

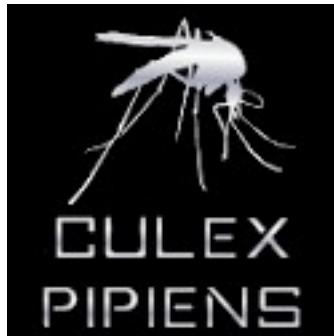
# The Mayans and the Spacemen

by Culex Pipiens



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The sun was warm on his old bones as he sat back on his ankles stretching his sore and tired muscles. Yik'in Chan K'awil had ordered the temple built to honor his father, Jasaw Chan K'awil, and while the construction had progressed slowly, it was now finally nearing completion. The carvings were among the last items yet to be completed.

With effort the old man rose to his feet grasped the chisel and hammer in his tanned and worn hands, weathered to the color and consistency of dried leather, and begin work on the glyphs once again. The hours passed as he chiseled out the remaining values ending 1272 years in the future. He stepped away once again to rest his weary arms and take a refreshing drink.

Upon completion he would finally be accepted in the upper caste of Mayan society. His family would be in a better position, subservient only to the leaders, not to almost everyone as they were now. Completing his masterpiece, a multiyear stone carving, would qualify him to move up in society. He knew the toll this work was taking on his body but the opportunities his family would soon enjoy were worth the cost, the sacrifice.

Once more rising to his feet, bones creaking, he glanced at the sun. It was well past the zenith and he only had a few more hours to work today. Perhaps in 4 or 5 more days he would finish his work, but the quality was of utmost importance. He would not rush and ruin the work. He would take as long as necessary to finish. Inspecting the stone he mentally laid out the remaining glyphs. 'Sun Beam. Fire Pillar.' He could see them sitting right there in the stone and just had to remove the unnecessary rock from around what would eventually be the symbols.

He turned and bent over to grasp his chisel and stone hammer. Standing upright he was about to turn back to the wall when he paused. His chest felt strange. A bit of tightness and a mild stinging sensation seemed to be radiating from it. Looking down he saw a wooden shaft with a cluster of colorful feathers tied to the end of it. Green, red and blue feathers so beautiful in the sunlight were tied to the shaft. The other end was embedded in his chest where a bright crimson red stream was emerging and starting to flow down his abdomen. The drops begin falling to the ground as he slowly sunk to his knees.

The pain of the arrow was not that bad, much less severe than he would have expected. He could hear the whoops and hollers of the invading tribe. The war cry of his people was quickly taken up while defenders rushed out to drive the invaders

away. Darts, arrows and atlatl spears were flying in from the jungle and being sent back just as fast. Finally the invaders rushed in towards the defending warriors where they all clashed with clubs, spears and knives. The fighting was fast and brutal.

As the old man remained on his knees he observed the battle but his mind was elsewhere. He knew he was dying and would not be able to finish the carvings. He knew his family would remain in the lowest caste while the Mayan rulers and royalty used them as they saw fit. If only he could finish the carving. The thoughts of failure were the last he had as his muscles started going slack. The chisel slipped from his hand to thump against the ground while the hammer slid out of his other hand clattering down the stone stairs of the pyramid. His lifeless eyes still started out while the tear that had run down his cheeked was quickly drying in the afternoon sunlight. Eventually gravity won and the old man toppled over on his side. It was almost two days later, well after the invaders had been defeated, before his family found him.

“Yuri Komarova will be piloting the mission with the two Americans, Jason Bradley and Susanna Polinski, rounding out the crew. They’ll be replacing Iroshi Sakayama and Tony Jameson while Natalia Ivanovich will remain on board,” said the coordinator of the next International Space Station mission to the assembled group. As Jason and Sue’s names were mentioned they had each briefly raised their hands in acknowledgement and so the others would know who they were.

“The primary goal, outside of crew swap, will be supply replenishment along with delivery of the next round of experiments. Todd, can you comment on those?”

“Sure. We have three going into orbit. One is from the school competition and the winner has their experiment going into orbit. The goal will be to study the growth patterns of a variety of vegetables in a zero G environment, contrasting any differences between traditional, heirloom and GMO varieties. “

“The other two experiments are from the government, classified, and not something I can discuss with this group as a whole. We will have separate break out discussions later with those on the approved list.”

