

J.L. MURRA

Chapter 1

Present Day. Yucatan Peninsula.

Approaching the Bright's Orbit threshold.



On a fresh December morning, in the thick jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula, Kiara awoke startled. She had experienced a very vivid and strange dream. She was alone on a vast plain, devoid of animals and plants, watching the sky that suddenly began to change colors as the earth started to shake. Frightened, she was running desperately, yet getting nowhere. When she woke up, her heart was still racing because of the shock.

She slowly rose from her camp bed and felt the fabric of the mosquito net that protected her. She hastily moved it away and took a pair of shorts and a cotton shirt that she always kept in a small dresser. She quickly got dressed and went

towards the exit of the rickety old camp trailer where her father had gotten her settled.

As she was leaving, she felt the warm breeze, very common in these coastal areas. The day was gorgeous; the wind was blowing with considerable strength. More than a week had passed since she arrived at the camp, and she had not yet visited the beach. The Caribbean was known for its incomparable turquoise colored sea and its white sandy beaches. "Today," she said to herself, "I will go to the sea for a swim, nobody and nothing is going to stop me."

She went to the main tent to speak with her father, who was the main manager of the archaeological project they were on. However, she didn't find him there and thought that he would probably be somewhere at the excavation site. She was about to leave when she saw an acquaintance. It was a young Mexican archaeologist whom she had met before. His name was José Garcia. He was very nice and Kiara had liked him since she arrived.

"Good Morning," Kiara said approaching.

"Good Morning, Kiara," José answered with a big smile. "It seems that it is not good for you to sleep in the camp bed. You look a little tired."

Kiara thought for a moment, and she realized that this morning she had forgotten to comb her hair due to the hastiness of finding her father. She had not washed her face either, so she must look awful for sure.

"It's not the camp bed," Kiara answered holding her hair, trying uselessly to fix it. "It's the noise," she was talking about the noises produced by the jungle animals during night.

“Well, I don’t believe the animals are going anywhere, so you will soon get used to them,” said José. “You will see” “José, do you know where I can find my father?” asked Kiara.

“Of course I do,” José answered. “Doctor Jensen went early to the west site to gather the ceramic samples found yesterday. I was about to go there. If you want, you can walk with me. It’s not too far.”

José and Kiara both left the main tent and went to the road. In order to get to the site, they had to walk a dirt road for more than one kilometer, but this did not bother Kiara at all because she loved to walk.

The archaeological zone had been found more than a year ago almost by chance when a group of investigators were studying the region’s felines. When walking through the thick of the jungle, they found the ruins and immediately reported the find to the authorities. Unfortunately, the Mexican government civilization could not earmark funds for its study and recovery, arguing that the country was in a deep economic recession just like all of North America

For several months, the discovery was ignored until a group of Mexican archaeologists found Doctor Jensen and with his support, gathered private and United Nations funds for the restoration project. These ruins were the most recently discovered and without a doubt belonged to the Mayan civilization whose mysteries Kiara loved. At eighteen years old, Kiara was already a knowledgeable astronomer, and following the Mayans example, she had an incredible fascination with the study of stars and celestial bodies. In her native California, she loved to go out at night to observe the

constellations for hours. She knew almost all their names and positions.

Her father Robert Jensen was an expert in Mayan culture and generally in all Pre-Hispanic cultures settled in the Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras regions. He enjoyed international prestige for having deciphered the Mayan codices that marked important dates in the history of the Empire and demonstrated the Mayan's knowledge of mathematics.

Kiara had not returned to Mexico for more than six years. During her last stay, she had suffered a tragedy. Her mother was kidnapped and most likely executed by a subversive group of inhabitants who were against the excavation of their ancestor's ruins by foreign scientists. This of course was only an excuse to conceal their true intentions: to ask for juicy amounts of money for ransoms. In spite of years of searching and investigations, nobody had revealed her whereabouts nor did anyone ever demand money for her return. Kiara lived with the doubt that her mother had been executed and buried somewhere in the tropical jungle and still felt the pain of not being able to see her and hug her.

Her father had not recovered from this great loss either. He went through a radical change of character. No longer was he the one who had raised her; he had become much more serious and authoritarian. At first, he abandoned his work to completely dedicate his time to the search for his wife. However more than a year later, his economic and emotional resources ran out to the point that the only way to remain sane was to return to the practice of his profession.

