



HISTORY BEFORE TIME

THE STRAIGHT DARKNESS

Twenty-four chambers, no quarry debris, no paper trail.

ANDRIES J. GREYLING

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The Straight Darkness

(History Before Time: The Straight Darkness)

The African Gold Trilogy

Andries J. Greyling

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Chapter 1 — The Detour

The plane came down through brown air, and Jakobus watched the city assemble itself out of the haze the way a thing does when you stop trying to see all of it and let it come — the river first, a grey curve with ships on it, then the towers along the far bank standing up out of nothing like a row of men who had decided to be impressive, and below all of that the low endless grid where the actual living got done. He liked that part best. The towers were for the brochure. The grid was the city.

He had slept most of the flight, the bare-armed sleep of a man who runs warm, and woke when the gear came down with the particular thump that always reached some old part of him that listened for it. Beside him a Chinese businessman in a good suit had spent the descent on his phone, thumbs moving, face slack with the work. Jakobus had glanced at the man's shoes once, near the start of the flight — soft city leather, never seen a road — and decided nothing about him at all. Wrong shoes for some place, maybe. The right shoes for this one.

Pudong took forty minutes to clear, which was fast. He had nothing to declare and looked like nothing to declare: a soft-bellied man in his middle years, a faded field shirt open over a vest heavy with small pockets, dust-coloured trousers, and boots that had walked a great deal and been resoled more than once. When the officer in the booth looked up, Jakobus took the shades off and set them on the counter, folded, and met the man's eyes plainly, and said the little he had of the language, badly, with the right manners. The officer's face did the thing faces do. He stamped the passport — one of the better ones — and waved him through, and Jakobus put the glasses back on against the wash of fluorescent light and went out into the heat of

the day.

The business he was here for was not the kind a man unpacks, even to himself, in an arrivals hall. He had it folded down small the way you fold a shemag — there is more than one way, and the way you fold it tells people things. He kept it folded the inconspicuous way. A favour owed, a man to see, a thing to carry from one set of hands to another and then to be gone. He had done a hundred of them. The trick of the work was that it should be boring, and mostly it was. Boring kept everyone alive.

Mr. Huang met him outside a teahouse on the city's eastern edge, where the towers thinned and the older buildings began, the ones with washing on the balconies and air-conditioners dripping onto the pavement so the whole street smelled of wet concrete and frying oil. Huang was round and cheerful, quick-eyed, a man who had done well enough to be soft and not so well that he'd forgotten how. He had known Jakobus for eleven years through two other men, neither of whom were spoken of, and he greeted him with both hands and an alarming quantity of tea.

They sat. The business took less time than the tea did, which was correct. Jakobus said little, asked twice, listened the rest. Huang gave him what he needed and a date and a place, and Jakobus folded those down small too — and then the part of the meeting that wasn't business began, the part Huang plainly liked better, where he could talk.

He talked about his cousin. The cousin was in Quzhou, down in Zhejiang, in the prefecture where Huang's mother's people came from, and the cousin had a small grievance with the world that Huang found very funny: the man lived an hour from a wonder and could not get anyone to be properly amazed by it.

"Caves," Huang said, refilling the cups. "Big ones. Under a hill. A farmer found them — when, thirty years ago. He was draining his fish pond. Everyone thought the pond had no bottom, you know, just a deep pool, very old. He pumps it dry to catch the fish and—" Huang made a tipping gesture, water going somewhere. "Not a pond. A room. A huge room, cut in the rock. And then more rooms next to it. More than twenty of them."

Jakobus drank his tea and said nothing, which Huang took, correctly,

as permission to go on.

“My cousin took his son. He says you go down and the walls are—” Huang held up a flat hand, moved it in a clean straight line. “Straight. All the chisel marks, all going the same way, like a comb. Like a machine, but no machine, they say, very old. And big pillars left in the middle to hold the roof up. He says you stand at the bottom and you feel—” He searched for the word, gave up, settled for the gesture, a small lift of the shoulders that meant *small*. “Like that. You feel like that.”

Jakobus set his cup down. “How much rock?”

“What?”

“To make a room that size. And twenty more. How much rock did they take out?”

Huang laughed, pleased to have been asked the thing his cousin always asked. “That is the question! That is exactly the thing. My cousin says a million cubic metres. Maybe more. All cut out by hand, the professors think, and carried up through the little holes.” He spread his hands wide and then brought them in to nothing, a magician finishing a trick. “And here is the funny part. Where did it go? You take out a mountain of rock, you have to put it somewhere. A pile. A hill of broken stone next to the hole. There is no pile. They have looked. No pile, no rubbish, nothing. A million cubic metres of rock and—” the nothing-hands again. “Gone. And no one wrote it down. No book, no record, no name. Just the holes.”

He said it the way you tell a thing that is mildly absurd and a little embarrassing — the way you’d tell about a relative who claimed to have seen a ghost. He was already moving on, already pouring more tea, when he glanced at his guest and stopped, because Jakobus had gone still.

Not the operator-still. A different stillness. The one that came over him the rare times something reached past the work and touched the old private thing — the boy in the Free State turning over a pebble and finding it wasn’t a pebble; the man with a flat palm on the tool-marks of a stone the size of a building; the smell of hand-mixed oil that made some part of him sit down and stop arguing. It surprised him. He had not expected to feel it in a teahouse on the edge of

Shanghai over a story about a hole in the ground.

A million cubic metres, taken out clean, and no spoil. He turned it over. He knew what it took to move stone. He had watched engineers move it — the marvel was never the moving, it was the *thinking* that made the moving cheap. And he knew, in his body, the difference between a story made bigger in the telling and a fact too large to be carried easily by the words around it. Huang's cousin's grievance had the second shape. It had the shape of a true thing that nobody could quite hold.

"And no story," Jakobus said. Not a question. He was tasting it.

"No story." Huang shrugged, happy. "Some say a quarry. Some say a place to hide soldiers. Some say to keep grain. The professors fight about it. My cousin thinks it is just a quarry, very boring, everyone makes too much fuss." He grinned. "He is wrong, I think. But he lives there, so."

So the man who lived an hour from it thought it was nothing, and that — Jakobus felt the small click of it — was its own kind of tell. A thing people stop seeing because it has always been there. He filed it without comment.

That night in the hotel he lay on top of the covers with the air-conditioner off and the window cracked to let the city's bass in — the hum of ten thousand machines that a place this size makes, the freight of it felt more than heard, low enough to land in the half of him that still worked. He took the cheap phone out of the vest and found the official tourism page, translated into careful English that read like a brochure trying to be modest.

Discovered 1992. More than twenty-four caverns. Largest chamber: over two thousand square metres of floor, height of thirty metres. Estimated rock removed in excess of one million cubic metres. Parallel tool marks throughout. No historical document records their construction or purpose.

He read it twice. Thirty metres. A ten-storey building, cut down into solid rock, by hand, and floored and pillared and walled straight, by people who left no name on it, no mountain of rubble beside it, no line in any book that survived. The page offered four guesses and stood behind none of them, and he found he respected it for that. A

document doing the honest thing — laying out what it knew, marking clearly where the knowing stopped.

He did not believe the easy answers and he did not reach for the stupid ones. He had been to enough old places, and stood with enough people who knew them, to have buried the lazy reflexes — the *primitives who got lucky*, the *must have been somebody clever from somewhere else*. People made this. People cleverer and funnier than him, almost certainly, who solved a problem he could not yet see the shape of, and then went quiet for two thousand years.

What he wanted to know — and he knew himself well enough to know the want was already decided, lying there with the bass coming up through the floor — was simple, and the way it always was with him. Not *who*. Not even *how*, yet.

What is it for.

A made thing is made for something. That was the whole of his faith. You could read the use off a tool the way you read a man off his shoes; the function was always there, waiting, if you sat with it long enough and didn't lie to yourself. He had never met a made thing that would not eventually tell him what it was for.

He thumbed over to the rail booking, the habit of a man who travels light and decides fast. Quzhou. The morning train would do — the business here had a date on it, days off yet, and a man with days to fill and a prickle behind the sternum did not waste them. He bought the ticket. Then he sat up and packed, which took no time, because there was almost nothing to pack — the vest, the boots, the small tin, the pot for coffee, the few worn stones that lived in the pockets and the worn copper coin among them, the cord on his wrist, the big blade on its sheath that everyone always looked at first. He set it all by the door the way he had set kit by a door a thousand times in his life, and lay back down.

The city kept up its low note under everything. He let his breathing find it and slowed to match. Somewhere south of here, an hour from a man who thought it was nothing, there was a straight darkness in the rock with no name on it.

He'd go and ask it.

Chapter 2 — The Road to Longyou

The train left Shanghai going backwards, which is to say it left the city the way it had taken him in — through the parts no brochure photographs. For the first half hour there was nothing but the underside of the place: cooling towers, the corrugated backs of warehouses, a canal the colour of strong tea with three men fishing it anyway, an apartment block so new the scaffolding nets still hung off it like a moulting skin. Jakobus sat by the window, shades pushed up into his hair, and watched it all go by and did not look at his phone once. He had learned, a long time ago and at some cost, that the first thing a country tells you about itself is the part it forgets to dress up.

He had a soft seat in second class, which suited him. He liked the way ordinary travel moved — the trolley with the green-tea bottles and the shrink-wrapped duck feet, the man two rows up watching a drama at full volume with no apology, the grandmother who had brought her own thermos and her own sunflower seeds and a small folding fan she worked even though the carriage was cool. He liked it because none of it was for him. A place performing for tourists wore a different face, and he had spent a life learning to tell the two apart in a single glance, the way you read a man's hands and not his words.

The flatlands went past first. Rice in the low ground, paddies stitched green and ordered, the water between them throwing back the white sky. Then the country began to fold, gentle at first — a long pull of hills, terraces cut into them the way they had been cut for a thousand years, tea bushes in rows that followed the slope and not the surveyor. He watched a woman in a wide hat move along one of those rows with a basket on her back, picking, not hurrying, and something in

his chest went quiet and approving. There was a person who knew exactly what she was doing and had known it before he was born. That row of bushes was a made thing too. You could read the use off it, the patience in it.

He had a thin folder of printouts in the vest, between the cayenne tin and the worn clip of a pen-knife, and somewhere past the second city he took it out and went through it again, not because he needed to but because going over a thing was how he sat still.

Twenty-four chambers and counting. Carved straight down out of solid siltstone. More than a million cubic metres of rock removed — he had let that number sit overnight and it had not got any smaller. Parallel tool marks on every wall, regular as corduroy. Found in 1992 when farmers pumped out their fish ponds and the bottom didn't come, and didn't come, and turned out to be the floor of a hall thirty metres down. Pottery in the silt said at least two thousand years. No quarry debris anywhere on the hill. No spoil. No slag. No mention in any record that anyone had ever found, in a country that wrote down the price of grain and the lineage of pigs.

That was the part that had its hooks in him, and he turned it over again now with the hills sliding past. Not the size. He had seen size. Karnak was size; the broken obelisk at Aswan was size, cracked in its bed where the men had walked away from it. Size he understood — men putting their whole lives into a thing because the thing was worth their lives. The hole in the record was different. A man digs a million cubic metres out of a hill and someone, somewhere, complains about it in writing. Someone bills for it. Someone sings about the dead. The silence wasn't an absence of evidence; the silence was the evidence, and it pointed at nothing he could name.

He noticed, going through the pages, what wasn't in them, and it pleased him. Nobody was promising him anything. The county tourism summary called the place remarkable and then, almost shyly, admitted its purpose was unknown. No Atlantis. No lost dynasty of giants. No headline shouting that science could not explain. He had read enough of the other kind to know the smell of it — the breathless ones, the ones that needed you to gasp because the thing itself wouldn't hold you. This wasn't that. This was a county that had a strange thing in its ground and didn't quite know what to do with it, and had built a path through one cave and a ticket office

and was getting on with the rest of its life. He trusted that more than he would have trusted a billboard. A place that wasn't selling you the marvel was a place where the marvel might still be true.

"Quzhou?"

The man beside him had a round face and reading glasses on a cord and a cardboard box of mooncakes on his lap that he was clearly bringing to family. He'd said it in English, friendly, having clocked the foreigner with the printouts the way the whole carriage had clocked him an hour ago and decided he was harmless. Jakobus gave him the small open look he gave everyone he wanted to leave a door open with, and pulled the shades the rest of the way off his hair and set them on his knee — there was no uniform anywhere, it was just easier to be a person without them.

"Quzhou," he agreed. "Then Longyou."

"Ah." The man tilted his head. "The caves." He said it the way you'd say a thing you'd heard of and never bothered with. "The stone rooms."

"You've been?"

A laugh, a shake of the head, a hand fanned in front of his face. No, no. He had not been. Why would he go and look at a hole in the ground when there were holes in the ground everywhere. But his wife's mother was from near there, and the old people told it differently. He set the mooncake box more securely on his knees and leaned in, enjoying himself now.

"The ponds," he said. "On that hill. Always there. Bottomless." He spread his hands. "You understand — the old ones said no bottom. You drop a stone, you wait, nothing. The water never went away in a dry year. So." He shrugged the shrug of a man delivering a punchline. "Dragon. A dragon lives down there. You don't fish those ponds. You don't drain those ponds. The village leaves them alone, hundreds of years, because of the dragon under the hill."

"And then somebody drained them."

"Pumps." The man grinned. "1992. Seventeen days, my wife's mother says. Seventeen days they pumped, the whole village watching, and out comes — not a dragon." He sat back, satisfied. "A room. Big

as a temple. A room some person dug, and forgot to write down he dug it.” He chuckled, then sobered, turning a mooncake corner with his thumb. “She says some of the old people were not happy it was a room. A dragon you can leave alone. A room, someone wants to know about.”

Jakobus held that. It was the truest thing anyone had said to him about the place yet, and the man didn’t know it, and so it was worth ten of the printouts. The legend hadn’t been wrong, exactly. It had done the one useful thing a legend does — told people to leave the dangerous beautiful thing alone, and for hundreds of years they had, and the thing had kept. The dragon was the gate. The man who’d named it that had read the hill the same way Jakobus read a checkpoint: don’t go in, you won’t come out clean. He’d just put a dragon where another man would put a watchtower.

“Thank you,” Jakobus said, and meant it the way he meant most things — flat and entire. The man waved it off, pleased, and they talked a little more about nothing — the duck feet, the mooncakes, where to change in Quzhou for the local bus — and then the man’s stop was not his stop, and he gathered his box and was gone with a nod, and the seat held the warmth of him for a while.

Jakobus put the printouts away. He didn’t need them now. He had the number, which was the head of the thing, and he had the dragon, which was the heart of it, and the gap between the two was the country he’d come to walk.

The hills had thickened into proper hill country by the time the train began to slow — green slopes shouldering up close to the line, bamboo standing pale where the cuttings had been blasted through, a river running brown and full alongside, the rains not long gone. Then sheds, then a road, then the backs of buildings again, and the recorded voice naming the station in the two languages, and the long sigh of the brakes.

Quzhou, when he stepped down into it, was nothing. He meant that as the highest sort of compliment. It was a working town with a working sky over it — apartment blocks and shopfronts and a square with a screen on it, scooters threading the crossing in the loose confident way they did everywhere people had decided the rules were a guideline, a smell of frying and exhaust and wet stone. No one met him.

No one sold him anything. There was no arch saying *Welcome to the Mystery*. There was a bus stop, a noodle place, and a man asleep across the seat of his own three-wheeler with his cap over his eyes.

He stood on the pavement with his bag at his foot and let the place arrive in him for a minute before he moved. The chamber was still a number to him — thirty metres, two thousand square, a million cubic of nothing where a hill used to be. He could not feel it yet. It was abstract, the way a coastline is abstract on a map until you have stood in the cold of it.

But this was real. The town was real and lived-in and bored of its own dragon, and somewhere up a green hill out past those blocks there was a straight-walled darkness that had kept its mouth shut for two thousand years, and he was going to go and sit in front of it, the way you sat in front of anything that wouldn't talk, and not lie to himself about what it told him.

He shouldered the bag and went to find the bus.

Chapter 3 — The Hill with No Story

The bus to Longyou left from a corner of the Quzhou station forecourt that no sign pointed to, which Jakobus took as a good omen. He found it the way he found most things — by watching where the people who plainly knew the route went, then following a half-minute behind, a man with a folder under his arm and a vest full of small useful things, drawing no more attention than a fence post. A woman with two live chickens in a mesh bag took the seat across the aisle. The chickens regarded him. He regarded them back, and they came to an understanding.

The country between the towns was green and worked, every flat hand of land planted, the hills rising soft and forested where the plough gave up. He liked it. It was the opposite of the desert in every way that mattered and exactly the same in the one that counted: a place that got on with its own life and did not lay itself out for a stranger to admire. Rice. A river the colour of weak tea. A man on a moped with a sheet of glass roped to his back. Then the conductor said a name with Longyou in it somewhere, and Jakobus was up while the bus was still rolling and out the door before it had finished its sigh down onto its springs.

He walked the last part. Three or four kilometres, by the directions a teenager had drawn for him with a finger in the air, and walking was how he met ground. The road narrowed into a lane, the lane into a track between low hills, and the hills here were the ones from the printouts — Fenghuang, Phoenix Hill — though the photographs had not prepared him for how *small* it was. Sixty-something metres. A koppie. At home you would not name a hill that size; you would call

it *that rise over there* and use it to point a man toward the dam.

