long time."

"How long did it take us to get through the last passage?" Jabba asked.

"About ten minutes," I replied.

“Then we’ve already gone too far.”

And, because he had to say it, as soon as my friend closed his big mouth, another condor head came into sight in front of us. It was much smaller than the last, and it stuck out of the middle of a solid wall of stone. I felt my mood change from gray to black when I saw that on both sides of the head, the wall was completely filled with some very large *tocapus*. The suspicion of another Aymara ambush weighed on my mind.

“Good, well, now we’re here,” Proxi said when the three of us stopped with expressionless faces in front of the little animal. “Get out the laptop, Root.”

“I was about to,” I replied, but honestly, I had been reflecting that if that small stone head was the conduit we had to pass through, it would be very hard for Jabba to get through it.

“No, no, wait,” he exclaimed suddenly, distancing himself. “Look. They’re the kneeling figures that are on the sides the Staff God!”

And while he said it, he pointed to some of the *tocapus* on the right-hand wall. He pointed up, down, sideways… The little winged genies that some took for angels sprouted, higgledy-piggledy, from the Aymara text.

“The ones on this side all have condor heads.”

“Yes, like on the door,” I agreed.

“And the ones here,” Proxi had placed herself on the left, “human heads.”

“Do they follow some pattern? Are they symmetrical?” I asked, stepping backward to take in the whole wall at once. I counted the *tocapus* in the upper row of each panel (five) and the ones in the first columns (ten), so there were one hundred *tocapus* in total, fifty on each side, and ten of them were little winged genies: five with condor heads on the right and another five with human heads on the left. And it wasn’t necessary for anyone to answer my questions, because with the panoramic view, and once I had located the ten discordant elements, the shape they outlined was easily recognizable: the tip of an arrow at each side, pointing at the head in the middle. If it hadn’t been separating them, they would form an x.

“As you can see,” Proxi remarked. “Perfect symmetry.”

“We should translate the text so we know what it says,” Jabba proposed.

A distant clamor of stone came from the end of the passage, startling us.

“What the hell was that?” I blurted out.

“Relax, my friend,” Jabba, the provocateur, told me, “nothing bad can happen to us: We’re already shut inside here. In case you hadn’t noticed, if we can’t solve this new enigma, we’re going to be trapped in here until we rot.”

I stared at him without saying a word. That damned idea had passed through my head, but I hadn’t wanted to take it seriously. We weren’t going to die there, I was sure. A sixth sense told me that my time hadn’t come yet, and I refused to consider even the possibility that we wouldn’t be able to resolve any obstacle that might arise. However difficult, we would make it to the chamber.

The quietude and coldness of my look must have affected him. He lowered his eyes, ashamed, and turned back to the *tocapus* on the right. It wasn’t the moment to get angry or for bad moods, so I thought I should help him get out of the embarrassing situation he had gotten himself into.

“What did we always use to say in Barcelona?” I asked him; he didn’t turn. “The world is full of closed doors and we were born to open all of them.”

“I have that up on the wall of my office,” Proxi remarked happily, also throwing a line to Jabba.

“Alright,” he replied, turning around to look at us with a half smile on his lips. “You’ve succeeded in awakening the programming beast in me. I can’t be held responsible for what might happen.”

He grabbed the laptop and sat in front of the right-hand panel, the one with the winged figures with human heads, and began to copy the *tocapus* to “JoviLoom” while Proxi and I examined the wall and the little zoomorphic figures. The truth was, not even in the photographs we’d seen at home or on the Gate of the Sun itself had we been able to appreciate the odd details of those little men. They looked like they were running if you wanted to see them running, but you could also see them kneeling if you imagined their attitude to be supplicant. The artist who had created them had confidently sought out that ambiguity in their pose so that the indication that you had to pray to Thunupa to find the way into Lakaqullu wouldn’t be too clear. All of them had wings, very large wings, although now that we could see them close up, they could also be taken as capes moved by the wind. Each of them also carried an inverted staff identical to the one in Thunupa’s right hand; it didn’t end in a condor’s head, however, but in the head of an animal that looked like a duck with an upturned beak, or a huge-mouthed fish. Those that had bird heads, on the right, gazed upward toward the sky, and their bodies were turned to the center, toward the stone condor; those with human heads, in front of which Jabba was sitting with the computer, had their bodies and gazes fixed on the big head on the wall.

“Okay,” Jabba said at last, “the translation is literal and it’s not very clear, but the text says something like ‘the people hold themselves to the ground, sink their knees in the earth, and put their eyes on the useless.’”

“Incredible!” I exclaimed, perplexed. “The world hasn’t changed at all in hundreds of years!”

Jabba stood and started on the second panel, burying himself again in his work. The change in his attitude was calming.

“The people hold themselves to the ground, sink their knees in the earth, and put their eyes on the useless?” Proxi asked me as if I had the answer to the problem. I limited myself to shrugging my shoulders in a gesture that said something like “I know as well as you do,” in other words, nothing. The little winged genies kept pulling at my attention. If their appearance was already strange in itself, stranger still were the pictures they had inside their bodies, like the long serpent inside the wing-capes or the little labyrinths on their chests, and the necks and heads that came out of their little legs, arms, and bellies, not to mention the inexplicable levers and buttons on their faces and the symbols on their headdresses. They were part men, part animal, and part machine. Of course, something indefinable and very outlandish.

“Here’s the second text,” Jabba informed us. “‘The birds lift up to fly, escape quick and fix their eyes on the sky.’”

“I don’t think any of that is of any use to us,” I remarked.

“I think it is,” Proxi countered. “We still don’t know how to use it, but I’m sure that they’re not just random phrases.”

“Some guys that control the power of words,” Jabba rebuked me, with the ardor of a new convert, “are going to put nonsense philosophical sentences on a closed door that we have to open? Come on, Root, use your head!”

“Okay, fine,” I admitted through gritted teeth. “They’re surely the key to opening this condor’s beak.”

“Well, come on, then, think,” he said, motioning to us with his hands to sit next to him.

“First I should tell you something I discovered,” Proxi announced, heading for the panel with birds’ heads. “All the *tocapus* are engraved on the wall, but the figures are buttons that can be pushed, like in the last test, in which the *tocapu* represented the number that could be pushed to make the mechanism work. Here, we clearly have to enter a digital combination, like in a cash machine.”

And as she spoke, she began to push the figures, one after another, to demonstrate that they could be depressed and really were like the buttons of a keypad.

“No!” yelled a desperate voice at our backs. “Stop! Hold still! Don’t keep going!”

In a matter of tenths of a second, and before we had time even to scream, the ground began to tremble and split as if an earthquake were shaking it. The stone blocks that were joined together with that perfection that dazzled experts became uneven, and we barely had time to get off those that sank and jump and hang on like crazy to those that stayed in place. And suddenly, after a few nerve-wracking seconds—the earthquake didn’t last much longer—a total silence settled on the place, indicating that the disaster had ended. I couldn’t move a muscle, thrown face down as I was against the stone slab I had climbed onto when I realized the one beneath my feet was sinking into the depths.

“Are you alright?” The question came from the back of the passage, from the voice that had yelled before to warn us of the danger, which, now that I heard it again, was terribly familiar: That deep contralto timbre and that cadence couldn’t be anyone other than the professor, Marta Torrent. But there was no space in my mind for her, for being suspicious or asking myself what the hell she was doing there, because before anything else, I had to find out what had happened to Proxi and Jabba.

“Where are you?” I yelled, lifting my head. “Marc! Lola!”

“Help me, Arnau!” my friend cried from somewhere behind me. I stood hurriedly, and under a thin cloud of dust, I could make out Jabba’s bulk lying face down on a slab separated from mine by a yard-long leap. His head and his arms were dangling into the void. “Proxi’s falling! Help me!”

I jumped to him and threw myself on the ground at his side. I don’t think I’d ever felt so much distress as when I saw Lola’s frightened face looking up at both of us from an endless crevice, from whose bottom she was only separated by Marc’s hand holding hers. I dragged myself as close to the edge as I could, extended my arm to grasp her wrist, and pulled her with all my strength. Little by little, between the two of us, we began to lift her up, but it was very difficult, as if an invisible force pulled her down, multiplying her weight. Her eyes stared at us, begging for the help her mouth, closed by panic, didn’t ask for. I noticed that

someone was standing next to me, because a foot grazed my side, and then I saw another arm reach down to Proxi and grab her hand to help us pull her up. With the strength of three people, we lifted Lola quickly, and she stood, at last, on the slab with the rest of us. Only then, clinging to Jabba, did she begin to sob silently, releasing the panic she still felt, and only then could I make out the professor who, with her hands on her hips, was breathing hard from the effort and watching my friends with her brow furrowed.

I put a hand on Lola's shoulder, and she, turning her face to me, let go of Jabba to hug me, still crying. I returned her hug tightly, feeling my pulse slow. Although it seemed incredible, Proxi had been about to die before our very eyes. When she let go of me to go back to Jabba's arms, I turned to the professor.

"Thank you," I felt obliged to say. "Thank you for your help."

"It was unwise what she did," she said, as friendly as always.

"Possibly," I replied. "Certainly, you have never been wrong, and that's why you can't understand other people's mistakes."

"I have been wrong many times, Mr. Queralt, but I've spent my whole life in archaeological excavations and I know what shouldn't be done. None of you have any idea. You have to be very prudent and distrusting. You can't ever let your guard down."

I looked around me. The floor of the passage, as far as the beam of my headlight illuminated, had turned into a discontinuous handful of stone blocks, like islands, separated not by the sea, but by wide chasms. Fortunately, the path had not been cut off; in fact, you could jump from one stone to another without too much danger, but honestly, the situation had changed radically for me, not to mention for Marc and Lola: Now we knew there was danger, a real mortal danger, in what we were doing.

"How far do the sunken stones go?" I asked the professor.

"About thirty feet," she replied, coming over. "From there on, the floor is solid."

"Can we return to the surface?"

"I don't think so." Her voice sounded calm, devoid of anxiety. "The first condor head and the wall behind it have sealed the exit in that direction."

"Which is why we have to go on."

She didn't say anything.

"How did you find us?" I asked, without turning. "How did you get here?"

"I knew you would come," she replied. "I knew what you were thinking of doing, so I was prepared."

"But we saw you working on the excavation and there was no one close by when we found the entrance."

"Yes, there was. One of the scholarship students was posted on the hill of Kerikala. I asked him to watch Lakaqullu with binoculars and to let me know when you appeared. Although the weeds hid the entrance, it wasn't hard for me to find, because I had seen you go into it and disappear."

Then I did turn to look at her. She was serene, and as always, seemed very sure of herself and of her decisions.

"And you went inside the shaft and the passage alone?"

“I was walking close behind you. In fact, I followed the light from your flashlights. I arrived in time to listen as you told your friends what I had explained to you in my office about the Tiwanakan culture’s ignorance of zero.”

Or rather, that we had served her the solution to how to open the first condor's head up on a silver platter.

“And when did you think of imparting the happy news of your presence?” I asked with poorly disguised anger.

“In the opportune moment,” she declared, unfazed.

“Naturally.”

We were in quite a bind. On the one hand, she remained obstinately determined to take advantage, until the end, of our discoveries and those of my brother; on the other, one word from her could land us in jail for having broken Bolivian laws by violating an archaeological monument that was unique, and a World Heritage Site, besides. The scale showed the pointer in the middle and the plates balanced; at least, until we got out of Bolivia. If we got out.

“Look, Professor,” my head ached a little, so I closed my eyes and massaged my forehead lightly, “let’s make a deal. I only want to find a solution for my brother’s illness. If you help us—” so as not to say, *if you don’t turn us in and you let us go on*— “you can take credit for everything we discover, okay? I’m sure Daniel would prefer giving up academic success to staying like a vegetable for the rest of his life.”

The professor looked at me in an indefinable way for a few seconds, and, at last, smiled slightly. Who wouldn’t smile when given what she most desired?

“I accept your offer.”

“Okay, what do you know about this whole story?”

That cynical woman smiled enigmatically again and remained silent for a few seconds.

“A lot more than you might imagine, Mr. Queralt,” she said at last, “and without a doubt much more than you and your friends, so let’s stop wasting time and get to work. We have to open an Aymaran lock, remember?”

Jabba and Proxi, arms around each other’s waists, watched us with astonished eyes. From the expressions on their faces, I guessed they agreed with my decision to peacefully integrate the professor into our team. It wasn’t the time for power struggles or for challenges in adverse conditions. That said, when we returned home, I planned to hire the best team of lawyers in Spain to hit her with the fattest lawsuit in the history of the world and get rid of her for good. The professor wasn’t expecting that, so for the moment, we could reduce the hostilities. Everything in good time.

The professor jumped carefully from stone to stone until she was standing as close as possible to the wall with the condor’s head. At my feet, she had left an old and deteriorated backpack.

“Let’s see… What do we have here?” she murmured, examining the *tocapus*. “‘The people remain on the ground, they kneel and fix their eyes on the superfluous,’” she read with astonishing ease. “‘The birds take flight, they propel themselves quickly and fix their eyes on the heights.’”

We were perplexed. The professor read Aymara as if it were her own language, leaving the translation from Jovi’s Loom in the dust. But, perhaps out of a desire

to show how thoroughly she knew the subject, she kept explaining her reasoning out loud:

"These phrases," she said, crossing her arms over her chest, "are a word game whose purpose is to contrast the ideas of passivity and rootedness with those of movement and transformation: humans stay stable on the earth, while birds evolve by exchanging the earth for the sky. In short, we're talking about using dynamic forces to achieve a change."

I didn't know if she expected us to say something, but since she was talking like she was giving a class, we remained silent.

"In any case, the worshiping figures on the Gate of the Sun appear mixed with the text, forming triangular figures with vertices that point to the condor's head. If we consider both tables as one, and number them in rows and columns from one to ten, as if it were a chess board…" she pinched her lower lip with her thumb and forefinger, pensive, "the figure would change radically, because then we would have two diagonal lines crossed in the center, one made up of two birds and three humans, and the other by two humans and three birds."

"Five," blurted out Proxi, who was following the explanation with great interest. "The two diagonal lines each have five figures. I mention it because I'm convinced all of this had to do with the last test, where you had to multiply by five and divide by two."

"It is without a doubt a progression of knowledge and skills," Dr. Torrent replied. "They teach us something and ask us to apply it practically. Are we worthy of accessing a superior power, or, on the contrary, does our mental incapacity close the doors to us?"

I was dazed listening to the two of them, especially the professor. She had an absolutely scientific way of reasoning and a definitely pedagogical way of explaining herself, and Proxi, our Proxi, picked up the signal like a radar receptor, reacting in harmony.

"Hey, Professor…" Jabba interrupted. "Do you know how to talk like a normal person? Do you always have to be so abstruse?"

Marta Torrent looked at him with narrowed eyes, as if she were concentrating on sending gamma rays at him to turn him into a puddle of plasma, and I thought they were going to start arguing if I didn't intervene to stop it. That was when I learned, however, that the narrowed eyes of the professor were the sign preceding her wild laughter. Instead of getting offended and reacting like a furious Nemesis, her laughter rung in the broken-floored tunnel and bounced off the walls, multiplying. It sounded as if we were surrounded by a choir of bacchantes.

"Oh, I'm… sorry, Mr…!" she attempted an apology, as she tried to stifle her laughter. "I… I don't remember your name, sorry."

"Marc. My name is Marc," he responded grumpily. I thought: "Bond. James Bond." But I kept quiet.

"Marc, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to irritate you. It's just, you know, my children and my students are always making fun of me for the way I speak. That's why it seemed so funny to me. I hope I haven't offended you."

Jabba shook his head, denying it, and turned his back on the professor to make his indifference abundantly clear, but I, who knew him well, knew that he had liked the response. The situation was becoming very uncomfortable.

“Alright, let’s see,” Proxi murmured, positioning herself next to the professor. “If we number the rows and columns like you said, from one to ten, the diagonal with three condors and two humans has its five figures situated in boxes 2-2, 4-4, 6-6, 8-8, and 10-10, while the diagonal with three humans and two condors has them in 1-10, 3-8, 5-6, 7-4, and 9-2. So the more regular of the two is the one with three condors.”

By then I had done several quick mental calculations with the numbers, and I was arriving at the conclusion that the irregular series didn’t make mathematical sense, while the regular one corresponded cleanly with the five first whole numbers whose result, whether you divided them by two or multiplied them by five, had the same root.

“We have to push the five figures in the diagonal with three condors,” the chubby worm said at that moment.

“Why’s that?” I asked, annoyed. Again, he had beaten me to it.

“Don’t you see it, Root?” Proxi reprimanded. “Two, four, six, eight, and ten are divisible by two and multipliable by five with the same root, while the other series is illogical.”

“Yes, I had noticed that,” I observed, joining them, “but why do we have to push the five figures?”

“Because they’re five, Mr. Queralt, five spread over two tables. Five and two, the numbers from the first test, and besides, following the idea contained in the phrases, the condors imply movement while the humans suggest immobility. In the diagonal of the five digits divisible by two and multipliable by five, there are three condors, while in the other, there are three humans.”

“Maybe the number three has something to do with the next test,” Jabba remarked.

Proxi wrinkled her forehead.

“Let’s try to be more positive!” she reminded him.

“What did I say?” he protested.

“Fine, but… What if we punch in that combination and it makes the rest of the floor sink beneath our feet?” I remarked with apprehension.

“The floor is not going to sink,” Proxi grumbled. “The reasoning is perfectly logical and coherent. As clean as an infinite loop.”

“What’s this about an infinite loop?” the professor asked.

“A group of instructions in code that endlessly lead to each other,” Proxi explained. “Something like ‘if Marc is a redhead then jump to Arnau, and if Arnau has long hair, then go back to Marc.’ It never ends because it’s an unconditional statement.”

“Unless I cut my hair and Marc dyed his blond. Then it would stop being unconditional.”

It was a good joke, but Proxi and the professor didn’t seem to think it at all funny, so the two of us who had broken into laughter shut up.

“Still,” I proposed, repressing the last unfortunate smile and speaking as judiciously as I could, to recover my lost dignity, “three of us should go back to the part of the passage where the floor is still whole, and one, secured with the rope, should stay here to enter the combination. In case the floor ends up sinking, the other three can hold him.”

“What’s this about ‘hold him?’ Are you already trying to get out of it?” Jabba discreetly insinuated.

“Neither you nor I can be that person because we weigh too much. Understand? It has to be one of the two women. It’s not a question of bravery, but of excess weight.”

“It’s very clear, Mr. Queralt,” the professor agreed, without showing a flicker of emotion. “I’ll push the *tocapus*.” And faced with Proxi’s gesture of protest, she raised a hand, stopping her. “I don’t mean to offend you, Lola, but I am thinner, so I weigh less. End of discussion. Give me that rope and move back.”

“Are you sure, Marta?” Proxi asked, not very convinced. “I’m an experienced climber and I can manage better.”

“That remains to be seen. I’ve been working in excavations my whole life and I know how to ascend and descend a rope, so get back. Come on. Let’s not waste any more time.”

In the blink of an eye, we made a harness for the professor with the rope, and we moved farther back in the tunnel, jumping from stone to stone until we got to safe ground; then we harnessed ourselves as well, so we could exert the maximum amount of tension in case of an accident. From so far away, our lights barely illuminated the wall at the end, so we couldn’t see what the professor was doing, and I was still waiting for everything to jump into the air, with my muscles tensed, when a sound like distant thunder erupted over our heads. When we looked up, our headlights lit a narrow band of the ceiling, the very center, which began to descend right on top of us like a piece of tape coming unstuck.

“Dr. Torrent!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “Are you alright?”

“Perfectly.”

“Then come here so we can unfasten the rope and get away from what’s over our heads!”

“What’s going on?” she asked; her voice sounded closer.

“Look, Professor!” Jabba bellowed. “Now is not the time for explanations! Run!”

The rope went slack in our hands and we pulled it back in bit by bit until we saw Dr. Torrent make the last jump to us. By then, the stony band of low sky was about to squash us, so we dispersed toward the side walls and pressed against them like glue, and even so, that thing was about to scrape the belly of the fattest of us. Only then did we notice that its descent had been on a diagonal, meaning that it was really an incredibly long staircase that came out just above the small condor head and ended at our feet, inviting us to go up it. But seeing the situation clearly did not make us peel ourselves off the walls. There we stayed, with our eyes glassy with panic and our nostrils crazily beating the dust that had fallen from the ceiling.

The first of the four to react was Proxi.

“Ladies and gentlemen…” she whispered apprehensively, “the neck of the condor.”

“Of the first one or the second one?” Jabba inquired in a voice that didn’t want to leave his throat. He remained stuck to the wall, sucking in his belly.

“Of the first,” I stated without moving. “Remember the drawing of the map of Thunupa.”

The professor examined the three of us with a dark look on her face.

“Are you guys as clever as you seem,” she asked, “or did you get all of this from the documents supposedly belonging to your brother, Mr. Queralt?”

But before I could answer her, Proxi beat me to it:

“We’re supposing that Daniel discovered it because his documents gave us the necessary clues to figure it out. But it wasn’t all in the papers.”

“I never write everything I know,” she murmured, passing her hands over her hair to remove the dirt that had fallen on her.

“Probably because you don’t know everything,” I concluded, moving toward the first step, to which were attached two thick chains that ascended into the heights, “or because you know nothing.”

“It must be that,” she replied with cold sarcasm.

I started to carefully ascend those banister-less saw teeth that had fallen from the sky.

“Is this gold?” I heard Proxi ask, wary. I turned and saw her examining one of the chains.

“It’s gold?” I repeated, astonished.

The professor passed a hand over the links to remove the patina of dirt, and the light of her headlight, much larger and older than ours, illuminated a gleam of gold. Proxi, true to her character, began to shoot photographs. If we got out of there, we were going to have a fantastic album of our odyssey.

“Yes, it is,” Marta Torrent affirmed decisively. “But it shouldn’t surprise us: gold abounded in this land until the Spanish arrived, and besides, the Tiwanakans considered it to be sacred because of its awesome properties. Did you know that gold is the most extraordinary of all precious metals? It’s unalterable and doesn’t oxidize, so ductile and easily molded that it can be transformed into threads as fine as capillaries or into thick and resilient chains like these. Time doesn’t effect it, nor does any substance present in nature. It’s the best electrical conductor and it doesn’t provoke allergies, nor is it reactive, not to mention it has one of the highest indices of light reflection in the world, since it reflects even infrared rays. It’s so strong that the motors of spaceships are covered in gold, because it’s the only metal capable of withstanding the super-high temperatures generated in their interiors without melting like chocolate in your hand.”

The account of the Yatiri my brother had compiled from scattered texts mentioned that they had left their legacy written on gold because it was the sacred metal that lasted eternally. But why had an anthropologist who specialized in ethnolinguistics completed such research on the metal? She looked at the three of us and must have read the question on our faces.

“It really spiked my interested when I discovered that the Yatiri, as you know, wrote their texts on golden sheets. I couldn’t understand why. I thought that if they wanted to leave messages on a truly resistant material, they could have used stone, for example. However, they showed an exaggerated interest in writing on gold, and that intrigued me. But it’s certainly infinitely preferable to stone. Much safer, unalterable, and resistant.”

“That’s why they wrote on gold sheets,” Proxi remarked, “and they hid them in the chamber of the Traveler before leaving Taipikala.”

Dr. Torrent laughed again.

“Taipikala, indeed. And the Traveler… Damned if you don’t know everything!”

“Are we going to stay here forever?” I snapped, starting my slow and cautious ascent up the staircase again.

No one answered me, but everyone started walking, following me. Why had the professor supplied us with that abundant information on gold? She couldn’t ask what we knew directly; that would have been a mistake, of course, so she had set a trap. She had obviously reacted when we had mentioned Thunupa, recognizing the least known epithet for the Staff God, letting us know that her knowledge was at the level of our own (when I spoke with her in her office, she hadn’t mentioned it). Then she had done the same with the secret name of Tiwanaku, Taipikala, and with the Traveler. Somehow, she was trying to communicate to us that she knew the story perfectly. But I couldn’t forget the phrase: “It really spiked my interested when I discovered that the Yatiri, as you know, wrote their texts on golden sheets.” That “as you know” hadn’t been a question, it had been an affirmation. Everything that she’d told us about the precious metal were data accessible to anyone, trivial information. Except that phrase. It was clear she had been expecting a reaction from us. Did she want to confirm that we knew about the gold sheets? The funniest thing was, somehow, she had gotten what she had been looking for: Proxi had responded with two important bits of information, Taipikala and the Traveler. Now she sensed perfectly how far our knowledge went, and in case we were interested, she had also told us, in her way, what she knew, in a way that made it perfectly clear that it was much more than what we knew, because she had researched details as insignificant as that of the gold in depth. She was exhibiting her limits and sounding out ours. She was as clever as the devil.

And those mysterious Yatiri? Why had she so protected her most important knowledge? In the chronicle it clearly said that if another cataclysm and flood like those of the age of the giants happened, the surviving humans would be able to find their legacy, a legacy that would provide them with a code of impressive power. Maybe it wouldn’t help them survive, or eat, or not get sick, but at least by being communicated, it wouldn’t be lost forever; someone would be able to preserve it. So that was the goal those guys had with the whole set-up of the Pyramid of the Traveler: They weren’t interested in helping a humanity in trouble, as we had believed, following a line of reasoning laid out by my brother, but in keeping what they knew from being lost forever. To some extent, it also didn’t matter to them what use could be made of said power. The important thing was that it endure.

The discovery chilled me. With each new step I ascended, my perspective of the situation kept evolving. We had entered there with an erroneous idea, an idea that had blinded us to the truth. None of us had planned that by accessing the secret knowledge of the Yatiri, we were going to come into possession of a unique power, capable of things as extraordinary as what had happened to my brother. But there was someone who perhaps had thought of it, and for that reason was so aggressively facing off against her possible competitors. Did Dr. Torrent act like that because she hoped to find out just how far our ambitions reached regarding that strange and dangerous privilege? Was it she who coveted it? Yes, it was, but for what? To publish her discovery in anthropology journals and receive academic accolades? From this new facet, those purposes seemed ridiculous. What government in the world would leave such a capability in the hands of a university

professor? So that's why she had told me, when she had called me at home, that she couldn't leave Daniel's material in my hands, and that it was a very delicate situation! What had her exact words been? "If just one of the papers you have in your possession gets lost or falls into the wrong hands, it would be a catastrophe for the academic world." For the academic world or for the world in general? "You cannot imagine how important that material is." No, perhaps at the time I hadn't been able to imagine it, but now I could, and it was vital that the professor not have access to the Yatiri's knowledge.

When the staircase ended, I found myself facing an impressive wall of stone blocks in the middle of a dark passage that trailed off into the darkness in both directions. If our calculations were correct, that was the exterior wall of the chamber of the Traveler, the chamber of the horned serpent, so the passages would form a square walkway around it, and we would get to the entrance by going either way.

"At last!" Proxi sighed when she arrived next to me.

I leaned toward her quickly and spoke in her ear.

"Lola, listen to me carefully: The professor can't go inside the chamber with us."

"Are you crazy?" she exclaimed, drawing back to look at me. Her headlamp blinded me for a few seconds. I blinked, seeing a thousand little lights imprinted on my retina.

"We can't allow her inside, Lola. She wants the power of words."

"So do we."

"What are you two whispering about?" Jabba asked in a powerful voice, with his foot on the last step. The professor appeared just behind.

Lola looked at me as if I'd gone crazy and turned toward him.

"Nothing. Just some of Root's nonsense."

"Well, don't give me any more of your nonsense, Root."

"Root?" Marta Torrent asked, surprised. "Why do they call you *Root?*"

"It's my…" How annoying, to have to explain internet handles to a neophyte! "My nickname, my tag. On the internet, we call each other by pseudonyms. Everyone does it. *Root* comes from the name of the main directory of any computer, the root directory. On computers with a Unix operating system, it refers to the main user."

"And what are yours?" she asked Marc and Lola, very interested.

"Mine is Proxi and Marc's is Jabba. Proxi comes from Proxy, the name of a machine that acts as a server for accessing the internet but stores the content of pages in its memory so the next visits are faster. It's like a filter that speeds up the process, and that, at the same time, defends the user from viruses, worms, and all the other junk floating around the internet. I work in the security department of Ker-Central," she justified herself, "Arnau's company. Root's. That's where *Proxi* comes from."

"And Jabba?" the professor insisted, looking at the redheaded worm who had a menacing look on his face.

"Jabba doesn't mean anything," he seethed, turning his back on her and going into the passage on the right.

"Really?" she asked, surprised. "Nothing?"

Lola and I looked at each other, anxious, and lowering my voice, I asked the professor not to press the issue.

“Well, it sounds familiar,” she remarked in a whisper. “I think I’ve heard it before.”

“*Star Wars*,” Proxi muttered, giving her the necessary clue.

“*Star Wa…*?” then she seemed to suddenly remember what character we were talking about, because she opened her eyes wide and smiled. “Ah, of course, of course. Now I get it.”

“Well, don’t tell him,” I said, going after Jabba, who was walking away, annoyed. When I got to him, I put an arm around his shoulders, buddy style, and told him softly: “We can’t let the professor go inside the chamber.”

“Don’t be paranoid, my friend. We still don’t know if we will be able to get inside ourselves.”

“Do you really think she only wants the power of words to publish her discovery in a journal?”

Jabba seemed to get it right away, and, giving me a look of complicity, slowly moved his head, nodding.

The passage was immense. Despite being on a higher level, and therefore a smaller one in the pyramid, the central chamber was enormous, of huge dimensions, based on the time we spent walking half of one of its four sides. There, the ground was firm and the air shadowy and hard to breathe, full of invisible particles that lent it weight and consistency. But as we advanced slowly through that spacious high-ceilinged tunnel, we were accompanied by the positive sensation that we were reaching the end, that on the other side of the wall on our left was the secret for which we had crossed the Atlantic. My only cause for worry was Marta Torrent. I couldn’t think of how we could stop her, how to block her way into the chamber.

“Can I ask you a question?” she said at that moment, breaking the silence to address the three of us.

“Go ahead,” Jabba grumbled.

“How have you been able to learn the Aymara language in so little time?”

“We haven’t learned Aymara,” I replied, still panting from the walk. “We used an automatic translator we found on my brother’s computer.”

“Don’t tell me,” the professor joked, with a cold expression that belied any supposed humor. “‘JoviLoom.’”

“You know it?” Proxi was surprised.

Marta Torrent laughed.

“How could I not know it? It’s mine.” She declared, very satisfied.

“Of course it is,” I spit, sarcastic. “Everything is yours, isn’t that right, professor? *JoviLoom*, *JoviKey*, the Autonomous University of Barcelona… And why not the world, right professor? The world is also yours, or if it’s not yet, it will be, isn’t that right?”

She chose to ignore my diatribe.

“You have *JoviKey*, too? Well, well…”

A nuclear war was about to break out in the passage. For having dared to say that my brother Daniel had also stolen those programs, I was going to leave her tied up in that pyramid so she could die of fear.

“Do you know what the names of those programs mean?” she asked us, defiant.

“*Jovi’s Loom?*” Proxi responded gruffly. “*Jovi’s Key?*”

“Yes, actually,” she said, “Jo-vi’s. My husband, Joffre Viladomat’s.”

A strong peal of understanding rang in my mind and stopped me cold, shaking me as if my head had been used as the clapper of a bell.

“Joffre Viladomat?” I stuttered. That was the name the house system had shown me on the screen when Dr. Torrent had called.

Everyone stopped to look at me, and the one who did it with the greatest satisfaction was the professor, who couldn’t hide her cruel little smile of triumph.

“Joffre Viladomat. *Jovi* to friends, since his university years.”

“Your husband is a programmer?” Jabba asked suspiciously.

“No, my husband is an economist and lawyer. He has a company in the Philippines that acts as an intermediary between the production areas of Southeast Asian exports and Spanish companies.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Marc muttered.

“Joffre buys products made in Southeast Asia and sells them to interested companies. You could say he’s a kind of intermediary who facilitates the acquisition of merchandise by Spanish companies at a low cost of production. His office is in Manila, and from there, he buys and sells everything from jeans to electronics to soccer balls to software. I asked him two years ago for a couple of applications to translate Aymara and to password protect my laptop. Joffre ordered the programs from a Filipino software company, and, after a few months, sent me *JoviKey* and *JoviLoom*, which had been designed according to my specifications and my databases.”

“In other words, what you’re saying is that your husband,” Proxi, who had gone red from rage, slowly pronounced, “buys products manufactured in subhuman conditions by third world slave-workers and sells them to well-known Spanish brands that, in this way, save the costs and taxes associated with a factory in our country and keep from paying social security for Spanish workers?”

Marta smiled with a mix of irony and regret.

“I see you are familiar with the global economic panorama. Yes, in fact, Joffre does precisely that for a living. And he’s not the only one, of course.”

I would have been able to see on her face and in her voice the subtle indication of some kind of complicated personal history behind her words, but I wasn’t disposed to subtleties at that moment. In fact, I felt so demoralized and destroyed that nothing that wasn’t the horrible nightmare of having discovered that my brother had stolen those programs (and who knows, maybe the documents we had found in his office as well, just as the professor had always maintained), nothing, I repeat, could have gotten through my mental barriers. It was incredible, unthinkable that Daniel had done such a thing. My brother was not like that, he was not a thief, he was not a guy who took things that belonged to someone else, he didn’t know how to steal, he’d never done it, and besides, he didn’t need to. Why would he want to sneak off with someone else’s, his boss’s, research material, if he had a fantastic career ahead of him and could achieve much more in just a few years by his own efforts? Why’s and more why’s… Why did he have to take those two programs and make me doubt him and his honor now while he remained ill in a hospital bed, incapable of defending himself? Damn it, Daniel! I would have been able to give you much better applications than those two good-for-nothing ‘Jovi’ pieces of junk! Did you need an automatic Aymara translator?

Well, if you'd just asked, if you'd just asked! I would have moved heaven and earth to get it for you!

"Arnau."

I've told you so many times, Daniel! Ask me for whatever you need. But you, 'no, no, I don't need anything'. Okay, but if you need something, ask me. 'Yes, of course, I'll ask you'. You never did accept my help willingly, you always made that expression of yours of wrinkling your brow without saying anything. But why did you have to take those two programs? Your brother was a programmer and had a software company, for Christ's sake, and dozens of programmers working for him! Did you have to get your hands dirty stealing the software from your boss, from that Marta Torrent you criticized so much? And why did you criticize her, huh? *You* were the one stealing from *her*! Why, why did you criticize her? Why did you accuse her of taking advantage of your work if you were the one taking advantage of hers?

"Arnau!"

"What!" I yelled. "What, what, what!"

My voice hit the stone walls and I woke up. In front of me I had Marc, Lola, and the professor, looking at me with worried expressions.

"Are you alright?" Lola asked me.

From habit, I suppose, I automatically did a quick check. No, I was not alright, I felt bad, very bad.

"Well, of course I'm alright!" I assured her, turning toward her.

Marc broke in.

"Hey, you! Stop, okay? You don't have to talk to her like that!"

"Both of you, calm down!" Lola yelled, pulling Marc back with one hand. "It's okay, Arnau, don't worry. We're going to calm down, okay?"

"I want to get out of here," I said bitterly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Queralt," the professor murmured, blocking my movement back toward the staircase. A silly gesture on my part, because really, there was no return path. There was no exit. But at that moment, I didn't care. I wasn't aware of what I was doing or saying.

"What is it you're sorry for?" I replied, disgusted.

"I'm sorry for having hurt you."

"It isn't your fault."

"In part, it is, because I wanted you to discover the truth and I haven't passed up a single opportunity to make it happen, without stopping to think that it could hurt you."

"What the hell do you know?" I aggressively rebuked her. "Leave me alone!"

"Pull it together," Jabba said from behind me.

"I'll do as I please. All of you, leave me alone," and, dropping my bag, I crumpled like a rag doll, sliding slowly to the floor with my back resting against the wall of the chamber. "I just need a few minutes. Go on without me. I'll catch up."

"How can we leave you here, Root?" Proxi fretted, kneeling in front of me and looking around, toward some rough and disquieting shadows. "Have you forgotten that we're many feet below ground, shut inside a pre-Columbian pyramid hundreds or thousands of years old?

"Leave me, Proxi. Give me a minute."

“Don’t be a child, Root,” she admonished affectionately. “We know that was a low blow, that you’re exhausted, but you have to understand we can’t leave you here.”

“Give me a minute,” I repeated.

She sighed and got to her feet. After a few seconds, I heard them move away, and their lights were lost to sight. I stayed there alone, with my headlight as my only illumination, sitting on the ground with my arms on my bent knees, thinking. Thinking of my (literally) brain-dead brother, of that idiot who had been capable of doing something so stupid. Suddenly I felt I didn’t really know him. I had always thought that he had his eccentricities and his depths, like everyone, but now I suspected that they were larger and darker than what I had believed. Tons of images of him passed through my head, fragments of conversations maintained over the years, and, mysteriously, the incomplete and partial impressions began forging concrete ideas that better fit the details I had never taken the time to analyze. Daniel laughing at me because I had gotten everything I had without setting foot in a university; Daniel proclaiming in front of the family that I was living proof that not studying was much more profitable than ruining one’s eyesight on books as he did; Daniel always without a euro in his pocket despite his magnificent career, and with a wife and son to take care of; Daniel accepting money from our mother through gritted teeth and systematically rejecting any offer of help from me… Daniel Cornwall, my brother, the guy the whole world appreciated for his cordiality and his indelible smile. Yes, okay, so it was clear that guy had always wanted to have something similar to what I had, and wanted to have it without working as hard as he did for much less, for almost nothing, in the university. What other explanation could there be? Now that I thought about it, unfortunately, I remembered that Daniel had always been the first to support that stupid idea my family had about me, according to which fortune had always smiled on me and luck had followed me my whole life.

If I thought about it, he had really only wanted to accelerate a process that was laborious for him and to get closer to a future that seemed distant to him. That’s why he had taken advantage of the opportunity his boss had given him with that research on the *quipus* in Quechua. Somehow he had discovered Marta Torrent’s material about *tocapus* and Aymara and had noticed that he could get more quickly what destiny had reserved for him anyway for some years in his future. He was also a winner, a sharp guy who knew how to take advantage of luck when it presented itself, like me, the smart-ass who had gotten rich without a university degree under his belt. I could almost imagine him talking with our mother, nurturing between them that legend in which I didn’t do anything really worthwhile, despite which, as I said, I had an enviable lucky star. How, otherwise, could the purchase of Keralt.com by Chase Manhattan Bank be explained? What was that, if not a chance stroke of luck which had nothing to do with the value of the business conceived, developed, and expanded by me working like a mule and missing sleep for years? Until that moment I hadn’t cared that my family saw it like that. It irritated me a little, of course, but I thought that all families had their hangups and that it wasn’t worth the effort to let it bother me or to fight against that false image. It was enough that my grandmother knew and recognized the truth. Not anymore. Now the story would take on its correct proportions, since it

had caused a much greater problem: The unhappiness of my brother. It was Daniel who would have to face robbery charges whenever Marta Torrent decided to bring them against him; it was Daniel who would have to deal with the end of his career in education or research; it was Daniel who would have to deal with the embarrassment in front of our mother, our grandmother, Clifford, Ona, and in the future, if nothing was done about it, also in front of his son. That was without taking into consideration the possibility of him spending a substantial period in jail which would end up wrecking his life for good.

I looked at the little circle of light my headlight projected onto the floor of the passage and the wall in front of me, and became aware of where I was and why. I regained touch with reality after the onslaught of anger, and my first thought, of course, was to ask myself why the hell I had to go through that whole mess to help an imbecile like Daniel, but luckily, I reconsidered: Not even he deserved to spend the rest of his life as a vegetable. Despite everything, I had to try to save him. The moment would come soon enough to clarify things and negotiate with Marta whatever had to be negotiated. And I had thought of hitting her with a giant lawsuit when we got home! I was going to have to swallow my words, my intentions, and my thoughts. Now, when Daniel was up to it, he and I were going to have a long conversation that would leave marks that would last for the rest of his life.

With a sigh, I stood and lifted my heavy bag to my shoulder. At that moment, three lights came on a few yards away.

"Are you better?" Proxi's voice asked.

"But, didn't you leave?" I inquired.

"How could we go? You're ridiculous!" Marc pointed out. "We pretended we were leaving, but we turned off our headlights and sat down to wait for you."

"Well, come on, let's go," I said, walking over to them.

The black storm clouds didn't completely clear from my head, nor did my mood improve, but we resumed the walk in silence, and somehow I knew it was still important to keep going.

Shortly after, we found the corner that ended the passage and that took us left by way of a new passage. When we ran into the first and giant puma head sticking out of the wall of the chamber, we knew that we were on the right path, and that, according to the map of the god Thunupa, that part of the tunnel had four of those heads, two of which (the central ones), flanked the entrance to the chamber of the horned serpent. Anyway, we stayed awhile, examining it just in case, but no, there were no *tocapus*, just an impressive and terrifying relief that from the ears and snout gave the impression of being a puma, but that really looked like a strange combination of round-nosed clown with a snake's head as a mouth.

"Well I think," Jabba observed, "that it's a guy with a puma mask. Do you know what I mean?"

Of course, we all said no.

"There was an ancient god who put on a lion's head as if it were a helmet and its skin hung down his back."

"Hercules," I noted. "And he wasn't a god."

“Fine, whatever. The point is the animal’s head only covered down to his nose and left his mouth and jaws exposed. Well, that’s what this thing looks like: a guy wearing a beast’s head that leaves half his face exposed. Like a mask.”

And yes, he was right. The truth was, all that Taipikalan art, or whatever you wanted to call it, was very strange. You could look at it from several different angles and find different interpretations, all of them equally valid. Proxi, pain in the neck that she was, flashed her camera over and over again, as if it had an unlimited capacity for storing images. In fact, it must have a bigger memory card than it came with, because otherwise, there was no explanation for how it could keep going.

After a few minutes, we resumed our Magellanic voyage around the chamber of the Traveler. Despite my mood, it didn’t escape my notice that Dr. Torrent was very quiet and lost in thought. It occurred to me that perhaps I could walk next to her and apologize for all the horrible things I had said to her since the day I showed up in her office at the university, but I quickly pushed the idea out of my head, because it wasn’t the time or place, and because I didn’t feel like it. I was already annoyed enough by my own problems, I didn’t need to load myself down with more.

At last, after about two hundred yards, we saw the second big puma head sticking out of the left wall.

“The entrance!” Proxi exclaimed, radiant.

When we got to the creature, we saw that past it was a gigantic door—or something that looked like a door, because it was an immense and regular polished stone slab, reaching from the ceiling to the ground, about thirteen feet high and six or seven feet wide.

“And there’s the other head,” Dr. Torrent pointed out.

The stone door indeed had a puma head on each side and they were exactly the same as the first we had examined.

“And the panel of *tocapus?*” Jabba asked.

“It’s probably under the heads,” Proxi remarked, “like with the first condor. Let’s get down on the floor.”

