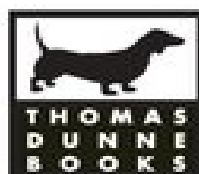


# DECIPHER

STEL PAVLOU



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# decipher

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STEL PAVLOU

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS  
ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN  NEW YORK

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1960

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ZEALAND ROSS DEPENDENCY

### the eighth day

FULTON CONFERENCE CENTER MAGNOLIA UNIVERSITY, NORTH MISSISSIPPI  
MARCH 16, 2012

THE BERESOVKA RIVER FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF SIBERIA 7:32 A.M.

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42,000 FT SOMEWHERE OVER THE NORTH ATLANTIC CLUB CLASS

### cern

SECURITY CLEARANCE LEVEL 3

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A CAIRO PENTHOUSE BALCONY 9:30 P.M.

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GIZA

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SCOTT

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expedition

EN ROUTE

CAPE TOWN DOCKS PIER 19

4:16 P.M

sacred places

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CROSSED WIRES

PONTIFICAL APOSTOLIC PALACE SECOND FLOOR VATICAN CITY

THE CHAMBERS

SFIORZA'S OFFICE

the first protocol

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SEAS: ROUGH WEATHER: GALE FORCE 4— RISING SHARPLY

USS HARRY S TRUMAN 1,524 NAUTICAL MILES NORTH OF McMURDO SOUND

CARGO HOLD

V-TOL

mcmurdo sound

MIDNIGHT

PERIODICITY

THE SUN

SOHO III

PROPAGATION

24 hours

REUNION

3:14 A.M.

HERCULES

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TIME TO SOLAR MAXIMUM: 19 HOURS, 23 MINUTES TIME TO CURRENT SOLA

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LATITUDE NINETY

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IGLOO

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**FOR CAMILLE**

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## tep zepi

### THE FIRST TIME

AVESTIC ARYANS—PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN—MIDDLE EAST

Ahura Mazda created Airyana Vaejo, the original paradise and birthplace of the Aryan race. There were seven months of summer and five of winter. But after Angra Mainyu, the Evil One, was finished there were only two months of summer and ten of winter. A mighty serpent, intense cold, thick ice and snow is all that haunts the land now. It is so cold that nothing can survive there. Yima, instead of building an Ark, was ordered to make a *Var*, an underground place linking the four corners so that specimens of every living thing could be brought there and saved.

Excerpt from: *Tales of the Deluge: A Global Report on Cultural Self-Replicating Genesis Myths*, Dr. Richard Scott, 2008

## EVIDENCE BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE WASHINGTON D.C. JUNE 14, 1960

(Based on actual transcripts)

“If this agreement is approved,” Senator Aiken said as he tapped out his ash from behind a thick veil of blue cigarette smoke, “Antarctica becomes a country without a government. Of course, it doesn’t have too much government now, but no government is provided for Antarctica under any conditions in the future?”

Herman Phleger shuffled through his papers and coughed, hoping to cash in on some spit. He failed. It was a hot, humid day. The brass and maple ceiling fans worked overtime. A whiff of freshly cut grass wafted in from the lawn outside. Manicured, the way mankind intended. And Herman Phleger was forced to cough again.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Phleger?”

“Uh, yes, sir—” Phleger croaked. He looked around for a clerk. Stood.

“Please use the microphone in front of you, Mr. Phleger. I think we’re all agreed we can’t quite hear you.” The Senator’s smile to his colleagues was a craggy one. There was a ripple of humorous laughter from the rest of the committee. It echoed off the wood paneling and around the sparsely populated Congressional hearing room.

Phleger leaned down close to the gadget. The squeal of feedback was painful. “Uh, I could use some more water, Senator.” He straightened his tie and re-took his seat.

Aiken waved at a clerk to take some water over to the State Department’s legal advisor. After all, Herman Phleger was the man who had headed the U.S. delegation at the Conference on Antarctica. He at least deserved a glass of water.

Phleger leaned in close to the microphone again as he adjusted his chair and thanked the Senator. He could almost hear the old bastard's cogs whirring from across the room. The Red scare. Grab some territory now while we still can. What with Khrushchev still fuming over that U-2 spyplane business back in May and Eisenhower on the defensive, sending 120 planes out to Southeast Asia last Thursday. Yeah, okay, so China and Russia aren't exactly on speaking terms but that's playing with fire. Of course Francis Gary Powers was working for the military: everyone in the State Department knew that. Although it wasn't exactly a lie when the government had tried to say he was flying a "weather plane. They simply wanted to know "whether" or not the Russians had any missiles in the area.

The clerk set a pitcher of ice water down on the desk. The legal advisor ignored the hissing and popping of exploding ice cubes as he poured himself a glass and gulped down a mouthful.

"Senator," he said, sighing with relief and mopping at his brow, "the Treaty specifically provides that no one surrenders its claim. There are seven claims which cover eighty percent of Antarctica: the United Kingdom, France, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. You take the sector Argentina and Chile have—they've incorporated it into their metropolitan territories and have criminal codes which they claim apply to them, and the same is true with respect to New Zealand. So they do have government in those territories." *So tough shit, Senator, we just weren't quick enough when it was time to stake a claim. Just be glad the Russkies don't have a plot either.* Phleger coughed again. "So, Senator, there may only be fifty people in the area but they do have governments."

Aiken was clearly uncomfortable with that thought. He shifted in his chair, like his ass spoke his mind for him. "But after the adoption of this Treaty, would the laws of a dozen countries apply?"

Phleger didn't need to check his notes. He shook his head. "The Treaty says that the signatories do not give up their claims, but the other signatories like the United States that do not recognize the claims do not by the Treaty recognize the claims and their position of non-recognition." There, that ought to confuse the old buzzard. It did. He watched him shift on his ass again.

Phleger pretended to be impatient. "For instance," he added, "if there was a commercial man—the Treaty deals with scientists and it deals with military matters ..." It was clear Aiken wanted a re-confirmation on that area. Phleger took another breath.

"Okay," he said, "if we send a scientist or an inspector into the section claimed by Chile, he can't be arrested by Chile. Our jurisdiction applies to him no matter where he is in Antarctica—because we made the decision not to recognize other claims to the territory, and because those other claimants made the concession that they would allow our scientists and unarmed military personnel to work within their territory on Antarctica. But, if there should be a mining engineer who went down into the sector claimed by Chile and he got into some trouble, Chile would claim that its laws governed."