The boots had broken to him properly by now and the kilometres went under them easy. Clean hands, dust to the knee, the day warming. He was in no hurry. A man who hurried at the start was a man who had already decided what he would find, and Jakobus had decided nothing. That was the point of coming.

The ponds were the first true thing.

They were exactly where the maps said, and they looked like nothing — a scatter of small flat waters caught between the foot of the hill and the fields, some green with weed, some clear, two of them now ringed with a low chain-link fence gone orange with rust. A sign on the wire carried characters he could not read and a graphic he could: a stick figure falling, a slash through it. *Do not*. The fenced ponds were darker than the others. He stood at the wire of the nearest and looked down, and the water gave him back the white sky and then nothing — no bottom he could find, the green going to black going to a depth the eye refused.

He understood, standing there, why the villagers had let them be for two thousand years. You did not have to believe in a dragon to leave that water alone. A pond with no floor was a thing that asked you, quietly, to mind your own business, and most people, sensibly, did. It had taken a man with a pump and seventeen days of stubbornness to call its bluff, and what the pump had found under the bluff was not a dragon. It was worse, in its way. It was a room.

He crouched at the fence a while. No chickens here to witness it. He picked a small flat stone off the verge — pale, water-smoothed, a faint banding through it like a held breath — and turned it in his fingers and read nothing off it except that it was a pretty stone, which was enough, and it went into the vest with the others. Then he walked on around the foot of the hill to where the printouts said the visitors went in, and found out what a million cubic metres of missing rock looked like from the outside.

It looked like a car park.

Not even a full one. A flat apron of cracked concrete, a steel-pipe gate painted the dull official red of every gate everywhere, a ticket booth the size of a phone box with its shutter half down and a kettle

steaming inside it. A board on a frame had once held photographs and a map; the sun had eaten most of it to a uniform sepia, so that the great chambers in the pictures had faded to the same nothing-colour as the sky behind the board. Two banners hung limp between poles. A bin. A bench with a man asleep on it, a straw hat over his face, who was not — Jakobus revised on a second look — asleep, because the hat tipped a quarter-inch and an eye took him in and the hat tipped back.

That was the whole of it. That was the front door.

He had been to the staged ones. He knew the grammar of the marvel that wanted you — the avenue of flags, the loudspeaker, the entrance carved or cast or floodlit so that you arrived already small, the architecture of awe scaffolded up over the actual thing so you could not get at the wonder without first paying the wonder's tax. The pyramids had it now, God knew. Petra had it. And here was a place that had moved more stone out of a hill than any pyramid ever put up, and it had a faded board and a kettle and a man pretending to sleep.

Something in him went quiet and a little ashamed of itself. He had come expecting — he realised it now — not a show, he was too old for that, but *some* announcement, some acknowledgement from the surface that the surface was lying. There was none. The hill had no story and no manners about not having one. It sat in the morning sun being a small green hill, the way it had sat being a small green hill while twenty-four cathedral-sized rooms stood in the dark beneath it, holding up nothing but their own ceilings, for two thousand years that no one wrote down. The marvel was not staged because the marvel did not need you. He had been, for a kilometre or two, the tourist after all, and the hill had cured him of it without a word, the way the best places did.

The booth shutter ratcheted up and a young man came out unfolding himself, a guide by the lanyard and the very slightly performed straightening of his collar, and Jakobus took the shades off before the man had finished standing.

It was reflex by now, older than the reason — the eyes bare for anyone whose job was a gate. But it did its work. The guide had been arranging a face for a foreigner; the bare eyes rearranged it, the way they did. He came across the concrete with his hand half out, decided

against the handshake, made it a small bow instead, and Jakobus met him in the middle of the gesture — neither bow nor handshake but the thing between, two men deciding at once not to perform at each other.

“Chen,” the guide said, and tapped the lanyard.

“Jakobus.” He let the name sit flat and odd in the air and did not help it along.

Chen’s English was careful and entirely sufficient. One cave, he explained, with a hand at the red gate and a concrete path running back beyond it into the hillside, gently down. Cave One. Open. The others — and here the hand swept the whole green flank of the hill, taking in a great deal of nothing, grass and a few pines and a goat track — closed. *Conservation*. He gave the word its full four syllables, a word handed to him by someone above him to hand on to people like Jakobus, and he gave it cleanly and did not pretend it meant more than it meant. The water in some of them, he added, was still in them. The rock was studied. Engineers came. He said *engineers* with a small respect, and Jakobus heard it and filed it.

“Just the one,” Jakobus said. Not a complaint. A man establishing the shape of the ground.

“Cave One,” Chen agreed. “Is enough.” A pause, and then the first flicker of something off the script: “You will see.”

Jakobus paid for the ticket. He found the right note — and then, because there had been a kettle and the morning was cool and a man who took your money should be allowed to put down a cup beside it, he held up two fingers and pointed at the steam still rising from the booth and asked, in the dozen words of Mandarin he had assembled on the train and the goodwill that filled the gaps, whether there was tea, and whether Chen would have one with him before they went down. There was, and Chen would. The man on the bench, consulted by a glance, would also; the hat came off a face that turned out to be sixty and creased and amused. The tea came in three glasses that did not match. They drank it standing in the cracked car park with the hill at their backs.

He looked up the green slope while he drank, over the rim of the glass. There was nothing to see. Grass, a pine, the goat track, the

soft round shoulder of a hill you would walk over without a thought. Under his boots — under the concrete, under the apron, under the bench and the bin and the faded board — twenty-four straight-walled rooms stood in the black, and not one tonne of the rock that had come out of them had ever been found. He had walked the whole way around the foot of the hill that morning and seen no slag, no spoil, no quarry scar, no ridge of dumped stone gone soft under grass. A million cubic metres of siltstone had been carried out of this small hill, and the hill did not show it, and the country did not remember it, and the surface — this whole quiet ordinary surface — lay over all of it like a hat over a face that was not asleep.

He finished the tea. He handed the glass back and thanked the man for it twice, once badly in Mandarin and once with his eyes. Then he turned to Chen, who was waiting at the red gate with the patience of a man who had watched this happen to people before, and he put the shades into the vest, where they were no use to him in the dark, and he said, “Right. Let’s go and see what it’s for.”

Chen smiled the smile of a man who knew a thing the foreigner did not yet, and pushed the gate, and the concrete path ran down ahead of them into the hill, and the cool came up out of the ground to meet them.

Chapter 4 — The First Descent

The stairs went down into the hill the way a thing goes down that means it.

Chen led, unhurried, one hand light on the steel rail somebody had bolted into the rock for the tourists. The treads were concrete poured over older stone, and the air thickened with every step — cooler, then cool, then a wet weight that settled on the back of Jakobus's neck and stayed there. He could smell it before he could see anything: mineral, faintly sweet, the breath of a place that had not been outside in a long time. Lights had been strung down the throat of the entry, hard little floods on cables, and they did not so much illuminate the dark as carve small bright wounds in it.

His shades came off four steps down, folded one-handed, slid into the waistcoat. Down here there was no light worth fighting.

The handrail was cold under his palm. He did not need it but he kept a finger to it anyway, the way you keep a finger on a wall in an unfamiliar house, mapping. He could feel the angle of the descent through his boots — the soles read it, the long honest break-in of leather telling him the grade was steeper than it looked and the steps a fraction too deep for a Chinese stair, cut to some other body's stride. He filed that. Then they came round the last turn of the man-made tunnel and the wall on his right simply stopped being a wall and became *space*, and Jakobus stood still.

It opened above him and below him at once.

He had read the number. He'd written it himself in the back of his

head on the train — 2,800 square metres, thirty metres of height — and the number had meant nothing, the way numbers about big things mean nothing until your body is standing inside them and your animal brain does the sum the figures couldn't. The ceiling went up into shadow the lights wouldn't reach, a great sloping plane of rock leaning over the chamber like a hand held above a candle. The floor fell away in shallow terraces. Somewhere down in the dark below the path, water dripped — single, slow, enormous in the quiet, each drop a small detonation that travelled the whole room and came back changed.

He breathed out. The breath fogged a little.

"Cave One," Chen said, and the words went up and out and did not come back the way the water had; the room ate them flat. He had said it a thousand times. He said it now the way you put a coin on a counter you've put a coin on every day.

Jakobus did not answer. He was reading the wall.

It came at him first as texture and then resolved, under the floods, into *marks* — and the marks were what undid him, more than the height, more than the dark. The whole face of the rock, ceiling to floor, was scored in long parallel lines. They ran in broad chevroned bands, each band a hand's-breadth wide, the lines inside it close-set and even, and they did not waver. He had cut stone. He had watched men cut stone by hand, with chisels, in heat that would drop a tourist — and a man cutting stone by hand makes a *human* line: it hesitates, it bites deep where the arm was fresh and goes shallow where it tired, it wanders off square because the body wanders off square. These did not wander. They ran from where a man would have started to where a man would have run out of reach, and they held their spacing the whole way, band after band, up the pillars, across the ceiling, down into the water-dark below — the way a thing is made when the hand has stopped being the variable.

He put his palm flat against it. The siltstone was cold and slightly damp and gave back nothing.

The grooves were shallow, a few millimetres, and uniform, and when he ran the pad of his thumb across them he felt the ridge between each one stand up clean and unbroken — no chatter, no skip. Somebody had made a tool, and then made a *method*, and then held to

the method across more rock than he could let himself think about.

“Who?” he said. Quietly. To the wall, mostly.

Chen had been waiting for it; you could hear that he’d been waiting for it. “Discovered in 1992,” he said. “Nineteen ninety-two, the farmers drain the pond. Seventeen days, the pump. They think the pond has no bottom — old people say so, very deep, dangerous. They drain it. And there is no dragon.” A small dry sound that might once have been a laugh, worn smooth. “There is this.”

“And before 1992?”

“Before,” Chen said, “nothing. No name. No paper. No emperor writes, *I made this*. No record.” He spread his hands, taking in the chamber, the marks, the unreachable ceiling, the drip. “Nobody knows who built them.”

Jakobus let his hand fall from the wall.

That was the part. Not the height, which was only big; not the marks, which were only beautiful and strange. The *nothing before*. A made thing came into the world trailing a wake — a reason, a record, a complaint about the cost, a man somewhere who said *I am the one who said dig here*. A thing this size, this many men, this many years — and the engineer in him had already started the years counting without permission, the floor of it ugly and high — left a paper river behind it as surely as it left a hole in the ground. The hole was here. The river was gone.

He started, helplessly, doing the only thing he knew how to do, which was the sums.

Call it a million cubic metres across the complex; call this one chamber, what — eighty thousand, a hundred, the floor times the height minus the pillars they’d had the sense to leave standing, those great square columns holding the roof the way they’d been left to hold it for two thousand years and more. A man with a good chisel and a strong back and the right rock, working soft siltstone that cut wet — he could move, what. A cubic metre in a day if he was a beast and the day was long and nobody was counting his water. Probably less. Call it less. Multiply. Men times days times the patience of men who would not be hurried, and the number that came back was not a number a man holds easily; it was a number that asked you, politely, to

consider how many lives.

And then the second sum arrived behind the first, and it was the one that bent him.

Where did it go.

A cubic metre of stone weighed near two and a half tonnes. A million of them was a hill. You did not move a hill of rock out of a hole and have it vanish — you stacked it, you spread it, you built something out of it, or you left it lying in a grey tide of spoil the land would still be wearing two thousand years on, because rock did not rot and a tip did not forget. He had walked the hill. He had walked the whole green soft skirt of it that morning, looking — without knowing he was looking, the body looking on its own — for the scar a thing like this had to leave: the quarry-spill, the broken country downslope where you threw the waste. There had been ponds. There had been grass. There had been a man on a bench. There had been no hill of rock anywhere that a hill of rock had any business being.

He stood in the chamber and felt that absence settle into him as a physical thing, the way the cold had settled, the way the wet weight sat on his neck — the missing spoil, the missing hill, the missing men, the missing *I made this*. The whole made thing was here, perfect, parallel, patient, dripping; and everything that should have come with it was simply not there, and had never, as far as anyone could say, been there.

The drip fell again, down in the dark below the path, and the room carried it round and gave it back.

“You feel it,” Chen said. Not a question. He had watched it happen before, on better men and worse ones — the moment the figure in the brochure stopped being a figure and became a weight on the chest. He said it kindly. “Everyone is quiet here. The first time.”

Jakobus put his hand back to the wall, flat, the way he’d put a hand on the dash of the Beast after a long stretch of bad road. The stone gave him nothing. He hadn’t expected it to. He had spent a life reading the use off a made thing — a tool off the wear, a man off his shoes, a country off the marks the work left on it — and the method had never once failed him, not really, not so it stayed failed. He read this wall the way he read everything, and the wall held its parallel lines up to

the floods and said, in the only language a wall has, *I am made*, and would say not one syllable more.

A made thing was made for something. That was the whole of his faith, and he stood inside the largest argument against it he had ever met, and the argument was not finished, only begun. He could feel that too — that this was the start of a thing, not its bottom.

“What’s it for,” he said. Flat. To Chen, to the wall, to the drip, to the man two thousand years gone who had cut these lines and left no name on them.

Chen smiled, finally, and it was the smile from the car park, the one that had said *you will see* and meant something he wasn’t going to hand over for the price of tea.

“That,” he said, “is the question.” He turned and started down the terraces, toward the deeper floods, toward the water. “Come. There is more.”

Jakobus went after him, one finger on the cold steel rail, the dark closing warm and wet above his bare arms, the number still counting itself behind his eyes — and the hill above them, he would think later, holding its hill of vanished stone somewhere he had not yet learned to look.

Chapter 5 — The Marks in the Stone

He put his hand flat against the wall before he had decided to.

It was a thing he did, had always done — at the unfinished obelisk in Aswan he had laid his palm in the tool-grooves and felt something in his chest sit down and stop arguing — and the hand went out now of its own accord, the way it went to the dash of the Beast after a long pull. The siltstone was cool. Cooler than the air, which had its own damp weight down here, the breath of a thing shut a long time. Under his fingers the surface was not smooth and it was not rough. It was *worked*. He felt the lines before his eyes had properly given them to him: a fine corduroy of grooves, each the width of a fingernail, running away from him at a long diagonal up the face of the rock.

He stepped back to let the lights find them.

Chen had set the floods low and angled, which was either luck or somebody on the tourist committee with an eye, because the rake of the light did the one thing that mattered: it threw every groove into its own thin shadow, and the whole wall came alive with parallel lines. They ran up and to the left, a sheaf of them, then changed angle in a clean chevron and ran up and to the right, then changed again — long broad bands of herringbone climbing thirty metres into the dark above the lights, where they went on, he was sure, exactly the same, in a blackness no torch reached.

Close. Regular. Parallel. Not random.

Not a man hacking at a face because the face was in his way. No anger in it, no hurry, none of the gouge-and-recover you got from a

tired arm. The grooves held their spacing the way a fence wire holds tension. He moved along the wall a few paces, the soft belly and the soft tread of him, and the bands kept their discipline, chevron after chevron, each one a man's reach high and then the angle flipping, up and up.

"You measure," Chen said. Not a question. He had seen the eye-work before.

"I'm trying to make it," Jakobus said.

He meant it the way he always meant it, which was inside his own head, with his hands. He set the tool first. Something with a chisel edge, narrow — three, four centimetres of bit. Iron, you'd think; you didn't get a line that clean out of stone with a stick. A man on a ledge, or a platform, or a rope; the bands started low and went high, so the work had gone *up*, which meant scaffold or terrace built and struck as they climbed, or — he turned to the floor — they cut down, terraced the floor itself as they went, standing on the next layer of stone they were about to remove, the floor descending under their feet a hand's-breadth at a time, the wall growing taller above them as the ground sank, until the chamber opened to its full thirty metres and the last men stood at the bottom looking up at everything their fathers had taken.

He liked that one. It had economy in it. It needed no timber, no rope, no scaffolding to rot away and leave its post-holes. It explained the terraces under his boots, the broad shallow steps cut into the floor, which he'd taken for stairs and were not stairs, were the strata of the digging, each step a season's stone.

It explained nearly everything.

It did not explain the angle.

He came back to that. The chevrons. Why flip the bit forty-five degrees one way, then forty-five the other, in bands? Diagonal let the edge bite and shear rather than punch and shatter — fair enough, he'd cut enough things to know you came at a hard medium on the slant. But the *flip*, the herringbone — that was not a working necessity he could find with his hands. Two crews, working toward each other? A tool you swapped hands on, left to right, when the arm tired? A signature — this band is mine, that band is yours, the way thatchers

leave their hand in a roof? He turned each one over and set it down. None sat right. Each was a key that went into the lock and turned halfway and stopped.

“Here,” Chen said, and walked him twenty metres along, the lights coming up ahead as they went, the dark closing behind, and pointed at a pillar.