“Hey, you, wait!” Jabba stopped her, grabbing her arm quickly to keep her from escaping. “This time you’re going to behave yourself, okay? I’ll get down on the floor.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I feel like it. I’m tired of having to rescue you from catastrophes. We’ve already been through two and they say the third one’s the charm, so stand aside and let me.”

Proxi stood next to Marta, muttering curses, and I saw the professor smile. Proxi must have been saying something funny, but I didn’t catch it. Nevertheless, the expression on her face changed at a dizzying speed and I turned my head back to the door, following her gaze and the beam from her headlight. In the very center of the door, there was a box with something inside it.

“Wait, Marc,” I exclaimed, going to him. “There’s something here. Look.”

The box was about four inches above my head, so I had to stand on tiptoes to be able to see it well. Marc, only a little shorter than I, could also appreciate the tiny tocapus on the engraving, but Proxi and Marta Torrent (especially the latter)

wouldn't have been able to see it even by jumping on a trampoline. It was a panel of *tocapus*, smaller than any we had found until then, and located, furthermore, at a really uncomfortable height.

"Give me the binoculars, Jabba," I heard Proxi say.

"They're in your bag. But don't try; it won't work. They won't let you zoom out that much. You're too close."

"It's true."

"Give me your camera, Proxi," I said. "I'll take a picture and we'll look at it on the computer screen."

"Good idea," she exclaimed, handing me the tiny gadget.

I shot several pictures, focusing by intuition, then I began to load the content from the memory card onto the laptop. Proxi had taken exactly seventy-two photographs, and in high resolution, so we had to wait awhile until we could at last look at the content of the new panel on the monitor. Without remembering that Marta could read Aymara perfectly, I was thinking I would have to copy those *tocapus* one by one to "JoviLoom," and there were a lot of them; then, when I was about to express my intention out loud, I heard her begin to translate the text:

"*Can't you hear, thief? You are dead because you tried to take the stick from the door. You will cry for the gravedigger to come this very night…*"

"Stop, Marta," Proxi exclaimed, alarmed, closing the laptop suddenly.

The professor jumped.

"What's going on?"

"Those words are the ones Daniel was translating right before he became ill," I explained.

"Oh God…"

"I can tell you the rest, if you want," I continued, "I have it translated here," and I opened the laptop again to look for the copy of the document.

"So you also know about the secret of the Aymara, of the perfect language?" Jabba hastened to ask the professor, while I jumped from one subdirectory to another.

"Of course I know about it," she replied, passing a hand over her forehead. "My father, Carles Torrent, discovered it. After many years of working with the Aymara on the excavations, they told him in secret that the ancient Yatiri possessed the power of curing or causing illness with words, of making people play musical instruments without having learned, or of making bad people good, or vice versa. According to the Indians, they could change any aspect of any person, from his mood to his character. Those were legends, of course, but when I discovered the system of writing with *tocapus* I found a lot of allusions to that power and I knew that what my father had taken for fantasy was real. The Capacas, the Tiwanakan priests, knew ancient *Jaqui Aru*, the *Human Language*, which was, practically without alteration, the Aymara language spoken since the conquest of the Altiplano by the Inca and the Spanish, and it hadn't changed, because it was sacred to Aymara speakers. Unfortunately, starting at that time, it began to be influenced in small ways by Quechua and Spanish. It's not that it was altered or anything, but it adopted a few new words here and there."

"Here it is," I interrupted. "*Can't you hear, thief? You are dead, you tried to take the stick from the door. You will call the gravedigger this very night. The others all*

die everywhere for you. Oh, this world will cease to be visible to you! Law. Closed with a key."

"It's not finished," Proxi clarified for the professor. "Daniel couldn't finish it. When he got to that part, he developed the Cotard's syndrome and the agnosia."

"In other words, since getting to that part, he thinks he's dead," I added, "he cries out to be buried and he doesn't recognize anyone or anything."

"I see," she said. "It's like a curse for anyone who opens this door with intentions of stealing. They already give an idea of its purpose with the first question: 'Can't you hear, thief?' It's a message for thieves, for those who know their intention is to appropriate what's behind that door. The Indians of these lands never closed their houses or temples. It wasn't because they didn't have locks or keys; it was because they didn't need them. They only used them to protect very important state documents or the city's treasury. Nothing more. In fact, they were very surprised when they saw that the Spanish used bars and bolts, and thought it meant they were afraid of them. Still, today, when an Aymara leaves his house, he puts a stick at the entrance to indicate he's not there and that the home is empty. No neighbor or friend would dare enter. If someone takes that stick, it's because he's going to steal, hence the expression used in the warning. I think this text is like a burglar alarm: If you come to take what isn't yours, all these things will happen to you, but if your intention isn't to steal, then the curse won't have any effect, it won't do anything to you. Notice that it's written with *tocapus*, so they undoubtedly wanted to impede the entrance of their own Aymara-speaking thieves."

"There's no reason for that necessarily to be the case," I objected; I was annoyed with the idea that the curse could affect only thieves, or rather, people like Daniel. "The other panels were also written in Aymara, with *tocapus*, and contained riddles or combinations to open the condor heads or make staircases come down."

"We have another theory, Dr. Torrent," explained Jabba, who had understood what was hiding behind my objection. "We believe it affects anyone who knows Aymara, like Daniel and you. It's a kind of code that works with natural sounds, those infernal sounds of the perfect language we heard when we arrived in Bolivia, ranging from clicks of the tongue to gurgles to guttural explosions, sounds that Daniel and you can produce and understand, even if it's only in your heads, reading silently, but we cannot; that's why it doesn't affect us."

She seemed to consider for a few seconds.

"Look," she said at last, "I think you're wrong. I've been studying this subject much longer than you have. In fact, that's why I gave Daniel the task of studying the knots, the *quipus*, in Quechua: I didn't have time for it. For twenty years, I've dedicated myself to Aymara and the *tocapus*. I imagine you also know the story of the Miccinelli Documents, so I won't go into detail. Suffice it to say that from my point of view as head of the department, Daniel was the researcher best qualified to work with Laura Laurencich, my colleague in Bologna; and on top of that, he was intelligent, bright, and ambitious. I gave him something that anyone would have wanted for his curriculum vitae, trusted him before any of the other more experienced and tenured professors, but I believed in him, in his great talent. What didn't occur to me was that he would take advantage of his free access to my office and my files to steal material from me that had taken many years of work,

and that, furthermore, was well protected. Or that's what I thought… I never would have expected something like that from Daniel; that's why I froze when you, Mr. Queralt, appeared in front of me with documents that no one except for myself had ever seen."

She stopped for a few seconds, surprised by having, almost without noticing, indirectly addressed that subject, and looked at me with a certain guilt.

"But, returning to our business," she proceeded, "because of my experience with the subject, obviously much greater than Daniel's and yours, I'm convinced that the Yatiri wouldn't produce universal curses, curses that could affect even the writer of the text. Do you understand?" She looked at us as if we were her students and she were imparting a lecture. "The panels next to the condor heads, Mr. Queralt, weren't exactly Don Quixote, right? In the first, they were short texts of only five *tocapus* that were repeated, furthermore, in the next panel and also in the one under the beak where you entered the solution. I don't know whether you had time to observe them, but they were simple sets of figures that, even visually (analyzing their order and repetition), would lead to the correct response, even if the reader didn't know Aymara. The same was true of the big panels by the second head: Visually, the enigma was solvable by carefully analyzing the positions of the figures in the two lines that formed the x. Here, on the contrary, we have a complete text that begins with a warning to thieves who can read Aymara. If, as you say, Marc, the content affects anyone who knows how to pronounce and understand the sounds of this language, the Yatiri themselves and their Capacas would have fallen under its effects. Believe me when I tell you this strange power doesn't work like that. It is so complete that it can perfectly differentiate the specific receptor of a message from those at whom it's not directed. That's why I think that you should let me read the text. Obviously, it won't explain how to open the door, but it's possible that it says something interesting." She sighed deeply and was lost in thought for an instant. "In any case, the worst thing that could happen is for you to be right and that, after reading it, I suffer the same symptoms as Daniel," then she let out a surprising guffaw, "in which case, please, search hard for the remedy for your brother and for me, Mr. Queralt."

We were overwhelmed from the long discourse. What could we say to change her mind? We exchanged looks of doubt and conformity, and after an affirmative gesture from Jabba, I brought the photograph of the panel on the door back up on the screen and gave the computer to the professor, who, without the least hesitation, picked up the translation where she had left off:

"Let's see: *Everywhere, others die for you, and, oh! the world will also cease to be visible to you. This is the law, the one closed with a key, the one that is just. You must not disturb the Traveler. You don't have the right to see him. You are no longer here, true? You already beg to be buried and you don't recognize even your family or your friends. Let these words protect our lost origin and our destination.*"

Strong stuff! I thought, attentively examining the professor (and Jabba and Proxi were doing the same). But there she was, perfectly content. Nothing had happened to her, and she was looking at us triumphantly.

"Great, don't you think?" she asked. "I'm still fine. The power has guessed that my intention is not to steal. Or perhaps it's that I know I don't have the intention of stealing and that's why it didn't affect me."

And if she wasn't going to steal, why was she there? We had all arrived at that door with the intention of appropriating something that was not ours and that wasn't going to help any humanity in trouble but was only going to save one of those thieves against whom the curse protected. Despite my being used to follow the logic of any complicated development of text, so much ambiguity disconcerted me. Only one explanation fit: that it was the conscience itself that determined the effects of the words, and given that, the possible consequences didn't matter without that key. What also seemed not to matter anymore was my old suspicion about the professor: that she was there, right as rain, indicated that her ambition was purely academic. All that about controlling the world like the bad guys in comic books wasn't true. If that had been her intention (simple robbery to take advantage of the power), she would have ended up like Daniel, and unfortunately, Daniel had ended up like that because he knew he had stolen Marta's material with that purpose; although he didn't know that the real curse, which he had probably found on some textile (and who knows who had copied the design and where he had gotten it from without understanding it), was on the very door of the chamber of the Traveler. My brother's uneasy conscience was what had played the bad trick on him.

"Basically…" Jabba muttered, looking sidelong at the immense slab of polished stone, "the problem is we still don't know how to open it."

"I know," Proxi declared, lifting both hands in the air and shaking them like pinwheels.

"You know?" I asked, openmouthed.

"Bah, don't mind her!" Jabba exclaimed with a look of resignation. "She's kidding us. Making it up."

"Aren't you the fool! When have you seen me make jokes about these things?"

Now it was Jabba you looked at her with surprise.

"You mean you really know how to open the door?"

"Well, obviously!" she said with satisfaction, but then she immediately pursed her lips, showing less conviction. "Well, at least I think I know."

"Why don't you explain it to us, Lola?" the professor asked, very interested.

But Proxi, instead of answering, fixed her eyes on me and narrowed them mysteriously. I was paralyzed.

"Arnau knows. Speak, oracle."

"I know?" I stammered. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure," she confirmed. "What do you have in that bag of yours that weighs so much?"

I arched my eyebrows, thinking, and immediately remembered.

"The stone tablet full of holes." Marta Torrent made a questioning face.

"When we passed the first condor head," Proxi explained, while I opened the bag to take the stone out, "we found a stone tablet the same size as that panel by the door, full of holes which also coincide, more or less, with the size of the *tocapus* on the panel. I have a feeling that if we put it over the panel, we'll find out what we need to know."

"Well thought out," the professor agreed. "Can I see it?" she asked me, extending her hand. I would have had to be very rude not to give it to her. "I see. It

is the same size as the panel and the holes are also more or less the same size as the *tocapus*."

"So," I said, "either it acts as a template that leaves exposed some *tocapus* that will tell us something, or we'll have to press the tocapus that are left uncovered."

"And how will we know what the correct orientation is?" Jabba asked.

"We won't know until we put it on," I said.

But it wasn't that easy. I could put the stone template over the panel, but then no one could see the *tocapus*, and if it was Jabba who held the heavy tablet, then the little I saw wasn't good for anything because I didn't understand it. It was too risky to push the *tocapus* without first knowing whether they said something or not. Maybe it would be like the last test and the ground would start to sink, or perhaps the sky would collapse on our heads. So we decided to go back to the tried and true method of photography. Jabba drew a tiny point on the bottom part of the stone with a pen, to mark the orientation, and then put it over the panel while I held the camera in the air and took the picture. Then, we turned it around and repeated the operation. When we loaded the two images on the laptop, Marta went to work.

"The first photograph doesn't make sense," she remarked, thoroughly scrutinizing the monitor, "but in the second, the text can be seen clearly: 'Take the stick from the door and what is closed with a key will be visible to you, the Traveler and the words, origin and destination.'"

"Fine," I muttered with annoyance, "and how do we take the stick from the door? What kind of help is that! I don't see any stick."

"Relax," Jabba told me, "we don't need the stick. We're going to press the *tocapus*."

"And if the ground sinks?"

"There's no reward without risk," Proxi observed. "What do you say, Professor?"

"Let's try. At the first sign of danger, we'll run."

"Or we'll hold on to the puma heads," Jabba suggested.

Because I was the tallest, the honor of pressing the uncovered Aymara symbols one by one, was mine. As soon as I had finished pressing the last of them, I heard, at waist-height, a click like compressed air suddenly released. I quickly lowered my head, startled, and I watched as a vertical ribbon of stone, as wide as a broom handle and so long it reached the floor, separated from the rest of the door and emerged toward me.

"That scared me!" I exclaimed, with my heart pounding. "I thought everything was coming down."

"Move back, Arnau," Jabba said. "Let us see."

"More proof of the Tiwanakans' skill," Dr. Torrent murmured in admiration. "I've never seen such perfection in a stone joint. This piece was invisible until just a second ago." The long bar seemed to be fixed in the center by a smaller bar, also of stone, that stuck out of the hollow.

"And now what?" Jabba asked. "Do we turn it, pull on it, or push it back in?"

"'Take the stick from the door and what is closed with a key will be visible to you,'" the professor recited.

“Let me,” Proxi requested, placing herself in front of it and moving her fingers like a pianist, or rather, like a thief before trying to figure out the combination of a safe.

But to her consternation, she had barely grabbed the stone piece and pulled lightly on it when it came off of its joint into her arms, which wavered from the unexpected burden. She was still looking at it, perplexed, when the larger slab it had emerged from began to screech and groan as a mechanical force made it rise slowly upward. The chamber of the Traveler was opening for us.

Without noticing, we formed a compact line in front of the growing opening, side by side, silent, expectant, ready to face the most outrageous or strange thing we had seen in our lives. Dr. Torrent, who was the first to see the place, exhaled an exclamation of surprise. My face was still looking at stone, and although I could have bent down to look, I was paralyzed, and not just by the cold air that erupted from inside. When at last the beam from my headlight penetrated the chamber and was lost in the depth of the shadows, I also let out a grunt of surprise: a sea of gleaming gold stretched from just a few yards in front of our feet into the invisible back of that pre-Incan pantry of an industrial park. Sheets and more sheets of gold, measuring approximately three feet tall by more than five feet long, rested on each other, forming perfect rows that reached to the distant back, leaving a narrow path in the center. Is was impossible to know how many rows of them there were from left to right, because we also couldn’t make out the sides. We only saw that it was enormous, that translating all of it would take years of hard work and would require the collaboration of a lot of people to extract a complete history from it. How many sheets could we see, just see? Fifty thousand, a hundred thousand? Five hundred thousand? It was incredible! Where was the beginning? And the end? Could they be classified based on some unknown system, or by subject, by time period, by Capacas?

Dr. Torrent was also the first to go inside. She took a dubious step, then another, and stopped. Her face reflected the golden sparks the headlights pulled from that ocean of gold on which not a speck of dust appeared to have fallen in five hundred years. She was fascinated, excited. She reached out her right hand to touch the first sheet in front of her, but since it was still too far, she took another uncertain step and then continued walking like a boat in a typhoon until at last she rested her palm on the metal. We almost saw the blue flash of an electric shock go through her, reaching to the ceiling, but it was only an impression. She bent her knees and squatted, brushing her hand over the *tocapus* engraved there, using the same delicacy with which she might caress the most fragile crystal in the world. For her, it was the culmination of a life of searching and study. What could that strange woman feel, I wondered, facing the most complete and ancient library of a lost culture that she’d been studying for so many years? It must be an incomparable feeling.

I was the next to enter the chamber, but unlike the professor, I didn’t stop to admire those texts written on gold. I kept walking in a straight line along the path, accompanied by Marc and Lola, who looked around them with fascination. The cold air of the place smelled like a mechanic’s shop, of an impossible mix of oil and gasoline.

“What does the one you’re examining say, Professor?” Jabba asked as he walked by her.

With that peculiar voice like a cello, Marta Torrent replied:

“It talks about the universal flood and of what happened after.”

I couldn’t help laughing. It was as if I had asked Núria, my secretary, how her weekend had been, and she had calmly confessed that she’d been to dinner in the International Space Station and visited the Great Wall of China. Which is why laughter rose in me, an uncontainable laughter, because of the disproportion between the question and the response, but what else could be expected from such a situation?

“What are you laughing at, Arnau?” Lola wanted to know, positioning herself next to me and shooting photographs left and right like the photojournalist she was.

“At the things that happen to us,” I replied, without being able to stop.

Then she laughed as well, and Marc copied her, and in the end even Dr. Torrent, who was now behind us, was infected with the silly laughter, and our guffaws resonated and were lost in the chamber of the horned serpent, which was naturally only a little smaller than the extremely long passages that surrounded it; consequently, it reminded me of an industrial warehouse of gigantic proportions. After a long time spent walking among those millions of gold sheets, an uncertainty shook me from within: Where, exactly, would be the remedy for thieves like Daniel? Which of those golden sheets would explain how to return sanity to someone who thought he was dead and who didn’t recognize anything around him? I told myself it was still very early to worry, since the professor might be able to find the sheets that dealt with the power of words; but intuition told me, at the sight of that panorama, that what I had thought would be simple after so much effort expended getting there was going to become an arduous work of many years, and without guarantee of success, besides. Where in the hell had we gotten the idea that the cure for Daniel was hidden in that damned chamber? At the moment, as far as we knew, there was only one person in the world—Dr. Torrent—who knew how to read Aymara, and not even in her wildest dreams would she be capable of completing a task of such magnitude; just the introduction of all that information into a mountain of computers running an improved version of the damned “JoviLoom” would require the entire population of Barcelona working their fingers to the bone for several decades. I felt my heart sinking slowly to my feet, so I resolved not to fall into a premature depression and to keep walking toward the end of that passage in case the Yatiri had decided to leave the pharmaceutical remedy a little closer at hand.

In the middle of that nave, we were like shipwrecked people eternally rowing without direction, but at last after a few minutes we could make out some distant stones, the back wall, and that encouraged us to hasten our steps, because with the help of the potent little Mini-Maglite flashlights, it had seemed like we saw at the base of that wall something like a shipping crate with many boxes on top.

The image got clearer as we neared it, but that’s not how we guessed what it was; it didn’t look like anything we could identify with a simple glance. Not even when we were a stone’s throw away could we decipher what we were seeing. We had to get there, go up the stone staircase, and lean over the packages in order to

realize that what we had taken for an altar was an enormous gold sarcophagus about thirteen feet long and three feet high, almost identical to those of the Egyptian pharaohs, except for the small difference that its head was pointed. The four boxes that had at first seemed to be sitting on top of the supposed altar were a few other huge sarcophagi placed on stone shelves sticking out of the wall at varying heights. There were two sheets the same size as the large dais embedded in the wall on both sides of the main sarcophagus; the one on the left contained a text in *tocapus*; the one on the right, a drawing of what looked like a cubist landscape.

And at that very moment, a deafening roar made us turn as quick as wind toward the path by which we had come.

"What the hell is going on?" Jabba yelled.

For a moment I was afraid the whole place was coming down, but the sound was very localized, rhythmic, familiar…

"The door is closing!" I shouted.

"Run!" Jabba exclaimed, beginning an absurd dash through the passage, grabbing Proxi's hand and pulling her along with him.

Neither Dr. Torrent nor I followed them. It was useless. The door was too far. Then the noise stopped.

"Come back here," I told them, cupping my hands around my mouth like a loudspeaker. "We're already shut in."

They came back, disheartened and furious.

"Why didn't it occur to us that something like that could happen?" Marc muttered, working hard to contain his irritation.

"Because we're not as clever as the Yatiri," Dr. Torrent told him.

The moment of confusion past, we turned our gazes back to the gold sarcophagi, but now we were serious and preoccupied, without our previous good mood. We looked at those golden coffins, each of us wondering in silence how in the hell we were going to get out of there.

To do something, we went up the stone staircase and were struck dumb, not knowing what to say or do before the sight of the silhouettes carved on the covers of the sarcophagi (at least, of the main one and the lowest two on the shelves). Some very realistic images showed some weird guys, who, if what we were seeing was true, appeared to be about eleven feet tall, to have beautiful beards, and to have undergone occipital frontal deformation.

"The giants?" Lola murmured, frightened.

But none of us answered her question, because we simply couldn't make a sound. If they were the giants, the chronicle of the Yatiri had told the truth. About everything.

"It can't be…" I groaned at last, bad tempered. "It can't, it can't be true! Help me, Jabba!" I shouted, standing at one side of the main sarcophagus and sticking my fingers between the box and the lid to push the lid upward. Both felt soft but icy.

Marc followed me like a shadow, also annoyed, and with a strength coming from anger, we managed to lift that heavy gold cover, which first slid gently and then fell heavily and noisily to the floor on the far side. A quick and surprising whiff of gasoline filled my nose. The professor's voice made us react.

“Do you know what you just did?” she said, very calm. When we looked at her, we saw that Lola had gone to stand next to her and also looked angry. “You could have ruined for good a serious and delicate investigation of this tomb. Has no one ever told you that you should never touch anything when you make an archaeological discovery?”

“You’ve just committed the biggest act of stupidity in the world,” Proxi declared, putting her hands on her hips and looking daggers at Jabba. “There was no need to open that sarcophagus.”

But I wasn’t in the mood to feel guilty.

“Yes, there was,” I contradicted in a quavering voice. “When we get out of here, I don’t care if an army of archaeologists comes in and seals this place for the next hundred years, but right now it’s ours and we’ve worked very hard to find a cure that will give Daniel back his sanity. And you know what, Proxi? I don’t think we’ll find it… Not here,” and I stretched out my right hand in a gesture that included the whole nave behind us. “Or will you be able to find the gold sheets that explain how to do it? If there’s a giant inside this sarcophagus, at least I want to leave with the certainty that the Yatiri were telling the truth and that there’s hope. If there isn’t, I will be able to go back home with a clear conscience and sit down to hope medication and time will have an effect.”

Immediately after speaking, I lowered my gaze to look at what we had exposed. I almost died of fright: a wide golden face looked at me with empty feline eyes from an enormous head that extended upward in a conical skull covered by a *chullo* made entirely of jewels, and adorned on both sides with two giant circular *orejeras*, also made of gold, with turquoise mosaics. My gaze traveled down that endless body, taking in a very deteriorated breastplate made of white, red, and black beads that formed a pattern of solar rays around the figure of Piri Reis’ Humpty-Dumpty, and over this breastplate rested an incredible necklace made of small gold and silver human heads. The mummy’s arms were raised, and a very fine skin like parchment was visible beneath which the almost powdered bone could be made out. The wrists, however, were covered by wide bracelets made of tiny seashells that time had left alone, unlike those giant hands that looked like eagle claws toasted by fire, resting on a golden thorax sticking out from under the breastplate. The size of each of those bones, which seemed drawn with sand, was really frightening. I was aware of Lola and Marta Torrent coming to stand next to me, and sensed their shock because of the unconscious backward movement of their bodies. The legs of the Traveler—that was, without a doubt, the famous *Sariri* so protected by the Yatiri—were covered by a fringed cloth, very damaged, on which could still be seen the original design of *tocapus*, and the feet, the enormous feet, were encased in golden sandals.

We were facing the remains of the Traveler, an eleven-foot tall giant who confirmed, on one hand, the myth of Viracocha, the Inca god, the so-called “old man of the sky,” who had created, near Tiwanaku, a first humanity that he didn’t like, a race of giants which he destroyed with columns of fire and a terrible flood, leaving the world dark afterwards; and on the other hand, he also corroborated the claims of the chronicle of the Yatiri, which told that a goddess named Oryana had come from the sky, and from her union with an earthly animal had given birth to a humanity of giants with centuries-long lifespans, who, after building and living in

Taipikala, had disappeared due to a terrible cataclysm that put out the sun and caused a flood, leaving them sick and debilitated to the point of turning them into the small and short-lived humanity we were now.

Marc expressed out loud what I was thinking:

"What bothers me is that the Bible's going to be right after all about the flood thing, now that no one believes it."

"What makes you say that?" exclaimed Dr. Torrent, without pausing in her contemplation of the Traveler. "I believe it. In fact, I'm completely convinced that it really happened. But not because the Judeo-Christian Bible tells that Yahweh, discontent with humanity, decided to destroy it with a flood that lasted forty days and forty nights, but because the myth of Viracocha tells exactly the same thing, and Mesopotamian mythology does as well, in the Poem of Gilgamesh, which tells of the god Enlil, who sent a flood to destroy humanity, and of a man named Ut-Napishtim, who built an ark onto which he loaded all the seeds and animal species of the world in order to save them. It's also mentioned in Greek mythology, and in China, where a man named Yu built, over a period of thirteen years, some enormous canals that saved part of the population from being destroyed by the flood. Do you want more?" she asked, looking back at the sarcophagus. "In the holy books of India, the Bhagavata Purana and the Mahabharata, the flood is described in complete detail and the story of the hero and his rescue boat is repeated. The Aborigines of Australia have the myth of the Great Flood that destroyed the world to create a new social order, and the North American Indians also tell a similar story, and the Eskimos, and almost all the tribes of Africa. Doesn't it seem odd to you? Because it does to me. Very much so."

Okay, so many similar occurrences couldn't be a coincidence. Maybe it was true that there had been a universal flood, maybe the holy books and myths needed a scientific evaluation, a secular and impartial reading to uncover the authentic history that had been transformed into religion. Why deny them all validity on principle? They probably contained important truths that we were refusing to accept just because they smelled of superstition and incense.

"And when is this supposed to have happened?" Jabba asked, skeptical.

"That's another interesting fact," the professor remarked as she leaned over to examine the Traveler's fringed skirt. "It could be said that almost all versions are remarkably similar: between eight and twelve thousand years ago."

"The end of the Ice Age…" I murmured, suddenly remembering the map made by the Turkish pirate, the Nostratic language, the mysterious disappearance of hundreds of species all over the planet (like the Cuvieronius and the toxodon), etc. But the professor wasn't listening to me.

"'This is Dose Capaca, who set forth on his journey in his six hundred and twenty-third year,'" she read out loud.

"That's what it says on the textile covering his legs?" Proxi hurriedly asked, leaning over the giant's delicate remains.

"Yes," Marta Torrent replied, "but perhaps this textile and some of the objects are from several centuries later than the body. We can't know."

The professor then moved, distracted, toward the golden, *tocapu*-engraved sheet that was embedded in the wall to the left of the sarcophagi. She stood in front of it, raised her head to illuminate the engravings, and began to translate:

"*You have learned how the language of the gods is written and you are reading these words. You deserve to know their sounds as well. Come find us. Neither the death of the sun, nor torrential waters, nor the passage of time have done away with us. Come and we will help you to live. Say: We will find you because we want to learn. Don't bring war because you will not find us. We want you to bring only the desire for knowledge.*"

Her fantastic radio announcer's reading voice had lent a solemn tone to the message's words, so Marc, Lola, and I stood with foolish expressions on our faces.

"It must be a joke, right?" I suggested after making an effort to react.

"It doesn't seem to be, Mr. Queralt."

"But… It's impossible that they still exist. They wrote that before leaving, and it doesn't seem likely that they're still somewhere awaiting the arrival of some visitors who have come by here and read their message."

"There's nothing left of these guys!" Marc boomed. "Someone would have seen them at some point and they would have been on the news. Besides, the message doesn't make sense. It starts with a ridiculous question that invalidates everything else. This is some scammers' joke."

"Why is the question at the beginning of the message ridiculous?" the professor inquired, turning toward him.

"Because, where do they get the idea that the people who have come here have learned to read these gold sheets? We don't even know how to get out of this pyramid! If you weren't with us or if we didn't have your husband's *JoviLoom*, none of us would have survived long enough to decipher this damned *tocapu* writing." Jabba seemed really angry; despite the cool temperature, his shirt showed large sweat stains around his neck and on his back. "I'll remind you that we're locked in and that it's been a long time now since we had our last meal. If we don't find a way to return to the surface, we're going to kick the bucket in a few days, which doesn't give us enough time, or proper physical conditions, for learning a language without help."

"Don't be so sure, Marc," she replied, with a furrowed brow. "Look at the wall. Pay attention to these drawings." And she pointed at some reliefs engraved on the stone blocks that formed a band running the length of the wall.

Like robots, we began to walk slowly, examining the series of images composed of large *tocapus*, each one followed by a scene of Tiwanakan art representing its meaning, like a school primer for learning how to read.

"Notice that the first *tocapu* on the wall is also the first that appears in the message," Marta Torrent was explaining to us, "and that the second and third, which form, as can be seen by the drawings, the verb 'understand,' with the suffixes for third person and realized action, or past perfect, are also the second and third from the text, etc. It really caught my attention when I read what the sheet said, that the message was written exclusively with figurative and symbolic *tocapus*. There isn't a single one that represents the sound of a letter or a phonetic syllable. The message is very well thought out so that it can be represented visually on the wall. Look at this little man who's working on a sheet with a little hammer and fine chisel. The previous *tocapu* is the root of the verb *to write*."

"In other words," I said, still walking, "the Yatiri leave a message that can be translated, or at least partially understood, in a short time. They take it for

granted that they should formulate their invitation for people who don't know their language or their writing. They have it very well thought out. But what if the conquistadors had gotten here? Imagine for a moment that Pizarro enters this chamber on his horse. Do you really think no one would have noticed these drawings were a lithographic primer?"

"I very much doubt they would have, Mr. Queralt," the professor replied, captivated like me by the incredible representations engraved on the walls. "To begin with, because the Yatiri went to a lot of trouble to hide this place, and I don't think it's necessary to remind you of all the things we've had to do to get to this chamber. But even if Pizarro had gotten here (which, fortunately, he did not, because none of this would still be here), he would not have been able to understand what he saw. He was illiterate, he wasn't familiar with letters and their function, and it can be supposed the ruffians and adventurers in his army were the same. Perhaps some priest versed in Latin could have, but he would have had to get here after all the gold was removed and melted into ingots to be sent to Spain, so he wouldn't even have seen the sheet on the wall with the invitation, or the other that represents a map and that we still have not studied."

As if moved by a spring mechanism, the four of us turned on our axes without blinking and started back down the path to the sarcophagi, a movement which made us smile until we got to the sheet and stood in front of it.

"Hey, Proxi," I said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Why don't you take a bunch of photos of Mr. Dose Capaca and this map?"

"Of the map, okay," she replied, "but of the giant, I don't dare. I know the light could damage him. In museums they don't let you take photographs."

"But that's to make you buy the postcards at the exit, woman!" Jabba exclaimed.

"No, Marc, no," the professor was alarmed. "Lola's right. The concentrated light of the flash could alter the chemical properties of the mummy, setting off biological processes of decomposition. I would beg you, even, to put the cover back in its place so the Traveler isn't further damaged by the oxygen in this chamber."

"Speaking of that…" I murmured, holding onto Jabba's elbow and pulling him toward the sarcophagus to carry out the order. "Why does this place smell like gasoline? Haven't you guys noticed?"

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Queralt. It has a logical explanation. In the mummification process practiced in this part of South America, they used bitumen in abundance, obtained as a residue from petroleum distillation, as well as different classes of resins which when combined with the bitumen and subjected to the smoking process, also produce a strong odor of motor oil, even after hundreds of years."

"After thousands of years, professor," Jabba pronounced, out of breath, as he helped me to put the cover on the sarcophagus, "because that's how much time this Capaca carries in his bones."

Proxi, meanwhile, was taking photos of the strange map drawn on the second sheet of gold.

"I don't know what to tell you, Marc," Marta Torrent murmured, "I'm no bioarchaeologist, and my knowledge of mummification is limited to the practical technicalities in Incan Peru. But everything considered, it's still surprising that

this body is so well preserved. I can't imagine what arts the Yatiri employed to make him last eight or ten thousand years. It's absolutely surprising to me. Really, I would say it's unprecedented."

"Well, unprecedented or not," I replied, returning to her side, "this whole big nave smells like gasoline, despite the fact that the five bodies are shut inside heavy gold sarcophagi."

She remained silent for a few seconds, then she pinched her lower lip between her thumb and index finger in a very characteristic gesture of hers that reminded me of my mother interpreting her pantomime entitled *I'm Thinking Profoundly*.

"Well, when we find the Yatiri," she said at last, very calm, "we'll ask them. Okay?"

Jabba burst out in sonorous laughter that echoed throughout the nave.

"Good one, professor, good one!" he exclaimed.

And he kept laughing like a lunatic, without noticing that Lola, Marta Torrent, and I were watching him, completely serious.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked at last, surprised, drying the tears from his eyes. "Didn't you think it was funny?"

Suddenly, a light went on in his head.

"Oh, no! None of that!" he exclaimed at the top of his lungs. "I won't follow you into this lunacy! We don't even know how to get out of here! Are you guys touched in the head?"

The three of us kept looking at him without laughing. The truth is we must have seemed like a trio of dangerous lunatics coldly looking at their victim before starting to walk slowly toward him with criminal intentions, but there was fortunately no witness there to tell the tale, except for Jabba, of course, and he could easily be made to keep quiet with a bribe in the form of a raise.

"You're right about one thing," Proxi conceded, without changing her serious expression or her posture. "First we have to get out of here."

"Right," was my intelligent contribution.

"Well, come on, let's go," Marc joked, sitting on the stone step that supported the sarcophagus. "It's very late and I'm hungry. I'm also tired and I need to take a shower when we get to the hotel. Oh, but… but it's eleven thirty local time! So, maybe we should stay, what do you think? We can sleep here, and tomorrow we'll see."

"Shut up, Marc," Proxi admonished, taking a seat at his side. "Didn't you say the panels of *tocapus* on the second condor had awakened your programming animal? Why don't you start up that magnificent hacker brain and analyze the situation as if it were a programming challenge?"

I dropped to the floor in front of them and carelessly let go of my bag.

"Sit with us, Dr. Torrent," I told the professor. "Surely we'll think of something."

"You could start by just calling me Marta," she replied, sitting with her legs crossed next to me. It was very cold in that damned place.

"Okay, but just so you know, I liked it very much that you called me Mr. Queralt. No one ever calls me that."

Jabba and Proxi laughed.

“It’s just that you don’t look like a *Mister*, Arnauet,” Proxi teased. “With that mane, that earring, and that nineteenth century gentleman’s goatee, you look more like a romantic poet or painter than a businessman.”

The silliness continued for a few more minutes. Like many other times since that strange story had begun, we needed to decompress. We were very exhausted and it was pleasant to forget for a moment the reality surrounding us, sarcophagi included. But finally we became quiet.

“We haven’t walked the whole perimeter of the chamber,” I remarked after a while.

“True,” Jabba agreed. “Maybe we’re here, wasting time, while there’s a beautiful door ajar somewhere.”

“Stop dreaming,” Lola told him, passing a hand over his hair to smooth an out-of-place lock.

“Fine, something similar,” he insisted. “A hole in the roof or something like that. I think we should split up. There are four of us, right? Well, each of us can take one wall of the chamber. If we don’t find anything…”

“It’s a bad plan,” I cut him off. “Whoever gets the wall with the door has to walk down the path in the middle or along one of the side walls to get there, which is a waste of time. I propose that we form two teams. We leave from here, from the sarcophagi, then each team covers a side and we meet again at the door. That way we can check if it can be opened, and if not, we come back here by the center path and start again. There has to be some way out.”

My idea was accepted, because, obviously, it was very good, but there was no time to put it into action. Before separating, it occurred to us to examine the stone dais of the Traveler’s sarcophagus, and it turned out that just where Jabba had been standing to take off and put back the cover there was a new panel of *tocapus*. Incredibly, he had stepped on it without noticing, and luckily nothing unfortunate had happened to it. If the chamber had been lit, we would have found it right away, but since our only illumination was from our headlights, the area behind the sarcophagus had remained in complete darkness the whole time.

“Does it mean anything, Marta?” Lola asked, leaning over.

The professor glanced at it and nodded.

“‘You have already learned how the language of the gods is written. Come find us and we will help you to live. Don’t bring war because you will not find us. We want you to bring only the desire for knowledge.’”

“But isn’t that the same thing it says on the gold sheet?” Jabba said, angrily.

“Not exactly.”

Marta wrinkled her forehead and regarded the small panel pensively.

“It’s only part of the original message.” She turned and craned her neck to the left to look at it. “They’re phrases of the message, but not all of them are here.”

“Okay,” I laughed, “we’re on our way again. Let’s turn on our brains.”

“And which phrases are missing?” Proxi asked.

Marta Torrent, doing another neck exercise, pointed them out:

“A piece of the original question is missing, the concrete part that says *…and you are reading these words*. Then the next complete phrase is missing, *You deserve to know their sounds as well*. It still has the next sentence but fuses it with the fifth, composing a single one, taking out *neither the death of the sun, nor*

torrential waters, nor the passage of time have done away with us. The sixth statement is missing as well, *Say: We will find you because we want to learn*, and then the rest is the same."

"I can't make heads or tails of it," Proxi muttered, put out.

"I don't think the key is in what's missing," I replied, "but in what they've left."

"That part doesn't make any sense either," Jabba protested, untucking his shirttails from his pants to make himself more comfortable on the floor. "Could you repeat it, Marta?"

"'You have already learned how the language of the gods is written,'" she read again in a dull voice. "'Come find us and we will help you to live. Don't bring war because you will not find us. We want you to bring only the desire for knowledge.'"

"There's something fishy here," I muttered, smoothing my goatee in annoyance. "I can smell it, but I don't see it."

The professor went to her backpack and took out a small canteen that flashed metallically under the lights. Suddenly I found I was drier than a desert.

"Do you want a little water?" she offered us. "It's been a lot of hours since we've had a drink."

"Yes, please!" Proxi exclaimed with all her heart.

What a trio of idiots! How could it not have occurred to us to bring water? The latest model Silva compass, the Wenger pocket knife, and the Bushnell binoculars, but at the moment of truth, no water or food. Bravo.

"There isn't enough for the four of us," the professor explained, "so please, don't drink too much."

I remember the distress I felt as the liquid trickled down my throat and fell coldly on my empty stomach. All I could think was that we either had to get our act together, or, as Marc had said before, in a few hours things would get pretty rough.

"You wouldn't have anything to eat, would you, Marta?" Jabba asked her with an expression on his face that showed how black his thoughts were.

"No, I'm sorry. I only have water. But don't worry," she told him, energetic, "we aren't going to stay here long. We only have to solve a small mystery and today we've already solved many, so there's nothing to worry about." Suddenly, a light went on in my brain, right behind the LED of my headlight.

"What if this mystery can be solved visually like you said we could have done with the others, Marta?" I asked her. "You claimed that by analyzing the order, the layout, and the repetition of the *tocapus*, you could get correct answer."

She arched her eyebrows and smiled.

"You may be right, Arnau."

"If it's a code," I said, opening the laptop, "I'm very good."

"And we are, too!" Jabba burst out. "Did you take any photos of the text on the gold sheet, Proxi?"

"They're still in the camera, with the photos of the map."

"Well, take one of this panel on the floor," I requested, "and then we'll compare them on the computer screen. If there's a logical structure, we'll find it."

And we found it. The professor was right. All of the Yatiri's mysteries could be solved by their form as well as by their content. Those guys, if they still existed, must be really clever and strange. With the image of the sheet from the wall on

one side and the image of the panel from the floor on the other, we discovered a repetition (just one) that gave the answer to the problem. It was so simple and clean that I marveled at its composition. I would have given a considerable pile of cash to hire on at Ker-Central the Yatiri who had rigged up that puzzle. It came from a very simple idea: There was a phrase that gave the key, that was the key, and that, at the same time, contained the fundamental idea of the message, and that phrase was "Say: We will find you because we want to learn." The *tocapus* it was written with were the only ones that appeared repeated in the text, scattered here and there in the phrases of the short message. That's why they had selected them, separating them from the whole. "We will find you" was made up of the *tocapus* that appeared in "Come find us and we will help you to live," where we only had to invert the signs indicating the persons of the verbs. "Because" was exactly the same in "Don't bring war because you won't find us." "We want" was the beginning of the last phrase, "We want you to bring only the desire for knowledge," and "to learn" was the root *tocapu* of "learned" in "You have already learned how the language of the gods is written." Simple and clean, as a good code should be.

We had barely finished pressing, in order, the *tocapus* that made up the phrase, when the panel split in two, along with the sides of what up to that moment had been one giant stone block, and, like bilge gates, the two sides sank and exposed a tiny stone staircase that descended into the depths. Although it might seem strange, such things no longer impressed us. We were beat, worn down, and, more than anything, desperate to get out of that cursed Pyramid of the Traveler, whom we'd already had the pleasure of meeting. We needed to return to the surface and see the sky, breathe fresh air, have an big dinner, and go to bed and sleep for twelve or fifteen hours.

We went down the stairs without wanting to acknowledge the small detail that we were burying ourselves even deeper underground instead of ascending, but it didn't last long. After twenty-odd stairs, we found ourselves in a narrow rocky passage that stretched off in a straight line and continued in a straight line for an hour. And then, for two. And when we were finishing the third hour of straightness was when we noticed that we had left Tiwanaku-Taipikala behind long ago and that we must be several miles to the west, according to the compass.

At last, around four in the morning, and more dead than alive, we ran into another staircase that went up. But first, of course, there had to be a final surprise.

We had just set foot on the first stair—I went first—after making sure it was clean of black moss and slipperiness, when the rasping and limp voice of Jabba, who was behind me, pulled me from my lethargy.

"Root, you skipped something."

I turned, more to look at him than to find out what the hell he was talking about—he looked like a lump, with circles under his eyes and a horrible ruddy shadow of beard on his transparent face—and I saw that, without moving, he was pointing at some kind of open niche halfway up the wall, located right where the staircase began.

I backed up a step and stood in front of the cavity, taking the small Maglite flashlight from my pocket, because I felt incapable even of tilting my head to

illuminate the hollow. There, as on the lectern we had found after passing the first condor head, was another piece of stone that was saying “pick me up.” It was a simple ring, a round sheet about eight inches in diameter and one and a half or two inches thick with a hole in the middle, like a thick and heavy bracelet. The professor, who had been walking last, passed Proxi, who hadn’t said a word, and stood next to Jabba to look at the piece.

“Did you see that it has an arrow engraved on it?” she said in a tired voice.

It was true. The stone ring had a very simple arrow—two lines that converged at one end—carved at the top.

“Do we have to take this doughnut with us?” Jabba asked, disdainful. No question about it, he was hungry.