Aiken frowned.

Phleger shifted this time. Was Aiken really that low on short-term memory? "And in that case, Senator," he explained, "we would claim that Chile's law did not govern because we do not recognize Chile's claim, and there would then be an international controversy as to who had jurisdiction over the individual."

It was double-Dutch. Phleger knew it was double-Dutch. Aiken didn't appear to know it was double-Dutch, but he didn't appear not to know either. Which was fine. So long as they were all in agreement. Since in essence, they were merely playing out what the Antarctic Treaty stated, which was: no matter what the claims of a single country over the region known as Antarctica, those claims could be freely ignored by everyone else. Except, and this was an important proviso, except in the case of a military build-up, which, it was agreed, was to be banned by everyone. Totally. Unless, of course, someone infringed upon the rights of the others as set out by the Treaty, in which case—

"We don't even recognize any claim of our own, do we?" Aiken reiterated.

Phleger almost nodded. He rubbed his chin. This was their "legal" reasoning. "By recognizing the



there is no sovereignty over Antarctica we retain jurisdiction over our citizens who go down there and we would deny the right of the other claimants to try that citizen. Yes.”

Aiken sat back in his chair, a crooked grin on his craggy face. That pleased him enormously. He stubbed out his cigarette and immediately reached for another. “Boys, I think we just found one more virtue of the bomb!” There was another ripple of laughter. He was right. Aside from the Soviet Union, who the hell was going to argue with them? You didn’t need to be the first. You needed to be the toughest.

Aiken lit the fresh cigarette and inhaled. He had a curious look on his face. Somber. “Suppose, Mr. Phleger,” he pondered, “that there was a sudden and tremendous demand for emperor penguins?”

“Sir? I’m not sure I’m follow—”

“Penguins, Mr. Phleger. There are serious conservation issues here. What if people went down there and started killing all the emperor penguins? Who could prevent that?”

“The people in each of the geographical areas covered by the seven claimant nations would claim they had a right to protect those penguins.”

“Then suppose one of our boys went into the Chilean area and stole a snow cat. What law would he violate?”

A snow cat?! What on earth was this old buzzard talking about? Snow cats didn’t come from Antarctica. Phleger bit the bullet. “The Chileans apply Chilean law,” he said.

“And we would deny it?”

“We would apply U.S. law and we would have an international controversy.”

“I see.”

“Senator, it doesn’t matter, the reason for the crime. Yes, the environment down there is an issue in the Treaty, but the situations you describe just aren’t covered. We would have to go to mediation over the issue, if it ever arose. We are dealing with an area where we have no territorial claims and the Treaty deals with matters in the international field exclusively. That’s why it’s important that Antarctica remain demilitarized.”

Aiken’s face adopted another grimace. “That’s all well and good, Mr. Phleger, but supposing natural resources of great value were discovered in Antarctica, of value enough so that it would justify an immense cost to exploit them. It might be a vein of diamonds a foot thick.”

Phleger let a sneer cross his face. He was no fan of Aiken, but he was a patriot. “There is no provision in this Treaty which would deal with that situation, Senator. If there was a discovery of value in a sector which was claimed by one of the claimant nations it would naturally claim sovereignty and the right to dictate the manner of exploitation. The United States on the other hand, never having recognized the validity of that claim, is in a position to assert that it has rights in respect thereto. And of course, should someone break the Treaty on demilitarization to protect its claim, the United States may use whatever force is necessary in order to protect the Treaty.”

Aiken smiled. “At least, that’s what we can say.”

“Yes, Senator. We can.”

The Antarctic Treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate by 66 votes to 21 on August 10, 1960. And that was how the world left it until 1993, when it was agreed that everyone should plow through the shoddy mess one more time. And again it was agreed that apart from the banning of the military and banning the exploitation of mineral wealth in respect to the environment, no country could lay claim to Antarctica.

Which was a dangerous conclusion to reach for a number of reasons, one of which had yet even been addressed. For it proved that the Antarctic Treaty’s vague double-talk had achieved exactly what it had set out to do: that should it stand as law in the face of overwhelming social change, its basic tenets

would remain: that if anything of value were discovered in Antarctica; anarchy would reign supreme

~~The Antarctic Treaty guaranteed that even if mankind had any desire to rid itself of the Seven Deadly Sins, Greed had been assured of a place in our hearts by virtue of time. By writing it down on a piece of paper and parading it as law and belief, Greed could be resurrected at a moment's notice.~~

That was the beauty of the written word. It was invariably taken at face value and granted permission to be spoken as the truth. It lived longer than the man.

And wreaked havoc in the process.

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## antarctica

The sacred symbols of the cosmic elements, the secrets of Osiris, had been hidden carefully. Hermes, before his return to the heavens, invoked a spell on them and said, “O holy books which have been made by my immortal hands, by incorruption’s magic spell, remain free from decay throughout eternity and incorrupt by time. Become unseeable, undefinable, from everyone whose foot shall tread the plains of this land, until old Heaven shall bring instruments for you, whom the Creator shall call his souls.” Thus spake he, and laying the spells on them by means of his works, he shut them safe away in their rooms. And long has been the time since they were hid away ...

The Virgin of the World  
Taken from the *Corpus Hermeticum* circa A.D. 100

**\*—REUTERS NEWS Service—8 MARCH, 2012—\***

Return-Path: latest@reuters.newsserv.com  
Received:mirage.rola.com(dispatch.services)  
205:174:222:1001:407839.70])byemin08.mail.col.com  
(8.6:12/8.6:12/4.9078.96)with ESMTP id SAA8933 for: >ralph.matheson@rola.com<;  
RCINS  
March 8, 2012 09:53:38-0400 / PAGE 7 of 32

Washington D.C.—IPM EST

With reports surfacing of unusual activity in the region of *Jung Chang*, a Chinese Research Station based 130km west of Mount McKelvey in central Antarctica, Secretary of State Irwin Washler has refused to confirm or deny that the United States placed a counter-offensive task force on standby in the South Pacific this morning. This despite confirmed sightings of 6 US warships heading for the Ross Sea. Reports also indicate over 6000 US troops encamped on the Falkland Islands, a British colony in the South Atlantic.