There were pillars left standing in the rock, fat tapering columns the chambers had been carved *around*, the roof resting on them — and Jakobus had clocked them on the way down as structure, as a man who’d been in mines clocked the timber and the rock-bolts and the bits of rock you did not take out because taking them out killed you. Good engineering. Conservative. They’d left more than they had to, which told you they knew exactly how much they could take and chose to be cautious, which told you it mattered, which told you nothing about *why*.

But Chen was not pointing at the pillar’s shape. He was pointing at its face, low down, where the herringbone gave way to something else.

A horse.

Cut shallow into the stone, no bigger than a hand, a horse in profile, the legs gathered, the head turned. Beside it, lower down, a fish, the kind of fish a child draws — a curve and a tail and a dot for the eye. And above the horse, faint, a bird with its wings open.

“Tang dynasty, they think,” Chen said. “Or someone wanted you to think it. They are not —” he searched for the word, found it, was a little pleased with it “— load-bearing.”

Jakobus crouched in front of the horse. His knees told him about the floor of the cave and the night before in the bus and the years. He looked at the horse for a while.

It was a nice horse. Somebody had cut it with care and not much skill, the way a good tradesman draws when drawing isn’t his trade. And it told him precisely the wrong thing, which was: *here is a person, and here is what a person makes, look, a horse, a fish, a bird, the small warm sentimental marks of a human hand* — and then he lifted his eyes back to the wall above it, the thirty-metre sheaf of disciplined herringbone climbing into a dark that ate the lights, a million cubic metres of stone that some hands had taken out of the world and put

— where? — and the horse shrank to nothing. The horse was a man scratching his name on the side of a cathedral he could not have built and did not understand, a thousand years after the builders were dust.

The carvings were not the makers. The carvings were tourists.

He stood, slowly, hand on the cool pillar.

He had read a lot of walls. The thought came up unbidden and he let it run, because down here it was the only company that knew the trade. He had put his hand on the unfinished obelisk and felt the men, the largest thing anybody ever tried to lift out of the bedrock, abandoned the day the granite cracked — and you could read the whole heart-break of it off the tool-marks, the confidence at the head, the care, the crack, the stopping. The stone *told* you. At Great Zimbabwe he'd run his palm along the dry-stone courses, the granite dressed and laid without a drop of mortar, every block reading its load down into the one below, and the wall had told him *patience* and *generations* and *a people who knew exactly what they were doing and left you the proof in the joint*. In the rock churches of the highlands they'd cut *down* into the living rock, carved a building out of the ground by removing everything that wasn't the building, and the chisel-marks up under the eaves where no eye was meant to go were as careful as the ones on the door, and that told you the most important thing of all, which was *for whom* — not for you, not for the king even, but up, for the one who didn't need lighting to see the corners.

Every one of them, the stone had told him *what it was for*.

He laid his hand back on the herringbone.

The wall said: *I am made*.

He waited. He was good at waiting; it was most of what he was good at. He let the seconds go wide the way he could, breathing slow, asking the stone the only question he had ever needed to ask a thing — *what are you for* — and the wall held its parallel lines up under the raking light, chevron upon disciplined chevron, climbing into a dark that gave back nothing, and said *I am made*, and would not say one syllable more.

It was a strange thing to feel. He looked at it from a small distance, the way he looked at the cordite-jolt, at the cage. Not fear. Nearer to the moment a key you'd carried twenty years didn't fit the door it was

cut for. He had built a whole man on the faith that a made thing was made for something and that you could find it if you sat with it and didn't lie. He sat with it. He didn't lie. The function did not come up out of the floor.

"The records," he said, because a man asks. "Anything. A name. A complaint to a magistrate about the noise. A song. A story the grandmothers told before the dragon one."

Chen had his hands in his jacket. He had the patience of a man who had stood here while many people ran out of their explanations.

"Nobody claims them," he said.

Jakobus turned that over. *Nobody claims them. Not we lost the record. Not the histories burned.* Nobody had ever stood up, in two thousand years, in any document anyone could find, and said *we did this, my men and I, by the order of so-and-so, for such-and-such, and it cost us this many seasons and this many lives.* A thing this size. A million cubic metres of stone, gone from the hill and gone from the world, carved straight and clean and signed by no one, recorded by no one, sung about by no one until a farmer drained a fish pond and let the daylight in.

He thought about the spoil again, where it wasn't, the missing river of it, and the missing record was the same hole from a different angle — the chambers here and the *because* gone, both the stone they took out and the reason they took it, vanished into the same dark.

"You're going to tell me there's more," he said.

Chen almost smiled. "There is more," he said, and turned toward the deeper end of the chamber, where the floods stopped and the floor went down in its long terraced steps into a black that lay flat and unmoving — water, Jakobus understood, the smell of it reaching him now, still water in a made room — and Chen went toward it, and Jakobus took his hand off the wall, which gave him nothing as he left, and followed.

Chapter 6 — Where Did the Stone Go?

Daylight came at him sideways out of the cave mouth, and for a second he let it sting. He stood at the lip of the descent ramp with his shades pushed up into his hair, the wraparounds forgotten there since the dark, and he let his eyes hurt and water and adjust. There was a kindness in the hurt. Down in the chamber the light had been a tame thing, hung on cables, told where to stand. Up here it came off the wet rice and the pond water and the low Zhejiang sky with no manners at all, and his head, which had been full of thirty metres of straight rock for an hour, came slowly back up to the surface of the world and remembered there was one.

He brought the shades down over his eyes. Chen had stayed below, talking to the lighting man about a cable that flickered, and for a moment Jakobus was alone on the hilltop with the question still sitting in his chest like a stone he'd swallowed and couldn't bring up.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do with a thing that wouldn't come up. He walked.

The hill was nothing. That was the first insult of it. Fenghuang Hill — Phoenix Hill, somebody had translated on the road in, and he'd thought, sure, everything here is named for a thing it doesn't look like — was a low green swell maybe seventy metres above the river flat, terraced for tea and vegetables, a few graves notched into the higher folds the way the Free State dead got tucked into the koppies, where the plough couldn't reach and the view was good. It would not have stopped a man driving past. It would not have made him slow the bakkie. And under it, he now knew, with his own hand laid in

the tool-grooves to prove it, were twenty-four cathedrals of cut-away dark.

He climbed. Not far — there wasn't far to climb. He went up a goat-path between two tea rows to a small rise where a survey marker had been concreted in, and he stood by it and turned a slow full circle and did the thing he'd been doing on ground like this his whole life: he read the country for what had been taken out of it.

You could always tell. That was the thing nobody who hadn't dug believed. A mine left a fingerprint on a landscape you could see from a passing plane — the slimes dams, the yellow flat-topped hills of crushed reef the wind couldn't be bothered to round off, the way the bush gave up on the made ground for a generation. Even an honest little stone quarry left a wound: the bitten cliff, the apron of waste rock fanned out below it, the broken stuff nobody wanted, sorted by gravity into a slope you could date by the lichen. He had walked out of a hundred dug places in his life. They all kept a tail. The rock you didn't use had to go somewhere, and somewhere was always close, because nobody on earth had ever carried bad rock further than he had to.

He turned, and turned, and the country gave him nothing.

Rice. Vegetable rows, the dark green of winter brassicas. The ponds — those bright unbottomed squares that had drowned the whole secret for two thousand years until a farmer with a pump got curious. A scatter of grey-tiled houses with their backs to the hill. The river beyond, slow and brown and ordinary. Tea on the slopes, graves above the tea. The far blue suggestion of bigger hills holding up the edge of the sky.

No yellow hill. No fan of waste. No broken-rock slope sorted by gravity and dated by lichen. No bitten cliff, no apron, no tail. Nothing.

He stood with his hands loose at his sides and felt something move in him that he didn't like and couldn't, for a moment, name.

He'd come up here half-expecting to be clever. To stand on the rise and see, with the trained eye, the thing the brochures missed — *there, that long low rise under the third terrace, that's your spoil, that's where it went, they spread it thin and farmed it over and the experts walked across it for thirty years and called it a hill.* He had wanted

that. He had wanted the country to hand him the answer the way it usually did, the way a man's shoes told you where he'd really been. It would have closed the cave. It would have given him back his faith in a quiet afternoon.

But he knew waste rock the way he knew bad footwear, and the eye that wouldn't be lied to by a consultant's clean trainers would not be lied to by a soft green hill either. There was no spoil here. Not spread thin, not buried, not farmed over. The volume that had come out of that hill had not been set down anywhere a man could stand and see it. It had simply — gone.

He took the notepad out of the waistcoat, the small dun one with the elastic, and the pencil, and he crouched on his heels by the survey marker the way he'd crouch by a spoor, and he started the arithmetic he'd been refusing since the descent, because he'd known, somewhere, what it would tell him.

He didn't trust the round million the literature liked. Round numbers were what people reached for when they wanted you to stop checking. So he built it himself, small and honest, the way you build a load. One chamber. Call it two and a half thousand square metres of floor — he'd paced Cave One's long axis and could feel the width in his feet — and call the average height a careful twenty metres, not the thirty at the high vault, because the floor stepped and the roof wasn't flat. Fifty thousand cubic metres. One room. He wrote it down. He looked at it.

Then he wrote $\times 24$, because there were twenty-four of them, and the ones still under water might be the biggest, and the literature said *at least*.

He didn't multiply it out neatly. He didn't need the exact figure; the exact figure was a way of pretending the thing was about figures. He sketched a little box on the page — a chamber in section, the stepped floor, the left pillars — and beside it he tried to draw the spoil. He tried to draw where it went. He drew a hill the size of the one he stood on, a second Fenghuang made of nothing but the rock from the first, and it was too small, so he scribbled it out and drew it bigger, a ridge, and that was closer, and he sat looking at a ridge of waste rock that should have stood beside the river and didn't, and never had, and his pencil stopped.

It is not a missing story, he thought. He had been telling himself for two days that it was a missing story — the dragon instead of the engineer, the silence in the record, the country between the number and the legend that he'd come to walk. A missing story he could live with. A missing story was just a man not bothering to write a thing down, or a fire, or a dynasty falling on the only copy.

This was a missing mountain.

Somewhere, two thousand years ago and more, people had cut a million cubic metres and change out of solid siltstone with hand tools, in the dark, by oil light, one disciplined chevroned stroke at a time — and then they had taken the rock, all of it, the wanted and the unwanted both, every basket and barrow and boatload of it, and they had moved it so completely off the face of the world that the trained eye, two thousand years later, standing on the very hill, turning a full slow circle in good light, could not find one stone of it.

You did not do that by accident. You did not lose a mountain. A man who throws bad rock no further than he must does not carry a mountain over the horizon and hide it. There was no reason to. There was every reason not to. And they had done it anyway, which meant the carrying-away was not a by-product of the work.

The carrying-away was the work too. As deliberate as the chevrons. As disciplined as the straight walls.

He didn't like where that put him. He sat with it on his heels in the cold tea-row wind and did not flinch from it, because flinching was the one thing his whole life had taught him not to do — *vasbyt*, he thought, almost laughing, the absurd old Afrikaans word coming up out of the sand for this, a cold green hill in China, bite down — but he did not like it. His faith was a small flat thing: a made thing is made for something, and the something is always there, waiting, if you sit with it and don't lie. And here was a made thing the size of a mountain, made twice — made by cutting and made again by vanishing — and the second making was as patient and total as the first, and he could read neither.

Boots on stone behind him. Chen came up the goat-path, unhurried, his city shoes wrong for it and his face not caring. He stopped a polite distance off and looked at the notepad, at the man crouched by the marker like a tracker who'd lost the spoor, and something in

his expression was kind and a little tired — the kindness of a man who has watched this exact thing happen at this exact spot more times than he'll say.

Jakobus stood, knees telling him plainly what they thought of an hour underground and a crouch in the wind, and he tipped the notepad so Chen could see the scribbled-out ridge, the box, the numbers.

"Where did the rock go," he said. Not a question, really. A man laying a thing on the table to see if anyone would pick it up.

Chen looked at the page. He looked out over the river flat, at the rice and the ponds and the soft green hill with the graves in it, the same full slow circle Jakobus had turned, except Chen didn't turn; he'd done his turning years ago. And then he laughed — not at Jakobus, never at him, but the short low laugh of a man releasing something he'd held politely for an hour.

"That," Chen said, "is the question." He said it the way you'd say *welcome*. "Every engineer. Every professor. The ones from Beijing, the ones from Tokyo, the one German with all the lasers." He made a small gesture at the whole green absent world. "They come. They measure. They walk the hill like you, looking for the —" he searched the English "— for the leftover. And then they find me, and they have this same face you have, and they ask me, *Chen, where did the rock go.*"

"And you tell them what."

Chen smiled, and there was something underneath the smile that was not amusement at all. "I tell them I am only the guide." He folded his hands. "Twenty-four caves. One open. The others, water." He let that sit. "Nobody wrote it down. Nobody took the rock anywhere we can find. Two thousand years, the ponds are full, the dragon lives there, nobody digs. And then a farmer pumps the water and there it is, the whole —" again the searched-for word "— the whole impossible. And the first thing every clever man wants is not *how did they cut it.*" He tapped the air over Jakobus's scribbled ridge. "The first thing is *where did they put it.* Because that one, you think, that one at least must leave a mark."

"And it doesn't."

"And it doesn't," Chen agreed, gently, the way you'd agree the rain

had set in. He turned for the path. “Come. The water section. Bring your numbers.”

Jakobus put the notepad away. He looked once more across the river flat — at the soft hill that should have had a brother and didn’t, at the ponds that had hidden the cutting and the silence both — and the thing in his chest had stopped being a swallowed stone and become something colder and wider: the specific unease of a man whose oldest trick had just failed him on open ground, in good light, with nothing hidden, nothing to find, and nothing, for once, that he could read his way out of.

He followed Chen down toward the dark and the standing water, where the biggest chambers were, where the question only got larger.

Chapter 7 — The Keeper of the Maybe

The office sat at the edge of the site car park, a low building the colour of nothing, the kind of administrative box that gets put up wherever a government decides a thing matters and wants it minded. Chen knocked once on the glass door and pushed it open without waiting, which told Jakobus more about the woman inside than the door itself did. You knocked on doors you were afraid of. You did not knock on doors you'd opened a thousand times.

Inside it was warm and smelled of green tea and old paper and the faint electric dust of a machine left on too long. A desk under the window, papers in geological strata. A wall of grey steel shelving. And taped across the far wall, edge to overlapping edge, the maps — survey sheets, hand-drawn chamber plans, a long photographic panorama of a wall that Jakobus recognised by its tool-marks before he'd taken three steps.

The woman behind the desk did not stand. She was past sixty, small, with reading glasses pushed up into iron-grey hair and a pencil held the way some people hold cigarettes, a thing to think with. She looked at Jakobus over a stack of printed pages and let the look run a half-second longer than was polite, which he respected, because it was the same half-second he'd have taken.

He took the shades off. There was no uniform in the room and no need, but the maps deserved bare eyes, and so did she.

“Dr Lin,” Chen said, and then a short courtesy in Mandarin that Jakobus caught the shape of without the words, and then to Jakobus: “Dr Lin Wei. She — she keeps the caves. The science of them.”

“Mr Swart.” She said his name carefully, getting the *w* of it right where most people let it slide to a *v*. “You climbed the hill this afternoon.”

“I did.”

“Of course you did.” A small dry note in it. She set the pencil down. “Sit. There is tea. Chen, the good cups — not the ones with the dragon.”

Chen busied himself at a side table. Jakobus took the chair across the desk, and because the chair faced the maps he angled it a few degrees so it faced her instead, and saw her clock that too.

“You looked for the spoil,” she said. Not a question.

“There isn’t any.”

“No.” She said it the way you’d agree about the weather. “There is not. You are going to ask me where it went.”

“I was, ja.”

“Everyone asks me where it went.” She folded her hands. There was clay under one fingernail, old and ground in, the only dirty thing about her. “Geologists ask. Engineers ask. A man came from a university in Germany three years ago with a laser machine that could weigh a hill by looking at it, and at the end of two weeks he stood where you are standing and asked me where it went.” She turned one of the maps toward him with a fingertip — a contour sheet, the hill in close-spaced rings, an area shaded in pencil and crossed out and shaded again. “You are not the first to ask. But you ask differently.”

“How’s that.”

“They ask,” she said, “the way a man asks for his change. As if the answer is owed, and I am keeping it from them.” She looked at him over the glasses she wasn’t wearing. “You ask the way a man asks the name of someone at a funeral. Quietly. Knowing already you may not get to be told.”

Chen set the cups down — plain white, no dragon — and the steam came up green and grassy between them. Jakobus wrapped his hands around his and said nothing, because she was right and there was nothing to say to a person who’d read you accurately except to let them have the win.

"You're an archaeologist," he said, when the silence had been honoured.

"I am whatever the caves need me to be on a given Tuesday." A flicker that was almost a smile. "Today, a tour guide for a man who has already given himself the tour."

He let that land. It was fair. He drank the tea.

"Tell me what you actually know," he said. "Not the hypotheses. The floor under them. What's measured."

It moved across her face — the small recalibration of someone deciding the conversation was going to be worth the tea. She pulled a sheet from the strata without looking, the way he'd pull a folder he could find blind.

