

Spelunking The Unexplored Nether Regions

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TOM ANKWORTHY ENTERED the make-shift control room in a neighborhood industrial park and went straight to the coffee machine. After taking a test sip and pausing a second to determine the its suitability, he turns and heads toward the control console.

Over the last three weeks, transmitters the STUNR team released in Texas have made their way over four hundred kilometers into Mexico, starting at where some consider are the seven caves that the Aztec held as their origin. These cave systems run too great a distance underground to take the chance of exploring them physically without being sure of places where the explorers could make breaks to the surface.

The transmitters are a series (Alpha, Beta, Delta, Epsilon and Phi) designed by Tom Ankworthy. Tom put everything he had into these state-of-the-art sensors. Each has a microwave transmitter that keeps its Global Tracking circuits in touch with the Global Tracking satellite (GTS). Each also contain an altimeter, four SONAR sensors, stabilizing gyro, sealed track style rollers for movement and circuitry that changes the transmission frequency based on the speed of the unit. Each with an outer shell of highly polished aluminum over space shuttle tile ceramic, still weigh one half kilogram, but are filled with helium and a thick gel to help the gyro keep it upright and just a bit more than neutrally buoyant. The cost of development, manufacturing and the hook-up cost to the GTS, left just enough to purchase the spelunking equipment and a Range Rover.

“So let’s see what you’ve got so far Eddy?” he asked, referring to the most recent data sent up from their check points in Mexico.

“It looks like Alpha has stopped again but Beta went another eighty kilometers, this time to the east just above Zacatecas,” answered Eddy (Edith Brohman). A 20 year old grad student speleologist, spending her summer helping the STUNR team research the cavernous system of tunnels that reach from just south of Pecos, Texas as far south-east as Saltillo, Mexico. “I’m expecting to be in contact with Scott anytime soon.”

Tom sits down next to Eddy and picks up the hard copy of the most recent data, replacing the coffee cup in its spot. “What was the last section reading before alpha stopped?”

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“The Alpha started one second intervals showing 1 cubic meter then at least 872 cubic meters for 30 marks, with three at 985, seven at 1089 and the first at 2007.” Eddy says stressing the 2007.

“Sounds like a good size cave.” Tom remarks, as trades the report back for his coffee. “What about Altitude and speed?”

“Plus 13.2 meters to minus 1851.8 meters at 66 meters per second,” Eddy places the eraser end of her pencil on the computer screen. “Ending there at minus 1865.1 meters at zero kph. I’m adding it to the model now.”

“That’s huge!” squawks Tom in the middle of a sip. “And quite a drop. What was the reading just prior?”

“17 Cubic meters at minus 29.2,” Eddy answers while turning around to let Tom get a view of the monitor screen. “4 kilometers per hour.”

“It must have shot up.” Tom says quietly as bends down closer to the screen.

Eddy changes the CGI (computer graphics imaging) of the data to 3D (3 dimensional) and plays the path taken by the alpha. It displays the transmitter moving slowly in a small 4 meter tunnel and then up to a 30 meter cave, accelerating and dropping until stopping suddenly.

“It stayed at 66 the whole distance?” Tom asks.

“Looks like it.” Eddy replies as she clicks the mouse. “1.8 kilometers.”

“It should have slowed down even with the decline in depth,” Tom remarks. “unless the water pressure kept it up.”

“Or it wasn’t in the water.” Observed Eddy.

“What do you mean?” Asked Tom.

“Let’s say that from mark 21689 to 21690 there was a bottle neck of . . . at the most, what we show as 1 cubic meter.” Eddy explains as she types the

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data into the computer. “If the bottle neck was at say. . . oh. . .60 degrees, this could propel Alpha into the cavern at . . a. . . round. . . 155mps causing alpha to start reading at one second intervals,” Finishing the data entry, Eddy refreshes the screen and uses the eraser again to follow the path of the alpha. “It comes out and up to the maximum peak of plus 13 meters high and then by 180 meters distance, just over one second, starts to decline. . . then to the next reading. . . here at minus 28.6 just under 3 kilometers. . . now at 66.5mps and free-falling. That would put the length at 1.8 kilometers angled about like this.”

The screen now showing the alpha movement down a cavernous waterfall and stopping on the bottom. Tom watches the 3D run with concern that they may have lost the use of their alpha unit.

“Shit! That’s the depth of the Grand Canyon!” Tom exclaims, now leaning back in the chair, “I’m surprised it’s still working.”

It must have gotten embedded in something,” remarks Eddy. “or landed on dry ground and the auto-track hasn’t been able to initiated.”

“Here you have the alpha at plus 13 meters.” Tom states as he points out the peak of the transmitter coming out of the bottle neck. “What’s the altitude there?” He asks, inquiring to find out if that location may be a CTS (Close To Surface) spot.

