

Eternal Horizons: On the Trail of the Templar Treasure

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Chapter One: The Sincerest Form of Flattery

“Are we rolling?” Arthur whispered.

Neville checked the digital camera display. “We have speed,” he said in a hushed voice.

“We have sound,” Connie, beside him holding a boom microphone, added. “Don’t you want to wait a bit and let me write up something?”

“No, no,” Arthur replied, crouching in front of his two-person crew. “This is too incredible to wait on. Let’s wing it. I want to capture the thrill of discovery. If I screw up, we can overdub later.” His wide eyes took in the entire breadth of the cave. “This is the most excited I’ve been since we were buzzed by that UFO over Machu Pichu.”

His stocky frame seemed poised to leap from excitement. He was dressed in dusty green jeans, a short-sleeved tan tee shirt covered by a well-worn fishing vest with a dozen bulging pockets, an oddly utilitarian outfit topped off by a brown baseball cap with a gold “EH” embroidered on the front. Despite wearing a tee shirt, he had a pair of thin leather gloves on his hands. His black hair was shot through with streaks of white, his face close-shaved, his gray eyes wide in anticipation.

“Alrighty then,” he said, as he rubbed his gloved hands together, though whether it was

from the chill of the cave or from the excitement was hard to tell. He faced the camera. “We’re now a few miles outside of Axum, still in Ethiopia, the supposed last resting place of the fabled Ark of the Covenant. We doubted whether a single guard on a well-known urban building could protect such a valuable relic from the many thousands of looters and profit seekers that must be drawn its way, so your intrepid host did a little searching, a little legwork...” He paused and smiled an impish grin. “And a little well-placed bribery. Our guide back there, Disseha,” Arthur indicated a shadowy figure in the doorway with an AK-47 slung over his shoulder, barely lit from the single spotlight attached to the camera, “was kind enough to bring us to this cave, high on a hill outside of town, where he claims the actual Ark is kept.”

Arthur unwound his compact frame and began to inspect the painted wall on his right. “And it looks like we’ve found something important all right. The walls here are covered with ancient paintings that I’d guess are over a thousand years old, maybe two. They match the style of the Holy of Holies we’d seen before on the church beside Lake Tana, the sight that was celebrated as a temporary resting place for the Ark. But these,” Arthur said, indicating the nearby wall with a gloved hand, “these haven’t been updated or retouched at all. The millennia have caused a bit of the paint to flake around the edges of the scenes, though the gold leaf has remained pretty much intact. Rather good condition, considering its age. This cave must have been selected for its relative dryness. Someone really chose well when they picked this spot.”

His right hand, obscured by the worn leather glove, passed close by the painted surface. A mural of surprising subtlety filled the entire wall, from the smoothed floor to the equally smooth ceiling almost five feet above his head. Men in robes and armor, both on horseback and on foot, were portrayed row upon row, an army on the march, except this army seemed to be made entirely of holy men: each head was adorned with a golden circle that identified a special purity of soul, much like the Greek Orthodox paintings of the Apostles with their radiant halos. The marching army led in from the cave entrance twenty feet behind them, an entrance with a single heavy door held open by their guide only a crack so as to let as little light as possible escape into the chilly Ethiopian night.

The army marched in glorious reds, blues, greens and yellows, deeper into the cave. The scene matched a similar procession on the opposite wall, thousands of painted figures returning from a great victory or some other memorable event. The detail on the faces, the precision in the rendering of pride in their mission, the painstaking work to recreate the individual weapons and

armor that adorned every figure, indicated the significance of their accomplishment.

“Notice the shield on this fellow here,” Arthur said. His gloved finger pointed to a marching soldier who bore a painted face on his shield, possibly the image of a general or a king, or even a holy man. “This shows these aren’t Muslim fighters, since they wouldn’t paint a person’s face on their shield. That’s against the Koran. This spot here,” he gestured at one section as he walked deeper into the cave, “this is a particularly wide river, maybe the Blue Nile, the one the Ethiopians call Tissisat, ‘the Water of Smoke.’ ” The water in the painting did indeed smoke, or at least it roiled with mist and foam. “This may be the area of the great falls leading down from Lake Tana that we visited earlier. And here,” he moved even deeper, Neville and Connie striving to keep pace with him, “these massive stelea can be none other than those we saw down below in Axum, where the Ark was brought in triumph.”

The single light on Neville’s camera cast eerie shadows on the painted walls and smooth ceiling. It was barely enough light to film by, and he and Connie crept cautiously, often glancing down at the floor to make sure they didn’t trip on anything.