“I would say so,” I replied. “But this time it’s not my turn to carry it, since I carried the other template.”

“You have a lot of nerve,” he complained, but picked it up in his right hand, and when he picked it up, a sound like cogs and pulleys came from the upper part of the staircase. Without giving us time to react, a sudden breath of cool air brushed by us and slipped through our noses into our lungs.

“The exit!” I exclaimed happily, and without giving it any more thought, I shot up the stairs with my heart racing. I had to get out of that hole.

The first thing I saw was the sky, marvelously full of stars. I had never seen so many. And then, with a lot of completely black open country around me, I felt deathly chill, as if I had been stuck suddenly in a freezer. I began to sneeze from the sudden temperature change, and as the others were coming outside and recovering from the claustrophobia, I used up several tissues with that sudden fit. It must have been a few degrees below freezing and we only had the light clothes we had put on the day before. Immediately, Jabba and Proxi started sneezing as well, and it turned into a concert. Only Marta remained intact, almost immune to the freezing cold night of the Altiplano. I saw her look in one direction and then another, perfectly unconcerned, and finally decide on the second.

“The town of Tiahuanaco isn’t very far,” she said, beginning the march through that dark Siberian steppe.

We, with our tissues in hand, followed her like loyal lambs.

“How do you know?” I asked her between sneezes.

“Because that peak over there,” and she pointed to an immense and distant shadow, almost impossible to recognize in the blackness of the night, “is Illimani, the sacred mountain of the Aymara, and the town’s in that direction. I know this place well. I played here as a child.”

“In this wasteland?” Lola asked, surprised.

“Yes, in this wasteland,” she murmured, without stopping. “I came to Bolivia for the first time with my parents, when I was three years old. I only stayed in Barcelona during the school term, and that’s until I got married, had my children, and finished my studies. You could say I’m half Bolivian. My friends were the children from the town of Tiahuanaco and we were free to run all day around this land. Thirty-five years ago here, we didn’t even know what a tourist was.”

Marc, Lola, and I shivered and our teeth chattered as we followed with light steps after the professor. It took a little over half an hour for us to arrive at the outskirts of town, and we headed directly for Don Gastón’s hotel, who turned to a

statue when, in long underwear and terry cloth shirt, he saw us show up at the door of his establishment. As soon as he recognized Marta, he quickly invited us inside and woke up the whole house. They brought us blankets and hot soup and lit the fire, throwing on wood as if they had to get a steamship moving. Marta gave Don Gastón a succinct explanation, which the man accepted without complaint. Then he took us to our rooms and promised that no one would bother us for any reason. Stumbling, I took a shower before getting into bed, and then, at last, I fell deeply asleep.

Chapter IV

I woke up around five in the afternoon, and when I went down to the dining room, Marc and Lola were already dressed and ready, waiting for me, calmly reading a Bolivian newspaper. According to what they told me as I ate breakfast, the professor had left after eating and had left a note for us with a telephone number, asking us to get in contact with her when we returned to La Paz.

Don Gastón, since we were friends of Marta's, only charged us the minimum for one day, without extras or food, and got us one of the few taxis in the village to return to La Paz. We made the journey in the company of some *cholas* with black braids and bowler hats, who unloaded thick bundles of multicolored cloth into the trunk of the vehicle, and who didn't open their mouths once in the whole trip, probably from lack of air, since Proxi and I also traveled in the backseat (Jabba wouldn't have fit).

When we walked through the doors of our hotel, we felt at home. It was so strange to think about everything that had happened to us that we simply decided not to think about it. It was as if there were a hole in time; three months could have passed, or years, because the hours had dilated in an extraordinary way and it was unbelievable that only a day had gone by since we had left there. The hole was also in our minds. We got into the elevator in silence, and the three of us went up to my room. Marc seemed worried:

"What do I do with the doughnut?" he asked me immediately after closing the door. Lola threw herself onto the sofa, and without thinking twice, turned on the television. She needed to recover her sanity, and the idiot box supplied her with a certain feeling of normality.

"Let's store it in the safe."

Our rooms came with safes hidden inside the closets. It's not that they were the paragon of security, but they provided minimum safety for the most valuable objects. Before leaving, I had stored my Captain Haddock watches inside.

"Should we put the laptop and Proxi's digital camera in there too?"

"Do you want to hide the proof from sight or something?" I asked, as I took a seat in front of the desk and turned on the computer. "We have to download all the images that are still on the camera's memory card and then burn all of them to a CD. That's what we'll store in the safe, along with the doughnut. The rest of the equipment stays out so we can keep working."

“You still want to keep going with this?” Lola asked me from the sofa, in an aggressive tone.

“No, I assure you that the only thing I want is for us to go out for a walk, have dinner somewhere, go to one of those *peñas* where they have live music, and once I’m there, I want to drink all the beer in the place.”

“Half of the stock is mine,” Jabba warned me.

“Half,” I granted. “Only half.”

“But what the hell are you talking about?” Proxi asked, taken aback. “You guys don’t drink!”

“My dear Lola,” I told her. “I don’t care. I plan on getting drunk anyway.”

“Me too,” Jabba added.

Of course, we weren’t going to do it, because we didn’t like alcohol (except for on special occasions and important dates, when we, like everyone, knew how to enjoy a glass of good wine or a little cava), but making such a claim out loud, in such a forceful way so typical of audacious and decided men, was a big interior comfort, a real reaffirmation of our virile spirit.

While I moved all the photographs, information, and documents to a compact disc, my colleague went off to his room to shower again and change his clothes. Lola’s only movement was that of her right thumb changing the channel with the remote. When I picked up the stone ring to put it in the safe, along with the newly burned CD, I saw that on the back it had a very strange hole, a cavity in the shape of a triangle with two equal sides and one shorter one, slightly curved outward, like a wedge of cheese. I thought about showing it to Lola, but I was sure that if I did, she would bite me, so I immediately put it away without any further consideration.

Right before leaving the hotel, Jabba proposed that we call Marta. Little by little, we were recovering and turning back into people, but we were still denying all that had happened in the catacombs of Taipikala.

“We won’t call her today,” I replied. “Tomorrow’s another day.”

“But she’s waiting. At least call her to tell her we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Stop pestering me.”

“Who has her phone number?” he insisted, pig-headed.

“I have it,” Proxi said, “and I’m not going to give it to you. I agree with Root: Tomorrow is another day. Now we’re going to have dinner in the best restaurant in La Paz. I need polluted air, haute cuisine, and a lot of people and traffic around me.”

“I’m game,” I said, moving in the direction of the street when the doorman let us out.

But Jabba didn’t give up his effort. He hammered away at it while we wandered around, enjoying the modern part of La Paz, with its high buildings, its streets packed with cars, its traffic lights—which no one, by the way, paid attention to—its street lights that came on shortly after we started our walk, its people talking on cell phones, its luminous billboards sparkling from the roofs… Basically, the wonders of civilization. But of course, my colleague couldn’t abide Marta Torrent waiting for our call without receiving it. For me, the mention of Marta not only transported me to the Pyramid of the Traveler, but also to the anger about the thing with Daniel, so my stomach twisted every time that pain in the neck brought

up the subject. But, at last, desperate to make him shut up, I took out my phone, and between courses of the exquisite European food, I dialed the number on the note Lola passed to me over the table. It was answered by the voice of a man with a thick Bolivian accent, who, when I identified myself and asked for Marta, immediately gave the phone to her. It was very surreal. It was just a few hours ago that we had separated from that woman, and the situation was uncomfortable, because I had gone from abhorring her with all my heart to feeling guilty when I faced her, with the disagreeable addition that the experience we had lived together had created some strange bonds of familiarity that didn't seem at all real to me at that moment. It was like calling an old girl friend you had just broken up with and suddenly having to meet with her for some urgent business.

"Where are you, Arnau?" was the first thing she said. Her voice unsettled my nerves.

"Having dinner in a restaurant," I replied, taking the napkin from my lap and putting it momentarily on the table so I could sit more comfortably.

"Which one?"

"La Suisse."

"Oh, then you're close by, in Sopocachi!"

"Well, yes. Having dinner."

"Would you feel like having a coffee in the house of some friends of mine when you finish?"

I was tempted to rudely tell her no, but I controlled myself. I pushed the mute button, looked at my colleagues, and repeated the proposition to them:

"Marta Torrent is inviting us to have coffee after dinner. What do you think?"

"Where?" Marc asked; Proxi only made a pained face and shook her head repeatedly.

"In the house of some friends."

"I say sure," replied the worm, who was stuffing himself with swiss cheeses. "What do you say, Proxi?"

"I've been saying no for an hour. Didn't you see me shake my head?"

"Okay, forget it then. Tell her no, Root, that we'll talk to her tomorrow."

I released the mute button and put the phone back to my ear.

"Is your friends' house very far from here?" I asked.

"Not at all! It's right by where you're having dinner," Marta replied.

Proxi looked at me with a very large question mark on her face.

"Give me the address and we'll be there within an hour." I looked at my watch. "At ten thirty on the dot."

When I hung up, I had a knife in front of my nose.

"Didn't we agree we wouldn't do anything until tomorrow?" Proxi asked with a menacing gleam in her black eyes.

I nodded pathetically.

"So?" And the knife inched closer.

"I'm curious," I justified, clumsily. "Marc wanted to go and I want to know why the professor was so interested in meeting tonight. I thought it might be important. Besides," I said, looking down at my plate, "the sooner we finish this, the better. We can't live in Bolivia forever, and my brother is still hospitalized."

The mention of Daniel provoked an awkward silence at the table.

“If we manage…” Proxi stammered after a few seconds. “If we manage…”

“To cure him?” I finished for her.

“Yes,” she muttered, looking me in the eye. “What will you do? How are you going to approach the situation?”

“I have no idea. I suppose that first I’ll have to talk with the professor and ask her what she’s going to do, if she’s going to open an administrative investigation or something like that. After that, we’ll see. For now,” I hesitated, “I don’t know, I can’t think about that.”

“Maybe, if you make a sizable donation to the college…” Jabba insinuated.

“Marta Torrent doesn’t seem like a person who can be bought,” Proxi cut him off.

No, she didn’t at all. We were quiet for a while longer, then we chatted about trivial things until we left the restaurant. We walked to Isabel la Católica Plaza and turned on Pedro Salazar Street and walked down it until we got to the San Francisco residential community, a complex of colonial style residences that had a certain Andalusian air, with white walls, grated windows, and plants everywhere.

When we rang the doorbell, the light of a closed circuit camera shone on us.

“Hello,” the professor said. “Follow the main street until it ends, then you will see the house on the right. It’s called LOS JAZMINES.”

The development had the appearance of being inhabited by well-to-do people. The small avenue we walked along was clean and well-lit, and decorated with flower pots on both sides. The house called “Los Jazmines” was a small two story chalet with a red roof and a large wooden double door, one side of which was already open, showing Marta with her face illuminated by a smile and a new image that made us forget the Indiana Jones from the excavations, with a white blouse covered in red embroidery and a red pencil skirt that turned her back into the department head of the Autonomous University.

“Come in,” she said cordially. “How are you? Have you rested?”

“Not enough,” Proxi replied with an affable (and hypocritical) smile. “And you?”

“Oh, I’m very well!” she remarked, stepping aside to let us pass. Behind her, a somewhat eccentric couple awaited us with their hands hanging at their sides. “I’ll introduce you. This is Dr. Gertrude Bigelow and her husband, the archaeologist Efraín Rolando Reyes, with whom I’ve been working in Tiwanaku for almost twenty years, right, Efraín?”

“Or more!” he joked. “Pleasure to meet you, friends,” he added. Efraín Rolando was the bald guy Marta had entered Don Gastón’s restaurant with the previous Saturday when we ran into her for the first time, the one with glasses and a grayish beard. His wife, Dr. Bigelow, was a tall, skinny, and ungainly American, with straw-colored wavy hair pulled back in a bun, covered (because you couldn’t say “dressed”) in a long and summery flowered smock. Both were wearing leather sandals.

“Gertrude,” Marta added, “is an actual physician, which is where she gets her ‘Dr.’ from. Not like Efraín and me, who are doctors of humanities.”

I was always uncomfortable meeting new people and having to be nice to strangers. It was a real mystery to me why what everyone in the world wanted was to go out and connect with this person and that, the more the better, and boast of having a lot of friends, as if it were a triumph—and as if the contrary were a

failure, obviously. I made the normal effort and shook the hands of the archaeologist and the doctor as Marta finished the introductions. Then they invited us into the living room, an ample space crammed with strange and ugly pieces of Tiwanakan art. Over the long white sofa, a large framed black and white photograph of the ruins taken at sunset gave a clear idea of what made Efraín tick.

We sat around a low square table made of pale wood—like all the furniture in that living room—and Dr. Bigelow, gesturing to Marta to stay with us and not follow, disappeared discreetly through the door.

"I'll catch you up," the professor said quickly. "Efraín and Gertrude already know everything we discovered last night. For years, Efraín and I have shared the same interest in Tiwanakan culture and its great mysteries, and we've been associates in this research, whose documents, Arnau, your brother found in my office."

"About that, Marta…" I started, but she raised a hand in the air like a traffic guard and cut me off.

"We're not going to talk about that matter right now, Arnau. There will be time for that. Right now, the only two important things are, one the one hand, to return Daniel to health, and on the other, to continue the research from our current vantage point. We're going to start with a clean slate, and since we have common interests, we're all going to work together. Is that okay with you?"

We nodded without saying a word, although, oddly, Jabba, Proxi, and I all took advantage of the occasion to shift in our chairs.

"Don't feel bad about the matter with Daniel," Efraín said. "Especially you, Arnau. What Marta and I would like is for everyone to work together, to set this matter aside. It's very easy to form an opinion when one is not involved, as I am doing, I know, but I assure you that remembering this business can only muddle the project. It's better if we focus on what's important, don't you think?"

Again, we nodded and shifted in our chairs. At that moment, Dr. Bigelow returned carrying a heavy tray. Marta and Efraín leaned over to remove all the junk and journals from the table, and we spent the next few minutes passing out cups, napkins, tea spoons, coffee, milk, and sugar. When at last we were all served and comfortable, including the American, we returned to the conversation:

"This country," the professor explained, "is riddled with legends about ancient civilizations that still live hidden in the jungle. The Amazon region occupies three million square miles, which means that Latin America is almost completely jungle, and only the coastal regions are inhabited, so the great majority of countries share these myths. The existence of great treasure, of millennia-old cultures, of prehistoric monsters, are a part of Latin American folklore in general. We shouldn't forget the legend of El Dorado, or Paititi, for example, the famous city of gold, whose alleged location in relation to modern borders is here in Bolivia. Of course, no one really believes in these things, officially, but the truth is that every so often the governments that share the Amazon jungle send expeditions in search of gold mines and uncontacted tribes of Indians."

"And are they successful?" I asked, with an ironic smile on my lips, a smile that fell immediately when I took my first sip of the coffee… I'd never tasted any so

strong and thick! Was that the wonderful coffee of Bolivia, or was it that they liked cyanide in that house?

"Well, yes," Dr. Bigelow replied, surprising me because she hadn't said a word up till then. "They are successful. I myself have been part of a medical team on a couple of them, and we've always returned with something very interesting. On both, we found small groups of unknown Indian tribes that ran away when they saw us, after shooting a couple of arrows. They don't want contact with the white man."

She spoke with a strong American accent, very nasal, with the "R"s much softened but without even a trace of the sweet musicality or turns of phrase of Bolivia. Maybe the two cadences were incompatible in her mouth, despite the fluency with which she spoke Spanish.

"It's thought that there are still almost a hundred groups of uncontacted Indians in the jungle," the archaeologist explained. "In fact, Brazil, as the country with the most jungle, has ample reserves of territory where seekers of gold, timber and petroleum companies, and hunters are prohibited entrance because casual aerial sightings of unknown tribes have been made. The current policy is to save them from contact with civilization in order to prevent their destruction, because, among other things, we would infect them with our illnesses and we could wipe them out."

"Actually, Efraín," his wife objected, setting her cup on the tray, "it's not entirely true that the creation of reserves keeps away the undesirables."

"I know, honey!" he replied, smiling. "But that's the theory, right?"

The archeologist's shiny bald head glinted as he moved it from one side to the other. I still tasted the bitterness of the horrible coffee in my throat and I still felt like my mouth was full of the grit from the grounds.

"Look," Efraín continued, smoothing his beard, "everybody everywhere thinks that everything is already discovered, mapped, and placed, but there's nothing more wrong or further from the truth. There are still places on Earth where satellites can't see and where we don't know what there is, and the Amazon jungle is one of those places. Geographical void, they call it."

"It used to be called Terra Incognita," Marta pointed out, taking a sip of her coffee. I kept expecting her to vomit or make some sign of disgust, but she seemed to love it.

"Just try to get a map of the jungle area of Bolivia," challenged Efraín, who appeared to be about fifty, more or less. "You won't find it! Those maps don't exist!"

"But I've never seen holes… geographical voids like the ones you were talking about, on any atlas or world map," Jabba declared.

"Conventionally, they're filled in with the color of the territory surrounding them," the archaeologist clarified. "Have you heard of the long search for the source of the Nile in the nineteenth century?"

"Of course," Marc replied. "I've seen tons of movies and I've played millions of old video games on the subject. Burton and Stanley and all those people, right?"

But the archaeologist didn't answer his question.

"Did you know that today, in the twenty-first century, in the Amazon there are still tons of rivers whose sources are still unknown? Yes, don't look so surprised.

I've told you, satellites can't see everything, and if the jungle is very thick, as it is, it is impossible to know what's beneath the canopy. The Heath River itself, for instance! No one knows where it begins, yet it is such an important river that it marks the border between Peru and Bolivia."

"Alright, but," I objected, "what's the point of all of this?"

"It supports the hypothesis that the Yatiri exist," Marta declared, without showing any emotion, "that it is very possible that they have really survived all this time, so organizing our own expedition to look for them isn't anything as crazy as Lope de Aguirre.[4-15]

"You forget one small detail, Marta," I replied scornfully. "We don't know where the Yatiri are, or rather, we don't know if they're even in the Amazon jungle. Doesn't it seem a little risky to make such an assumption? Maybe they hid in some cave in the Andes, or among the inhabitants of some town. Why not?"

She looked at me expressionlessly for a few seconds, as if deciding whether to make me understand my ignorance and stupidity in a delicate way or not. Luckily, she controlled herself.

"What a bad memory you have, Arnau! Don't you remember Sarmiento de Gamboa's map?" she asked me with a small ironic smile on her lips. "You brought a copy to my office, so I imagine you must have studied it, correct? I found that map, drawn by Sarmiento, on a broken canvas in the archives of the Hydrographic Deposit in Madrid, about six years ago now. Remember the message? "Pathe of the Yatiri Indians. Two monthes by land. Seye I, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, that it is truthe. In the City of Kings on the Twenty-Second of February of One Thousand Five Hundred and Seventy-Five.'" I was stunned. It was true; my inquiries about that map covered in marks that looked like ant footprints had led me to the Amazon, but at the time it hadn't seemed like an important piece of information, because I didn't understand its meaning. "All I had to do was superimpose the broken map over a map of Bolivia," Marta added, settling herself comfortably on the sofa, "to discover that it represented Lake Titicaca, the ruins of Tiwanaku, and, leaving from there, a path that clearly entered the Amazon jungle. I'm convinced that it will be perfectly feasible to begin the search for the Yatiri."

Lola, who had uncharacteristically remained even quieter than Dr. Bigelow, leaned forward and put her cup on the table without trying the brew, as she adopted an expression of pronounced tiredness:

"We already thought that when we were inside the chamber of the Traveler, Marta," she pointed out, "but now, here, in the city, drinking coffee, things seem different. I remind you that the map we found on the gold sheet was only a drawing made of lines and dots on an empty background. I'm sorry, but I do think it's crazy."

"We still haven't studied that map in detail, Lola," she replied, very calm. "We still haven't reviewed all the graphic material that you, aptly, collected in the pyramid. We, and I'm referring to Gertrude, Efraín, and myself, are prepared to try. Efraín and I, because we've been working on this our whole lives, and Gertrude, because, as she has told you, she is familiar with the uncontacted tribes and knows the jungle, and she's convinced that we can find the Yatiri. If you don't want to come, I would kindly ask you to give us all of your materials."

She stared at me without blinking, waiting for a response.

“In exchange,” she added, in the face of my obstinate silence, “I will forget the business with Daniel, although within reason, naturally. But we could negotiate.”

Now I recognized her. She was again the Marta Torrent that I had gotten to know so well in her office at the university. When she showed that cynical side of herself, I felt well, calm, capable of talking to her on the same terms and equally matched. Even seeing her again dressed in a skirt and wearing the earrings and the wide silver bracelet that I had seen on her in Barcelona helped me to see her in the proper light.

“Wait, Marta,” Dr. Bigelow beat me to it. “It’s fine if you forget about the thing with Daniel if you like, but you haven’t let them tell us what they think about the expedition. Maybe no negotiation will be necessary. What do you say?” she asked the three of us.

Were they playing good cop bad cop to disconcert us? Or was that my mistrust of human beings in general talking again?

“What do you say, Arnau?” Lola asked me, but Marc, again, beat me to it:

“We only want to cure Daniel of the damned Aymara curse. If you want to go into the jungle, that’s your problem, but we could give you the documents in exchange for the cure, or rather, for you bringing us the remedy…”

“Let me, Marc,” I interrupted. My colleague was shooting off at the mouth, and deep down I wanted to avoid at all costs ending up in the middle of a strange journey through the Amazon jungle. I could understand him, but I did not share his opinion. “When we began this conversation, Efraín and you, Marta, offered to work as a team with us. You spoke of collaboration. Now I see that what you really wanted was to get the material and to get us out of the way.”

“That isn’t true,” the archaeologist said. “I can assure you. You know how impulsive Marta is. She can’t trust anyone on faith. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right, Efraín,” she murmured, then added by way of an apology. “I’ve been hasty. I’m sorry. I tend to get ahead of everyone else’s thoughts and I know that for you a journey into the jungle is unthinkable. That’s why I came to the conclusion that you were going to reject our offer to join the expedition, and I was afraid you would take the material with you or that you would refuse to share it with us.”

My muscles relaxed and I calmed. I, in her place, would have thought the same. I just would not have been so direct. But I could understand her suspicions.

“So, what do you say?” the Yankee doctor asked us. “Are you coming with us?”

Jabba opened his mouth, obviously to say something, but also obviously, Proxi gave his foot a hard stomp that hurt even me. My friend, of course, shut his mouth suddenly.

“I will go,” I said, very serious. “I don’t at all like the idea, but I think I should try. It’s my brother who needs my help, and although I’m sure you would do everything possible to bring back the cure he needs, I wouldn’t feel right waiting. Besides, and forgive me if I’m too sincere, but in case you didn’t bring it, I would always think it was because I hadn’t gone with you, because you hadn’t cared enough, or because, since it wasn’t the main objective, you had let it go by unnoticed. So I should go, but I can’t speak for my friends, because they have already done a lot and they have to make their own decision.” I looked at Marc and Lola and waited.

Jabba, with his brow furrowed, remained mute.

“Would you take it out of our vacation time?” Lola asked, suspicious.

“Of course not!” I replied, offended. “I’m not that much of a bastard, am I?”

“Sorry Arnau, but you can never trust your boss, especially if your boss is also your friend. Those are the worst.”

“I don’t know what planet you come from, honey,” I replied, very irritated, “but I don’t think you have any reason to complain about me.”

“No, I don’t,” she agreed mildly. “But my mother has taught me since I was a little girl that you can’t be too cautious, and as an IT security expert, I confirm it. So, if you’re not going to take time out of our vacations, then we’ll go with you.”

“I also have a say, don’t I?” Jabba protested, facing Proxi. “I don’t agree with this decision you’ve made on my behalf. I don’t want to go to the jungle. There’s no way I’m going into that dangerous place! I like nature, true, but only when it’s a normal, European nature… without wild animals or tribes of Indians who shoot arrows at white men.”

Proxi and I looked at each other.

“Arnau is more of a coward than you,” she rallied him, “and he’s going to go without complaint.”

“He has a sick brother and I don’t.”

“Fine,” Lola said, giving him the cold shoulder, “don’t come, then. Root and I will go. You can go back to Barcelona and wait for us.”

That seemed to make an impression on him. The idea of being separated from the group, marginalized, returned to Barcelona like a package, and more than anything, the idea of Lola wandering around the world without him, running the risk of falling into the arms of another (the jungle was known to be very aphrodisiac, and savages were known to be very thin and attractive), was more than he could take. He looked like a contrite orphan with a lost, pained expression.

“How can I let you go without me?” he protested weakly. “What if something happens to you?”

“Someone will lend me a hand, don’t worry.”

Marta, Efraín, and Gertrude looked at us, disconcerted. They still weren’t sure whether the scene taking place before their eyes was a serious conflict or a normal stupidity. With time, they would get used to it and not pay it any attention, but in that first interview, they looked lost. Something had to be done. It wasn’t a good idea to drag out a violent situation for our hosts.

“Okay, come on, stop being an ass,” I told him. “You’re coming, and that’s it. You know that Lola will never admit she’s afraid to go without you.”

“What!” she exclaimed. “Arnau, you really are an idiot.”

I wiggled my eyebrows significantly at her so she would understand my ploy, but she didn’t seem to get it.

“Fine, I’ll go,” Marc conceded. “But you’ll pay for everything.”

“Of course.”

Marta, who had already had a chance to get to know (a little) Jabba inside the pyramid, was the first to react:

“Very good. It’s decided then. The six of us will go. How about we stay here tomorrow to begin work on the gold map?”

I nodded.

"But what about your excavations in Tiwanaku?" I asked.

"Suspended until our return, due to bureaucratic procedure," Efraín said with a big smile on his lips. "And now, how does a good drink of aguardiente sound? You haven't tried anything better in your lives, I promise!"

Loaded with all our computer equipment and with the material we had taken from the pyramid (doughnut included), we took a *movilidad* the next day and presented ourselves at Efraín and Gertrude's house at noon. Apparently, Marta always stayed there when she was in Bolivia, so it was like her second home, since, according to what she told us, she spent at least six months a year in Bolivia. I wondered what kind of marriage hers was, with the husband living in the Philippines and her hanging around the other side of the world in the other direction, but in the end, it was none of my business; although that didn't stop Proxi from speculating at length on the subject for a few days.

That Wednesday, the 12th of June, dawned cool and autumnal, so we didn't mind sacrificing it working on the damned cubist map from the chamber. We had to make sense of it, and in order to do so, Efraín had spent all morning contacting all his friends and acquaintances in the government and the army with the goal of finding the most detailed map of Bolivia currently in existence. A couple of scholarship students from Tiwanaku and a conscripto(4-16) brought it shortly after our arrival, and we were impressed when we saw the enormous quantity of zones the country had—especially in the Bolivian Amazon—that were shown empty and marked "without data." Those maps, of course, weren't even close to being household maps. They were the best and most detailed official maps of the country, so no little girls had colored in their geographical voids. The enlargements of the parts of the jungle that Efraín had ordered were especially pitiful. It was then, looking at those white holes, that I understood what he had told us the night before: The world wasn't completely explored, or totally mapped; not even satellites watch everything from the sky, as much as we were taught to believe the contrary.

We enlarged the images from the map on the gold sheet and Sarmiento de Gamboa's map using Efraín and Gertrude's computers and printers. While we were at it, we made some adjustments to the Windows operating system the computers ran, leaving it more stable and effective, so that the famous blue screens signaling supposedly serious errors stopped popping up. The result of the enlargements was a perfect matching up of the significant points on both maps, with the unexpected surprise that where Sarmiento's ended, the gold sheet also ended, showing a little more of the path, but only to end abruptly in a triangle that was identical to the little cheese wedge on the back part of the doughnut. I quickly told them of my discovery of the day before, and took the stone ring out of my bag to show it to them.

"I don't understand how it can be related," Marta objected, setting it carefully on the table after examining it. "It must be some kind of calling card. The end of the path means that the Yatiri are here—and she touched a spot on the gold map. All we have to do is put this sketch over the army maps and check the location of the refuge."

It was easier said than done. The army maps were as big as sheets, and in comparison, our enlargements looked like napkins, so we had to reprint them,

bigger, and in sections, with the lines of the drawing separated from the gold sheet from the chamber, so we wouldn't go crazy or blind. When we at last managed our objective, we had to place a lamp on the lower end of the large dining room table, which had a glass surface, to be able to see the route clearly and draw it on the military map with a pencil. Of course it was much easier, much clearer, when we entered into one of the biggest blank areas of geographical void in Bolivia, because the black line of the drawing stood out perfectly as it moved mercilessly forward into the middle of that nothingness to stop in the perfectly visible baggy triangle; a tiny pyramid in a giant desert.

"What region is this?" I asked, breathless.

"But, Arnau, kid!" Lola admonished. "Can't you see where it says 'without data' there in the middle?"

"Of course I see it," I declared. "But, even so, this part of the country must have been given some name, right?"

"Yes, of course," Efraín replied, cramming on his glasses and leaning over the table. "It's in the Northeast, between Abel Iturralde province and Franz Tamayo province."

"The provinces here have people's names?" Marc asked, taken aback.

"Many, yes," Gertrude clarified, with a smile. "Some were christened by force during the dictatorship. Franz Tamayo was, until 1972, the famous land of Caupolicán."

"Oh, shit, now I see it!" the archaeologist exclaimed suddenly, standing. "Our path of the Yatiri Indians enters the Madidi National Park, one of the most important protected nature reserves in all of South America."

"So why is all of this blank?" Lola asked, pointing at the enormous geographical void. "If it's a national park, they should know what's inside."

"I just told you, Lola," the archaeologist insisted. "It's a protected natural reserve of gigantic proportions. Look what is says here: nineteen thousand square kilometers. Do you know how much that is? A lot. It's one thing, on a map, to mark theoretical boundaries, and another very different one for anyone to have set foot there. Besides, not all of this Terra Incognita is part of the park; of course a Bolivian national park would have to end at the Bolivian border, but here you can clearly see that the unknown territory also extends into Peru and Brazil. And look at this faint line delineating the edges of the park, it runs outside of the geographical void. This area is known."

"There's only jungle there," Marc objected.

"And what else do you want in a park in the Amazon?" Marta replied, then pointed at Tiwanaku on the army map. "So the Yatiri left Taipikala around 1575, a date on which Sarmiento de Gamboa had access, we'll never know how, to information about their escape route. Before that, they were dying from the illnesses the Spanish had brought from Europe and living in hiding, distributed among the agricultural communities of the Altiplano, passing themselves off as peasants." The professor's finger was delicately tracing the line of pencil drawn on the army map. "They left in the direction of La Paz, but they did not enter; they headed for the high snowy peaks of the Cordillera Real mountain range, and crossed them, taking advantage of the pass formed by the Zongo River Basin, until it joined with the Coroico, which took them to the gold mines of Guanay. From

there, they continued their descent into the jungle, following the Beni River. Maybe they used boats, maybe they didn't, it's hard to know, although the route, by the way, consistently follows waterways."

"But the conquistadors would have easily discovered a group of boats full of Indians," Lola remarked.

"Undoubtedly," Marta agreed, and both Efraín and Gertrude nodded. "That's why it's hard to imagine how they managed it, if they really did. Also, we should remember Sarmiento de Gamboa's phrase: 'Two months by land.' Maybe they left on foot, pretending to be a commercial caravan, to justify the llamas loaded with bundles, or maybe they did it in small groups, in small families, although that would also have been much more dangerous, especially in the jungle. You can see how the route leaves the Beni river here and goes into the middle of the jungle, into unknown territory."

"That whole area is inside the Madidi National Park," I remarked. "Can we enter?"

"No," Dr. Bigelow said emphatically. "All the parks have very strict rules on that point. To be able to enter, you need some special permits that they only issue for reasons of study or research. Now they're letting up a little because ecotourism and adventure tourism in these natural areas are turning into important sources of income, even for the indigenous communities, but the visitors can only enter with authorization and only to follow some fixed routes that don't go very far into the jungle and that aren't excessively dangerous."

"Dangerous in what way?" Marc wanted to know, with a pathological interest.

"Caimans, venomous snakes, jaguars, insects..." Gertrude listed without turning a hair. "Oh, of course! You'll have to be vaccinated," she said, looking at the three of us. "You should go to a pharmacy right away and buy the syringes, then go to the International Polyclinic, which isn't very far, to get vaccinated against yellow fever and tetanus."

"We have to buy our own syringes?" Jabba marveled.

"Well, the vaccines are free, but you have to bring your own syringes with you."

"And do we have to go now?" I asked dejectedly.

"Yes," Gertrude replied. "The sooner, the better. We don't know when we'll have to leave, so it's not a good idea to delay. I'll go with you, if you like. We'll be back in thirty minutes."

While we got our things and left the house heading for a pharmacy, driven by Dr. Bigelow, I turned to look at Efraín and the professor:

"Start thinking about how the hell we're going to explain the research we want to do in Madidi Park so they give us permission to enter."

"Well, believe it or not," the bald archaeologist replied, "that's what I had in mind."

We submitted like saints to the injections in the International Polyclinic, a place that made me uneasy until I satisfied myself that the hygienic measures were acceptable. Then I stretched out my arm, convinced that I wouldn't die of an infection or an abscess although not at all sure of the secondary effects of the vaccines. I'd had the tetanus one a couple of times in my life (although only the first dose), and I didn't remember having had any reaction from it, but the yellow fever one worried me a great deal, even after knowing that it could only cause a

slight headache and a mild fever. In fact, I felt sick for the rest of the day, although, I must admit, only when I thought about it.

We returned to Gertrude and Efraín's house, and since it was already almost time to eat, we went to a nearby restaurant. When we were on to the second dish—a llama stew—I readdressed the problem that was pounding through my head:

"Have you thought about how we're going to obtain the permits?"

Marta and the archaeologist looked sidelong at each other without answering.

"We're not going to ask for them," he said, leaving his silverware resting on his plate.

It was his wife, Gertrude, who jumped as if a scorpion had stung her:

"But… My God, Efraín! What are you saying? You can't get in without a permit!"

"I know, honey, I know."

"So?" Dr. Bigelow's tone was urgent.

"Hey, come on," he responded, suddenly using a strangely respectful mode of speech, that in Bolivia was really the most intimate way to address someone close. "You know they won't give them to us."

"What do you mean?" she objected, speaking in the same mode. "All you have to do is tell your friends in the Ministry of Research about the Yatiri."

"And how long do you think it will take for the press to get ahold of it? You know as well as I do how things are here. Before we even get to the entrance of the park, there will already be a hundred archaeologists combing the area, and the story of the Yatiri will be printed in all the newspapers."

"But listen to me, Efraín, we can't go into the jungle without someone knowing. It's crazy!"

"I agree with you, Gertrude," Marta chimed in, intervening in the conversation, "and I already told Efraín the same thing. Besides, we would need indigenous guides who know the jungle, and those three," she gestured with her chin at Marc, Lola, and me, "have never been there, they don't know what the 'Green Hell' is. We could manage, but they could not. They would be vulnerable to everything."

"If we don't protect them well, my friend," the archaeologist contradicted, leaning in to talk more quietly. "Listen, haven't you realized how important this is? Any leak would put an end to our work, and not just that: Can you imagine if the Yatiri's knowledge fell into unscrupulous hands? Haven't you thought that if these sages are really in the jungle, their power could become an issue of national security, or worse still, a commodity for sale, like weapons of mass destruction?"

I liked the archaeologist. He was a guy that spoke clearly and didn't beat around the bush. That same danger had occurred to me when we were in the Pyramid of the Traveler, when I thought that Marta had motives other than the academic in her search for the power of the Yatiri of Taipikala. Efraín had arrived at a cold but accurate conclusion: We were dealing with sensitive material, depleted uranium, and if we weren't careful, we could cause a catastrophic situation that would be hopelessly out of our control.

"But that will be what happens when we find them," Marta said, returning to the llama meat that was getting cold on her plate.

"No, because we will present the information with the greatest respect in the world, deactivating the fuse of the danger through internationally distributed scientific journals! If we let this matter out of our hands, the Yatiri could end up in

some terrible place, like Guantanamo Bay, turned into guinea pigs, and we, the six of us, disappeared in some 'mysterious accident.'" He made quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you or not? The power of words, of language, the control of the human brain through sounds, is something very attractive for any government. And this is a historical and archaeological research project, which is why we have to take all possible precautions and not tell anyone."

"I don't know whether you're exaggerating, Efraín," Marta murmured, "or whether you've hit too close to the truth. In any case, caution seems like a good idea when and if it doesn't endanger our lives."

"The most dangerous thing is the jungle, my friend," he told her affectionately, "as you know, and the only problem, if we do what I propose, will be in taking these three into the Green Hell. But I'll repeat what I said before: We can protect them."

I, however, was not so sure about that. More than anything, I wanted to help my brother, but if doing so meant becoming puma chow, neither he nor I would be gaining much.

"And why don't we hire indigenous guides like Marta said?" I asked, taking a long sip from my glass of mineral water. My throat was dry.

"Because none of them would want to come with us without the official permits," Efraín explained. "You must realize that the indigenous communities of the natural areas are the ones that supply park rangers to SERNAP, the National Service of Protected Areas. Who is going to know the jungle better than the Indians who have to protect it? Any guide we could hire would be the cousin, brother, uncle, or neighbor of a Madidi park ranger, so we wouldn't get very far, there's no doubt. Besides, they're very small communities. Villages of just a few hundred inhabitants. When one of them is missing, they all know where he's gone, with whom, and to what purpose."

"Even if we bribe them with a bunch of money?" I insisted.

"In that case, we'd only get the least trustworthy guides," Gertrude pointed out, speaking with much certainty, "those who would abandon us in the jungle when we least expected it, taking all the food and supplies they could carry. It's not worth the effort to try."

"But we can't go without guides, right?" Marc asked, anxious. "It would be suicide."

"But we have the best guide we could wish for!" Efraín exclaimed, very pleased with himself. "What do you think, Marta?"

The professor gave a nod of approval as she smiled at Dr. Bigelow, but it didn't seem to me that she was completely convinced of what she was agreeing to.

"Can you think of anyone better?" the archaeologist insisted.

Marta shook her head quickly, but I still perceived a shadow of doubt behind her conservative gestures and smiles.

Dr. Bigelow, trying to justify her husband's enthusiasm, turned toward us, and casually explained to us that she had spent the last fifteen years of her life working for Relief International, an American NGO that procured itinerant physicians for isolated indigenous communities of every country in the world. She, apart from coordinating the medical teams that worked with the rural

communities of the Andean foothills, was part of one such team and had found herself required on numerous occasions to go into the tropical forests to get to some remote indigenous group. Which is why the National Secretary of Health of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare had turned to her for the two official expeditions the Bolivian government had sent into Amazonia in search of uncontacted Indians within its borders.

"And, precisely because of my experience, I can guarantee," she concluded, "that I alone am not sufficient as a guide to an expedition that's going to enter into unknown territory with three people who have never in their lives set foot in the jungle."

"Not even if we keep a constant eye on them?" asked a disappointed Efraín.

"We would have to do more than watch them constantly," she said. "We wouldn't be able to let them out of our sight even for an instant."

"Each of us will be in charge of one of them," her husband resolved, putting both hands firmly on the table. "We won't take our eyes off them, and we'll teach them all we know about the potential dangers of the jungle. I will commit to bringing them back safe and sound."

The idea of them taking care of us like preschoolers, with personalized attention, seemed to me like a good reason to calm down. I saw the same relief in Marc and Lola's faces.

"There's another problem, Efraín," the doctor objected. "It seems you haven't stopped to think that if they catch us inside the park, we'll pay for it dearly. It will be a very big scandal."

"Well…" I said, intervening, "if they catch us, it will be because they've decided to eliminate geographical voids, and I don't think that's going to happen at precisely the same time, right? And as far as the scandal goes, Dr. Bigelow, I think it's already included in the price of admission. If we're going to risk it to help my brother, then you guys also have your own and important motivations to look for the Yatiri. Marta explained it very well yesterday: She and Efraín have spent their whole lives working on this, and you, Gertrude, maintain your faith in finding some Yatiri who have remained uncontacted by any human being for five hundred years. That is your price."

The doctor smiled.

"You're wrong, Arnau," she said mysteriously. "That is only a small part of my price."

Marta and Efraín exchanged looks and slight smiles.

"What are you talking about, Gertrude?" Lola asked her, very interested. Her mercenary instinct had been awakened.

"Since I was let in on the secret of the Yatiri," the doctor began to explain, setting down her silverware on her plate and discreetly arranging her wavy hair, "I became obsessed with what you guys call the power of words, the capacity of the Aymara language to cause strange effects on human beings, through sound. As a doctor, I was very curious, and I've spent the last years reconciling my work in Relief with the scientific investigation on the influence of sound on the brain. I have my own theory about the matter, and my price, Lola, is to find out if I'm right."

Silence fell around the table.

“And… what is that theory?” I dared to ask, intrigued. It sounded promising.

“It’s very boring,” she apologized, looking away.

“Oh, come on, honey!” her husband protested. “Can’t you see they’re dying to know? We have time.”

“Tell them, Gertrude,” Marta prompted. “They’ll understand perfectly.”

Dr. Bigelow started playing with some crumbs on the tablecloth.

“Alright,” she said. “If you don’t understand something, you can ask.”

In a quick gesture, she crossed her arms over the table and took a breath.

“You see,” she began, “over the last fifty years, great advances have been made in the study of the human brain. We hardly knew anything, and then suddenly everyone began to study the things this so perfect organ is capable of doing. It is still a great mystery today, and we still only use five percent of its immense capacity, but we’ve advanced a lot, and we’re capable of drawing a very complete map of its different areas and functions. We also know that the immense electrical activity of the brain, which emits an infinite number of different kinds of waves, causes individual neurons or groups of neurons to emit certain chemical substances that control our moods and feelings, and therefore the behaviors provoked by them. These substances, or neurotransmitters, even though they circulate everywhere, can operate in very specific places with very different results. More than fifty neurotransmitters are known, but seven are the most important: dopamine, serotonin, acetylcholine, norepinephrine, glutamate, and the opioids known as encephalins and endorphins.”

“Wait a minute!” Marc exclaimed, raising his hand in the air. “Did you say that those substances that circulate in our brains are what cause our feelings?”

“In effect, yes,” Gertrude confirmed.

“But that’s fantastic!” he said enthusiastically. “We’re programmable machines like computers.”

“And the code that operates us are those neurotransmitters,” I added.

“Exactly,” confirmed Jabba, whose engineer’s brain ran at quantum speeds. “If we wrote with neurotransmitters, we could program people.”

