

Dedication
To Denver C. Phillips
1917–1997
A father for the age.

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Discovery of the Century

(1)

Two legs dangled precariously over a jagged precipice of ice.

A yanking of thin lines stretching above followed in final test of readiness. The ropes appeared too thin for the task. In truth they were strong enough to hold a mammoth.

Then came the command: “Lower away!”

Slowly the figure in the orange down jumpsuit descended from the icy ledge into the no-man’s-land of space. Five hundred feet of nothingness spread under the crane arm holding him. Beneath that, mountain peaks and glacial ice extended in all directions.

Far below the daring mountaineer a black mouth in the glacier overlooking Ahora Gorge on the north slope of the mountain—appearing tiny, but wide enough to receive him—possessed a secret about to be exposed to a waiting world.

The target hole, toward which he was being lowered through space, stretched across a mere six feet in diameter. It had been melted through the ice with state-of-the-art torches lowered by the same crane on the ends of two large cables. A third simultaneously sent oxygen into the recess to keep the flame alive, even as the melted water thus produced was suctioned out with a gigantic dentistry tube attached to a fourth. One of the lines also held a remote television camera to guide the efforts of the team perched safely in the encampment above. Coordinated by a sophisticated computer program designed specifically to Livingstone’s specifications, the operation combined large-scale NASA engineering with intricate medical ingenuity to perform a space-age archaeological arthroscopy on one of the most remote glacial packs on the globe.

The only potential glitch that neither men nor computers could control was the winds. Always unpredictable at 16,000 feet, they were especially treacherous here in the eastern Turkish highlands. If they whipped up, neither

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astronaut nor heart surgeon, with any number of computers at their command, would be able to prevent the cables from flailing about wildly.

The winds, however, had behaved according to the optimistic forecasts of the team's resident meteorologist.

The burning was carried out in the early morning hours on two successive days of calm. They then prayed that no unforeseen storm moved in suddenly to dump snow into the void thus created and that the weather would hold for yet a third day.

That would make it possible for a *man* to be lowered in place of torches. He would witness the discovery up close with his own eyes and feel with his own fingers what everyone on the mountain hoped the spectrographic images from the previous spring had indeed discovered, and the subsurface interface radar from two weeks ago confirmed and pinpointed more precisely. He would conduct what tests were possible at the base of the six-foot-wide well, remove a few samples, and then recommend to the overseeing committee how to proceed.

No storm had come. The winds remained at bay. And now, at a little after seven o'clock on the morning of the third bright day in a row, the much anticipated moment had at last arrived.

From the cliff's edge precisely above the target hole, the orange figure slowly descended. No less than fifty video and television cameras recorded the moment from various vantage points of safety about the mountain above.

Archaeologists, historians, and preachers had dreamed of this moment for centuries. Now the potential discovery offered an exquisitely fitting climax to a millennium of technological advance, briefly diverting man's focus from what he might *become* to where he had come *from*. For if the predictions were indeed correct, the seed of all humankind on the globe may have originated right here.

Whether anyone would be the first in the modern era to actually set foot in that ancient place—a site of legend and myth to some, of fact and divine intercedence in man's affairs according to others—probably few of those dreamers in their heart of hearts realistically imagined possible.

Yet modern man's resourcefulness had a way of making impossibilities happen. The foot of a human being had indeed ventured out of a spaceship called *Eagle* to plant itself onto the surface of the moon. In that instant had impossibility become history.

Now had a similar moment of destiny arrived. To archaeologists this day was surely no less significant than in July 1969. Whether the name Adam



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Livingstone would be known to posterity with the same prominence as Neil Armstrong only the future could determine.

On this morning, decades after the American spaceman, an adventurous Englishman, archaeologist, explorer, and daredevil dangled in midair at the end of the tether controlling his life. Certainly he occupied center stage of the world's collective attention no less than had Armstrong during his rendezvous with history.

Adam Livingstone's thoughts, however, were preoccupied with the task at hand. Closer and closer, he now approached what signified a major fulfillment of the objective he had set for himself ten years earlier. That was to see, to discover, to set foot inside places unknown to any mortal before him. His dream was to represent to the field of archaeology what Alexander did to conquest, what Columbus did to sailing, what Edison did to technology, what Einstein did to nuclear physics.

At thirty-four he was already well on the way toward achieving that goal. If yesterday's dig—more accurately “melt”—and today's exploration of the shaft were successful, the resultant fame would surely catapult his growing reputation into yet more lofty realms of worldwide renown.

Livingstone glanced below him. The essence of his chosen field of endeavor was digging holes into the past, yet now he was about to enter the most remarkable such *tell* imaginable. It was one he hoped would take him back to the earliest of all beginning points known to man . . . to the sixth chapter of the book of Genesis itself!