“Thanks Todd. Finally we’re shipping up some new equipment that will allow the station to link in communications with Hubble and actually control it from there. Nothing fancy, just a simple rack mount server. Four screws and the usual cable hookups. Including this install, unloading the supplies and experiment equipment and bundling the trash for the return trip, plus the crew briefings and turn over we expect connect time at seven days. We’ve got a three day extension window built in if weather conditions or other factors delay the return.”

“If there are no other questions then we’ll break into our smaller groups and review the mission plan being passed out by Fred. You’ve got about an hour until lunch arrives and then another hour after lunch before we reconvene as a full group to hash out any issues.”

Manny Lopez adjusted the straps on his backpack before continuing down the trail. He almost laughed out loud at the use of the word trail to describe what he was walking down. It was so overgrown as to be nearly unrecognizable.

He walked on thinking of what he was about to do. For centuries the ruins had been abandoned. Manny knew the history as well as anyone else. The Mayans were in decline and when the Spanish conquistadors arrived they put the final nail in the coffin, so to speak. They were destroyed as a people and as a culture. That’s what all the books taught. Manny knew different.

The Mayans saw what was happening and left just token resistance groups to fight the Spanish. The rest simply melted away. Disappeared into the jungle eventually joining up in small groups with other tribes, other cultures. They quickly adopted to their new people but always secretly kept their Mayan beliefs and culture alive and passed it down from generation to generation. Year after year, decade after decade, century after century the knowledge of the task was passed down father to son, mother to daughter. Manny was the culmination of over 400 years of knowledge of the task.

Somewhere along the way the reason why was lost to the ages but the fact that the task had to be done was never forgotten. Manny was so near to completing his task. He had to get there tonight in order to be in position for the morning sun rise.

Pulling up abruptly, Manny shook his head realizing he’d almost stepped on a fer de lance. One bite and he would have never completed his task. Giving it a wide berth, he stepped off the trail a few paces, moved around and back onto the trail continuing his journey and paying closer attention to the here and now.

Десять. Девять. Восемь. Семь. Шесть. Пять. Четыре. Три. Два. Один. Ноль.

The translation scrolled across the bottom of the screen, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0 while a voice over, in English, called out “igniters on”, “main engine ignition” and finally “we have lift off at 3:17 am Russian ALMT time, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012 on a routine resupply and crew change for the International Space Station. This is Hilda

von Berg reporting for CNN Europe.” The Russian Soyuz Rocket left the launch pad and started the climb into space and an eventual rendezvous with the ISS.

Manny was shivering in the cool air. You wouldn't call it cold, he was in a jungle after all, but after hours of sweating his way down the trail and eventually climbing to the top of the Mayan pyramid, nearly 230 feet up in almost total darkness, he now ceased activity and was exposed to the wind. As the sweat evaporated and his clothes dried he started to warm up. It was critical that he remain awake for the sun rise. The knowledge passed down told him the task must be completed at sun rise. Once again he felt the backpack and the heavy object in it reassuring himself that he would not fail.

A wild bird call jerked Manny awake. As he whipped his head up he saw the light in the sky and realized it was almost sunrise and he'd fallen asleep. Working quickly Manny opened his pack and removed a strange shaped piece of stone. It was cylindrical in shape with a number of protrusions on one end and two hollowed out spaces on the other end. He was already sitting near the designated spot having taken up position the night before.

Over the years his parents, both full blood Mayan descendants had brought him here and joined with the tour groups. They always gawked and played the tourist role quite well. At the designated spot Manny would always be pulled aside and asked to find the hole. He never failed to locate it.

Today would be no exception. Turning to the wall he brushed a vine away from the hole and inserted the cylinder. It went in about 80% and stopped. Manny slowly rotated it and pushed until the protrusions lined up and it slid in the rest of the way. He was nearly trembling with anticipation. Any moment now the sun would crest the horizon and he would complete a process started over a millennium before.

Flash!

There it was. He inserted his fingers into each depression grabbing the stone in the middle and firmly turned clockwise 180 degrees as he and his countless ancestors had been instructed.