“Let’s see.” Answers Eddy, as she grabs a file from the desk and looks up to the screen for the coordinates. GTS shows “104 degrees 24 feet west and 23 degrees 27feet north. Here in this valley at the north end of this section of the Sierra Madres.”

“Up in the mountains?” Asks Tom.

“No, 15 meters,” answers Eddy. “That’s a CTS. The surrounding hills go as high as 200 meters though.”

“So the alpha might have come out and up as close as 2 meters from the surface.”

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“If the trajectory was at 60 degrees and there is indeed this kind of a drop.”

“What would it be otherwise?”

“Well, the alpha would have had to been grabbed or eaten and pulled down by something that moved through a humongous lake of water at 66k an hour,” Eddy says sarcastically.

“And now it hasn’t moved for how long?”

“As of 2 days ago, 3,482 marks.” Says Eddy. “Not quite 2 an a half days.”

“So whatever it was may have let go?”

“I don’t think so Tom.” Says Eddy condescendingly. “Look, nothing grabbed it. I’ve got full measurements right up until it stopped. If something grabbed it, I’m sure that at least one of the sensors would have been covered.”

“You’re right.” Concedes Tom. “What’s the positioning now?”

“One SONAR is showing 27.4 meters at minus 1865.1 and the alpha is at a 32 degree angle, so it’s probably stuck. The tracks apparently haven’t been able to move it.” Says Eddy as she directs the computer to zoom in on the mock-up. “It’s probably setting in mud like this, aimed at a wall in the cave.”

Tom tilts his head to match the mock-up on the screen showing the alpha embedded in a mud bank at an angle with one SONAR sensor visible. “Not in the water?”

“Possibly, but I don’t think so.” Says Eddy, her head now tilted as well. “And see how the tracks must be positioned out like this.”

Tom walks over to the coffee machine and picks up a cookie, holding it up in an offer to Eddy. “How ‘bout beta” He asks, now munching on the cookie.

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“It’s probably popped up near Zacatecas or gone past.” Guesses Eddy.
“I’ve got a page into Scott at the site there, like I said, I’m still waiting for his call.”

“The next transmission is tomorrow?”

“Yeah, at noon.”

“You need a refill?” Tom asks, holding up the coffee pot.

“Sure.”

Tom walks over to the console and pours some coffee in to Eddy’s - SPELUNKERS DO IT IN CAVES- mug. “I’ll tell you what,” Starts Tom. “I want to check out the alpha. . . hell I want to check out this cave! Let’s call Chris and have her come over and handle the data for a few days, and you and I’ll grab Bill and head out tomorrow morning early, to the area where alpha is stuck. Instead of Saturday. You want to go?”

“Sure. I’ll get the data together so we can check out the other CTS points along the way.”

“Who’s got the gear?”

“It’s still in the rig from when we started to go two weeks ago. You just need to put the rations in the back-packs and load them on. What about the call and the reading coming in tomorrow? The alpha may have moved.”

“Chris can call us on the road. Regardless I want to check out this spot. Why don’t you download the data to the laptop just in case. I don’t want to have to rely on the SRP to process any new data over the modem.”

“I’ll call Chris now.”

“Okay. I’ll head over to Bill’s and get his stuff loaded on. Give him a call and let him know I’m on the way.”

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“Roger that.”

Tom places the coffee pot back in the machine and chugs the remaining coffee in his mug. “See ya in a couple hours.”

Tom goes through the checklist for the gear to be packed into the Rover. The most important items; the repair kits, SRP (Satellite Relay Phone), and the GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) transceiver, are still fully packed and batteries charged. Now the only thing is to get the daily supplies loaded and that's Bill's department.

TOM ARRIVES at Bill's sports shop. It looks like Eddy got in touch with him because his gear is setting outside ready and Bill is in the shop going over last minute details with the manager, for while he's gone for a few days. Tom backs the Rover up to the gear and gets out.

“Hey Bill!”

“Tom.” Yells Bill, as he comes out of the store. “Eddy says we're ready.”

“Yeah. Did she tell about how alpha got stuck?”

“No. Just that it was.”

“It's great! There must be a huge cave down there about as deep as the grand canyon. Probably with other off-shoots.”

“We gonna bring more units?”

“Hell yes! If there's a rift this big, there may even be a route or two through Sierra Madre that could dump off into the Gulf of California.”

“Well, that's a cool dream Tom boy. But I really don't think so.”

“Gotta have our dreams.”

“How far west is it?”

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“104”

“Wow, that’s almost straight south.” Bill says reaching for a map.

“Yeah, and about 300 kilometers due east of the tip of the fault.”