Neville felt as if he had to stoop to get his lanky frame to fit inside the cave, though the ceiling was many feet above. His sandy hair was long and wavy, a beach bum’s mop waiting on the perfect wave. He looked like he could have been twenty and often acted like it, though he was closer to forty. Not being on camera, he opted for worn camo pants, battered Keds and a long-sleeved gray tee shirt with the words, “It’s not the Heat, it’s the Stupidity!” emblazoned on the back, with a blue handkerchief tied around his neck. His angular face and droll attitude implied a clown without makeup, though his deep blue eyes bespoke a slumbering wisdom hidden just below the surface.

Connie was more respectfully garbed. Her black jeans flattered her slim figure quite well, with a surprisingly clean white shirt underneath a light-blue windbreaker. It was more clothing than would be thought necessary for an Ethiopian summer, though it was perfect for the cooler cave interior. She moved more assuredly than Neville, a gymnast or a ballerina perhaps in her previous days. She wore her red hair tightly bound, a nod to the difficult situations they often found themselves in. Her face was striking enough that those who’d never seen their broadcasts usually concluded she was the ravishing host, and her deep voice only added to their bewitchment.

Arthur walked on with unusual confidence, as sure of himself as if he’d walked this cave a hundred times before. “This is definitely the group that brought the Ark on its final trip, here

into the heart of Ethiopia, from Jerusalem to Egypt, then on to Lake Tana and Gonder, and finally here to Axum. Look at this building here, this one,” he said, his voice rising in excitement. “This looks just like the guarded building in the town below. They’re having some kind of ceremony, probably for the installation of the Ark into the Holy of Holies. And here it is, in this image here,” he said reverentially, “the Ark, with its attendants dressed in special robes, preceded by the holy men, as it meets its final resting place.”

Neville aimed the spotlight at the section of wall that Arthur indicated. “Sure could use more light in here,” he grumbled.

“I’m picking up extraneous sounds,” Connie said, nudging him with her elbow.

“Glad to know someone’s equipment is working properly,” he shot back. “Now, if I had the proper lighting —”

“That’s enough, you two,” Arthur cut in. “You get to edit out that bit later, Nev.” He walked a few steps farther on, then stopped and looked around. In the faint light from the camera, he could tell the cave opened up into a larger room. “Nev, pan around over here.”

Grumbling to himself, Neville did as he was asked. The cave, up till now a straight ten foot by ten foot passageway, enlarged to a giant room, where the left and right walls fell away to distant shadows. An imposing square building, carved out of the same rock as the cave walls, sat in what must have been the center of the area. Above it, the ceiling pulled away into the darkness overhead.

“Ah, now, here’s the real beauty,” Arthur said, half to himself.

“Magnificent,” Connie said, almost hypnotized.

“Boy, I wish I had this lit properly,” Neville complained.

The square building, perhaps fifty feet on a side, seemed to have been carved straight out of the rock of the mountain. No crack or crevice was discernible between the one wall facing them and the floor. The wall that faced them was painted with the same vibrant colors of the double murals that led into this place, although the scenes depicted now were of a different sort. Instead of the triumphant entourage escorting the Ark, these images described the great accomplishments of the Ark itself. Here a scene from the tribes of Israel lost in the desert, when the Ark would fly on ahead at the end of the day and choose a location for the night’s campsite. There, a scene where the Ark helped defeat one of the many peoples of Canaan, emitting great bursts of light and steaming vapors. Another scene, smaller and to the lower right, showed an Israelite attempting to keep the Ark upright as it almost tipped over upon arriving at the first

Temple, and being struck dead for his efforts. Geometric lines and hieroglyphs, Hebrew characters and more esoteric sigils, all of them painstakingly covered in gold leaf, edged the building's top and bottom.

In the middle of the wall was a simple unadorned opening, a doorway perhaps, covered with a purple silken cloth layered with dust. Its width was about ten feet, its height close to fifteen.

“At last, the end of our journey. The object of thousands of years of quests, hundreds of books and more than a few blockbuster movies, lies behind this simple cloth. Here, we'll finally be face to face with the greatest icon ever built by man and God, the Ark of the Covenant.”

Arthur hesitated, and turned around to face the camera. “Stories tell that anyone who approached the Ark, if not properly clothed and anointed, would be struck dead for their temerity. In fact, two of Aaron's own children were killed for approaching it without being suitably prepared. I wonder,” he said, turning back to face the doorway, “if it still harbors such a deep antipathy to strangers, or if it's mellowed a bit in its old age?”