He was two-thirds of the way down now . . . another two hundred feet to go. As he gazed below him, all was white, save his two dangling orange legs. Above, the sky shone pale blue in the dazzling autumn morning's sun, only just creeping above the peaks at his back.

The air was breathless. The whole world was quiet. Except for the slight pressure and an occasional tug upon his shoulder straps, he felt nothing. Only a slight sensation of updraft against his cheeks betrayed his downward movement.

Slowly he turned his head around toward the mountains of ice and snow.

This was spectacularly peaceful, he thought. He felt as if he were floating weightless in the air. It was cold. Probably he should be wearing his goggles. But nothing was going to keep him from witnessing every second of this momentous day with eyes wide open.

He had been waiting a long time for this moment.

(2)

The daring archaeologist was not given to premonitions or angst. They were a liability in his line of work.

But as he glanced down into the void below him, the thought flitted through Livingstone's brain—*What if something goes wrong?*

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What if he tempted fate once too often? Was he ready to face death? Was he prepared, as they said, to meet his Maker?

He laughed the idea off.

This was too beautiful and triumphant a moment to spoil. He didn't believe in immortality anyway, so what difference did it make? Life was life. This was it. Live it to the full. When you died you died. That was it. No need to worry about it ahead of time. As to meeting his Maker, Adam Livingstone was too thoroughly a modern to give the idea a second thought. Once his time came, he didn't plan on meeting anybody. He would get his living done on *this* side of death and waste no time thinking about the other.

Besides, Livingstone thought, he had himself designed this whole apparatus holding him. He had supreme faith in the equipment, in his team, and in himself.

His thoughts turned momentarily to Candace.

Did the living he intended to do include marriage and a family? he found himself wondering. What did he want for himself, for his future—however long or short that future happened to be?

They had lunched together at Harrods two weeks ago, where Livingstone had appeared to dedicate an archaeology display in commemoration of his upcoming Turkish adventure.

"You're quite the talk of London, Adam," she said across the most secluded table they could manage to find once the festivities were concluded. "How lucky of me to have you all to myself."

"You could have any man in England, Candace," Livingstone said with lighthearted laughter.

"Maybe I don't want just *any* man," she rejoined, glancing into his eyes with a teasing smile. "You simply must come round to Swanspond soon," she added. "Daddy is dying to see you again."

Livingstone laughed once more. "I shall try the instant I am back from Turkey."

"Daddy will be disappointed not to see you before your trip."

"Your father is too important a man to expend his energy waiting to see me," he replied. "Are you sure you are not using him to gain your own ends, Candace, my dear?"

"And so what if I am?" she replied, allowing her lower lip to protrude slightly. "Is that so unreasonable of me? A woman can wait only so long, you know, Adam."

He really ought to marry her, Livingstone thought. But did he want to bring a wife into the midst of such a consuming career? Was he ready for marriage? Did he even have time to fall in love?

All these thoughts flitted through his brain in the merest second or two.

A brief flash of light shone below and far to his left, waking the descending archaeologist from his momentary reverie. No doubt a reflection of the morning sun off an ice crystal.

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What am I doing! he said to himself. This was not a convenient time to consider such questions as marriage and death!

It was time to get on with the business at hand.

(3)

Again Livingstone looked down. Only fifty feet more. The excavated flue of blackness was directly below him and steadily enlarging. From a mere dot as he began, it now showed itself as a duct into the heart of the otherwise unreachable glacier. Everything was going exactly according to plan.

"Easy now . . . I'm nearly there," he said, speaking into the tiny microphone embedded in the suit under his chin.

Immediately a slight tug came upon his shoulders signalling a slowing of descent. Then a stop.

"Are you over it?" came a voice through a miniature speaker attached to the headgear near his right ear.

"Slightly off . . . only two or three feet."

"Which direction?"

"Draw in the crane—can you see me clearly—backward and to my right?"

"Yep, good—making the adjustment . . . *v-e-r-y* slowly."

Livingstone felt himself swing slightly from the pull at the top of his tether .

"Good, that's it," he said. "I'm over it—wait a minute till I'm steady again. . . ."

A brief silence.

". . . start easing me down gradually."

The downward motion resumed.

"All right . . . about twenty-five feet . . . twenty . . . now fifteen . . ."

Again he slowed.

"Ten feet . . . eight . . . six . . . four, three, two, one—stop."

The downward motion ceased.

"Where are you?" came the voice at his ear.

"I thought you were watching me from up there!" said Livingstone. "What do you mean, where am I!"

"We can see you fine," replied Scott Jordan, Livingstone's closest friend, an American who had served as his lifeline and confidant on more adventures and projects than either could count. "We want to know how it looks on *your* end."

"I'm exactly at the top of the shaft. My boots can touch the ice around the edge."

"See anything inside?"

"Just blackness. Wait a minute—I'm going to turn on my spotlight."