“A tectonic from a recent plate movement?”

“Possibly. God knows there’s been enough of them down there the past few years.”

“Ahh! Mazatlan.” Bill sighs.

“Yeah. Maybe come up in some natural warm spring bath house at a resort. I wanna be there when alpha pops up between someone’s legs.”

“What time you wanna leave tomorrow?”

“Three in the morning. That’ll get us in Durango by about nine, and then to the last CTS. . . hopefully before noon.”

“See ya at three.”

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JUST UP AHEAD they see Durango. Not much of anything else for miles except hills leading up to the Sierra Madres. With Bill asleep in the back, Tom and Eddy, who just woke up, start to go over the map and the data called in from Zacatecas.

“Go over the route from Durango Eddy.”

“45 degrees south-west for 60 kilometers and there should be an eighty meter hill straight ahead. Then turn 90 degrees right and head south-east for about 15 kilometers and turn 90 degrees left heading south-west again for another 15 kilometers and it just off to the left.

“We shouldn’t have any problem getting there by noon to set up camp.”

“Do either of you realize,” Bill grunts as he wakes up and re-positions himself in the seat. “that it’s the 20th of June and we’re going to get there and set up our camp on almost the longest day of the year, with the sun as close as it gets in the summer.”

“Ooh! It’ll be cosmic,” says Eddy.

“It’ll be good time,” adds Tom.

“It’ll be HOT!” Gripes Bill. “I’m a spelunker. I like it ‘cause I’m not a sit-out-in-the-sun and bake my ass kinda guy.”

“It is getting hot,” Eddy says as she takes off her pullover revealing just a halter top.

“Not that I don’t mind some of the side Effects of the sun,” Jokes Bill. “but I vote we stay in Durango for a few hours and down a couple. I’m sure they must have a watering hole in town.”

“That’s probably all they have in town,” interjects Tom.

“It looks like we’ll be making Durango around 10:30,” states Eddy. We might as well stay and get something to eat.”

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“I agree,” concedes Tom. “We can hook up the laptop and get the next set of readings as well. That’ll save on the battery.”

“What about the call from Zacatecas?” Asks Bill.

“Oh yeah! Let me give Chris a call.”

“That must be Durango up ahead,” says Tom, pointing forward to what looks like a speck on the ground about 10 kilometers ahead of them.

“What’s that off to the left?” Bill asks. Referring to the foliage laden hills south-west of the speck.

“Our destiny,” Eddy says, after looking up.

“You mean destination?” Corrects Tom. Eddy remains silent not acknowledging Tom’s remark, as her way of answering no while she waits for an answer on the SRP.

“Is there a road that we’ll be using?” Bill asks.

“Not according to the map I have,” Eddy answers, putting her hand over the phone. “But it looks pretty level and. . . Hi Chris this is Eddy. Have we got a call from Scott yet?” There’s a pause. “Great. We’ll give him a call when we get settled. If anything else comes up just give us a call. . .By.”

“Well?” Asks Tom.

“He’s got beta and wants us to call or come down as soon as we can,” she answers.

“Let’s call him and have him come up here and join us,” Tom suggests.

THEY PULL INTO DURANGO and head to the only set of building that has anything that looks like electricity or phone lines connected to them. A place called El Rio.

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“That area looks pretty thick,” says Bill, referring to the hills off in the direction that the trio need to head.

“Yeah,” remarks Tom contemplating. “I’m sure one of the locals will know of a way in.”

“See that peak there,” Eddy says pointing as she gets out of the Rover. “That must be the triangle point I show on the map. It’s about 25 kilometers east of our . . . destination.”

“That’s not too bad,” says Bill, as he shuts the door.

“Oh, the laptop,” Eddy says. “Tom, could you grab the laptop and SRP?”

“Got it,” he grunts, leaning into the rig.

Bill holds the door for the other two.

“Buenos dias.” Is heard as they step into bar.

There are a couple of men sitting together and one by himself, at the bar watching TV, and two couples sitting at a table eating. The floor is well kept dirt with a couple of chickens walking around and something that looks like a ferret sitting on a stand that supports a potted plant.

“Good morning,” replies Teddy.

“Hi,” Tom says, as he sets the equipment on a table. “The food smells good.”

“Very good food Señor. My name is Rolando. We have chicken and pork how ever you would like it,” Rolando replies.

“And by any chance a place to hook up our computer?” Asks Teddy.

“Si. You can unplug this light,” he answers pointing to the corner by the window.”

“Gracias,” she replies.

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“Beer?” Asks Bill.

“The best in all of Durango!” Rolando replies with a laugh joined in by the two at the bar.

“I’ll have one of your best then,” he says sitting down at the table. “You want one too Eddy.”