“Well, if the worst happens,” Neville said, “we'll get them to add your picture to one of the walls.”

With a muttered laugh, Arthur took two steps forward, ready to push aside the dividing curtain.

“Maybe you should —” Connie called out.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Arthur replied. He pulled his right hand back slowly and slid off the thin leather glove. “Camera off, Nev.”

Neville, apparently ready for the request before Arthur had even voiced it, switched the camera to ‘Standby,’ though he kept the light on. “Should have brought the portable floods,” he mumbled to himself, though he was focused on Arthur's actions.

While he gained control over his breathing, Arthur flexed his now-uncovered right hand. He rolled his fingers into his palm, as if he were preparing to spin the tumblers on a bank vault. His hand moved not to the curtain, but to the adjacent wall on the left, where an image of the Ark was shown blasting a nameless group of unbelievers into dust. He spread his fingers wide and brought them slowly toward the wall's painted surface.

“If I'm out of contact for more than —” he started to say, then his voice cut out.

The instant his fingers touched the wall, his mind was overloaded with sounds, sights, blurred images, moving scenes, chanting voices, flashing lights, hundreds, maybe thousands of

memories all competing to crowd into his head, a cascading sensory overload that would have stunned most humans and paralyzed many more. Others would have simply gone insane from the flood of images that assailed his mind. But this wasn't the first time Arthur Albright had touched the past.

In his mind, the cave was flooded with light and swirling images. Though he stood in the same spot, he could see and somehow feel the entire cave's presence. He knew instantly that the excavated part of the cave continued only a short distance past the stone building, with but a narrow vertical shaft near the back for ventilation. He could tell that the stone building was indeed an integral part of the stone of the mountain, for he could sense the entire creation process of the site itself. Weeks, perhaps months of excavating and carving the cave from the rock of the mountain compressed themselves into impossibly quick vignettes that took Arthur less than a heartbeat to experience.

He swallowed, aware that all this was flowing into his brain much too fast, and tried to slow the download, as he liked to think of it. He'd trained with a Cajun psychic back in Louisiana who'd taught him to manage the inflow of information before it became too much to handle. He knew that the amount of info he received from any artifact he touched would vary by the age and history of the artifact itself, but he'd rarely touched anything like this holy repository.

As he gained control of the hurricane of time, he was able to close in on a particular scene of his own choosing: the painting of the cavern and the central building. He observed the hand of the artist who illuminated the scene beneath Arthur's own hand: a dark-skinned Ethiopian holy man with deeply etched wrinkles like the mountain itself, swathed in white robes, who chanted as he painted. His senses did not include what the holy man was thinking: he was never quite able to penetrate into another person's thoughts. But he was able to observe the scene quite clearly, and from multiple angles, all at once.

Incense burners sent up spirals of smoke from in front of each wall of the building. He perceived it was being prepared as a shrine: the other walls, all being worked on simultaneously, were each attended by more holy men, some mixing paint, some applying the images with special brushes, all of them chanting similar hymns. He wasn't sure how he knew they were holy men; he just knew.

Arthur could tell the interior was unfinished: no purple cloth covered the opening. He stretched his mind to observe the interior. Inside were three more men, similarly garbed in

swirling white cloth, who measured the interior of the building with a segmented iron rod, while a fourth man swung another incense burner. The iron rod was divided into three sections, each one about the length of a man's arm from elbow to fingertip. Most ancient civilizations had their own particular measuring length, usually something based on the concept of the royal cubit: about twenty inches, the distance from the Pharaoh's elbow to middle finger. It appeared these builders had fashioned a special device to keep that distance unchanging.

He watched as they marked off the width, a total of twenty of the lengths, then the depth, an equal twenty lengths. As one of the men climbed on a wooden platform to check the height, Arthur realized, with part of his mind that wasn't engaged in observing this ancient event, that if the outside of the building was fifty feet wide and the interior a little over thirty, then the walls of the building had to be on the order of ten feet thick all around, with a ceiling of twenty feet in thickness. *More prison than cathedral*, he thought. Another section of his mind desired to go further back, to see how the building and the rest of the cave had been so cunningly fashioned, what manner of craft they employed to carve the cave itself, but he knew he'd get hopelessly lost if he followed all the possible trains of thought.

He regained control and observed the outside of the building once more. He willed the scene to advance to the day when the Ark itself was installed. He bypassed many more events where the cave was filled with chanting holy men and clouds of incense, more painting, some strange all-night vigils, until one moment when the cave entrance was lined with robed men along both walls, all facing inwards.

