

Appetite

By Edward Martin III

We're hungry.

There may be no more accurate an epitaph for the human race.

Initially, we shared the hunger of our fellow animals -- food, shelter, mates -- but our hunger grew to match our brains. We hungered for knowledge, we hungered for land, we hungered for power. More, more, more.

This is why I spent the last two decades of my life with a shovel in one hand and maps in the other. This is why I've spent the last years of my life under this damnable desert sun.

My belief that fossil fuels are -- in all respects -- a dead resource and not to be counted on endears me to the environmental sort at the same time it creates enemies for me of those who helm the oil hungry behemoth of industry. But any compatriots I might find among the ranks of the Green as quickly disown me when I declare with equal vehemence the inefficiency of solar, geothermal, hydroelectric, wind, and other sundry power sources, not to mention the suicidal push for nuclear energy. These are measly bread to our ravening hunger. With all due respect to my colleagues, they have no clue as to humanity's hunger.

I understand it. I understand the blind need for more of everything that has been the defining characteristic of this species since one cell enveloped another in the pre-life ooze. I understand that no finite energy lasts long against the unstoppable force of the seething, breeding, hungry people who would dig it up, suck it from the skies and the ocean, or tease it from the atom. Distressingly, all forms of natural energy seem to be, in one tragic fashion or another, finite.

This leaves the supernatural, a notion of mine that has alienated my peers for more than a decade. I can understand such revulsion. Had I not been forced by my previous employer to take a four-week sabbatical I would be as skeptical as my fellows in this respect.

For my sabbatical I was exiled to places lacking technology, computers, modems, phones, even electricity. The country I chose was not popular amongst vacationing intellectuals and the region within even less so. This village had one thing however, a remnant of past ecumenical influence, which piqued my interest. It had a library. A small and uninteresting library, containing mostly family records.

I searched those shelves like a madman, hungry for intellectual stimulation after only five days from home. Then, high on a crumbling shelf, in a corner anyone could have missed, I saw the scroll.

I knew it was old the moment I touched it, the moment my trembling hands opened it. The ancientness of the village and the library paled in comparison to this fabulous treasure. It felt older than Time.

It was a diagram. A diagram and a map and an explanation. The language components were iconic, of a type I'd never seen before, but easily understood (opening previously unsuspected doors on the sciences of linguistics and neurology).

The vehicle however wasn't nearly as interesting to me as the contents. The diagram, map, and explanation leaped into my brain -- it was exactly what I had been looking for!

Energy. A limitless, clean, pure source of energy. This ancient document revealed in a few eyeblinks the Holy Grail. I do not choose that metaphor lightly, as this wasn't any source of energy, but Primal Energy, the force behind the movement of stars and the tumbling of sand grains, creating and sustaining the very fabric of time and space. Limitless Energy.

My breathing must have changed enough to capture the attention of the librarian, who whipped the scroll away from me with a cry of dismay. Although I have a passing grasp of the local dialect, his obvious curses were beyond me. He rushed me out onto the dry, silent street and slammed and bolted the door behind me.

Thinking I had overstayed the library's hours, I planned to return the next morning. Although much of the scroll and diagram still burned in my memory, the map remained just out of reach. The next morning I was greeted by the smoking remains of the library's foundations. At the same

time, my language skills deteriorated, because no one seemed to understand me, and all the locals insisted there had been no library at all, but only a long-abandoned abattoir. I left that day.

For the next twenty years I traveled, searching for landmarks. I recalled the map details with stunning clarity, but the greater location was still unknown. I was searching for a specific blade of grass, but I had no idea in which meadow to start!

My colleagues ostracized me, convinced I had fallen prey to some sort of madness which drew me to desert pilgrimages. Their amusement shifted to tolerance, then to disgust and indifference, and the remaining time I spent searching without the benefit of patron or the burden of detractor.

Then, twenty years after seeing the map, I found it. The location. Had I never seen that map, but stood blindly on this spot, I could not mistake this nexus of energy, this eternally deep wellspring.

Now I had to dig.

Spurned by my associates in the energy industry, I had found support in the company of numerous mystics, seers, and spiritualists I met during my search. One in particular was positioned well enough to respond to my fervent pleas for help, sending a small team of diggers and equipment.

The diggers spoke enough English such that I could direct them, but insufficient to inform me of their increasing dissatisfaction. When I arrived at the dig three weeks later, the sandy walls of the thirty-foot depth were shored up with timbers, but no workers to be found.

I telephoned my benefactor, reporting the truancy and was informed that my loan of laborers was terminated. My previous life's high profile, apparently, was threatening the confidentiality of my patron. Further dealings were out of the question and I was told to not call back. My puzzlement temporarily shifted to anger, then changed to fury.

This was ludicrous -- we were too close to stop now!

I leaped into the pit, my manic state lending me strength, and seized a pick. I dug for hours, my fingers swelling and blistering against the pick and my back growing cherry red in the desert sun. Five hours passed and the

shadow of the pit wall slid across my body, cool and soothing, and then, moments later, I struck rock.

In three hours, between my fingers and the shovels, I had cleared away a room-sized area of grooved stone. My cracked fingernails and numb fingers understood the geography better than I did and eventually I revealed a great radial pattern, ancient as Time, and without a doubt the base of the Nexus.