“Sure, I’ll try one,” she answers, pulling the table just a few inches closer to the wall so she can get the laptop on to it.

“Make that three Rolando,” Tom adds as he to takes a seat.

“There we go,” says Eddy as the laptop beeps its way on and she takes a seat. “I’ll see if Scott’s on the computer.”

“We have grilled chicken ready to go. It’s very good,” Rolando mentions as he sets their beers on the table.”

“That sounds great. And some salad?” Eddy asks.

“Si,” he answers.

“Yeah, sure,” Tom says.

“Fine,” replies Bill in unison to Tom.

“You got Scott on?” Asks Tom.

“Yeah, he’s saying that the alpha stopped sending that last sonar. It must be blocked,” Eddy starts typing a response to Scott and asking if he wants to come up.

“I wonder if it’s sinking,” Bill mentions.

“No change in the altitude. And it’s been covered for two days. Over four days at this level,” Eddy replies, while typing some more. “He says he’d

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love to come up but can't make it until tomorrow. And wants to know if he should bring Lisa."

"Sure. And have him bring beta as well," Tom replies, as Eddy types in his request. "Tell him to call when he gets to Durango."

"Rolando. Is there a road going into the forest area south of here?" Asks Bill, as Eddy continues with the call to Scott.

"Not very much," he answers, as he sets the chicken on the table. "That is el bosque de los lamentos muertos. The forest of moaning dead. Nobody goes in there for many generations."

"Moaning dead?" Asks Bill.

"Every Year at this time if you listen well, you can hear the forest moan," he answers. "They say that the spirits of those that were sacrificed to the gods, cry to be let go."

"Are there any temples in there?" Eddy asks, as she puts down the SRP.

"I don't think so," he replies. "Many years ago an American went in there and found some ruins. Uh. . .Bill Burrud. He had many people with him and after they left, no body ever went in again."

"Oh yeah!" Says Tom. "I loved the Bill Burrud show. Did they bring anything out with them?"

"No. But you can asks Fidel. He went in with them. He says there is a face on a stone, but it was to heavy to move," Rolando answers as he turns to the gentleman sitting by himself. "Fidel. Estas personas quieren entrar en el bosque de los lamentos muertos."

"There is not much there, if you are looking for treasure or things for museum," he answers. As he gets off his chair and approaches the table.

"No. We are tracking an underground cave system and one of our tracking devices is in that area," replies Tom.

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“It is very overgrown,” he says discouragingly, shaking his head. “No body has gone in there for over thirty years.”

“If you have some time today, could you please show us the best way to get in there?” Tom asks. “It’s very important that we at least give it a try. We will pay you for your time and experience. Please have a seat.”

“I can get you as far as tetas pequeñas. But my jeep is too old to go any further,” Fidel answers, as he sits down.

“Tetas pequeñas. What’s that?” Asks Eddy.

“Little t . . . er um breasts,” says Rolando, translating tits to breasts for the sake of being in front of Eddy.

“That must be the two peaks north of the CTS,” says Eddy, tracing the map with her finger. “That’s where we need to go.”

“You are driving the Rover?” Asks Fidel.

“Yes,” answers Tom. “Will that be alright?”

“Si. You should make it okay.”

“What about the face on the stone?” Eddy asks.

“It is a place to give offerings to the god of fresh water,” he replies. “They feed grapes every day at noon and once a year, sometimes more, they would sacrifice a member of the village or if they capture a warrior from another village they would be the sacrifice.”

“Feed Grapes?” Asks Bill, as he finishes the last of the chicken.

“Si. Then move the tongue and they get swallowed.”

“How long do you think it would take to get to the Tetas pequeñas?” Asks Eddy.

“Maybe two or three hours.”

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“We should get going. It’s almost one o’clock,” says Tom. “Fidel. How much do you want in return for guiding us into the forest?”

“I will do it for twenty American dollars.”

“Okay,” Tom answers. “Bill. I’ll get the tab if you can get twenty for our friend Fidel.”

“You know, it’s really going to be hot right now,” says Bill. “We could stay and down another one. There’s going to be plenty of light. It’s one of the longest days of the year.”

“We will have no problem with the heat,” says Fidel. “It is very cool in the forest.”

“That settles it then,” says Tom. “Rolando. “What do we owe you?”

“Eight Dollars American,” he answers.

“Here, keep the change,” Tom says, handing Rolando a twenty. “Thank you very much for your hospitality.”

“Gracias Señor Tom!”