Arthur slowed the scene down until time seemed to barely crawl by. A procession of Ethiopian attendants, two long columns of solemn white-robed holy men, marched into the cave, apparently at night from the darkness outside the narrow cave opening. He noticed there was no heavy iron-bound door guarding the entrance as there was in modern time. The floor was clean-swept, the paintings on the walls were crisp and bright.

The men that stood along the sides held their hands with palms upraised while they chanted with their eyes closed and their chins lifted. Through their voices, he was able to interpret some of their emotions: expectation, satisfaction, and more than a little bit of fear. They chanted the same song, one that sounded from its tenor and mood to be both welcome and warning. The marchers continued to arrive, over a hundred just since Arthur had begun watching, filing into the back of the cave, filling the open space around and behind the square building,

adding their chanting as they formed row upon row. When it seemed that the cramped cave could hold no more, the marching line ended, though the chanting continued.

Suddenly, there was a collective shout. The tone of the chant shifted to a higher, almost wailing song. The chanters mixed in more shouts, collective groans of anguish, maybe the pain of the Ark's victims or doubts about their own worthiness. Each shout was accompanied by a slap on the chest, hard enough to raise a bruise after the third or fourth time.

The beat of the chanting also increased, a frenzied pace, furious and emotional. The chanters moved in surprising harmony, though their flailing arms and pounding hands would appear to get in the way. The cave echoed with their resounding prayer, a testimony of power and a cry for mercy.

Then, without any signal, the chant ceased. The last echoes faded away in the farthest reaches of the cavern. Only the heavy breathing of the chanters moved the still air. No other sound could be heard, until some minutes had passed, and the soft tinkling of swinging incense braziers broke the calm.

A short procession of holy men marched slowly into the cave, six with braziers, six more carrying odd book-sized stones before them. These were *tabots*, the representation of the twin stones carved with the words of the Ten Commandments that Moses placed inside the Ark, often called the Tablets of Testimony. Each church in Ethiopia had its own sacred tabot. They were shown to the outside world only once a year, in a great ceremony where they were carried around the town in a joyous procession.

The tabot-bearers, with special shawls over their shoulders reminiscent of orthodox rabbis, took positions flanking the door of the Holy of Holies, while the incense-bearers proceeded inside the building itself. From what seemed like the stone of the cave itself, a low rumbling murmur was heard, although Arthur could tell it was the hundreds of holy men, each humming a note so low, so softly that collectively it felt like the vibration of a powerful diesel engine idling in the distance.

And then, it was here: the Ark, borne aloft by eight strong men, barefoot, clad in white, too, but much thicker cloth than the other holy men, garbed so heavily that Arthur wondered how they could breathe or even see from inside their cloaks. Only their feet were visible, their hands and faces covered by the same thick cloth, virgin wool if the Old Testament accounts were to be believed. They swayed left and right as they entered the cave, eight men working as one, and

between them, a golden-covered relic of ages past swayed with their movements.

The Ark was covered in gold, just like the descriptions, a simple box maybe three feet wide, four and a half feet long and another three high, the well-known two cubits by three cubits by two cubits description. Every inch was gilded, engraved with simple horizontal lines, geometric shapes and odd esoteric symbols. It was topped by a thick lid similarly covered in gold, all of it shining brightly in the darkness despite the subdued light inside the cave. But atop the lid, where the accounts held that two seraphim faced each other, stood two magnificent angelic creatures, kneeling, their wings spread high above their heads, their faces wide with desire, their arms reaching across the gap with open, yearning hands. The seraphim were never well described in the ancient accounts, and through the ages, the figure of winged sphinxes seemed to be the most appropriate icon to imagine. But these! These creatures were so hauntingly beautiful, so awesome in their power and majesty, they seemed to compel the very stones around them to obedience. Their height, close to four feet above the lid, seemed too small by a factor of ten for the impact their presence created.

Though he watched from a wholly different time, and wasn't even there in person, Arthur almost felt the need to kneel in reverence before them.

The eight bearers, four in front, four in back, trudged slowly forward, swaying left and right, as if their burden were that of a hundred Arks. They marched toward the Holy of Holies, and the rumbling murmur that Arthur had detected earlier began to multiply, though none of the gathered holy men seemed to be making any sound at all.