Chinese activity has been under intense scrutiny since NASA’s confirmation of high-

quality mineral deposits in the upper Antarctic basin last month and their announcement this week of radiation emissions in the vicinity of the Chinese base. “A vast amount of heat is being generated down there,” said Dr. Charles Taylor, head of the Antarctic Scientific Committee. “We know Antarctica has a lot of volcanic activity, but this is distinct from any geology we know of.” To generate that much heat would require nuclear power, which is banned under the Antarctic Treaty. As one source remarked, “According to these numbers, either they’ve cracked nuclear fusion, or they’ve found a power source of even greater magnitude.”

The US, having sworn to defend the principles of the Antarctic Treaty banning military entrenchment, was outraged by the recent publication of satellite photographs clearly showing a Chinese military convoy landing at *Belgrano II*, the Argentine base camp on the Weddell Sea. But with its oil industry lobbying to establish offshore platforms in the region, the US position is weak. The Chinese have refused to comment.

> **SPORTS AND WEATHER NEWS FOLLOWS ... >>>**

**WEATHER HEADLINES:  
SEVERE WEATHER PLAGUES WHOLE CONTINENTS  
ICELAND–2 PM GMT**

Reports are emerging of an imminent flood in the southern coastal region. Glacial ice has started melting from within for some weeks now and whole reservoirs of melt water have built up to disturbing levels. Preliminary indications also show sea temperatures have risen by five degrees in the last three weeks and are on a steady increase. The fear is that the warm seawater will rapidly erode the glacier walls, which are holding back the melt water. Similar reports of a sudden global rise in sea temperatures are emerging from all over the world. Scientists are at a loss to explain it, other than as another manifestation of Global Warming.

*[click for more information on these environmental hotspots]*

Madras, India–Typhoons continue. 1500 dead.

Tokyo, Japan–Multiple Tsunami warnings issued.

California, USA–200 dead in massive earthquake.

London, England–pre-tremors detected.

Midwest, USA–storms and severe weather freeze potato belt.

**Transfer interrupted! <<<**

**Communications Error 343571 <<<**

Users are advised. If error message 343571 appears—DO NOT ADJUST YOUR SYSTEM. An error has occurred in the communications system. A satellite has stopped responding to messages and may not be relaying information. This is usually caused by solar flare activity and is nothing to be alarmed about. Normal service will be resumed shortly. We apologize for any inconvenience this has caused ...

## **LAT. 67°20'S, LONG. 180°16'W ROSS SEA—OFF THE ROSS ICE SHELF NEW ZEALAND ROSS DEPENDENCY**

Ralph Matheson felt nauseous. So much so, he'd just lost his breakfast, which was now a glistening yellow tiger-stripe frozen solid down the side of *Red Osprey's* iron-oxide-colored hull.

He had the shakes bad. Always did when he felt sick. He quickly wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve before gripping the rail tightly and heaving again. Frozen chunks hit the swell below, but the sound was lost in the roar of the storm.

“Hey, dickhead!” a crusty voice commented. “There’s a ten-thousand-dollar pollution fine for puking in the ocean.”

Jack Bulger was a craggy old bastard. Fifty and solidly built. His voice sounded like throat cancer. He was paying a visit, while he wore his gray hair in a buzz-cut like a marine’s. A sharp contrast to Matheson’s curly nut-brown mop which he kept firmly tucked inside his hood. Matheson was sure Bulger had his head bare just for machismo. Not that Matheson could care less. He just wanted to stay warm. That was why he’d grown the beard to begin with.

Bulger be damned. Matheson didn’t want to be out here anyway, checking main derrick uplink. He’d avoided it all morning. Hid in the galley for a half hour, reading a printout of Reuters news reports off the Web and nursing a coffee and doughnut.

As far as he could tell, the sensors attached to the base of the huge, battered drilling tower were fine. The intermittent signal dropout was down to a faulty connection which he’d fixed in seconds. There was no way that his equipment was going to jeopardize the drilling process. The weather, on the other hand, he had absolutely no control over.

He eyed the mass of nine-foot sectioned steel drill pipe as it shot up and down, caged inside the derrick. Bad idea. He gripped the hand-rail again. Clenched his stomach.

Bulger swiped his co-worker on the back. It seemed playful to outsiders, but Matheson knew better. Bulger was trying to make him spew his guts again.

Matheson watched the smoke from Bulger’s cigar mix with his breath and drift his way. He shivered. Trying to keep his voice slow and even so he could hold his temper and the rest of his breakfast down all in one go, he said, “There are *seven* lows gathering—all within a fifty-mile radius. This is *not* typical Antarctic weather. I was told to expect four, maybe even five lows—ferocious weather conditions by anyone’s standards. But seven is unheard of! I do not relish the idea of being

part of weather formation history!”

Bulger puffed on his cigar. “Bracing, isn’t it?”

“Bracing is not a word I’d choose to use!” Matheson shrieked. “Hell on earth, maybe. Or the final Canto in Dante’s *Inferno*, if you knew what the hell that was! If you read anything other than *Penthouse!*”

The weather fronts were moving in fast and deadly. Coming out of nowhere. Matheson was acutely aware that out here there was a good chance it might get him killed. And listening in on the scientific chatter from McMurdo Station hadn’t helped matters. The scientists had absolutely no explanation for such severe weather.

Antarctic weather. The only certainty was, it was going to be bad. At approximately 60 degrees of latitude south, the winds thundered in from every major ocean with nothing to stop them. Not one island. Not one mountain. A ship could set a course to follow precisely LAT. 58°s, in effect circumnavigate the globe, and never once run into dry land. The Antarctic was the most forbidding place on earth and Matheson was certain of one thing: he wanted to go home.

“What do you want, anyway?” he asked Bulger shakily, wiping at his mouth again. Bulger didn’t bother replying. Just braced himself as a small wall of water crashed across the bow and sprayed the crew. He watched with a satisfied air as it caught Matheson off-guard.

Matheson wiped his face down.

They were both engineers. Matheson was usually a desk man, designing setups on a workstation and never going anywhere near the field. Bulger was the exact opposite. A real hands-on kind of guy who spent most days elbow deep in grease, fixing problems with common sense, guile and a wrench. They both knew their stuff, of course. Pressures per square millimeter, per square inch. How to cause stress fracture, and how not to. They both knew textbook stuff and more. But Bulger knew construction workers and roughnecks. He knew how their minds worked and how they liked to work. As far as he was concerned, Matheson knew shit. And Matheson knew this.