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THEY HEAD OUT into the forest, following Fidel and Tom in Fidels' extremely beat up jeep. As they enter the forest, the entrance hidden by overgrowth, it becomes virtually dark enough to need head lights. There actually is a rutted road of a sort, but you could not tell by looking at it. Looking very much like a rain forest, though this is not much of a place for rain, it must be attributed to the subterranean wealth of water. The hills of the Sierra Madres stick out from the forest like dry sores. The wooded growth that the vehicles were driving over, made a sound like driving on a rickety old wood bridge. As they come up to the Tetas pequeñas they can see that their next direction is too steep on the sides for Fidels' old jeep.

"You may not be able to get your Rover through there also," Fidel tells Tom.

"We'll give it a try," he answers. "It's a pretty good rig."

"What do you think Tom?" Asks Bill. Now both him and Eddy out of the rig surveying the area.

"Go for it," yells back Tom, then turning to Fidel. "So if I give you another twenty, would you willing to go back and wait to guide our friends down to here tomorrow?"

"Si. It would be my pleasure," answers Fidel. "I would also be willing to bring them to you. I would like to see the ruins again."

"That would be greatly appreciated," says Tom. "Eddy, get an extra map of the CTS for Fidel. He's going to come in with Scott and Anna tomorrow."

"Sure."

Fidel heads back as the three head into the narrow crevasse. The Rover has to ride at a 30° angle to make the trip.

"We should be close to making our turn to the left," says Eddy.

"That doesn't look like only trees up ahead," says Bill.

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“No. It looks like a wall,” says Tom. “Did we miss our turn?”

“We couldn’t have,” says Eddy, as they pull up to a stop and her and Tom get out.

“It’s the ground pushed up,” says Bill. “Fairly recent. Like within the past ten years.”

“Well, should we try going around, up the side of the hill?” Asks Eddy.

“Okay, but let’s make something that Scott and them will be able to see to follow us the right way.”

“Here ya go,” says Bill, throwing out a cardboard lining from an equipment box, some duct tape and a magic marker. Not wanting to get out in the sun that’s beating down in the clearing, he shuts the door quickly.

“Make up something and we’ll tell them what to look for when we give ‘em a call,” says Tom. “I’ll go up this side and look for a way to get through.”

After climbing up the side of the hill Tom can see that the area look more structured than just a natural valley. The overgrowth is considerable but still there is almost a design to it. There are many different type of vegetation and some of it looks as though it may have been planted with some purpose in mind.

“How this?” Eddy yells, holding up a sign that has STUNR and an arrow drawn on it.

“Perfect,” Tom yells back as he comes out of the bushes. “Let’s tape it to a stick or something and put it out in the middle of the clearing.”

They head up the side of the hill, spinning the tires a little but doing a pretty good job of marking their path. Once in the small valley on the other side of the wall of dirt, the path was evident. It was very obvious that there had been activity here at some point in time. Pedestals of some sort were strategically placed as if to mark the path to something up ahead. They were so grown

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over that it was difficult to tell if they were made and placed or chiseled out of rock that existed in that spot.

“What’s our GTS?” Tom asks Eddy.

“104 mark 30 and 23 mark 38,” she answers.

“Twenty-three thirty?” Bill asks. “That’s Cancer.”

“Cancer?” Inquires Tom.

“Yeah,” he replies, picking up one of the maps. “Actually the Tropic of Cancer is like twenty-three mark twenty-five. . .or . . .here we go. Twenty-three mark twenty-seven.

“Twenty-three mark twenty-seven?” Pipes in Eddy. “That’s were the alpha is stuck.”

“Right on the Tropic of Cancer?” Remarks Tom.

“Directly,” states Eddy, having just received the map from Bill.

“So,” Signs Bill. “tomorrow is not only the longest day of the year. But, the sun is going to be as close as it gets in the summer, exactly over our heads. Just fucking great.”

“Check it out,” Says Eddy, pointing ahead at a wall of trees a few hundred meters in front of them.

“How close are we now?” Tom asks.

“I would say . . . in there somewhere,” Eddy says. “Or, just on the the other side if that’s another wall.”

“Well, we may-as-well stop here,” Tom says, as he opens the door to the rig and pulls ut a walkie-talkie. “We can go check things out, but I imagine this will be where we’ll set up camp.”

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“I’ll bring the camera,” Eddy says, as she slips a battery into the camera.
“Anything else?”

“Some rope,” Tom replies. “Bill. You stay here in case we need to have you get help.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” he answers, stretching out across the seat making himself more comfortable.

“And no running the air conditioner. We need to conserve the gas,” Tom says, pointing to the dash.

“Ah, man,” Bill cries disappointedly, then reaching over, picking up a map and fanning his face.

“Hey! I got one of these plants in my living room,” Eddy says, giving it a pet with her hand. “I wish it’d get this big.”

“I wouldn’t want to keep my house in an environment like this for the sake of the plant,” says Tom, dramatically wiping his forehead.