While they were walking, José talked to Kiara about how they had arrived months before and cleaned up the area to put up

the camp site around the ruins. She was listening attentively when she saw the entrance to the excavation west site at the end of the road. In the distance, she could recognize her father's shape examining a piece of ceramic pottery, standing by stonewall. She approached him.

"Good morning Dad," Kiara said.

"Good morning. What are you doing here?" her father replied waving to José at the same time.

"I've come to let you know that I've decided to go to the beach for a swim," answered Kiara.

"Are you coming to let me know or to ask for permission" asked her father surprised and with an expression that showed his annoyance.

"I came to ask for your permission, but I really want to go" she said in a more docile tone of voice. "I have been here for more than a week and I'm already very bored. I want to see the sea; I know that it's beautiful in this region."

"I see. I don't think it's a good idea," her father replied.

"There is a lot of wind and it can be dangerous. You can't go there by yourself, and I don't have time to go with you. Better wait until the day after tomorrow, and we can go together. I'd also like to go for a swim."

"But Dad," answered Kiara with a look of disappointment, "why do I have to wait until the day after tomorrow? I told you. I'm bored. Ask Doctor Sanchez or someone else to go with me, but let me go."

"Impossible!" her father replied. "Doctor Sanchez runs the excavation at the main site. She has no time to waste. As

you know, our funds are limited, and the project must be completed as soon as possible.”

At that moment, José who had been listening to the conversation interrupted.

“Doctor Jensen, if you’ll allow me, I can take Kiara to the beach. It is not too far from here, only ten kilometers. We can use the jeep and we would be back in a couple of hours.”

Doctor Jensen turned around to observe the young archaeologist, and categorically said, “Thank you very much José, but that will not be necessary. Kiara will wait until the day after tomorrow, and we will all go together.”

“But Dad!” Kiara had a knot in her throat. The relationship with her father was not easy and things had not improved over time. “This means I have no right to take a walk or have fun, only to live according to your mood, right? Why are you so unfair with me?” Her eyes began to fill of tears, and her father felt uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Calm down Kiara,” her father said. “You are not in Cancun or some other touristic beach; this is the jungle, and there are many dangers here.”

“José knows this place better than anybody else, and we’d only be gone for a couple of hours!” Kiara contested turning to face José, asking for support. However, he remained quiet, and the tension continued to grow. Doctor Jensen spoke. He hated to be condescending with her, but he was busy and the last thing he wanted was to have to support the tears of a frustrated teenager.

“All right, Kiara, you win. But you have to take the satellite phone with you and be back by dinnertime. José, you are responsible for being back here at that time too.”

“Don’t worry, doctor,” José reassured. “We will be back on time. You have my word.”

Kiara smiled and hugged her father strongly.

“Let’s go José. There’s no time to lose!” Kiara said. As Kiara was about to leave, her father stopped her with a gesture. José watched this and knew that they needed some time alone, so he went ahead to prepare the jeep and get the satellite phone.

“Kiara, you have to understand that it is not easy for me to work and take care of your every whim at the same time,” her father began. Be careful; remember that you are in the jungle. Do not stray far from the jeep and have your phone at hand. When you return, we are going to have a long conversation. And maybe we’ll spend some time together next week in Cozumel. Would you like that? We can go diving. The reefs are wonderful.

Kiara could not hold back the tears and stared at her father. She took a step forward and hugged him affectionately.

“I love you Dad. Let’s spend some time together, alone, without any excavations or ruins or archaeologists.” After a while, they heard the sound of the jeep. “I’ll see you in a bit.” Kiara said as she left.

José was already waiting for her with the satellite phone and some supplies. He told Kiara that he would pick up some fruit at the main camp while she prepared her things. They took off down the dirt road and then escaped deep into the tropical

Mexican jungle on another road. The landscape became more beautiful as they carried on down the road that led them to the beach. On both sides the tall, distinguished Gum trees and the curious Ceiba trees could be seen. The noise of birds and insects was heard everywhere. The sky looked clear, and the temperature could not be more pleasant.

Kiara enjoyed the route that took about twenty minutes. José seized the moment to talk all about the local flora and fauna. When she realized the command of English he had, she wondered where he had learned it. She was listening with curiosity. He was a complete fan of the Mayans, just like all the others at the camp. There was no doubt about that.

“Look, Kiara,” José said. “What do you think of gazing into a jungle that has existed for thousands of years, before humans polluted the environment? We can consider ourselves lucky that places still exist where man has not arrived to sully and destroy.” Kiara listened carefully and could do nothing but give a nod of agreement. She thought about José’s words and wondered to herself whether this trend of destruction would change some day.