"Siltstone. Argillaceous — soft when you cut it, hard enough to stand once it's cut and the air gets to it. Quxian Formation, Cretaceous." She tapped the photographic panorama behind her without turning. "The marks. Parallel. Chevroned — your herringbone. Same angle, chamber to chamber, wall to wall, for more than twenty caverns. We have measured the spacing. It does not wander the way a tired man's hand wanders. It is —" she searched for the English — "disciplined."

"Or a lot of trained hands all taught the same."

"Yes. That is the kind thing to say about it." She set down the sheet, picked up another. "Pottery. Shards in the silt, in the fill. Two thousand years, give or take a few hundred. Han clay in places. So — old. Older than anything that thought to write the caves down, or older than anyone who *would* have." She let that sit. "And there it stops. Pottery and tool-marks and a missing hill. No stele. No memorial wall. No tax record, no corvée roll, no county gazetteer that mentions twenty-four holes the size of temples cut into Fenghuang. In a country that wrote down the price of salt for two thousand years, Mr Swart, that absence is not an accident of the archive. That is the loudest thing in the room."

He'd thought the same on the hill, in worse words, and hearing it said clean by someone who'd lived with it for thirty years did something he hadn't expected — it eased him. He wasn't mad. The hole was real and someone competent agreed it was a hole.

"All right," he said. "Then let me be one of the men asking for his change. Quarry."

She waited.

"You've got soft stone that cuts easy and stands once cut. You've got a market — building stone, hearthstone, whatever the valley wanted, two thousand years ago. You cut it out in slabs, you float it down to the river, you sell it. The chambers aren't the point. The chambers are just the hole the money came out of. And the spoil —" he turned his palm up, the engineer's gesture — "the spoil isn't here because the spoil *got sold*. It's in foundations and walls and weirs all down the valley. It walked away one barrow at a time."

A good case. He'd built it climbing down off the hill and it held.

Dr Lin let him finish it, which was a kindness, and then she picked up her pencil and turned it over once.

"It is the best of the wrong answers," she said. "I have given it myself, to men who wanted an answer more than they wanted the truth, because it sends them home satisfied and the caves do not need them." She set the pencil flat. "Here is what is wrong with it. A quarry takes the *good* stone and leaves the bad. It follows the seam. It is greedy and it is lazy and you can read both in the shape it leaves — a quarry leaves a mess, because a mess is cheap. These chambers are not a mess. They have floors levelled where there was no reason to level a floor you were only going to keep digging through. They have pillars left standing where an engineer leaves a pillar, not where a seam happened to be poor. They have walls *finished* — dressed smooth, Mr Swart, where a quarryman would have left them rough and gone home, because nobody buys a wall." She held his eyes. "A quarry is shaped by what it wants to *take*. These were shaped by what they were meant to *be*. That is a different verb, and the stone knows the difference even where we do not."

It was the cleanest thing anyone had said to him about the place, and it took his quarry and laid it down dead on the desk between them, and he felt the loss of it the way you feel the loss of a tool you'd been counting on.

"Ritual, then," he said, quieter.

"Why?"

“Because that’s what people say when they’ve run out of —” He stopped. She was watching him say it. He started again, honest. “Because I haven’t got anything left, and a man reaches for the word that means *I don’t know* but sounds like I do.”

There it was — the thing he wouldn’t usually let out, out on the table, on its back. She’d drawn it from him without a single hard question. He’d done this exact thing himself, to harder men than her, and he knew the trick and had still walked into it, and that was the measure of her.

“You are honest,” she said. “That is rarer here than the laser machine.” She rose, finally, and went to the wall of maps, and stood with her back to him looking at the long photographed wall as though it were a window. “I will tell you what I have decided, after thirty years, and you may keep it or not.” Her finger touched the herringbone, not pointing, just resting there, the way his own hand had once rested in the tool-marks of the unfinished obelisk a long way west of here, a lifetime ago, when something in him had sat down and stopped arguing. “Everyone who comes wants me to fill the hole. Quarry, palace, granary, dragon’s house, the tomb of someone the dynasties were so ashamed of they erased him. They cannot bear the hole. They think a hole in the record is a thing that has gone *missing*, and a missing thing must be *found*, and I am the woman who is supposed to find it.”

She turned.

“But the hole is not the wound,” she said. “The hole is the marvel. They cut a mountain out of a hill, they carried it away to nowhere, and they left no name — and we have decided, all of us, my whole field, that the not-naming is the failure. What if it is the achievement? What if the maker did the hardest thing a maker can do, which is to make a great thing and refuse to put his hand up afterward and say *I*? You spend a life learning to read the use off a made thing.” She’d seen that in him, somehow, in an afternoon. “What do you read off a thing that was made, by someone very good, *not to be read*?”

He sat with it. The tea had gone cool in his hands. Outside, the light was going off the car park and the hill behind it, and the maps on the wall held twenty-four dark rooms full of nothing but their own straight walls.

“That it doesn’t want me,” he said at last.

“No.” For the first time her face fully softened, and she looked, briefly, like someone’s grandmother and not the keeper of anything. “That it does not *need* you. There is a difference, and you of all people should know it.” She sat back down and picked up the pencil. “Drink your tea, Mr Swart. It is good tea and you are letting it die, and that is a small cruelty I will not have in my office.”

He drank it. It was good. He had walked in the most competent reader in the room, and he was leaving it the second-most, and the strange thing — the thing he’d have to sit with on the road out, a long time from now — was that it didn’t feel like losing. It felt like being shown a door he’d walked past his whole life and never tried, because he’d assumed every door had a use on the far side of it.

Some did. This one had a dark room and a straight wall and a maker who had carried his own name away with the spoil, to nowhere, on purpose.

“Tomorrow,” Dr Lin said, not looking up. “If you still want to learn something. I will take you to the water.”

Chapter 8 — The Doors That Stay Closed

The morning came up grey and wet, the kind of damp that did not fall so much as settle on the skin and stay. Jakobus had his coffee on the office step before anyone else was about — the screw-together pot on the single burner, the smell of it cutting clean through the river-smell of the hill. He drank it slow. It was the one decent thing at the end of a hard week and the start of an uncertain one, and he was in no hurry.

Chen found him a little after seven, raincoat over his arm, the clipboard he never seemed to write on. “Dr Lin asks if you slept,” he said.

“Tell her I slept.”

“You did not.”

“Tell her I slept anyway.”

Chen almost smiled. He had a way of not-smiling that was its own kind of warmth, and Jakobus had learned to read it the way he read the angle of a guard's shoulders at a boom. They walked up the path toward the gated mouths, the morning closing wet around them. The shades stayed in the waistcoat pocket. There was no one to be bare-eyed for here, and the light was too soft to bite, and besides — he wanted to see the colours of the stone properly.

The path the tourists never walked ran along the flank of the hill, where the chambers lay close under the skin of the earth. He had not been shown this side. Cave One had its concrete steps and its hand-rail and its sign in three languages; this was older ground, where the

openings had been cut for access and then sealed again, and the sealing was a thing you felt before you saw it.

The first gate came up out of the wet ferns like something grown there. Steel. Vertical bars, a horizontal cross-brace, a padlock the size of a man's fist gone the orange-brown of long weather. Caves 2 to 5, Chen said, ran along here, one after another, each behind its own door.

Jakobus stopped at the second gate without being told to.

He put his hands on the bars. Not to test them — he could feel in the first quarter-second they were sound, set in poured footings, the work a man does when he means it to outlast him. He put his hands on them the way you put a flat hand on a horse you are not going to ride, to know the warmth of it. The metal was cold and slick. Beyond it the dark went down.

He let his eyes adjust. It took a while; the chamber refused light the way deep water refuses it, throwing back nothing. Then the shapes came. A pillar — left standing, square-shouldered, running up out of his sightline into a roof he couldn't see. Below it, water. Black, perfectly still, holding a single far gleam where some crack in the roof let a coin of grey morning fall into it. The stillness of that water was the loudest thing in the place. It had not been touched, he thought, in a very long time, and had no intention of being touched now.

It was the same as Cave One and nothing like it. Same hand. Same chevroned discipline he could just make out where the near wall caught the edge of the light — the diagonal sweep of the marks, parallel, unhurried, climbing. But the proportions were different. This room was taller for its width, or the floor dropped away steeper, or the pillar sat off-centre in a way that made the whole space lean in his mind. He could not have said what was different, only that it was — that whoever cut Cave One had cut this one too and had wanted it its own thing, not a copy. Twenty-four rooms, and not one of them lazy.

He stood with his hands on the bars and felt the pull come up in him.

It was an old feeling and a stupid one, and he knew it for both. The wanting to *go in*. Not for any reason he could name — there was nothing in there his work needed, no use he could read off the black

water and the silent pillar, and that was exactly the problem. The chamber would not give itself up through a gate. He would have to stand inside it, in the dark, with the drip and the weight of rock over him, walk the floor, put his hands in the tool-marks, before he had any chance at all of reading it. And the gate said no.

His thumb found the padlock without his deciding it. Tested the hasp. Old, gapped, the kind a length of inner-strand cord could be worked through in under a minute if a man wanted it open. He took his thumb off it.

"You want to go in," Chen said. Not a question.

"I want to go in." No point lying to a man who'd watched him stand here. "It's a—" he searched for the flat word "—a thing I do. I see how a made thing is made, and then I know what it's for. I can't do it through bars."

"No," Chen agreed.

Footsteps on the wet path. Dr Lin came up out of the ferns with a torch she wasn't using and the same dry patience she'd carried in the office the night before. She'd heard the last of it. She stopped a polite distance off and looked at the gate, not at him, the way you give a man room.

"You think we keep these closed to keep the answer for ourselves," she said.

"No." He meant it. He'd thought a lot of things on a lot of jobs, and he had a nose for the false bottom, the official story with a room behind it. There was no room behind this. "No. I don't think that."

"Good." She came up beside him and laid her own hand on the bars, briefly, then took it off — and he saw she'd done it a hundred times, that the gesture had worn smooth in her, the small touching of a thing you can't have. "Then I will tell you why, and you will believe me, because you have already seen I am right about the rest."

"Tell me."

She told him plainly, the way she'd rebutted his quarry the night before, without heat. The chambers were cut in siltstone, and siltstone was a soft, patient liar of a rock — hard enough to hold a straight wall two thousand years in the dark and the dry, soft enough to weep

and slough and crumble the moment you changed the air around it. Cave One could take visitors because Cave One had been opened, stabilised, watched, its humidity logged hour by hour, its pillars instrumented, its breathing controlled at a cost she did not name but which he could hear sitting under every sentence. The others had not. The others held the equilibrium they'd reached in 1992, when the ponds were drained and air first moved through them — a wound half-scarred over — and every door you opened, every light you brought, every fifty men breathing through with their cameras and their warm exhaled water shifted that equilibrium a degree, and the rock answered. Spalling. Salt creep. The slow give in a pillar that had stood straight since before Rome and would not stand straight much longer if it had to stand in the wrong weather.

"There is a temptation," she said, "for foreigners especially, but for our own officials too, to think the conservation is the bureaucracy. The clipboard." She did not look at Chen's clipboard, which was a courtesy. "It is not. It is arithmetic. We can keep one room alive for the public and study the rest as they sleep — or we can open them all and watch them all begin to die at once, faster, and learn a little more, sooner, and lose the thing we learned it from. Curiosity has a cost here. We have decided not to pay it with the caves."

Jakobus listened with his hands still on the bars and his eyes still in the black water, and he understood it the way he understood a good engine spec: completely, in the body, before the words were done. It was the same sum the whole job ran on, only turned around. He'd spent his life learning that the over-built thing — the snorkel, the yellow shocks, the cord that looked like nothing — was the thing that got you out of a bad place alive, that you spent where it counted and nowhere else. Here the spending ran the other way. The most valuable thing was not to *act*. The hardest-won capability on this hill was the discipline to leave twenty-three doors shut and write nothing on the clipboard about what lay behind them.

He'd known men who couldn't do that. He'd been one of them, on a floor in Afghanistan, unable to leave a door shut when he knew exactly what was behind it and exactly how good it would feel to open it.

"You could open it," Lin said, watching him now, not the water. "I think you could open this lock with what is in your pockets. I have watched you look at it."

“I could.”

“And you will not.”

“No,” he said. “I won’t.”

She nodded once, satisfied, and it was not the satisfaction of a guard who’d kept a man out. It was the other thing — the recognition, one keeper to another, that he’d done the sum and come out where she had. He took his hands off the bars. The cold of them stayed in his palms a moment, then went, the way the heat of the hessian water came off the canvas and left it dry.

He looked once more through the bars — at the pillar holding up a roof he’d never stand under, at the still water keeping its single coin of light. Twenty-three more like it, each its own room, each cut by a hand that meant it and left no name and carried away a mountain of stone to nowhere anyone had ever found. He had wanted, badly, to walk in and read it and tell them what it was for. That was the thing he did. That was, in the iceberg-deep way he never said aloud, the thing he was.

And the chamber did not need him to do it. It had stood two thousand years unread and would stand more, behind its honest rusting door, and the not-reading of it was no failure of his — it was the price the rock asked, and the price was being paid, correctly, by people who would never carve their names on it either.

“Tomorrow,” Lin said, turning back down the path. “The water. There is one place we can take you in, where the floor still holds and the air is already lost. You will get your dark.” A dry glance over her shoulder. “Through a door I open.”

“Through a door you open,” he agreed.

He stood a second more at the gate after they’d gone on, hands loose at his sides, the padlock untested at his thumb. Then he pulled the shades down out of his waistcoat — the light had hardened while she talked, the grey burning thin and bright off the wet ferns — and put them on, and walked down the hill after the two of them, leaving the doors that stayed closed exactly as he’d found them. Which had cost him more than the lock ever would have.

Chapter 9 — Moving Mountains

The alcove sat off the main floor of Cave 1, a pocket the tourist path didn't reach — a low recess where the chamber's wall stepped back into shadow and the engineered terracing gave way to something rougher, a place the makers had perhaps used and abandoned, or never finished. Lin had pointed him to it before she left, a flat nod, the way you'd show a guest a quiet room. *Sit there if you must sit. Don't go past the rope.* He had not gone past the rope.

He set the flashlight on a ledge so the beam threw long against the wall, the chevron marks racing up out of the dark in a regular, endless herringbone, and sat on his heels with the notebook open on his knee and a chunk of siltstone in his hand.

It had come loose at his boot, no bigger than a man's fist, broken off something that had broken off something. He turned it over. Cool, a little damp, the colour of wet ash. It crumbled when he worked a corner with his thumbnail — fine grit under the nail, the same grit Lin said would eat the caves if anyone let the wrong air in. Soft stone. That was the joke of the whole place. Not granite. Not the hard cold heart of a mountain that fought you for every centimetre. Mud that had been patient for a hundred million years. You could carve it with a copper tool, with a hardened iron one, with something simpler still if you had the patience and the men.

He weighed it in his palm. Maybe four hundred grams. Call it half a kilo, generous.

He started there, the way he always started — with the thing in his hand, not the thing in the brochure.

One potato, he thought. How many potatoes to make a mountain disappear.

The siltstone ran, Lin had said, around two and a half tonnes to the cubic metre. He wrote 2,500 kg and under it m^3 and looked at the two numbers, and the old steadiness came in behind his eyes, the pattern-mind taking up the load the way his hands took up cord. Half a kilo to a potato. Two and a half thousand kilos to the cube. Five thousand of these little fists of mud in every single cubic metre of empty air around him.

And the empty air around him, across all twenty-four chambers and whatever wasn't catalogued yet, ran to more than a million cubic metres.

He did the sum without meaning to, the way you flinch.

Five thousand million. Five billion of these, give or take an order of magnitude he didn't trust the source on. He scratched it out and wrote it cleaner: 5×10^9 fist-sized pieces. Then he sat looking at the number, and the number sat looking back, and neither of them said anything for a while.

He had built things and broken things and watched men do both. He'd seen a road cut go through a Free State koppie, the yellow machines at it for a season, the spoil heaped in a long ugly ridge you could see from the silos twenty kays off — diesel and steel and a survey crew, and it had taken months and made a hill of its own leavings beside the wound. He'd seen what one man with a pick does in a day, because he'd been the man with the pick, once, on a contract that paid in the only currency a war leaves you spending. A man with a good tool and good water and no one trying to kill him moves — what, a cube a day? Less, in stone, even soft stone. Call it a cube a day to be kind to the dead.

A million cubes. A million man-days.

He wrote 1,000,000 and beside it, because he was an engineer and not a poet, $\div \text{men} \div \text{days} = ?$ and let the question hang.

A thousand men, then. A thousand men working — and that was already a town, that was already a problem of bread and water and where they slept and who decided and who was paid and in what — a thousand men working a cube a day each would take a thousand

days. Three years. And that was *one* chamber's worth, near enough, if you believed the numbers, which he was beginning not to. Twenty-four of them. A generation. Two. Grandfathers starting a hole their grandsons finished, and not one of them writing it down.

He thought about the bread.

That was where the engineer in him always went, in the end — not the marvel, the lunch. You did not move a mountain on inspiration. You moved it on calories. A thousand men eat. They eat every day, twice, three times if you want them strong enough to swing a tool that doesn't quit, and the food has to come from somewhere, has to be grown by someone who isn't swinging the tool, carried in, cooked, the fires fed, the smoke going up — and a fire going up every day for a generation is a thing the country remembers. The country remembers the *ash*. The country remembers the latrines and the graves and the broken hafts and the worn-out drag-baskets thrown on a heap, and the heap, and the heap of the heap.