THE TWO WALK through the foliage for about one hundred meters. From about a meter or so into the plants, all of the plants end up being the same plant. Some of them as high as twenty meters with large leaves starting at the less than a meter from the ground, and the others at every height in between. It was as close as one could get to being in a green fog.

“Does this seem a bit odd,” Tom says, remarking about the thickness of the vegetation.

“I wonder if we shouldn’t have tied a rope to ourselves, to help us find our way back.” Eddy says, stopping now, turning around and trying to find where they had just walk through the plants.

“This has got to be where the word thicket came from,” Jokes Tom.

“How would we know if we’re not going in circles?” Asks Eddy.

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“Oh shit!” Exclaims Tom, reaching in his pocket for his compass. “I forgot to set our Bearings before we went in. Which direction should we be heading Eddy.

“South east,” She answers. “Almost directly.”

“Shit!” Tom says, hitting the compass. “It won’t stay in one place.”

“Great!” Eddy says, looking up to the sky. “I can’t see enough sky to make out a direction. . . Tom. . .can you see the sun anywhere up there.”

“No,” he replies, now looking up as well. “That’s kinda eerie.”

“Let me see the compass Tom,” Says Eddy.

“Okay,” He says, handing it to her. “Let’s just do an about face and go back the way we came in.”

“This way?” Eddy asks, turning around and holding both arms straight out in front of herself.

“I guess,” Tom replies, giving Eddy a bit of a shove to start going.

“I’m not sure this is actually the. . .OW!” Eddy cries out, bending down and grabbing her knee. “What the hell is this?”

“Let me see,” Tom says.

He carefully moves Eddy aside and starts pulling the plants away side-to-side when appears a large stone face sticking it’s tongue out at him.

“Ahhh!” Tom cries, taking a jump back.

“What is it Tom!” Eddy asks.

“I think we found the altar thing the Fidel was telling us about,” he answers.

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Tom moves forward, grabbing the plants again slowly and moving them to reveal the stone face. Laid back at an angle of about 20°, the face has a wide forehead crowned with what appeared to be a feather head dress. The eyes are large tear shaped with a bit of a bulge between them that resembled a nose but has no nostrils. The mouth is lip-less and open with a rounded tongue protruding about a half a meter.

“Oh god,” Eddy gasps, hiding behind Tom.

“Exactly.” He says.

“You know what this means Tom?” She asks.

“We’re above the alpha?” He says.

“No. It means this isn’t the way back to the Rover,” She says. “We must have gotten turned around.”

“You have the GTS display?” Tom asks.

“Yes! That could help us get out,” She replies, pulling the unit out of her pocket and turning it on.

“These plants have kept this relic virtually untouched by the elements,” Tom remarks, as he rubs his hands across the surface of the stone and then moving the tongue back and forth. “This seems to be almost like a mortar and pestle.”

“Okay. We’re at 104 mark 24 and 23 mark 28,” Eddy says. “so we need to move at least 10 meters or so and I’ll take another reading.”

“Here. I’ll tie the rope to the stone so we can at least get back to here as a starting point,” Tom says, pulling the coiled rope from his side.

They back away from the stone, letting the rope uncoil as they go. The stone disappears from sight within about a meter.

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“This should be far enough,” Eddy says, stopping after about 10 meters of the rope had been let out. “It’ll take just a minute or so.”

“I wonder if that idol does something with the offerings.”

“What would a stone do with food?”

“Not the stone. Something for the priest or medicine man or whatever. You know. . . like change the offerings into wine so they can all get drunk after all the others have gone home.”

“Maybe it wasn’t food they put in there. Maybe they cut up a virgin and ground her up in the stone.”

“Don’t be morbid. Besides, there’d be blood all over the stone.”

“True,” Eddy says as she press the display button on the transceiver. “Here we go. We are at 104 mark 24 and 23 mark 29. We need to go to the left about 50 meters and this way.” She says pointing in the direction away from the stone.

“Great. We should go back a couple meters and get around these plants. If we were walking in circles then hopefully it won’t be more than a hundred meters back and we’ll have enough rope.”

They walk back through the foliage occasional wrapping the rope around a plant to keep it secure. Every twenty meters they stop to take another reading to make sure they are not walking in circles. Although they can’t actually see the sky, they notice it getting darker by small degrees. For a one hundred meter walk it seemed to take forever through these particular plants. Stepping on the small plants to avoid the larger ones makes a crackling sound like the sound of squashing bugs.

“This reminds me of Florida,” Eddy remarks as she pulls the plants away from her face.

“The heat?”

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“No, the bug squashing sounds as we walk. I spent last summer down there and I never new if the grass was making the sound or if I was actually stepping on bugs. I never wanted to look to see.”