“Let me continue,” Dr. Bigelow asked, in a marked Yankee accent. “What I’m telling you is that it’s not a theory: it’s been scientifically proven for many years, and today we know even more. What would you think, Marc, if I told you that by electrically stimulating an area in the temporal lobe of your brain, thereby activating certain neurotransmitters, I can cause you to have a profound mystical experience and convince you that you have seen God? Well, it’s true, it’s empirically proven, just as it’s proven that no area of the brain has been found where happiness resides, although there have been areas found for pain, physical as well as psychological, and for anxiety. If dopamine circulates in your brain, you feel pleasure, but only for the time the neurotransmitter is active. When it stops being active, the sensation or feeling will disappear. If you are very busy or very concentrated on some task, a part of your brain called the amygdala, which is responsible for generating negative emotions, will remain inhibited. That’s why they say staying busy cures all ills. Basically, the point is that fear, love, shyness, sexual desire, hunger, hate, serenity, etc., are born because there’s a chemical substance that is activated by a small electrical charge. To put it more concretely, there’s a special class of neurotransmitters, called peptide neurotransmitters, that

work in a much more precise manner, and can make any of us hate the color yellow, want to listen to music or read a book, or feel an attraction to redheads," and she looked at Lola with a smile as she finished.

"Or have a fear of flying," Marc added.

"Yes, actually."

"So basically, Aymara contains some kind of electromagnetic wave," Proxi ventured, with a look of uncertainty, "that the Yatiri know how to use."

"No, Lola," Gertrude disagreed, shaking her straw colored hair when she moved her head. "If my theory is correct, and that's what I want to find out with this trip, it's something much simpler. I think that Aymara is by far the most perfect language in existence. Efraín and Marta have explained it to me many times, and although I barely understand it, I know they're right. But what I think is that it's actually a perfect vehicle to bombard the brain with sounds. Have you seen that typical movie scene in which a crystal glass shatters when a very loud or very high pitched sound is made nearby? Well, the brain responds in the same way when it's bombarded with sound waves."

"It shatters?" Jabba joked.

"No. It resonates. It responds to the vibration of the sound. I'm convinced that what Aymara does is allow a determined kind of wave to be produced by the speech organs, by the mouth and the throat, that travels through the ear to the brain, triggering the neurotransmitters that provoke a certain mood or a certain feeling. And if what it activates are the super-specialized peptide neurotransmitters, then almost anything can be achieved."

"But what about the Aymara that's still spoken today?" I asked, intrigued. "Why doesn't it produce the same effects? Because of the small influences from Quechua and Spanish from the last five or six hundred years?"

"No, I don't think so," the doctor replied. "My theory, as I've told you, is that Aymara is the perfect vehicle to produce sounds that alter the brain, but what order or sequence do you have to make them in for them to cause the desired effect? Was a single sound from the curse that affected your brother what caused everything, or was it, rather, a certain combination of sounds? I think what the Yatiri do is pronounce specific words in the necessary order."

"In a nutshell: your everyday magical formulas," Lola smugly singsonged, like someone whose theory has been confirmed. "It's nothing to be made light of, not by a long shot, but have you considered that the old expression from stories about witches, the famous abracadabra, could contain the principles of the theory of the activation of neurotransmitters?"

"It would be interesting to do a study on that," I pointed out.

"Don't start, I know how you are!" Marc exclaimed, worried. "And you're capable of forgetting everything else to jump into this headfirst."

"When have I done that?" I asked indignantly.

"Lots of times," Lola confirmed indifferently. "The last time was the day you discovered the mysterious paper scribbled with some Aymara words that seemed to be related to your brother's illness."

Dr. Bigelow, Marta, and Efraín were listening to us, confused.

"My point is, it would be interesting," I insisted, annoyed. I didn't feel like having my arm twisted.

“I agree with you, Arnau,” said Dr. Bigelow, smiling. “That’s why I’m going to follow Efraín and Marta on this crazy adventure. Finding out if my theories are correct is my only price,” she finished.

Efraín smiled with satisfaction and looked at us, swelling with pride.

“So?” I asked. “Are we going to look for the Yatiri?”

Everyone nodded without hesitation, including Marc. We knew we were saying yes to the wildest scheme in history, but it was that quality of folly and madness that made it a challenge we couldn’t say no to.

“When will we go?” Proxi asked, lifting her cup of thick, bitter, and gritty Bolivian coffee in the air. I recognized that distinctive shine in her black eyes: It was the same one that appeared in her eyes whenever she had a challenge ahead. Honestly, I would have preferred that the challenge could be faced with a keyboard and monitor, but since that was impossible, it was better to let oneself be pulled by the tide of adrenalin in an adventure as extravagant as that one.

“If we manage to prepare supplies, study the area, hire transportation, and give you guys an accelerated course on jungle survival,” Efraín joked, “we can leave on Monday.”

Carrying a list longer than a day without bread (made by all of us the previous evening, after returning from the restaurant), Lola and I left the hotel on Thursday morning, prepared for a shopping trip. We also carried a catalog of locales where we could acquire the supplies which ranged from tents, hammocks, sleeping bags, and mosquito nets, to dishes, filters and purifying tablets for water, toilet paper, and insect repellent. We spent all day running around, making sure everything we bought was taken to our hotel, where we would depart from the following Monday, after leaving our things in Efraín and Gertrude’s house and paying the hotel bill to keep them from coming after us as debtors. We were terribly embarrassed when we had to ask for machetes for clearing paths in the jungle, but the salesman, completely calm, showed us various models, told us which was the sharpest, the biggest, the most dangerous, and recommended a German brand that, according to him, made the best steel blades. While we broke our backs and our wallets shopping, Marta headed for El Alto, the highest neighborhood in the city, where the airport was where we had landed upon our arrival in La Paz. It was also the location of the TAM (Military Aerial Transport) terminal, the only company that offered flights between La Paz and Rurrenabaque, the town that served as a departure point for visiting the Madidi National Park. The other alternative to get there was the sadly famous Yungas Highway, known more commonly as Death Highway, due to the numerous traffic accidents that occurred on its terrible slopes and curves; but apart from that obvious motivation not to use it, there was also the problem of time: it took fifteen or twenty hours to get to Rurrenabaque. And that was in the dry season, because in the rainy season, you never knew. Although we couldn’t be sure until the last minute, Marta got the six tickets for Monday the 17th of June and we were lucky, because they had added extra flights to cover high demand, since we were in the middle of the tourist season. They cost us about seven hundred euros, plus a deposit to reserve the return tickets. We didn’t know the exact date, but we thought it would be toward the end of the month, so if we didn’t want to end up stuck in the middle of a bustling boarding area without a flight to La Paz, we had to leave the reservation agreed upon.

Gertrude didn't have an easy job getting the medical supplies for her kit. Even her position as coordinator of Relief International in Bolivia turned out to be more a hindrance than a help. From the distributors that sold to her NGO, she got the most basic products, like saline, painkillers, bandages, antibiotics, syringes, and disposable needles, but she couldn't find a way of acquiring the antidote for snake venom, the so-called polyvalent antivenom, or the special syringe necessary to inject it, without attracting unwanted attention. All of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday were spent on this and similar problems, while Efraín and Marc studied the Madidi region and how to enter the park without being discovered.

One of the first things they found on the park, searching the net, was an interview given by a guy named Álvaro Díaz Astete, an acquaintance of Efraín and Marta, who had been the director of the Museum of Ethnography of Bolivia, and who was the author of the only ethnographic map of the country. In it, Díaz Astete claimed to be sure of the existence of uncontacted tribes in the Madidi region, around the unknown source of the Heath River and in the Colorado River valley. But what was most surprising was that someone like him was certain that one of those unassimilated groups were the Toromona, a tribe that had mysteriously disappeared during the Caucho War in the nineteenth century, and who, according to legend, were great allies of the Inca whom they helped to disappear into the jungle with their great treasures after they were defeated by the Spanish. These historical facts, apparently true, had formed the basis for the legend of the lost city of El Dorado, or Paititi, hidden in the Amazon. However, the Toromona had disappeared more than a century ago, and they were officially recorded as exterminated; that's why Díaz Astete's observations on the possibility that they continue to survive among the uncontacted groups of the Madidi reinforced our conviction that the Yatiri could easily be in a similar situation. Really, no one knew what those geographical voids held; infamous were the unfortunate expeditions of the British colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett in 1911 (the man charged with drawing the borders of Bolivia with Peru, Brazil, and Paraguay), and of the Norwegian Lars Hafskjold in 1997, who had entered into the area and never been heard from since.

So the Madidi was a geographical black hole, classified by the National Geographic[4-17] and in a report by Conservation International[4-18] as the reserve with the most biodiversity in the world, in which could be found, for example, more bird species than in the whole of North America.

The information that Marc and Efraín were pulling from the web and telling us at night when we all got together to have dinner drew an increasingly broad and formidable view of the crazy expedition we were embarking upon. We all remained silent, but I, like everyone else, wondered if we might not be making a mistake, if we might not end up like that British colonel or that Norwegian explorer. My need not to cut my cord to civilization made me buy, on the last day at the last minute, a small setup consisting of a GPS to keep track of our location at any time, and a battery charger for my cell phone and laptop which I planned to take to the jungle no matter what. I didn't want to die without sending the world a final message, indicating where they could find our bodies to send them back to Spain.

On Sunday night, I called my grandmother and spent a long time talking with her. If there was anyone capable of understanding the madness we were about to

commit, that person was my grandmother, who was not at all surprised by what I told her, and who even encouraged me enthusiastically. I could have sworn that she would have loved to trade places with me and risk her neck in the Green Hell, the only expression that Efraín, Marta, and Gertrude used to refer to the Amazon jungle. She asked me to be very cautious and not to take any unnecessary risks, but she didn't once tell me not to do it. My grandmother was pure energy, and until her last breath she would continue to be the most alive person on all of planet Earth. We agreed that she would tell my mother nothing and I promised to get in touch when I could. She told me they were thinking of taking Daniel home, since continuing with his hospitalization wasn't accomplishing anything, and I was about to confess to her the theft of the material from Marta's office. I didn't go through with it because of a selfish and absurd instinct: if something bad happened to us on the expedition, my brother's crime would expire in that instant, so it wasn't worth making my grandmother suffer from things which, if it came to that, I would tell her when I returned to Barcelona.

On Sunday, with all the supplies prepared and stored at the hotel, Marc and Efraín continued to compile information on the Madidi, which Gertrude, Marta, Lola, and I read over quickly, going through the pages one by one in the order they came off the printers. The park had been created by the Bolivian government on September 21st, 1995, its boundaries drawn to adjoin those of other national parks (the Manuripi Heath, the Apolobamba Integrated Management Natural Area, and the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve). Its climate was tropical, warm with one hundred percent humidity, which made any physical effort a nightmare. Aerial exploration and satellite photographs showed that the southern part of it was characterized by deep valleys and high slopes, while the sub-Andean region had mountain ranges with altitudes that reached as high as sixty-five hundred feet. So, from the little we knew of our route, we would have to put those mountain ranges behind us to get into the flat region in the first place, following the course of the Beni River and then turning toward the valleys and slopes of the south.

"There's something that doesn't fit," Lola remarked, getting up from the sofa and walking over with a worried look on her face to the military maps that were still unfolded on the table. "If, as we've calculated, the distance between Taipikala and the ending point of the line from the gold map is about two hundred eighty miles, and on a hike through the mountains, without hurrying too much, you can walk about nine or twelve miles a day, something's not right, because it would take less than a month to get to the triangle, yet Sarmiento de Gamboa speaks of two."

"Well, for our sake, I hope you're wrong," Marc told her, wary. "Remember we've only bought provisions for fifteen days."

"We couldn't carry any more either," I argued.

Our food reserves had been estimated without counting the miles we would cover by airplane from La Paz to Rurrenabaque. Once there, the distance that separated us from the triangle on the map was about sixty miles, so, taking into account the inexperience of Lola, Marc, and me, possible accidents, and having to clear the trail with machetes, we had decided to be generous and divide among the six of us food provisions for a couple of weeks, that is to say, also counting the sixty miles back. We were convinced we wouldn't need more and that we would even return with unopened cans in our backpacks, but we preferred being

cautious to going hungry, since, once we were in the jungle, whatever we lacked we wouldn't be able to buy in any store, and it would be a very disagreeable experience to see my friend Marc gnawing on the tree trunks or taking a bite out of the first snake that crossed his path.

The night before the flight to Rurrenabaque, I couldn't sleep. I remember that early morning caught me responding to Núria's last emails about work matters, and that I sat dazed, staring at how the light of dawn filtered in through the cracks in the blinds. There are times when a person doesn't know how he's gotten to where he is, when he can't explain how the events happened that brought him to a certain situation. I distantly remembered having organized a boycott against the TraxSG Foundation's tax, and my sister-in-law calling me to tell me Daniel was sick. Until that day, my life had been a good life. Perhaps a solitary one (okay, I'll admit, a very solitary one), but I thought I felt content with what I did and with what I had achieved. I didn't use to allow myself much time to think, as I was doing at that moment, in that hotel room thousands of miles from my home. I had the sensation I had been existing in a bubble into which I didn't know when or how I had entered. It occurred to me that perhaps I was born already inside it, and in the very moment I had that thought, I knew it was true. If, someday, everything returned to normal, I told myself, I would keep directing Ker-Central until I got tired of it, and then I would sell it to start something else, some other business or company that interested me more. I had always been like that: Whenever something became routine and ceased to take up all of the hours in my day, I left it and looked again for the heart of the bubble with a new activity that pushed me to overcome my limits, and that kept me from thinking, from being alone with myself with nothing to do but watch the sun rise through some half-closed windows, as I was doing at that moment.

Perhaps I wouldn't return from the jungle, I thought, perhaps there were dangers awaiting us too great for three novices, two enthusiasts, and a pseudo-expert, but I felt better than I had ever felt in my life anyway. I was outside the bubble, looking at a real world, risking much more than getting a virus on my computer or losing a few million on a bad investment. I suddenly sensed there were things beyond my narrow virtual world, where my favorite music played, where my books were, and where I could look to my heart's content at the paintings I liked. In the end, I told myself, I would have to thank Daniel when he got better—after wringing his neck, metaphorically-speaking—for having given me the opportunity to get out of my perfect and rigid life. That whole business about the Aymara had broken my ideologies and had made me face a part of myself I hadn't known. Had I ever been more alive than when I was walking down that pathway formed by sheets of gold in the guts of a pre-Incan pyramid, or when I was working like a lunatic, sorting out the puzzle of the information left by Spanish chroniclers about the conquest of America in the sixteenth century? I didn't know exactly how to define how I had felt in those moments, but I would have dared to claim it was something like passion, like a passion that made my blood race in my veins and made me open my eyes, fascinated.

When Marc and Lola came by to get me and go down to breakfast, around ten in the morning, they found me asleep in the armchair with my bare feet on the table and in the same clothes I had been wearing the night before.

That morning, I had to do something very important: I was going to shave my head before catching the TAM flight to Rurrenabaque. According to the warning Marta had given me, long hair in the jungle was a lure for all kinds of bugs.

The airplane took off at noon from El Alto military airport, and in the fifty minutes it took us to arrive, the landscape and the climate changed radically: from the cool, dry, and more or less urbanized Altiplano situated at thirteen thousand feet above sea level, to an oppressive, hot jungle environment ten thousand feet lower. I had the firm belief that the military people would stop us when our two hundred some pounds of luggage passed through security (because of the machetes and knifes), but if few airports in the world put into practice such control measures, even after the attacks of 9-11, El Alto followed them even less, so those dangerous weapons made it onto the craft without the least difficulty. Efraín explained to us that on any flight to the jungle regions, it was inevitable that the passengers take such tools with them, and that they weren't considered weapons. Just as we had hoped, they didn't ask us for any documents either, and it was a good thing, because Marc, Lola, and I had nothing with us other than our Spanish DNI, the national identification document, since we couldn't risk losing or damaging in the jungle the passports that would take us back home when the whole thing was over. Poor Marc had a horrible time of it again on the flight, and although the trip was short and pleasant, he swore with a voice that barely made it from his throat that he would only return to Spain if he could go by boat. It was useless for us to try to explain to him that there were no longer big maritime lines that offered transatlantic trips, like in the time of the Titanic: he swore and swore again that he would find one or stay in Bolivia forever. The bus from TAM, or, as it was called there, the *buseta*, picked us up right on the runway to take us to the company's offices in downtown Rurrenabaque, although giving the title of "runway" to the soft meadow covered in high grass and flanked by two walls of forest by way of beacons was only a generous euphemism. When it rained, Lola observed, aghast, that band of earth would turn into a useless mire.

Once in Rurrenabaque's downtown, surrounded by tourists of all nationalities waiting to enter the park, we went into one of the town's bars and ate something before going out in search of a *movilidad* to take us close to the place where we planned to slip into the Madidi. We were lucky, because at the quay—nerve center and social center of Rurrenabaque—there remained only an aged Toyota parked next to the Beni River, and we managed to rent it for a few bolivianos from its owner, an old Tacana Indian called Don José Quenevo, who, with incomprehensible half-formed words, also promised to personally take us to where we wanted to go for another small fee. The sight of the Beni was impressive at that hour of the afternoon: the banks were as wide as four highways stuck together, and on the other side we could see the adobe houses with palm roofs of the little town of San Buenaventura, little brother to Rurre (as its residents called it for short). Six or seven wooden canoes, as long as train cars and so narrow that their occupants had to sit single file, crossed from one town to the other, hauling vegetables and animals. For some reason, and despite the oppressive air, I felt fantastic looking at the surroundings of green hills, wide river, and blue sky covered in white clouds: I barely felt the weight of the enormous backpack I carried on my back and I felt optimistic and light as a feather as I jumped up into

the bed of Don José's grimy truck, which couldn't have been more full of dirt if a cement mixer were emptied into it. Efraín sat in front with the old Tacana driver and asked him to take us to the nearby locality of Reyes, where we planned to camp for a few days. However, when we had been traveling for less than a half hour, exactly as we had agreed, we began to hit the roof of the cabin and we told Efraín—loudly so that Don José could hear us clearly—that we wanted to get out there and go the rest of the way on foot. Our driver calmly stopped the *movilidad* in the middle of that tortuous path that was the road to Reyes—we hadn't passed any vehicle, and not a soul could be seen close by—and, before leaving us in the middle of nowhere, he warned us that we still had a long hour by truck until we got to our destination, and that it would be good for us to hurry so we wouldn't get caught by nightfall. The truth is the sun still shown brightly, mitigated only by the brims of the hats with which we were all equipped. I wore the panama hat I had bought in Tiwanaku to hide my long hair from Marta's sight, and, although now that hair rested in some wastebasket in La Paz—I had cut it all off—, the truth was it perfectly fulfilled its intended purpose of protecting me from the sun and from the bites of the mosquitoes, which, like gray clouds, fluttered around us despite the repellent we'd covered ourselves in.

After an infinity of maneuvers to turn his dilapidated *movilidad* around and start back on the path toward Rurre, Don José disappeared from our view, and at last we were completely alone on the very edge of the Amazon jungle. Efraín took out one of the maps from his pants pocket and spread it out on the ground. With the help of my GPS receptor we discovered that, as we had foreseen, we were very close to one of the Madidi park rangers' cabins, and the plan consisted in waiting hidden until nightfall, and slipping into the grounds, passing under the very noses of the sleeping guards. That maneuver turned out to be very dangerous, because entering the jungle at night and in the dark meant exposing ourselves to the possibility of running into a puma, a snake, or an angry tapir, but we only planned on going in far enough to cross the limits of the park without being found out and then finding a spot to sleep and wait for sunrise. Starting at that moment, we had ahead of us a long week of walking without rest, following the route traced on the map from the gold sheet, which I had taken upon myself to enter point by point into the GPS so that it would keep us going in the right direction.

We went into the west part of the jungle, which, since it wasn't very thick and was made up of thin palms, was easy to move through. Besides, we all walked with a very light, easy step, and Marta and Gertrude explained to us that the energy we were feeling was only the opposite effect of altitude sickness, since now we had more oxygen in the air from the change of altitude, and everyone felt this when they descended from the Altiplano to the jungle.

"It will last for a few days," added Gertrude, who was last in line, "so let's get as much from it as we can."

The distribution of personal responsibilities had been agreed upon the night before: Marc was in Gertrude's hands, so he was walking in front of her, occupying the second to last spot; Lola had ended up with Marta, so she went ahead of Marc; and I belonged to Efraín, who went first, clearing a path, machete in hand, although, since I was much taller than he was, I frequently had to bow my head so I wouldn't scratch my face.

As we moved through the vegetation, it changed at an imperceptible rate; the underbrush became denser and leafier, while the trunks of the palms got thicker, choked by vines, and they crowded together, their crowns forming a cover fifty or sixty feet above our heads and barely letting the light through. The sticky heat caused by the humidity in the air started to take a toll on us. Luckily, we had bought special clothes for the jungle: We all wore long sleeve shirts that got rid of sweat instantly, dried quickly if they got wet, and provided incomparable thermal insulation from the heat and the cold, and our pants were windproof, breathable, and waterproof, as well as elastic, and could be changed in the blink of an eye from pants to shorts, depending on what we needed.

At last, an hour and a half after leaving the road, we came upon a clearing in the forest with a giant sign bearing a long welcome message that said "Bienvenidos-Welcome. Madidi National Park and Integrated Management Natural Area," and below it, over a yellow background, a drawing of a funny monkey hanging from the letters. Right behind the notice, half buried in the exuberant green underbrush, a cabin with wooden walls and a palm roof blocked access to the protected zone, but to our surprise, the cabin seemed completely abandoned and there was no evidence of any human being nearby, park ranger or otherwise. Efraín silently brushed past me to Gertrude and put a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back so that she couldn't been seen from the house. The six of us crouched in the vegetation and silently set down our packs and got ready to wait until it was completely dark. The ground on which we were sitting seemed to give off the heat of a furnace, with waves of torrid, wet, and moldy air. Everything rustled and crackled, and as twilight fell, the noises got louder until they became deafening: the buzz of diurnal cicadas gave way to the sharp chirps of nocturnal crickets and grasshoppers, peppered with strange howls coming from the crowns of the trees and by the incredible uproar coming from the nearby Beni, made by frogs with their croaking and drumming. In case there was something missing to make Marc, Lola, and me, latest generation cosmopolitans, collapse, the shadowy underbrush where we were hiding began to fill with lights flying around us, coming from some repugnant bugs that our three companions caught in their hands as they murmured, with voices full of tenderness: "Fireflies, how beautiful!" Right. The beautiful fireflies measured something like two inches; in other words, they were firefly giants, and gave off flashes more suited to a lighthouse than a sweet nectar-eating insect.

"Everything is very big here, Arnau," Gertrude told me in a quiet voice. "In the Amazon, everything is oversized and colossal."

"Remember the British Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett who disappeared in this area in 1911?" Efraín asked me in a whisper. "Well, it turns out he was a friend of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Sir Arthur also wrote a stupendous novel called *The Lost World*, in which he described giant animals, and it seems that it was inspired by Colonel Fawcett's accounts of his travels in these lands."

I didn't say anything, but I took off my hat and shook it, trying uselessly to scare the fireflies, which were aware of their size and numbers and decided that I was inviting them to play some kind of fun game, and they insisted on coming even closer to me. The part of my body where I felt most vulnerable was the nape

of my neck, left naked after my haircut, and I felt chills just thinking that one of those insects could brush me with its wings. I still hadn't gotten used to having my neck uncovered. I think that was the first time it occurred to me I would have to change my attitude. All around me was nature in its purest and wildest form. It was not my well cared for urban garden attended by a professional gardener who worried about keeping the bugs out of my house. Here I had absolutely no say, I couldn't exercise any influence over my surroundings because they were not domesticated surroundings. In reality, we were the intruders, and as much as the heat, the insects, and the thick underbrush bothered me, I would either have to adapt or become an impediment to the expedition and to myself. What sense did it make to remember that thousands of miles away I had a house full of giant screens connected to an artificial intelligence system whose only purpose was to make my life comfortable, clean, and agreeable? Moved by an unconscious impulse, I took out my cell phone from my backpack and turned it on to see whether it was working. The battery level was good and the satellite signal was as well. I sighed, relieved. I was still in contact with the civilized world, and I expected to stay that way for the following two weeks.

"Missing Barcelona?" the professor asked quietly. I couldn't see her face because the sun had set quickly and we were in the dark.

"I suppose so," I replied, turning the phone off and putting it away.

"This is the jungle, Arnau," she told me. "Your technology isn't worth much here."

"I know. I'm preparing myself mentally. Give me some time."

"Make no mistake, Mr. Queralt," she whispered jokingly. "Since we left La Paz there has been nothing that depended on your will. The jungle will take care of showing you that. Learn to be respectful, or you will end up paying for it dearly."

"Should we go?" Efraín asked at that moment.

We all nodded and stood, picking up our equipment. It was clear there were no park rangers of any kind there, and at that hour they weren't going to show up so we weren't taking any risk crossing the entrance.

"Isn't it a little irregular for there to be an entrance without any guard?" Lola asked, taking her place in the line.

"Yes, of course it's irregular," Gertrude replied without lowering her voice, as she finished adjusting her pack on her back, "but also quite common."

"Especially at these secondary entrances where almost no one ever comes," Efraín pointed out, stepping decidedly into the clearing. The darkness was so complete that, despite the fact he was right in front of me, I could barely see him.

We walked along the narrow path that crossed in front of the notice and the empty guard post, and entered, at last, into Madidi. The sounds of the jungle were as startling as its silences, which also fell without any obvious reason. Suddenly everything would go surprisingly quiet and only our footsteps would be heard on the fallen leaves; and then, also unexpectedly, the sounds, cries, and strange whistles would return.

When we were one or two hundred yards from the entrance—I couldn't be sure, because I had never been good at measuring distances by feel—Efraín stopped and I heard him doing something until a light, small at first and then intense and bright, turned on in his gas lantern and illuminated our surroundings. Marc

turned his on as well, and Marta, who was walking behind me, copied them, so our walk became much faster and safer; thanks to this, we found a small hollow in the vegetation soon after, next to a stream, and we decided it was the perfect place to camp that night. A cloud of moths had been hovering around us since we had turned on our gas lamps. Gertrude made us examine the ground carefully before we began to pitch our tents: according to what they told us, there were many kinds of very dangerous ants in the jungle, and we should make sure we weren't close to any termite nest, most easily identified by its high conical form. We pitched the tents in a semicircle facing the stream, and we made a fire to chase away any animals that might be attracted by our smell and the smell of our food. According to Gertrude, the savage beasts weren't that savage, and they usually fled whenever they detected a human presence, except, of course, when they were hungry and the snack seemed unprotected, in which case, dinner was served. But a good fire, she assured us, could keep us safe all night.

We had a big dinner, and since it was still early—our watches showed a little after eight—we stayed up chatting and enjoying the good temperature. I had never been a boy scout, nor had I ever gone camping, or belonged to any hikers' club, so that night was the first time I had experienced a conversation around a fire, and I couldn't say I liked it, because we only talked about the things the three novices should keep in mind so no accident would befall us. In any case, the sky was full of big shining stars like I had never before seen in my life, and I found myself in a completely anomalous and extraordinary situation because of those guys who knew the power of words. I remained quiet while the others talked, and I looked at Marc and Lola's faces, illuminated by the flames, knowing that they were enjoying themselves, that they loved being there, and that, one way or another, they would figure out how to face whatever difficulties might arise. I, however, was only filled with a rational determination in the face of that adventure in nature. That place, despite being a clearing next to a clean and agreeable sounding stream, was not my place, and of course I didn't expect things to differ very much from that piece of the Green Hell we'd gone through that afternoon, where everything stung, bit, or scratched.

Finally, around ten, we went to sleep, but not before leaving the provisions in a safe place and clearing up the remains of dinner so as not to attract any nocturnal visitors. Efraín and Gertrude shared a tent, of course, but I slept with Mark, and Lola with Marta, since Marta and I were not about to sleep under the same roof of plasticized canvas.

At midnight, despite the good weather and the fact we were in the dry season, when we were all asleep or trying to sleep—as was the case with me—the beautiful starry night turned and without us knowing where the rain clouds had come from, they dropped from the sky a downpour of the kind that makes history, and that was accompanied, furthermore, by a strong south wind that almost ripped the tent stakes from the ground. The fire went out and we couldn't light another, because all the wood was wet, so we had to remain on guard so as not to end up the dinner of some beast. When it was finally morning and the storm had moved on, away from us, we were completely exhausted, wet, and cold, since the temperature, according to my GPS, had dropped to sixty degrees Fahrenheit, something

incredible for a tropical forest, but fantastic for the walk that awaited us that day, Gertrude told us happily.

We had a breakfast loaded with energizing foods and set out walking northeast, clearing the trail with our machetes. That was really exhausting, so to share the effort, we took turns in the lead position. On my second turn, my right hand started to become inflamed, and when it was time for my third, I already had some painful blisters that threatened to burst at any moment. Gertrude punctured them, put some cream on them, and carefully bandaged them, then she had to do the same with Marta, Lola, Marc, and herself. The only one who wasn't effected was Efraín, who had hands calloused by his recent work on the excavations in Tiwanaku. In these conditions, with the forest still dripping from the nighttime rain, and the ground turned to slippery sludge in which we sunk to our ankles, we barely managed to move forward, with the added discomfort that the insects, perhaps because of the storm, were especially aggressive that morning and the virulence of their attacks intensified as the sun rose in the sky toward midday. Everything considered, the real problem was not the insects, or the mud, or the vegetation, or even the trees, of which there were now a greater variety of species, and not just palms; the real problem we faced were the thin lianas that hung from the branches like Christmas garlands, forming solid viny walls that we had to cut down with our machetes. That was a nightmare, a hell, and by the time we stopped to eat, near a small river that didn't appear to have any name, although it appeared on the maps drawn in a delicate light blue line, we were completely exhausted. Only Marc gave the impression of being a little more together than the rest of us, and even so, he was barely capable of opening his mouth to say a single word. We sat next to the small waterway, with our hands extended as if we were panhandling. Suddenly, Lola laughed. We didn't know what brought it on, but for the same unknown reason, we all copied her and began to laugh like lunatics, without being able to stop, from pure desperation.

"I think this has been the worst experience of my life!" Efraín exclaimed, dropping his head onto Gertrude's shoulder to choke the laughter that hindered his speech.

"I don't think it," Marta added. "I'm completely certain."

"Well, imagine what it's like for us," Marc muttered, shaking his bandaged hands in the air to chase away the flies, wasps, butterflies, and bees that surrounded us.

"Now do you understand why we call it *Green Hell?*" Gertrude asked.

"I don't know if I'll be able to take two weeks in these conditions," I remarked, slapping the nape of my neck to kill a mosquito.

"We'll get used to it," Lola bolstered me, smiling. "You'll see."

"But we just started!" Efraín pointed out, taking his pack from his shoulders and standing up. "Don't worry, my friend, people are capable of much more than they think they are. You'll see, in a couple of days you'll have totally made an Indian of yourself."

"All I'm making of myself is a fool," I muttered, absolutely convinced.

Efraín took off his tee shirt and boots, and without thinking twice, with his pants on and everything, he got into the water, thrashing around and splashing all of us. Really, he needed it, because he could easily have been confused with a

mud sculpture. It was one in the afternoon and we had started walking at six, but for me, that time had stretched into an infinity. While the others followed Efraín in his fit of lunacy and got into the water to clean themselves and have fun, I consulted the maps and the GPS, and discovered, frustrated, that we'd only traveled a little over three miles. Our location was 14º 17' south, 67º 23' west. Not even if we found a highway in the jungle would we arrive tonight at our planned camping spot. Our plan to cover over ten miles a day hadn't been anything other than stupidity, as was the matter of the extra energy from having come down from the Altiplano and breathing more oxygen.

"Chin up, Arnau," I murmured, talking to myself. "Things can't get any worse."

In the end, since I was also covered in a dry scab of mud that had been accumulating on my skin, I decided I needed a bath. Never in my life had I been so dirty, grimy, sticky and smelly. Of course, it was another new experience that I should learn to bravely endure, but this one did go against my most basic principles.

The afternoon hike wasn't much better than the morning one, only a little slower, because we were tired and our backs ached from the weight of our packs. Lola also carried a plastic bag in her hand with a couple of snails she had captured near the river, and didn't seem to mind carrying those two little animals whose spiral shells were only a little smaller than a Mallorcan ensaimada roll. During the hike, we discovered wide columns of ants moving among the bushes. Since each ant was about an inch long, the procession was impressive. The longest column we ran into was made up of some red-colored ants carrying enormous pieces of leaves in their jaws and moving toward an impressive mound of dirt almost two feet high.

"Is that a termite mound?" Lola asked.

"No," Gertrude said. "Termites are much larger. It's an anthill. What happens is that sometimes ants make similar structures to better protect the entrances to their underground tunnels."

Marc let out a long whistle.

"They must be enormous tunnels!"

Dr. Bigelow nodded.

"We've probably been walking over them for several miles without knowing it."

"Are these dangerous?" Marta hurried to ask.

"I'm not familiar with them, but I wouldn't touch them, just in case. You could spend days with a high fever and in pain."

Before night fell, we stopped at last in a small space between trees.

"We'll spend the night here," Efraín announced, comically stabbing the machete into the ground with a flick of his wrist.

"Here?" Marc asked, surprised. "We can't pitch tents here."

"We won't pitch them, Mr. programmer," the always energetic archeologist replied. "Today we'll sleep in the hammocks, under the mosquito nets."

"In the open?" I lamented.

"In the open. The mud makes pitching tents impossible."

"Let's check the ground first," Gertrude reminded us, "and the tree bark, too. Then we'll see if we can stay."

There were ants on the ground, but small ones that moved forward single file and didn't seem dangerous. We closed our packs well, after taking out the food for dinner, and lit the gas lamps, getting ready for the night. We were exhausted. We also lit a generous fire in the middle to heat our dinner and to protect us that night from wild animals. I remember that I was sort of dazed while we ate, but there was to be no mercy for anyone: when we finished, all of us had to clean our plates, cups, and silverware with water from our canteens, then we had to tie our hammocks to the thick trunks at a good height, parting the lianas and knotting them so they wouldn't bother us. Then we hung the mosquito nets from the low branches and let them drape over us, taking care not to let any insect inside, and we lay down to sleep. However, despite not having gotten any sleep the night before, and the fact that the day's hike had been hard, it wasn't easy for me to get to sleep: how in the hell was I supposed to lie on that net without turning into a painful arc with my lower back in a right angle? And I wasn't the only one. I could hear the squeak of the ropes of Marc and Lola's hammocks, rubbing against the trunks as they rocked, their occupants tossing and turning as desperately as I and emitting sharp complaints of pain from the day's bruises. But I was so tired I couldn't talk to them. I thought I should stay perfectly still no matter what muscle ached, because that way I would be able to fall asleep; however, in the light of the bonfire, the image my tired eyes saw at that moment when they opened for an instant was that of six white chrysalises hanging over a ground covered in enormous yellow snakes with black rhombus-shaped marks on their backs and small bright eyes. The blood froze in my veins and I jumped in the damned hammock, feeling a thousand needles poke me all over my body.

"Efraín," I called, with the calmest voice I could muster.

But Efraín was snoring softly, sleeping the sleep of the just, and he didn't hear me.

"Gertrude," I insisted. "Efraín."

"What's going on, Root?" Lola asked, turning like an egg roll inside her hammock, to be able to see me.

I didn't say anything. I just pointed at the ground so she would look down and understand. Then she opened her mouth, horrified, and an endless high scream came from her throat, causing a thousand noises in the jungle, a thousand shrieks, caws, roars, trills, chirps, whistles, and howls. But hers was the loudest of all.

The sudden exclamations of fear from those who had been woken up joined the cacophony.

"What's going on?" Gertrude yelled, while Efraín, still half asleep, took his hat off his face and threw a hand out to his machete, which he'd left stuck in the trunk, inside his mosquito net.

Lola kept screaming and Marc kept spitting curses too strong for any human ear. Marta was the only one who, although awake and alarmed, didn't lose her cool.

I kept pointing at the ground like a sleep walker, with a mechanical movement of which I was not even aware. When Gertrude looked in the direction I was pointing, she at last saw the creatures that carpeted the floor of our bedroom, spiraling and zigzagging around the bonfire.

“It’s okay, It’s okay…” she said, very calm. “Everyone calm down.”

“But shit, what the hell is going on?” Efraín exclaimed, trying to keep his eyes open.

“Calm down, my love,” she told him. “A family of pucararas has come to warm themselves by the fire, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” Marc bellowed, scared.

“Look, Gertrude,” I added, “the situation doesn’t look good, understand?”

“Of course I understand. Take a good look at them because you should learn to get away without startling them if you meet one of them on our walk. They’re the largest venomous snakes in existence, from the same family as rattlesnakes, although pucararas don’t have a rattle, and they’re the source of the antivenin I’m carrying in my kit. But they only eat small animals, not human beings. The heat has attracted them. We should leave them alone. When the fire goes out, they’ll leave.”

“The jungle is full of them,” Marta confirmed with great calm.

“Yes, full. So you guys don’t worry about it. Just don’t step on them when you’re walking; don’t bother them. Now we’re safe in the hammocks. Last night they also certainly came to camp, and no one noticed, right?”

“Good thing we didn’t!” I exclaimed miserably.

“When the fire goes out, they’ll go away. Believe me.”

“Alright,” Marc said, “but then come the pumas, the lions, the hyenas…”

“There are no lions here, Marc,” Gertrude told him, looking again for a comfortable position in the hammock.

“Does that mean there are hyenas?” Marc asked, alarmed.

“Shit, just go to sleep already,” mumbled Efraín, who was already a chrysalis again.

With the pucararas slithering around below my back, I didn’t get any sleep that night, either. Which made two nights like that. I had never felt that close to danger. Until that moment, all the situations of risk that I’d run into in my life had been previously planned, and their hypothetical consequences (a fall in the waste water pipes of Barcelona’s sewer, or a computer virus) didn’t carry a mortal threat. But I was so tired that my mental resources weren’t working and I felt panic oozing from all of my pores, and my sleepwalking brain wouldn’t stop producing frightening images that kept compulsively returning again and again.

The bonfire burned down and the pucararas really did leave, but during the two hours left before dawn, I remained in a nervous half-sleep, subjected like a torture victim to the most absurd ideas that my imagination could come up with. I wanted to go home, I wanted to be with my grandmother, I wanted to play with my nephew and see my brother. All I longed for were those small things that, from that hammock, seemed distant and very precious. When you reach a limit and are facing the abyss—or you think what’s in front of you is the abyss—everything superfluous disappears, and that which really matters gets bigger and becomes clear like light. I analyzed the order of the things I wished for: first, my house, which is to say, my space, my place, the projection of myself, the refuge where I felt safe, where my books were, my favorite music, my video game consoles, my movie collection, my garden; then, my grandmother, the most special person in the world, who I considered to be my direct root in life and in my origin, skipping

over the sad link of a silly, superficial, and weak mother; then, my nephew, that funny and intelligent pig-headed little boy, who somehow inspired tenderness and affection in me for no particular reason, just for being my nephew and little more; and, last, my brother, my idiot brother, for whose sanity I was capable of lying in that hammock in the middle of the jungle. Was it because we shared a good part of our genes? My fatigue didn't allow me to delve too deeply into the reasons I could have for loving him despite everything.

"Up, my friends! Time for breakfast!"

Our alarm clock, the good Efraín, had decided at five in the morning that we'd already slept enough. When I jumped out of the hammock, I felt like all of me was stiff, right down to my ID.

We walked for seven hours without rest, putting up with the stifling heat that new day had given us and forcefully clearing a trail through the lianas. My hands and the others' hands were so bruised we could barely feel them, but what did it matter? The three novices had been turned to zombies, to robots, because, if I was exhausted, it was nothing compared to what showed on Marc and Lola's faces: pale lifeless ghosts brought to life by some botched enchantment to resuscitate the dead. If we continued like that, we weren't going to be able to reach our destination. It was a good thing we were enjoying those few days of limitless energy the change of altitude had provided, because otherwise we would have died.

That night we were again unable to pitch the tents, so we repeated the disagreeable adventure with the pucararas, but my body told me it had had quite enough silliness, and I managed to fall directly asleep at last and wake up in the morning much more rested. It would have been perfect if it weren't for the thick fog that enveloped us and kept me from distinguishing what the thing was on my legs that was as heavy as a Great Dane. When I stirred to get up, thinking it would be a branch or the pack of one of my already awake companions, the Great Dane turned out to have four agile and fast feet equipped with sharp toes that scratched me through my pants.

"Fuck! What is this?" I exclaimed with the adrenalin flooding my veins, as I struggled to see through the fog what the hell it was that was running over my body like that.

From the trunk I had attached the end of my hammock to, some eyes covered in armor stared at me: A lizard longer than my arm, marked with some ostentatious greens, browns, and yellows, sat motionless, in an alert posture, with a strange forked tail raised in the air, and a threatening spiny crest as large as a fan.

"Get out of the hammock very slowly, Arnau," Gertrude told me.

"How slow?" I asked without moving.

"As if all the bones in your body were broken."

"Oh, okay. Lucky me."

"Is it poisonous or something?" Lola asked anxiously, as I forced myself to slide millimeter by millimeter, without slipping, to the ground.

"No, actually it's not," Gertrude replied in a playful voice. "These geckos, or Amazon lizards, are completely harmless."

I felt like a complete idiot hanging from the hammock in a truly ridiculous position, but I joined in their laughter once I had my feet on the ground and my

heart rate had returned to normal. The poor animal had run off up the tree as fast as a race car as soon as I had jumped.

"Did you see it had two tails?" Efraín remarked, lighting a new fire to prepare breakfast.

"It was revolting!" Lola exclaimed, her disgust clear on her face.

"These geckos tend to have two tails," the archaeologist explained while Marta put water on to heat, "because since their tails fall off very easily and another grows right away, any small cut or scratch on the first one makes the second one grow."

"Please, that's disgusting!" Lola almost yelled. "Can we change the subject?"

"What a way to start the day," I said, showing solidarity.

Marc was already chewing his granola chocolate cookies.

"Well, I thought it was pretty," he mumbled. "I would have liked to take a picture of it to use as a desktop on my office computer."

We had our digital camera and Efraín had also brought his, but if someone had taken one of them out to satisfy the insane wish of the intergalactic worm, I would have been capable of killing him. The cameras were reserved for our encounter with the Yatiri and were not for photographing repugnant animals.

"You're not right in the head," I told Marc disdainfully. "The lizard should have been sleeping on your legs. Then we'd see how much you liked remembering it every morning when you turned on your computer."

"I always have good memories of those who have shared my bed," he declared, joking.

"In other words, just me," Lola clarified, sighing in boredom.

That day we progressed at good speed, enough to cover a total of twelve miles. My muscle pain disappeared as I walked, and my hands began to get callouses where before there had been painful blisters. My nails were broken and black, and the dirt mixed with sweat started to stain my skin a brown color that no longer came off with the water from the rivers and lakes we found on our way. I also stopped feeling my swollen feet inside my boots and the inhumane weight of my pack on my lower back and my shoulders. Anything could be gotten used to.