Bulger climbed up to the upper deck, announcing, “There’s a problem with your node.”

Matheson’s face fell. “What kind of problem?”

The drill ship lurched, bucking on another ferocious wave. They were getting bigger, Matheson thought. That one had to be at least 30 feet high. He felt his knees tremble as he watched the turquoise ocean race up to meet him, then dip away again. A thunderous blast of freezing blue water and ice crashed over the bow and swept up deck in a tidal wave. In the time it took him to turn his head to see the vast yellow derrick, the mighty drilling tower, had already borne the brunt of the impact and the 50-knot winds were whipping the water back into a frenzy. Before he even knew what hit him, Matheson was knocked on his ass and smacked backward.

He jerked to a stop, his nylon safety line creaking with the strain. There was little he could do but stay put until the bitter salt water washed over him. He choked when he could finally take a breath, and shuddered from the cold despite the protection of his rubbery Day-Glo orange survival suit and layers of thermal underwear.

Thank God he’d remembered to clip himself on. It wasn’t the sort of routine he was used to. After all, there wasn’t much chance of being swept overboard on the way to work in San Francisco. Transients were like that.

Staggering to his feet, Matheson went to pull his cold and wet balaclava back into place but it started to leak of bile, so despite it being minus 80°C with the wind-chill factor, he removed it instead. As a result, he could feel his nose hairs freezing. Breathing through his mouth made him cough. Breathing through his nose wasn’t much better, but it was vital. He had to warm the air up despite his sinuses. People

were known to die of shock breathing air that was too frigid.

~~He had to get out of the cold. He could feel the seawater freezing on his face. What kind of welcome would he get if he went home to Wendy and asked her to marry him with his skin hanging from his face?~~

Bulger was watching him from the upper deck. “What sort of problem?” Matheson demanded, well aware that his voice was turning hoarse and feeble. “What’s wrong with the node?”

“Check it out for yourself,” Bulger snapped. “You couldn’t design a fucking vending machine for a parking lot.”

Matheson wanted to yell after him, but Bulger was gone. Ralph was only out here in Antarctica because Bulger had insisted he come out and field test the thing. The man was going to make his ulcer worse, keep plugging away at him like this.

He made a grab for the ladder, then changed direction. He jerked his head to the side rail again and hung over it. He could feel the freezing cold of wet metal through the thermal gloves. Already the seawater was starting to freeze around his hand and he had trouble pulling his fingers away. He retched, but there was nothing left to bring up.

The roughnecks were watching. That was the most embarrassing part. Matheson tried to compose himself; he had his pride. He wanted to look them in the eye and exit gracefully, but of course he knew if he took his eye off the horizon he’d throw up again. So instead he clung to anything he could find that was solid enough and inched his way to the ladder.

He clipped his safety line to a rung and had just about plucked up enough courage to climb when a delicate ungloved hand thrust a small silver hipflask into his hand. He glanced around surprised to find the cool blue eyes of Ilana Petrova, one of the Russian roughnecks. He couldn’t see her straw-blond hair. Like him, she kept her hair hidden away in the warmth of her survival suit hood. They wore them on deck. He could see her tight smile though. Her thin, pink lips. “Thank you,” he said meekly. “What is it?”

“It’s good,” she said in her thick Muscovite accent. “Rum. And eat dry bread. When you throw up again, you need something to—to—”

“To throw up,” Matheson smiled, embarrassed. “Yeah.” Ilana nodded at the flask encouragingly. Matheson took a swig. Wiped the top and handed it back. “Thanks,” he said.

She tucked the flask away, slipped a glove back on and nodded in that curious Russian way. They eyed each other, and for just a brief moment Matheson actually didn’t feel quite so ill. It didn’t last long.

“What’s the problem with the node?” he asked tentatively.

Ilana frowned. “Nothing,” she said.

“Nothing?” Matheson mused. He watched her walk away, her familiar wiggle on display as she negotiated the rusty metal deck plates. He watched her climb the crane, get a slap on the ass and kick the guy in the face as another wave hit the bow and crystal droplets scraped against his skin. His stomach twisted in knots again as he climbed up out of the bitter cold. Questions formed in a torrid swirl in his mind. Why weren’t his seasickness pills working? What was the point of wearing a survival suit in a place where you were unlikely to survive?

And what was Bulger playing at?

The control room was dark, bathed in a deep red glow. Banks of monitors blinked reams of data. Hunched engineers. The room stank of cigarette smoke and every so often he could smell Bulger’s cigar. He was lurking in here somewhere. The murmuring was active as information traded hands and the drill’s progress was tracked. He glanced at a bank of screens showing the rig outside and watched for a moment as the pipe appeared to ram up and down inside the tower like a piston, as the sh-

bucked on the waves. It was impressive. There had been trials up in Alaska, of course, but this was the first true exploratory oil drill in a polar region. Problem was, this was Antarctica. Where it was illegal.

But then, illegal was not an alien concept to the big oil companies. Matheson never forgot his college days when a ship by the name of the *Exxon Valdez* poured over ten million gallons of oil straight into the ecosystem. That may have been an accident, but Exxon's poor attempt at wriggling out of cleaning up its own mess was not.

But there was no National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Antarctica to bring Rola Corp. into line if it screwed up. The company could effectively do what it liked. Yes, a permit was required to be here, but unofficially if *Red Osprey* struck oil in the meantime, the company was sure it could all be worked out. That was the trouble—Rola Corp. had plans on Antarctic oil, with or without Ralph Matheson. So he figured it might as well be with him and by default with somebody who would make sure the *Exxon Valdez* never happened out here.

Trouble was, they'd pulled the rug out from under him. They weren't supposed to be out here for another six months. They just weren't ready.

"What's going on? Bulger said something about a problem with the node." Matheson unzipped the parka part of his suit and made a bee-line for Charlie Harper, a black systems specialist from Wisconsin. They were friends, and had worked together before out in Saudi Arabia a few years back. He was about the only person Matheson trusted on this ship. He could feel his teeth chattering as he lowered himself into a comfortable chair.

Charlie replied almost too lethargically: "Nothin' much. Just the same ole same ole." Which was Charlie-speak for: Shit's hit the fan.

Charlie was focused on his monitors. Clicked the mouse a couple of times. When his gaze met Matheson's it was worried. "We got a warship. Chinese."