When they arrived, Kiara’s mouth hung open. The sea in this zone was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. It had several colors, different as the water joined with the sand. Along the shoreline was a distinguished turquoise color, almost becoming ultramarine blue, even darker as it was moving away in the horizon. The sand was fine and white like talc, and the landscape was full of palms, some bushes unknown to her and piled rocks that stretched along the whole beach.

Kiara took off her boots and jumped immediately out of the jeep to feel the warm sand on her feet. She happily ran towards the sea and waded out until the water reached her knees. The water temperature was perfect. Not too cold, not too hot, just perfect.

A wave of emotion passed through her body as she felt the water moving against her legs. It was definitely great to be alive in that place, at that wonderful moment. She turned her head to look at José who was taking some backpacks out of the jeep. She observed the landscape that joined the jungle with the water of the sea, and more emotions rushed through her. This place was truly magical. There was something about that beach that she could not see, but her body perceived it with a sensation of wellbeing that she had only experienced a few times. Her feelings of astonishment yielded a deep state of mental calm and rejoicing.

José approached her and kindly smiled.

“What do you think of our country, Kiara?” he asked.

“It’s wonderful!” she responded. “I’m honestly speechless; it’s amazing to be here.”

“I imagined that it was going to give you that impression. That is why I offered to bring you here,” explained José. “Our Mayan ancestors considered this a sacred place. It is a place of power, a place where their ceremonies were performed.”

“What type of ceremonies José? Ceremonies where human beings were sacrificed?” Kiara asked.

“No, Kiara, of course not,” José answered. “There were different periods in the history of the Mayan empire. Not all

the times were that terrible, but in the end, look what happened. It was during the fall of their civilization when they destroyed themselves. Everything seems to indicate they were imprisoned by their own fears just as is currently happening. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know what you mean, José," said Kiara with a confused face.

"Of course, you don't. How could you? You are too young to understand. Your life revolves around parties and the crazy fun at bars and night clubs, like the famous *spring breakers* who come to Cancun year after year."

"Do not call me a *spring breaker*," grumbled Kiara. "I don't like that term. I am not like the rest of the students my age. I have different interests."

"Oh, that's great. And, what are those interests?" José asked.

"I don't know. I like stars," responded Kiara. "Someday I'll become an astronomer, and I'll write books, like Carl Sagan. I'm a fan of him, you know. I am not the stupid and ignorant American you think I am."

"Hey, hey, easy. I never said that," José defended himself.

"You didn't say it, but you hinted at it," Kiara said. "I'm quick enough to pick up on that. I'll have you know that unlike other students my age, I spend hours in the library studying astronomic charts."

"I too was always interested in the study of sciences," he replied, "even if I did not have the fortune like others to be

able to pay for a university degree. All that I know I learned by means of experience.”

“Is that how you learned to speak English?” asked Kiara intrigued by José’s statement. “Ever since we talked in the camp, I noticed that your pronunciation was excellent.”

“Thank you Kiara,” José said. “You are definitively a better observer than I thought. Well, you see, I lived in the United States for several years. I have some relatives who live in East Los Angeles. That is how I understand your language and customs.”

“Los Angeles?” Kiara asked. “That’s where I live. It’s a huge city. Are your relatives still there?”

“Yes, they are,” he answered, turning towards the sea to face the horizon. “However, I haven’t been able to visit them for quite some time.”

José paused, and a long silence followed; it seemed he was remembering something. He had been watching the sea. Kiara realized that something in the conversation had bothered José, and she decided to change the subject.

“What were you telling me about the Mayans who inhabited this zone?” She asked. “I’m very interested in learning more about past cultures.

“Oh, the ancient Mayans, yes. They performed other kinds of ceremonies, José responded. “They worshiped the Sun and Mother Earth. They felt profoundly grateful for all the blessings that nature gives us, and how could they not? Kiara it is a real privilege to be alive and to experience all the natural life that makes up this kind of place. Don’t you think?”

“I completely agree,” she nodded even though she really did not understand the great admiration the Mayans felt for nature or the close bond they had with their immediate surroundings.

“During their rituals,” José continued, “the ancient wizards who were their governors invoked Heavenly and Earthly powers in order to ensure that their harvests were prosperous so that their people and animals were well fed. They could provoke rains at will and avoid droughts. They possessed a mighty power.”

Kiara looked at José with skepticism in her eyes.