Livingstone reached for the halogen lantern strapped to his side, flipped it on, and sent the high-powered beam straight down below him.

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“Nothing,” he said. “It’s deep,” he added with a laugh.

“You getting cold feet, Adam!”

“Did I say that! Come on, Scott—*Eagle Two* to Mission Control . . . let’s get this show on the road. Start me moving again. I want to see what’s down there.”

“All right, you’re the boss—here we go.”

(4)

As the archaeologist resumed his descent, Jordan’s private satellite line rang in the tent high above. “Get that, will you, Jen?” he said, keeping his eyes on the monitor in front of him.

“It’s Washington, Scott,” said Livingstone’s other trusted assistant in her musical Scandinavian accent.

“Stuart?”

“Right. What shall I tell him? Surely, you don’t want—”

“You bet I want to talk to him,” interrupted the handsome black man with a flashing smile of perfectly set teeth. “That man’s going to be president someday. I want him on our side when it comes to research appropriations. I told him to call. Put the phone to my ear—I can’t take my hands off the controls.”

Jen did so.

“Marcos—you there?” said Jordan, still eying the monitor carefully.

There was a brief pause as he listened.

“Yeah, well you almost missed it, old buddy. Look, I can’t talk. I’m sort of in the middle of the greatest discovery of all time. I’ll have Jen hook you into the line. You won’t be able to say anything, but at least you can hear Adam and me live . . . right, good . . . okay, talk to you soon.”

Jordan nodded. Jen removed the phone from his ear and did as he had indicated, while Scott returned his full attention to the task at hand.

Meanwhile Livingstone’s feet slowly entered the cylindrical well of ice. Now knees . . . shoulders . . . finally his entire body descended below the surface and out of sight from above.

“You’re gone from view *now*,” came Jordan’s voice in his ear.

“I’m still here,” returned Adam.

“Got room to maneuver?”

“Think so.”

“How deep is it?”

“Can’t tell . . . still no sign of the bottom. The lantern’s picking up only frozen wall. Looks like I’m inside a vertical pipe of ice—a slight bluish tinge around the edges wherever the light hits.”

“I’ll turn on the helm-cam.”

It fell silent for a few moments. Livingstone continued lowering into the

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chilly blackness. It was eerily quiet. If anything went wrong now, he was a dead man. But nothing *would* go wrong. This was the moment, the triumph.

He arched his neck to see above him where the six-foot-round circle of faint blue light grew smaller and smaller.

He turned off the lantern briefly. Blackness engulfed him. The quiet inside the ice shaft was entirely different than that of open space. The air was dead, cold, empty. How old were these frozen walls, he wondered.

He had been in dozens of cramped, unusual, and dangerous places in his life. He had studied scores of ice-core rods drilled into glaciers. Now he was *inside* a hollow ice core. This was a sensation entirely new . . . uncanny, full of mystery.

“Hey, what’s going on down there? The lights went out!”

“Don’t worry, Scott. I wanted to see how dark it was.”

Livingstone flipped the lantern back on, then reached up to adjust his helmet lamp. He squinted straight down, following the beam of light. The bottom was somewhere below him. He’d seen it on the monitor yesterday. Yet he could not escape the thrill of adventure, knowing his eyes would be the first to actually see it.

Still the lingering question remained: Might what they observed when they’d cut off the torches and siphoned out all the water from the bottom of the well . . . might it be only a horizontal slab of rock? Or perhaps a chunk of prehistoric tree? Only personal inspection could answer those questions.

“Wait . . . I think I see something!” Livingstone cried, surprised at the dull echo of his voice from inside the thin black cavity. He was probably two hundred feet below the opening now. Below him . . . yes, he could make out an end to the round cavity through which he had come!

“It’s the bottom . . . another seventy-five feet.”

“We’ll slow you up,” said Jordan.

“Not yet—get me down there!”

“Give us a countdown then. I don’t want to send you crashing onto it.”

“Ten-four, Mission Control,” said Livingstone excitedly, trying to imitate a NASA accent, “—about fifty feet now.”

Silence.

“Thirty . . .”

His descent eased. Was this how Armstrong felt creeping down *Eagle’s* ladder onto the moon, wondering if the moondust would support him? What would *his* feet find when they touched down on the surface below?

“Twenty feet . . . fifteen . . . ten . . .”

Heart pounding with anticipation, Adam Livingstone awaited the final moment.

His searchlight now clearly revealed to his eyes the ancient timbers upon which his feet were about to strike. Was he about to become the first human

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being to stand upon those miraculously preserved planks, or so he hoped . . . since Noah himself!

“Hold it just a second, Scott—I need to tighten one of these straps.”

(5)

Eight hours to the west, it yet remained night.