Charlie had the Global Positioning System, or GPS, on line and was busy monitoring air and sea traffic. GPS kept track of the position of every vehicle linked into its network of satellites. Those vehicles could access all kinds of navigational data, including pinpointing all the other vehicles plugged into it, anywhere on earth, at any given time. It had been developed by the U.S. military sometime in the last century. Now it was an everyday part of civilian life.

Clearly a Chinese warship was bad news. There was every chance now they would have to dump the pipeline and move on quickly. *Red Osprey* had a distinct advantage over the warship in that, thanks to some bright young computer programmer, it didn't actually register on any GPS system. At a distance *Red Osprey* was to all intents and purposes invisible. But if they were found, they would be boarded.

Matheson had seen the news. He knew what was going on and it wasn't good. *Red Osprey* was flying the U.S. flag. To the Chinese right now that was a red rag to a bull. "Is this what Bulger came down to see me about?" Matheson snapped, agitated. He didn't need this right now.

"Yeah. He thought maybe they could hear what we're doing in the water."

"And can they? Charlie, I need to know. My ass is on the line here."

"No, man! No way they could hear us. You did good."

"I did good? I did *good*? I did a goddamn miracle, Charlie. Next to loaves and fishes, bringing the project forward six months was a goddamn, honest to goodness miracle. How do you *know* they can't hear us?" Matheson was working himself into a sweat.

"I know they can't hear us, coz I've been listenin' to *them* on the radio for a half hour. Man, they're too busy partying to be bothered snooping around for us. They've been hanging around all morning watching our guys over at McMurdo preparing a new landing strip. They're too distracted. Shit, I can't hear somebody over there singin' Abba—in Chinese."

Matheson frowned in surprise.

"What can I say?" Charlie shrugged. "The node's got great ears."



“What song?”

““Supertrooper.””

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If *Red Osprey* were discovered it would blow the whole situation. They’d already had one close encounter with a wing of Chinese fighters out on patrol. They hadn’t been discovered, but with Chinese and U.S. forces facing off over mineral rights, in a world where dwindling fossil fuels were sending prices skyward, *Red Osprey*’s surreptitious oil tapping could spark a war.

Bulger had been bugging him about friction vibration for weeks. It was what they had been most concerned about. Screw whether it actually worked. Just make sure the damn thing didn’t make any noise.

The “damn thing” was the heart of Matheson’s design, a device called the Depth Node. It had been transported out to the Ross Sea under cover of darkness last winter and dumped directly beneath their ship. Then, controlled remotely, it had dug in on the sea floor. It was the main point for capping the well and heating the buried pipe-work. The node was what made polar oil exploration possible and the company intended to set up nodes all over the Antarctic coast. Drill, strike oil, then cap off, only returning to a node when they wanted to fill a tanker. Refining was done aboard ship. The node would take care of everything else. Its power unit ran on hydrogen and oxygen—essentially water—and was designed to last twenty years. But the prototype had only been in the ground for nine months. It was supposed to run silently. What if it *had* failed?

Water power was a new technology which Rola Corp. had acquired the patent to about fifteen years ago, previously and sat on. So far, the rival water-powered generators that had emerged onto the market were so extremely expensive only western nations could afford them. Which was good because that meant it would be decades before the Third World could scrape together enough cash to buy the technology. Until then, they would need oil. The problem was, there had been no mass testing of the new technology. What if there was a problem with the water-powered section of the node, something beyond Matheson’s predicting capabilities, and the Chinese had detected this? They were a sitting duck.

Charlie handed Matheson a mug of coffee as he watched the screens. Absorbed, as if he were playing a game. “What’s that?” Matheson asked, pointing to a series of blips.

“That red one’s the Chinese sub. The other’s a U.S. carrier. And that there, see that blue one? That’s a plane on its way from Chile to Pirrit Hills, in the Chilean sector. And I can tell you right now, they’re up shit creek without a paddle.”

“What’s happening?”

“It’s a small aircraft,” Charlie explained. “That storm we got moving in just fucked up their damn radar. They’re past the point of no return. They’re going to have to find somewhere to land and refuel. They’re going to get back. And between you and me, I don’t think they’re even gonna make it to the fuel dump.”

“What do we do? Charlie, we can’t just let them crash! What if it was us out there?”

“We can’t just get on a radio, either. We’re not supposed to be here, Ralph.”

“I know, but—look, see? The two closest research stations to Pirrit Hills are both American. Siple and Sky-Hi—y’know, Eights Station. They’re both manned. Charlie, you gotta send out an emergency message—on the Internet at least. Just make sure they’re anonymous.”

“If I send out *any* message, they’ll know somebody’s out here,” Charlie said defensively.

“You gotta do something,” Matheson argued, distressed.

“I’m sorry, but they’re on their own.”

Matheson watched the scope. Watched the plane head off into oblivion.

“What’s that?” He gestured at a red blip about twelve miles off their port bow and sipped his coffee. It was bitter. Shittiest coffee he’d ever tasted.

“That’s our carrier I was tellin’ ya about. Been doin’ maneuvers or something. They’re too busy worryin’ about each other to give a damn about us. But hey, fuck ’em. So Frankie ran a simulation test on a dump. We can be outta here before they get close enough to sniff around.”

Matheson nodded and had more coffee. On his computer screen a graphic cut-away view showed the drill in progress. A string of steel-alloy pipe extended down from *Red Osprey* to the node. The node then ran its own length of pipe vertically down a further 500 meters. The pipeline then changed direction dramatically and had been steered around difficult strata of rock. It was approaching the estimated site of the oil field at a gentle downward sloping angle.

Directional drilling had been pioneered by the Norwegian National Oil Company in the early 1990s when they sank a well nearly 24,000 feet horizontally from a starting point 9,000 feet under the North Sea. It was so successful there was a rush to adopt the technology since it allowed for more efficient drainage than conventional means.

“Thorne was on the sat again,” Charlie dropped in casually.

Matheson almost choked on his coffee. “What did he want?”

“Test results. Come on, Ralph, he wants to know how your baby’s holding up. Just thank God he’s not on a plane out here.”

Matheson gulped more coffee. Tried not to taste it, just enjoy its warmth. But his hands were shaking and this time it had nothing to do with seasickness.