“Do you really believe they were able to do such things? It sounds like fantasy to me. You know what I mean? Like something from a comic book.”

“The world is more mysterious than we think, Kiara.”

José began. “Our greatest defect is to think that we know everything. Actually, we know very little about this culture or any other, and I accept that. Almost everything said about the Mayans are mere suppositions. Nobody really knows exactly what they knew, or what they did here. Nobody knows where they came from either. What we do know is that they were exceptionally intelligent and very advanced in fields of study like mathematics, and astronomy. They were able to predict eclipses and measure periods that included tens of thousands years and even more. They were familiar with planetary orbits and mathematically calculated when the planets were going to be aligned. But we don’t even know why they did that. Maybe we never will.”

“Well, I’m sure that my father will continue dedicating his life to trying to figure it out,” Kiara responded. “You’ll see.”

“I am also thinking of dedicating my life to studying this culture,” José said. “I could not stand living with this doubt forever.”

Kiara looked carefully at José and could recognize in his eyes the look of resolution to fight for what he believed to be important in his life. Later, José left and told her that he was going to walk through the jungle in search of medicinal plants and some fruits that grew there. They separated and agreed to meet at one o’ clock in the afternoon to return to camp at the time agreed to with her father.

The wind started to blow harder and Kiara could see that a mantle of clouds was beginning to form on the horizon. As the minutes passed, she started to enjoy the total privacy on that remote beach. She grabbed her backpack and took her bathing suit out. She would not use her suntan lotion since she did not feel like polluting the water, so she put it back in the backpack. She ducked behind a palm tree to put her bikini on. Her body was beautiful and slim. Her skin was white and her hair brown with some blond mixed in here and there. She was a tall, very beautiful young girl. Her blue eyes competed with the beauty of the Caribbean Sea.

Kiara plunged completely into the crystalline water and dove with open eyes looking carefully at the whitish bottom of the sea. “I wish I would have brought goggles and a snorkel,” she thought. The sea floor was another spectacle offered by this place. The sea was full of life that varied from small fish

that approached her with curiosity, to crabs and marine snails of all possible sizes. Along with that, the sea bed was almost carpeted with small shells. She liked to collect them, which is why she spent a lot of time diving and grabbing the shells that most attracted her. The sun in its entire splendor was radiating light, and she began to feel how the intense rays were tanning her shoulders.

Suddenly, as she returned to the surface, she saw something that astonished her: there on one of the big rocks, located about a hundred meters away from her, she noticed the figure of an elderly man wearing a white Indian suit with multicolored embroidery. The vision lasted only a few seconds, but she could distinguish that he was holding scepter or cane decorated with colored feathers or something similar in his left hand. The strange character was staring right at her. Kiara wiped the water from her face and pulled her hair back. When she looked again, the man was no longer there.

“How is that possible?” Kiara asked herself. It had taken less than a second to put her hair up. Where had this character gone? What did he want? She remembered what had happened to her mother and felt afraid. José was not there. She was completely alone, and she did not know what to do. She hurried out of the water and went towards her backpack, grabbed her shorts along with a shirt and got dressed. She was about to put her boots on when suddenly, she felt a strange force behind her. She turned to see what was happening and let out a scream of terror. The old man she had seen before was just a few meters away staring at her. His presence was imposing. Kiara could not move; she was paralyzed. He was

the strangest character she had ever seen in her life, and he seemed to dominate her with the power of his stare.

The old man said something in his language that she could not understand. Kiara tried to articulate some words, and with a hesitant voice asked, "Who are you?" The old man did not answer; he was simply scrutinizing her with his gaze. Kiara stopped feeling scared from one moment to the next, almost as if by magic. Something in that gaze made her feel that the old man had no intentions to harm her. She took a step backwards and realized that she could move. Was it that he had allowed her to do it? The old man came closer, almost touching her, and she could not move anymore.

"Go home," he said in Spanish. "Sacred place."

The old man pronounced these words and at the same time made a sudden movement with the cane in his left hand. Kiara felt the feathers passing near her face and immediately, the scene started to become blurry. She listened to him singing a tone she did not understand, and the last thought that overcame her was that he was hypnotizing her. She tried to resist, but it was useless. The blue sky became red and then black. She had the clear feeling of falling in an endless emptiness, and then she felt nothing. Kiara did not realize that she had just entered a deep trance.