“That was the diving time you did off the treasure coast?”

“Yeah. And the BT excursion.”

“BT?”

“Bermuda Triangle. One of the crews doing the excavation with the Fischer team on the treasure coast also went down the Bermuda Triangle area and checked out the search for the lost ships.”

“Ever find any?”

“Ships? No. But they found the Planes from the Navy, that went down back in the forties.”

“I heard about that. But that wasn’t actually in the Bermuda Triangle.”

“Yeah, it was just outside. They found them over a hundred miles off course. We found three boats last summer, just outside the Triangle. None of them had been recorded as lost, but they were all over ten years old.”

“So did you ever actually go in the Triangle?”

“Not by much. It seemed as though everything that gets lost in there, ends up somehow sinking just outside of it or almost as if they moved out of the area.”

“Currents?”

“Maybe.”

“Here we go. There’s an opening just ahead.” Tom uncoils the last few meters of rope. “Just in time.”

“Thank God! That hundred meters seemed like a thousand.”

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As they come out into the clearing they can see Bill's feet in the widow of the Rover, tapping to music. Eddy walks to the rear of the rig and Tom goes up to the passenger side and bangs on the window.

"You could have been setting up the camp Bill," He yells, pulling on the locked door. "Open up!"

"By myself?" He answered in bewilderment. "If I tried to do that we would a spent twice the time trying to undo the mess."

"Just don't have the talent for tents eh?" Eddy remarks while a smile.

"Or the inclination to become proficient," Bill answers as he climbs out of the rig and starts helping unload the camping gear. "The nice thing about spelunking, is that you can never go alone. There's always someone around to help.

"And here you are with a sporting goods store," Eddy says sarcastically.

"And a great reputation for hiring people to work for him that are very experienced at the sort of things that he doesn't know how to do. This looks like a good spot," Tom adds as he pulls the release string on a geodesic tent and it pops into full assembly in about two seconds. "I ought to know. That's how we met a few years ago."

"Yes," Bill says, kinda puffing out his chest and pretending to tuck his thumb behind the lapel of a jacket. "If you know how to blow it up, swing it, shoot it, cast it, or sink it in a hole. . .I got a job for you."

"Speakin' a castin' it," Eddy says, with a bit of a out in the back-woods hick accent as she pulls the release on her tent. "A'm starved. What say we get some grub started right away?"

"Well, let's see," Bill starts pulling out the provisions. "Salisbury steak dinner, chicken Kiev, meatloaf, crispy nuggets and teriyaki beef."

"Chicken Kiev," Says Eddy.

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“Salisbury,” Tom answers.

“Nuggets,” Bill says, pulling each out along with a jug of water and some cups. “So how’d it go in there? Find a place to get to the alpha?”

“No,” Tom starts to say, as he finishes setting up the camp stove. “We did however find that we need to use some rope or something to make sure we don’t go walking around in circles.”

“Too thick of brush?” Bill asks.

“That, and the compass doesn’t seem to work.” Eddy says, putting her dinner packet on the stove plate.

“We found the stone face that Fidel mentioned, Tom says, flipping his dinner. “We tied the rope to it so we can find our way back.”

“If you couldn’t use the compass, how’d you know which way to go?”

“I remembered to bring the GPS transceiver.”

“Good job Eddy,” Tom remarks, clapping his hands while holding the tongs and then handing them to her.

“You could have used the sun,” Bill says, with a tone of condensation in his voice.

“We couldn’t see the sun Bill,” Eddy replies, handing him the tongs, pulling them back away just as he grabs them, and then letting him take them from her. “We do know how to find our way using the sun or other stars.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was really eerie,” Tom says, holding his hand out for the tongs. “Like another world in there.”

“It really is,” Eddy confirms. Plopping her packet onto a plate. “I was expecting to hear all those eerie animal noises like in jungle movies.”

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“Yeah, that’s the way I felt too,” Tom says, opening his dinner packet.

“Well thank God for the lack of those noises,” Bill exclaims, he too now starting on his dinner. “My nightmares are of finding some never before seen horrid creature while I’m down in a cave. Or worse yet, an underground aquifer. There’s something about meeting up with something unknown, in an environment that they have all the advantages in.”

“Yeah, like that forest.” Tom says. “It’s so damn thick you literally can’t see more than a few feet in any direction around you.

The three of them finish the rest of the meal in silence. Mostly because they were too hungry to want to use eating time for talking, but also to look around as the sun finished setting and the Milky Way started making its way through the atmosphere. It was so dark that the Milky Way cast shadows around them and the heat in the air caused the starlight to giggle the shadows in unison to their twinkle. They each started their lanterns and put away their trash.

“It seems awfully quite,” Eddy says skittishly.