Rip Thorne, President of Rola Corp. Exploration. Asshole. Just a mention of the guy’s name was enough to give Matheson the willies. Thorne was the one who had caused his ulcer in the first place. Rip Thorne and Bulger. Between them, they were responsible for him winding up out here. Six whole months. How the hell could Thorne expect to bring this project forward by six whole months and expect it to work? And what was with Bulger anyway? Thorne’s personal little rottweiler. He’d already overruled the first test drill site, said he wanted to drill someplace else. Someplace he personally picked out.

Matheson checked the data. “Charlie, please tell me you didn’t give him an answer.”

Charlie glared at his friend. “Without checking with you first? Are you shittin’ me? Of course not! I told him he’d have to wait for your damn report.”

Matheson nodded. Tried to shake off his mood. He checked the data again. “Remote drill-bit operating fine,” he relayed warily. “Geosteering sensor ... Hmm. Interesting rock composition . . . crystalline? Huh ... MWD, MWD, where are you? Uh, got it.” He clicked on the Measurement-While-Drilling icon and checked the torque and forward force on the drill-bit. It was high. Within operating limits, but still high.

They had hit a tough strata of rock earlier in the day and were trying to break through, so the order had been given to go to full power. It would wear the drill-bit out at twice the rate, but since this drill bit had been going for a day and it wasn’t unusual to change the bit every twenty-four to forty-eight hours, they might as well just let it burn itself out.

Geology was a funny business though. No one was quite sure what kind of rock they had encountered. And in the past six hours they had only advanced enough to attach one more nine-foot section of drilling pipe. So just in case the drill broke through to an underground cavern or some particulate matter, like sand, a clamp harness had been attached to the pipe at their end to stop the bit from running off with the entire pipe-line if there was a sudden lurch forward. It would scupper the whole job if that happened and nobody wanted that, since retrieving miles of pipe from the ocean floor just wasn’t an option. They would be forced to start again from scratch.

Glancing at the secondary monitor, Matheson hesitated over the three data icons. One meant a remote data dump via satellite to his workstation back home. A second meant an immediate digital download onto the ship’s system core. And the third one—was yellow. *Yellow?* What did that mean?

“This is my ship! What did you think you were doing?”

He turned from the screen as the door flew open and the captain of *Red Osprey* stormed in. Jaffna was a small man with Indian features and a western temper. He flipped the lights on and everyone screwed up their eyes for a second. Abuse was hurled, but he didn't give a damn. He zeroed in on Bulger.

Bulger was on his feet. “You're a fucking idiot!”

“I gave direct orders and you overrode them. Try it again and I'll take your head off!”

“Are you an idiot, Jaffna? Is that it?” Bulger met him center-stage. Everyone else knew better, and got out of the way. “What kind of a fucking idiot displays the signal? Anyone with a good pair of fucking glasses could see it, goddamnit!”

Matheson leaned in quick and whispered, “What signal?”

“Jaffna turned the lights on,” Charlie explained quickly and quietly. “Flew the signal that we're doing sub-aqua work to passing traffic. Bulger told a deckhand to switch 'em off.”

Matheson shook his head in surprise. “Well, by international law he's supposed to.” He grimaced and sat back. Watched the two men go at it and was even enjoying the entertainment until suddenly it hit him.

Yellow meant block resistance. Recoil forces and internal pumping pressure.

Matheson spun around fast. “Shit!” He grabbed the mouse, clicked on the yellow icon, called up the data. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” He spun back around. The recoil was massive. It hadn't struck oil at all. “Who's on forward resistance?”

As Bulger and Jaffna stuck at it, Jaffna screaming something about not wanting to lose his license and planning on captaining another ship someday, Matheson scrambled to his feet. Screw them. Screw the Chinese navy. This was more serious. The shit had already hit the fan and none of them knew it.

He scanned the room fast. Jabbed a finger at Frankie, a fat, young, nervous-looking guy. “You!” He growled. “You were monitoring forward resistance. Why didn't you pick up on it!”

“I—I went for a piss,” Frankie stuttered.

Matheson shoved him out of the way, dived for his monitor. “The bit's broken through. It's pumping pressurized seawater!” This was unprecedented. He wheeled around and bellowed at everyone in the room. “Dump the pipe now! We got a Code Zero!”

Everyone knew what that meant. There was a terrified silence. Code Zero was a theoretical situation they'd computer simulated back in the States. They had broken through to an underwater sinkhole. At this temperature the water should have been solid ice, but the pressures exerted from the sheer weight of the glacier ice shelves above meant the water was under extreme pressure and remained liquid. Give it a means of escape and of course it was going to take the path of least resistance. Recoil effect would be buckling the pipe. In this cold, the pipe should have snapped, but it couldn't because it was a steel alloy designed to remain elastic. For the node to work, the pipe-line was a pipe within a pipe. It was the central-core pipe that was going haywire, and it was the core pipe that *Red Osprey* was directly connected to. The recoil would be speeding up the pipe in waves. At some point it was going to reach the ship. In calm weather they'd clear decks until all the fun was over. But in this storm—they could sink them.

Everyone dived for the controls. Bulger hit the alarm and was on the intercom in a blink. Klaxon whirred. Hazard lights flashed. “This is an emergency! Everyone below decks, now! Get off decks! Leave everything! This is not a drill! Go! Go! Go!”

No one stuck around to ask questions. But it was already too late. The first buckle hit *Red Osprey* when it was already in the throes of another thirty-foot icy wave. The roughnecks all lurched in one direction as they started to unclip safety-lines and transfer over to the main deck-rails. But the pipe

whiplashed with such force that it righted the ship on the crest of the wave, and when *Red Osprey* finally lurched to port, three roughnecks were catapulted into the ocean. They were dead inside a minute.

Matheson watched the monitors when he should have been concentrating on his readings. He watched Ilana climb down from the crane as a brace from the derrick sheered off and shot straight through her abdomen. It blasted out her back and took her guts with it. Blood sprayed red across the sky like lightning and was gone in the crash of another wave. Her body clung to the ladder for a moment—the ladder broke away. She never had time to change her expression.

Matheson heard Charlie's breath catch in his throat. Glancing at him quickly he saw his friend was glued to the monitor too. He had the look of a man who'd just lost his lover. When had those two gotten together? The ship lurched and swung back. Screw Charlie's love-life. Matheson dived across the room. Everyone was panicking. He flipped up the Plexiglas sheath on the central console and hammered the bright red abort switch.