Chapter 2



Thomas Render hurried into his office and noticed that his desk looked more disorganized than ever, as if it hadn't been cleaned in weeks. He was about to organize the files when someone knocked at his door. A curious looking person of short stature entered the office. It was Daniel Roth, chief of the satellite monitoring office and a key element for Render. He was responsible for the administrative management of Goddard space flights laboratory at NASA, and his position was controlled directly from the White House. As he was responsible for observing the proper management of research resources, he kept Render informed of important issues as they arose.

"Mr. Render, I have important news about the weather," Roth began.

"What's happening Daniel," asked Render.

Daniel replied while opening a package of files and spreading them over Render's desk.

"The meteorological monitoring center just sent some photos for us to analyze. These images are from twenty minutes ago and are some of the strangest I've seen lately. As you can see, something that looks like a hurricane is forming just ahead of Quintana Roo in the Yucatan peninsula in the Caribbean Sea zone.

"Why do you say *like* a hurricane?" Render asked.

"This storm has the shape of a hurricane, but it formed right off the coast of Quintana Roo which is odd since hurricanes normally form over Open Ocean," said Roth. "Also this phenomenon possesses an electromagnetic force that we have not been able to identify. What we do know is that this isn't being generated by wind or air temperature," Roth continued. "At first, we thought the Doppler radar was failing, but the Mexican harbor headquarters confirmed the presence of strange cloud formations and strong winds approaching their coasts."

"Well, that is strange, strange indeed," Render responded.

"Luckily it's far from our coasts. Continue monitoring the phenomenon and alert the Coast Guard to send a message to all ships sailing in that area; they should modify their routes. We don't want any accidents. Tell the meteorological center that we are going to analyze the possible causes of this phenomenon."

"Got it," Daniel said, "but there is something else."

"What is it?" Render replied impatiently.

“The SOHO space probe detected high areas of activity on the sun a half hour ago,” Roth answered. “High concentrations of electromagnetic energy are forming two sunspots of gigantic proportions north of the solar equator. Director Graham has already been notified, and he ordered the command center to redirect the Hubble telescope to observe the event.”

“Why was I not made aware of this?” asked Render surprised.

“It happened very suddenly,” responded Roth. We tried to find you, but it was impossible. The energy concentration was barely detected half an hour ago, and the weather across the entire planet has been behaving erratically since then. Quintana Roo is just one of the strange phenomena that has popped up around the globe. There are also alarms related to another phenomenon generated in the Atlantic near Bermuda. I mention it because this is the closest event thus far.”

“Has the command center already calculated the size of the solar flare,” Render asked.

“There working on it,” Roth answered. “The predictions aren’t good.”

“How bad is it Daniel?” asked Render. “What magnitude will it reach?”

“The Federal Aviation Administration has issued an alert to all airports and aircraft to ground air traffic in a matter of minutes.” Roth said. “The problem is the planes that are still in the air. They are being warned and diverted to the closest airports. We don’t know how serious the effects will

be on the ground, but we can predict an electrical blackout for the entire northern hemisphere.”

“This cannot be happening,” replied Render alarmed. “Not like this. Not so soon. Forget that and come with me to the command center. We have to see what’s happening. Is Doctor Hayes aware of the situation?”

“Yes sir,” answered Roth.

“One more thing, Daniel,” Render began.

“Yes sir?” asked Roth.

“Don’t call me sir. We’re not in the military. Just call me Tom, okay?” said Render.

“Yes sir, I mean, Tom,” replied Daniel, who could not stop seeing Tom Render as the politician responsible for obtaining the necessary funds for the agency.

Tom and Daniel came into the elevator that would take them to the command center main room. As they arrived, they felt a deathly silence. It seemed as if everyone was waiting for the countdown to the launch of the space shuttle. The personnel seldom were so concentrated.

Sarah Hayes, Commander in chief and director of the command center, looked at Tom. They were old friends. They had met more than fifteen years ago when she had come to work for NASA. She was a slender, Caucasian woman. She had beautiful green eyes that contrasted with her hair color to give her face a unique beauty. She usually wore a tailored suit with the skirt one inch above the knee. She was an astrophysicist by trade and had worked practically all her professional life for NASA. She was responsible for all the missions sent into space in addition to the technical

functionality of the North American research satellites that orbit the Earth. As an expert in astrophysics and quantum mechanics, she had written several books about the complex nature of our universe. Tom Render, saw her coming into the room and approached her.

“Hi Tom, I’m glad to see you,” she said.

“Hi Sarah,” said Render “What the heck, is happening?” Sarah smiled.

“You always cut straight to the point, Tom” Sarah replied.