On Saturday, when, according to our calculations, we were only a few days from our goal—we had covered more than forty miles and we were in unexplored territory—the landscape mysteriously began to transform: The trees became much larger, reaching a hundred or a hundred twenty feet high, forming an impenetrable canopy that forced us to walk through a stifling half light in which everything was cold and dark and in which there were no signs of animal life, although the profusion of hanging plants, lianas, and creepers was such that we could barely make out the trunks of the trees, many of which now measured more than ten feet in diameter at the base; in other words, they were authentic jungle giants. The flowers disappeared, leaving a landscape painted exclusively in shades of green, and the ground was covered in a high and tangled kind of weed, full of thorns that scratched our skin and pants, making pitiful tatters of the HyVent windproof fabric and the anti-sweat lining. We tied kerchiefs to our legs to keep from getting scratched, but it was useless, since the thorns of those plants were like scalpel blades. Everything took on the shadowy tone of a nature that didn't seem to appreciate visitors, if one could, I thought, use such a human comparison

when talking about something as strange as that environment. Even the smell changed, becoming moldy and filled with the aroma of rotting vegetation.

Sunday was even worse, since the trees seemed to huddle together, looking for a way to block our path. We wore all the clothes we had brought, we had even knotted the towels around our faces, arms, and most importantly, our legs, but it was impossible to avoid the scratches. That forest seemed to be kicking us out, letting us know that it would be better if we turned around and went back the way we had come.

That night, sitting around the fire, covered in small stains of Betadine as if we were a new species of animal with mottled skin, we commented, amazed, on how hard it must have been for the Yatiri to cross that thick forest carrying all their possessions and accompanied by their families. It was almost impossible to imagine such a feat. None of us could explain it.

"Maybe we're wrong about the path," Marc suggested, stirring the wood in the fire with a green stick. We had worked hard clearing the vegetation from that small area of ground and cleaning it of all kinds of insects and snakes.

"I assure you we're following the correct route," I guaranteed, checking the GPS. "We haven't veered at all from the itinerary laid out by the map from the Pyramid of the Traveler."

Efraín, who was still holding his plate with his half-finished dinner (rice with canned vegetables), smiled widely:

"Have you realized that tomorrow or the day after, at the latest, we're going to find them?"

A look of satisfaction appeared on all of our faces.

"Could they have built a city like Taipikala in the middle of a place like this?" Gertrude asked, with her eyes shining.

"I'm anxious to find out," Marta remarked, dropping comfortably onto her pack. "If they have, it must be an impressive place… and alive," she added, showing certain excitement. "More than anything, alive. I think it would be the biggest satisfaction of my life to enter a Tiwanaku inhabited by people and brimming with activity. What do you say, Efraín?"

"I don't know…" he replied with a childish smile on his face. "Yes, I think I too would feel like the king of the world: the first archaeologist to have the opportunity to travel in time! Tiwanaku alive… I don't know, really. The idea overwhelms me."

"I don't want to be a killjoy," Lola interrupted, untying her boot laces, "but have you thought of how they could have brought hundred-ton stones here? Don't get me wrong, but I very much doubt there are andesite quarries in this area."

"There aren't any near Tiwanaku, either," Marta argued. "To build that place on the Altiplano, they had to transport them from many miles away."

"Yes, but the jungle?" Lola insisted, obstinate. "And the conquistadors? Someone would have seen impossibly huge stone blocks disappearing into the jungle without accounting for the fact that they would have had to bring them through areas like this one."

"A colleague of mine," Efraín said, "a famous Bolivian archaeologist, presented a very good theory about how the Tiwanakans managed to move those impressive rocks. According to some studies he did, two thousand six hundred twenty workers could drag a ten-ton piece of andesite using long leather cords made with

I don't remember how many vicuña skins, making them slide over a ground covered in millions of square feet of clay."

"Oh, good!" my colleague Marc blurted, exaggerating the relief he felt from the information. "Everything's resolved, then! Let's catch all the vicuñas on the Altiplano, kill them to get the leather necessary to make really long sturdy cords that two thousand six hundred twenty people can hold onto, who, on top of that, have to transport enough clay to cover Mount Illimani plus the thousands of quarts of water necessary to wet it, and, walking on this slippery mud, they drag, for fifty or sixty miles, a ten-ton rock, of which there were not one, but thousands in Tiwanaku." He sighed and kept peacefully stirring the fire. "Fine, no problem. Now I understand."

"That image reminds me of the Hollywood movies," I said, "the ones where thousands of Jewish slaves drag, under the lash of a whip, the stone blocks to build the pyramids of Egypt."

"Well, that's not true," Efraín remarked. "The most recent discoveries show that slavery didn't exist in Egypt."

I was dumbfounded when I heard what Efraín said. I still remembered Charlton Heston playing Moses in The Ten Commandments and ripping the whip from the hands of the Egyptian overseer who hit the Jewish slaves.

"But those calculations about the two thousand six hundred workers don't work for the hundred-ton stones of Tiwanaku, right?" Lola asked uncertainly.

"No, of course not," Marta replied. "Those calculations don't explain how they could transport the one hundred-ton ones or the one-hundred-twenty-ton ones. They don't even explain those of fifty or thirty. It's only a theory, but it's the most accepted, in lieu of a better one. Although it doesn't really hold up."

"Which means," the mercenary continued, pensive, "that if no one really knows how they moved them, maybe they could bring them to the jungle."

"Well, the truth is, we hope so," Marta agreed, smiling.

"We'll have to see it," I murmured, stifling a yawn.

"It won't be much longer, my friend," Efraín said with conviction.

And it wasn't. After a Sunday and a Monday of fighting hard with the underbrush and the woody and flexible strands of the hanging plants that united the trees in a sinister hug, in the middle of Tuesday morning, the underbrush suddenly got less dense and the trunks got far enough apart that we could move without using the machetes. Even the sun seemed to filter easily through the high canopy, touching the ground with its long and delicate arms, under which we loved to pass. Paths seemed to form in front of us, paths which, although they looked wide and clear from the beginning, were still narrow trails that got wider, heading into a forest that got clearer every minute.

Suddenly, I tripped over something. I extended my arms in the air to keep my balance and ended up leaning on Efraín's back.

"Arnau!" Marta exclaimed, quickly grabbing me by the straps of my pack.

"I almost broke my neck," I growled, looking at the place where I had lost my footing. The sharp point of a stone clearly carved by a human hand stuck out of the ground. Everyone bent down to look at it.

"We're very close," Efraín said, stating the obvious.

Barely fifty yards later, we ran into a wall covered by thick green moss and made of large stones, fitted together like the stones of Tiwanaku. The cries of a family of howler monkeys filled our ears.

"We've arrived," Lola announced, moving past the others to stand next to me.

"And the Yatiri?" Marc asked.

No sound other than the jungle noises could be heard, or, needless to say, any other human voice apart from our own. There was no one to be seen, either; only that green wall, crumbling in spots. A black portent began circling in my head.

"Let's keep going," the archaeologist muttered, taking the path on the right.

"Just a minute, Efraín," exclaimed Gertrude, who had dropped her pack on the ground and was opening it with quick capable movements. "Wait, please."

"Now what's going on?" he muttered impatiently.

Gertrude didn't answer, but took something that looked like a credit card out of her pack and lifted it in the air so we could see it.

"Whatever happens," she said, very serious, "I have to record the voices of the Yatiri."

And saying this, she untucked her shirt from her pants and stuck the tiny gray recorder to the milky skin of her belly. It looked like one of those patches for quitting smoking that nicotine addicts put on to overcome their cravings, just a little bigger.

"In case they don't let you, right?" Lola remarked.

"Exactly. I don't want to take any risks. I need their voices to be able to study them."

"But, does it record in a high enough quality?"

"It's digital," Gertrude explained, "and yes, it records in very high quality. The problem is the battery, which only lasts three hours. But that will be enough."

A few yards away, we found an entrance. Three doors identical to the Gate of the Moon of Lakaqullu stood together, forming an entrance of truly gigantic proportions which was in perfect condition. On the upper part of the lintel, in the center, the largest—about thirteen feet high—was marked with a *tocapu* in the style of a family crest, but the moss that covered it kept Marta and Efraín from being able to identify it. The place was completely abandoned. The Yatiri had left there a long time ago, but only Gertrude dared to say so out loud:

"They're not here," she said, and it was enough to make all of us accept the truth that was torturing our minds.

"You can put away the recorder now," Efraín murmured, contrary.

No, the Yatiri weren't there. The strange city that we could make out on the other side of the entrance—of obviously Tiwanakan design—was a complete ruin, devoured by the vegetation and devastated by neglect. Nevertheless, despite knowing we would find nothing there, we passed through the entrance and kept walking in silence down a kind of street, along which there still stood two-story houses built with great blocks perfectly joined without mortar. Many had collapsed, but others even still had their roofs, made of stone slabs. And all green, a brilliant green that glittered under the sunlight from the drops of humidity.

We continued down the road until we got to a large square plaza, built probably in imitation of Kalasasaya Temple. In the middle, an enormous monolith resting on a black stone pedestal represented the typical bearded giant of Tiwanaku. On

this occasion, however, we observed a considerable likeness to the Traveler who rested in the secret chamber of the Pyramid of Lakaqullu: more than ten feet tall, feline eyes, large ears adorned with the flat circular pieces the Aymara and the Inca had put in their lobes, and a head with the conical shape caused by occipital frontal deformation. The Yatiri had been there, there was no doubt of that, and had spent enough time to raise a new and beautiful city like the one they had left on the Altiplano. Stone stelae like those of Tiwanaku could also be seen scattered around the plaza, displaying in their reliefs images of anthropomorphic bearded beings that gazed toward the four streets running from the corners of the plaza, including the one that had led us there.

"That way," Efraín ordered, turning right again.

As we followed the direction indicated by the archaeologist and turned down another road identical to the last one, I realized that the effort we had made to cross the jungle and risk a thousand dangers had come to nothing: The Yatiri weren't there and we didn't know what had become of them. The map from the gold sheet ended right at the spot where we were, so we had no idea which way to go; and besides, what for? Maybe the Yatiri weren't anywhere anymore, which seemed the most likely, maybe they had died out, had dispersed, suffered attacks by savage tribes and died. That was our final stop, the end of our hopes. From that moment on there was nothing left to do. Well, there was something: translate the millions of gold sheets in the Pyramid of the Traveler, in case the cure for Daniel would show up someday, if he didn't die first or if we didn't all die first. So much damned jungle, so much travel, so many insect bites, and so many dangers, all for nothing. We had come away empty-handed. Maybe I could facilitate the translation process with the gold sheets by improving Marta's "JoviLoom" and mechanizing the processing of images. Maybe, if I contributed money to the project—which, doubtlessly, would be undertaken between Spain and Bolivia and would end up under the direction of Marta and Efraín—the translations wouldn't take so many years to be finished, and the information we needed would most likely show up right at the beginning or shortly after. There was also the possibility of finding, somewhere on the planet, a team of neurologists capable of undoing the curse's effects with some drug or some experimental treatment. During the Cold War, hadn't they done experiments on brainwashing, mental programming, that sort of thing? I just had to go back home and restart the business from the beginning, going in another direction. Fortunately, money was no problem, and besides, I would also sell KerCentral. Really, I was bored with it.

The street was very long and the jungle had made such vigorous bushes grow up among the remains of the cobbles that the ground rose in many places. At last, we found an enormous building that could very well be, based on its design, a palace or principal residence. It seemed to be in good conditions, and Efraín started toward the entrance.

"We're not going inside there, are we?" Marc asked, wary.

"We should find out what happened to the Yatiri," the archeologist replied.

"But it might not be safe," Marta warned.

"If we're careful about collapses, we can go in," he insisted, without turning to look at us.

At that moment I thought I saw something move in the upper part of the building. Maybe it was an trick of the sun, surely the shadow of some bird, because I also heard a very high trill come from the same place, so I didn't pay it much attention. I was much more worried for Efraín, who, without the least bit of the care he had promised, had gone inside the palace with a firm step.

"Efraín, don't do anything stupid!" Marta yelled at him. "Get out of there and we'll continue examining the city!"

"Listen to me!" Gertrude shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth as if they were a loudspeaker. "Get out of there immediately, honey! I'm not going to tell you twice!"

But the archaeologist didn't reply, and, worried, we shot off into the building, afraid something had happened to him. Dr. Bigelow was really worried; in a place like that, no one could be sure of anything. We suddenly found ourselves in a wide room with some collapsed walls, broken by a magnificent staircase, which we began to walk up very carefully, looking at the sky through the holes in the roof.

Suddenly, the archaeologist appeared at the top of the stairs with a big smile on this face.

"Do you know what wonders are here?" he asked, and then in the same breath, without pause, he stopped us cold. "No, don't keep coming up. The floor and the walls are in very poor condition."

"Come on! Now we have to leave?" Lola complained.

"What wonders are you talking about?" I inquired, turning on my heals to begin my downward climb.

"There are some beautiful reliefs on the walls up there," Efraín explained, descending, "and underneath the vines, you can tell they were painted green and red, to remember the predominant colors of the andesite in Tiwanaku, I imagine. They must have really longed for their old city. There's also a copy of the bearded figure that we passed in the middle of the plaza."

"Did you take pictures?" Gertrude asked him, seeing that he had his camera in his hand. The doctor had relaxed when she found her husband unharmed, and now she looked at him with her brow furrowed and a certain menacing air. If I had been him, it would have worried me a great deal, but Efraín was so satisfied that he didn't notice anything.

"I'll show them to you later," he said. "Now let's go back out to the street."

My peripheral vision got the impression that something big was sliding as fast as wind through the hollow of a crumbling wall on my left. I turned my head quickly, but didn't see anything. I began to think I was going crazy and suffering from terrible visual hallucinations, but since I was a very stubborn and suspicious person, I went over to check it out with my own eyes.

"What's going on, Arnau?" Marta hurried to ask when she saw me change direction.

"Nothing," I lied. "I only want to see what's behind there."

But there was nothing. I cautiously stuck my head in as I finished speaking, and discovered that the space was completely empty. There was no longer any doubt that so many days in the jungle had unhinged me.

We went out into the sun and resumed our walk down the street in search of other important buildings or at least ones that got our attention, but what

remained up to the outer wall was in a complete state of ruin covered in profuse vegetation and gigantic trees. We went back, retracing our footsteps, and agreed, since it was time, to stay and eat in the plaza and make camp at the feet of the monolith of the giant, using his black stone base as the deposit for our packs and the rest of our equipment. Heating water in the little gas stove to prepare a soup, we decided that we still weren't ready to throw in the towel: We would explore that city completely, from one side to the other, until we managed to find out what had happened to the Yatiri and why they had left, and if we could also manage to find out where to, even better.

"Yes, better," Marc put in scornfully as he opened a can, "but we don't have enough food to follow them. We're here a day behind schedule, so we only have enough food left for six days. For seven, with the extra, but no more."

"Okay, we'll go back home when we finish exploring this place," Efraín declared.

"We can't stay," Marc insisted. "Didn't you hear me say we don't have food?"

"Nothing will happen to us, though, because we won't eat much on the last day," Gertrude remarked. "When we leave Madidi, we'll regain our lost pounds."

"Look, Doctor, don't laugh," my friend thundered. "Maybe you guys can manage a whole day walking through the jungle without eating, but I can't, and all the time we spend here studying this place is lost time."

"We have the coordinates of this place," Lola observed, in solidarity with Marc, who she knew well enough to know that if he didn't ingest the necessary amount of food, he could become a danger for everyone. "We can come back whenever we want, in a helicopter."

Efraín and Marta looked at each other and exchanged affirmative looks.

"Okay," Marta replied. "When we finish eating, we'll collect our things and go."

"I'm sorry, Root," Lola said, looking at me guiltily.

"I'm sorry, too," Marc murmured.

"I don't know why you're apologizing," I replied, but I did know; I had been thinking about it as they talked. If there was something in that city to indicate that the Yatiri were still alive somewhere, our leaving would keep us from finding it, and would mean that my brother would have to remain with his brain disconnected until we returned on board a comfortable helicopter. But there was also the possibility that there was nothing to suggest such a thing, so it didn't matter. As Marta had pointed out to me at some point, nothing had depended on my will since I had set foot in that jungle, or even more concretely, since the problem with Daniel had started, and that was a big lesson that I, the guy who always wanted to have everything under control, who didn't intervene in anything that he couldn't direct and manage, was learning the hard way.

"I promise you, Arnau," Marta said, very serious and very aware of the thread of my thoughts, "that I will do everything in my power to solve the problem with Daniel as soon as possible."

"Thank you," I answered dryly, more to hide my frustration than to reject her promise, a promise of which I not only planned on reminding her when the moment came, but of which I would make a serious project and participate in myself.

“Who has the stone piece you guys took from Tiwanaku?” Efraín asked at that moment, with a hand resting on the statue’s pedestal and a strange expression on his face.

“Me,” Marc replied.

“Would you mind giving it to me?”

“It must be at the bottom of my pack,” Marc grumbled, standing. “I’ll have to empty it.”

“Go ahead, do it. I promise to serve you a big plate of quinoa after.”

All of us thought we detected something strange in the archeologist’s attitude, so we kept looking at him while Marc rifled through his belongings, looking for the doughnut.

“It’s okay, guys! I’ll explain everything!” Efraín exclaimed, laughing at our anticipation. “Come and see what I’ve found by chance at the feet of the giant.”

Gertrude, Lola, and Marta were already there before he finished talking, looking at the place where the archeologist’s hand was resting, and I went over and calmly peered over their heads. A small protuberance on the black stone, in the shape of a little wedge of cheese very similar in size to the hollowed out triangle on the doughnut, could be seen in the middle of the stone, at the feet of the monolith.

Marc walked over with the stone ring and gave it to Efraín, who put it over the protrusion, confirming that they fit together perfectly, since the doughnut wouldn’t budge. We immediately noticed that the arrowhead carved on the upper part was clearly pointing toward a corner of the square from which ran one of the streets we hadn’t gone down, the one between the street that had brought us here from the entrance and the street that had gone to the palace with the reliefs.

A whistle, loud, sharp, and of course impossible for an animal to make, erupted from the heights. We barely had time to raise our heads to look for the source of the disagreeable sound, when all the roofs of the buildings around the plaza filled with elongated figures armed with dangerous looking spears, which pointed directly at us. Everything had happened so fast that no one moved a muscle, or cried out, or made any sound. Numb and turned to salt statues, we contemplated that Dantesque scene in which dozens of naked Indians threatened us with their spears from the terraces and roofs on all four sides of the plaza.

I knew without a doubt that those sharp-tipped spears were really dangerous. Maybe if they had threatened me with a rifle or a pistol, ignorance, which is very brazen (since I had never seen that kind of weapon before in my life, except, of course, in movies), ignorance, I say, would have kept me from feeling fear. But those very long javelins, which must be practically as tall as their carriers, paralyzed me with terror; I could almost feel how they penetrated my flesh. Which also contributed, I suppose, to the fierce appearance of those Indians: Obviously, we couldn’t see them well from where we were, but they looked like they had their faces covered by terrifying black masks that made our blood run cold.

The seconds kept going by and not even the air moved in that place.

“What do we do?” I whispered, calculating the necessary pitch so my companions could hear me and the Indians on the roofs could not. Those savages, however, must have the ears of a cat, because by way of protesting my words, or as a threat, they again emitted a high whistle which burst our eardrums and caused the profoundest of silences in the jungle surrounding us.

A lance that I didn't see passed by my hip with a sharp whisper and buried itself deeply in one of our packs. The dry sound it made when it embedded itself in the pack, breaking the waterproof fabric, was repeated several times, so I supposed they were shooting at our bags from several angles and that what they really wanted was to keep us from moving or speaking. Of course, they succeeded: Like me, my companions must have felt a mortal cold moving up their legs to their heads, a cold that stiffened our muscles on its way and cut short any thoughts of breathing. Then there appeared in front of us, from the street the stone doughnut was pointing at, the guy who must have been the leader of that aborigine patrol, surrounded by five tough and bad-tempered looking bodyguards. They walked with a slow, dignified step, as if they felt very superior to us, the poor foreigners who had the bad luck of setting foot in the wrong neighborhood. I told myself that if we had chanced upon one of those uncontacted Indian tribes who killed white people as a warning to keep anyone else from entering their territory, as had happened several times in Brazil in recent years—Gertrude had told us that when we were already in the jungle, when we couldn't have a change of heart and turn back—we were in trouble. Our lifeless bodies would show up near some civilized place as colorful and strategic no trespassing posters.

The boss, commander, leader, chief, or whatever he was moved to stand facing me, since I was now in the first line of fire, having stayed behind the others, looking over their heads at how the piece fit in the triangle. He was a tall, thin man, much taller than the middling height I had seen among the indigenous people in Bolivia, and his skin was also a different color, between reddish and tan instead of the usual copper brown. He was barefoot, dressed in a long loincloth that hung down to his knees and a headdress of colorful bird feathers, and his face displayed a large black square tattoo—what I had taken to be a mask—that began below his lower eyelashes and ended at the horizontal line drawn by the by the corners of his mouth, extending to his ears. Of course it was not paint that could be removed with a little water: it was an actual tattoo, and his companions also exhibited them, although in dark blue. He had chiseled features, more like the straight fine angles of the Aymara than the rounded shapes common to Amazon tribes.

The guy stared at me for a long time without speaking. Maybe he had come to the erroneous conclusion that I was the leader of that group of whites because of my height, but there was no way to divest him of the idea, so I held his gaze, more out of fear than bravado. Then, when he tired of it, he walked with the same slow dignified step toward my companions and I lost him from sight. I didn't dare turn around, but the silence continued, so I supposed what was going on must not be anything different from what had happened with me. Suddenly, the guy growled something. I froze in anticipation, imagining that now the spears would pierce us mercilessly, but they didn't, and then he repeated the same words in a shout, in a more impatient tone. In the silence of the plaza, the echo of his deep voice rebounded from one side to the other. The howler monkeys resumed their screams from the crowns of the nearby trees. When he repeated his message for the third time, this time very rudely, I turned slowly and saw that Marc and Gertrude had also turned. The commander lifted his right arm, pointing with his left index finger

at the stone doughnut in his other hand, and repeated for the forth time what seemed like a rude question.

It was Gertrude who, perhaps because of her previous experience in dealing with contacted and uncontacted Amazon tribes, answered him on behalf of us all:

"This piece," she said in a very, very soft voice, as if she were a lion tamer addressing the worst of her animals—"we took from Tiwanaku… from Taipikala."

"Taipikala!" the feathered man exclaimed triumphantly, and to our surprise, his men, both those who accompanied him and those who remained on the roofs, chanted the word with the same enthusiasm. Then, since apparently it had not been enough, he waved the stone ring in the air again, and addressed Gertrude, rattling off another incomprehensible earful. She looked at him without blinking and didn't answer. That seemed to bother him and he took a few steps in her direction, until he was a little less then three feet away from her, and again pointed at the doughnut and repeated the enigmatic question.

"Say something to him, honey," Efraín begged with his voice lowered. "Tell him anything."

The chief gave him a piercing look while one of his bodyguards lifted his lance and pointed it at the archaeologist. Gertrude got nervous. Her hands shook as she began to tell the complete story of the doughnut in the same measured tone as before:

"We found it in Taipikala, after leaving Lakaqullu, where we were shut in the chamber of the Traveler, the…sariri."

But the leader didn't seem impressed by any of the magic words Dr. Bigelow made herself pronounce.

"We were there," Gertrude continued, "looking for the Yatiri, the builders of Tai…"

"Yatiri!" the guy said, again lifting the doughnut in the air with a gesture of satisfaction, and his troops copied him, breaking the jungle's silence.

Apparently, that had been enough. The leader and his five men passed in front of us on their way back to the street they had appeared from, while the lines of lancers vanished from the roofs. In case one of us held on to the hope that it was the end and they were leaving, he or she was completely wrong: The lancers reappeared everywhere, filling the plaza, and the commander stopped halfway to the street and turned to look at us. He made a strange gesture with his hand and a group of demon-possessed figures came from among the ranks to throw themselves at us as if they were going to kill us; but they went right past us, stopping in front of the monolith, picked up our abused packs and the rest of the things we had lying around, and took them before the leader, who, with another gesture of his hand, ordered them to destroy everything. Before our unbelieving eyes, those vandals tore open the packs and spread their contents on the ground: they ripped the clothes, the tents, broke the toothbrushes, the electric razors, the maps, the packages of food… They used rocks to smash everything metal (canteens, cups, cans, Gertrude's medical kit and all of its contents, machetes, scissors, compasses…), pitilessly destroyed the cell phones, digital cameras, GPS, and my laptop, smashing them repeatedly on the ground; and in case they'd left something not completely ripped to shreds, while some of them kicked the remains of the disaster into a pile, another one, a very old man, took a couple of sticks

from a small leather bag and spent a good while rubbing them together until smoke started to come from them. Then he managed to burn a fistful of straw-like plants, with which he set fire to the pyre of our possessions. There was absolutely nothing left when that whole savage ceremony was finished, except the hammocks, which had been carefully separated from the rest and set aside. But only they and the clothes we wore survived the brutality. If they decided to let us live after that, their kind gesture completely lacked significance because without food, compass, or machetes, we didn't have the smallest chance of returning to civilization. I was sure the six of us were all thinking the same thing at that moment, and I was proven right when I heard muffled sobbing behind me that could only be coming from Lola.

Then, with the pyre still smoking, each of us was firmly grabbed by an Indian, and, following the steps of the commander, his entourage, and his army, we were taken toward the exit of the plaza. Only then did my neurons start to react, and the loose ends began to come together. Maybe it was because we took the street indicated by the arrow carved on the stone doughnut—the same one the leader had appeared from—but the truth was, two plus two equals four: The Indians had been spying on us since we had arrived at the ruins; I myself had glimpsed them moving surreptitiously around us, and then they had suddenly appeared at the exact moment in which we had put the stone ring on the pedestal of the monolith. Besides, the guy with feathers had taken the ring, and, holding it in his hand, he had visibly reacted when Gertrude had pronounced the magic words "Taipikala" and "Yatiri." Now, after destroying any possibility of escape on our part, they were taking us with them, following the same direction the doughnut had pointed. All those facts led to two obvious conclusions: Those guys could be the Yatiri themselves, turned wild after having deteriorated to an undeveloped state, like what happened to the group of children in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, or they were taking us to the Yatiri, that is to say, exactly what we wanted, although not in that way or at that moment.

"Listen," Efraín said, mustering bravery and trying, I suppose, to transmit it to us, "have you realized they haven't hurt us and that they're taking us in the right direction?"

The Indian holding him by the arm shook him pitilessly to make him shut up. It would have been different if it had been Jabba, who was taller and wider than his guard, but Efraín, larger than most Bolivians, barely reached his guard's shoulder. Mine, also very willowy, came to my neck, but I had no intention of making him nervous especially now that I knew they weren't going to kill us and that they were taking us where we wanted to go.

While we left the city, exiting through another door similar to the entrance gate, then going down some big uneven and broken steps, I silently deduced that we must not be very far from our destination, since they had ruined all the food we brought and they didn't carry anything besides their lances. The fact that they had respected the hammocks could mean we'd have to spend the night in the jungle, or it could just as easily just mean they were keeping them for themselves so we would find the Yatiri before night fell.

But, naturally, when one made such a speculative deduction, one should be sure of having all the information, of possessing all the facts, because if that's not

the case, one's conclusions might be as erroneous as mine ended up being: We didn't find the Yatiri before nightfall, nor did we the next day, or the day after that, or in that week; and the hammocks really were our beds that night and the many that followed.

We walked all afternoon, following some narrow paths that were mysteriously open in the thick forest. The Indians didn't have machetes or anything sharp to cut the vegetation, so it was difficult to guess the origin of those paths, but they were there, and they were full of strange bends and turns. Only days later, we learned they had been made by animals moving through the jungle in search of water or food and that the Indians knew how to find them by instinct and take advantage of them to travel from place to place. According to them, it was a waste of energy to clear trail with a machete, since there was another, much less tiring way.

Those paths or trails tended to start and end at small rivers, lakes, springs, waterfalls, or swampy areas—which also existed in the jungle, and which we crossed during those days—and that first afternoon we entered into a small canal with water somewhere between green and black in color, and we followed it until nightfall, in the opposite direction as its current. On both sides, fronds of bushes and weeds could be seen spiraling around the colonnades of the high trees that formed the barrier between the water and the earth, casting a dense shadow over our heads with their thick foliage, interlaced at an incredible height. The aerial roots of many of those giants hung like curtains, making our passage difficult, but instead of cutting them with a knife, as we had been doing up to that day, the Indians separated them with their hands, apparently without feeling the pricks from the thorns that abundantly covered them. The air was humid and sticky, and whenever, for some reason we didn't know, the leader ordered a brief halt, the silence of that shadowy place was overwhelming, and voices echoed, as if we were inside some cave.

We passed through an area in which horseflies the size of elephants accosted us ceaselessly, and another with electric eels, whose big heads, whenever they brushed our legs through the rifts in our pants, gave us an electrical shock like an intense needle prick. Suddenly, in the dimmest part of that canal we'd spent all afternoon following, we heard some strident cries that sounded like the howls of suffering souls. I felt an unpleasant crawling sensation on my back, and goosebumps formed on my skin from pure terror; the Indians, however, reacted with great satisfaction, stopping and ordering us with gestures to stay still and silent while they craned their necks upward, looking for who knows what. The cries continued discordantly and with different notes. My guard took a small box and two sticks from a cord hanging from his shoulder, deftly uniting the two sticks to form one; from the box he took a short arrow that had a small oval mass on one end, and stuck it in the wide part of what was doubtlessly the first real—or fake—blow-gun that I had seen in my life. He put the tube to his lips and kept intensely watching the lofty crowns of the trees forming the vault above us. My companions' guards did the same, so we were temporarily free, although we dared only to exchange encouraging looks and forced smiles. The cries from of the suffering souls began to become more defined, and sounded something like "tocano, tocano." At last, some of our indigenous guides discovered the hiding place of the

group of singers, because we heard some quick dry sounds, like the shots from air guns, and a commotion in the foliage caused by the fall of objects from a great height. Unfortunately, one of the creatures landed a few inches from me, splashing an enormous quantity of water that soaked me completely. The animal was a beautiful toucan, very fat, with a formidable beak almost eight inches long and incredible saffron-toned plumage on its tail. It wasn't quite dead (it had the arrow stuck between its chest and one of its wings), so when my guard tried to catch it, it defended itself vigorously and emitted some sonorous lamentations that completely alarmed the Indians, and they began to shout something desperately to my guard in an urgent tone. But before he had time to act, thousands of birds, invisible until that moment, came from nowhere and began to descend on us, completely furious, jumping from branch to branch with their enormous wings extended and emitting terrifying cries from their open beaks. I think the terror I felt was so great that I made an involuntary gesture of protection, crossing my arms over my face, but luckily, before those distant cousins of the protagonists in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* destroyed us, my guard managed to dominate the wounded bird and pitilessly wrung its neck. The end of its plaintive cries brought a sudden end to the attack, and the toucans disappeared into the thick leaves as if they had never existed.

Lola was pale; she leaned on Marta, who didn't look any better, but who, nevertheless, was protecting Gertrude's shoulders with her arm, drawing her close. Marc and Efraín were petrified, incapable of moving or making a sound, so when the Indians put the gigantic dead animals in their arms, as they did in mine, they kept staring blankly without realizing what they were carrying. The jungle we were experiencing didn't have anything to do with the one we had known up till then. If, since we had snuck through the entrance into Madidi, I had thought I'd understood the expression "Green Hell" that Marta, Gertrude, and Efraín used so much, I was completely wrong. What we had seen until then was an almost civilized, almost domesticated jungle, in comparison with this wild and delirious world through which we were now moving. The feeling of danger, of frenzied panic, that I had when I thought those things was mitigated by a very strange idea: If the key to making things work in the virtual world of computers was in writing a good code, a clean and organized code, without absurd loops or superfluous instructions, in the real world of the authentic "Green Hell," there also had to exist some similar rules, and those who knew the code and knew how to write it correctly to make everything work were the inhabitants of that place, the Indians who accompanied us. Perhaps they wouldn't know what to do if faced with a computer, or faced with a simple traffic light, but they doubtlessly understood even the smallest elements of the environment around us. Just as they had foreseen the toucans' attack when their wounded companion had emitted those laments, and they had known perfectly what to do (kill it to make it be quiet), where we, the technologically developed urbanites, saw only leaves, trunks, and water, they knew how to decipher the signals of the code used by the "Green Hell" and knew how to respond appropriately. I looked again at those tattooed, primitive-looking Indians, and I knew without question that we were the same, identical in every way; we just applied our like capacities to the distinct environments that chance had given us. They weren't stupider because they didn't

use electricity or work from eight to three; if anything, they were lucky to have such an abundance of resources at hand and to know how to use them with so little effort and so much intelligence. The respect I felt at that moment did nothing but grow as the days passed.

That night, we had grilled toucan for dinner (it turned out to be a very tender and flavorful meat) with iguana eggs that our hosts took from certain hollows in the trees with the same ease with which they would have picked them up, packaged, from the shelves of any supermarket. The powerless lizards froze where they were on the trunks and watched as the indigenous men calmly took their eggs, which were elongated, about an inch and a half long, and turned out to be very appetizing both raw and grilled over the hot stones of the fire. For desert, we ate great quantities of some very mature fruits the size of large apples, which, oddly, smelled and tasted like pineapple, but they weren't, and they had many seeds and very little pulp. We ate more and better than we had on our own, with all that tasteless freeze-dried, canned, packaged, and powdered food, and when we hung the hammocks—the Indians also had their own, made of fine vegetable fibers, which fit in one hand when folded—I at last slept soundly, without worries, and dreamed that I was arriving in my car at Xiprer Street to see Daniel and his family, and that the whole street was clear for me to park where I wanted, without having to park the car over the curb. I unfortunately couldn't tell all of this to my companions because our guards didn't let us speak amongst ourselves until two days later, when they decided that it was no longer necessary to watch us, because we'd understood the situation.

Really, we had understood it almost immediately, and if we needed something else to make us accept it with awe and satisfaction, we discovered it that first night, after dinner, when our friendly hosts, tired of food and walking, spent a long time around the fire, telling each other funny things that made them laugh a lot, and in them, in those stories, there was a term they repeated continuously, most of the time pointing at themselves or the whole group: the word was none other than "Toromona." In the end, I told myself after exchanging a significant glance with Marta, that guy, the author of the ethnic map of Bolivia, what was his name? Díaz Astete, yes, that was it, Díaz Astete had been right in his claims that there could still be Toromona in the Madidi region, that tribe which had supposedly disappeared during the Caucho War in the nineteenth century and which, according to history, had been the great ally of the Inca who hid in the Amazon jungle when they fled the Spanish (taking with them, according to legend, the mythical treasure known as El Dorado). But what was unknown to both history and Díaz Astete was that the Toromona hadn't helped the Inca, precisely, but some citizens of the empire—which made them Inca, according to the Spanish chroniclers—who were the Yatiri wise men, the Capaca-priests of the Aymara people, the "people of ancient times," who, coming from Tiwanaku-Taipikala, "the central stone," had fled from the Spanish, from their cruelty and their contagious illnesses, taking with them not El Dorado (they had left that in the chamber of the Traveler), but the most important treasure they possessed: their sacred language, the ancient *Jaqui Aru*, the "human language," whose sounds were consubstantial with the nature of beings and things.

The Toromona had found the magic words they had needed in the plaza of the city in ruins, but we had also found ours that night, and so a relationship was formed that was going to last much longer than we realized at the time.

During that first week, we walked without rest, following trails or rivers and penetrating deeper and deeper into a jungle that changed its character every few days. Sometimes it was friendly and impressive, like when we reached the summit of one of the peaks in a mountain range that we had at last crossed in its entirety, and we saw at our feet, stretching as far as the eye could see, a carpet of many-hued treetops in which were tangled some still, white clouds. On other occasions, however, it was as hostile as the worst of enemies, and we had to be always on our guard to keep from suffering from the bites of army ants, mosquitoes, bees, and tarantulas, and also of snakes, bats, caimans, and piranhas, the most abundant species of fish in the Amazon. We often saw pumas and jaguars, but they never tried to attack us, and also falcons, eagles, monkeys, and anteaters (very delicious, by the way, with a flavor similar to goose). The Indians kept the anteaters' long claws, and during the stops we made to eat or sleep, they sharpened them with rocks until they were transformed into dangerous knives. With time, Marc, Efraín, and I got used to trimming our beards with those claws. Watching the Toromona and learning from them became an obsession. If Marc and I had always said that the world was full of closed doors and that we had been born to open all of them, those Indians knew how to open the doors of the Green Hell, and I wanted to learn to break the passwords of the code of the jungle. Marc and Lola made fun of me, but Marta, like a good anthropologist, came with me whenever I discreetly joined a group of Indians who were going to carry on some odd activity. They let us wander around without giving us any trouble, with a mix of compassion and scorn very similar to what parents feel for their smallest, clumsiest children, but they quickly discovered how real our interest was, and they granted us a preferred status within the small army, coming to call us by our names whenever they found something they thought might interest us. There was one lesson, however, that I would have preferred to skip if I had been able to.

Two or three days after leaving the ruins, I noticed I had an enormous abscess on my right shin. I ignored it, thinking it was a common inflammation caused by one of the thousands of scratches and small cuts we suffered every day from plants, but soon after it began to fester and swell even more, causing such terrible pain that it made me limp. Gertrude began to really worry when another, similar boil appeared on the back of my left hand and swelled so much that there came a time when it looked more like a boxing glove than a hand. We had no antibiotics or painkillers, and poor Dr. Bigelow felt incapable of helping me. The day that Marc and Efraín had to help me walk, grabbing me below my shoulders, the Toromona noticed that something weird was going on with me. One of them—the old pyromaniac who had set fire to our possessions—made them put me back on the ground and examined my hand and shin with the eye of a village doctor who had spent his whole life seeing the same illnesses in his neighbors. He put some leaves that looked like tobacco in his mouth and chewed for a long while, allowing threads of brown saliva to fall from the corners of his mouth. I felt so bad that I couldn't even manage the effort necessary to pull my hand away when the old man spit slowly on the very painful inflammation, then stared attentively at the abscess

until it opened a small mouth, a volcano on the surface, and something that moved erupted from my hand. I think I swore, cursed, and blasphemed until I was hoarse, while Marc and Efraín held me strongly to keep me from moving. Lola got dizzy and had to step back with Marta, who also wasn't taking it well. Only Gertrude remained intent on what was going on while I spit out a torrent of all the worst curses I knew. The old Indian used two fingers to extract from my swollen hand a white larva about an inch long, which allowed itself to be removed without offering resistance, drunk from the tobacco juice the old Indian had so kindly prepared for me. Taking out the second larva was a little harder because it was bigger and had spent much longer holding onto my flesh. The old man, who turned out to be the tribe's shaman, explained to me with gestures that they were horsefly larvae and that, apparently, like mosquitoes looking for blood to suck, those insects felt a special predilection for some people. Logically, the whole thing awakened the investigative passion of the doctor and amateur anthropologist that was Gertrude Bigelow, and from that moment on, the doctor stuck to the old shaman like a limpet and was continually fascinated by the new things she was learning.

After that disagreeable experience, I spent the rest of the trip shooing away like crazy all the horseflies that got close to me, and my companions also developed a strong aversion to that insect, so much so that, in the end, we helped each other in the job of keeping them away, since they were capable of biting through clothes. The only good thing was that when the old man removed the larva, the abscesses closed and healed perfectly in a couple of days, with the help of an oil that the Indians got from the bark of a tree with dark green leaves and white flowers very similar to jasmine, oil that they got just by stabbing one of the sharp anteater claws into any part of the tree. The shaman's method for relieving my pain was another matter: He made me put my bare feet on the damp soil near puddles, and then he applied the thick heads of several electric eels to my hand and shin. It goes without saying that they produced a series of shocks that, oddly, acted as an anesthetic, making the pain disappear completely for a few hours.

Those Indians knew how to make the most of everything and find everything they needed in their environment. From a strange tree that abounded on the banks of rivers, they took a white resin that had a penetrating smell of camphor and kept the fearsome army ants and ticks away. They only had to pull off a piece of bark and let the resin flow, which they then applied all over their bodies or to the trees they were going to tie their hammocks to. With time, naturally, we ended up copying them—which is the best way of learning—and, by example, when our clothes turned to rags we decided that it would be a good idea to cut what was left of our pants off above the knees, enduring like the Indians the small cuts and bruises that we ended up not noticing.

The truth is, almost without noticing it, we were undergoing a major transformation. And not just myself, but also my civilized companions, who ended up adapting themselves perfectly to the rhythm of daily life in the jungle and the strange customs of the Toromona. Despite the humidity and the constant insect bites, we enjoyed excellent health during the course of the journey; and that was because, according to what Gertrude told us, in the Amazon, the swampy overgrown areas are generally more healthful than the dry ones because of the

absence of tropical heat. We no longer felt fatigue and could walk at a good pace all day long without ending up exhausted by nighttime, and we learned to eat and drink unimaginable things—Marc, of course, was not once disgusted by any of it—and also to remain quiet and concentrated for hours, alert to the signs of the jungle. In my case, however, it was a much more spectacular metamorphosis, because, of the six, I was the least used to nature and the most squeamish and finicky. Nevertheless, in those three short weeks, I became a guy capable of shooting a blowgun, of identifying the tree with red wrinkled bark from which we extracted a very nutritious drink (which, even if it smelled like dead dog, tasted exactly the same as cow's milk), as well as the poisonous vine that we mashed and shook in the water of rivers to kill the fish that would be happy to eat us for dinner. I also came to know, from my own experience and some late-coming Toromona advice, which leaves we could use as toilet paper and which ones had toxins that we would do well to stay away from, and, of course, to recognize the silent wake drawn on the water by caimans or anacondas when we bathed in the rivers.

Of course all that was nothing. Just the basics, just what was indispensable for survival. You can't learn in a few days what takes a whole lifetime of practice. I was only a privileged tourist, not a traveler in the old fashion of those who spent months or even years in the place they wanted to get to know; and like a common tourist, my vision of that world was the same that the members of an organized trip like "all of Greece in four days, cruise through the islands included" would get. I was aware of it, but just as adrenalin flowed in torrents through my veins whenever I broke through the protections of some place with prohibited information and slipped through the sewers in the Nou Camp to leave my tag painted on the walls of the press room, on that journey I couldn't resist combating my ignorance of all that surrounded me.

One night, very near our destination, as we talked a while before sleeping, Lola looked at me and suddenly laughed.

"When you get home," she mumbled between hiccups, "are you going to keep asking Sergi to protect you from the innocent little bugs in your garden?"

Marc, who was annoyed because the previous afternoon he had touched a moth, and later, without noticing, had wiped the sweat from his face with his hands, causing a rash that was driving him crazy, let out a laugh that made all the Toromona, who also were chatting next to the fire, turn their heads toward us.

"If only they could see you now, Root! Wait till I tell them at the company!"

"You'll keep your mouth shut," I told him very seriously, "if you don't want me to throw you out on the street."