The bearers slowed only when they entered the doorway itself, as the curtain was drawn aside by one of the nearest watchers. But when the second bearer on the right collided with the doorway, he lost his grip for just a moment. The Ark tilted that way, almost striking the doorway. The holy man who'd pulled aside the curtain reached out to steady the Ark —

And, steadied, the Ark and its bearers continued on into the depths and darkness of the Holy of Holies. The rumbling held a steady reverberation for a few minutes, and soon, the eight bearers returned, the weightless poles on their shoulders, their heads down, as they retraced their steps to the cave entrance.

The holy man beside the doorway pulled the purple silk curtain back into place. The cavern full of marchers began to file out in the reverse order that they'd entered, silently, as if they already missed the icon that would be buried here, hidden away from all eyes while empires rose

and fell, mountains eroded, glaciers grew and retreated, and mankind forgot about its greatest religious artifact.

The stone floor felt cool and refreshing through Arthur's clothes. The images rolled about in his head like untied cargo in a storm-tossed freighter. If it weren't for someone slapping his left hand, still gloved, he'd have kept his eyes closed and slept through the rest of this nightmare.

"Arthur! Snap to!" Neville called from across a wide valley. "We've got trouble!"

"Here, let me," Connie's voice chimed in. "I know how to handle him."

The next thing Arthur felt was a hard slap across his left cheek. He sat bolt upright, face to face with Connie whose right hand was ready for another sweeping smack across his face.

"I'm up! I'm up!" Arthur growled.

"Thought you would be, old chum," Connie said with a grim smile.

"Here's the scoop," Neville said quickly, as he removed the disc from the digital camera and stowed it in a special hardened jewel case inside his vest. "Our guide yelled that there were lights on the trail we took up here, right before he hightailed it for safer climes. Looks like a dozen or so of the local Boy Scouts, and from the way they're shouting, they plan on using us for their next merit badges."

"Problem is," Connie added, as she stood and looked around the back of the pitch-black cave, with nothing for illumination but a pen light, "we haven't exactly got a back door in this restaurant."

Still groggy from the volume of information he'd just been exposed to, as well as their implications, it took Arthur a moment to remember. "No, wait — in the back there. Up in the ceiling, maybe. There's a chute, or a shaft or something. Ventilation, I think."

Neville helped him to his feet as Connie panned her light around the ceiling. "Where? I don't see a bloody thing."

"You okay to stand?" Neville asked. When Arthur nodded his assurance, Neville swung his camera up and thumbed the spotlight on. "There it is! Back wall, about eight feet up."

There was indeed a small chink in the otherwise flattened surface, the only area other than the door in the entire cave complex that was devoid of paint, about a foot from the back wall and rougher than the stone nearby. It seemed wide enough to allow them access, if they could reach the ceiling. But as if some divine power had anticipated their need ages ago, a series of

three oversized steps rested just below the opening, affording those in need, perhaps the original carvers, access to the shaft.

Neville ran over and directed his light up into the shaft, throwing the rest of the cave into relative darkness. “Seems clear, though I couldn’t guess how far it goes. It does have some sort of handholds on one side.”

“Better to be lucky...” Connie said, dumping the sound gear in a pile under the shaft’s opening. She fished around in the bag with the recording deck, ejected the recorded tape, and slipped it into a pocket of her windbreaker. Then she studied the shaft, looking for the first handhold.

“Lemme help you up,” Neville said. He put down his camera, the light’s illumination bouncing off the floor, and helped her into the first few feet of the shaft.

“There’s a faint light up above,” Connie said, “maybe thirty, maybe forty feet up.” She braced herself with one hand, fished out the penlight and flashed it above her head. “Yes, there’s definitely an exit up there. Must be blocked with plants. I can only see a tiny opening.”

Arthur replaced the glove on his right hand, and shook his head as if he was still coming out of a dream. “Wait! Not yet! I have to check something first!” He rushed back to the front of the Holy of Holies.

“Where’s he going?” Connie yelled.

“No idea,” Neville said. “I’d better go see.” He grabbed the camera and bounded after Arthur.

“Sure,” Connie grumbled, bracing her body in the narrow shaft. “Just leave me dangling.”

Neville found Arthur standing in front of the Holy of Holies, hypnotically staring at the time-worn purple cloth. “No time for sight seeing, Arty. We gotta get moving.”

“I have to know,” Arthur replied, in a trance-like voice.

“Listen, if this is the real thing —” Neville began. But it was too late: Arthur was already drawing aside the age-old curtain, bracing himself for an onslaught of the Ark’s anger as he released layers of dust. The only thing that struck him from inside the carved stone tomb was two thousand years of neglect.