Nothing.

Perhaps he had done something wrong? Should he turn it more? Or just leave it?

Slow Manny became aware of a very subtle trembling that increased in volume.

The temple had been constructed over a sink hole in the jungle. Large slabs were balanced just so and then filled in around them with sand to stabilize them. The bones, the columns of the temple, were added next and slowly layer upon layer was added. Manny's simple act of inserting the "key" and turning the lock could best be described as pulling the drain on a bath tub. At first it doesn't look like anything was happening but soon you notice the water level start to drop.

Under the temple the drain plug had been removed and could not be replaced. The sand slowly drained out from between the slabs and down into the sink hole. As the anchoring effect of the sand lessened the slabs started to shift. Subtly at first and then growing as more and more sand drained away.

Finally a tipping point was reached and the first slab dropped down the hole. Soon other slabs followed along with the support columns of the gigantic pyramid shaped temple. Manny was just starting to think that perhaps he should not have hung around when the building dropped out from under him. The stones collapsed down into the sink hole along with Manny. He did not have long to consider his fate as the tumbling multi ton stones quickly reduced him to a red smear across a number of rocks.

The rumbling went on for what seemed to be ages but in reality was only a few minutes from beginning to end. Had anyone else been around they would have seen most of the pyramid disappear into the ground leaving only two columns and a slab suspended between them still standing.

Slowly the sun continued its climb into the sky.

The Soyuz rocket continued up eventually consuming all the fuel and ejecting the Soyuz capsule into orbit on a trajectory to intercept the ISS while the launch stages dropped back to earth.

Hours later they met up with the station and started docking maneuvers.

Just as the staff showed up to start preparations for today's tourists the sun reached a level such that it was able to shine down on the slab, specifically on a giant diamond embedded in the middle of the slab. The cut of the beach ball sized diamond was such that the sun's rays were combined, magnified and focused straight down into the earth.

As the staff came over to investigate the collapsed, and in fact nearly completely gone, pyramid, the light beam shooting into the planet had already heated to near 10,000 degrees, well above the point necessary to vaporize rock. It continued drilling deeper and deeper.

Scientists for years claimed to have found the extinction level event location, the meteor that impacted just off the coast of Mexico. Known as the Chicxulub crater, the books state that a massive asteroid hit here and caused worldwide destruction and led to the extinction of the dinosaurs.

They were wrong.

Chicxulub was actually a supervolcano. Rivaling, even surpassing the Yellowstone megacaldera. It joined sites such as Yellowstone, Lake Taupo, Pacana, Kurile Lake, Long Valley and Kamchatka, just to name a few. Any one of these was sufficient to alter the weather for a decade or so. Chicxulub had altered it for centuries.

The actual lava pocket extended well into Central America, only the part under the Gulf of Mexico blew last time.

As the light beam continued drilling ever deeper the ground started rumbling and the park staff fled in all directions. Most ran to their cars, some fled into the jungle. The sun continued the climb into the sky and was approaching the zenith. The earth continued to shake in a nearly continuous earthquake felt as far away as Texas, Florida and Brazil.

When the sun reached the peak, the focused beam which had steadily increased to nearly 20,000 degrees in temperature, finally broke through to the lava chamber. The shaft was quite narrow, only 6 inches or so in width but dozens of miles deep.

The analogy is a bit gross, but when a ripe pimple is squeezed the contents, if there is an exit channel, come flying out. Chicxulub could be thought of as a massive pimple on the earth. A 300 mile across pimple. The pressure of the earth itself coupled with the tiny shaft was enough to trigger the release.

Lava came out under such pressure that the stream climbed nearly two miles into the sky before falling back to earth. The hot lava and pressure in the shaft quickly melted the surrounding rock further widening the shaft. Within an hour the stream shooting out was nearly a quarter mile in width, although only shooting up about



half as far at this point, and still growing. Earthquakes were being felt as far north as Chicago and south nearly to the tip of Argentina.