The sun sparkling off the glacial pack into which Adam Livingstone was at this moment boring like a human ice mole had set only a few hours before. U.S. Senator Marcos Stuart sat in his Washington office riveted in front of a television screen. The speakerphone on the desk beside him, turned to full volume, relayed the historic and dramatic conversation between his friend and the archaeologist.

A knock sounded on the outer door.

“Come in!” he called without turning his head.

The door behind him opened. Stuart heard footsteps cross his secretary’s office and walk through the open door into his own. He knew well enough who it was. He would rather enjoy what was left of this evening alone. But his visitor was more responsible for securing him his present position than anyone, and he could not refuse him . . . at any hour.

“Working late, Senator?” said the new arrival.

“Just keeping tabs on events in Turkey.”

“Military crisis?”

“Hardly,” laughed Stuart. “Archaeology.”

“Ah, yes—I’d forgotten your predilection for the sciences. What’s going on?” asked Stuart’s importune guest. He squinted at the monitor but was unable to make heads or tails of the images being relayed into space and back to earth.

“Adam Livingstone is about to prove that Noah’s flood may be more than a fairy tale,” quipped the Senator.

The other man did not reply. Stuart did not observe the creasing of his visitor’s eyebrows at the words.

“What’s your interest?”

“This man Jordan—who’s at the controls—he and I go way back.”

“What’s the connection?”

“We majored in geology together at Colorado. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“What about Livingstone?”

“What about him?”

“You know him well too?”

“Well enough, I suppose. Look at this—it’s amazing!”

“How’d you meet?”

“When Jordan and I went to Cambridge to study for a year.”

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“Same field?”

The senator shook his head. “Livingstone was working on his master’s in archaeology. He wrote a paper Scott showed me once. Other than that I was busy with my own studies.”

“And now?”

“We keep loose tabs on one another through Scott.”

“Close?”

“Not especially. Scott’s a good mutual friend, that’s all.”

The other took in the information thoughtfully. “Well, no matter—all that’s in the past, Marcos,” he said. “You’re an important man now. Your star is only beginning to rise. You can take my word for that. And some of my people are at last ready to meet you.”

“Can’t you call my secretary tomorrow and arrange something?” rejoined Senator Stuart. Frustration was evident in his tone as he tried to keep his attention on the set in front of him. The man’s timing could not be worse.

“I don’t think I need remind you, Marcos, that we do not go through *public* channels.”

Stuart nodded and muttered a few words. Just then the voice of his long-distance friend sounded on the table.

“Can’t this wait?” Stuart said impatiently, nodding at the screen. “Look, he’s moving again.”

His visitor did not reply immediately. He listened for a moment, intrigued with the telephone exchange crackling through the night.

“. . . *okay ten feet . . . five . . . three feet . . .*”

The office fell silent. The only sound was the static over the telephone line.

“I’ll be in touch,” said the man after a moment. He turned quickly and moved toward the door.

“And, Senator,” he added, pausing briefly and glancing back with narrowed eyes, “when my people are ready, I suggest you give *them* your full attention.”

Stuart muttered something in reply. But already his visitor was gone.

(6)

The remote place at the immediate focus of the world’s attention sat squarely in the center of a nose-shaped bulge in east-central Turkey, twenty miles from the Armenian border, fourteen miles northwest of Iran. The mount of activity lay also within just a few miles of Gruziya and Azerbaydzhan—known to westerners as Georgia and Azerbaijan—and Iraq. It would have been difficult to find a place on the globe more central to forces of change and ancient conflict, sitting at the very hub between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Though sought after through the years by thousands of would-be fame-

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seekers and Bible-provers, in recent decades the region had remained largely off-limits to adventurers and archaeologists.

There had been, of course, rumors and legends of numerous sightings through the years.



A shepherd lad named Jacob was said to have stumbled upon the ark in 1905 while searching for his lost goats. He drew a picture of a boxlike boat sticking out of the ice near the edge of a steep drop-off. Another young Turkish shepherd named Georgie was reported to have climbed the mountain twice a few years later and actually climbed up onto the structure and peered into its windows.

In 1916 and 1917, Russian soldiers and scientists made one of the first documented expeditions specifically to find the ark. They were said to have walked inside the enormous mythical ship, seen the animal stalls, taken photographs of their discovery, and mapped the area in great detail.

Upon returning home, however, they found themselves engulfed by the Russian Revolution. All photographs were lost.

Through the years such stories proliferated, added to by pictures taken from a U.S. Navy plane and many other so-called eyewitness accounts. The navy pictures too, like those of the Russians decades earlier, were never made public.

Somehow photographs *always* turned up missing, adding a certain dubious quality to their authenticity. Thus the exact spot upon the mountain where sightings were said to have occurred could never be pinpointed with accuracy.