The depth of the walls was clearly ten feet and gave the feeling of an ancient bank vault. Inside, the air seemed close, murky, clotted with ages of immobility. Arthur took a tentative step inside, while Neville inserted a fresh disc and thumbed the camera into record mode.

“This is it, people,” Arthur said softly, unconsciously falling back into his announcer role. “We are in the presence of the famed Ark of the Covenant. This ain’t no Hollywood mock up, friends. This...” His words trailed off. “This is the real thing.”

As Neville swung the camera into the opening and followed Arthur, his light bounced and reflected like a hundred spotlights. Inside the Holy of Holies, every inch of the walls was covered with gold leaf, tons of gold from the looks of it. Everywhere they looked, ancient craftsmen had embossed their vision of Yahweh: the piercing light, the great mountain wreathed in smoke and flame, the thousands of Israelites kneeling in prayer before it. Two massive cherubim, almost touching the ceiling, crowded against the left- and right-side walls, their spacious wings above them brushing the ceiling. And beneath their wings, their own hands stretched yearningly before them, exactly like the two smaller cherubim on the Ark itself, whose narrow end faced the entrance, its own cherubim kneeling like penitent children returning to their god-like parents. The effect was one of divine majesty, compelling mere mortals to supplication before an unknowable yet overwhelmingly desirable power. Neville swallowed the lump in his throat.

Arthur walked slowly forward, his gloved right hand outstretched. “After millennia of being hidden in this dusty cave, after Templars, treasure hunters, even the Nazis had given up hope of ever finding it, we are finally in its presence.” His fingers were now only inches away from the gilded edge.

“Arthur,” Neville warned, “you’re not really going to touch that?”

“It’s okay,” Arthur replied, half in a daze. “It’s perfectly safe to —”

As his gloved fingers made contact with the very corner, some unseen force took hold of Arthur’s body and shook him like a rag doll. His mouth wrenched open, trying to call for help, but all he managed was a garbled scream.

“Arthur!” Neville cried, torn between helping his friend and keeping the camera rolling. “Let go! Let go of the damn thing!” he said, trying to keep Arthur’s jerking body in focus.

“I c-c-can’t!” Arthur said through gritted teeth, his body wracked with convulsions. “I c-c-can’t—I c-c-can’t—” He seemed to recover some measure of control. “I c-c-can’t...believe you fell for that!” He let his hand drop down to his side, and began to laugh, as his tongue wiped a bit of spittle off his upper lip. “Got you good, didn’t I?”

Neville blinked a couple of times. “I sure am glad I kept rolling, and didn’t try to save your ass!”

“Sorry, really, I am,” Arthur replied, still laughing. “Here, help me with this...”

He put both hands under the lid and pushed with all his might. Neville joined him, and together they grunted with the exertion of shifting the heavy lid.

“Saw something in my vision of the installation of the Ark,” Arthur said, as he grimaced with the effort. “One of the holy men helped keep the Ark upright, just as it was about to fall. But when the same thing happened before, back in Jerusalem, the Ark blasted that poor fellow into smithereens. There’s even a picture of it on the outside of the Holy of Holies.” The lid budged a few inches, and they redoubled their efforts. “Scholars have speculated what with the Ark being designed as a huge capacitor, something like static electricity would have electrocuted anyone who came into contact with the Ark, other than those with special clothing.”

The lid gave another few inches, the gold-on-gold ringing like a hollow bell. “But the holy man I saw that touched it wasn’t dressed like the carriers, which could only mean —”

The lid gave way almost half a foot, and Neville swung the camera up to shine the light inside. “Empty!” he exclaimed. The interior was covered in gold, like the outside, and even here, the artisans had left their intricate handiwork on every inch. But the great Ark was completely empty.

Neville turned to look at Arthur. “So you knew it’d be empty, and that it’d be safe to touch.”

“Yeah,” Arthur replied, staring down into the void.

“How’d you know they didn’t put something inside it, after they dropped it off here?”

Arthur thought for a moment. “Actually, I hadn’t considered that.”

Neville shook his head. “Too bad they didn’t have a little surprise in store for you. That would have been worth filming.”

“But why would they lug this thing all the way down here, if it didn’t work?” Arthur asked.

“Come on, you two!” Connie cried from the shaft. “We’ve gotta go, now!” She was already beginning to climb.

“Sorry, pal,” Neville said, flicking the camera’s record button off. “Time to run.” They rushed out of the Holy of Holies’ entrance to the sound of staccato automatic weapon fire, not far from the entrance.