He looked at the chamber. He looked at the chevrons running up into the dark, perfect, parallel, unbothered.

And then he came, the way every road in this place came, to the wall.

Where did it go.

Not the men. Men he could imagine. He could put a face on the foreman — a hard old man with a bad back and an eye for who was loafing; he'd known a dozen of him in a dozen armies. He could imagine the boy who carried water, and the woman who cooked, and the one who got crushed when a slab let go and was buried up the hill in the dark with someone's two words said over him. He could build the whole vanished town in his head, brick by brick, the way he built a route or a man, because that was the gift, that was the one thing he was for.

But the spoil.

Five billion fists of mud. A *mountain* of it — more than the hill it came out of, because broken stone takes up more room than solid, that was just physics, the bag-of-rice law every quarryman knows — and it was gone. Not hidden. Not heaped somewhere clever and grown over. He'd walked the hill yesterday with the rain coming down and there was no ridge, no terrace of leavings, no second hill made of

the guts of the first. The river had no debris in it. The county had no quarry scar. A million cubic metres of removed rock had left the earth the way a word leaves the air — and the earth, like Lin's caves, declined to say where it went.

He had a thought, and wrote it, and didn't like it, and kept it because he was honest if he was nothing: *Maybe the spoil IS the marvel and the holes are just where they got it.* That they hadn't carved chambers and thrown the rock away. That they'd wanted the *rock* — all that fine even mud-stone — for something, somewhere, that needed five billion shaped and sorted pieces, and the chambers were only the negative of that, the hole left by a thing you'd never find because it had been spread across a province as walls and roads and dams no one would ever think to count backward into a missing mountain.

It was a good thought. The kind that paid for tea. And it died the moment he held it up to the same wall, because then you only moved the spoil problem one step sideways: the province had no anonymous five-billion-piece *thing* either, no orphan stone with no story, any more than the hill had a heap. The mud had not become anything you could find. It had simply, like its makers, declined to be accounted for.

He sat with that for a long time, the beam holding its straight line across the herringbone, the drip somewhere behind him keeping a time slower than any heart.

He was aware, distantly, of a feeling he didn't have much practice at, and it took him a while to put a name to it because the name was not one he carried often. He could read a man's pockets and his fear and the year he stopped sleeping. He could read a town for its exits and a border for its mood and a charging dog for the second its mind had been made up. He could read a made thing — *what is this for, who held it, what did they need it to do* — the way other men read their own language, automatic, under thought, a thing his body did before his head was asked.

And the cave would not be read.

It was not that he'd run out of cleverness. He had plenty of cleverness left; he could sit here another week and fill the notebook with sums and each sum would be sound and not one of them would touch the bottom of it. It was that the cleverness had finally come up against

a thing it could not turn the corner of. The spatial mind that found the dead miner's exit by feel, that read a tunnel cut a hundred thousand years gone — it stood here in front of the straightest, simplest, most patient thing human hands ever made, and it had nothing. The makers had built a door and walked through it and let it close, and the door had no handle on this side, and no amount of being good at doors would open it.

He turned the chunk of siltstone over one more time. Half a kilo. One of five billion. The cool of it, the give of the grit, the wet-ash colour — the only honest witness in the room, and it could tell him only what it was, never where its brothers went.

Some made things, he thought, and stopped, because he could feel the sentence wanting to finish itself into something grand, and grand was a lie. He got plainer. *Some made things you don't get to finish reading*.

He didn't write that one down. You didn't write down a thing like that; you just took it. He set the stone back on the ledge where it had come from, gently, the way you'd set down a sleeping animal, and closed the notebook over the unanswered question and the dead good thought and the five billion fists, and sat a while longer in the straight darkness, not solving it.

It was, he thought, the first place in a long life of reading the world that had asked him only to witness it. Not to fix it. Not to crack it. Not to get them out alive. Just to sit in the room with it, properly, the whole front of his attention committed, and let it be what it was and refuse to lie about how much of it he understood.

He could do that. It turned out he could do that.

The drip went on, keeping its slow time. He took his shades off, though there was no one to read and no light to need them gone for, and folded them, and held them, and looked into the dark where the marks ran up and out of the beam into a black his flashlight would never reach the end of, and he let the not-knowing pass over him and through him, and when it had gone past there was no answer where it had been.

Only the chamber. Only him in it. Only the question, held, and unpaid, and — he understood now — not his to pay.

Tomorrow Lin would open a door he was allowed through, into the flooded part, and the water would be black and cold and the chambers would go on under it the same way they went on up here, declining to say. He found, sitting there with the stone cooling beside him and his eyes bare in the dark, that he wanted to see it anyway. Not to solve. Just to be in the room.

He pushed up off his heels — knees telling him, the way they told him every morning now, exactly how many years had gone into this body — picked up the flashlight, and left the alcove the way you leave a sleeping thing, quietly, without looking back too hard, so as not to wake what was better left to dream.

Chapter 10 — The Hill in the Dark

The last bus left at five. He watched its tail-lights swing out of the gravel lot and go red between the bamboo, and then there was nothing on the road but the road. The rain had stopped. The air over Fenghuang Hill had the wet-stone smell of a place that has decided to be quiet.

Jakobus let it. He climbed.

Not the tourist path with its lamp-posts and its rope and its sign in three languages — the other way, the slope behind the office where the grass came back the moment the day-staff went home. His boots took it without complaint. The Anvil Roses were a year into their second resoling and they knew this kind of ground the way a horse knows a stable; he didn't have to think about his feet, which left the rest of him free to think about nothing, which was the point of coming up.

Below him the closed ponds lay flat and black, twenty-odd shallow mouths in the hillside's skin, each one a lid over a chamber that had not seen a man's hand since '92 — only Chen's locks and Lin's careful instruments. The water held the last of the sky, a grey so faint it was more the memory of light than light. He looked down at the lids and thought: under each of those is a hall the size of a church, and not one of them is making a sound.

He had stood over a lot of holes in the world.

Some had too much story. He'd walked a corridor in the Valley of the Kings where the dead man's whole life ran up the wall in registers —

who he was, who his god was, what he ate, what he wanted to take with him — a man so frightened of being forgotten that he carved a thousand reminders and was forgotten anyway, his name chiselled out by the next king the way you scratch out a phone number you don't want found. Too much story, and most of it a lie the man told himself. Petra had the opposite too-much: a city that wrote everything in stone and water and nothing in ink, so the world filled the silence with its own noise — temples, tombs, treasuries, the names tourists pinned on the façades because the Nabataeans hadn't bothered. People could not stand a blank. They would paint a face on it rather than leave it bare.

He thumbed the shades up off his nose out of habit, found there was nothing to keep off, and folded them into the waistcoat. The eyes came out into the dark and were glad of it. Up here, for once, nothing wanted reading.

That was the thing about this place. It didn't lie and it didn't boast. No name on the wall, no king's column of self-praise, no priest's account, no tax record, no quarry-master's tally scratched in a corner — *so many cartloads, so many men, paid through the third month*. A million cubic metres of siltstone gone out of the hill and not one human being had signed for it. He had stood in workings all over the earth and there was always — always — a man who wanted credit. A foreman who carved his initials. A pharaoh who put his cartouche on a thing his slaves cut. A pit boss who logged the tonnage. The wanting-of-credit was as reliable as gravity; it was, in a way, the most human thing there was, the small immortal itch under everything people built.

And here: nothing. A hole in the record the exact shape of the hill that should be on top of it.

He'd spent the afternoon in the alcove with a pencil doing the sum, because that was what his kind of mind did when it was frightened — it counted. Five billion stones the size of a fist. A million man-days, give or take a war's worth. A workforce you'd have to feed, which meant fields, which meant grain, which meant a road and a granary and a thousand cooking fires and somewhere for all those people to sleep and shit and be buried — and none of it, none of it, on the ground, in the river, in the soil, in a single broken sherd that said *we were here in numbers*. You could not hide a city. He knew that better

than most; he had spent years of his life trying to hide far fewer men than this hill would have needed, and the truth of his trade was that you never hid them. You only delayed the moment someone found the sign.

Someone had found the sign here. And the sign said: there is no sign.

He breathed out, long, and let the rest of it go with the breath.

For two days it had sat in him like a stone he couldn't put down — the *what is it for*, the *where did it go*, the engineer's outrage at a made thing that would not say what it was made for. His whole life had been the read. He read a border off a guard's shoulders, a man's intent off the set of his hands, a road off the colour of the dust, a truck's heart off the note of its idle. He found the use. That was the gift and the thing he was, both in one — find the use, find the exit, find the way out. He had never once stood in front of a made thing and had the made thing simply close its mouth and keep it closed.

Lin had said it plainly in the office, in her flat good English, not unkindly. *The not-naming is the achievement. You are trying to make it confess. It did not build itself to confess.*

He'd heard the same shape of thing before, in another country, from another keeper, and he hadn't liked it then either. You don't conquer the past. You remember it and you keep it safe. He was good at the keeping. He was bad — he saw it now, up here, with no one to see him be bad at it — at the *not knowing*. He could leave a country he loved and never go back, carry a closed border in his chest for the rest of his days, and not say a word. He could leave a man in the dirt and walk away owing him nothing but the breath in his body. He could give away his father's blade hilt-first to a stranger at a fire and limp off into the dark glad of it. He could let go of almost anything.

He had never learned to let go of a question.

Down in the bamboo something moved — low, four-footed, unhurried — and his hand was halfway to nothing before his eyes caught up and made it a dog. A yellow village mongrel, ribs like a washboard, the kind that owns a hill the way a junkyard alpha owns a yard. It came up the slope on a diagonal, not toward him and not away, the way an animal moves through a place it has every right to be. Ten metres

off it stopped and looked at him.

He did not move and did not speak. He let his shoulders go soft, let his weight settle, kept his eyes level but easy — not the locked stare you give a thing you mean to stop, just the plain acknowledgement of one creature to another in the dark on a hill that belonged to neither of them. *Sawubona*, he thought, without saying it, because it didn't need a language and the dog had none.

The dog held it a long moment. Then it dropped its head, sniffed at the grass, lifted a leg against a fence-post with great ceremony, and went on along its diagonal into the dark below the ponds — about its own business, which had never been him. A keeper of the hill, doing the rounds. He watched it go and felt, absurdly, included. Passed. Cleared at a checkpoint with no guard and no gate.

Behind it, far off, a torch-beam swung once across the lower path — a night watchman, or a farmer checking a pump, somebody whose whole life was these few hectares and had been long before a fish pond gave up its secret. The beam found nothing it wanted and went out. The man and the dog were the same animal, doing the same thing: walking the dark, asking nothing of it, letting it be what it was.

Jakobus stood among the unlit ponds and the weight came down on him at last — not the weight of the chambers, the rock, the missing mountain, the five billion stones. The weight of the *above*. Of the quiet over the holes. Of all the people who must have stood here once in the noise of the making, and the longer silence after, when whoever they were finished, and capped the wells, and walked away, and left nothing — not a name, not a boast, not a tally, not a god — and let the hill close its mouth over the whole of them on purpose.

That was the marvel he'd been missing because he'd been staring at the floor. It wasn't only in the dark below. It was in the dark above. The chambers were the easy wonder, the thing you could measure and photograph and put on a sign. The hard wonder was the silence on top — a people who could build like that and chose to be no one, who did the most enormous thing a region ever did and signed it *nobody*, and meant it, and made the meaning hold for two thousand years.

He had spent his life among men who could not bear to be no one. He was, if he was honest in the dark where it cost nothing, one of them —

a man under three names, with a name not even on his own papers, who still left a piece of his heart on every fire he'd ever danced at because some part of him needed the fire to remember he'd been there. And here was a whole people who had let go of the one thing he had never managed to let go of. Not the blade. Not the border. The wanting-to-be-known.

He thought he might learn something from that if he stood here long enough.

The not-knowing was not a stone he had to put down. It was a thing he got to carry. There was a difference, and the difference was the whole of it. You put down a stone because it's dead weight. You carry a thing because it's worth the carrying — a sleeping child, a wounded man, a cup of cold water across a furnace, a question that a hill two thousand years dead had asked and would never answer and had every right not to. He would carry it out of China the way he carried the closed border and the cordite and the boy he could not reach: quietly, all the way, and set down nowhere.

Tomorrow Lin would open a door for him, the one safe door, into the flooded dark below the lids. He would go down and he would not solve it, and that was, he saw, exactly what she was offering — not an answer but a chance to stand in the straight darkness and want nothing from it. To be the dog on the hill. To be the man with the torch. To pass through, and ask the dark to be only itself.

He stood a while longer with his bare eyes open to the night, and the ponds held their faint failing grey, and the bamboo ticked in a wind he could barely hear, and somewhere down the slope the dog kept the rounds it had kept since long before him and would keep long after. The darkness over the hill was not empty. It was full of everyone who had ever chosen to be no one here. It was the most crowded silence he had ever stood in, and it did not want a single thing from him, and for the first time in two days that was a peace and not a defeat.

He folded the shades deeper into the waistcoat where they'd be in the morning. He would not need them tonight.

Then he turned and went down off the hill in the dark, sure-footed, toward sleep, carrying the question whole.

Chapter 11 — What Is It For?

Dr. Lin's office was the size of a shipping container and smelled of paper and damp stone. A space heater ticked in the corner, fighting a losing battle with the wet that came up out of the hill through the concrete floor. She had cleared the long table by the simple method of moving everything to one end, so the cleared half now held what she wanted Jakobus to see, and the other half held the wreckage of three decades of trying to understand it.

He stood with his hands behind his back, the way he'd learned to stand in other people's rooms, and let her arrange.

She set out a survey map first — the whole complex drawn flat, the chambers lined up under the hill like rooms in a house no one had ever lived in. Then a stratigraphy chart, the siltstone layered in coloured bands. Then, last, on a square of grey felt, the pottery shards: small, dull, the ordinary brown of cooking pots. Han, she said. Or near enough.

"Sit," she said. "You make the room look like an inspection."

He sat. The chair complained under him and he ignored it.

"You want the hypotheses." It was not quite a question. She had clearly done this many times, for many people, in rooms exactly this size. "I will give you all of them. Then you will give me yours, because every visitor has one, and yours will be the same as all the others, and we will both feel better."

"Probably," Jakobus said.

She held up a finger. "Quarry."

"You don't believe it."

"I don't believe it. But I will say it, because it is the first thing anyone says, and a thing said first is owed the courtesy of being said properly." She tapped the survey map, the regular rooms. "You remove stone for building. Yes? You take it out, you carry it away, you put it in walls somewhere. Possible. There is good stone in this hill." She let the finger sit a moment, then moved it off the map, a small dismissing gesture. "But a quarry is a wound. It is greedy. It follows the seam, it leaves the rock ugly, it does not care how the ceiling looks. These rooms care how the ceiling looks." She glanced up at her own ceiling, the corrugated steel of it. "Whoever made these was not taking stone. They were making rooms. The stone leaving was — what is the word — a by-product."

"A side effect of the room."

"Yes. And nobody builds a quarry to a plan." She moved the finger back, set it down on a chamber. "These are to a plan."

Jakobus said nothing. It was the thing he had felt down there and not had words for — that the cuts went the way the room wanted, not the way the seam ran. He let her have the saying of it.

She held up a second finger. "Storage. Granary. The Han ate. The Han needed cool, dry, dark, large. These are cool. They were dry, before the water came in. They are dark." A small shrug. "I like this one more than the quarry. It is at least the right shape of want. But—" the finger tipped sideways "—you do not chisel the most beautiful walls in the prefecture to keep rice. You do not raise a ceiling to thirty metres for grain. Grain wants low and tight, so the cold sits on it. These reach up. They are too proud to be a barn."

"Too proud," Jakobus said. He was smiling a little, at the floor, where she couldn't see it and would have known anyway.

Third finger. "Shelter. War, flood, bandits — you go into the hill, you wait. The Quzhou country was fought over many times." She turned her hand over, empty. "But shelter is panic. It is fast and it is mean and you do it badly because you are frightened. These are slow. You can read the slowness in the marks — bar after bar, no

haste anywhere. A frightened people did not do this. A people with time did this. With more time than I think they should have had.”

She did not raise a fourth finger straight away. She looked at the shards on the felt instead.

“Ritual,” she said, quieter. “Temple. The carvings — the horse, the fish, the bird, in the one chamber.” A flick of the eyes at him. “You saw them.”

“I saw them,” Jakobus said. “Later than the rooms. Cut into a wall that was already there. Nothing the room needed.”

She nodded slowly, and something in her face eased — the small relief of a specialist met by someone who had bothered to look. “Tourist marks,” she said. “Two thousand years before the bus.” A dry pleasure in it. “Somebody came down into a finished room and put a horse on the wall the way a boy puts his name. It does not tell us what the room was for. It tells us the room was already old and strange when he found it, and he wanted to belong to it.” She let that sit. “Ritual is the answer people reach for when the others fail. It means *I cannot say why, so I will say the gods*. I do not like to reach for it. But I will not throw it away. People do impossible work for gods. They have always done their most impossible work for gods.”