At last that uncertainty seemed about to be put to rest. Methods of infrared and multispectral photography had been greatly improved through the years, recently revealing tantalizing clues that could not be ignored. Now the Turkish government, under initial prodding from well-connected political friends and, ultimately, in a deal brokered by Livingstone himself, had two years ago granted its approval to the project now reaching culmination. It was far more extensive than anything yet attempted—a quid pro quo arrangement between several Western governments, three unnamed American firms, a French professional consortium, and four British cabinet ministers, likewise unnamed.

No financial specifics had been disclosed. But Turkish officials expected the windfall to accomplish for their sagging economy—beleaguered by factional strife, weakened by the Kurdish refugee problem, and having a difficult time finding a national compass in the post-Soviet new-world order—no less than

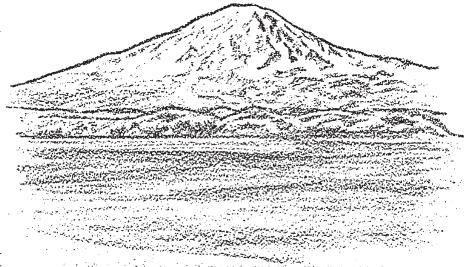
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what the Marshall Plan had for postwar Germany. If allowing international explorers to poke around in the ice could substantially fatten their nation's treasury and line the pockets of a few of those same officials in the meantime, what could it hurt?

Nor did the Livingstone Cartel, as it was unofficially styled, peer too closely into whatever graft might be involved in the arrangement. Too many questions in this part of the world had never been a wise practice. As long as they were allowed access to the mountain, they considered their investment secure. They would not quibble over details or whatever local politics resulted from it.

They had been granted five years to conduct their research. After that time all would be renegotiated. It was what amounted to a five-year "lease" of sorts on the 16,946-foot mountain known to Turks as Bü Agri Dagi.

Livingstone, it was reported, had been involved in a daring rescue of several high-placed Turkish officials who had fallen into misfortune in Baghdad a couple years earlier. Details of the incident were confidential and sketchy, though there was a clear linkage between it and the sudden relaxation of policy regarding Ararat exploration. If said officials owed Livingstone their lives, after this he would consider himself repaid many times over for his bravado.



A governing committee of seven had been appointed to oversee the interests of the cartel. But Livingstone, ostensibly a nonvoting eighth member, was recognized as calling the shots.

It was his brainchild. Without his prestige, knowledge, experience, and reputation, the expedition would have little chance of success. Livingstone's presence and charisma provided the central ingredient making a lucrative outcome possible.

For anything to capture the public fancy, a personal element was required. The comptrollers for this profit-sharing cartel recognized that Livingstone himself was it—handsome, famous, rich, one of England's more eligible bachelors, and by any standards a brilliant man with visionary objectives. He had received more press recently than the royal family.

To garner American support and enthusiasm, a shrewd media blitz on U.S. television had elevated the status of Livingstone's right-hand man to a near equal level of importance. Most U.S. citizens were unaware that the project was international in scope. Thinking it entirely an American affair, they followed it as eagerly as they had the moon landing. In the States Scott Jordan would no doubt wind up being the more famous of the two men.

Jordan's ethnic background drew high interest from the African-American

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community, offering beneficial PR antidote to recently growing polarization between whites and blacks, accomplishing for archaeology what Tiger Woods had for golf. And with blond, blue-eyed diminutive Swede Jennifer Swaner—about whom lingered a faint air of the counterculture from her years of schooling in northern California—completing the Livingstone trio, the entire project could not have been more perfectly cast by a Hollywood master script-writer.

If Livingstone returned to England with what his backers hoped were pieces of antiquity itself in his hand, his fame would eclipse that of his Scottish namesake for his African exploration a century before. Moreover, the treasures of unearthen (or “un-iced”) wood would be as valuable to science as the moon rocks. According to the few metaphysicists among them, that wood could become even more significant in divulging the meaning of that science.

The only interests conspicuously unrepresented in the project were Jews and evangelical Christians, both of whom it seemed would possess a great stake in the potential discovery. Any number of evangelicals had clamored to get in once news of the project broke on CNN. But several of the principle financial players were outspokenly opposed. They would open no door that allowed religion a role in the expedition. Especially, they said, Christian fundamentalists whose agenda could hardly be considered scientific in nature. Whether Jewish and Israeli interests had been considered or rejected for similar or other reasons was not known.

Motives on the part of all but Livingstone himself were purely financial. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, all the adventure seemed gone out of the world. There hadn't been a good crisis you could sink your teeth into for years. Space stations weren't all that interesting to most people. Mars remained a remote possibility at best.

But Noah's ark!

This was something to capture the attention of the world. And hopefully pay rich dividends later for those who knew how to exploit the business aspects of archaeology. It was personal, televisable, and tailor-made for this era of heightened spiritual interest. Columbus had brought gold into the coffers of Spain and Portugal. Why might not the discovery of the century likewise yield handsome rewards?