More sirens added to the din. The computer confirmed that the node had capped off and had jettisoned the ship's umbilical. But the internal pressure readings didn't change. Something had been pumped and was rocketing up the inside of the pipe-line. If they didn't dump the umbilical now it might catch on the sea-bed and they'd never get out of there.

Matheson whirled around looking for the dump controls. He found Captain Jaffna already on the intercom, yelling at the bridge for full ahead. His fingers flew across the keys. The umbilical would be gone in seconds.

Matheson checked the monitor again, checked Jaffna. Watched the pipe begin to fall through the deck-hole into the water below.

The remaining roughnecks scrambled for cover. Some made it, but some didn't.

Dumping the umbilical was becoming impossible. As it slid into the ocean it caught on more sheering braces. Hanging limply from the towering derrick it was 3,000 feet of dead weight pipe under no control, at the mercy of the undercurrents.

The creaking got louder. The derrick buckled, came crashing down and crushed another roughneck. Matheson could see the guy's thick bushy mustache. His name was Pete. He was still alive, but he was trapped, Matheson realized, under a pipe-line that was now pointing directly at the bridge and living quarters. Directly at them. Like a cannon.

Matheson braced himself, watching Pete struggle under tons of battered steel until the nozzle inevitably exploded. Freezing mud blasted out, smashing everything in its path. Fists of rock tore through portholes like bullets. The smell of sulfur was overwhelming. And the cold ...

Jaffna never wavered. Always thinking, always looking for an option. He keyed more controls and the ship rocked as a blast ripped through the deck-hole. Jaffna had instigated an emergency dump. The pipe-line was gone and they were free. But the devastation was immense.

*Red Osprey* tossed back and forth several times before Jaffna's orders finally kicked in and the ship steamed full ahead. But she was limping badly, smoke pouring from her engine room.

Bulger thumbed the klaxons off. Everyone stood motionless, trying to take it all in. Charlie, his dark skin stained with tears, rubbed his cheeks angrily and tried to focus on the GPS systems.

"The sub?" Matheson demanded.

Charlie shook his head and shot a look at Jaffna. "We got a destroyer coming at us. North-northwest. Full speed. Sending out registry *USS Ingersoll DD-990* ... it's the Marines."

Jaffna nodded. It was time to get out of here. He yanked the door open and let a slew of mud and rock slide into the room as he beat a retreat to the bridge. The large picture porthole beyond was

smashed and the wind and ice gusted in, driving it all across the floor. A large knot of muddy rock skidded up to Matheson's boot.

Matheson turned to Charlie. They eyed each other for a moment before he tentatively stepped onto the upper deck, ignoring the squalls that blasted his face with ice. The drilling tower was buckled the length of the deck. Bodies lay strewn about. Huge boxes of equipment were broken and junked from stem to stern.

"Clip yourself on," Bulger ordered quietly. He was looking distastefully at his cigar. He tossed it overboard as he clipped his own safety line to the main rail and made his way down the ladder. As Matheson could hear him keep saying was: "Christ, what a fucking mess. Oh, Jesus, this is terrible."

Stunned, Matheson went down to the main deck to give a hand with the clearing up. He'd have preferred to go back to bed and give the day a shot from another angle. Even a sunset would have given him the sense of closure he wanted. But this was Antarctica and sunset wasn't due for another six weeks.

He had set to work making a note of the victims. There were thirteen dead in all. As he ticked them off on a clipboard, trying his best not to be sick again, a roughneck by the name of Pico interrupted. He had a large chunk of something in his hands. It looked heavy. "Hey, I think this must be yours. What kinda stuff did you guys have on deck? This looks pretty expensive." He handed it over.

"I don't remember us having anything on deck," Matheson commented. He frowned and examined the object, turning it over in his hands. He wasn't the only one. Bulger had a piece and Frankie made grab for a chunk. Now he came to think of it, there were lumps of the stuff all over the deck. "This isn't from any of our equipment."

Matheson took the rock-like object over to a puddle and started washing the dirt away. It was clear as crystal, and picked up the light so effectively that it appeared to be glowing pale blue. Almost clear. He shared a wary look with Bulger and for that brief moment they both forgot their differences. "It's a piece of rock ..."

"What kind of rock?" Frankie asked furtively. His skin was peeling. He hadn't used his balaclava either and looked terrible.

Matheson turned it over again. "Looks like diamond."

"Doesn't look like any diamond I ever saw," Frankie mused. "It's heavy, but it ain't nearly heavy enough. Did this come through the pipe-line?"

Charlie stepped up to them. Exchanged sympathetic glances. "Must have," he said.

Slowly, very slowly, Bulger smiled, baring his teeth like a shark. "I knew it," was all he said.

Matheson suddenly held his piece up to the light. "Well, I'll be damned." He positioned himself so they could all see. "Look," he said, disbelievingly. "It's got writing on it."

Glinting in the light were finely etched, perfectly formed glyphs—ancient-looking symbols whose meaning was lost on them. So clear were the hieroglyphs that it looked like the diamond itself had incorporated the writing into its natural structure.

It was astounding.

"I wonder what it says?" someone was asking.

"Looks Egyptian."

"Egyptian?" Matheson jerked a thumb at a distant iceberg. "Out here? Come on, man!"

Frankie set about picking up every piece he could find. "We gotta get more of this stuff," he said. "Someone needs to take a look at this. We're gonna be rich!" But his hand was quickly squashed under the sole of Bulger's thick heavy boot.

"This shit right here is company property, Fat Boy. You collect it all up for the company."

Matheson warily ran his fingers over the etchings on the stone. Thirteen people had just died because of this stuff. He gripped it tightly. They were going to be rich? Somehow, he wasn't so sure.

He held the stone up to the light again. Took another good look. And that was when he noticed the black smudge on the horizon closing in rapidly. A black smudge of storm clouds against a green sky ... a green sky?

Klaxons erupted on deck again before he could say anything. As cliff-sized waves crashed across the bow, and the destroyer circled in from the North, Matheson watched a sleek gray military Sea Hawk helicopter swoop in from the sky, its screaming engines barely making a dent in the noise from the storm. Hovering low over the center deck where *Red Osprey* moved least and the derrick lay crumpled, its doors slid back abruptly. Ropes were tossed out. And as a dozen Marines swung down from above, a loud-hailer fixed next to missiles on the stub wings of the chopper suddenly sprang to life.