"You're not serious, are you?" Gertrude asked, worried. She addressed me in the informal mode. We had all begun to address each other like that shortly after being taken out of the ruined city, without really knowing why. Now we used the formal mode of address like the Bolivians, only for very personal things, and Marc and Lola, jokingly, had become accustomed to using it to address each other when they were fighting. The world in reverse.

"Of course he's serious," Marc told her, very carefully pushing the re d strands from his forehead with the back of his sore hands. "He's already fired me on more

than one occasion. Now he seems so calm and self-possessed, but when he gets mad, he has a wicked temper."

"He's fired me a couple of times, too," Lola recalled, tugging at the loose threads of what remained of her very expensive HyVent pants. "But he does it without noticing. Deep down, he's a good guy. Weird, but good."

"Weird?" Marta laughed.

"They're the weird ones," I observed with an impassive expression. "Look at them and tell me if they're not. They seem really weird to me."

"We didn't sell an internet portal to Chase Manhattan Bank for millions of dollars right after our thirtieth birthday," Marc argued, bringing up the trivial part of my biography that got the most attention.

Quick as a flash, Marta, Efraín, and Gertrude turned to look at me.

"Is that true?" the archaeologist asked, very surprised. "You're going to explain it to us right now, my friend."

I put a contemptuous look on my face and pointed my chin at the fat redhead.

"Do you know why we call him Jabba?"

"You…!" Marc began, furious, but Lola silenced him with a hand over his mouth.

"I couldn't care less why you call him that," Efraín said. "Is that true about Chase Manhattan Bank? You're not going to escape by selling out your best friend!"

The jungle had also made us lose our last shreds of civilized social behavior. We'd turned a bit *Lord of the Flies* by then.

"Yes, it's true," I admitted reluctantly, "but I spent it all building my house and starting my current company, Ker-Central."

That was not completely true, of course, but talking about money had always seemed like a faux pas to me.

"Then you must have an impressive house," Marta murmured, opening her eyes very wide.

"He does, he does," Lola whispered, insinuating that it was a dream house. "You'd have to see it to believe it, right, Marc?"

"Hey," I protested, "what's up with you guys tonight?"

"Is your business very big?" Gertrude inquired with much curiosity.

"They don't know who you are in Bolivia!" Marc teased. I was tempted to get up and give him a couple of sharp pinches on his fat, irritated, and itchy cheeks. "The guy sitting before you is one of the few European internet geniuses. Everything having to do with artificial intelligence applied to the internet has passed through his hands."

No one said anything, but I thought I could hear (virtually) a chorus of surprised exclamations come from their closed mouths.

"Okay, look," I told Jabba in a warning tone, "since you're being rude, I'll tell you: I might put Ker-Central up for sale. I'm thinking about it."

Marc and Lola turned white as paper.

"Don't be stupid!" the redheaded worm managed to spit, making a great effort to recover from the fright. "Looks like you want to start something tonight!"

"Look at what I've become!" I exclaimed, turned toward him. "I'm almost thirty-six years old and I'm a boring businessman, someone who spends the day signing

papers. I need to change, to do something I really like. And I'm not talking about that idiotic idea of being happy," I added, very serious. "As Gertrude explained to us in La Paz, the brain doesn't have one tiny corner dedicated to something so insignificant and commonplace. Really, I'm talking about doing something that I enjoy, something that's part of the real world."

"You need new challenges," Marta affirmed.

"Yes, something like that," I admitted reluctantly; I felt sick at seeing myself publicly exposed like that. "I don't want to be the financial administrator of other people's ideas. It doesn't work for me."

"Well, if you're that tired of it, give me Ker-Central, but don't sell it! I also helped create it, remember?"

"I already told you, I'm still thinking about it. Okay?"

"Watch your back!" he warned me before closing his mouth definitively for the night.

The subject didn't come up again. It didn't get the chance. The next day, after crossing a small valley between some very high mountains, thus saving ourselves from a dangerous pass, we found ourselves in the early afternoon in a jungle completely different from that which we had seen so far. The gloom was complete and the ground was muddy and cold and covered in some abnormally large and tall ferns, which had openings between them, showing some narrow paths through a forest that at the very least could be called shadowy. Walking through it, we felt like poor Gulliver in the giants' country. The huge trees, only separated from each other the necessary distance to keep from devouring one another, or fallen on the ground brought down by old age, were around three hundred feet tall, almost as tall as any New York skyscraper, but the impressive thing about them was their trunks, which by looking at them seemed be some sixty or eighty feet around. I had heard of the famous African baobabs, so thick they had been used as houses, stables, jails, and bars, in which up to fifty people could enter at once. I had even seen in a book, when I was little, one of those baobabs in which a hole had been bored in the trunk to build a road through without knocking the tree down, making it the only living tunnel through which large trucks could easily pass. But those colossal monsters crowded into that lost corner of the Amazon were much larger than the baobabs. Efraín remarked that they could be sequoias, the tallest trees in the world, but he corrected himself when he remembered that sequoias, which grew almost exclusively on the west coast of the United States, could indeed grow to much taller than three hundred feet, but their trunks never got as thick as those around us. Their gigantic roots sank into the soft mud (which exuded a light fog that reeked of rot) and their crowns were lost to sight in the sky, impossible to make out, also hidden by the foliage which was bent from its great weight; and there were places in which, between the tight carpet of ferns, the impressive trunks, barely separated from each other, and the long vines and creepers that hung from who knows where and tangled in authentic Gordian knots, it seemed impossible that anything not belonging to the vegetable kingdom could live. But there was at least one animal that we didn't see, but we did hear.

When its song first reached my ears, I couldn't help thinking there was a person nearby, humming a precise melody, but the pitch suddenly rose and it seemed to me I was listening to a flute, an instrument which inarguably required a person to

extract sound from it. I scanned the cold vegetation around us because it sounded very close, almost right next to us, but I didn't see anything at all. It was an incredibly beautiful music, and of course it came from a flute. The Indians smiled and remarked amongst themselves, and my companions showed the same stupefied expression that I did faced with the phenomenon of the close and invisible artist. Suddenly the languid sweet notes of that flute transformed into a kind of squeaking and then went silent. Shortly after, the human singing began again, and again turned into the flute and ended in that disagreeable sound. When the same composition sounded from different places at the same time, we had to accept reality: it was the song of a bird, of an extraordinarily gifted bird, but a bird.

That was a world of gods, not of people, and our group looked like a small line of ants drowning in the thick leaves. Finally the paths suddenly disappeared, overcome by the vegetation, and the Toromona stopped. The leader, who was at the front of our strange procession, lifted an arm in the air and uttered a cry that reverberated in the forest and caused a pandemonium in the foliage. And then, nothing. We stood there, still and waiting for who knows what. A few seconds later, a similar cry came from some distant place, and only then did the Toromona leader lower his arm and relax. But we didn't move, and after a while Marta, very serene, stuck her hands in the pockets of her tattered pants and said out loud:

"I think we've arrived, my friends."

"Arrived? Where?" asked Marc, the dimwit.

"In Osaka, Japan," I told him, very serious.

"In Yatiri territory," she clarified, giving me an admonishing look.

"I can't see anyone," Efraín murmured, worried.

"Well, I feel like they're watching us," Lola said, and shivered, drawing close to Marc. Without noticing, we had formed a small huddle as we waited for the walk to resume or for them to give us some indication as to what we should do.

"Yes, so do I," Gertrude said, lifting her hand to her stomach and leaving it there.

"Well, it's likely that they are," Marta conceded, nodding. "The Yatiri must be curious to know who we are and why we've suddenly appeared here, accompanied by the Toromona."

I stopped, changed the position of my feet because they were getting stiff.

"What was such a numerous army of Toromona doing hidden in the ruins of that abandoned city in the jungle?" I asked, looking for a clue. "Were they there by coincidence or was someone sent to look for us?"

"Come on, Arnau, you're not going to tell me the Yatiri sent them to get us on exactly that day at exactly that time, are you?" Lola objected.

"I don't know, but I do remember having read an account that said these guys, when they lived in Taipikala, predicted that the Inca were going to arrive, and also the Spanish, some foreigners who lived on the other side of the ocean, no less. They're probably fantasies, but I wouldn't swear to it."

"They're fantasies," Marta repeated, nodding. "The most likely is that the Toromona's settlement is close to those ruins and they keep guards posted in case someone shows up with the stone ring. It's clear they're allied with the Yatiri, but

there's a big difference between that and the idea that the Yatiri sent them to look for us because they knew we would be there."

We suddenly went quiet, because we all noticed at the same time that the Toromona had started to move. But the strange thing was that they didn't move forward; instead they surrounded us, even though the path between the giant trees wasn't that wide. Little by little, they enclosed us in a narrow circle, and we, stupefied, watched them without knowing what was going on, although we all had a certain sense of alarm that showed in the worry on our faces. Something strange was going on. When we saw the leader come over to us with his body guards and the old shaman, we no longer had any doubt.

"What the hell is going on?" Marc asked, alarmed, wrapping an arm around Lola's shoulders.

"That's what I would like to know," Marta replied with the same cold and deep voice she used when she was mad.

The leader faced our little group, looked at us inscrutably, and pointed at the path by which he had come. When we didn't move, his arm stretched in that direction and he imperiously repeated the gesture. He was ordering us to walk in front of them and go down that passage between ferns.

"What do we do?" Jabba asked.

"Whatever they tell us to," Efraín muttered, grabbing Gertrude's hand and beginning to walk.

"I don't like this at all," Marc murmured.

"If you can think of a better alternative," I told him, grabbing one of Marta's arms and coaxing her to come with me. "I'll give you Ker-Central. I give you my word."

"How about running away like lunatics?" he asked with an ironic smile.

"No, not that."

"I knew it," he told Lola as he brought up the rear.

Since they hadn't kept stride with me, I turned to look at the Toromona, in case they were aiming their lances at us or something, but the Indians stood motionless in the middle of the jungle, watching us unblinkingly. The leader maintained a dignified stance and the shaman smiled. It was the end of another phase of that incredible adventure. I wondered if we would see them again, since without their help it would be impossible for us to return to civilization. But who could know how that strange journey would end?

Thirty yards further, the path narrowed to a fine line and ended abruptly. We arrived at the end and stopped, without knowing what to do. Were we supposed to wait, or should we go back to the Toromona?

The ferns stirred a little on my right, and I turned my head quickly in that direction. A naked arm suddenly appeared, parting the leaves, and I found myself a couple of feet away from a guy as tall as I, somewhat older, and dressed in a kind of long sleeveless shirt tied at the waste with a green sash. The guy, who had large gold discs inserted into his earlobes, looked at me for a long while, without changing his expression, and then he examined my companions, one by one. He had typically Aymaran features, with high cheekbones, a sharp nose, and vaguely feline eyes. His skin, however, was very light, so light that, although it was not white like ours, it wasn't remotely like that of the Indians, either.

Of course, we were petrified. Petrified and struck dumb. So, when they motioned for us to follow them, the six of us startled in the most discourteous way.

He disappeared again into the ferns, which closed behind him, and we stayed there without moving, with idiotic expressions on our faces. After a few seconds, he reappeared and looked at us with a furrowed brow. It was odd, but his eyebrows went in opposite directions: both traced the sinuous line of a tilde, but while one angled downward, toward his nose, the other raised toward his forehead. And there he stood, looking at us from beneath those strange eyebrows and waiting for us to start moving and follow him. One by one, we crossed the green barrier and submerged ourselves in that sea of immense leaves without saying a word, overwhelmed by a situation we had been awaiting for a long time. I was the first to enter and Efraín came behind me. The Yatiri—since there was no doubt that's what he was—walked straight toward one of the trees without stopping or changing direction, and I, astonished, watched him go in through an opening, through a very low door roughly carved in the trunk, which led us to a dark corridor in which I felt like the trucks must feel when they pass through the tunnel in the African baobab. The tree was alive and sap undoubtedly circulated in its wood, which gave off an intense fragrance, a scent similar to cedar. At the end of the corridor, a few yards away, there was a light, so I deduced that more Yatiri were waiting for us there, but I was wrong: Those guys had hollowed out the center of the tree, creating an enormous tubular room from which rose a ramp, carved into the very walls of the room, ascending in a spiral into the heights. Some oil-filled stone cups with wicks burning inside were placed at varying heights, phantasmagorically illuminating that strange vertical tunnel.

"*Jiwasanakax jutapxtan!*" our guide exclaimed in a severe tone, as if convinced we weren't going to understand him.

"What did he say?" I asked Marta in a whisper.

"It's Aymara," she murmured, fascinated.

"Of course it is," I replied. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know…" she whispered, without being able to hide her wide smile of happiness. I'd never seen such an agreeable expression on her face.

"Okay, but what did he say?" I insisted, also smiling.

"For us to go with him," she translated in a lowered voice.

The Yatiri began the gentle ascent up the ramp, and then I noticed, when I followed him and stepped onto it, that the wood inside that great tree was very hard, since it didn't give way under our weight: there wasn't even the slightest oscillation, not the smallest tremor. In the light of the oil lamps, it was a pleasant yellow color laced with long veins of iridescent browns, and it was polished and varnished with some kind of shiny resin, perfectly smooth. The ledge on which we walked stuck out of the wall itself in a wedge shape (thicker at the base) and ended in a wide and barely elevated little trim. There was no handrail, so if someone wanted to throw himself over the edge, he could do so without impediment.

I don't know how much time we spent going up, but it was a lot. It took us a long time to get to the place where the gentle incline ended in a new door, which we went through after the friendly Yatiri. When we had gone through another

short tunnel, we came out onto a wide walkway that connected to another door in the neighboring tree, about fifty feet away. The most pleasant thing was that we were again near the light of the sun, and at that altitude it managed to slip in through the branches. Marc came up next to me, and behind him came Marta and Lola, followed by Efraín and Gertrude. It struck me to see that below us another path in the air led to the trunk of the tree to our right, and then, looking over, I noticed that, both below us and above our heads, a dense network of similar streets connected all the colossal trees in sight. And the most incredible of all: Those arteries were made of the gigantic branches that sprouted from the trunks, that had been molded and adjusted to go from one place to another naturally. Some went up, some went down, others twisted here or leveled out there, and all of them crossed at different heights; so that, if you fell—although it seemed very unlikely that such a thing could happen, since the paths were so wide—it would only be a couple of yards to the next level down. Those guys had built megalithic cities with a technique that neared perfection by shaping living nature with the genius to adapt it to their needs.

I pointed it out to Marc with gestures, and also to the others, who nodded to show they were as awed by it as I. When we entered the next tree, we found ourselves in a kind of enormous plaza, also lit with oil lamps. A small group of Yatiri argued in the distance, next to a staircase that seemed to lead to similar floors above and below. The first women we saw were there, and they, unlike the men, were dressed in short, loose shirts and skirts that fell to their feet. All the clothes those people wore were brightly colored, like those worn by the Aymara in the markets of La Paz, and all of them had the traditional gold discs inserted into their ears, the supposedly Incan *orejeras*, which, according to legend, distinguished the bearers of a special solar blood from everyone else. Efraín remarked to us that the masculine shirt was called *unku* and after the conquest its use had been prohibited by the Spanish, who legally imposed the use of pants. Men and women, without exception, wore leather sandals and covered themselves with shawls that fell to their knees. On average, they were very tall, with light skin and blue-black hair, dark curious eyes, and Aymaran features, although, and this was a fact that kept impressing us, all the men had dark shadows of short beards on their faces. None of them made the slightest gesture of greeting or welcome; quite the contrary, as if they were afraid of us, they retreated to the stairs and covered half their faces with their tunics.

There were benches carved in the walls of that giant plaza, and two men and a woman of very advanced age, who must have been chatting until our arrival, examined us from where they were perched on them with serious and impassive faces. The woman addressed our guide, raising her voice:

"*Makiy qhipt'arakisma!*"

Our Yatiri answered her and kept walking toward the exit, making a farewell gesture to her with his head.

"What did they say?" Marc wanted to know, turning toward Marta.

She nodded, like an applied student who had perfectly understood the lesson, and then looked at us with her eyes shining and said nervously:

“The older woman asked him to hurry, not to delay, and he replied that the Capacas were already waiting for us and that everything would be done very quickly.”

Efraín moved forward to cut into the conversation:

“They’re taking us to see the Capacas, my friends!” he exclaimed, excited. “I can’t believe it!”

“Let’s see if they’re going to carry out some ritual human sacrifice with us…!” Marc blurted, with a voice full of excitement.

When we left that tree, we heard voices and laughter coming from some place above us, but we didn’t see anyone. We also heard barks, and we looked at each other with very wide eyes: there were dogs up here! Incredible. But not that incredible if we looked in the windows and doors visible in the nearby trunks, which looked like residences, houses inhabited by people we couldn’t see. The network of branches cleverly converted into streets continued on the other side of the tree, and also beyond the next one, and the next, and the next… Although it was impossible to see more than a couple of giant trunks on each side, there was no doubt that it was a large vegetable city from which the vines and creepers had been removed, and in which nature had been deeply respected, since not a single artificial floor or platform, or any planks or framework of any kind, could be seen.

Our guide seemed to be taking us along a very well-studied route so we wouldn’t meet anyone. Incidentally, he succeeded: We didn’t run into a single other human being until we arrived in front of a huge stump, accessed by a multitude of aerial walkways from the neighboring trees which were separated from it by a certain distance. It was by far the largest trunk we’d seen so far, but it lacked branches and leaves. It gave the impression of having been struck by a lighting bolt that had split it, beginning at the spot where it forked into its crown. It was impressive to see it like that, mutilated and grandiose, and I didn’t doubt that was the place we were headed, since it had the appearance of being an important center of power or administration. We descended down one of those streets that sloped slightly, curving, toward the great wooden doorway of the stump, and the door heavily opened a crack as if by magic when we stood in front of it. Two Yatiri dressed in the usual way came from the dark inside and waited for our guide—who ordered us to stay where we were—to take a few steps toward them. Then they allowed us to enter the mutilated tree, and we were suddenly frozen, not because it was cold (it wasn’t), but because of the ostentation and richness of that place: Immense tocapu tapestries divided the space like partitions, hanging from the roof, and gold sheets embossed with scenes that seemed to be taken from the distant life in Taipikala covered the floor. Hundreds of oil lamps lit the interior, and furniture such as chests, chairs, and tables made in an unknown style that used gold and wood as materials stood everywhere.

The guide made us go forward a little and again motioned for us to wait.

“*Mä rat past’arapï*,” he said very haughtily, before disappearing. If he thought we didn’t understand him, why did he bother to talk to us, and in that tone, besides?

Efraín translated:

“He said he was going I don’t know where for a moment.”

“He didn’t say where,” Marta clarified.

“I didn’t think so.”

“What do the *tocapus* say?” Lola asked, walking over to the closest one. It was an impressive tapestry, about twenty feet long.

“Well this one, in essence,” the professor began to explain, examining it attentively, “is a kind of invocation to a goddess… But it doesn’t say the name. It must be Pachamama, Mother Earth, because it mentions the creation of humanity.”

“And this one,” Efraín pointed out from the other side of the room, “tells how the giants disappeared with the flood.”

“These guys have a sick fixation on these subjects, don’t you think?” Marc remarked, perplexed.

We were walking around there, killing time, looking at the things around us, but my mind was far away. I could only think that after so much time and so many things like those that had happened to us, the moment had arrived at last when I’d have to make those guys explain, however I could, how to pull Daniel from lethargy.

“Are you worried?” Marta asked me suddenly. She had come up next to me without me noticing.

“No, not worried. Maybe nervous.”

“Look at all of this,” she told me, talking like a professor. “It’s a unique opportunity to recover a lost part of history.”

“I know,” I replied, looking at her with a smile. I had ended up liking the dryness that characterized her and I found myself comfortable with her tones, sometimes too superior. Really, she didn’t notice; for her they didn’t have the same import as for her listeners. “I’m aware of the importance of the situation.”

“It’s much more important than you realize. It could be unique.”

“I want a magical anti-curse,” I announced. “What do you want?”

“I want to be able to study their culture, for them to let me return with a team from the university to carry out a research project complementary to the publication of the discovery of the written language of the Tiwanakan culture, which would be the first part of…”

“Okay, okay!” I interrupted, dying with laughter. “I think they’re going to give me what I ask for because of the humility of my request. You want everything!”

Marta got suddenly serious, looking behind me: Our Yatiri guide had reappeared among the hangings in the back, and gestured for us to go with him.

“Work is my life,” she said harshly, starting to walk.

We entered into an enormous room formed by walls made of tapestries with *tocapu* designs which rippled as if a light breeze blew through the place. The flames of the oil lamps wavered, and so did the dark gray hair of the four old Yatiri, two women and two men—both with mustaches—who were waiting for us, comfortably sitting in impressive gold chairs. At a considerable distance, they had placed six very humble wooden stools for us. Our guide motioned for us to sit, and, bowing his head to the elders, disappeared.

They were the Capacas, the governors of the Yatiri, heirs of the priest-astronomers who had ruled Tiwanaku, and they were looking at us with such indifference that it almost seemed as if we weren’t there. Didn’t it impress them to see six strangely dressed white people who had suddenly appeared in their city?

And, incidentally, what was that city called? Taipikala-Two? And why didn't they have cone-shaped heads like their ancestors? Didn't they practice occipital frontal deformation anymore? What a disappointment!

I saw Marta and Efraín exchange looks, coming to an agreement as to who was going to begin the conversation, but before they could decide, a fifth Yatiri figure made an appearance in the scene, stepping suddenly from behind the hangings behind the Capacas. He was a young man, barely twenty years old, who came in at a run and tried, without much success, to stop cold and to not fall flat on his face at the feet of the elders; with much effort, he managed to keep his balance, after wobbling for a minute. We saw him murmur a few words with his head bowed—he was dressed in a red unku with a white sash, and he wore a red band on his forehead—and then remain still in that pose while the Capacas deliberated. At last they seemed to consent to whatever the young man was asking them, and he stood; then, positioning himself to one side, he addressed us loudly to make himself heard despite the distance:

"My name is Arukutipa and I am a ladino Indian, and I'm at your service so that you may understand with our principal Capacas."

I froze. What was that kid doing speaking an old Spanish, with a closed and imperfect intonation? And besides, why was he calling himself names? But Marta, quick as lightning, leaned forward, calling us to counsel, and launched into a quick explanation:

"This boy's name, Arukutipa, means 'the translator,' or 'he who has a way with words,' in Aymara, and he claims to be a *ladino* Indian, which, in sixteenth century colonial America, is what they called the indigenous people who knew Latin or *Romance*, meaning those who spoke Spanish. So the Yatiri are providing us with an interpreter so they can communicate with us. They still have the Spanish they learned before fleeing to the jungle!"

"But, then," Efraín pointed out, surprised, "they don't imagine that we could know their language."

"Wait, I'm going to surprise them," Marta said, with an intelligent smile, and turned to the Capacas and exclaimed: "*Nayax Aymara parlt'awa.*"

The elders didn't move a muscle on their faces, they remained expressionless; only the young Aruku-whatever turned to look at the Capacas with a surprised expression. There was no exchange of words, they didn't dialogue, yet Aruku-whatever turned back to us and spoke again in the name of the elders:

"The principal Capacas say that Your Mercies are lucid, wise, and very lettered persons, but that, as you must obtain taking a clean path and without great disputes, it is good that the words be Spanish of Castile and that evil and hurt not grow from the said words."

"But, but… What the hell did he say?" Marc, who had turned redder than normal and who looked like a pot about to let out a burst of steam, asked indignantly. "What damned language is he speaking?"

"He's speaking Spanish, I reassured him. "The Spanish that the Indians of Peru spoke in the sixteenth century."

"They don't want us to use Aymara," Efraín said, hurt. "Why?"

"You heard him," consoled Gertrude, who, despite being quieter than normal, had a gleam in her eyes that betrayed the intensity of the emotions that rushed

inside her. “They don’t want a mess. They don’t want problems with the language. They prefer for us to understand each other in Spanish.”

“Of course, since their language doesn’t change, they think others don’t either!” Marc exclaimed indignantly. “Well, I don’t understand what that kid says! To me, he might as well be speaking Chinese.”

“You understand him perfectly,” Lola growled. “What’s going on is that you don’t want to, which is different. Make an effort. Would you prefer for Marta and Efraín to speak with them in Aymara and for the rest of us to get left out? Come on, man! With all we’ve had to do to get here!”

“The Capacas have account of the many letters of Your Mercies, but now they ask to know how Your Mercies had knowledge of this kingdom of Qalamana.”

“Qalamana!” Marta exclaimed. “This city in the jungle is called Qalamana?”

“Qalamana, señora.”

“‘That which never gives up,’” Efraín translated. “A very appropriate name.”

“The principal Capacas ask to know,” Aruku-whatever insisted, “how Your Mercies had knowledge of this kingdom.”

“Arukutipa,” Marta said, “I would like to know whether the Capacas understand us when we speak Spanish. I ask because it’s going to be a very long story, and if you have to translate it, we’ll never finish.”

Arukutipa changed his weight from one foot to the other several times, indecisive, and turned his head to the elders a couple of times.

“The Capacas, señora, don’t understand you,” he muttered at last. “They are not ladino Indians.”

“Well, then, I will try to be brief…” Marta said, taking the floor and launching into the story that had led to our knowledge of that kingdom, starting with when her great uncle, Alfonso Torrent, had begun to work with Don Arturo Posnansky in Tiwanaku at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was increasingly clear to me that the best way to get to know Marta, to really know her, was by listening to her extraordinary voice, by understanding the very music of which it was made. Only there, in the sounds that came from her throat, in the intonations that were imprinted on them, in the words she chose and the phrases she constructed, was the truth of that woman who hid and defended herself like a sea urchin. And just as I had thought that distant day in her office, her voice was really her Achilles heel, the weak point through which the truth came gushing out without her noticing.

Arukutipa was a simultaneous translator, because the elders, listening to him repeat what Marta told, nodded when it was appropriate, furrowed their brows at the right moments, and looked worried or complacent when it was called for, just as Marta finished explaining whatever would provoke said expressions. I didn’t hear him hesitate once. He didn’t ask her to repeat a single word, even though our Spanish and his were very different, and there were modern terms that would be difficult to explain for whoever didn’t have information about what had gone on between the seventeenth century and the twenty-first.

At last, Marta began to speak about Daniel. She mentioned that, like her, he was a professor in a Spanish university, and that, working under her, he had accidentally discovered the curse of the Pyramid of the Traveler. Unfortunately, she said, he had fallen under its influence, and then she turned to me, introduced

me as Daniel's brother, and let me speak, so that I could finish telling the story and express my petition.

Of course, I did it as eloquently as I could, without losing sight even for a moment of the fact that those guys had to know that the curse only worked on Daniel because he didn't have a clean conscience, but, just like Marta, I skipped discreetly over that part and kindly asked for a solution to the problem. Then Efraín outlined our expedition through the jungle until we got to Qalamana with the Toromonas.

Arukutipa tirelessly repeated our words—or we had to suppose he did, because, although we didn't exactly hear him, we saw him pay attention to us and ceaselessly move his lips—and when we finished, after almost an hour of speaking without pause, the kid gave such a big sigh of relief that we couldn't help smiling.

After that, we stood, quiet and motionless, hanging on the murmurs that came to us from the back of the room. At last, Arukutipa turned to us:

"The principal Capacas ask for the name of the bizarre woman of white hair."

"They're talking about you, Marta," Gertrude whispered with a smile.

She stood and said her name.

"Señora," Arukutipa replied, "the Capacas delight from your visit and say that Your Mercy will hear the relief for the punishment of the sick man of the hospital, the brother of the gentleman of tall body, and that with this, his misery and trials will cease. But say the Capacas, señora, that so, after having heard the relief, Your Mercies must leave Qalamana for always and not speak ever of this city to the other Spanish."

Marta made a sour face.

"That is impossible," she announced in her gravest, most glacial voice. The poor kid was left breathless and dumbfounded.

"Impossible?" he repeated, incredulous, and then translated it to Aymara. The Capacas remained impassive. Those people weren't shaken by anything.

And then the first of the strange things we would see that afternoon happened. The Capaca woman sitting on the far right gave a short rant, and Marta opened her eyes very wide, disconcerted.

"The old woman said," Efraín murmured, "that we should obey, because otherwise none of us will leave here alive."

"Oh, shit!" Marc exclaimed with a scared expression.

Marta replied something in Aymara to the old woman.

"She told her," Efraín translated for us, very surprised and wary, "that there's no problem, that none of us will ever speak of Qalamana with anyone."

"But… It can't be!" Gertrude blurted. "Has she gone crazy or something? Marta!" she called; Marta turned, and for some strange reason I guessed that she had suffered the same kind of manipulation as Daniel. I couldn't explain why I knew, but there was something glassy in her look that I recognized at first glance. Gertrude motioned her closer with her hand and Marta squatted down in front of her. "You can't accept this deal, Marta. Your life's work and Efraín's work will be lost. And we have to find out what the power of words is. Do you have any idea what you've said?"

"Of course I know, Gertrude," she assented with her usual furrowed brow, the same expression that she got when someone or something made her

uncomfortable. “But I had to accept. We can’t leave Daniel like he is forever, right?”

“Of course not!” Efraín blurted in a very aggressive tone. “Obviously we can’t! But you have to haggle like in the market, Marta, you can’t give in right away. These people have no idea what has happened in the world since the seventeenth century, and for them the Spanish are still the enemy they have to protect themselves from. Get up and negotiate, show your smarts. Come on, let’s go!”

The old Capaca man who was sitting next to the Capaca woman on the far right also said something out loud at that moment. Efraín’s face changed; his anger gave way to a great calmness.

“It’s okay, Marta,” he declared, looking for a more comfortable position on the stool, “leave it. It doesn’t matter. We’ll keep doing what we did before as if we’d never set foot in this city. We can’t hurt these people.”

“What’s going on here?” Lola asked, scared, looking at Marc and me.

“They’re reprogramming them,” I said, totally convinced. “They’re using the power of words.”

“How dare they?” Marc shouted, looking at us defiantly.

“Forget it, Arnau,” Marta told me. Her gaze was returning completely to normal, without that watery shine that I had noticed before and that now gleamed in Efraín’s eyes.

“But they’ve manipulated you, Marta!” I exclaimed, indignant. “You’re not the one making this decision. It’s them! Wake up, please!”

“I am awake, I assure you,” she categorically declared with her usual temper. “I’m completely awake, clear, and calm. I know they’ve used the power of words with me. I can see it plainly. I can see how the change of opinion is caused inside me. It was like a flash of light. But now the decision to put Daniel before any ambition is my own, as mine as the one not to be willing to let them kill us for refusing to give our word that we’ll never talk about this city. I’m the one deciding, even if it’s hard for you to believe.”

“I say the same,” Efraín declared. “I agree completely with Marta. We can still ask them for answers to what we want to know, but it’s not necessary to make that information known and attract all the researchers in the world here to end up destroying this culture in a blink of an eye.”

“This is crazy!” I said angrily, and turning to the Capacas, I exclaimed: “Arukutipa, tell your bosses that the world has changed a lot in the last four hundred years, that the Spanish don’t dominate the world anymore, that we don’t have any kind of empire, and that we’re not a country of conquistadors or warriors! We’ve been living in peace for a long time! And also tell them that using the power of words to change people to suit your convenience isn’t the action of decent or honorable people!”

I had finished my rant on my feet, shaking my hands like an impassioned orator, and my companions looked at me as if I had lost my mind. Marc and Lola, who had known me longest, only looked frightened, although it was certainly from fear of the Capacas’ reaction; but Marta, Gertrude, and Efraín had their eyes wide open in surprise at my energetic tirade.

Arukutipa had hastily translated my words almost at the same time as I said them, so when I finished yelling, the elders had already heard all of my message.

For the first time, I thought I detected a confused expression on their wrinkled faces. They again kept their mouths closed, but the kid with the red band transmitted their response to me:

"The Capacas ask to know if the battles and the spilling of blood and the loss of people of the kingdom of Piru are ended."

"Of course they have!" I exclaimed. "All that ended hundreds of years ago. The Spanish no longer govern these lands. They kicked us out. There are many different countries with their own governments and the relations of all of them with Spain are good."

Now the confusion really was clear on their faces. If you asked me, they understood Spanish perfectly, despite Arukutipa's work.

"The Christian *Viracochas* don't govern in Piru?" the translator asked with a voice that barely escaped from his throat.

"No!" I repeated, taking a few steps forward to reinforce my words. I did it at a bad moment, because, hidden behind the large tapestries, an army of Yatiri armed with bows and lances and protected with small rectangular shields had remained invisible until that moment, in which they quickly and noisily spread out like a defensive wall between the Capacas and us, at whom they pointed their weapons.

"Fuck, they're going to kill us!" Mark roared, seeing that things were serious.

"Now what's wrong?" I asked Arukutipa, even though I couldn't see him.

"Your Mercies shouldn't come near," said the kid's voice. "Death would be caused for the Spanish pestilences."

"What pestilences?" I asked, exasperated.

"Measles, plague, influenza, the biological weapons of the Conquest," Marta declared sorrowfully. "The most recent studies show that in the great epidemics that occurred in old Tiwantinsuyu, between 1525 and 1560, ninety percent of the population of the Incan Empire may have died, which means the extinction of millions and millions of people in less than forty years.

"In other words, according to that, only ten percent survived," I remarked, and an idea crossed my mind. "What year did the Yatiri leave the Altiplano?"

"Around 1575," Marta replied. "It's the date on Sarmiento de Gamboa's map."

"They're immunized!" I exclaimed. "The ones that survived and got here had produced antibodies against all those diseases, and so they transmitted the genetic immunity to their descendants. They can't get sick from us!"

"Sure, buddy. Now try explaining it to them," Marc said. "Tell them that it's a germ, a bacteria or a virus, and then you can tell them about the antibodies and how vaccines work, and when they understand that, explain the thing about genetic immunity to them."

I sighed. Marc was right. But I couldn't lose anything by trying.

"Listen, kid," I told Arukutipa. "The Spanish pestilences don't exist anymore. All that ended at the same time as the battles and the spilling of blood. I know it's difficult to believe, but I'm telling you the truth. Besides, the guide you sent to pick us up when we arrived with the Toromonas and who brought us here was very close to us. You can check that nothing's wrong with him, that he's okay."

"Luk'ana will die by his own will, señor," the boy assured me calmly. We all jumped in surprise. "Now he is alone and waiting for Your Mercies, to take you

from here. Then he will offer his life so as not to sicken us all. The city must have mercy on him for his service."

"These guys are crazy, Root!" Marc exclaimed with all his heart. "Let's get out of here right now!"

"It won't be necessary for him to die, Arukutipa," pronounced the "bizarre woman of white hair." "Nothing will happen to him. As Arnau, the gentleman tall of body, said, the Spanish pestilences are over. Everything has changed, yet you still have the same fears from four hundred years ago."

Silence fell on the other side of the wall of soldiers, until, suddenly, they dramatically retreated and returned to their hiding places behind the tapestries. Apparently, the situation had stabilized and the Capacas felt somewhat calmer.

"Verily the Viceroy does not rule, nor are there magistrates or mayors or sheriffs?" the young translator insisted, still incredulous in the face of such large and unexpected changes.

"No, there are no Viceroys or magistrates or Spanish *encomenderos*," Marta replied.

"And the Sacred Inquisition?"

"It disappeared, fortunately. Even in Spain, it no longer exists."

The kid remained silent for a few seconds, then he inclined his head toward the elders as if they were telling him something.

"The Capacas ask to know of whom Your Mercies are vassals."

"Of no one!" I replied, annoyed. Vassals! Well, that's all we needed.

"Castile has no king?" Arukutipa asked, surprised. "There is no Sacred Catholic Royal Majesty?"

"Yes, yes, there is a king in Spain," Lola intervened unexpectedly, "but he doesn't govern, he doesn't have power like his ancestors. Anyway, you keep asking us questions without giving us any information in return. We can tell you all you want, but we also want to know things."

There was a stir both in the back of the room and the part we were in. We were caught off guard by the mercenary's audacity.

"It's that they were getting on my nerves with so many questions," she quietly told us, by way of an explanation.

Arukutipa stood and looked at her.

"The principal Capacas ask the name of the woman of long nose and thin size."

"Now they're talking about you, Lola," Gertrude teased again.

"Your turn will come, Doctor," she replied, standing up and declaring her name as if she were on trial.

"Doña Lola," Arukutipa began, "the Capacas say that Your Mercy ask what you like, that they will respond truthfully what they know."

"Hold on!" Efraín said hurriedly, grabbing Lola by the arm to make her turn toward us. "Let's agree on what you're going to ask. We may not get another chance."

"It's clear, isn't it?" Marta replied, unruffled. "We have two big mysteries: one, the power of words, and the other, the story of the giants, one of whose remains we had the pleasure of seeing in Taipikala."

"That's two questions," I argued.

"Well, we can try," Efraín ventured. "Maybe they will answer two."

“Please,” Gertrude murmured in a pleading voice, “first ask about Aymara and its power. That’s the most important.”

“Both things are, honey,” Efraín remarked.

“Listen to me, please. First, ask about Aymara.”

“Okay,” Lola said, turning back to the translator and the Capacas. “I want to know,” she told them, “how is it that you have the capacity to manage people, to change them, heal them, or make them ill using words?”

Poor Arukutipa must have been sweating blood as he translated Lola’s petition, because, despite the distance, the agony showed on his face and he kept squeezing his hands together and rubbing them as if he had to control their shaking.

His conversation with the Capacas was longer than normal. Until that moment we hadn’t seen them exchanging more than two or three phrases, even if the boy later uttered long paragraphs or questions, but this time the debate was drawn out for several minutes. My impression was that they didn’t argue about the convenience or inconvenience of telling us their secret, but more about how or how much or what to tell us exactly. They were going to tell us something, I didn’t have any doubt, but what? A part?

“The words have the power,” Arukutipa exclaimed suddenly, facing Lola, who remained standing, waiting. Then, he took a step back and retreated, leaving the space to the Capacas. The four elders stood, closed their fists, and rested them, crossed, over their shoulders. Then they began to softly drone a strange chant in Aymara. At first, Marta and Efraín were so impressed they didn’t even breathe, but they slowly calmed, without taking their gaze from the Capacas for a second. Marta, under the influence of the chant, began to translate for us, in a monotone, what the elders said, but it would have been all the same if she hadn’t, because somehow, inexplicably, we were understanding them. No, I’m not in any way saying that what happened to us was some kind of miracle like the gift of language the Apostles received from the Holy Ghost on Pentecost. On the contrary. The real reason we could understand what those old Capacas chanted was contained in the very story the little song narrated. In the end, I confused Marta’s voice with the one I heard in my head, and I wouldn’t have known how to differentiate one murmur from the other. They were different, but they said the same thing, and both had a hypnotic effect.

At first, the Earth didn’t have life, said the elders, and one day life arrived from the sky on some large smoking rocks that fell everywhere. Life knew what shapes it had to create, what animals and plants, because it had everything written within it with the secret language of the gods. And everything filled with living beings who occupied the earth, the sea, and the air, and human beings appeared, identical to how they are now except for their limited intelligence, barely superior to that of an ant. They didn’t have houses, or office, and they dressed in tattered animal skins and leaves of trees. In that first time, everything was very big, of colossal dimensions. Even men and women were big, much bigger than they are now, but their brains were very small, as small as those of a reptile, because life had made a mistake and hadn’t correctly read the instructions. Then the gods saw that what they had made was good, but that not everything was well or going as it should go, so they sent Oryana.

Oryana was a goddess who came from the depths of the Universe. She was almost like one of the women who populated Earth, since life wrote the same everywhere, even if small differences appeared, but sometimes, as had happened with human beings, it made mistakes, and then the gods had to intervene, even though they didn't like to. Oryana was different from us in only a couple of ways: She had very large ears and her head was conical. When she got to Earth, she mixed her life with that of some beings from here, and when she did, she rewrote the shape that human intelligence should have. She gave birth to seventy children, each of them with a very large brain, a perfect brain, identical to hers, capable of any feat or achievement, and she taught her sons and daughters to speak. She gave them a language, her language, and told them it was sacred and that with it they could rewrite life and manage that perfect mind they now possessed. She told them she had made them the same in every way as the gods, and that they should conserve that language, Jaqui Aru, without changing it or altering it, because it belonged to everyone equally and it had to be used by everyone to manage the great intelligence that was now available to them. As she taught these and many other things to her children, they built, in the place were they had been born, a city to live in, which they called Taipikala, decorating it as their mother told them the city she came from was decorated. They learned to make drinks from the fermentation of the new plants that Oryana had given them, such as corn; to produce honey from another animal that she also brought and that wasn't there before, the bee; to work metals; to spin and weave; to study the sky; to calculate; to write… And when everything was well channeled, two hundred years after her arrival, the goddess Oryana left.

The millennia passed, and the descendants of Oryana—or Orejona, as they had come to call her in memory of her large ears—populated the world, creating cities and cultures all over the planet. There were many eras, but they conserved *Jaqui Aru* without changing it, and everyone knew how to use the power it contained. However, despite the prohibition, variations appeared in different places anyway, which led to incomprehension between peoples and the loss of the old knowledge. Human beings, in general, stopped using the great powers of their perfect brains, powers that definitely had never been known in all their vastness. But in Taipikala, Oryana's language was maintained, and out of respect, they continued to insert gold *orejeras* in their earlobes and to deform their skulls until they had a conical shape, like hers. For this reason, the city became a very important place and the Yatiri became the guardians of the old wisdom.

In that old world, the Capacas said, there was no ice and no desert, no cold or heat; there were no seasons and the climate was always temperate. A covering of water vapor enveloped the Earth completely, and the light came through tenuously and diffusely. The air was richer and the plants grew all year, so it wasn't necessary to plant or to harvest, because there was always an abundance of everything. And all the animals existed, none was missing, and they were much bigger than they are now, as were the plants, which also were all there, following life's plan. Until one day, seven rocks as large as mountains fell from the sky, hitting the Earth with so much force that they made it dance and made the stars change place in the heavens. Enormous clouds of powder jumped into the air, darkening the sun, the moon, and the stars, and enveloping the world in a bleak

night. Volcanoes exploded all over the planet, tearing open the ground and expelling great quantities of smoke, ash, and lava, and there were terrible earthquakes that leveled the cities and left no human construction standing. A tornado of embers that burned the skin, causing ulcers that wouldn't heal, colored the earth and water red, poisoning it. The fire burned the trees and the grass, and some rivers evaporated, leaving their beds dry. Burning hurricanes stormed through, devastating everything, consuming entire forests in an instant. Men and animals, desperate, looked for refuge in the caves and rifts, running from death, but very few managed it. Then, just a few days later, an unfamiliar intense cold suddenly fell, followed by heavy rains and floods, which fortunately put out the fires that were still devastating the world. And the snows came. And all this happened so fast that many animals were encased in the ice as they ran, gave birth, or ate. Mud drowned everything. Preceded by a tremendous roar, giant waves from the seas, advancing like solid walls of water across the entire horizon, covered the earth, dragging the remains of dead sea animals all the way to the peaks of the mountains. That which the peoples of the world called "the flood" had started.