“This is bad?” Bill quizzes.

“That is odd,” Tom contemplates. “You’d think there’d at least be crickets or frogs or something.”

“We probably scared everything away,” Bill rationalizes.

“Maybe, but it never happened on any of our other sites,” Tom remarks.

“Have you guys camped much in this area of Mexico?” Eddy asks.

“Well, not this far south yet,” Tom replied.

“Maybe we’re not the only ones scaring away the creatures.” Eddy states.

“Now I feel so much better,” Bill says sarcastically.

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“SENSORS!” Bill and Tom say in unison, as Tom jumps up with his lantern and makes his way to the Rover.

“Sensors?” Eddy asks.

“Yeah. Infrared motion detectors,” Bill answers, as Tom goes around the camp setting up the sensors. “They’re set for anything larger than about the size of a mouse. If anything comes near the tents, they let out a screech that’ll sent it running, only leaving behind a pile of poop.”

“Okay,” Tom says, sitting back down. “I have the remote. If anyone needs to get up and move around, let me know and I’ll turn off the sensors.”

“And,” Bill adds, as he leans over to Eddy. “If you have any trouble going to the bathroom, just sneak out quietly and when the sensors go. . .so will you.”

“Funny Bill,” Tom scolds. “If you do that, we’ll both be going in our tents.”

“You’d think a sound that bad would put us all at a bit of a disadvantage if something, or someone, actually did approach the camp.” Eddy says circumspectly. “Trying to run after soiling ourselves I mean.”

“I think we should just count our blessings and get a good QUIET nights sleep,” Tom suggests. “I think we’ll be in for our cut of work tomorrow, trying to get through the forest.”

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TOM RISES FIRST the next morning. Having not slept well he clumsily steps out of the tent forgetting to first turn off the perimeter sensors. One sounds off and the next three follow immediately. Tom covers his ears from the piercing shriek of the alarm and jumps into his tent just as Eddy heads through her tent and Bill jumps up inside his tent causing it to roll over on its side.

“Damn it!” Tom yells, jumping from his tent frantically pushing the buttons on the remote. “Off, off, off. Son-of-a-bitch. OFF!”

“Holy shit batman!” Eddy yells as the alarm finally shuts off. “I think the bat mobile’s sprung a leak.”

“Well Eddy,” Bill says, sticking his head out of his now upside-down tent. “Sounds like an interesting dream.”

“Sorry guys,” Tom says, throwing the remote back into his tent. “I was kinda fogged out when I got up. I forgot about the sensors”

“Just as well,” Bill states, climbing out of his tent, dragging and shaking it a couple of feet with one foot still caught inside before it lets loose. “I doubt we could have set a more reliable alarm.”

“Coffee anyone?” Tom yells from inside the Rover.

“YES!” Both colleagues exclaim together.

“We did bring some? Didn’t we?” Tom asks, still rummaging through the back of the rig.

“In the purple cooler,” Eddy replies, lying on her back with her head sticking out of her tent as she puts on her clothes. “With the cream. The sugar’s over here with the other provisions”

“Ah! A little bit of civilization in the land of the lost.” Bill sighs with a yawn. “I don’t suppose you brought the latté machine?”

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“Sure,” Tom answers sarcastically, mimicking the sound of a machine.

“Would you like a croissant with your drink?”

“I’ll have the short sta. . .” Eddy starts to get out as the short wave radio comes on with sound of Scotts voice.

“Breaker good buddy. Anyone out there?” Scott repeats a couple of times.

“Hello?”

“Here Eddy.” Tom says, tossing the coffee and cream her way and then reaching in to the rig and grabbing the microphone.

“Ten-four,” He replies. “Go ahead.”

“Tom?” Scotts voice comes back.

“Bingo,”

“We’re sitting here in Durango with a local named Fidel. Says you asked him to guide us in.”

“Ten-four. He knows where we are and’s willing to give us a hand for a few pesos.”

“Anything you need from Tom before we head out?”

“As much rope as you can get.”

“Nylon?”

“No. It doesn’t have to be.”

There’s a bit of a pause. “Fidel says we can get plenty.”

“Great. Give a holler on the SRP when you get to the tetas pequeñas. We’ll probably be away from the Rover”

“Get to the what?”

There’s another bit of a pause as Fidel translates for Scott.

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“Sounds good to me,” Scott replies with a bit of a laugh.”

“About an hour,” Tom says.

“That’s what he says,” Scott replies.

“Over and out.”

“Out.”

Tom hops out of the rig and sits down next to Eddy, whose now about to make the coffee. Bill joins them and begins digging through the provisions for the sugar.

“Gotta have the sugar,” Bill grumbles.

“We got an hour or so before Scott and Lisa show up with Fidel.