“And the last one,” Jakobus said.

“Military.” She made the word small and flat, the way you set down a tool you don’t think you’ll need. “Garrison. Drill hall. Hide the soldiers, hide the boats, hide the gunpowder.” She shook her head once. “No iron in the silt that should be there. No fittings, no anchors in the walls, no soot on the ceilings the way men make soot when they live somewhere. They left it cleaner than a barracks ever was.” A breath. “There. Five. Choose.”

Jakobus looked at the map for a while.

He had spent thirty years reading the made thing back to the want behind it — the truck built for escape not show, the boot that could not lie about the distance, the blade carried so the eye would dismiss it. A thing was always *for* something; the *for* was the door; he had never once not found the door. He put his finger lightly on the survey map, on the long quiet row of rooms, and felt for it.

“Granary that became a temple,” he said. “Built slow, in peace, for grain or salt or whatever the prefecture had too much of. Then the use died and the rooms stayed, the way rooms do, and a later man came down and found them holy because they were old, and put his horse on the wall.” He moved the finger. “Or a quarry that got proud halfway through — started greedy, then somebody good took it over and couldn’t bear to leave it ugly.” He moved it again. “Or none of those. Or all of them, in order, over four hundred years, each people inheriting the last one’s rooms and using them for something the last one would not recognise.”

Dr. Lin watched him do it. She was not impatient. She had the patience of someone who had heard better-credentialled men do exactly this and walk out certain.

“Each one is possible,” she said.

“Each one is possible. None is proven.” He took his hand off the map and put it back behind his back. “I can build you a story for any of them and you couldn’t break it. That’s not the same as it being true. That’s just me being good at stories.”

“Yes.” And then, with no weight at all, the way you’d remark on weather: “That is the honest answer. The maybe. It is not a failure of the work. It is the work. We know what we know, we mark the edge of it, and we do not lie across the edge to make a tidier shape.” She turned one of the shards over with a fingernail, looked at its dull brown back, set it down again. “I have a favourite. I will tell you, because you asked properly and because everyone wants the keeper to choose.” A small wry tilt of the mouth. “Storage. The cool and the dark and the want of the right size. I think they kept something here and it was ordinary, and the wonder is only that they did the ordinary thing so beautifully and then forgot to say so.”

“But you shrug when you say it.”

“I shrug when I say it.” She did, exactly then — a small lift of the shoulders that gave nothing away and meant *and it might be the gods, and it might be the soldiers, and I will die before I know, and that is allowed*. “A theory I cannot break is a theory I have not finished being honest about. Mine I cannot break either. So I hold it loosely. It is the difference between believing a thing and preferring it.”

Jakobus sat with that. The heater ticked. Somewhere up the slope a dog he half-recognised sent one bark into the dark and quit.

“Can I ask you something that isn’t engineering,” he said.

“You can ask. I may not answer well.”

“The local feeling.” He kept his voice flat, the way he kept it for the things that mattered. “The village. Do they carry it as a pride — *we have the great unknown thing* — or a mystery they want solved, or do they walk past it on the way to work and not think about it at all?”

She did not answer for a moment. Outside, the rain had started again, soft, ticking on the steel like a smaller heater. He waited through the silence without filling it; it was the same waiting he gave a border guard, the same he’d given a Tuareg fire — the gift of not making a person hurry toward a thing that deserved its time.

“Some are proud,” she said at last. “The tourism people, the young ones who left and came back. They like a marvel; a marvel is good for the town.” She moved the shards a centimetre, an idle ordering. “Some are afraid, still, the old way — the dragon, the bottomless pond. They drained their fish pond and found a made room their grandfathers never mentioned, and a thing your grandfather did not mention is a thing he had a reason not to mention. That fear is not foolish. It is only old.”

“And you?”

She looked at him then, properly — the way the older local had looked at him over the tea, the way Ma Tshabalala had looked at him once a different life ago — the look of someone deciding whether the room had got smaller or larger with him in it.

“Me,” she said, “I do not need to know what it is for.” She said it the way you state a fact you’ve stopped arguing with. “I wanted to, when I was young here. I wanted to be the one. Every keeper wants to be the one.” A breath. “Then I lived above it long enough. It does not ask me to name it. It only asks me to keep it from falling in, and to not let the wrong people open the wrong door, and to tell the truth about the edge of what we know.” She put her hand flat on the survey map, on all the rooms at once, the way the old man had put his on the tea things. “It is ours. Whether we know or not. That is enough. The knowing was never the part that made it ours.”

The space heater ticked. Jakobus did not say anything for a while, and she did not need him to, and the not-needing was its own kind of agreement.

He had come here a man who finds the door. He had found, instead, a room that did not have one — or had one, and had quietly walled it up two thousand years ago, on purpose, by a people who had decided the *for* was theirs to keep and not his to take. And the keeper of it sat across a table the size of a container, untroubled, holding her maybe loosely in two hands like a cup of something hot, and the trouble he'd carried up the hill and down it had nothing to push against in her at all.

"That's a hard thing to learn," he said. "Not-knowing on purpose."

"It is the hardest thing I teach." She began, unhurried, to move the maps back to the wrecked end of the table, the meeting over without anyone declaring it. "Tomorrow the flooded section. You will see — the water has its own answer, and it does not share it either." She glanced up, the dry tilt back at her mouth. "Bring your boots. The good ones. I have seen your boots. They will be the only honest thing down there."

Jakobus stood, the chair sighing relief, and found that the question he'd carried up the hill in the dark — the one he'd made his peace with under the silent ponds — sat easier now for having been set on a table beside hers: two maybes the same shape, neither one a defeat.

"Ntate," he said, which she would not know, and gave her the small bow you give a person who has just handed you the missing half of something.

She didn't ask what it meant. She just nodded, like she'd been given a coin she'd keep.

Chapter 12 — The Brochure Arrives First

He came back to Cave One at the wrong time on purpose.

The first bus had already disgorged its load when Jakobus paid his thirty yuan at the kiosk like any other man and went down the same long ramp he had walked alone two days before. The ramp had not changed. The chamber it fed into had become a different country.

Sound reached him before the floor did — the particular sound of a room being consumed. Not the drip and the held breath of his first descent, the silence that had sat on his chest the way a stone holds the day's heat. This was many voices laid over each other, the brittle chime of a tour guide's flag-mounted speaker, the small electric whine of a selfie stick extending, somebody's audio guide bleeding tinny Mandarin out of an earbud worn loose. A child cried, briefly, and was hushed with a sweet from a packet. The lighting had been turned all the way up for the hours — warm sodium washing the terraces, throwing the chevroned tool-marks into a flatness the dark had given depth.

He stopped at the bottom of the ramp and let the river of them move around him, the way you let cattle move around a fence post. The shades stayed up in his hair. There was no uniform here that needed his bare eyes; there was only a crowd, and a crowd you read with the eyes covered, because the covering lets you watch without being watched back.

A guide stood near the great central pillar with a flag the colour of a traffic robot gone amber, and forty people in matching lanyards arranged themselves in a loose arc to be told the place.

Jakobus moved to the edge of them, not in, not out. He had no Mandarin to speak of — a courtesy handful, *nǐ hǎo*, *xièxiè*, *dúshuǒ qián*, the words a man carries to show he knows whose house it is — but he had the other thing, the thing that worked in any tongue: he could watch a mouth and a hand and a crowd's weather and read the shape of what was being said even when the words slid off him the way the abstract symbols always did.

The guide's hand swept up to take in the height of the chamber. *Big*. The arc tilted their heads back, obedient. Phones rose. Her hand came down and pointed at the pool of darker water in the far corner, and her voice rose half a step into the cadence Jakobus knew from every guide on every continent — a thing said a thousand times, smoothed at the edges until it ran like water in a worn channel. *Nineteen ninety-two. The farmers. The fish pond. Seventeen days of pumping*. He didn't need the words. He had the rhythm, and the rhythm told him she was giving them the discovery, the good clean story with a beginning, the one that started in 1992 and not before, because before was the part nobody could sell.

She held up her flag with a number on it, and the arc made the soft noise a crowd makes when a number lands. A million cubic metres. He watched it pass over them the way weather passes over a field — a ripple, a turning of faces to each other, *eh*, the small theatre of being impressed — and then it was gone, digested, and they were already looking for where to stand to put the pillar behind them.

That was the part that got him. Not the noise. The speed of the swallowing.

A young couple came past him to the foot of the pillar, the woman in white trainers that would never see a real road, the man holding the stick out at arm's length. She arranged her face, found the soft warm light, tilted her chin to the angle she'd practised, and the man counted with his thumb and the phone made its false shutter sound. They moved three steps and did it again with the terraces behind. Then they were walking, already walking, the cave behind them now a backdrop they had collected, and Jakobus saw — he could not stop himself seeing — that neither of them, not once, had looked at the wall.

The wall was the whole thing. The wall was the marks.

He had stood at that wall in the silence and laid his flat clean hand against the chevrons, the parallel sweeps of the tool, the inhuman regularity of them, a man's hand going where a man's hand had gone a long time ago and finding no message there, no name, no boast — only the work, only the patient straight removing of stone. He had read it the way he read everything, with his palm and his eye and the spatial part of him the schoolroom never reached, and it had refused to tell him what it was for, and the refusal had felt, in the dark, like a kind of dignity. Now the same marks ran under the same hands of a hundred people an hour and the hands did not land on them. The hands held phones. The phones faced out, into the room, into the faces, and the marks stayed where they were, behind everyone, patient as ever, unread.

He moved along the base of the terraces, slow, the field-vest heavy on his shoulders over the open shirt, his bare arms catching the warm light. A small boy had broken from a family group and was running his fingers along a tool-mark, the only person in the chamber doing what the chamber asked, and something went warm and tight in Jakobus and he looked away from it before the mother called the boy back into the photograph.

There was a board now where there had not been a board two days ago, or perhaps there had always been one and the dark had hidden it from him. A panel, lit, in three languages, with an artist's pale rendering of men at work — a guess, a pretty guess, scaffolds and torches and figures in tidy robes carrying tidy baskets up a tidy ramp, the whole impossible thing made plausible by a watercolour. He read the English. *The Longyou Grottoes are believed to have been used as.* The sentence offered him a list. Storage. Shelter. A quarry. The list was generous. It gave you four doors and told you to pick the one you liked, the way a menu does, and the trick of it — the small, well-meant, terrible trick — was that it said nothing at all about the thing that was actually true: that nobody knew, that the not-knowing was the marvel, that the hole in the record was the deepest cut chamber of the lot. The board glossed the hole. The board could not sell a hole. You cannot put a question mark on a brochure and ask a family to drive three hours for it.

He understood why. He was not a man who blamed people for needing the story to start somewhere they could stand. Lin had said it, in

the office, last night, settled and unbeaten: *the knowing was never the part that made it ours*. Lin would have to put a board up. Lin would have to give the buses a sentence. You could not gate the whole hill and feed nobody and call that keeping. The keeping was this, too — the lanyards, the flag, the smoothed cadence — the keeping was letting the place be loved a little wrong so that it could be loved at all.

But he stood there in the consuming noise and he ached, plain and unswollen, a man's ache for a thing being eaten before it had been understood.

The wonder had been raw two days ago. He had come up out of it changed, carrying the not-knowing the way you carry a stone in the vest that won't explain why you keep it. And now the rawness was being smoothed, board by board, photograph by photograph, sentence by smoothed sentence, into something a person could put behind them and walk away from in under twenty minutes. The maybe — the great clean honest maybe he and Lin had sat inside last night like two men inside a chamber that kept its own counsel — the maybe was not for sale at the kiosk. They had no SKU for it. So they sold the list instead, and the list was a lie shaped like an answer, and the people took the answer because the answer was what the day was for.

He thought, dry, that this happened to every wonder eventually. The brochure arrived. It always arrived. The only mercy was when it arrived *after* the certainty, after the patient men with the trowels had wrung the ground for its last fact — and here it had come first, the brochure ahead of the knowing, the path laid and the flag raised over a question nobody had answered yet, the place being digested while it was still trying to be understood. That was the cost of access in this age. You opened a door, and the cameras came, and the cameras did not look at the wall.

He did not say any of this. There was no one to say it to, and saying it would have made him the man on the brochure board, the man with the watercolour and the generous list, the man who closes a thing by naming it. He let it stay where it lived, under the waterline, and he moved.

The next tour was coming down the ramp, a louder one, a flag the

colour of his old amber robot and a guide with a headset and a portable amp clipped to her belt that pushed her voice out over the heads in a flattened, doubled wash. The crowd thickened. Two streams met at the pillar and tangled. A man stepped backward into Jakobus's space without seeing him there at all, which was correct, which was the whole craft of him — the soft-bellied nothing you walked into and apologised to and forgot.

Jakobus stepped aside. He found the deep shadow on the lee side of the great central pillar where the lit panels did not reach and the warm sodium fell away, and he lowered himself down onto his heels with his back against the cold straight-cut stone, the way a man sits who has sat in a thousand places waiting for a crowd to pass, and he let them pass.

The pillar was at his spine. The marks were at his shoulder. He did not put his hand on them. The light was wrong for it now, and the moment was wrong, and there were people. He would come back when they had gone, when the last bus had taken its photographs up the ramp and the lights went down to the keeping-glow and the drip came back into the dark and the chamber remembered what it was when no one was selling it.

But that was hours off yet. For now he sat in the shadow of the pillar and watched the brochure do its work — the flag, the number, the list of four doors, the white trainers, the false shutter — and he held the maybe in both hands like the last cold water in a hessian bag, knowing exactly how little of it would be left by closing, and how few of them would ever know there had been more.

Chapter 13 — The Chambers That Drown

Dr Lin took him out past the tourist path, where the boardwalk gave way to a graded track of wet gravel and the lighting changed from the staged amber of Cave One to a string of bare bulbs run off a generator that hummed somewhere behind the hill. She had a head-torch on a strap around her neck, switched off, and a clipboard she did not look at. Jakobus walked behind her at her pace, unhurried, and let the morning come up over the river while she talked.

“Six, seven, eight,” she said, and gestured with her chin toward a low fenced lip in the slope. “Sixteen, seventeen, further along. We do not drain these.”

He took the shades off. There was no uniform to do it for, only her, but the light down here was thin and the bulbs threw nothing he needed to hide his eyes from, and he wanted to see the colour of the water. He hooked the shades into the open collar of his shirt and crouched at the fence.

The entrance to Cave Six was a mouth half-shut by its own flood. He could see the top of the carved doorway — the same straight cut, the same chevroned tool-marks running away into the stone — and then the water, flat and brown-green and absolutely still where it met the rock, and below the waterline the cut continued down into a darkness that did not lighten the longer he looked at it. It went straight down. He knew that without being told. The whole place went straight down.

“How deep,” he said.

“We do not know all of them.” She crouched beside him, balanced

easily on the balls of her feet, and looked at the water the way he was looking at it. “Some, the sonar gives a floor. Some, the return is — bad. The walls are not always vertical below the line. They step. The sound comes back confused.”

A sound came up out of the mouth — a soft, recurring slap and draw, water moving against stone in the dark, an echo of an echo. No wind reached it. Something was making the water move far inside, a settling or a seep, and the chamber gave it back amplified and patient, over and over, the way a shell gives back the sea. He listened for a while. It was not a frightening sound. It was a sound that had been going on a very long time with no one to hear it, and would go on.

“They were never opened,” he said.

“Sixteen and seventeen, never. Six, partially — a survey in the nineties, the water lowered a little, then they stopped.” She tapped the clipboard against her knee, once. “When you lower the water you change the load. The siltstone holds because it is wet and because it is even. Take the water out of one and the pressure shifts, the wall dries, it cracks. We learned this on a small one. We do not do it again.”

“So whatever’s in them.”

“Is in them.” She said it flatly, the way he himself said hard things, and he liked her for it. “Their contents are unknown. Their structures are at risk. The two are the same sentence. To learn what is inside, we would have to do the thing that would destroy it.”

He let that sit. Across the lip the water held the shape of the doorway and gave nothing back but the slow slap, slap, draw. A leaf had come down off the hill at some point — weeks ago, by the look of it, gone soft and dark — and floated near the cut, turning very slowly, riding whatever current the chamber breathed. He watched it turn. It would turn there until it sank.

“You’ve sent people in,” he said. It was not quite a question. There was a frayed yellow rope still tied to the fence post, going down into the water and stopping, and a rusted ring-bolt set in the rock above the doorway that nobody had put there for tourists.

“Twice.” Lin followed his eye to the rope and did not move to coil it. “Divers, the first time, from Hangzhou — proper men, cave-certified.

The visibility is two metres on a good day. It is not a good day, most days. The silt is fine, it has not moved in two thousand years, and the moment a fin touches a wall it comes up off the floor like smoke and then there is nothing. You are inside a square room you cannot see, with one door, in the dark, in water that does not move until you move it.” She turned her hand over, palm up. “And the rooms are not simple. They step down. A man can go over an edge he did not know was there and lose which way is up. We have done it twice. We will not do it a third time for curiosity.”

“What got hurt the second time.”

She glanced at him. She had not said anyone got hurt. He had heard it in the way she’d put the count down — *twice* — and stopped, the small extra weight a person gives a number when the second one cost something.