It rained for almost a year without stopping. Sometimes, when the cold was very intense, the rain turned to snow, and then it rained again, and the water kept soaking everything. Since the day the disaster had started, the sun had not been seen again. The catastrophe was global. Contact was lost with the other towns and cities. They were never heard from again, just as many species of animals and plants, which had been extraordinarily abundant before, were lost. They were extinguished forever during that time. All that remained was their memory in some reliefs of Taipikala, and in many cases, not even that. The few survivors who managed to see the end of that long and catastrophic night were sick and weak, full of terror. But they weren't even afforded the comfort of recovering their world as it had been. The Earth had been completely destroyed and it would have to be created again.

One day, after much time, the dark cloud covering the world retreated and the soft covering of water vapor enveloping the Earth left with it. It stopped raining and the sun's rays reached the surface in all their strength, causing terrible burns and consuming the soil until it was left dry. Slowly, the living beings adapted to that new situation, and life wrote again over what had remained, according to its eternal instructions. However, now the years were five days longer than before, because the Earth had tipped on its axis (as the new orientation of stars in the sky clearly showed), causing the yearly seasons, which made it necessary, if people wanted to eat, to plant and harvest at specific times. So many things had to be changed, among them the calendars and the way of life. The cities were also rebuilt, Taipikala among them, but human beings were very weak and the work was exhausting for them. The children who were born were born sick and with serious deformities, the majority dying before they could grow. Although the Earth was remade relatively easily and nature took little time to rebuild itself from its own remains, it took men and women, and even some animals, centuries to recover normality, and as those centuries passed, they noticed that their lives were becoming shorter and shorter and their children and grandchildren weren't developing normally.

The Yatiri had to take control of the situation from the beginning, at least in their territory. Whatever happened outside their borders was something they couldn't control. They took it upon themselves to recover their authority, to put an end to the chaos and terror, to the savagery into which humanity had fallen. They invented rites and new concepts, simple explanations to calm the people. In time, only they kept the memory of what had existed before and of what had happened. The world was populated again, there appeared new cultures and new peoples who had to start again with nothing and fight hard to survive. Many turned savage and dangerous. The Yatiri and their people became the Aymara, "the people of ancient times," because they knew things that others didn't understand and because they kept their sacred language and their power. Even the Incap Rúnam, when they arrived at Taipikala to unite it with Tiwantinsuyu, still had part of the memory of who those Yatiri were, and respected them.

The Capacas' chant ended there. One of the old women pronounced a few words more, but I didn't understand them anymore. The spell, or whatever the hell it was, had ended.

"The rest of the story," Marta concluded, translating what the Capaca woman said, "you already know."

I felt completely calm and serene, as if, instead of sitting on that stool listening to a story about the destruction of the world, I had been listening to music in my living room at home. Those guys had done something to my head while they talked to us about Oryana and everything else. Marc, Lola, and I had come to the erroneous conclusion that if one didn't know Aymara, one was safe from those strange influences, but it wasn't true: The power of the words transcended the barrier of language and slipped into your neurons, whatever language they spoke.

As Gertrude had supposed, Aymara was a vehicle for power, a perfect language, almost a programming language, which allowed the combination of sounds necessary to stir up your brain. Aymara—*Jaqui Aru*—was the keyboard that had allowed the perfect brains of those first children of Oryana to be programmed, giving them the necessary applications to live. Whatever those guys had done in my head, it was allowing me to make a series of connections that would not in a million years have occurred to me on my own. Tons of ideas crossed through my mind, and all of them were different, disconcerting, and, of course, impossible to share with the others in those minutes. Suddenly, I was enjoying an incredible mental clarity, and I felt as if those Capacas were still playing around in my head, drawing new paths of understanding.

My companions were living experiences similar to the one I was having, which is why, when the elders' chant ended, the silence lasted for a long time. We weren't capable of speaking because we were very busy trying to pin down our thoughts. The Capacas' chant most likely contained tons of sounds capable of altering our brains, of awakening them. Maybe we had gone from using five percent to temporarily using six, or five and a half, and we were conscious of it. Then I also understood what Marta had said to me when I had accused her of having been manipulated by the Yatiri to make her agree never to speak of Qalamana: I also clearly understood that they had used the power of words with me, yet I didn't feel as if I had been invaded by alien ideas or thoughts. I was, as she said, awake, clear, and very calm, and I knew that everything in my head was mine. It was I,

and only I, who occupied my mind, and who, like Marta, now saw with clarity how unnecessary it was to bring everything to light, to bring lights and cameras to Qalamana, or even worse, to take that power from the Yatiri's hands and put it in the hands of some scientists working in the service of armed governments or terrorist groups, of which the world was full, in a time when all ideologies and all systems had been corrupted.

"So…" Lola murmured, lifting her hands to her head as if she needed to hold it in place or to compress what she had inside, "all that about an Ice Age lasting two and a half million years, nothing. Everything happened in very little time… That's why the mammoths are found still frozen in the Siberian ice, so fresh that their meat has fed generations of Eskimos."**(4-19)**

Her voice gave us back our capacity for speech.

"This is crazy," Marc stammered, shaking his head, trying to get rid of some thought that didn't seem to be to his liking.

"I think we all have too many things in our heads," I said, standing with difficulty to stretch my body and mind. It caught me almost by surprise to discover that now I did know what I wanted to do with my life when I returned to Barcelona, to my home, to those places that seemed remote and unreal in that situation, but that would doubtlessly turn back into reality in very little time.

Slowly, we were coming out of that state of deep concentration in which the chant had submerged us. My head began to slow down and the ideas stopped rushing through it.

"The visit of Your Mercies has ended," said Arukutipa's voice from the back of the room. "You must depart now from Qalamana and not return."

Marta's expression turned sour.

"We have accepted not speaking of your city or of you or of the power of words to keep you safe from…" she hesitated, "from the other Spanish, but I don't understand this prohibition against returning. I have already told you that we do not govern in these lands and that nothing remains of the pestilences, so, if we constitute no danger, why can't we return? Some of us would like to learn more things about your culture and your history."

"No, Doña Marta," the kid replied, "Your Mercies must not be disobedient and proud. You leave and don't come back again and return without quarrel with the Toromonas to the city of Qhispita, in the jungle, and when you are in Taipikala, return the stone you took to go from Qhispita to Qalamana."

"Qhispita means *safe*," Efraín kindly translated for us.

"Are you saying," Marc asked, alarmed, almost ignoring the archaeologist, "that we have to go back into Lakaqullu, go through the whole pyramid again, and pass those tests again, to leave the stone doughnut in the place we found it, which was right at the end of the path?"

"Don't worry," Marta reassured him quietly. "We've agreed not to speak of Qalamana and its inhabitants, but we still have to decide on our own what we'll do with the doughnut and with the Pyramid of the Traveler and its gold sheets. Anyway, I remember perfectly where we emerged onto the surface, so if we decide to return it, it will be enough to enter from the other direction."

"It seems like they expect us to respect what they left there," I murmured.

“Don’t forget, Marta,” Efraín said, giving me a dark look and holding out both hands in a gesture of supplication, “that I’m the director of the excavations they’re doing at this very moment in Tiwanaku and that you are a part of my team. We can’t throw away this unique opportunity, my friend. You yourself obtained, with your influence, a special authorization to excavate in Lakaqullu.”

“Your Mercy should withdraw from your error,” Arukutipa ordered Efraín at that moment, “and so deserve our honor and respect for ever. And also Doña Marta should withdraw.”

“Your old city,” she replied, getting to her feet so they could hear her clearly, even though, really, they could hear us perfectly, as we’d been talking in whispers and still they knew the content of our discussion, “your old city of Taipikala is being studied and brought to light, the earth that has accumulated on it for centuries, or for thousands of years, is being removed. If we don’t do it, others will, others who will not have so much consideration. You can’t stop it. For a long time the ruins of Taipikala, or Tiwanaku, the name you gave it when you were invaded by the Incap Rúnam, have attracted researchers from all over the world. We are your best option. Your only option,” she emphasized. “If Efraín and I keep working there like we have been doing until now, we can keep you from being found, and share the knowledge of what the Pyramid of the Traveler holds in a neutral and scientific perspective, and, why not, also hide the compromising information, so that no one ever knows of your existence. If it is others who, now or in a hundred years, reach Lakaqullu, you will be lost, because they will show up here, in Qalamana, days later.”

The boy, who had already translated Marta’s speech, moved back a step to let the elders think about their response. A moment later, he took a step forward and returned to his place. None of them had uttered a single word.

“The principal Capacas are very worried for Taipikala and for the body of Dose Capaca, the Traveler,” he declared, “and as well for what Doña Marta has said of the researchers of the world and for the many lessons, doctrines, and testimonies that were left on the gold, but they think that Don Efraín and Doña Marta can do the work such as Doña Marta has said and so favor the Yatiri of Qalamana. The Capacas will now give the relief for the punishment of the sick man of the hospital, and then Your Mercies must leave Qalamana for ever.”

“How single-minded!” Marc snorted.

But I was thinking about how trusting the Yatiri were: Some weird contagious guys, among whom were some dangerous Spanish, showed up unexpectedly at their door and told them that all the reasons they were hiding didn’t exist anymore, and the really smart Yatiri, instead of questioning it, went and believed it without argument, and furthermore, the weird guys made them believe that for their own good they should hand over the keys to their old house. It didn’t seem right to me that such a special people could be so innocent and silly. Although, of course, I told myself, surprised, they could have subjected us without our knowledge to some kind of test with the power of words; and as had happened to Marta with the curse that had made Daniel ill, we had passed, because we’d really told them the truth.

“And so, Doña Marta, pay attention and we will provide you with the relief for the sick man.”

The old woman on the left stood before saying:

"*Jupaxusutaw ak munta jinchu chhiqhacha jichhat uksarux waliptaña.*"

I looked at Marta and saw that she had her eyebrows raised in an expression of indescribable surprise.

"That's it?" she stammered. "Just that?"

"Just that, Doña Marta," the young Arukutipa replied. "But have it in your head well guarded because you will have to repeat it as such."

"I think that I've memorized it, but just in case, I would like to say it once. The idea of making a mistake once we're there scares me."

"Not necessary, but if you like…"

"*Jupaxusutaw ak munta jinchu chhiqhacha jichhat uksarux waliptaña*" she pronounced, very slowly.

"What does it mean?" I asked Efraín with my voice lowered.

"It's silly, my friend: 'He is ill and I want this: for the wind that penetrates his ears to cure him starting now.'"

"That's it?" I asked, surprised.

"It's what Marta said," he replied, turning his attention back to the conversation with Arukutipa and the Capacas.

But the conversation had reached its end. The translator, inclining his head, was taking his leave of us, and the Capacas stood up solemnly, bringing the encounter to a close. A little disconcerted, we copied them. Our guide, the friendly Luk'ana, appeared from behind the large tapestry on the left, with the same disdainful expression and the same strange eyebrows he had when he left. Maybe he already knew we had saved his life, and maybe not, but in any case, his face didn't show the smallest gratitude or the least relief from not having to die that night.

"Leave in peace from this city of Qalamana," Arukutipa bid us farewell. The Capacas didn't even bother with that; they simply left in the same direction they'd come in from, with the same great indifference with which they had entered that room two or three hours before.

Luk'ana gestured to us to follow him, and, walking behind him, we returned to the immense reception hall of that grandiose trunk. I had almost forgotten the strange world we were in and its reality surprised me again when we set foot in the vestibule, which was now empty of guards. The guide picked up one of the oil lamps resting lit on the tables and gave it to Lola, then he gave another to Gertrude, and so on, until we each had one of those luminous stone gravy boats in our hands. Then, with a slight effort, he opened the two heavy doors by himself, and we noticed that outside everything was dark and the air coming in was cold, almost icy. Night had fallen while we spoke with the Capacas.

We went in reverse through the same aerial labyrinth we'd followed to get there, only now we walked more slowly, curiously observing the lights that shone from the windows of the residences built inside the trees. It was a supernatural image, almost aggressive, belonging more to an Escher painting than to a tropical rainforest, so, lacking a camera to steal that instant from time, I tried to keep all the details in my memory, down to the smallest, because I would probably never return to that place, and no one besides us would know of its existence, so it

would be a unique memory which, very certainly, I would return to on many occasions throughout my life.

We traversed the immense illuminated plaza, now deserted, and crossed the last vegetable bridge to the trunk of the tree that led to the exit. We descended the ramp in silence and arrived at the lowest tubular room, where Luk'ana, stopping us, gestured to us imperiously to leave the lamps on the ground and go into the dark tunnel that would return us to the jungle. Then Marta turned and told our guide:

"*Yuspagara*."

He remained impassive.

"*Yuspagara*," she insisted, but Luk'ana maintained his poker face. "Can you believe I'm thanking him?"

"Forget it, come on," I told her, taking her elbow and gently pushing her toward the tunnel. "It's not worth the effort."

"Bye, damn it!" I heard Efraín say at almost the same time.

And the six of us went into the blackness of the tunnel without, that time, seeing any light at the end. That exit in darkness was our goodbye to the world of the Yatiri.

When we got outside, using our hands to part the giant ferns that hid the entrance, we moved forward like blind people to the path that we'd left at the beginning of the afternoon, walking in a straight line so as not to get lost. But when we separated the last feathery leaves, the tenuous light of some camp fires dazzled us, making us blink. Seconds later, we could make out the Toromonas in the distance sitting around several fires, chatting animatedly and waiting for us.

They received us with sober expressions and big smiles. They seemed to be showing us that we had received a great honor by being accepted into that arboreal world, and that, because of it, we were now more worthy of respect. The Toromona leader called us over with gestures and invited us to sit with his favored group and the old shaman, and he himself offered us the most succulent parts of the large howler monkey that was slowly roasting over the fire.

We slept there that night, which was terribly cold. Luckily, the Indians had used a special wood to make the fires, and it gave off a lot of heat as it burned and kept the flames miraculously going until dawn of the next day, when we set off on the long return journey to the city in ruins that we now knew was called Qhispita, and which had probably been a Yatiri settlement that had served as a bridgehead to Qalamana when they decided to flee the Altiplano. We had no idea how we would get from Qhispita to the exit of Madidi National Park, but we were sure the solutions would come to us as we got closer to the problem. The new way we had of facing things was surprising; we were losing what remained of our old urbanite ways at the speed of light.

That morning was Tuesday, the 16th of July, and exactly thirty days had passed since we'd left La Paz. We still had another month ahead of us to make the return journey to civilization, but it was a time that passed quickly, especially the three weeks it took us to get to Qhispita, because during the day we kept learning a multitude of useful things from the Toromonas, and at night we had long conversations next to the fire, remembering and analyzing the afternoon we had spent with the Capacas of the Yatiri. For the first days, we found it impossible to

talk about it. The six of us suffered a kind of block that didn't allow us to accept what had happened. We resisted publicly recognizing the shameful idea that we had lived an experience that was inexplicable from a rational viewpoint. It was not easy to admit something like that. Nevertheless, like good children of Scientific Positivism, we ended up confronting it from the least disgraceful perspective.

Each of us had retained different fragments of the story that had been transmitted to us through the strange chant, and so the first disagreement we had was about the way in which those of us who did not speak Aymara had understood the message. Only two possible explanations fit: one was telepathy, and the other was Marta's voice, which had translated without pause everything the elders had revealed to us. We knew that telepathy was not nonsense, that, throughout the twentieth century, and especially during the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, the subject had been studied very seriously, and its practice was more than proven, but still, it sounded too bad, too carnival, belonging more to fortune tellers than to laboratory work, so we finally decided to stick with the politically correct version: it was Marta's voice, superimposed over the chant, that really transmitted the content of the story to us. At no point did we mention the lack of verbal communication between Arukutipa and the Capacas, setting the matter aside as if we hadn't noticed it. Unconsciously, we were doing the same thing as the researchers we had so criticized for not bravely confronting the enigmas of Taipikala.

As the days passed, however, we began to analyze the message. Lola, as always, was the first to mention it:

"I don't mean to be annoying," she apologized in advance one night, as we sat next to the fire, "but I can't get the idea out of my head that, according to the Capacas, the last Ice Age didn't last two and a half million years, but was the result of a more or less short catastrophe that happened because giant meteorites crashed into the surface of the Earth."

"We can't believe that," Marc murmured. "It goes against all of modern geology."

"I'd give anything for a cigarette," Marta murmured.

"You haven't smoked since we left La Paz, huh?" Gertrude said, satisfied.

"Are you changing the subject?" Lola asked them suspiciously.

"Not at all," Marta replied, sitting up a little and looking at her. "I knew that, sooner or later, we'd have to talk about all this. Which is exactly why I need a cigarette."

"Well, I'm convinced there's a lot of truth in the story they told us," Gertrude declared suddenly.

"Even the part that said life came in smoking rocks from the sky?" Marc asked ironically.

"Don't be so sure it's that strange," I objected, pulling a plant from the ground and starting to wind it between my fingers. "That is exactly what the most recent theories on the appearance of life on Earth say. Since there's no way to explain how in the hell it originated, now they say it came from outside; that DNA, the genetic code, came on the back of a meteorite."

"You see?" Gertrude smiled. "And if we keep digging, we'll find many more things like that."

Lola cleared her throat.

“But, then…” she said, uncertain. “What about the part where life created all the animals and plants of the world at the same time? Do we do away with the theory of evolution, as well?”

There was my favorite subject, I told myself, quickly winding myself up. But Gertrude beat me to it:

“Well, there are already many people who don’t accept the theory of evolution. I know it sounds strange, but in the United States, it’s a subject that’s been researched for many years for religious reasons. You already know that in my country there’s a strong fundamentalist current, and those people made it their business a long time ago to show that science was wrong and that God created the world exactly as the Bible says.”

“Really?” Marc asked, surprised.

“Forgive me for saying so, Gertrude,” the mercenary remarked with her usual aplomb, “but you Yankees are really weird. Sometimes you do things that… Well, you get what I’m saying.”

Gertrude nodded.

“I agree,” she admitted, smiling.

“Okay, but what were you getting at with the thing about the fundamentalists?” I asked.

“Well, it was relevant because, okay… Really they call themselves creationists. And, yes, they found proof.”

“Proof that God created the world?” I snapped.

“No, not really,” she replied, amused. “Proof that the theory of evolution was incorrect, that Darwin was wrong.”

Efraín seemed to be familiar with the matter, because he nodded every now and then, but Marta was another matter; she squirmed as if a pucarara had bitten her.

“But, Gertrude,” she protested, “there can’t be proof against evolution! Please, it’s ridiculous!”

“What there isn’t, Marta,” I said, “is proof of evolution. If Darwin’s theory had already been proven,” and I remembered that I had said the same to my sister-in-law Ona not long ago, “it wouldn’t be a theory, it would be a law, Darwin’s Law, and it’s not.”

“Man…” Marc murmured, chewing on a little plant, “I was never completely convinced of the idea that we come from monkeys, as logical as it may seem.”

“There’s no proof that shows we came from the monkey, Marc,” I told him. “None. Or what do you think the missing link is about? A story? If we listen to what the Capacas told us, the missing link will remain missing forever, because it never existed. Supposedly, mammals came from reptiles, but no fossil has been found of any of the innumerable intermediate and malformed beings that had to have existed over the course of millions of years to make the leap from one perfect creature to another also perfect creature. And the same is true with all other species on the planet.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!” Lola reproached me. “Now it’s going to turn out that you, a rare rational and analytical mind, are an ignorant nitwit!”

“I don’t care what you say,” I replied. “Everyone has a right to think what they want and entertain whatever doubts they want, right? No one can prohibit me from asking for proof of evolution. And, at the moment, they don’t give it to me. I’m

tired of hearing them say on television that the Neanderthals are our ancestors, when, genetically, we have less to do with them than with monkeys."

"But they were human beings, weren't they?" Marc asked, taken aback.

"Yes, but another kind of human beings, very different from us," I explained.

"And what proof did the fundamentalists of your country find, Gertrude?" Lola asked curiously.

"Oh, well, I don't remember all of it right now. I'm sorry. What we're talking about in regards to what the Yatiri told us has brought old lectures from the last few years to my mind. But, really, let's see…" And she pulled back her wavy dirty hair, gathering it on the top of her head. "One thing was that in many parts of the world they've found the remains of fossilized skeletons of mammals and dinosaurs in the same geological strata,[4-20] [4-21] which is impossible according to the theory of evolution, or dinosaur footprints and human footprints in the same place, like in the Paluxy riverbed, in Texas.[4-22] And another thing I remember as well is that, according to scientific experiments, genetic mutations are always detrimental, if not lethal. It's what Arnau was saying before about the millions of malformed beings that would be necessary to go from one well-adapted species to another. Most genetically mutated animals don't stay alive long enough to transmit those alterations to their descendants; and besides, in evolution, it would be necessary for there to be two animals of different genders to have the same mutation in their genes by chance in order to assure the continuation of the change which is statistically impossible. They admit that microevolution exists, meaning that the small characteristics of any living thing can evolve: blue eyes in places with little light or black skin in areas of strong sunlight, or greater height because of better nutrition, etc. What they don't at all accept is macroevolution, meaning that a fish can become a monkey or a bird a reptile, or that a plant can give way to an animal."

We were all listening attentively to Gertrude, but I sneaked a look at Marta and saw that she had a terrible expression that threatened a storm with lightning and thunder:

"That's enough!" she cut in brusquely. "There can be many explanations for what the Capacas told us. We are all free to adopt the one we like. It's absurd to argue about this. I absolutely refuse to continue. What we should do is study the documents in the Pyramid of the Traveler in detail and fulfill our promise: Efraín and I will start publishing our discoveries, and after that the scientists, the creationists, and the pagans can research whatever they want to on their own."

"But there's something else, Marta," Gertrude murmured enigmatically.

"Something else? What do you mean?" Marta asked, distracted.

Gertrude reached into the back pocket of her pants and took out the small digital recorder she had shown us the day we arrived at the city in ruins.

"There's not much battery left, but…" and then she pushed a small button and, very distantly, we heard Arukutipa's voice saying: "The words have the power." She didn't let us hear any more; she turned off the tiny machine and put it away again before the Toromonas could see it.

The rest of us were mute from astonishment. Gertrude had recorded the interview with the Capacas! That opened a world of infinite possibilities.

“I will need your help,” she told Marc, Lola, and me. “I can’t share this recording with anyone to study it, but you have the computers to do a frequency analysis of the Capacas’ voices.”

That aligned perfectly with my new projects.

“You can count on me,” I agreed, smiling widely.

We held many conversations very similar to that one night after night during the weeks we spent getting to Qhispita. Every once in a while, saturated with that subject, we talked about ourselves and about our lives instead. Marc, Lola, and I told them about our “100 Series,” hidden on a forgotten platform under Barcelona, and we explained the use we made of it to them; so, for the first time, we shared our activities as hackers with other people. Marta, Efraín, and Gertrude listened to us without blinking, with astonishment and confusion on their faces because of the things they hadn’t even remotely imagined could be done with a simple computer. The difference of ten years, more or less, between them and us constituted a generational rift when it came to information technology, a rift widened by the rejection—incomprehensible from my point of view—that the scholars of the humanities like to exhibit as a mark of class. Marta and Efraín could manage email and some basic applications, but that was all.

The truth was we all got to know each other very well over those weeks. On another occasion, the secret of Marta’s marriage that had so intrigued Lola was at last revealed. The famous Joffre Viladomat, because of work, had gone to Southeast Asia five years before, ruining what little had remained of his marriage to Marta Torrent. Their two children, Alfons and Guillem, nineteen and twenty-two, respectively, lived in Barcelona during the school year, but whenever vacations started they ran off to the Philippines to be with their father and with Jovita Pangasinan (their father’s new companion). According to Marta, Jovita was a lovely woman who got along very well with Alfons and Guillem, so relations were cordial between everyone. Lola gave a long sigh of relief when she heard the end of the story, and didn’t try to hide her old interest in the matter.

Also on one of those nights, Marc, Lola, and I came to an agreement about the future of Ker-Central, which would become an anonymous partnership. I would keep half the stocks and the two of them would share the rest, financing the purchase with bank loans. From that moment on, I would be free and they would be the de facto directors of the company. The building would still be mine, Ker-Central would pay me rent for it, and, naturally, my house would stay on the roof.

Everyone wanted to know what I planned to do when I “retired,” but I kept my mouth closed and they didn’t succeed in getting a single word out of me. Like a good computer pirate, I was an expert at keeping my secrets until the moment I made my move (and even more so, afterwards). They asked with a great deal of insistence, and maybe, just maybe, I would have given some clue if it hadn’t been for the fact that even though I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do I needed some very concrete help to find the best way of doing it, and because, to complicate things more, I had been forming a plan for several weeks to hack into, while I obtained that help, the apparently impregnable and supposedly very well-protected place that contained it.

One afternoon, about two weeks after beginning our return, the Toromonas stopped in a clearing and gestured to us to stay there while they organized

themselves in groups and disappeared into the jungle, going in different directions. We were alone for a couple of hours, a little surprised by that strange abandonment. It seemed that the Toromonas had something to do, something important, but that they would return when they had finished. And so they did. A little before nightfall, they returned carrying strange objects in their arms: pieces of thick hollow trunks, some small round fruits that looked like pumpkins, branches, rocks, wood, and a little game for dinner. The shaman was the only one who had left alone and who reappeared just as he had gone, with only his bag of remedies hanging from his shoulder. Quickly, the men divided tasks, and while some lit the fires to prepare the food, others began to hollow out the fruits, throwing the pulp and seeds on the ground, and to clean and cut the branches in arm-sized pieces. They were organizing something, but we couldn't imagine what.

At last night fell on the jungle and the natives were very animated as we ate. The shaman, on the contrary, stayed on the periphery, a little way away from our groups, at the edge of the vegetation and in the shadow so we could barely see him. He ate nothing and drank nothing and remained motionless in that corner without anyone addressing him, not even to offer him a little water.

When the last Toromona had finished eating, a kind of silence began to fall little by little over the camp. We were increasingly disconcerted. The leader suddenly gave a few orders and the men stood up and the fires were extinguished. Darkness enveloped us because the moonlight was barely a pale reflection on the sky; only a few branches, held up by the natives, were kept lit. Then the men lifted us up off the ground, grabbing us by one arm, and made us sit again, forming a wide circle in the middle of the clearing, with them all around us. We knew that they weren't going to hurt us and that what they were doing obeyed some ceremony or show, but it was impossible not to feel a certain nervousness, because it seemed that whatever was going to happen was directly related to us. I was afraid that Marc would blurt out one of his atrocious commentaries at any moment, but he did not; he looked very calm the whole time, and I would even say he was enchanted by that new experience. Then the shaman appeared in the middle of the circle. He stuck a reed in the ground, and, with a sharpened anteater claw, he made two deep cuts in the shape of a cross on the upper end. Then he separated the four sides so that it could hold a cup in the middle, into which he dropped a fistful of stems and leaves that he took from his bag of remedies. With the claw, he went about cutting everything into very small pieces, as if he were going to prepare a julienne soup, and when he finished, he grabbed a fistful and squeezed hard. A liquid slid from his hand and fell into the cup. He repeated the operation many times until all that was left was a dry paste which he threw forcefully into the vegetation of the jungle. In that exact moment, a Toromona began to beat a stick against one of the hollow trunks they had brought from the jungle, producing a deep, regular sound.

The old shaman took the cup from between the pieces of reed and drank the content very slowly. Then, suddenly, the scene sped up: someone took the reed from the ground and made it disappear, while four of the leader's five bodyguards surrounded the old man, who was sprawled on the ground, and firmly held his arms and legs. The rhythm of the drum sped up. The shaman started to become agitated, trying to stand, but the strongmen stopped him. The old man fought like

a lion, screamed like a wounded animal, but all his efforts to free himself were useless. Then, he calmed down. He went completely still and the men let him go and moved away in silence. It seemed like the only thing in the world was that dead old man and the six of us surrounding him. The sound of the drum became slower and slower, like the beats of a calm heart.

That situation lasted for a long time, until, slowly, the shaman got up. He seemed drugged and his eyes were very blank. Someone took him a small object and put it in his hand. It was one of those fruits they had emptied before dinner; it had apparently been turned into some kind of maraca filled with pebbles or seeds. The shaman began to dance in front of us, shaking the maraca to the rhythm of the drum. He sang something unintelligible and jumped every once in a while as if he were a monkey. At one point he shook the maraca impishly in front of Gertrude's face, making her jump backwards with a scared expression, and he froze like a statue. Then he knelt before her, and, with his free hand, traced some symbols in the dirt. He stood again, making the instrument rattle and made another complete round of the circle, jumping and singing, to stop in front of Marc, who also didn't appreciate having that rattle shaken in front of his face. The scene of the pictures on the ground was repeated, just like with Gertrude, and the shaman continued, doing the same in front of each of us. When my turn came, the old man stared at me with his frightening blank eyes, shook the maraca again, and knelt down to scribble. But no, he wasn't drawing random lines; instead, his entranced hand drew what was unmistakably a bird.

The ceremony ended when, with four sharp strikes of the drum, the shaman toppled onto the ground. The leader's strongmen picked him up and took him inside the jungle, from which he did not emerge until the next morning, just in time to resume our walk to Qhispita. He seemed to be feeling better than ever and he smiled at us from afar when he saw us. By then, we already knew that what had happened the night before had been a gift the Toromonas had given us. We realized it when at last we could see all the drawings. For Efraín, the shaman had drawn a three-stepped Pyramid inside which was a snake. Marta had received the same pyramid, but over it, the shaman had drawn a bird identical to mine. Marc and Lola had gotten the same human head with several aureoles joined by spokes, which, more than saints' halos, looked like incandescent light bulbs. Gertrude believed at first that her drawing was a lock, but then realized it was a bag of remedies like the shaman's, because he had included a small decoration of feathers like the one that hung from his. Those were our futures, the things that interested us and that we planned to dedicate ourselves to: Efraín and Marta to Lakaqullu, the three-tiered pyramid with its treasure chamber; Marc and Lola to Ker-Central, a company promoting projects of artificial intelligence; Gertrude to practicing medicine among the Indians of the Amazon, but from a new approach, a little more like a curandera and shaman; and I… Well, what the hell did the bird that both Marta and I had gotten mean? I wouldn't explain it. I pretended ignorance and kept silent. Deliberately, I let the others, Marta included, wrack their brains trying to figure it out.

At last, on Monday, August 5th, we arrived at Qhispita and we stopped before the same door through which we had left as prisoners. The Toromonas took their leave of us at that moment. The leader put his hands on our shoulders, one after

the other, pronouncing some words we didn't understand in a friendly voice, and then he and his men went back into the jungle and disappeared. They weren't very expressive people. After a few seconds, we went into the city and slowly walked up toward the plaza. We moved in shock: in comparison with the six weeks spent in the jungle, those ruins seemed like the edge of civilization, with their cobbled streets and their houses with walls and roofs.

We reached the square, and we contemplated in silence the empty buildings and the solitary and enormous central monolith, the one that showed a giant bearded man with the features of the Traveler of Lakaqullu, very close to whose pedestal of black stone still lay the charred remains of what had been our possessions. Like hungry beggars, we rifled through the ashes in search of something that might have survived, but there was nothing left. All we had were our hammocks, a couple of blowguns, and some sharpened fangs. That and the large quantity of knowledge acquired alongside the Toromonas.

Over the last few nights, we had been discussing how we could return alone to Rurrenabaque. Remembering the burned maps, we knew that by walking always westward, we would end up finding the great Beni River, and that from there all we would have to do would be to follow its course to its source, and sooner or later we would reach the twin towns of Rurrenabaque and San Buenaventura. When we had come, we had faithfully followed the path indicated by Sarmiento de Gamboa's map and the map from the gold sheet, but now we would have to figure it out for ourselves.

When we had checked to see what direction the sun was setting, we began our journey through the jungle. We were no longer the same six people who had arrived at that abandoned city loaded with modern technology and designer food. Now we knew how to hunt, skin, make a fire, protect ourselves from dangers that ranged from pumas to army ants, from horseflies to toucans, just as we knew how to follow the paths opened by animals, pull up a vine and drink its watery content if we were thirsty, or cure an abscess with snake or lizard oil. No, we were no longer at all the same six people (three hackers, a doctor, an archaeologist, and an anthropologist) who had arrived at the ruins of Qhispita with their waterproof breathable backpacks.

It took us two and a half days to get to the Beni, and from there, two days more to find a small village called San Pablo, made up of only three or four indigenous families, who, of course, didn't have telephones or know what they were; but they did have some magnificent canoes in which they offered to take us to another settlement called Puerto de Ixiamas, thirty miles upriver. We had predicted the reaction our ragged state and sudden appearance might cause in anyone who saw us, so we told a grisly story about a plane crash in which we had lost everything and a dramatic story of survival in the jungle. Those people, who looked even worse then we did, looked at us without understanding very well what we were telling them (they were simple people who knew little Spanish), but even so, they gave us dinner, let us sleep inside one of their wood cabins, and the next day, they took us to Puerto de Ixiamas, which turned out not to be much bigger than San Pablo, but which had a telephone, a telephone that only worked when it was connected to an old gasoline generator, and which even then offered little guarantee of making a connection. After a couple of hours of fruitless attempts

through various local switchboards, Efraín was able to contact one of his brothers and tell him, more or less, what our situation was. His brother, who was a peaceful math professor little accustomed to such surprises, kept his cool and promised to wait for us in the last riverside town before Rurrenabaque, Puerto Brais, two days later, with food and money.

We were on the margins of the world, in some lost corner of the jungle where no one ever came and where they weren't used to seeing white people or hearing Spanish spoken. We were still on the outskirts of Terra Incognita, but, on board the river people's canoes, we arrived on the agreed upon date at Puerto Brais, about nine miles from our destination, where Efraín's brother, Wilfredo, with confusion written all over his face, received us with big hugs and a suitcase. We couldn't pass very unnoticed on that small quay, or in the little bar where we quickly cleaned up and changed our clothes, but when we boarded the last boat headed for Rurre we looked like calm tourists coming back from an agreeable excursion in the area.

Since we had lost the reservations we'd paid for when we came, Wilfredo had had to go to El Alto and purchase the six tickets for the return flight to La Paz that was leaving that very night (they kept adding special flights for tourists), so we spent the afternoon sitting first in a bar, and then in a park, trying not to call to much attention to ourselves. At the arranged hour, we walked calmly to the TAM offices where the bus left for the grass airfield.

We landed, at last, in El Alto at ten something at night, and we said goodbye to Wilfred before getting into two Radio-Taxis that took us to Efraín and Gertrude's house. I had never felt a shock like I suffered traveling inside a vehicle through the streets of La Paz. The speed surprised me. It was like returning to Earth after having spent a long time on another planet. Everything seemed new, strange, fast, and too noisy to me, and besides, there was a dry and wintry cold in the air that I was no longer used to.

Gertrude and Efraín stopped to see some neighbors who had a copy of the keys to their house in case something happened. They opened the door with the keys, and only once we were inside did we understand that we had really returned. We looked at each other and smiled without saying anything, as confused as a group of kids on their first day of school. Marc and Lola's suitcases, and mine, were in the guest room, so we showered, put on our own clothes, sat in normal chairs around the dining room table, and with plates, silverware, and napkins, we ate a magnificent dinner that was delivered from a nearby restaurant. Then, still somewhat out of it from the change, we turned on the television and sat stunned, watching the images that moved on the screen and listening to the voices and the music. Everything was still very strange, but what surprised me the most was seeing the others well-coiffed, with clean hands and nails, and dressed in long pants, skirts, blouses, and sweaters, all clean and without tears. They looked different.

There was something, however, that I couldn't postpone any longer. It had been almost two months since I had said goodbye to my grandmother with a promise to contact her when I could, thinking it would be a matter of a couple of weeks. So I called her. It was six in the afternoon in Spain. Like any grandmother in the world, mine hadn't had a very good time of it while she hadn't had any news of me; but

despite her worry (which was almost enough to make her call the Bolivian police on a couple of occasions, she told me), she had managed to keep my mother under control by convincing her that I was fine and that I called often.

"And where did you tell her I am?" I asked her. "So I don't put my foot in my mouth when I get back."

"You know I never lie," she replied firmly.

Please, no! I thought, horrified. What the hell had she told them?

"That you had gone to the Amazon jungle looking for some natural remedies to cure Daniel. Some herbs. You don't want to know the face your mother made! Right away, she started to tell all her friends as if it were something very chic. You have half of Barcelona waiting for you, dying of curiosity."

I would have felt like killing her if it hadn't been for the fact that hearing her, and returning in some sense to normality, made me happy.

"Did you get them, Arnauet?"

"Did I get what?"

"The herbs… Well, whatever it was. You know what I mean." She let out a long sigh and I got the impression that what she was really doing was hiding the exhalation of smoke from a cigarette. "Your mother's made me tell it so many times that I've almost come to believe it."

"Possibly, Grandma. We'll know when we return."

"Well, your brother's at home. We checked him out of the hospital a month and a half ago. He isn't any better; the poor thing is exactly the same as when you left. Now he doesn't even talk anymore. I hope whatever you're bringing will do something. Do you want to tell me what it is?"

"I'm calling you from the house of some friends and it's an international call, Grandma. I'll tell you when I'm there, okay?"

"When are you coming back?" she wanted to know.

"As soon as we get the tickets for Spain. Ask Núria. I'm going to call her right now so she can take care of everything. She'll keep you informed."

"I want to see you so badly!"

"And I, you, Grandma," I said, smiling. "Oh, by the way! There's something I need you to do for me. Find a good moment for me to be alone with Daniel. I don't want there to be anyone in the room watching, or even in the living room waiting, or in the kitchen making dinner. The house has to be empty. Also, I'll be bringing someone with me."

"Arnau!" she said, scandalized. "You're not thinking of bringing an Indian shaman to your brother's home, are you?"

"How do you expect me to bring a shaman!" I asked, irritated. "No. It's Marta Torrent, Daniel's boss."

There was a long and meaningful silence on the other end of the line.

"Marta Torrent?" she said at last, with hesitation in her voice. "Isn't she the witch that Ona talks about?"

"Yes, that's the one," I admitted, looking sideways at Marta and seeing how she and Lola laughed at something they saw on the television. "But she's a great person, Grandma. I'll introduce you. You'll like her, you'll see. She's the one who's going to cure Daniel."

“I don’t know, Arnauet…” she muttered. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to bring Marta Torrent to your brother and Ona’s house. Ona might be offended. You know she considers Marta responsible for Daniel’s illness.”

“Look, Grandma, don’t make get into that right now.” I snapped; remembering the stupid things my brother and my sister-in-law said about Marta put me in a bad mood. “You just do what I tell you and leave the rest to me. Figure out how to empty the house so Marta and I can go in without anyone knowing about it.”

“You’re putting me in a tight spot, kid!”

“You’re clever enough to pull it off,” I teased.

“Of course I’m clever enough! If I weren’t, I don’t know what would have become of this family. But I’ll tell you again that you’re putting me in a very difficult situation with your sister-in-law.”

“You’ll do fine,” I reassured her, closing the discussion. “I’ll see you in a couple of days. Take care of yourself until I get back, okay?”

When I put down the phone after talking to my grandmother and to Núria, it was no longer civilization that seemed strange to me, but the memory of the jungle. As if by magic, I had recovered my normal way of behaving and I felt I was turning back into the same Arnau Queralt from before. But no, I told myself. Surely not entirely.

Epilogue

Two days later, on Friday, August 16th, we boarded the plane that would take us to Peru. This time since we would be traveling in the opposite direction as the sun, we would reach Spain two days later, on Sunday the 18th, although the whole trip would take the same twenty-two hours. In El Alto, we said goodbye to Efraín and Gertrude with big hugs, and exchanged promises to see each other soon in one country or another. Marta would return to Bolivia at the beginning of December to continue the excavations in Lakaqullu over Christmas, and I carried with me Gertrude’s recording of the conversation with the Capacas.

“Tell me everything you do,” she told me for the umpteenth time, “and let me know as soon as you find anything.”

“Don’t be such a pain, please!” Efraín reproached her, shaking my hand enthusiastically.

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” I told her. “I’ll give you a blow-by-blow.”

Before taking off, Marc took some pills that Gertrude had given him, which left him dead to the world even before the plane took off. It was hard for us to wake him up when we landed in the Lima airport and also in all the subsequent airports where we landed and took off again. Gertrude’s pills (with which he was well provisioned) kept him in a comatose state until we got to Spain, and, as he later admitted, that trip was the most pleasant he had taken in all his life.

“What better way to die,” he mumbled sleepily in Schiphol airport, “than to do it without realizing.”

Before each of the planes we boarded started its engines and the pills took effect again, he bitterly said his goodbyes to Proxi, Marta, and me (especially to Proxi, of

course) “in case we don’t see each other again.” It got to the point that I swore by what was most holy that I wouldn’t travel with him in an airplane ever again for what remained of my life. Lola could do nothing but put up with it, but I could easily save myself from those dramatic situations.

At last, during the last flight, the one that would take us from Holland to Barcelona, Marta and I sat three rows behind Marc and Lola. It was the moment I had been waiting for to be able to talk openly with her about the problem with Daniel:

“Have you come to some decision in regards to my brother?” I asked her shortly after they served us our lunch trays, just a half hour after take-off. Before that, we had been chatting about computers, and she had asked me with much interest to show her my “robotic house,” as she put it.

She didn’t immediately answer my question. She remained silent for a few long seconds, appearing to put all her attention on the plastic trays in front of us. I would have preferred, by far, a good piece of grilled toucan to that garbage. Marta cleared her throat.

“If he is cured,” she murmured, lifting a bit of dry salad to her mouth with her fork, “I would like to speak with him before doing anything.”

“I think you’re afraid that I’m going to ask you not to turn him in.”

“I’m sure that you wouldn’t do that.”

I smiled. “No, I wouldn’t,” I confessed, pushing the tray away and turning toward her as much as the narrow space allowed, so that I could look at her. “But I would like to know what options you’re considering.”

“The theft of research material from a department is something very serious, Arnau. Don’t think that it’s going to be easy for me to come to a decision. I still can’t believe Daniel capable of taking documents from my files. I’ve asked myself a thousand times why he would do it. I can’t understand it.”

“Well, although it might be hard for you to believe, he did it because of me,” I explained. “No, not through any fault of mine, or to do me some favor. I have also been thinking a lot about it, and although we’re all blind when it comes to our own family, I think my brother has always felt a great rivalry with me. Jealousy, certainly, or envy. I couldn’t say exactly.”

“Longing to be the firstborn?” she suggested, half jokingly, half seriously.

“Longing for easy success, for fast money.”

“Is that what you have?” she asked, taken aback.

“No, not at all. But he always saw it like that. Or wanted to see it like that. Or he was wrong and he understood it like that. What difference does it make? What matters is that in order to achieve a great success by discovering the power of words, he stole your material on Taipikala.”

“Efraín and I weren’t that far ahead of him,” she admitted, also abandoning her food after a couple of fruitless attempts to swallow it.

“Daniel is very intelligent.”