“We don’t know yet. We’re waiting for the Hubble alignment to observe it. Fortunately, during the last space shuttle mission, we installed a heat reducing filter, so we now can observe the Sun directly for five minute intervals.

At that moment, one of the operators made an announcement over the microphone.

“Twenty seconds until full alignment. We will have an image in thirty-five seconds and counting.”

The command room grew more and tenser while everybody waited for the image to appear on the big screen located at the front of the room. Tom looked at Sarah once more. Generally, the occurrence of the solar spots indicated that the sun’s magnetic activity was increasing. That meant that at any moment a solar flare could erupt, sending huge amounts of high-energy radioactive particles out into space. The radiation from these particles would bombard our planet causing communication satellite failures, while at the same time overloading electrical power grids.

At that moment, the screen lit up and an incredible image began to come into focus. It was our Sun seen from the

perspective of the space telescope. The image was filtered through the ultraviolet spectrum, but even so, it was colossal: a great sphere of light and incandescent fire that moved as if it were alive and had a will of its own.

In the northern part of the Sun's equator, dark spots could be distinguished. These spots appeared and disappeared at regular intervals. After a few moments, it appeared that these spots were combining to form two points or spots of enormous proportions.

"Enlighten me Sarah!" Tom said sarcastically. "What's going on?"

Sarah Hayes appeared hypnotized watching the screen. It was a unique image.

"Tom, we are witnessing the formation of two great sunspots," Sarah responded. "They seem small from here but each of these spots has a diameter hundreds of times greater than the earth. In 1989, the last time the Sun showed this kind of magnetic hyperactivity, it produced a flare so powerful that it interrupted all the electrical power in Canada and a large portion of the northern United States. Six million people lost electrical power in the blink of an eye. Besides that, it interrupted satellite communications for several hours and left many satellites useless. Our radiation insulators have improved since then, but these spots that are about to form seem bigger and more violent than the ones that occurred twenty-three years ago."

"That doesn't sound good," said Tom. Adrenaline was rushing through his body. "What can we do?"

“We have taken every possible precautionary measure, but there is no way to completely prevent it.” Sarah stated. “A solar flare is coming and like any other storm, we can only wait and try to withstand the damage. What worry us most are the satellites and planes that are in the air. I hope they can make emergency landings as soon as possible.”

One of the operators interrupted the conversation and approached Sarah to give her a report.

“Doctor Hayes, the Van Allen belts report has saturated quickly,” the operator said.

“That means that it’s beginning,” Sarah raised her voice to speak to the personnel. “All the monitors should be ready and working. The storm will begin in a matter of minutes. Warn the Pentagon and order the Emergency Broadcast System to emit an alert of extreme solar radiation throughout the country.”

“What about the Hubble?” Tom asked. “Are we at risk of the radiation damaging our telescope?”

“The Hubble telescope has protection against radiation,” Sarah answered. “An electronic device automatically turns it off when it detects radiation above adequate operating levels.”

The mood was serious as everyone watched the screen and the changes being generated on our star. Sarah began to review the reports she now had in her hands. The spots continued fluctuating each time at shorter intervals. Tom heard the ring tone of a cellular phone.

“It’s mine,” replied Daniel Roth, taking his phone with his right hand.

Tom was more nervous by the second and his adrenaline was on the rise. He observed several operators approaching Sara with different photos and reports. None of them had a positive expression on their face. Daniel continued on the phone, but said almost nothing, only listened. The room was filled with tension as the magnificent star kept shining on the huge screen. Tom looked around and could stand no more.

“Daniel, tell me what’s going on,” Tom demanded.

Daniel put the phone on hold.

“It’s worse than we expected, Tom,” he answered. “Meteorological phenomena are being reported all over the country. Quintana Roo in Mexico is at general alert. Whatever is happening there is unprecedented. It is a type of highly magnetic storm accompanied by gale-force winds and great concentrations of electricity. It is going to sweep away everything it touches. If it makes landfall, there will be no place hide. Winds of more than three hundred kilometers per hour have been registered near the phenomenon’s core. Satellites are recording everything. The Europeans have called us already; they are observing it and are surprised. The phenomenon is moving towards the coast at an impressive speed. If it finds a boat in its path, the strong waves will surely sink it. The phenomenon will make landfall in a matter of minutes.”

“Damn!” Tom replied. “This can’t be happening. What about the United States?”