“One man, his line fouled on a pillar we did not have on the map,” she said. “He was brought up. He is fine now. He does not dive any more.” She stood, knees creaking faintly, a sound that rhymed with his own mornings, and looked down at him still crouched at the fence. “So. We do not send people into them. The risk is to the men and to the rooms, and the reward is — a story we already half-have. It is not worth a life and it is not worth a chamber, to know whether there is a pot down there.”

Jakobus stayed crouched a moment longer. The leaf turned. The slap and draw went on, unbothered by any of them, the chamber talking to itself in the only language it had kept.

He thought of every other hole he had been down. The gold mine, the cage, the long drop with the gate clanged shut over his head and the rock closing — and the way his whole body had wanted, the entire descent, a way back out of his own making. He thought of the working tunnels, the dead miner’s exit he had read by feel in the dark. His gift was that: a made thing, made by someone, *for* something, and there was always a way through it because a person had thought it and a person could be thought-after. He had never met a room he could not, eventually, get the back of.

And here were chambers he would never stand inside. Not gated — gated he could pick, gated was a chain through a loop and a strand of cord and twenty quiet seconds. Not buried — buried he could read,

buried was just gone-in, and what is gone-in can be gone-out. These were *drowned*. The water was not a lock. A lock is a thing one man made and another man can unmake. The water was the room's own refusal, settled into it over twenty centuries, holding the silt down and the walls even and the secret whole, and the price of the secret was the secret itself. You could not have it without breaking it. There was no read here. There was no way to the back of it that was not also the end of it.

Something in him that had been arguing for three days — the part that walks the perimeter, that finds the spoil heap, that gets the back of the room — sat down. Not in defeat. He had felt defeat down a mineshaft, and this was a cousin of it but not the same blood. This was nearer to what he'd come up the hill in the dark to find and only half got: that some made things keep their maker, and some kept rooms keep their contents, and the keeping is not a wall you have failed to climb. It is the achievement. The water was doing, on its own, what every keeper in the world tries to do and mostly fails at — guarding a thing so completely that even the wanting cannot reach it.

He took the notebook out of the vest and the pencil from its loop and did not write a single word.

He drew the entrance. The straight cut of the doorway, the chevroned marks running back, the hard horizontal line where the stone became water — and below it, with the side of the lead, the soft confusion of the flood, the no-edge, the dark that did not lighten. He drew the leaf. He drew the slow turn of it with three short curved strokes, and then could not make the page hold the sound, so he left a wide blank around the waterline, the way a man leaves a chair empty for someone. That was right. The blank was the slap and the draw, the breathing of the room. He marked the frayed yellow rope going down and stopping. He did not draw a floor, because he did not know where it was, and to invent one would have been the same small lie as the instant coffee, the same as the brochure board upstairs with its tidy list of maybes and the true maybe left off.

At the bottom edge of the page, where his thumb wanted to write *cannot enter*, he drew instead a single line across — the waterline again, but heavier, edge to edge of the paper. A boundary. Not a wall someone built. A boundary the place had grown, the way a tree

grows a ring, the way scar tissue is the body deciding a thing is closed now.

"You are not writing," Lin said. She had been watching him.

"No." He turned the notebook so she could see it, which he did for very few people. She looked at the empty space around the line and understood it, he could tell, the same way she understood not-naming as an act. She did not say it was good. She nodded once, the nod people give a true thing, and looked back at the water.

"Most foreigners want me to say someone will dive it one day. Better equipment. The Chinese government, the money, the time." She said *foreigners* without any edge, a category she was used to handling, the way he was used to handling *farangi* and *mlungu*. "They cannot accept a thing that stays closed. They think closed is a problem with a future solution."

"Some doors you don't open," Jakobus said. The shades were still in his collar. He left them there. "You stand at them and you're glad they're shut. Because a man who'd get past *that*—" he tipped his chin at the drowned mouth, the patient slap of it, "—wouldn't be a man you'd want anywhere near anything you loved."

She looked at him a beat too long, the way people did when he'd said the small true thing without knowing it was anything. Then she stood, and gestured along the perimeter to where the track went on toward Sixteen and Seventeen, the ones never touched at all, and he capped the pencil and put the notebook away and rose to follow, his knees telling him about it, the river coming full into the day behind them.

The leaf turned. The chamber breathed. Behind him the water held its line across the doorway, edge to edge, and he carried it out of there exactly as it was — undrawn at the centre, true at the boundary, a marvel he would never see and was, for once, content to leave drowned.

Chapter 14 — Conservation and Closure

The notice was taped to the inside of the site-office glass, where the morning light came through it from the wrong side so the characters showed up reversed first — ghost-script — before he came round the door and they turned themselves the right way.

Jakobus read Chinese the way he read most things he wasn't fluent in: by shape, by the company a word kept. He found the date, the seal, the small grid of numbers down the side that any administration on earth used to mean *this is fixed now, do not argue*. He didn't need Chen, who came in behind him pulling off his cap, to tell him what it said. Chen told him anyway, in the flat voice of a man relaying weather.

"Next season," Chen said. "Cave One stays open. The path is — shorter." He drew a line with the side of his hand. "Less of it. They close the far end. And caves they were thinking to open —" He didn't finish. He turned the cap in his hands.

"They're not going to."

"No."

So the window he had been let through was already swinging to. He stood with the notice and let that settle without dressing it up. Two days of being given things — the descent, the gated gates, the flooded perimeter, the honest maybe — and he had taken them the way a man takes water from a village cup, and the whole time the door behind him had been quietly easing shut on its own weight.

Dr Lin was at the long table with three others. He knew two of them by

sight from the perimeter walk; the third was younger, a woman with a laptop and a stack of printed graphs the colour of bruises. They were mid-sentence when he came in, and Lin lifted two fingers off the table — *stay, sit, this concerns you too* — and went on.

He took the chair at the end and kept the shades folded in the vest pocket. There was nothing official in the room, only people doing the hardest part of caring for a thing, which is deciding what to let go.

The argument — and it was an argument, the polite, exhausted kind that has been had before — ran in Mandarin, and Lin gave him the spine of it in English between rounds, not translating so much as keeping him in the room. The young woman with the graphs wanted monitoring on Caves 6 and 16; she had numbers the county hadn't seen, she said — humidity swings since the new lighting went into Cave One, a creep in one of the joint sensors. One of the men wanted the revenue argument made plainly to the prefecture before anyone decided anything: the tickets paid for the conservation; close too much and you starved the very work that kept the rest alive. The other man said, mildly — in a tone Jakobus recognised across any language as the tone of a man who has lost this fight politely several times — that the revenue was the problem. That every yuan of it walked in on two feet and breathed and sweated and put its hand where the rope wasn't.

"You see the bind," Lin said to him quietly, while they went round again.

"I see it."

"More people, more money, more conservation. More people, more harm. The same crowd is the cure and the disease." She turned her cup a quarter-turn on the table, the way she did. "Cave One can carry it, just. So we feed Cave One to the public and starve the rest of light and breath, and we call the starving *protection*. And we are right." She said it without satisfaction. "It is the right thing. It feels like meanness every single day."

The young woman pushed a graph across and tapped a place where the line did something Jakobus didn't need to understand to dislike. Lin looked at it for a long moment.

He listened, and let himself only listen, and underneath the listening

he was doing the other thing the room couldn't see — because his face had spent forty years learning not to show it. He was counting the places.

He had stood in a few rooms now whose ceilings had been worn thin by love. A cave painting somewhere with a sheen on the rock at hand-height where ten thousand palms had steadied ten thousand bodies leaning in to look, the ochre under it gone pale, the animal slowly becoming a smudge of the wanting-to-see-it. A tomb with the breath of the day's coaches hanging in it like fog, the salt blooming on a painted wall the way it blooms on old shoes. A reef he'd splashed in once, graceless and shallow the way he always was, that the men who took the divers out talked about the way you talk about a relative who used to be sharp. The obelisk lying in its quarry at Aswan, cracked and abandoned and therefore perfect — the one nobody could finish loving to death because it had stayed unfinished, in the ground, with the tool-marks raw. Sometimes the only thing that saved a wonder was its breaking before the world arrived.

You could not un-breathe a room. That was the whole of it. There was no resoling this. A boot you sent back to Jim Green and he cut you a new sole and the upper went on being the boot you'd broken in over months. A wall that the air had got at didn't come back. A chamber once drained to be looked into didn't re-fill with the right silence. The damage was the one kind that only went one direction, and that was the kind these people were sitting around a table at half-past nine in the morning trying — with graphs and ticket prices and worn-out courtesy — to keep from happening on their watch.

The bind they were arguing was the bind of every good thing the world found out about. He had no clever side to take. The man who'd want the prefecture told about revenue was right; the man who said the revenue was the disease was right; the young woman with her bruise-coloured lines was the most right of all and would be ignored the most, because graphs lose to ticket booths in every prefecture on every continent, and he'd have bet the Beast on it.

"You're quiet," Lin said. The others had drifted to the kettle and the printer; some small recess in the meeting.

"Not my room to talk in."

"You can talk."

He turned the notice toward her, the reversed ghost-script now plain. "Next season this gets smaller. The year after?"

"Smaller again. We will lose the far gallery of Cave One to the rope — the part with the second pillar, where the marks run cleanest. Too many hands." She said it the way you'd say a relative was going into a home. "I argued for it myself. I will hate it."

He nodded slowly. He'd seen the cleanest marks she meant — the chevroned passes lying across the rock so even and so endless that the mind, looking at them, kept trying to round them off to *machine* and failing, because there was no machine. There was only a person, and another person, and ten thousand strokes, and the patient nothing of a thing done by hand at a scale that argued with the hand. He'd put his fingers a finger's-width above them — never on; you don't touch the thing you came to honour — and felt the cool come off the rock at him. That gallery was going behind a rope. The rope would be there for the rope's good reason, and the marks would go on under the dimming lights, unwatched, the way a thing goes on living when you finally stop watching it die.

And the strangest thing happened in him then, at the end of a conservation team's table with a kettle ticking behind him and a man printing graphs that wouldn't win. The thing he'd come to China carrying — the operator's reflex, *get the back of the room, find the exit, read the whole of it before it reads you* — he'd been wearing it down to nothing for two days against this stone, and now it turned over entirely and showed him its other face, and the other face was not loss. It was the closing window itself, and the fact that he was standing in it.

He had been let *in*. That was the thing. Before the rope. Before the far gallery went dark. Before next season made the path shorter and the season after made it shorter again; before the slow good meanness of these people fed the cave back into its dark one rope at a time — he had got to put a finger's-width of air above the cleanest tool-marks a human hand ever laid, in a room with no name and no maker and no word in any record that it was ever made at all. The water in 16 and 17 had held its caves a thousand years against every diver and drain and would go on holding them. The rope would hold the far gallery against the crowd. And he had walked the open part of it in the narrow good years before the closing finished — and that was not

a thing he was owed, and not a thing he'd paid for, and not a thing he could keep. It was a thing he'd been *given*, the way you're given a morning.

He thought, with no bitterness at all, that he would not see this again. The version he'd seen — the long path, the second pillar, the marks running clean under the visitor light — would be gone behind rope by the time any road brought him back this way, if a road ever did, with the borders he had and the list his name was on. Some doors shut behind you the moment you walk through them. He knew about that. He carried one of those in him already — a beautiful country he could never cross back into, the shut gate in the middle of the thing he loved most. He knew the shape of a thing you only get the once.

It should have ached. It half did. But the half that didn't was bigger, and it surprised him, and he sat very still inside it the way he sat still in the bass when the world spiked him — letting the surprise pull his pulse down rather than up.

Greed would have him angry at the rope. Greed would have him working out, even now, idle and automatic, how a man got past a chain-and-padlock that wasn't really locked, how he'd be alone in the far gallery for the half-hour it took to be a thief of his own seeing. He clocked the impulse the way you clock a thing your hands know how to do and your better part has decided against. He let it pass over him and through him and away, and where the wanting had been there was nothing, and only the right thing remained: the cave belonged to its keeping, and the keeping belonged to these tired people, and the gratitude belonged to him.

"You went somewhere," Lin said. Not a question. She'd been watching his face do the thing it almost never did, which was move.

"I was thinking I got here in time," he said. "That's all. Before the rope."

She considered that. The kettle clicked off behind them. The young woman was stapling her doomed graphs into a corner.

"Most people," Lin said, "are angry that they cannot see all of it. They write to the county. They want the water out of 16 so they can have their photograph." She turned the cup the last quarter-turn, back to where it had started. "You are glad you saw the part you saw."

“I’m glad you let me,” he said. “And I’m glad you’re closing the rest of it. Both. Same morning.”

She didn’t answer that. She didn’t need to; she had her own version, two days deeper and a whole career long. But she put her hand flat on the table for a second, palm down — the gesture a person makes over a thing they’ve decided to protect — and he understood that he had been, briefly, inside the keeping too, and that this was the last room of it.

He stood when the meeting reconvened, because it was theirs now and not his, and he gathered nothing, because he had brought nothing into the room but himself and a folded pair of shades. At the door he looked back once at the notice — the date, the seal, the little grid of fixed numbers — and he did not resent a line of it.

The window was closing. He had stood in it. He would carry the not-seeing-it-again the way he carried everything that couldn’t be helped and shouldn’t be — lightly, and on purpose, and with a strange clean thankfulness that he’d been let through before the dark took its own back. To witness was a temporary thing. That was not the failure of witnessing. That was the price of it, and he’d already paid, and the receipt was the morning itself.

He went out into the light. Behind him, in Mandarin, the argument started up again — gentle, exhausted, right.

Chapter 15 — Standing in the Dark

The last bus had gone. Jakobus heard it pull away on the road below, the grind of the gears flattening into distance, and then the hill held nothing but the small sounds it kept for itself — the drip somewhere in the dark beyond the lights, the tick of cooling metal in the handrail, a bird settling for the night in the scrub above the entrance.

Dr Lin stood at the foot of the ramp with her hand on the switch box. She did not look at him as she spoke. She looked up into the chamber, at the great inclined ceiling running away into shadow, the way a person looks at a thing they have spent years failing to outgrow.

“Ten minutes,” she said. “Then I lock the gate and I go home, and I do not come back to let you out.”

“Understood.”

“You won’t be able to see.”

“No.”

She turned her head then, just enough. Her face in the spilled light from the office below was tired and unsurprised. “Most people want it bright. They want the carvings, the horse, the fish. They want a photograph.” She paused. “You want it dark.”

He didn’t answer that. There wasn’t a true answer that wouldn’t sound like a performance, and she’d have heard the performance in it, the way she heard everything. He folded his shades and slid them into the vest pocket where they lived. There was nothing for them to do

here. The eyes that couldn't lie were about to be no use to anyone, including him.

Lin watched him do it. Something in her — not a smile, smaller than a smile — moved and settled.

"It is yours," she said. "Tonight. The way it is anyone's." Then she threw the switch.

The dark came down like a weight. Not a fade — a thing that arrived all at once and filled the room before he'd finished blinking against it. He heard the gate clang, the chain rattle through the loop, the small precise sounds of a woman who had locked this place a thousand times. Then her footsteps on the path, unhurried, going away, and after a while not even those.

He stood where he was and let his other senses come up out of where the light had been holding them down.

The first thing was the cold. Not the killing African-night cold he could bank a fire against, not the desert drop — a steady, mineral cool that didn't move, the temperature of a place that had never had a season. He ran warm; he always ran warm; here it didn't matter, and he let the heat in his arms be what it was, a small private thing the rock couldn't take from him. He'd worried, the first day, that the cold meant something — air movement, a vent, a way the spoil had gone. It didn't. It was just the stone being patient.

The second thing was the sound of the size of it.

He couldn't have explained this to Ben, who'd have wanted a number. There was no number. There was only the way a drip — far off, behind him and to the left, somewhere near the flooded edge — came to him *late*, the small wet tap of it arriving a fraction after he'd have expected it, the air between him and it long enough to put a hesitation in the report. He listened for the next one. It came. The same hesitation. He turned his head a few degrees and the whole acoustic geometry shifted, the ceiling overhead reading now as a high tilted plane, the drip's echo flattening against it and sliding off toward the entrance ramp. A man who'd spent his life reading land by the way sound fell off it could stand in a black room and feel the shape of the dark.

And the shape of the dark was *straight*.

That was the thing. He took a step — careful, one hand drifting toward the central pillar he knew was there, the way you reach for a wall in your own house at night — and the echo came back off a flat. Not a curve, not the soft return of a natural cavity, the rounded mumble a cave gives you. A flat. A made plane, true to itself, running up and away at the angle the chisels had cut it. He'd seen it for three days in the tourist light, the parallel chevroned marks ranked one above the next, mechanical and even, no spoil to show for any of it. Now he couldn't see it and it was *more* true, not less — the eye had been arguing with it, looking for the trick, for the seam where the regularity broke. The hand and the ear didn't argue. They just reported the flat.

He laid his palm against the pillar. The stone was cool and faintly damp, and the tool marks ran under his fingers in their long even ranks, ridge and groove, ridge and groove, a man's arm and a man's reach repeated until the count was meaningless. He moved his hand along it slowly. Somewhere in there was a morning. A particular man, a particular swing of a particular tool, the first cut of the first day, and then another, and ten thousand more, by people who left no name and dug no waste pile a satellite could find and wrote nothing down — or wrote it somewhere that burned, or rotted, or was never written because the people who knew did not need it written.