An inferno is the best description for the Yucatan peninsula. Everything was either obliterated or still on fire if not covered in dozens of meters of lava. The sheer volume of lava landing in the ocean converted trillions of gallons to steam and heated the surrounding water to the boiling point. Rising through the atmosphere the steam cooled and coalesced into storms on the scale of category 5 hurricanes.

Still the shaft grew and the lava flowed.

The entire crew at the space station was involved in brief introductions followed by the transfer of literally a ton of supplies. Zero gravity makes it easy to handle heavy weights, but a ton of anything still takes up a lot of containers to hold it and time to move it.

Once everything was settled they relocated to the communications module.

“ISS calling Houston. Over”

“ISS this is Houston. Signal strength is good. Over.”

“Docking procedures completed and cargo has been off loaded. Over.”

“Roger that. You all get settled in and we’ll send a wakeup call at oh five hundred. Over.”

“Copy Houston. Wakeup at oh five hundred. Over and out.”

“Houston out.”

The lava spurting out rivaled and eventually surpassed the largest known super volcano. Within 12 hours over 10,000 cubic kilometers of lava had shot out of the hole, now nearly a mile in diameter. The flow was subsiding due, mainly, to the decreased pressure. Unfortunately this resulted in a large empty pocket under the Yucatan peninsula over 200 miles across and up to a half mile deep. Something had to give and the downward force of all that rock and water finally caused the land to fracture and buckle. The entire caldera dropped nearly a half mile straight down. The sound of the resulting collapse of the earth shattered windows as far away as Memphis and caused nearly every living being as far away as Mississippi to suffer

ruptured ear drums. The rumbling cracking sound was heard nearly around the entire world. Only parts of Australia and Siberia heard nothing.

When a mass of that size falls, even just a half mile, the impact was the equivalent of a magnitude 10 earth quake. Had seismographs been calibrated to go higher they would have but a magnitude 10 is all they could register. The shockwaves were felt all through North and South America and even in parts of western Africa and Europe. Many tectonic plates around the planet slipped causing additional localized earthquakes, some of which began setting off additional volcanoes. Within 24 hours every other major volcano, including all the other calderas eventually let loose too. The shaking set of Las Palmas dropping the side of the mountain into the Atlantic and speeding a massive tsunami towards the east coast of the US.

Dropping the land and the ocean floor a half mile straight down opens up a lot of room for the ocean to rush in and fill which it promptly did. The gulf coast of Florida saw the water retreat out literally to the horizon. Over time the Atlantic rushed into the gulf to fill in the gap and as the water surged back tsunamis upwards of 2000 feet in height rushed back towards the US gulf coast. The entire Gulf reacted as water in a bath tub does sloshing back and forth sending massive waves first to the US, then back to Central America, then back to the US. This went on for days with the wave height slowly diminishing with each cycle.

The Las Palmas wave hit the east coast at a mere 300 feet in height. Between the two waves sweeping back and forth over Florida, it, as a state, ceased to exist and even the bedrock itself was ground off and mostly washed into the ocean.

Around the world the other volcanoes and earthquakes triggered a whole range of other tsunamis inundating every country for dozens of miles in from the coast at a minimum and in some cases literally washing over the entire country. The land masses were altered, some new places rose, many sunk or were washed away. A world map no longer matched what was physically there.

“ISS to Houston. Come in.”

Static.

“ISS to Houston. Come in Houston.”

Static.

“Is the radio working?”

“Yes. Try boosting the gain.”

“I did. I’ve tried every frequency out there. Nothing is answering. It’s like every transmitter on the planet has been destroyed.”

“Well we know that couldn’t have happened so there has to be something wrong with the radio. Get Tony, he’s the radio expert he can fix it or switch us to the backup unit. Good thing he didn’t leave yet.”

Sue went over to find Tony. Hand over hand she pulled along the guide line floating in the zero gravity space station module. Drifting along she pivoted to look out the porthole and catch a glimpse of her home. While she knew her parents, retired down to Florida, couldn’t see her she still imagined them staring up and waving at her.

Nearing the window she could see something was wrong. Besides the fact they never got their wake up call from Houston, Florida was missing. Gone. Like someone had simply cut it off of the US and discarded it. Sue screamed.