“I know. Both brothers are. The resemblance isn’t only physical. Which is why I had so much trust in him and in his potential. But I can’t ignore what he did. You must understand, I am the head of the department and one of my professors committed an infraction that could happen again someday.”

“Maybe not,” I suggested.

She was silent again.

“Maybe not,” she admitted after a while, “but I’m suspicious by nature and what I can’t ignore is that part of Daniel’s brain that allowed him to enter into my office and steal the material from my files. He may not do it again, true, but isn’t there something in him that works wrong, something that always wishes for something outside of his reach and tells him, 'Go ahead, you know how to get it'?”

“He’ll need help,” I stated.

“Yes, he will. He has to learn again that there are rules and limits, that not all our desires are obtainable, and that there are no shortcuts or high speed trains to get where we want to go, that achieving things always takes effort.”

“We all make mistakes sometimes.”

“True. Which is why I need to know what’s in his head before making any decision. Maybe you should also sit with him and explain to him in detail how hard you’ve worked to have what you have.”

I considered her words. Of course I thought of talking to my brother, not to tell him my life story but to explain to him at length what I thought of the incredible stupidity of what he had done. Although perhaps Marta was right. Maybe it would be more effective to do what she had said, but how could I sit down with my brother and talk about things like that? I wasn’t sure I knew how to do it.

“On another subject…” she said, also turning as much as possible in her seat to face me. “Have you thought that it would be better for us to be alone with Daniel when I have to repeat the phrase the Yatiri taught me?”

“You remember it, right?” I asked, alarmed.

“Well of course I remember it, don’t be silly! How could I forget something so important? So, what do you say about being alone with him? I just think that it would be very awkward for me to play tribal witch in front of your family.”

I burst into laughter.

“Don’t worry,” I told her at last, “my grandmother has already taken it upon herself to explain to everyone that I went to the Amazon jungle looking for some magical herbs. She also knows that she has to find a moment in which Daniel’s house is empty so that you and I can go. That matter is already taken care of.”

“How old is your grandmother?” she asked, surprised. “She must be rather long in the tooth.”

“Well, you’ll meet her soon!”

We landed in Barcelona at two in the afternoon. Lola’s mother was waiting for us at the airport. Neither Marta nor I accepted her offer to take us home in her car. Marc was really not well and needed to lie down as soon as possible. We would share a taxi.

“Will you tell us how Daniel responds to the Yatiri’s phrase?” Lola asked quietly as we said goodbye.

“I’ll call you when we’ve done it. No matter how it goes.”

“Don’t forget our agreement about Ker-Central,” Marc, his eyes glassy, pronounced laboriously.

“I’ll put the matter in the advisors’ hands tomorrow,” I replied. “Get some rest tonight; you look pathetic.”

“I know, I know…” he muttered as he followed Lola’s mother like a lamb, dragging the baggage cart.

“Call us, Root,” Proxi insisted with a worried expression. “When everything has been dealt with, the four of us will meet for dinner, okay?” she asked, looking at Marta.

“Of course,” the professor said, smiling. “Have you noticed that while we were in the jungle, you stopped calling each other by your internet nicknames?”

“What a shame you’re not a hacker!” Proxi replied, hugging her and then walking away slowly, following the invalid Jabba and her mother. “But when you visit Arnau’s house, you’ll probably become hooked.”

“And the ‘100’!” Marta said, her smile widening. “I also want to see the ‘100’.”

Proxi raised a hand by way of a goodbye.

“Okay,” I announced, “it’s time to get a taxi.”

I got home before Marta, who lived in Zona Alta, in Bonanova, so I watched as the taxi pulled away, turning on Passeig de Gràcia, taking her uptown.

“Call me when we have to go see Daniel,” she told me before we said goodbye, with the same calm and serious expression as always.

While I was getting into the elevator, I asked myself when I would call her, when the best time would be to do it. Well, I told myself, the answer was simple: As soon as I managed to disperse the family welcome that waited for me upstairs. I would invite her to dinner that night… Or would that be too soon? Well, so what? I would call her. I wanted to know what she thought of my projects and what she would say about how to bring them off. At the moment, when the elevator door opened, I would have to confront the business of medicinal herbs.

To deal with that issue, on the day after I spoke with my grandmother on the phone from La Paz, I went to the Witches’ Market and bought a disgusting concoction that, according to the Yatiri who sold it inside some grimy glass vials, caused passion in a beloved woman. It didn’t matter to me, anything would have worked as long as it really looked like an ingenious formula prepared especially for my brother, and that thick brown liquid looked like just that. So, after greeting Clifford and hugging my grandmother, and when my mother had finally finished her battery of noisy kisses, I solemnly gave her the dirty containers and told her that after having consulted with all the Amazon shamans registered in the Bolivian census, I was absolutely sure that a tea with some drops of that product in the morning and at night would return Daniel’s sanity. I didn’t want her to spread more fantasies than was necessary among her friends, so I kept the details to a minimum and limited myself to talking about the indigenous communities we had visited along the Beni River on our trip. Clifford, like a good Englishman, seemed resistant to the experiment, but he didn’t dare to open his mouth in front of my mother, who appeared enthusiastic about the exotic little vials. She immediately got on the telephone and started to tell Ona the whole adventure, and I, taking advantage of the situation, slipped away discreetly and went to my room, where I showered, changed my clothes, and shaved my beard, restoring the goatee. My grandmother had commented that I was thinner, handsomer, and dark for the first time in my life, which was true. My hair was still very short, and I still had my earring, which now stood out much more against skin tanned by the sun and wind. Little remained of that long, pale, and urban face I had had when I left.

But there were other changes. I discovered it when I opened my mouth to ask the system to connect me to Marta and noticed I didn’t know how to address it,

because I no longer had any idea how to talk to a machine gifted with an intelligence perhaps as artificial as our own. I froze from that discovery. What Gertrude had told us about the brain and neurotransmitters, what we had learned about the power of sounds to program and deprogram the mind, and even the example of the shaman entering into a trance with the rhythmic thumps of the drum and maraca, had left me with a doubt that could be summarized in the typical question of the programming world: What difference is there between adding two and two, which is what people do, and seeming to add two and two, which is what computers do? The result is still the same, four, no matter what pathway one takes to get there, and in this case my surprise was that the pathway was basically the same: an infinite number of electrical connections, as fast as light, that traveled through neurons, in our case, or through silicon, in the case of computers.

Many things had changed inside me over those last two and a half months of strange lessons, and now, to my surprise and almost against my will, I gave the nameless system that controlled my house its own personality, which it never would have occurred to me it could have. And that, in fact, it did not have, I told myself angrily, shaking my head to rid my mind of absurd ideas. I knew that I should give it the orders in an unequivocal tone of voice so that it would interpret them as being directed at it and not at Magdalena, but from my mouth there only came a polite voice that wanted to ask for things with a completely uncalled for "please." I had to make an effort and force myself to remember the programmed way to communicate with it, but after a couple of attempts, which it ignored, I began to get annoyed: Maybe it had become autonomous or had broken? Luckily, it occurred to me to look at the giant screen, and I saw its message there: "Blocked number. Unblock number and dial?" I laughed at myself and at my absentmindedness, and only after a few seconds did I notice that the system was trying to tell me something important. Marta's number, blocked? How could it be blocked?

"But what the hell is wrong with me!" I exclaimed out loud. "I'm an idiot!"

I had suddenly remembered that on the afternoon of that distant Sunday that Marta had called to demand her material on Taipikala and the Aymara, I had ordered the system to reject all calls from that number and all that came from the owner of that number, and even those from her department at the university.

"Unblock!" I said.

Just a few seconds later, I heard Marta's voice.

"Yes?"

"Marta, this is Arnau."

"Hello, Arnau. What is it? Do we have to go to Daniel's house already?"

"No, no…" I laughed. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight? I want to talk with you about a few things."

There was a surprised silence on the other end.

"Of course," she replied at last.

"Does it seem a little too soon?" I asked, as I finished putting my watch on. "Would you rather we meet tomorrow or the day after?"

"No, not at all. It's great for me."

"What time should I pick you up?"

That conversation was incredible. I had never before made such a blatant attempt to get close to another human being. On similar occasions, I had felt as if I had to leave my tranquil planet in order to relate with other beings whom I didn't understand, and that's why I didn't do it and why I didn't become close friends with anyone. But Marta was different. I had lived almost two months with her, day and night, and I was inviting her to dinner with absolute calm and confidence.

"Come whenever you like," she replied. "Really, I'm not doing anything. I just sat down on the sofa, ready to light my first cigarette in two months."

"Well, don't do it," I told her. "Why is it so important to you?"

"I like to smoke, so I'm not going to deprive myself of this small pleasure. Don't lecture me, alright?"

"Alright. So, can I pick you up now?"

"Well, of course. You should be here already."

I liked that. I also liked getting back in my car and punching the horn hard while I drove. It was a little after six thirty in the afternoon, and despite having spent twenty-four hours stuck inside airplanes, and having crossed the Atlantic, I felt like the king of the world. My mother had upbraided me for going out "with a friend" before going to see my brother and my nephew first, but I acted as if I didn't hear her and I jumped into the elevator. Fortunately, if the "relief" the Capacas had given us worked, I was going to be free of all of them much sooner than they thought. Each in his own house and God in everyone's, wasn't that what popular wisdom said? I would visit my brother when it was time, and as far as my nephew went, I had just unpacked the little doll I had bought for him in the Witches' Market in La Paz, so that as soon as I saw him I could give it to him and he could break it.

I was lucky enough to find a place to leave the car in an alley right by her house, one of those old houses with two floors and an attic, with a facade blackened by pollution and a small yard. Marta opened the door.

"This building has no microphones or sensors or cameras," she warned me scornfully as I went inside. "I'm telling you in case you feel uncomfortable. If you yell, there's no computer to answer you. I'm sorry."

It was a very large house, with parquet floors, high ceilings, and antique furniture. There were books everywhere, even in the hallways, in great wooden bookshelves that completely obscured the walls. I wouldn't have expected anything different: the house was to Marta as Marta was to the house.

"You don't have a video game console, either? You know, a Playstation or a Gameboy," I asked her as we entered the living room, whose high windows opened onto the yard.

"I do have that," she admitted, smiling, dropping onto the sofa. Although the surroundings were strange, she was again the same Marta from Bolivia, or so it seemed to me, with the difference that there she wore winter clothes and here she wore a simple summer dress. "The bedrooms are upstairs. In my sons' rooms you can find one if you need it. Feel free."

I sat on the chair in front of her, although without settling in. I was nervous, so I began to play with a plastic cigarette lighter I found next to a stone ashtray that held several butts.

"Didn't you say you were going to smoke one cigarette?" I asked, surprised.

“Well, I needed nicotine to make up for the months I missed.”

I decided not to beat around the bush.

“I need your help, Marta. You have to explain to me… Or rather, I want to work with you in Tiwanaku.”

She laughed. “Is that what you were hiding when we asked you what you wanted to do when you retire?”

“Sort of.”

“You’re a little vague. Tell me more.”

“I want to work with you, I want to be part of the team,” I was explaining myself like an open book. “The problem is that I don’t have any kind of academic background. I’m a businessman, an internet businessman. How can I work with you on an excavation, in what capacity? To begin with, I had thought of offering you and Efraín the applications and the computers you need to translate the gold sheets in the Pyramid of the Traveler. I would write them myself or improve the ones Joffre gave you. I would be a programmer again,” I smiled, “like I was when I was twenty. But I would like to participate in some other way, not just as a programmer.”

“Well…” she hesitated, “I don’t know. I would have to think about it. Of course, if it only depended on me, there would be no problem. I think I would very much like to work with you. But the excavations are financed by the Bolivian government…”

“And by private companies,” I broke in.

“Yes, by private companies looking for tax deductions and trying to make a good image for themselves, not to become an integral part of the excavation.”

“Okay. So, what should I do?”

“If that’s all it is,” she teased, “then you disappoint me. I thought you were hiding some interesting secret.”

“Well, I may have some secret,” I admitted, leaning forward to get closer to her. “Or perhaps two. What do you think?”

“That’s better,” she smiled openly.

“My first secret is this: I would work with you only while you were in Bolivia. The time you spent here in Barcelona in the university I would travel the world. I’m going to become a hunter of legends on the origin of humanity.”

“But that’s what the creationists Gertrude was talking about do!” she said, taken aback.

“No. They collect proof against the theory of evolution. Let them handle that job, since they’ve been doing it for a long time. I will talk with people as strange as the Yatiri. I’ll go to Africa, Asia, North America, South America, Australia…”

“Now I understand the drawing the Toromonas’ shaman made for you,” she blurted, her eyes wide. “The bird, of course!”

Did she remember that he also drew her the same picture? We were about to find out.

“I’ll look everywhere,” I continued enthusiastically, “I’ll even look under stones to find all the legends that talk about the creation of the world and of human beings. I’m convinced I will be capable of doing a very serious study with everything I find, and that I will discover very important coincidences, and I will be able to establish interesting parallels. Don’t forget I’ve been a programmer for

many years and I've learned to extract data from dispersed fragments of information. But my problem is that when I have all the material, when I return to Barcelona to work on it, I won't know how to do it. We're back where we started: I lack an academic background. It will be necessary to systematize, organize, write… I know several programming languages and I can write millions of instructions in them, but I'm not capable of composing even a small historical or scientific essay."

Marta looked at me, completely surprised. The moment had arrived:

"Why don't you work with me, Marta? Why don't you come with me?"

Now I'd spit it out. I felt the sweat running down the back of my neck.

Her mouth gaped. "Did you ask me to go with you?" she stammered at last.

"We would spend as much time as we need with Efraín and Gertrude in Bolivia to finish the excavation of Lakaqullu and deal with the material in the Pyramid of the Traveler. I could be in charge of the, shall we say, clandestine jobs," I smiled, "like taking Dose Capaca's body out and hiding it somewhere chosen by you and Efraín, some spot that you know of in the area," I talked without breathing, without pause; I talked like my mother, "or removing from the chamber of the Traveler all reference to the flight of the Yatiri to the jungle, or also closing the exit tunnel where we found the stone doughnut that Efraín still has. Maybe it would be a good idea for you to ask for a leave of absence from the university, or one of those grants they give you for research. I don't know, whatever you think is better. That way we could travel and visit the Dogon, the Hopi, the Navajos… all those peoples who have preserved old legends about the flood and the creation of the world. Half a year in Bolivia and half a year traveling, compiling information."

"But…"

"Besides, that way I could also work with Gertrude on the recording of the voices of the Capacas of Qalamana. I've discovered that I'm very intrigued by how the brain works just as, at one time, I was intrigued by how computers worked. Again, of course, I lack the necessary tools. I'm not a doctor. But I didn't know anything when I started programming with Spectrum, either, and look how I've ended up, so I think I can learn a lot with Gertrude, and if I'm in Bolivia, we would work better."

"Arnau…"

"Another thing is that it occurred to me that we could spend the summer working in Taipikala and the winter in the other places, so between trips you could have a chance to come home and be with your sons. Or do they still need you, and you can't leave them alone? Because that would change our plans a little, and…"

"Shut up!"

I went suddenly silent.

"Listen," she told me, putting her head in her hands, "I think you're crazy. I don't know if I understand very well what you mean. You're speaking in code and I'm confused."

I remained silent, with my lips pressed together to show that I wasn't thinking of saying another word. Really, I had already made my play. A real hacker never reveals his secrets, but when the moment comes to act, he acts decisively.

“How about we go eat,” she proposed, piercing me with her look, “and we can talk about it calmly from the beginning while they serve us a ton of things that we haven’t eaten in a long time? There’s a very good restaurant close to here.”

“Okay,” I said. “But it’s a little early. It’s only a quarter till eight.”

“Not for us, we’re still on Bolivia time, and there it’s time to eat. Besides, remember this morning on the plane we didn’t touch the trays.”

That was true. But I wasn’t hungry. I had just done one of the most difficult things of my life, and apparently the hard part still wasn’t over. Did she want me to say it in Aymara, or what?

“The Toromonas’ shaman drew us both the same bird.”

“I’m going to get my things,” she said, walking hurriedly toward the door of the living room. “Wait for me.”

It was all going to be ruined.

“Listen,” I stopped her.

“No, not now,” she replied.

“Yes, now,” I insisted. “Come with me to look for old stories that may contain some truth. I’m sure it would work out. We would make a good team.”

She scrutinized me, with an expression of exaggerated distrust on her face.

“And if it doesn’t work out,” I continued, “then we’ll stop and go back to just being friends. I’ll keep traveling and you will help me when I get back.”

“You’re a raving lunatic, you know?” she said. “Besides, do you think you can show up at my house and tell me all this nonsense without warning? What manners! Listen, I’m nine years older than you and I can guarantee that you are the coldest and least clever person I’ve met in my life. Do you know how stupid what you just said is?”

Alright, I couldn’t pester her any more or she would throw me out on the street.

“Think about it, okay?” I replied. “And now, let’s go eat. Come on, go get your things. I’ll wait for you.”

We were completely alone in the restaurant for a couple of hours. The August tourists didn’t come to that area, and the natives had abandoned the city en masse. That was without taking into consideration that in summer no one in his right mind would go out so early, unless it was to die melted into the asphalt. I got home around one in the morning, tired from the long trip, from the time change, and from using all my resources and personal charm to trap Marta in the net I had slowly woven before her eyes, trying to keep her from noticing. No, I hadn’t insisted on telling her my life story or boring her with the basic details of my existence. All I did was listen to her, look at her and listen to her, and discover what mattered to her, because, to break the protections of a secure place one wants to hack, the first thing one must do is find the weak points in the system and try to figure out the access codes. When, at last, I returned home and dropped onto the bed, although I wanted to think about what we had been talking about to improve my strategy, I couldn’t: I fell asleep in a matter of seconds, and I didn’t wake up until twelve hours later. But when I opened my eyes the next day, I felt euphoric and satisfied: I was sure I had opened a breach, a small one, in the defensive wall. The world was full of closed doors, and I had been born to open all of them. And I didn’t have the least bit of doubt that Marta was a challenge that was worth the effort.

After breakfast, I lazed around the house and the garden and enjoyed the agreeable feeling of having returned. Although I didn't feel tired, from pure laziness I walked dragging my feet like an old man and at about the same speed; but in spite of that, bad luck brought me at last to the study and forced me to sit in front of one on the computers to check my email. The work messages didn't interest me at all, so I only looked at the ones in my personal email account; and although I thought the inbox would be full, I only had ten miserable messages, five of which were from Proxi and all of them from that very morning. What got my attention was the odd detail that they were encoded, so I had to decrypt them before I could understand why she had gone to so much trouble: Proxi had extracted a selection of photographs of the best things from the Pyramid of the Traveler from the CD on which we had recorded all the material on Lakaqullu, and honestly, I felt a lump in my throat upon seeing again the warrior helms on the slabs that marked the entrances to the shafts, the big round eyes and sharp stone beaks of the condor heads, the reliefs with the panels of tocapus from the tests, the staircase that had dropped from the ceiling and hung from two thick gold chains, the puma heads that guarded the immense door leading to the chamber, the panel with the original copy of the curse that had affected Daniel and that I myself had photographed so we could see it on the computer screen, the interminable rows of gold sheets full of *tocapus*, the immense gold sarcophagus of Dose Capaca with his head pointed by occipital frontal deformation, the wall with the drawings that helped explain the invitation to go in search of the Yatiri, the sheet with the map that led to Qhispita…

I sat for a long time, shocked, in front of the monitor, looking at the images over and over again. Fortunately there was no one in my house but me, so I could put some of them up on the giant screens and enjoy looking at them almost life-sized while my mind went back to those fantastic moments and to the things that had happened to us while we were there. Unfortunately, the Toromonas had burned Proxi's camera, and we had no more record of our time in the jungle and in Qalamana than Gertrude's recording of the Capacas' words which I had. For a moment I felt tempted to listen to it, to see what effect the power of words could produce in that room of my house. But I didn't. If my projects turned out well in the end, why not give Gertrude the satisfaction of working together with me on the matter while Marta and Efraín got their hands dirty in Tiwanaku? Besides, before anything else, I should call the professor.

"Do you have a computer with an internet connection at home?" I asked her abruptly when she picked up the phone.

"The usual thing is to greet first, and then ask," she replied with that deep harmonious voice that went through me like a shot.

"Hello. Do you have a computer with an internet connection at home?"

"Of course."

"Then give me your email address. I'm going to send you something you're going to like."

"Did you know sometimes you are stranger than that Luk'ana wretch who led us through Qalamana?"

"Yes, it's true," I admitted quickly, without giving it any importance; indifference was part of the plan. "By the way, what are you doing this afternoon?"

She remained silent.

"Oh, wait, I had forgotten!" I told her, laughing. "First greet, and then ask questions. Hello again, what are you doing this afternoon?"

I knew she was smiling.

"I was thinking I would finish unpacking and organize a bit. I woke up very late, and yesterday I didn't have time to do anything, as you know."

"It's just that I thought you could come to my house. They've left me completely alone. What do you say?"

"Do you want to keep me in secret?" she asked with an obvious double meaning. But I already had some experience with her way of reacting, and of course, as she well knew, it was something else that I had in mind.

"Really, what I was thinking…"

"Don't go on," she interrupted quickly. "Send me the thing you wanted me to see, and then we'll talk again. Let me breathe."

I carefully noted down her email address and we hung up. While I was finishing sending her the photos, my grandmother called.

"Arnauet? Listen, I'm at Daniel's apartment."

"What's up?"

"You have to come stay with your brother for a while. Do you mind?"

Did I mind? It was terrible, horrible, it couldn't be worse! I had very important things to do that afternoon and I didn't want to skip them for anything. But when I was about to blurt out an angry reprimand and unpleasant words, I noticed that my grandmother must have people around her and that's why she wasn't speaking clearly. She was certainly trying to leave me alone with my brother.

"Do you mean to say that you've found a way of taking all of them away?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. You'll have to come stay with him for at least two or three hours. I know you must still be tired from traveling, but…" I heard my mother's voice in the background saying that if I was tired, it was because I'd gone off right after arriving. "The thing is, Arnauet, we've thought that since you're back, we can take advantage of you being here. We're exhausted. You understand, don't you? If you stay with your brother, then Clifford, your mother, Ona, Dani, and I can go out, buy some clothes for the boy, and have something to eat somewhere. We need it, Arnauet."

"You're the best, Grandma."

"Come on, don't complain," she chided, and my mother, in a tone that left no room for doubt, declared that I would stay with my brother whether I complained or not.

"Tell your daughter that I can hear her."

"She knows," my grandmother replied, very entertained. "She said it close to the telephone so you would hear her. Okay, then, it's set. How long will it take you to get here?"

"An hour. I have to go pick up Marta."

"Since you're coming alone," my grandmother pronounced, to make it clear that it would be better for Marta to wait in the car until they had left, "remember to grab that very ugly doll you brought for Dani, the one you showed us last night."

"It's a god."

"I don't care. It's still in very bad taste. Alright, goodbye. Don't be late."

Basically, my magnificent plans for that afternoon had just been dashed. I'd have to wait, and frankly, I didn't like it at all. Something told me that Marta would indeed have come to my house. Well, I could find out. We still had the night ahead of us. I called her.

"Hello, have you seen the pictures?" I asked her when she picked up.

"I'm looking at them." I could hear in her voice the smile that was doubtlessly drawn on her lips. "It seems unbelievable, doesn't it?"

"It does. I felt the same."

"It's fantastic material. Lola did a great job. It seems odd to look at all those things from here, from home!"

"Speaking of homes…"

"I've been thinking," she announced unexpectedly. "I think I prefer to leave the visit until after we cure Daniel. Let's do things properly."

"Okay," I accepted, very calm.

She remained silent, surprised.

"Okay? I thought you would insist."

"No, not at all. If you want to leave it until after curing Daniel, it's okay with me. By the way," I said, very serious, "my grandmother just called. I have to stay with Daniel for a couple of hours, because the whole family is going shopping."

It took her a few seconds to react, and then she laughed.

"Fine! You win!" she said, still laughing. "We'll go to your brother's apartment, and then we'll see."

While I went to look for the car, I reproached myself for having so much stupid faith in the Capacas' damned phrase. If it didn't work, if that spell, charm, or enchantment didn't fulfill its purpose, Daniel would remain a vegetable for a long time, or in the worst case, for the rest of his life. I told Marta as much when she got in the car, and for the rest of the trip to Xiprer Street, we nervously discussed the alternatives: Translate the gold sheets from the Chamber of the Traveler at top speed, try to find Qalamana again by flying over the immense area of its probable location, make Daniel listen to Gertrude's recording… Basically, I guess we were nervous about a lot of things, but we were going to face the worst of them immediately.

"You remember the phrase, right?" I asked her for the umpteenth time as we got out of the car, which I had parked, as always, across a corner of the sidewalk.

"Don't be difficult, Arnau. I've already told you that I remember it perfectly."

"By the way…" I called her as she walked away toward the café where I'd asked her to wait for my call; she turned and in her eyes I saw something I liked. "You know I don't have your cell number?"

With a smile, she walked up to me and repeated it a couple of times while I tried to save it to my phone without any mistakes. Then she walked away slowly and I stayed watching her until she turned on the second cross street and disappeared. It took an effort for me to break my paralysis and walk to the door of my brother's building.

My mother buzzed me in from upstairs, and as I crossed the entryway and went up the three or four stairs that led to the elevator, I saw, waiting for its arrival, the back of one of those enormous redheaded guys that looked so much like Jabba. Someday, I told myself, someday I'll come to this building and they will all have

left for their planet and I won't run into any of them again. I laughed with my mouth closed, and the guy looked sideways at me, thinking, I supposed, that I was off my rocker.

Ona met me at the door and gave me a strong hug. She looked much better than when I left Bolivia. She had recovered her smile and she again looked animated and content.

"Come on, then, get inside, shaman of the jungle," she teased. "Has anyone told you you're worse than your brother? Look at you, running off to the Amazon in the middle of the night and coming back two months later with a miracle potion!"

"Well, it's doing wonders for him," announced my mother, who came in from the hall with her grandson in her arms. "I would even say he looks, I don't know… more alive. Right, Clifford? Clifford and I were just remarking on it this morning after giving him the first infusion with the drops, right, Clifford? Right away I noticed something strange in Daniel, something different."

Ona rolled her eyes at me to show that I shouldn't believe a single word of what my mother was saying (as if I could) while I grabbed Dani and lifted him in the air. It was terribly hot in that apartment. Even so, my nephew, as always, was firmly clutching his blanket.

"Look what I brought you!" I told him, showing him the Ekeko.

"Really, Arnie, I don't understand how you could have bought something like that for the boy. With all the pretty things there must be in the jungle! This doll is awful."

At that moment, my nephew threw it joyfully through the air and kicked me to keep me from picking it up off the floor, where he could keep happily destroying it.

"See what I was telling you?" my mother continued. "It's going to last him ten minutes! You have your head in the clouds, son. You should have brought something he could keep until he was older, as a souvenir from his uncle's travels. But, no, of course! You bring him a horrible doll that the boy's going to break before we leave."

My nephew played soccer with the Ekeko in the hallway. His leg aimed a little to one side or the other at first, and he didn't manage to make the god move toward the living room, which was his objective, but on the second attempt, the successor of the Staff God, Thunupa, slid forward another yard, cleaning the floor. The kid was having the time of his life. The gift had been a very wise choice.

"Hey, come on, get going," a weak and tremulous voice said from the sofa in the back of the room. "The stores are going to close."

It was my grandmother. Why did she have that strange voice?

"But aren't you going with them?" I asked her with an inquisitive look, as I greeted Clifford, who, like Ona, looked much better than the last time I had seen him. Time makes us get used to everything, even the most painful experiences.

"Your grandmother has just had a dizzy spell," my mother announced. "That's why we didn't have time to call you. But since the poor thing doesn't want to ruin our afternoon, she insists that we go without her. Can you take care of her, Arnie? We're leaving you in charge of your brother and grandma, so you have double the work. If she gets worse…" she said, grabbing her purse and handing Clifford Dani's bag with the diapers, bottles, extra clothes, and that whole incredible

quantity of things that children need to go anywhere. “Are you listening to me, Arnau?”

“Of course I’m listening to you, Mom,” I murmured, distracted, stealthily shooting my grandmother one of those looks that would have frightened the devil.

“I was telling you that if grandma gets worse, call me immediately on my cell. Will you be alright, Mom?” she asked, leaning toward my grandmother to give her a kiss goodbye.

My grandmother, putting on a serious expression, let herself be kissed, and sighed sadly.

“Don’t worry about me. Have a good time.”

Everyone went back through the hallway toward the door, and my mother turned her head to talk to me in a whisper:

“Don’t be shocked when you go in the bedroom and see your brother. Bed rest takes a lot, you know. He’s very thin and emaciated, but that’s normal. Don’t let it upset you. And don’t let grandma out of your sight. It had to happen sooner or later! Right, Clifford?” Clifford nodded without saying anything. “Look at her, the poor thing, how much she wanted us all go to together, and at the last minute, she’s taken a terrible turn. But the thing is, whether she likes it or not, she’s getting on in years and these things happen to people of her age. Watch her carefully, Arnau, in case something happens to her and gives us an unpleasant surprise! Take care of both of them, okay, son? Then, when we get back…”

“Eulàlia,” Ona called her from the landing, with the elevator door open.

“Okay, we’re leaving, but what I was going to tell you,” I gently pushed the apartment door open to make her go, “what I was going to tell you was that tonight we’ll all have dinner here. The whole family reunited. Okay?”

“Not a chance!” I thought. “I have other, much more interesting things to do tonight!”

“Eulàlia,” Ona insisted. “They’re calling the elevator from other floors.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming! Okay, remember everything I told you, Arnie.”

“Yes, Mom,” and I closed the door abruptly, turning toward the biggest liar in the world, ready to give her a piece of my mind. But she had already gotten up off the sofa, as fresh as a rose, and stood waiting for me, smiling. I could see how well she looked, thanks to the afternoon light coming in from the balcony.

“You know you’re a cheat and you’re going to have to go to confession lots of times for what you’ve done today?” I yelled, advancing toward her in long strides.

“Be quiet, they’ll hear you!” she begged with a scared expression, holding a finger to her lips. “Come here. Did you think I was going to miss it? No way! Besides, you owe me. I’ve been covering for you for two months. By the way, where’s Marta?”

“In the café around the corner I always park the car on.”

“I hope they don’t see her.”

“Ona’s the only one who knows her and I don’t think she’ll look,” I replied, taking a seat and looking at the plants my sister-in-law had on the terrace. In the smallest space imaginable were piled dozens of pots full of all kinds of flowers.

“You should hear the things Ona says about her! If she finds out that Marta has come to her house, she’ll kill you and me!”

“I have something to tell you, Grandma,” I told her with all the pity in the world, taking her hand and making her sit next to me. I knew that what I was going to explain to her about her grandson Daniel was going to hurt her a great deal, but I didn’t have any choice; she was the most clear-headed person in the family, and if we cured my brother, he would need her help to face what would have to come after. Besides, the nonsense my family said about Marta would have to stop. I began fill her in on the research on *quipus* and *tocapus*, but without going into details so I wouldn’t confuse her. In the gentlest and shortest way I could, I related the theft of material from the professor’s office and what had happened with the curse. And while I explained what we had really gone to look for in the jungle and what we had found there, I called Marta to tell her to come up.

My grandmother broke down when she heard the truth. She was the strongest woman I knew (well, Marta was just as strong, but I had seen my grandmother face very serious problems in her life and resolve them with absolute composure), nevertheless, when she heard that her grandson Daniel had stolen important documents from his boss’s office, she collapsed and started to cry. Never, until that day, had I seen her shed a single tear, so I was stunned and dispirited. Fortunately, I reacted and hugged her tightly. I told her that between the two of us we would do everything possible and impossible to help Daniel. At that moment, the doorbell rang and I left her for a minute and went to the entry phone to buzz open the downstairs door. Then, while Marta came up, I ran back to her side, but to my surprise I found her recovered, with her eyes totally dry.

“And this woman, the professor,” she asked me suspiciously, “is coming to help Daniel after everything he did to her?”

“Grandma!” I reprimanded her, running back to the entryway; the doorbell had just rung again. “Marta is a good person. You would do it too…. Anyone would do it.”

“I suppose so,” I heard her say as I opened the door. There, with a serious look on her face, was the woman for whom every member of my family felt something different and controversial. Myself included.

“Come in, please,” I requested. My grandmother was already coming from the hall to receive her. “Grandma, this is Marta Torrent, Daniel’s boss. Marta, this is my grandmother, Eulàlia.”

“Thanks for coming,” my grandmother told her with a smile.

“Pleasure to meet you. I suppose Arnau already explained, more or less, the silly thing we’re planning on doing.”

“There’s nothing wrong with trying, right? I’m very grateful to you for being here. And please, address me informally. When one is more than eighty years old, formality doesn’t do.”

Marta smiled and the three of us walked slowly toward the back of the apartment. The door to my brother’s room, which was ajar, was right between the entrance to the living room and the near end of the sofa, facing the small round dining table.

“Do you want something to drink before…?” my grandmother started, without knowing how to finish.

“I don’t want anything,” I replied, nervous.

“I don’t either, thank you. I would prefer to see Daniel first. If…” Marta hesitated. “If it doesn’t work then I will need a very strong coffee. And, of course, a cigarette.”

“I’m a smoker too!” my grandmother exclaimed with the joy of one society member who finds another.

“Ready, Marta?” I asked, opening the door and looking at her. She nodded.

The blinds were raised and the windows open, although partially covered by the curtains. The room was an oven at that hour of the afternoon. In front of us was the small closet that Daniel and Ona had built in a corner of the room. By taking a couple of steps to the left, we got to what remained of the room after the project, occupied almost completely by the enormous bed, in the center of which was my brother. The sight of him overwhelmed me.

Daniel looked like a dead man. He was uncovered and had on a tee shirt and some pajama shorts. He had lost at least thirty or forty pounds, and, as my mother had told me, he looked emaciated. At that moment, he had his eyes open, but he didn’t turn to look at us when we entered. He remained immobile, distant. His arms lay limply on the sheet. My grandmother went over to him, and picking up a dropper from the night table, put a couple of drops in each eye.

“They’re artificial tears,” she explained. “He doesn’t blink enough.”

“Let Marta stand where you are, okay?” I asked.

My grandmother looked at us with infinite sadness. I suppose what I had told her about the theft still pained her, but also, like the pragmatic woman she was, she was suffering from her own internal battle, trying not to foster any false hope about what could happen. She smoothed Daniel’s hair and also adjusted the pillow his head was resting on, and then, very serene, she came out from the corner and joined me where I was watching the scene from the foot of the bed. Marta took her place next to my brother and remained silent, looking at him. I would have liked to know what she was thinking. Really, those two had known each other for a long time and had worked together for several years. He disparaged and criticized her in front of Ona, but Marta? What did Marta think of Daniel, besides recognizing how intelligent he was? She had never told me.

“I hope, sincerely, that it works,” she murmured, suddenly raising her head to look at me. “Right now none of this makes any sense to me, Arnau. It seems terribly absurd.”

“Don’t worry,” I encouraged her. “It’s not going to hurt him and he can’t be any worse than he is, so go ahead.”

“Come on, girl, try it.”

Marta leaned toward Daniel and rubbed a hand over her forehead, trying to brush away the last doubts.

“*Jupaxusutaw ak munta jinchu chhiqhacha jichhat uksarux waliptaña*,” she said, very slowly and in a clear voice, without looking away from him.

My grandmother discreetly made me lower my head, and she asked me in my ear what those strange words meant.

“It’s a formula,” I explained. “The important thing isn’t what it says, but the sounds made by pronouncing the phrase.”

And Daniel moved his arm. He lifted it very slowly in the air and dropped it on his abdomen. Marta jumped back, startled, and my grandmother raised her hands

to her mouth to choke an exclamation of the joy that poured from her eyes. Almost without interruption, Daniel turned his head on the pillow and stared at us. He blinked a couple of times, wrinkled his forehead, and moistened his dry lips just as if he were waking up from a long sleep, and then he tried to tell us something, but his voice wouldn't leave his throat. Marta, still incapable of believing what she was seeing, left the corner to give the space to my grandmother, who walked over hurriedly as Daniel followed her with his gaze, turning his head again. This time he even tried to raise it, but he couldn't. My grandmother sat on the edge of the bed and passed a hand over his forehead and hair.

"Can you hear me, Daniel?" she asked tenderly.

My brother cleared his throat. Then he coughed. He tried again to raise his head and managed to a little.

"What's going on, grandma?" was the first thing he said. His voice sounded strange, as if he had a cold, with pharyngitis.

My grandmother hugged him, squeezing him tightly in her arms, but Daniel, with an effort, held her and pushed her away. She smiled. Before she could say anything, my brother turned toward Marta and me. The muscles of his face, still rigid from lack of use, attempted an unrecognizable grimace.

"Hello, Arnau," he said with his rough voice. "Hello, Marta."

"You've been very ill, son," my grandmother explained, forcing him to let his head fall again. "Very ill."

"Ill…?" he asked, surprised. "And Ona? And Dani?"

Marta stayed where she was while I rounded the bed and sat on the side opposite my grandmother.

"How do you feel?" I asked. Daniel, wincing in pain as if his whole body were stiff, planted his hands on the bed and sat up slowly, in order to be level with me, resting his back against the headboard.

"Well, I feel confused," he said at last; his voice was getting clearer little by little. "Because a minute ago I was working in my office and now you say I've been ill. I don't understand anything."

"What were you working on, Daniel?" I asked.

He wrinkled his forehead, trying to remember, and suddenly a light went on in his head. His face expressed fear and his gaze jumped above my shoulder to land on his boss, on the professor.

"What are you doing here, Marta?" he asked her, cowed.

But before she could answer, I got her attention by putting a hand on her arm:

"You've been sick for three months, Daniel, because of an Aymara curse." I told him very seriously, fixing him with my gaze; he jumped. "You know what I'm talking about; you don't need any more explanation. Marta came to cure you. She woke you up. It's taken a lot for us to find the cure you needed. In a couple of days, I'll tell you everything. Now you need to rest and recuperate. We'll talk when you're better. Okay?"

My brother nodded slowly without erasing the alarmed expression from his face. I patted his arm reassuringly and got up, going toward Marta, who stood gravely and silently watching Daniel.

"We're leaving now," I announced. "In a little while, Mom, Ona, Dani, and your father will be here. They went out, but when Grandma calls to give them the good

news of your recovery, they will return immediately. Oh, and another thing! Don't tell the family anything about the curse or the Aymara. Okay?"

My brother lowered his gaze.

"Okay," he murmured.

"Goodbye, Daniel," Marta said. "We'll see each other soon."

"Whenever you like," he replied.

It wasn't a good idea for us to stay any longer. Our presence, now that he knew what had happened, wasn't helping him at all. He looked agitated and nervous. The moment to talk would come when he was feeling better. I gave my grandmother a kiss, and she said goodbye to us with an understanding look, took Marta by the hand, and left the room with her.

"It worked," she said, smiling and raising her eyebrows in confusion.

"It worked," I repeated, absolutely satisfied.

Yes, it had worked, but starting then, my brother had a long series of medical tests waiting for him, and even worse, the solicitous attention of our mother. Everyone would be astonished by his recovery, just as they had been astonished by his sudden illness. But we knew the truth, and that truth touched on the strange power of words, that extraordinary capacity of sounds to program the mind. We had a lot of work ahead of us, but it was exciting work: the brain, the flood, the Yatiri, the old legends on the creation of the world and of human beings… However, despite our new projects, the big changes, and the many jungles we still had left to explore, the most important thing was to have understood that some modern technologies and some recent scientific discoveries coupled inexplicably with the old magic of the past, with the myths of old cultures. Past, present, and future mysteriously interlaced.

"You weren't very affectionate with Daniel," Marta said as we went out.

"I was as I had to be. It would have been impossible for me to act differently."

It was true. Things would never be the same as before, and that was okay, I thought, looking at Marta and remembering the day I showed up in her office at the college, and she, so serious and circumspect, had been unable to hold back a laugh at the horrified face I'd made upon discovering the dried out mummy and the hanging skulls. Had my hacker strategy worked? Would she come with me, or bury the matter?

"Okay, Marta," I said, closing the apartment door. "We've cured Daniel. Now…."

"What do you want to do?" she interrupted in a teasing tone.

I smiled.

"Do you feel like seeing the '100'?"

(1-1) Small software applications that install themselves in the operating system without the knowledge of the owner and monitor all the activities of the computer by sending this information through generally commercial servers.

(1-2) Light Emitting Diode (L.E.D.).

(1-3) Vain, in Catalan.

(1-4) Part of chaos theory. The seemingly chaotic shapes of nature, like trees, clouds, mountains,

coastlines, etc., can be described and reproduced with simple mathematical formulas.

(1-5) HyperText Transfer Protocol.

(1-6) Umberto Eco, The Search for the Perfect Language, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 346.

(2-7) José Toribio Medina, "Historia del Tribunal de la Inquisición de Lima: 1569-1820. Tomo II, Apéndice Documental del Historiador Peruano Carlos A. Mackehenie" (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2000).

(2-8) American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII). The ASCII code combines all text characters and all punctuation symbols in a standard table, representing them as numbers.

(2-9) R. Sagárnaga, "Tiwanaku. Historia del Asalto al Cielo," Escape, La Razón Digital, (October 2, 2002).

(2-10) According to Blas Valera, cited by Garcilaso de la Vega (Book I, chap. VI), "Vassals of the Inca," citizens of Tihauntinsuyu, the Kingdom of the Four Regions.

(2-11) The name given to the Spanish by the Inca because of the likeness of their physical appearance to the god Viracocha.

(3-12) National currency of Bolivia.

(3-13) C. Ponce Sanjinés, Thunupa y Ekeko: Estudio Arqueológico Acerca de las Efigies Precolombinas de Dorso Adunco (La Paz: The National Academy of Sciences of Bolivia, 1969).

(3-14) Gregorio Iriarte, economist, cited in "Bolivia: The Social Consequences of Debt," by Marie Dennis. NACLA, North American Congress on Latin America, 31, no. 3 (1997).

(4-15) A Spanish adventurer from the sixteenth century, famous for his expedition along the length of the Amazon River in search of the legendary El Dorado, with the intention of establishing an independent kingdom in the middle of the jungle.

(4-16) In Bolivia, recruit, national serviceman.

(4-17) March, 2000, Spanish edition.

(4-18) A biological Assessment of the Alto Madidi Region and Adjacent Areas of Northwest Bolivia, 1991.

(4-19) Richard Stone, Mamut. La Historia Secreta de los Gigantes del Hielo, (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 2002).

(4-20) "El Origen de los Mamíferos," National Geographic España (April, 2003).

(4-21) EFE article: "Un Yacimiento en Rumania Aporta Nuevas Pruebas Sobre la Coexistencia de Dinosaurios y Mamíferos en Europa," La Vanguardia Digital (June 4th, 2002): section "La Vanguardia de la Ciencia."

(4-22) Hans-Joachim Zillmer, Darwin se Equivocó (Barcelona: Timun Mas, 2000).