“This is the United States Marine Corps! Stay where you are on deck! You are being boarded!”

Machine guns were cocked. Hands held high. A braided officer took center-stage. With a scowl firmly fixed to his young face he assessed the crew with one definitive sweep before finally locking his gaze on Matheson and making a bee-line for him.

Still gripping the rock, Ralph Matheson had a manic grin smeared across his face.

The Marines were here.

They had been caught at last. Thank God, he thought.

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## the eighth day

It is a curious thing that God learned Greek when he wished to turn author—and that he did not learn it better.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosopher, 1844–1900

### FULTON CONFERENCE CENTER MAGNOLIA UNIVERSITY, NORTH MISSISSIPPI MARCH 16, 2012

“In the beginning was the word,” Dr. Richard Scott announced, fumbling with the switch and pressing it twice by mistake. The digital projector raced through a sequence of images so fast it was impossible to pick out the detail. Scott muffled a groan and tried in vain to cue the slide up once more, but couldn’t find the number to punch in. He looked to the audience. Letting his shoulders sag. “And the word is currently not repeatable in public,” he said.

The audience gave a louder than expected note of amusement but somehow Scott couldn’t trust their motives. They were academics for the most part, with a sprinkling of students. They had come to listen to the man whose little tour had caused quite a stir in some circles. Even the President, a devout and notable Baptist, had felt the urge to come out and actively question his work. One tiny professor from U-Dub. It was ridiculous. Where was the religious freedom in this country anymore? Had it always been a myth to begin with?

Scott glanced down exasperated at the equipment and caught a glimpse of his own reflection. Neatly trimmed hair. Square jaw. He fiddled with switches, but it was no use. Forlornly, he glanced over to the student research assistant they had assigned to him for just this kind of emergency. “Uh, could you—uh? Hello?”

A guy from Federal Express was getting her to sign for a package. Scott was amazed. “Uh, excuse me, sir? I’m trying to lecture here.”

“When we promise ten-thirty, sir, we mean it.”

Scott couldn’t help it. He broke into a smile and burst out laughing to a squeal of feedback off the PA system. The audience laughed with him.

“A round of applause for our friends at FedEx,” Scott chuckled.

The delivery guy took off his cap and gave a bow on his way out, to the delight of the audience. Meanwhile, Scott’s assistant had dumped the package and was vaulting onto the stage.

Scott cupped his hand over the microphone. “Thanks.”

She was a bright girl, November Dryden, very bright. Very attractive. But more importantly—very patient. “Knock ’em dead,” she said, returning to her seat with a smile.

With his lecture back on track, Scott shared an amused jibe with the audience. “I think, on balance, ancient manuscripts are a lot easier to handle,” he said.

Another ripple of laughter bounced around the auditorium as the audience settled down and the first slide popped up onto the screen.

Scott was a linguistic and cultural anthropologist by trade. He studied social structures, language,

politics, religion and technology, but his specialty was language. He was an epigraphist who spent years deciphering ancient inscriptions. Yet despite the confidence he had in his own work, he worried about this lecture more than any other. It might be dangerous to his health, because this was the Bible Belt. A lecture on newly discovered ancient manuscripts that called the Bible into question wasn't going to cause lively debate, so much as explosive disagreement. And then there was the other issue—

“To begin again,” Scott continued. “In the beginning was the word. And that word is ‘unbelievable.’ Let me start my lecture today by being very honest about my beliefs.” He took a deep breath. “I don't believe in Jesus Christ.”

There were stunned expressions in the audience. Scott shuffled his papers.

“The Gospels,” he explained, “were written in Greek. Where we have ‘word,’ the Greeks have *logos*. But *logos* means more than just ‘word.’ It means thought, deed, action. It means ‘word in action.’ It's the same in Hebrew and in Aramaic. Some have recognized this dilemma and opted for the word ‘act.’ In the beginning, there was the act. But that still doesn't convey the full meaning of *logos*. Christians wanted to attract Jews to their faith; Jesus was, after all, a Jew. So Christianity—like all great religions—borrowed from its predecessors both the language and imagery of what had gone before. Hence, in the beginning was *logos* because to the Hebrews, this was nothing new. In Proverbs it's the wisdom motif.

“To entice Pagans, all they did was move into a bunch of old churches and not bother redecorating. All those vast mosaics of Christ, the bearded savior—those are portraits of Zeus and Jupiter. Those churches are Greco-Roman. So Christianity then, is the earliest known example of religious recycling. However, how *much* it borrowed has always been a source of debate. But today I brought the answer with me. And, if I may, I'd like to share it with you.”

Scott sipped his water. Partly to quench his thirst, but mostly to gauge his audience.

Ancient texts. They had been calling Christianity into question now for decades. The first had turned up in 1947. A shepherd boy by the name of Muhammad adh-Dhib, or Muhammad the Wolf, of the Ta'amireh tribe of Bedouin, had passed by the ancient settlement of Qumran, by the Dead Sea, and stumbled upon ancient scrolls in some clay jars in a cave. The most recent, the *Istanbul Genezah*, had been found in a chest in the roof of a mosque. A *genezah* was a collection of prayer scripture—stored but no longer used, usually because they were worn out. These things hadn't seen the light of day in at least 1,500 years.

Throughout this time the Christian establishment had suppressed any information that questioned its religion. But since the mid-1980s a small academic fringe had seen it as their duty to reveal Christ as merely a man. It was a viewpoint Scott hadn't entirely shared to begin with, but things had changed.

“So,” he continued now, “if we've got problems with just one word, think about the sort of problems we have when we consider that the Bible contains hundreds of thousands of words, and all of them from mostly dead languages. We have to admit that our interpretations, from any point of view, are going to be open to error. For example, how many of you know somebody who speaks fluent Aramaic and uses it in everyday speech?” He let slip a smile. Time for an anecdote.

“Okay, how many of you here speak German?”

There was a flutter of hushed conversation from the assorted nervous academics.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to call you up on stage and saw you in half. Just give me a rough figure. One, two? Six?” He could see a few hands slowly go up. He nodded. “Six. Right. Okay—out of an audience of maybe two hundred. In Europe, maybe a hundred million people speak German. Maybe more, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't care. The point is, if you wanted to know how to speak German you'd ask a German, right? I mean, they use it every day.”



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