The crew watched for days as the planet tore itself apart. Volcanoes and lava flows lit the night sky and by day they watched the oceans literally slosh around the planet covering vast stretches of the continents, only to recede and later flow back over the ground again and again. The storms were of a scale never seen before by any human. Swirling hurricanes bigger than North America. Ash streaks extending through the atmosphere thousands of miles. They had only launched not yet two days ago and already the planet no longer looked like anything they recognized. It was now a foreign and hostile environment.

The shell shocked astronauts gathered in the common area module and Jason began, “For now we’re all stranded here. We all saw what happened to the planet and it’s obvious the return flight won’t be leaving tomorrow as originally planned.”

“Can we ever return?” asked Natalia.

“We are not self sufficient up here,” said Tony. “The air can be re-circulated and even our urine can be filtered and distilled back into potable water...”

“Eewwww”

“... as I was saying, but the food is a finite resource. It will only last so long. Even with urine filtering, you lose a small amount of liquid each time to filter cleaning so eventually that runs out too.”

“How much food do we have?” queried Iroshi.

“The current supplies are at two months plus what we brought up, so we have about an 8 month supply for three people. With six of us it’ll be four months, maybe five with strict rationing.”

“How about the seeds from the student project?” added Sue. “We were going to grow them anyway. Couldn’t we do so but harvest from them too?”

“That’s a good idea but we don’t have enough grow medium for anything beyond some supplemental greens. Trying to do any more would be nearly impossible and that’s without factoring in the need for water for the plants.”

“Oh. Yeah, forgot about that. Sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. If we’re going to have a shot at surviving this it’s going to take all of us pulling together and considering all ideas.” Jason flashed Sue a brief smile which at least eliminate her frown.

Jason was thinking that Sue was cute although when she was unhappy her frown looked almost like a pout and made her seem childish. Perhaps if they could get some time alone together he’d ask if she.... No what am I thinking. We’re probably the last people left in the world... although you know if that’s true it’ll be up to us to repopulate... no stop that. Let’s focus on surviving this first. Jason dragged his attention back to the conversation going on.

“...ever going to be able to go back. The planet is destroyed and flooded.”

“No, Yuri, not totally. Some higher spots should have avoided getting flooded. We’ll have to do a land mass analysis looking for locations at a certain altitude or higher, far enough inland, not downwind of any major volcano, a sizable distance from any caldera and not on known fault lines.”

“Iroshi, you got to be kidding. The only place that meets all those requirements is where we’re standing right now.”

“No, I’m not kidding. But I did forget to mention that it also has to be within 15 degrees or so of the equator.”

“Why?”

Jason jumped back in, “With all the ash in the atmosphere we’re looking at a decade or more of cold summers and possibly even another ice age. Near the equator is the

only place that might stay warm enough to support crops and eventually a place to live. Once we plug the variables into the computer we should be able to get a list of possibilities and work it. Hopefully we'll have a number of candidates we can check out."

"Check out? Yeah, let me just beam down and see how stuff looks."

"No, I'm serious. We have resources up here we can use. Remember the Hubble control system we brought up?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Flip the telescope around and point it at the planet. If we can see some star 14 billion light years away I should be able to read the fine print of a contract down on the planet with it. The NSA satellites up here don't have anywhere near the same level of optics and they can make out license plates from space. The Hubble should be fine for locating remnants of civilization."

"And if we don't find any?"

"I guess we'll have to deal with that reality if it happens."

"What countries are likely candidates?"

"Anything in Central Africa, most of the Indonesian island area, and Peru or Brazil. The further we wander from these areas the less likely we'll find anything. Now for the bad news. The islands were probably wiped out either as many are volcanic in nature or the tsunami's swept over them. Central African countries, like the Congo, either are jungle or full of warlords and many times both. Brazil and Peru were the closest countries to the area that looks to have erupted first but the winds may have kept much of the ash away. Of course Brazil is mostly tropical rain forest, i.e. Jungle and much of Peru is on the coast. Anyway, we should monitor the radio 24x7 just in case someone figures out a way to transmit and looking for signs of habitation with the Hubble should be our other priority. I'd say everything else is on hold unless the situation changes."