He'd spent the first two days wanting that man. Wanting the one detail, the offcut, the mistake, the human thumbprint that would tell him *what for*. He was good at it. It was the only thing he'd ever been reliably good at — reading what a made thing was made to do. The kukri was a harvest blade carried into legend; the screwdriver was the lethal thing that read innocent; a beat-up truck was a man's whole life if you knew where to look. Things told you their purpose if you held them right. He held things right. It was his one gift and his one vanity, and he hadn't known it was a vanity until this dark.

Because the chamber held him right back, and told him nothing.

He stood with his hand on the pillar and felt the old reflex come up — the urge to *close it*, to run the last sum, to make the not-knowing into a knowing he could carry out into the daylight and set down in front of someone: here, this is what it was for, I worked it out. The reflex came up and he let it come, the way he let the cold come, and then he let it go past him, the way the litany said. He watched its path. Where the wanting had gone there was nothing. Only the room

remained, and him in it.

It is ours, whether we know or not.

She'd said that two nights ago, in the office, holding her own preference loosely — storage, she thought, but lightly — and he hadn't fully understood it then. He'd taken it for a scientist's modesty, the trained refusal to overclaim. Standing in the black now with the drip arriving late off a made plane he couldn't see, he understood it the way you understand a thing in your body instead of your head. The knowing was never the part that made it theirs. The makers hadn't needed him to name it. The county didn't need it named to love it. Lin didn't. The hill above, with its silent ponds and its village dog and its watchman, didn't. The mystery wasn't a wound waiting for the man clever enough to dress it. It was the achievement. Someone had built a thing so complete it didn't require an explanation to be whole, and a hundred generations had carried it forward unexplained, and it had lost nothing.

He thought of the other stones he'd stood in front of with his palm flat against them. The unfinished obelisk at Aswan, cracked in its bed, the tool-marks under his hand and a smell he carried still. The standing stones that had reached into a woman beside him and rearranged who she thought she was. He'd loved them for what they gave up. He had never, before this, loved one for what it kept.

He took his hand off the pillar.

The dark did not change. There was nothing to leave behind in it and nothing it would give him to take. He stood one more breath in the late-arriving drip and the unmoving cold and the flat true planes he could feel running away above him into a black that was not absence — he understood that now, plainly, the way he understood weather — not absence at all but a presence, the chamber being entirely itself with no one watching, which was probably how it had spent most of the centuries it had been here, full of nothing but its own straight darkness.

He turned. He didn't need light to find the ramp; the cold air read its slope, the echo thinned toward the gate, and his hand found the rail where he'd known it would be. He went up slowly, one boot ahead of the other, the resoled leather sure on the worn stone.

The gate was where she'd left it, the chain looped, the old padlock gapped the way the cheap ones always were. He looked at it a moment in the grey that wasn't dark and wasn't light. He could have it open in fifteen seconds and she'd never know which way the chain had moved.

He worked the chain back through the loop the way it had gone in, hand-tight, and left the lock exactly as it sat. Then he stepped out.

The day had gone while he was under. What was left of it lay along the western rim of the hill, a low band of failing light over the ponds, the sky above it already deepening to the blue that isn't quite night. The air up here moved — there was a season up here, a smell of wet leaves and cooling earth and somewhere far off a cooking fire. A bird he didn't know said one thing and stopped.

He stood in the last of the daylight and let it find his face, the bare eyes, no glass to soften it, and he didn't reach for the shades. There was no uniform to read here and no one to be harmless for. There was only the hill, holding what it held, and a man going down off it carrying a question he wasn't going to answer and had stopped needing to.

He went down toward the road, unhurried, into the dark coming up the way dark comes up everywhere, ordinary and complete, and he found that he was, for once, entirely all right with not knowing — that it sat in him not like a failure but like a stone in a pocket, smooth, kept, his, asked of nothing.

Chapter 16 — The Maybe Road

The town had not changed overnight, and that was the first thing Jakobus noticed when he came out into the morning with his bag on his shoulder. The same shutters going up over the same shopfronts, the same woman setting out the same plastic stools, the same smell of frying dough and engine oil and the river somewhere underneath it all. A man on a scooter went past with a stack of egg crates lashed behind him and did not look twice at the foreigner standing in the road. Why would he. The hill was the hill; the caves were under the hill; the brochure said what it said. The town went on living over a wonder the way a town will, with its back to it — which was the most honest relationship anyone here had with the thing.

He had the cave in him now. That was the difference, and it was a difference no one passing him in the street could see. Somewhere behind his sternum, mapped onto the part of him that held the river-pebbles and the closed border and the smell of the bazaar shop near the Sphinx, there was a straight darkness — a clean-walled chamber thirty metres to its ceiling, chevroned all over by a hand that had left nothing else of itself anywhere on earth. He carried it the way he carried the rest. A private geology. He did not have to name it to keep it.

He bought two coffees at a stall that did not really do coffee — instant, milky, sweet past argument — and did not decline it, because there was nowhere else, and a man who would drink from the buckled tin cup at a Nubian zeer was not going to be precious about a paper cup in Quzhou. He had made his own pot at first light anyway, the screw-together tin on the windowsill of the guesthouse, the one ceremony

he would not skip. The stall coffee was for Dr Lin.

She was waiting where she'd said she'd be, at a low table outside the noodle place by the bus station, in a quilted jacket against the river chill, her hands around a glass of tea she had not touched. She watched him come the way she watched everything — completely, and without hurry. He set the paper cup down in front of her and sat across from her with his bag between his boots.

"You made your own," she said. Not a question. She had seen the pot.

"I did."

"And brought me this." She turned the cup a quarter without lifting it. "Which is terrible."

"It's terrible," he agreed. "It's what there is."

Something moved at the corner of her mouth. They sat with it. A bus pulled in behind them and let out a sigh of brakes and a cargo of schoolchildren, and the noise washed over the table and away again, and neither of them filled the quiet it left.

"You did not break in," she said at last.

"No."

"In the night. Alone. With the gate and ten minutes and no one to see." She studied him over the tea she still hadn't drunk. "Most men I have given that to, I have watched go quiet afterward in a way that is not peace. They wanted the next gate. They were already at the next gate while they thanked me for this one."

"I had the gate I needed." He turned the cup in his own hands, not drinking either. "You gave me the dark. I don't need the water."

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she did drink the terrible coffee — a small mouthful — and made a face that forgave him for it, and put it down.

"There is a thing I will tell you," she said, "that I do not tell the divers and the engineers and the men who come with the lights and the equations. They want the cave to be a problem they have not yet finished. So I let them think it. It keeps them careful." She turned her glass. "But you — you stopped wanting it to be a problem. On the

hill, I think. Maybe in the dark. I do not know which night it was, but it was one of the nights." She lifted her eyes to him. "Thank you for that. It is a small thing and it is the whole thing. The cave is easier to keep when one more person has decided not to take it."

He sat with that the way he'd sat with the dark. There was nothing to add that wouldn't make it smaller. So he gave her the only thing that fit, which was the truth, plainly — the worse it mattered, the flatter the saying of it.

"You let me in before you have to close it," he said. "I know what that cost. Not money. The other thing." He nodded once, the small finishing nod he gave to a thing settled. "I'll keep it the way you keep it."

She held his eyes. He didn't reach for the shades — they'd been in the vest pocket since before the dark, and somehow she'd earned the bare-eyed version of him without his deciding to give it. The grey of his eyes had gone green in the river light, and if she read the shift she said nothing of it. The Sawubona ran both ways across the little table and neither of them named it, because you didn't name it; you let the circles dissolve and stood in it a second and went on.

"Go," she said gently. "You have a train."

He paid for the noodles she hadn't ordered, over her protest, and shook her hand at the bus station, and the handshake turned — without either of them deciding it — into the brief committed front-to-front of a real one: her surprise at it, then her acceptance, the porcupine stiffness going out of her shoulders for the length of a breath. Then he was on the bus and she was a quilted figure by the table getting smaller, not waving, just watching him go the way she watched everything, all the way out.

The bus to the station. The wait on the platform among the egg crates and the families and a man asleep sitting up with his chin on a sack of rice. The high whine of the fast train coming in like a held note resolving. He found his seat by the window with the bag under his knees, and the country began to peel away — the hill gone behind almost at once, swallowed into the green clutter of other hills exactly like it, no monument, no sign on the skyline that said *here*. And that

was right; that was the whole of it. A wonder that did not advertise from the ridgeline because the makers had not wanted to be found, or had not cared to be remembered, or had simply done the work and walked off the hill carrying everything they'd cut and leaving nothing — and now even the hill was indistinguishable from its neighbours, holding twenty-four chambers and one open answer.

He thought about what he would say about it, later, to whoever asked, and the honest accounting was short. He could describe the scale; people would not believe the scale and he'd let them not. He could describe the chevroned marks, the parallel regularity a hand had made that looked like no hand could have made. He could tell them there was no spoil heap, no quarry debris anywhere on the hill, a million cubic metres of rock removed and not one slag pile to show for it — and they would lean in for the answer the way everyone leaned in, and he would have to disappoint them the way Lin had taught him to disappoint them without it being a defeat. *No one knows. There is no record. No king put his name on it. No priest, no general, no merchant. They made the most precise underground city on earth and did not sign it.*

That was all he had. Not the answer. The shape of the question — clean and large and unfilled, like the chambers themselves. He had gone in there to read a made thing the way he read everything, the way he read a man at a boom or a truck under a rust-tired shell or a knife by the angle of its belly, and the made thing had let him read its precision and its patience and its impossible labour — and had kept, behind all of that, the one thing he was actually built to find. *What is it for.* It had not given it up. It would not give it up to him or to Lin or to the divers or to the lights, and after a lifetime of finding the use of things, the not-finding sat in him without rancour, the way the closed border sat in him: a place he could not go that did not make the rest of the map smaller.

He took out the notepad — the small one, soft-cornered, the pencil worn to a stub — and balanced it on his knee against the train's hum. He did not write the scale. He did not write the marks or the missing spoil. He had Lin's voice in him for that, and her voice was the one that should carry it, not his; the locals owned the telling and he was only ever the road. He sat with the pencil over the page a long while, the green hills sliding by, and then he wrote one line, in his blocky

engineer's hand — the only kind of writing the symbol-blind part of him had ever fully trusted — and wrote it slowly so the letters would hold.

Some made things keep their secret.

He looked at it. He did not underline it or date it or add a second line. He was not going to improve it; it was right, and you did not sand a thing that was right. He closed the pad over the pencil and put it back in the vest, against the river-stones and the worn coins, where the true things lived.

The trolley came past with its tea and its dumplings and he bought a thing he could not name and ate it, because it was offered and he was hungry and that was the deepest courtesy he knew, and it was good, and he was fine. The country went on peeling away. Somewhere ahead was Mr Huang and the favour and the rest of the road, the iceberg of it, and he'd get to that when he got to it. For now there was the window and the hum and the kept thing behind his sternum.

He had come to find an answer and was leaving with a better question, and that — he turned it over once, the way you turn a pebble that has spoken to you, and put it away — that was not a smaller thing to carry home. It was the heavier one. He'd take it. A man who had spent his life finding the use of everything could afford, at last, to be content with the one made thing that had outwitted him, and had done it not by hiding but by simply, completely, declining to say.

The train ran on into the green country, and Jakobus Swart sat easy in his seat with the maybe in his pocket, and did not need it answered.

Chapter 99 — Author's Note, Real vs. Invented, Responsible Wondering

This is a novel about a hole in the ground that nobody can explain, and a man who makes his living explaining things.

I wrote it because the Longyou Grottoes are real, and because the thing about them that haunts me is not what people usually reach for. It is not the size, though the size is staggering — more than a million cubic metres of solid siltstone cut away by hand from twenty-four chambers, walls left straight, ceilings raked to a height you have to crane your neck to lose. It is not even the precision, the parallel chisel marks running across every surface in patient chevroned rows, like a thing decided once and then done a hundred thousand times without losing heart.

It is the silence. There is no record. No dynasty took credit. No emperor's annal mentions the work, no county gazetteer, no song, no stone carved with a name. A million cubic metres of rock came out of that hill and the spoil — the rubble, the slag, the unmade leftover of any quarry that size — is simply *gone*, with no heap on the surface to mark where it went. The caves were found in 1992 by farmers who had always thought their fish ponds bottomless, and who drained them over seventeen days to learn they were not bottomless at all. They were chambers. Made ones. And the people who made them said nothing the world ever kept.

I have spent a lot of time, in books and out of them, with the kind of person who needs the answer. Jakobus Swart is one of those people,

sharpened to a point. His whole gift — the thing that has kept him alive across more ground than is good for any one man — is reading what a made object is *for*. Show him a wall and he will tell you who built it and why and what they were afraid of. So I wanted to walk that man into a room he could not read, and watch what he did when the room refused him.

What he does — and this is the only thing I will say outright about the story you have just finished — is let it refuse him. He does not invent a maker. He does not reach past what the evidence will carry. He stands in the straight darkness and accepts that some made things keep their secret, and he carries the keeping out into the world like something owed.

That is the whole argument of the book, and I will not flatten it here into a moral. But I owe you an honest accounting of where the real ground ends and the invented ground begins, because a wonder is only worth anything if you can trust the writer to tell you which is which.

Real / Debated / Invented

Real	Debated	Invented
The Longyou Grottoes exist — Fenghuang Hill, Longyou County, Quzhou, Zhejiang, China.	The exact date of construction (pottery and silt suggest 2,000+ years; no document confirms).	Every named person — Dr Lin Wei, Chen, Mr Huang, and all dialogue.
24+ man-made chambers in argillaceous siltstone.	The primary function — quarry, storage, shelter, ritual, military. None is proven.	Jakobus Swart, his courier business, his China cover, his whole presence at the site.

Real	Debated	Invented
Discovered June 1992 by local farmers who drained fish ponds over ~17 days.	Where the spoil went.	The specific access Jakobus is granted, after hours and to the flooded perimeter.
Academic estimates of >1,000,000 m ³ of rock removed across the complex.	The full extent of the complex below the known chambers.	The conservation meeting and the timeline of further closures as dramatised.
Parallel, regular chisel marks on walls and pillars; straight walls; pillars left as roof support. No contemporaneous historical document names the construction.	Whether the chambers were dug together or over generations.	All interior monologue, all reflection, all of Jakobus's reading and refusal to read. The town's specific indifference as a scene (the <i>feeling</i> is invented; the unadvertised quality is true).
Cave 1 is open on a tourist path; other caves gated for conservation. Some chambers (6–8, 16–17) remain water-filled. Decorative animal carvings (horse, fish, bird) in one chamber, regarded as later additions.		

If you take one fact from this table, take the absent spoil heap. It is not fringe invention. It is in the literature, noted by the geologists and engineers who have studied the place properly. A million cubic

metres of rock came out of that hill and we do not know where it went. That is real, and it is the marvel, and it needs no aliens to be astonishing. The people who could remove that much stone that cleanly, and leave no trace of the leaving and no record of themselves — they were not lucky primitives and they were not visitors from elsewhere. They were people, cleverer and more patient than most of us, who chose not to sign their work. I find that more frightening and more beautiful than any saucer.

On wondering responsibly, and on going there

The Grottoes are open to visitors. If you go — and Cave 1 is worth the going — go the way Dr Lin (invented) asks of the man in this book (also invented), but for reasons that are entirely real:

The caves are not closed to spite you. The chambers that are gated are gated because siltstone breathes and weeps and slowly fails when air and feet and light reach it, and because a thing that survived two thousand years in the dark can be unmade in a generation of good intentions. The rope is not an insult to your curiosity. It is the reason the cave will still be there for someone after you. When access shrinks at a wonder, the honest response is not resentment. It is gratitude that you were let as far as you were.

Do not climb past the barriers. Do not touch the marks. Do not improve the local story with a theory you brought from home. The people of Longyou County have lived over those caves a long time without needing the marvel to be solved, and that is not ignorance — it is a kind of relationship with the unexplained that the rest of us could stand to learn. Buy the tea. Pay the entry. Let the custodians own the telling. The knowing was never the part that made it theirs.

And when you stand at the bottom of Cave 1 and crane your neck up into all that engineered dark, resist the part of you that demands an answer before you are allowed to leave. The right thing to carry away from Longyou is not a verdict. It is a better question, held open, and the discipline to keep it open all the way home.

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To the geologists, engineers, and archaeologists who have studied the Longyou caverns with rigour and refused to overclaim — your honest *maybe* is the spine of this book.

To the people of Longyou County, who keep a wonder without selling it whole.

This is a work of fiction. The site is real; the science cited is real and sourced; everyone in the story is invented, and any errors of fact are mine alone. A sensitivity reader with knowledge of the region and of conservation ethics reviewed the manuscript; their care made it better, and the decision to let the function of the caves remain unanswered in these pages is deliberate — it is what the evidence currently allows, and nothing more.

Some made things keep their secret. The least we owe them is to let them.

— *for the ones who can stand in the dark and not need the light.*

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— Andries J. Greyling

