

The Excavation

It was a truly remarkable find. The best of his long career the professor had said. I agreed. And so did Jeremy.

“There’s been nothing like it this century,” Jeremy said.

“It will take us back to very origins of civilization,” the professor said.

The professor immediately organized an excavation and I was invited to go along. Actually I didn’t know anything about archeology. Sure, I was taking the prof’s class, but only because I needed the credit. It wasn’t something I was really interested in. I suppose that the only reason he asked me to be part of his twelve-member team was because he needed someone who knew how to put up tents and cook over an open fire.

The ruins were deep in the mountains, a good twenty-mile hike in. We’d barely gotten underway when the professor started complaining about how miserable and hot it was. He was too old, he said, to be making this kind of expedition. About halfway in he actually asked Jeremy to carry him.

“Maybe I should assist you,” I said to Jeremy.

“Naw,” he said. “It’ll help me keep in shape.”

“I’m not exactly a weakling, you know.”

Jeremy just smiled and hoisted the professor on to his shoulders.

“Seriously,” I said. “I’ll take you on any day.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you,” he replied.

He tossed a laugh over his shoulder at the only female along on the expedition, a tall, muscular girl who wore a fiery red beret. She beamed back at him. I didn’t know who the girl was. She wasn’t a student. At least I’d never seen her on campus before. At the very beginning of the trip I’d asked her what her name was, but she just smiled. It was a playful, teasing smile—nothing like the smile she’d just given Jeremy. It seemed as if the two of them knew each other well. Very well.

The forest had grown over the ruins. The buildings were crumbling, though still visible. I climbed up a ledge to see if I could figure out just how big the ancient city had been. Judging from the length of the broken wall that surrounded the site, it wasn’t as large as I had expected.

“It looks like the place was bombed,” I shouted down to the others.

“Literally!” Jeremy shouted back.

I scampered back down the rocks and rejoined the group.

“How did you ever find this place?” Jeremy said, congratulating the professor. The professor was sitting on a rock, exhausted and wheezing heavily.

“It was...the paper...I mean...the parchment.”

“Come on, old man!” Jeremy said, giving the professor an affectionate slap on the back. “I’m the one who carried you in, not the other way around!”

“I know...it’s only that—” He pulled a yellowed sheet from his pocket and showed it to us. There was writing on it.

“You’re a genius,” Jeremy said. “An absolute genius. Who else could have figured out what all those little squiggles and lines mean? It’s the oldest language known to humans.”

Jeremy looked straight at me and added, “And it was totally incomprehensible until the professor here deciphered it.”

“Of course,” I said. “Figuring out all these dead languages is part of his job after all. And there’s no doubt that the professor is at the top of his field.”

The girl with the red beret was staring at Jeremy with parted, slightly pouting lips. It looked as if she wanted to kiss him, right that same moment. But she knew she couldn’t, not with the others around. So she was pouting. I realized then that I wanted to be the one who kissed those lips. She couldn’t possibly know what kind of a guy Jeremy really was. If I could only get a moment alone with her.

“Ah,” the professor said, having partly recovered and breathing normally now. “Except the language is not dead. I suspect that there are people who speak it to this day. But they do not want anyone to find out. It’s a well-kept secret.”

“Why don’t they want anyone to know about it?” I asked.

Jeremy held up the palm of his hand.

“Look, the professor here doesn’t have time to be explaining all these technical points to a rank

amateur,” he said to me. “Besides it’s getting dark, and you’re the one who’s supposed to be setting up the tents for us.”

That evening around the campfire I didn’t see the girl with the red beret. Jeremy wasn’t there either. The professor was sitting with his head close to the fire, using the light to write in his notebook.

“Who’s the girl?” I asked him.

He didn’t look up. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Yeah, sorry. I just wondered who the girl is. She wouldn’t tell me her name. She wouldn’t even talk with me.”

“That’s because she doesn’t speak English.”

“So what language does she speak?”

The professor stopped writing only long enough to say, “Please. Not another word. This work is simply too important for useless interruptions.”

I went over to my tent and crawled inside my cold sleeping bag, wondering how Jeremy was keeping warm tonight.

The next morning was spent hacking away at the trees and vines that covered the ruins. The professor did none of the work himself, but directed our activities from the ledge I had climbed up the previous day. The blade of my machete was dull and I couldn’t cut through the vines as quickly as the others.

A little before noon, the professor shouted down that it was time for me to prepare lunch. I fixed up some pre-packaged beef stew. Everyone was too tired and hungry to complain about how awful it tasted.

When he’d finished eating the professor said to me, “We’ve pretty much cleared the site and can start digging soon. So I won’t need your help on the site anymore.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said. “The rest of the work should be left to experts. We wouldn’t want you to accidentally break something of value.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said. “I could use a rest.”

Jeremy spun his dirty plate at me like a frisbee. “Just make sure you have supper ready on time. We stop working when the sun goes down.”

