

T H E I C E C A P

BOOK II

The Ancestor Series of Adventure-Thrillers

THE ICE CAP AND THE RIFT

Draft: 11-15-06: By Marshall Chamberlain

Scheduled for Release July 2008



Iceland: December 25th

THE VATNAJÖKULL ICE CAP stretched out in rutted weaves of gray across the vastness of 8100 square kilometers nestled between volcanic mountain peaks.

Two orange specks moved east over the surface like tiny bugs. Speeding along at twenty-five miles per hour, the two Skidoos spewed white rooster tails in the fresh snow. They dodged around the fumaroles and boiling mud pits surrounding the recently active Grimsvötn

Caldera, and headed toward a distant seismic recording station built into the protruding side of Mt. Breidabunga. Constructed in the early thirties by the British, the old station wasn't connected to Iceland's digital monitoring system or integrated into the U.N.'s international network.

Lárus Hansson, from the Icelandic Hydrological Service, and Dr. Marten Soffle, a visiting professor from Cambridge University's Department of Earth and Astronomical Sciences, were making an unscheduled visit. Monitoring stations throughout Iceland were registering errant blocks of increasing tremor activity in the complex family of calderas underlying the Ice Cap. The outdated measuring station was nearest the center of the disturbances, and retrieval of its tapes could be important to understanding what was taking place.

Beneath the ice cap, nine hundred and fifty meters thick in some places, lay an intricate series of buried caldera lakes sustained by melt water from geothermal heat. Scientists knew from experience that increased volcanic activity caused the water temperature to rise, producing overflow, dangerous ice-cap sloughing, glacial stream flooding, and the possibility of major eruptions.

Tremors issuing from the center of the Ice Cap rolled under the Skidoos, tossing them about, and the two geologists knew the screeching and grinding sounds below them were results of ice shattering out in all directions like spider veins.

"This is not good," Soffle barked into his helmet, barely avoiding a collision with the other Skidoo. "The activity is increasing. I hope this will be worth it. The tape should tell the story. What do you think, Lars? Should we turn back?"

"It's not where I thought I'd be spending Christmas, my friend, but it's only another ten minutes. It's curious. The temperature data doesn't support a change in the volcanics. There is no reason to

believe the lakes are causing this. The tremors have registered over the entire country, but it appears something unusual is building here.”

Cambridge University maintained a sophisticated seismic recording station in the Canary Islands. Over the last five weeks, its instrumentation had registered increasing numbers of group disturbances as far away as the Azores and Cape Verde Archipelagos. The only common denominator was the meeting of tectonic plates in the Atlantic Ocean along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Dr. Soffle was visiting the Icelandic geophysicists to determine if the reported tremor activity in Iceland would correlate.

They slugged through several more quivering waves before reaching Mt. Breidubunga’s rocky edge. A fifteen-minute climb brought them to the station. Lars shed his unwieldy gloves and quickly unlocked the rusty metal door. The two middle-aged scientists scurried inside and closed the door against the freezing wind and the trepidation outside.

The ancient equipment looked like a Reuters tickertape. A six-inch wide roll of tape wound on a spool every time readings were taken. The only technological innovation was the solar power cells charging the batteries. The station was scheduled for updating, but the remote location made it last on the list. It had been maintained and kept functional because the deep hole drilled at its creation came closest to the principal magma pool underlying the island.

Lars pulled the metal chain on a sixty-watt light bulb tacked up on the wall. “Let’s take a look at the last four or five days,” he said.

They knelt down on the cement-slab floor in the confining space of the weatherproof box, relieving themselves of the bulky helmets. Dr. Soffle slipped out of his heavy mittens, pulled a folder from his leather duffle, and spread three graphs out, records from the monitors on the Canary Islands and two stations at opposite ends of Iceland. Unrolling the tape, they laid it flat on a clipboard. The relative record

blocks were similar, except the intensity was far higher here, and tremor frequency and strength had dramatically increased in the last eight hours.

“Lars, this is bloody foreboding,” Soffle said. “I’ve never seen pre-quake activity like this. The frequency pattern in the groups is consistent at all stations, but the strength here is ominous. Something’s going to give.”

“I agree, and it’s going to happen right here. Best we get back as fast as we can. We should be able to raise the park station at the edge of the ice cap by the time we get halfway across. They can relay us to Interior at Reykjavik. We have to alert them.”

From afar they looked like racers coming down the slope into the bowels of the ice cap. Yellowish steam was beginning to escape as far as the eye could see from hundreds of surface openings, leaving piles of dirty debris markers spotting the snow pack. The ice cap seemed to be breathing.

Engines whined full out passing the halfway point. They had traversed two more sets of ferocious tremors, and the sound of the cracking ice below was terrifying, riveting them to their vehicles as they sped, hanging on for dear life.

In the distance, issuing from the rugged brown ring of the Grimsvoltn Caldera, a steaming black ribbon was serrating its way through the ice toward them. The horrendous sound was like a shrieking tornado. A wake was spreading behind it, like something unimaginable was tunneling backwards gobbling the snow and ice, leaving a gaping black crevasse hissing and spewing yellow steam.

“What in God’s name?” Lars screamed into his helmet mic. “Can anybody hear me?”

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It was so loud it sounded like gibberish to Dr. Soffle. “Lars, turn off to the left,” he yelled, and then nudged Hanson’s Skidoo to get his attention. “Get out of the way,” he screamed and nodded left.

Lars looked both ways and pulled left.

Steam burst from the vicious tear as it clawed toward them, cracking like lightning. They both turned away from it, but the fracturing started to spread out. They looked back; the ribbon of shrieking and tearing had suddenly become a ragged, hundred-foot open mouth coming at them like the blast of an atomic explosion

“Go back to the right, Lars.”

But Lars wasn’t there.