I had found it.

I paused, reading the iconography, the strange twisted cuneiform etched deeply into the bedrock. It was beautiful and primordial and I spared my erstwhile patron a harsh chuckle -- he had given up so close that it was pure comedy. This was mine -- all mine. I would be the sole conduit for the greatest source of energy mankind has ever enjoyed.

I climbed to the top of the excavation to retrieve my camera, to document this fantastic artifact. At the lip I paused while gazing at the great relief below, the fabulous and intricate images and curves. I could feel the anticipatory thrum from beneath that stone. Ecstatic, I turned and, for a moment, stared dumbly at the automobile that had not been parked there when I started digging.

I gaped at this peculiar appearance, and it was sheer blind luck that I noticed the blurring from the corner of my eye and moved my head when I did.

The crowbar smashed into my shoulder and my arm detonated with pain. I fell back, away from my attacker, stumbling to the ground.

He advanced, murder in his eyes, yet in that exact second I recognized also the face of my benefactor, my patron. Instantly, his entire scheme was laid bare to my mind, his insistence on the use of a mobile telephone, his cagey replies as to his whereabouts, and the actual reason he removed the workers. It was not because he had become disillusioned with the project, or worried about his reputation. On the contrary, he believed in it as thoroughly as I had. He simply chose to accept the aphorism that two men can keep a secret, as long as one of them is dead.

He swung the crowbar at my head and I rolled sideways, my arm dangling useless. He was no assassin, but I was completely unarmed and exhausted.

Who knew how long he had planned this from above the pit, watching and waiting?

I knelt and jumped at him, grappling with my good arm. We spun. I forgot how close we were to the edge of the pit.

I have read conflicting reports. Sometimes, people claim that the time they spend falling during accidents is too short a time to think, that perhaps their brain seizes up in an effort to belay the horror of such a drop. Another school of thought holds that only in such times do we appreciate the speed of our own brains as the amount of time we spend suspended stretches to a terrifying duration. I, however, am a scientist, first and foremost. I know that our bodies accelerate at thirty-two feet per second and that the time passing between our departure from the lip and our impact was precisely the amount of time necessary -- no more, no less.

I am sure we were both severely damaged in that fall, but between the adrenalin and the panic, I doubt we were ready to feel any effects.

We grappled at the floor of the pit, our blood mixing in the grooves beneath. I worked my feet and legs under my attacker and shoved. He tumbled away and scrambled to his feet.

The crowbar fell next to my head. Armed!

As he lunged, I swung the bar against his head. He cartwheeled to the left and fell hard. His body twitched, but didn't move. One blood-filled eye glared at me as his mouth worked around broken teeth.

Crowbar in hand, I staggered to the center of the Nexus. All the designs and diagrams pointed to a single circle, a smooth plate three inches in diameter. The center. The Nexus.

I slammed the crowbar against it.

“Mine!” I screamed at him.

He twitched and tried moving toward me, but his body was no longer in his control.

“Mine, mine, mine!” I punctuated each with a strike of iron against the stone. At the third strike, the stone gave way, cracked, and dropped away, revealing light beneath. I fell to my knees and looked.

I saw fire. Not magma, because I know what that looks like, nor any fire of mankind. I saw a roiling, burning, living flame. No surface, no fuel, just a void filled with storms of fire.

In each wave of flame, in each curling tendril of plasma, I saw the figures, each sheathed in tongues of flame, each being burned and blackened, screaming mouthlessly, kicking, spinning, twitching, contorted in agony.

“Now you see,” croaked a voice. I raised my head. He had dragged his broken body closer. “Now you see it all. It showed you what you wanted to see. It would show you anything!”

He collapsed.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why reveal so much energy? Why hand over a Universe full of limitless energy?” I shook him.

His lips quivered. I pressed myself close.

“It doesn’t matter why,” he whispered, “Only that they convinced you to do so, and you’ve given them everything. Everything.” He died.

I stared at his lifeless, bloody face.

The Nexus hissed, and I saw, from the lip, cracks spreading like hungry fingers, razoring the sky with umber light.

I scrambled back, avoiding my section falling in. His body slid, and then dropped into the maelstrom.

I ran to the ladder. The screaming, growing louder, had changed once the body dropped in, as if human flesh was an instantly acquired taste. Agony was replaced by a different sort of cry, a cry I’d become familiar with for decades: hunger.

I climbed, crazily, and ran, while the Nexus grew, swallowing up the ancient stone floor that had bound it, swallowing the excavation, gobbling up the sand at the tops of the pit. I dared a glimpse over my shoulder in time to see our two automobiles drop into the light. When I tuned back to my run, I saw the land before me shifting and tilting up, high, high above my head for miles, forming a ramp, sending everything into the growing maw.

I had been tricked.

The Nexus was a prison and the stones were warnings and in my greed and stupidity, I had read my own meaning into them.

The ground tilted more beneath me and now I felt the sliding.
Instinctively, I scuttled backwards, but I knew it was useless.

I saw them rise from the pit, rise on wings of flame and clouds of fury, and they saw the world before them and they saw me and they screamed and I knew nothing would stop them. Nothing would ever stop them.

I slid, with the sand, into the gulf.

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