The conversation continued for quite a while on just what strict rationing would entail and how to conserve water. A general consensus formed that they were up against a 90 day deadline leaving them with a supply of food and water for when they returned.

Dateline, 47 days after the Mayan Apocalypse

“Hello? Anyone out there?”

“Guys come quick! I got a voice on the radio.”

Tony grabbed up the microphone, flipped the switch and mentally noted that the broadcast was coming in on the amateur frequencies. Must be someone on a ham radio and given their orbital location, they'd have to be in the US, probably mid US either central or mountain zone.

“This is the ISS station to unnamed radio operator. Do you read?”

“Yes! I can hear you! Just how bad is the destruction? Can you see it from up there? What happened? How has....”

“Whoa... one question at a time. Yes the destruction is bad. It's worldwide. From what we can tell a whole series of volcanoes and tsunamis all let loose pretty much at the same time. We've been unable to contact anyone since it started. How about you?”

“I've been in contact with a small handful of people scattered over the US and Canada. I'm in a cabin in the mountains west of Denver. It's really bad here. We missed much of the ash but the winter storms normally dump 15-20 feet up here for an entire season. Last time I checked we were at 30 feet and there's still at least 2 solid months of winter yet to go. We're running low on food and water. We've been melting snow but our firewood is almost gone or buried under yards and yards of snow and we can't get to it. Once our supply runs out I fear we're going to either freeze or die of thirst.”

“You keep saying we. Are there others with you?”

“It's just me and my wife. Kids move out ages ago. One lives....,” the operator made a sound like he was choked up, “... I guess I should say they lived on each coast. Were the tsunamis that bad?”

Tony wasn't sure if it was a lie or not but responded, “You can take comfort as, from what we saw, it was quick and painless for them.”

“Thanks I guess.”

“You said you've contacted others?”

“In the first few weeks we were hunkered down. Then I finally tried a few frequencies. The more remote you were and the higher you were the more likely it seems you survived. Unfortunately the remoteness is also a handicap. Most of the

homesteaders like us have dropped off the radio. They were further north and probably got buried with snow. I've got no one on the southern coast, or any of the southern states. Mexico is quiet too. On rare occasion I can pick up a foreign contact. A few in Europe are reporting similar conditions and have relayed dire messages from Russia, China and India. I did get a few contacts in Ecuador which were encouraging. It sounded like the few people still alive there were just barely hanging on but they reported minimal snowfall, even in the higher elevations."

Jason was scribbling furiously in a notebook writing down everything they were hearing.

"How about you spacemen up there? How are you going to get home?"

"We have two emergency capsules we can use to return to earth but we don't know where to try to return to. From what we've seen and your report it doesn't sound like anywhere is still normal."

"Nope I can't say that....."

"What happened? Did he get cut off?" asked Sue.

"We must have drifted to far away for his signal. He said he's near Denver so each time we cross the center of the US we can try calling him again. So far I have just been passively listening. Unless anyone objects I'm going to transmit and see if I can find others."

"Makes sense go for it."

Dateline, 65 days after the Mayan Apocalypse

The astronauts were able to re-establish a radio connection with Ted, the operator from outside of Denver, and checked in with him each day. Today is the first time he did not respond. Their observations had shown a massive storm over Colorado, and in fact over a large part of the central US for six days straight. Either his antenna was blown down or the snow finally beat Ted and his wife and he no longer was among the living.

Dateline, 85 days after the Mayan Apocalypse

“We’re five days away from our self imposed deadline for leaving. I’m pleased to say our food stores will let us stay nearly another month however then when we return to earth we’ll have nothing and need to immediately begin foraging for food. If we miss our target zone, even by a few dozen miles, it could be a nearly inhospitable landscape with no food or water to be found.”

“Has the target area been finalized?” asked Natalia.

Jason turned to Yuri and Iroshi, “Anything new from Hubble?”

They looked at each other before Yuri finally took the lead, “Nothing really new. We’ve done extensive scans along the equator focusing primarily on inhabited areas and come up with very little. Anywhere in the area of Indonesian is a complete write off. Most of the archipelago, at least what we can still find, are bare rocks. Only the very highest peaks of a few islands were not washed over however when Krakatoa blew the ash fall across the entire area buried any plants or animals that escaped the floods.”