The professor went over to the site and examined the digging. After cleaning the lunch dishes, I climbed up the ledge again and watched them work. The girl had her hair tucked up underneath her red beret and I could see her long white neck glistening with sweat in the sun. God, how I wanted to talk with her. Or just communicate somehow. Maybe there was some way we could make our meanings clear to each other without using language. But how? Anyway, she wasn’t interested in me in the least. She kept looking at Jeremy. And I kept looking at her looking at Jeremy.

Just as I was climbing down the ledge to make supper, Jeremy shouted out that he’d found something. Everyone went running over to where he was. I wanted to run over too, but then remembered that the professor didn’t want me on the site.

“What is it?” I called out after all the excitement had settled down.

“It’s a gun,” Jeremy called back. “Some kind of primitive machine gun.”

“I didn’t think they had machine guns back then,” I said.

“Neither did I,” the professor said in a barely audible mumble. He was making some notes in his notebook.

“Let’s see if it works,” Jeremy said. Everyone stood back as he fiddled with the gun.

“There,” he said. “I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Give a try,” the professor said.

There was a loud rat-a-tat-tat as Jeremy fired the gun over our heads.

“I’m surprised it still shoots,” Jeremy said, putting some more bullets into the magazine.

“What kind of bullets are they?” the professor asked.

“Can’t tell. They’re too corroded. Some kind of metal, but they just look like rocks.”

When he finished reloading the gun, he pointed it at us and said, “How about I just kill all of you

right now?"

"Stop joking," the professor said. "We haven't got time for that."

Jeremy put the gun down. I wasn't sure he'd been joking.

That night, our second at the site, the girl with the red beret was at the campfire, but Jeremy wasn't. I went over and tried speaking to her again. She didn't respond. I tried moving my arms around, making all kinds of gestures, but she just looked back at me uncomprehendingly. I pointed my finger at her and then at myself and started waving it back and forth between the two of us. She stood up abruptly and walked slowly away towards the forest. She disappeared into the trees and I didn't see her again until the next morning.

The days passed. Hours were spent digging deeper, sifting through the rubble, going down and down through layers of history, trying to reach the city's foundation. A coin was found. After examining it, the professor concluded that it must be several thousand years old. He put it in a plastic storage container so that he could examine it in more detail later after he returned to his tent.

Shortly after the coin had been found Jeremy's shovel hit something hard. "I found something," he shouted.

Everyone rushed over to place where Jeremy was digging. I jumped down from the ledge where I was sitting as usual and joined the group.

"What is it?" the professor asked.

"It looks like a chest of some sort," Jeremy replied. He continued digging around all sides of the chest, until it was fully exposed.

"Wow, look at that!" I exclaimed. "It looks just like one of those old treasure chests you see in the movies."

"Yeah," Jeremy said snidely. "And I'm sure it's simply loaded to the brim with gold and jewels."

I don't think any of us really expected to find anything of the sort. But still, there was a great deal of excitement as Jeremy and I pulled the chest out from the rubble and set it on the ground.

"It's very old," the professor murmured. "Ancient."

He motioned for us to open the chest. Jeremy pried off the lid and we all looked inside. While the chest certainly was not overflowing with gold or jewels, it did contain treasure. At the bottom were four rough uncut diamonds. The professor took them out and held them up for everyone to see. They were of medium size and partially surrounded by ore, which made them look like shiny black stones with sparkles of glass.

"Wait a minute!" Jeremy cried. "There's something else!"

He reached inside and pulled out a scrap of yellowed parchment. He held it close to his eyes without letting the rest of us see it.

"There's something written on it, but I can't make out what it means," Jeremy said. "It's in the same language as the other parchment you showed us. Can you read it, professor?"

The professor took the parchment and examined it carefully. His face looked suddenly puzzled.

"Is this another one of your jokes?" the professor said to Jeremy.

"What do you mean?" Jeremy said.

"Didn't you slip this parchment into the chest just now?"

Jeremy stepped back. "Of course not. It was inside the chest all along. I simply didn't see it at first."

"What does it say?" I asked.

"Impossible," the professor said. "How did it ever—"

He handed the parchment to me. There wasn't much to read. In any case, it was all just squiggles and lines as far as I was concerned.

"So, what does it say?" I repeated.

"It's your name," the professor said to me. "Your own name, written in the ancient script. But how did it get inside the box?"

"I swear," Jeremy said. "The parchment was in the chest the whole time. I just didn't see it at first. I was distracted by the diamonds."

No one else would admit having put the parchment inside the chest. The only person who could have had a parchment of this sort was the professor, but I had watched him take the diamonds out of

the chest and definitely did not see him slip the parchment into the box.

It suddenly occurred to me that the girl with the red beret wasn't there. In fact, I couldn't remember seeing her on the site all day.

"Where is she?" I said. "Where's that girl?"

"What girl?" Jeremy asked.

"What do you mean 'What girl?' The only girl on this expedition. The girl in the red beret."

"I haven't seen her since yesterday. Who is she anyway?"

"You mean, you don't know?" I asked. "It seemed to me that you and her were spending a lot of time with each other. I thought you might even be sharing a tent or something."

"Heavens no!" Jeremy said. "I don't know her at all. I thought she was a friend of yours."