“Not good,” Daniel replied. “California, Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado have reported extreme wind speeds. Tornadoes are expected to form at any moment. For now, thousands of homes have been damaged because of the strong winds. New England reports snow development and accelerated winds, and the temperatures have drastically dropped. All air travel has been suspended. More than four thousand flights have been cancelled. All of the country is experiencing severe weather. It’s madness! We’ve never seen anything like this.”

Tom could not believe what he was hearing.

“Daniel, keep the satellites in position. Use all the Doppler radars available. We need data. Alert the entire population about the severe weather. Nobody should be out of their homes.

At that moment Sarah returned to Tom and Daniel. Daniel continued the telephone call giving the instructions he had received from Tom.

“Tom,” Sarah said approaching him, “we have declared a maximum state of alert for the entire country; you have to see these files. The atmospheric reports show that gamma ray radiation coming from the sun is reaching critical levels in the upper layers of the atmosphere. The Pentagon just called us. Two military satellites were disabled. They are demanding answers. You have to shut down the satellites, or the radiation is going to fry them.”

“Sarah please,” he responded. “This is The Pentagon were talking about; they wouldn’t turn off the surveillance satellites for even a tenth of a second.

“But they’ll have to unless they want to lose them completely!” Sarah shot back.

“You know the consequences of making this kind of recommendation. They are going to demand for evidence to back it up. How are we going to tell them that we don’t know what’s happening?” Tom replied.

“We have to explain it to them,” Sarah said. “Never before have we reached levels this critical! Radiation is about to threaten the life of this planet. The magnetic pole is fluctuating; the compasses have a deviation of fourteen degrees. On top of that, the instruments are recording an unknown type of radiation, with an ultra-short wavelength, never before registered.

“Unknown radiation? What do you mean?” asked Tom.

“That’s not possible. Surely the satellite’s sensors are overloading. You’re the expert. You tell me what is happening.”

“The readings aren’t coming from the satellites, Tom,” Sarah answered. “The radiation is reaching our instruments here on the ground, right where we are.”

“No, that can’t be true!” Tom exclaimed. He knew perfectly well the risks of exposure to radiation. “This cannot be happening.”

“It is happening, right now,” Sarah replied. “Apparently, there is no mistake in the readings. If this is correct, we should be suffering disorders or we are going to begin to experience them very soon. All the radiation coming from the Sun causes

severe damage to organic tissue. Let us hope that this is just a circuit failure.”

The atmosphere in the room was more and more tense. The calm before the storm was gone. All the operators argued amongst themselves. Daniel approached Tom Render.

“Tom, cell phone coverage is down. We are losing communications,” he said.

Tom looked at the screen that was still showing the incandescent gigantic. Suddenly, the image started to fail. All the attention in the room centered on the screen. The failure was increasing, but the image still showed the growth of the sunspots. They became immense and were darkening almost a quarter of the Sun.

One of the operators who monitored the instruments could not suppress their gasp.

“Doctor Hayes, the levels of gamma radiation in the atmosphere are exceeding critical levels! We are losing communication with the satellites! The telescope is shutting down!

The last thing the operators saw was the maximum growth of the sunspots, and then, nothing. Electrical power was lost and all the lights in the room turned off. A few seconds later, the generators turned the emergency lights on, and Sarah, Tom and Daniel were looking at each other.

Chapter 3



Kiara slowly opened her eyes and could recognize that she was still on the beach. The strange thing was that now she was sitting in the driver's seat of the jeep. She began to remember the details of what had happened and felt grateful for not being hurt.

She felt perfectly fine, but the wind hit her face violently. She watched the sky and noticed that the clouds were closing in. She immediately understood that a storm was approaching. She had to get out of there right away. She looked for the key in the vehicle's ignition, but it wasn't there. Of course, logically, José had taken it with him.

"Damn!" she thought. "I have to find him quickly." She got out of the jeep and started to walk down the road shouting at the top of her lungs for José. More than ten minutes passed, and she had moved forward about six

hundred meters and was extremely nervous. The wind became more violent and in the distance she heard the sound of thunder and lightning that would frighten anyone.

Kiara knew the risks of being outdoors during a tropical storm. The idea of being there during one made her tremble. She had to think fast. José did not appear or respond to her shouts.

“How is it possible that he does not realize, a storm is coming?” she asked herself. Suddenly she remembered what the old man had told her: “Go home.” Maybe he meant that she was in danger in that place. Surely, he had put her in the seat of the jeep so that she could leave as soon as possible. She had to go back to the vehicle and ask for help by satellite phone.