As a historic find, this would surpass King Tut's tomb. It would be greater than the ark of the covenant or the chalice of the Last Supper, if either of them were ever unearthed.

There would be books, photographs, television specials, movies, lecture tours, and who could tell how many hundreds of ancillary products created for sale.

And the cartel owned rights to it all.

As long as the discovery was genuine and worldwide interest proved what they were counting on, the investment—which some sources estimated at a

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billion dollars for the mountain “lease” alone, not to mention funding for the high-tech expedition—would repay itself many times over.

All this, Livingstone’s reputation, and several personal and corporate fortunes, hung on the line with the 225-pound weight of explorer and equipment, as all seven committee members and a dozen or more of the cartel’s investors stared breathlessly at several television monitors under the expansive tent of expedition headquarters above. Several had been flown in earlier by huge military helicopters from Dogubayazit as soon as morning’s light permitted. On the screens before them passed the slowly moving nondescript surface of ice wall as seen by the miniaturized camera attached to Livingston’s helmet light.

Within moments they would observe that which they hoped would make them rich men and perhaps etch their names in history as a footnote underneath Livingstone’s, or else it would send one or two of them to the bankruptcy courts of their respective countries before month’s end.

(7)

A distant mountain climber lowered the telescope from his eye and hastened on. The sun shone in his face. It was reflecting off the lens too much from here to see accurately.

He had to be closer. And get the sun behind him. He needed to see exactly what was going on. He must take a precise fix of the coordinates.

With speed remarkable for his bulk and breathing heavily from the exertion, cold, and altitude, the climber hurried up the steep rocky trail ahead of him, over the stones and around the ice floes of his own personal Mount Maleficent. He, too, had been excluded from an event, which by all rights should have included him. Like Maleficent, he would find a way to make them pay for that oversight.

Over his characteristic khaki garb, he had dressed from head to foot in white climbing pants and parka so his movements would be unseen against the snowy background. His breath, visible in the chill morning air, came in frosty bursts. One of his gloved hands carried an ice ax, the other the telescope. Around his waist clanged an assortment of ice screws, chocks, pitons, carabiners, harnesses, a hammer ax, and other assorted impedimenta of the mountaineer’s craft.

He would probably need none of it. His objective on this day was not to scale icy peaks but to gain a vantage point from which he could clearly observe the goings-on across the way.

His smoldering resentment kept his blood warm against the elements. Did they think they could cast him aside so easily?

He would show that he still had a few discoveries left for the world too! He had been here before, once in the 1960s on the Lord Bode expedition and

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again on several of the more recent Morris ventures into Davis Canyon. He knew Ararat better than any of them. Once he had their location pinpointed exactly, he would return again.

He would not so easily be overshadowed by this young upstart!

Thirty or so minutes later, upon the ledge of an exposed projection of an adjacent ridge of Ararat's treacherous slopes, the hefty lone figure positioned himself on the edge of a narrow precipice. He was separated from the spectacle being played out before the world by a distance of approximately a mile as well as by a deep glacial vault that none but an eagle would be capable of traversing. Standing a thousand feet lower in elevation than his renowned counterpart, he stared into the eyepiece of his high-powered telescope, which now sat on a tripod where he had positioned it on the ledge. He was grateful that the usual cap of clouds was gone today, and visibility was perfectly clear.

The setting was exactly as many of the sketches represented it—a glacially encrusted overhang sitting beneath a sheer cliff of rock overlooked from above by the summit and extending straight down from the site a thousand or more feet.

He could see nothing of the structure from where he stood. But if it was there, Livingstone was approaching it just about the only way possible. Sightings reported a year ago after two years of warmth and glacial meltback had no doubt exposed the protruding end of the vessel, though it had been covered over again by last winter's heavy snows. He was loath to admit it, but he had little doubt that Livingstone was on to the find of all time. The thought filled him with silent rage.

He continued to breathe heavily. The watcher was, in truth, in better shape for this sort of escapade than his size would indicate. Until just a short while ago he had himself been considered the foremost archaeologist in the world. The fact that such a perception was now eroding, notwithstanding his discovery in the Rift Valley, was a bitter one for an ego nearly as large as his frame. It made him more determined than ever to reverse the trend.

For just such an opportunity had he hounded the Livingstone expedition since the moment he learned of its objective.

Nor was he the only one stalking Livingstone's moves. Forces in higher realms had been invisibly tracking the Englishman for years. The Dimension had underestimated the danger of this present expedition, however. But it was about to wake. When they did, powers of both light and darkness would be sent into the battle that would soon be at hand.

(8)

"Ten feet . . .," came Livingstone's voice over the speaker in the headquarters tent.

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Regulating the controls of the intricate system of wheels and ropes, cable and cranes and pulleys, to which a thousand feet of cord was attached, Scott Jordan slowed the rate of descent to a crawl. From here on, he would take it inch by inch.