“That good, eh?”

“Yeah. Moving on to Africa the range of volcanoes on the eastern side all went, pretty much at the same time and either dropped large parts of Africa into the Indian Ocean or poured lava in unbelievable volumes into the heart of the Congo. Most of the jungle is now a hot molten lake 750 miles or so across. The intense heat burned everything within 100 miles of the lake and from what we can tell the volume of lava seems to causing the entire interior of Africa to sink, either due to the weight or the now empty pockets underneath.”

“Are you saying that the center of Africa may drop low enough to become a lake?”

“No, more likely drop low enough to let in the ocean. It already appears to be about 20 feet below sea level and is dropping a few feet a day. When the water finds a way in we could be looking at a global sea level drop of 10-15 feet. Let’s just hope it’s gradual and not in one big rush like Chixulub.”

“You said we can’t go north or south so we’re screwed.”

“No Natalia. You’re partially correct, the northern and southern latitudes are experiencing extreme winter. Most definitely an ice age is starting again. Perhaps a mini ice age lasting just a few decades, perhaps one last lasting thousands of years but we have reference to determine this. However there are a few parts of South America that look promising.”

“Brazil?”



“Nope, Ecuador.”

“Wasn’t there a bunch of volcanoes there? Isn’t it just as destroyed as everywhere else?”

“Mostly, however the southern area has a small volcano free zone and a highland area, almost 2500 meters above sea level, that escaped the flooding. From Hubble imagery we can see people eeking out an existence there along with some agricultural activities taking place. It used to be almost 60 miles inland from the ocean, now it’s about 64 miles and if Africa continues dropping it could end up about 70 miles inland by my calculations. The major city there is Cuenca.”

“A highland? Isn’t that bad with the coming ice age?”

“I checked the archive disks and found the historic weather patterns. It ranges from around 70 during the day to average lows in the 40s. Even the records are very modest. Highest temperatures have been in the 80s and the record low was just barely below freezing. Normally it gets about 3 feet of rain per year peaking in spring but still fairly steady throughout the year. Now of course with the upheaval, this could all be way out of whack now however to the west is nothing but Pacific Ocean for thousands of miles so the major weather influence will be ash clouds. Our Hubble imagery shows they have received ash fall but the total accumulation looks to be only about 6 inches. Within a year of rain and working the ground I’d expect it would actually be a benefit.”

“So it’s this place.... Uh...”

“Cuenca Ecuador.”

“... or nothing?”

“We found some other areas that looked promising but Hubble showed no one around. I don’t know if there were some undetectable localized conditions, say noxious or poisonous gases, that killed the people but left the flora alone or if there just isn’t anyone there. I speak for me when I say the best chance at surviving is in a community and Cuenca is the best I have found. How do you all feel about this?”

Nods of agreement went around the group.

“Should we put this to a vote?”

“I thought we just did. It’s the best location you’ve been able to find, we agree on a community. The only question that remains is, ‘What to take with?’”

“Anything that isn’t bolted down and even some of that equipment too.”

“Keep in mind we’re going to land in an 1800’s community. No electricity, no modern conveniences. We have limited room and need to bring things to help survive.”

“True, everything here runs off electricity. But, we have batteries. We have solar panels. If we took that with it could last years down there. Think of the knowledge on the computers and the archive discs. What we could bring the locals could be invaluable.”

“Tony, do you really think the six of us are going to march into a culture that’s been around for millennia and a city that’s been around for centuries and tell them how to do things? More likely they’ll be the ones teaching us. We go in with an attitude and if we’re lucky will only be thrown out. I agree about the knowledge being valuable but only limited parts of it will be useful to us. Medical information for example. As to what to take I was considering things like the seeds we have, obviously food, the water filtration systems, anything medical in nature and all the tools.”

“Keep in mind guys, once we leave no one will ever be coming back. Eventually the entire station will degrade in orbit and probably burn up on reentry. If we don’t take it with it’ll be lost forever,” added Sue.