She hated the idea of worrying her father because of her own neglect, but she had no other choice. She ran back up the road and in a few minutes, she was again in the vehicle. She picked up the satellite phone and dialed the camp number. The telephone rang for a long time and finally she had to redial. At the second attempt, one of the archaeologists answered.

“It’s Kiara,” she said. “I need to speak with Doctor Jensen.” The noise produced by the interference was terrible and the archaeologist’s voice could hardly be heard. Kiara had to concentrate and barely made out that they would go to look for her father. “I need you to come and pick me up,” she said. “José disappeared, and I cannot find him!” As much as she shouted, she was not getting any answer. Feeling desperate at not being able to hear anything, she hung the phone up and put her hands over her face. The wind blew her

hair into a mess, and the rain had started to fall. Kiara knew that she would be soaked in few minutes.

She did not know what to do and the weather was deteriorating quickly. She tried pointlessly to look for the ignition cables underneath the panel. She would never be able to start the jeep without the key. Her only hope was to find José. She jumped out of the jeep and began to run towards the road, shouting his name frantically.

She quickly ran deep into the jungle as the wind and rain began to devastate the vegetation. Her desperation grew as the weather got worse. Thunder and lightning were heard much, much closer, and it began to pour.

Kiara was completely wet from head to toe and began to feel cold. She began to lose hope of being able to leave before the storm got worse. She had to find shelter. The jeep was not an option because it did not have a roof. Her desperation did not allow her to think clearly. How was it possible that José would not come back? Maybe he had suffered an accident or maybe he was lost in the middle of the jungle looking for the way back to the road. Her experience with the old man had left her completely upset. She did not feel capable of making a decision. She had no idea what to do.

At that moment, she believed she heard a scream coming from the jungle. She perked up her ear and stayed still. Once again, she heard a voice that was screaming from the thickness of the vegetation. She was now sure that it was José. She went into the jungle, but it was almost impossible. The trees were shaking with the huge force of the wind, and the branches struck with tremendous force.

She kept fighting the wind, trying to scream her lungs out for José to hear her. She continued moving forward for some time, walking always in the direction of the screams.

After a while, the weather became unbearable, and she had no idea how many times she had changed direction. Suddenly, she stopped and reflected. She realized that she no longer heard the screams and had completely lost her way. She no longer knew where the road was. She was lost in the middle of the jungle.

Kiara raised her head and looked at the sky. She got scared when she saw that it had completely changed color. It was a very dark gray and she could see electrical discharges. She began to moan in despair. She had to do something to get out of there and find a safe place to protect herself from the storm. She could not stay there. That would be foolishness. Seized with fear for the first time, she thought that maybe she was going to die in the jungle.

A blinding light followed by a deafening noise made her lose her balance and fall to the ground. A bolt of lightning had hit a tree just forty meters from her. Kiara sat up and panicked. She did not want to die there, not that way. She began to run frantically looking for the road to go back to the jeep. Her intention was to hide underneath it and wait for the storm to pass. She couldn't think of a better idea. As much as she tried, she wasn't able to find the road; she was totally disoriented and confused in the middle of the jungle. Also, she had lost all sense of time. Her situation worsened with every passing minute.

She stopped for a moment and tried to think clearly. She thought about her father and the message she had sent by

satellite phone. Even though they had not heard, they knew that with the storm approaching, her life was in danger. They would send somebody to find her. The thought of being rescued filled her with courage. She must move to find the road again. “Come on Kiara,” She said to herself. “You can do it.”

A roar was heard behind Kiara. She froze. What kind of beast could it be? She heard the roar again, much closer now. She did not waste any more time. With the little strength she had left, she began to run in the opposite direction of the animal sound. Kiara was about to give up. Her heart was beating so fast that she felt that it was going to explode. Another roar came from her right side. She could not believe what was happening. It was the worst day of her life. She didn't have any more strength to run and if the storm did not finish her off, then she would die devoured by a wild animal. Her heart exploded in her chest and Kiara felt faint.

She remembered the Mayan figures that represented the jaguar, lord of the jungle. The roars she listened were undoubtedly from this feline. She was not going to be able to escape nor had she weapons with which to fight. She felt throughout her body that the beast was approaching. In panic she had the idea that it was time to entrust to God. Tears ran incessantly by her cheeks. Slowly faced the direction where the roars were coming. She couldn't react when she saw the superb animal. The jaguar jumped upon her and easily knocked her down, crushing her with all its weight. Kiara knew nothing else.

The jungle was governed by its own rules.