Not a head moved from the screens. Scarcely a sound could be heard, save a few mumbled comments.

“Look down at your feet, Adam—let us see too!” came a whisper.

Almost as if he had heard the words, though the chief project engineer had spoken nothing into his microphone, Livingstone’s helmet camera swung down, revealing the floor of the ice chamber.

A few gasps sounded, followed by exclamations of astonishment.

“Okay, nine feet . . . five . . . three feet . . . two . . .,” came Adam’s voice again.

Silence immediately returned. Not an eye moved from the monitors.

“One . . . gently . . . that’s it—hold it there.”

“What is it, Adam?” asked Jordan.

“I’m down, Scott—I’m touching. I want to test it to make sure it’s solid and will support . . . seems fine . . . frozen solid—let out a little more line . . . fine . . . all right, good—I’m standing firmly on the bottom.”

At last a cheer went up inside the tent.

“I heard that!” laughed Livingstone.

“Everyone up here is proud of your accomplishment, Adam. So is the watching world. But you must know the question on everyone’s mind—”

“What historic words I am going to utter for posterity—let me see, that’s one small step for an archaeologist—”

“Never mind that!” interrupted Jordan with a laugh. “What is it you’re standing on!”

“That’s what I came down here to find out,” replied Livingstone. “All right, I suppose we’d better get on with it. Let out a little more line so I can move about freely.”

On the monitors, observers and investors now saw Adam kneel down.

“The surface is a brownish gray,” he said. “I’m sure you can see too that it doesn’t appear at first glance to be any kind of granite, at least nothing I’m familiar with. It’s uneven, though not pitted like stone. There seem elongated depressions, a graininess such as you would expect from wood. It obviously appears to be wood—solid, frozen . . . and I would have to say it does not look like a mere tree. It’s flat, as would be a cut timber of some kind.”

They could see Adam scanning the interior of his tiny cave of exploration.

“I’m taking off one of my gloves. . . .”

All waited in silent expectation. They saw a hand rub back and forth across the floor.

“Hard to tell . . . ,” came the voice from below after a moment. “It feels no

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different than ice. It's covered with a thin layer of the refrozen meltwater from yesterday. The surface isn't exactly level. Up at one end it's pretty clean, and the ice is thicker down at the other end where the residue from the burn drained down."

He paused a moment.

"What's peculiar, though," he added, "—look here, do you see that . . ."

His finger pointed for the camera.

". . . a few spots of blackening. It's almost—but that could hardly be . . . I was about to say that it's almost as if the torches had actually burned the wood in spots."

"Try your hand-burner."

"Right."

Livingstone stood again, unfastened the small propane torch from his waist, ignited it, and knelt again. Carefully he fanned the flame across a small section of surface. He paused to feel it, then burned at the ice again. After two minutes he turned off the burner and set it aside. He removed a small hammer and pick from the equipment strapped to his side and began chipping at the section of floor his flame had probed. The observers saw him reach down and grasp something between his gloved fingers and examine it carefully. He turned it over two or three times.

"Scott, you're not going to believe this!" he exclaimed. At last his voice displayed genuine excitement. "The petrification is not complete! This is wood all right—real, genuine wood . . . the black spots are burn marks—our torches actually burned the surface of this wood!"

Astonished exclamations nearly raised the canvas roof of the headquarters tent.

"Adam . . . Adam, can you hear me above this hubbub here? Everyone is shouting only one question—is it the ark?"

The tent grew silent again.

On the screens Adam knelt again and appeared examining the floor very carefully.

"We'll have to do more tests," came his voice at length. "But it is wood, of that there can be no doubt. That leaves but two possibilities—that somehow an immense tree utterly nonindigenous to this region wound up here. The fact that we are four to six thousand feet above Ararat's tree line would make such an occurrence impossible under any other conditions than a cataclysmic flood of unbelievable proportions. Even if this is a mere tree, its presence here would appear to confirm the flood theory. But the second possibility seems far more likely."

"What possibility!" came the eager voice from above.

"I am standing on a flat, not a round, surface. It can't be a tree. Unless I miss my guess, there are detectable markings different from the grain itself—which to me indicate that I am not the first man to touch this wood."

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“What kind of markings?”

Adam bent close to the floor and again pointed below him.

“Such as would come from a crude cutting instrument of some kind—I’m not sure if it was a saw or ax,” he replied. “I don’t know if you can see what I’m pointing to here, but to my eyes I think it is clear that something or someone actually cut this wood into the flat boards upon which I am standing. And the irregularity of the grain in places gives the appearance of lamination. In other words, it’s not just one large plank. Whether it is the ark, I cannot yet say . . . but I would stake my reputation on the conviction that these are certainly boards hewn by man.”

The cheering that went around the tent of headquarters now did not stop for three or more minutes.