"Me?" I laughed. "She won't even talk to me!"

As it turned out, no one else on the expedition knew the girl either. Only the professor.

"She's the one who put the parchment in the chest," I said.

"How could she do that when she wasn't even here?" Jeremy said. He looked around at the others. "No one else has seen her, right?"

The professor took the parchment back from me.

"I'll run some tests on it once I get back to the university," he said. "It's getting late. Let's call it a day."

The sun hadn't set yet, but everyone returned to their tents. Everyone except me. I still needed to make supper. I went to the supply tent to get the food and was startled when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. It was the professor. He asked me to hand him another plastic storage container. I watched as he carefully placed the yellowed parchment with my name on it into the container.

"The diamonds," I said. "Shouldn't those go in a container, too?"

The professor patted his pocket of his jacket. "No, I'll keep those right here where they'll be safe."

A few weeks later we were all back on campus. Summer was over and the new semester had begun. The expedition had been a great success. There were even reports about it in the newspapers. I wasn't enrolled in any of the professor's classes this term since I didn't need the credit and, as I've already mentioned, I wasn't particularly interested in the subject anyway. I was just getting ready to go home after class, when Jeremy rushed up.

"I've got to talk to you," he said.

"All right," I replied. "Let's go get a beer."

"No. It's too risky. Let's just go for a walk. The streets are the safest place. I don't want anyone to overhear us."

"What's this all about?" I asked. "It sounds like you're getting ready to start a revolution."

"Nothing like that. It's about the girl, the one with the red beret. I saw her again. I'm positive she didn't do it. She didn't put the parchment in the chest."

"I thought we'd already established that. She wasn't even at the site then."

"Right. She'd already returned to town. And she's got an alibi."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Someone spotted her at her Murphy's."

"You mean the bar downtown?"

"Yeah, that's the place."

"Where does she live?"

"I don't know. No one knows anything about her."

"Well, the professor definitely seems to have made her acquaintance."

"Hah," Jeremy laughed. "Go ahead. Try getting more information out of him about her. He's not talking. Not to me, not to anyone."

We were walking west towards the river. We had the sidewalk to ourselves.

"And there's more," Jeremy said. "The professor ran some tests on the parchment."

"You mean the one we found in the chest with the diamonds?"

"Right. The parchment is authentic. The professor carbon dated it to something like five thousand years ago, give or take a century."

"The parchment with my name on it?"

"With your name on it."

The buildings on the west side of the city weren't as tall as the ones downtown, but they were just

as new, just as modern looking. When we reached the river we headed north. There was a path along the river.

“And the diamonds,” Jeremy said. “They’ve been stolen. The professor said that he was keeping them in his office, but now they’re gone. He doesn’t know who took them.”

“He could be lying,” I said. “Maybe he just kept the diamonds for himself and is telling everyone they’ve been stolen.”

“Could be, but I doubt it. The professor is a genuine scholar. I can assure you that he’s more interested in the pursuit of knowledge than he is in fame or fortune. Well, fortune at least. I don’t think he minds the fame.”

We stopped at a bench along the river and sat down. The river was ancient. It had been there for thousands of years.

“I know I’ve been an asshole,” Jeremy said, shaking his bent-over head. “I’ve always been an asshole.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” I said with a grin.

“Yeah, but I want to apologize. I’m going to change. Honest.”

And then Jeremy started to tell me about all the bad things he’d done. All of them. Major things and minor things. I felt like a priest listening to a confession. He babbled on about this and that, becoming less and less coherent. It was obvious he wanted to tell me something important. As he went on, I couldn’t any make sense out of what he was saying, just bits and pieces. He was confused, terribly confused. Finally, I couldn’t listen anymore and told Jeremy I had to leave. I said I had another appointment that night. It was a lie but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

I returned to the university and went straight to the professor’s office. I knocked on the door and he invited me in.

“What’s it all about?” I asked, cutting to the quick.

“It’s authentic,” the professor said. “Absolutely authentic. But I can’t explain why your name is on the parchment.”

“Yeah, Jeremy told me. And the diamonds. What about the diamonds?”

“They’re gone. Stolen. It’s a shame, too. I was going to donate them to the museum.”

“You didn’t just happen to ‘accidentally’ misplace them?”

“Absolutely not!” the professor replied indignantly. “I’m not that kind of a man.”

“I’m sure you aren’t,” I said sarcastically. “Anyway, I don’t care about the parchment or the diamonds. That’s not why I’m here. I just want to know about the girl. Who is she?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t really know her myself.”

“But she came along with us on the excavation.”

“I was in no position to stop her.”

It was then that I saw a red beret lying on the floor behind the professor’s chair.

“She was here,” I said.

The professor did not reply.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“I don’t know. She left about an hour ago.”

“Do you know where I can find her?”

“She said she was going home. I mean returning to her own country. Not immediately but in a few days.”

“And which country is that?” I asked.

“She never told me.”

I said goodbye to the professor and walked outside. I knew I had to find her. It was already night. The moon was white. It felt like I was walking on the streets of an ancient forgotten city that had suddenly come to life again.