Yuri was assigned to plot a course home with a landing in Ecuador close to Cuenca but still far enough away to avoid any risk of crashing into the city. The others inventoried the entire station down to even the screws holding it together. If they could remove it and use it they counted it. Once they had their lists they met and prioritized them, rejecting many items, until they had enough to fill the capsules without exceeding the weight limits.

The next week was spent disassembling and packing. A couple of space walks were required to retrieve part of the solar film which was carefully packed and stored away aboard one of the Soyuz capsules. As the capsules filled up, the weight of each item was carefully calculated and totaled as this would affect the trajectories once they started re-entry. Yuri continually updated his flight plans to reflect this.

Finally the day of departure was at hand. Everyone wrote notes and left them in the space station. It narrated their witness of the destruction of the planet and where they were going to hopefully meet up with the few remaining survivors. Many shed tears as they left the station knowing their notes would likely never be read and a

major step forward for humanity had to be abandoned. Finally they all boarded the capsules. Yuri would pilot one capsule and Natalia would pilot the other one. Piloting is a loose term as both computers had already been programmed and for the most part everyone was just along for the ride.

For safety sake the approach was designed to bring them in south west of the city by about 5 miles figuring if the winds affected their descent it would push them further away, rather than towards, the city. Both capsules undocked and floated free. Yuri's capsule started 30 seconds before Natalia's. Her approach would mirror his but the 30 second delay should result in nearly a mile separation as they entered the atmosphere.

Yuri's programming was accurate and they entered the atmosphere west of Peru and south of the Galapagos Islands. A bumpy ride followed by a jerk as the parachutes deployed and they were floating towards the ground. Just before touchdown jets fired to help soften the landing. Everyone unbuckled and opened the door. The burnt smell was the first thing to hit them coupled with the dingy barely blue sky. It looked like an LA afternoon with high smog levels.

Struggling out of the cramped interior Jason emerged from the capsule and immediately started looking for the other one. It had landed about a half mile away and looked intact. They worked to stow the parachute figuring it would be important to save anything that could be reused or re-purposed.

Within an hour they had all got the capsules secured and were surprised to hear an engine. A truck was headed their way with the locals.

Tony spoke fluent Spanish although definitely not the dialect from here. He was able to communicate enough to figure out that they were here to help and to bring them to Cuecna.

## Epilogue

The group was welcomed by the inhabitants. Roughly a third of the original citizens were still alive so housing was easily remedied. It seemed they weren't the only ones to figure out this area was habitable. A small portion of the population with the means and resources and the survival mindset had already figured out this location would have the best chance of surviving almost anything that happened. Some had already relocated months, years and even decades earlier and others took to the air when the first reports started pouring in of the disasters. The city had a section that

was basically a melting pot of people, all who knew they had to pull together and work hard if there was to be any chance at survival.

Over a couple of years the volcanoes and earthquakes finally subsided and went dormant again. The planet settled down and within a decade the skies were purged of most of the ash. The ice age returned extending down through the great lakes, just like last time and lasted a few hundred years before the glaciers started to retreat.

Three hundred and seven years later a group of explorers, traveling along the remnants of a glacier, in what had once been known as Minnesota, found a large metallic object that appeared to be blackened and badly damaged sticking partially out. Cars, buildings and anything else made of iron and steel had long since rusted away, yet this object, even with the burning did not appear to be rusted. Perhaps the glacier had protected it. They worked for awhile at gaining access and inside found a shocking variety of technologies that were only whispered rumors of a time long ago. Looking in a small container they found 6 written notes with faded ink on brittle paper. None could read the notes, in fact none could read at all, and they put the container in their pack to bring back to the village elder who might be able to decipher the strange symbols on the aged crumbling paper.



Culex Pipiens (pen name) is an amateur fiction writer focusing on PAW (Post Apocalyptic World) themed stories. Culex's work can be found on [www.culexpipiens.com](http://www.culexpipiens.com) where many of the stories are available as free downloads. A number of Culex's stories are also available in the Kindle format on Amazon.com (search Kindle books for 'Culex Pipiens'). In addition, select stories are only available in Kindle format. If you like the stories and want to support Culex's work, consider buying one or more in the Kindle format which is readable on Kindle devices along with the free Kindle app for PC, Mac and many different tablets.

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