Immediately half those in the tent scrambled for their satellite-linked cellular phones, for which provision had been made. In less than an hour, four-inch headlines had been set at the offices of no less than five hundred daily newspapers around the world—from Tokyo to Moscow to London to New York—proclaiming NOAH’S ARK DISCOVERED!

(9)

Meanwhile Adam Livingstone busily engaged himself in what further exploration and experimentation were possible in his cramped six-foot circular laboratory.

“Is there any way you can send one of those large burners and the suction cable down?” he said to his chief engineer. “How’s the wind up there?”

“Still holding calm,” replied Jordan. “What do you have in mind?”

“If I could open up this cavity . . . burn away more of the ice. Any extra foot I can get to might provide the evidence we’re after.”

“I’ll consult with the others. In the meantime, take what samples you can.”

Half an hour later, torch, oxygen, and suction cable were on their way down over the ridge, attached to the guideline that had taken the glacial astronaut on his historic descent an hour before.

“Watch yourself, Adam,” Jordan cautioned. “That’s a powerful torch. You don’t want to create too large a cave for fear of collapse.”

“This ice is several hundred feet or more thick in every direction. It’s not going anywhere.”

“There could be cracks.”

“I’ll be careful, Scott. But this is the chance of a lifetime. I’ve got to expose as much of this surface as I can.”

“If the winds kick up, we’ll have to pull you out.”

“Relax,” laughed Livingstone, “no winds are going to bother me down here.”

“If it starts blowing a gale—”

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"I'm not leaving here until I'm good and ready," interrupted Livingstone. "Try to yank me out before then, and I'll unhook the rope!"

"Your committee might have something to say about that," laughed his friend. Despite his cautions, Jordan would have trusted Livingstone's judgment with his own life. He had in fact done exactly that numerous times.

"You tell my committee I'm thinking of spending a day or two down here."

"What!"

"It's actually rather cozy. You just send me down food and water."

"You'll need more than that."

"Like what?"

"Air, for one thing . . . and warmth."

"Didn't you say the oxygen line is on the way down? If I get cold you can send me down another parka."

"Some might argue you've lost your mind!" laughed Jordan.

"Don't worry. If the weather becomes a problem, I'm on my way up. But it's taken who knows how many millennia for someone to find this place . . . we have to know. The more I de-ice of this thing, the better chance we'll have."

Jordan did not argue the point further. Everyone wanted the same thing—to learn as much as they could in what time they had available. If conditions deteriorated, they would reassess.

"Matter of fact, why don't you join me, Scott?" added Livingstone. "The hard part's done. Now that we have a secure line from the crane into the shaft, we can move people and equipment up and down with relative ease."

"I wouldn't trust anyone else at the controls."

"How about Figg? Why don't you start getting him suited up? And Jen would like nothing more than to be the first woman since Noah's wife to set foot down here. What do you say, Jen . . . if you're up there listening?"

"I'm on my way!" shouted the young lady, trying to grab the microphone excitedly out of Jordan's hands.

"But don't bring your Birkenstocks!" laughed Livingstone. "It's cold down here."

"Let's see how the initial work with the torch goes first," replied Jordan, reassuming control of the mike. "If you clear out enough room for two or three people to maneuver," he went on, "and if the weather cooperates, we'll see. Figg is already getting his parka on."

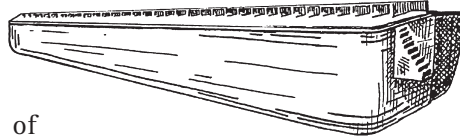
In thirty minutes two cables stretched down the shaft to Livingstone, and the suction pump was operating. Adam fired up the torch at minimum burn and set about to enlarge his iglowlake cavity. It took several accidental extinguishings and considerable tinkering with the external oxygen flow between Adam below and Jordan at the controls before he managed to get much ice melted. Once the levels of flame, oxygen, and suction were regulated to satisfaction, however, Livingstone began to make rapid progress.

The splashing about of melting ice made it messy work. Within two hours,

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however, the archaeologist had tripled the area of exposed wood—at one narrow point extending to some fifteen feet against the grain. The flat expanse was clearly wider than the girth of any possible behemoth of prehistoric tree, establishing the surface conclusively as man-made and no mere natural occurrence of a growing thing.

By noon he had exposed enough to establish some order to the planking structure, digging out samples between them of a crystalline resinlike substance of amber color. Though his on-site television camera captured his every move and recorded every motion of progress, he also shot still photographs of every inch. Color enlargements would be capable of far more detail than mere video.



But it was the discovery made by Adam Livingstone about two o'clock that afternoon as he continued to lengthen the crawl tunnel he had begun excavating from the original six-foot opening, which finally ensured his place in history. Anxious editors circling the globe at last possessed verification that they were indeed on solid ground to run the headlines their papers had set that morning.