



# THE LOST SHIP

THE POWERS  
THAT BE  
BOOK  
TWO

*A prehistoric alien shipwreck lost  
within vast reaches of Amazonian  
jungle carries a doomsday device.*

*A perilous race to find it is on.  
And the clock is ticking.*

JOHN HOPKINS

*“A mythical alien shipwreck from another time lost in the Amazon is the stuff of legend, like El Dorado.”*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sopping wet and weary, the expedition huddles within the alien campfire’s protective circumference on a raised spit of muddy Brazilian rainforest surrounded by a flooded understory constituting the unnamed river’s headwaters.

Rachel checks the collapsible camp pot hung above the licking blue flames and pours two beef stew packets before giving it a solid stir. The miserable five try not to appear too hungry as freeze-dried chunks rehydrate and expand like magic into cubed meat and potatoes mixed with green beans, onions, and corn in a thick and savory bone broth.

Owen leans forward, frowning, “Who puts corn in beef stew?”

Richard objects with feigned indignation, “I do.”

Antoine passes his bowl to Rachel. “I don’t care what is in there; I’m starving.”

\* \* \* \* \*

**THE POWERS THAT BE SERIES  
TRILOGY**

**The Golden Ellipse**

**The Lost Ship**

**The Blue Spark**

# THE LOST SHIP

THE POWERS  
THAT BE  
BOOK  
TWO

**JOHN HOPKINS**



The Lost Ship

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**Dedicated in memory of Michael Crichton.**

*October 23, 1942 – November 4, 2008*



# Preface

**T**he little voice in your head compelling you to fulfill a creative aspiration is your muse. You can choose to ignore it. Many do. I surrendered to my creative muse, writing science fiction based in a near-future populated with a colorful cast. My advice? Do not ignore your muse in favor of work, sports, reality TV, or other monumental time wasters. Worse yet, pass to your greater or lesser reward, leaving it unfulfilled, haunting your soul for eternity with an endless harangue about that nagging project in the garage, the picture you never painted, or the sweater you never knitted. It's your muse; whatever it is, you better get to it. Who knows? You might even enjoy it. What's more, perhaps excel at whatever is entrenched within your psyche waiting to get out.

My muse, a saga of humankind's ultimate place in the universe, compels me down a twisting and turning narrative path that began with a comic strip called Lost Cactus and its shared universe of short stories. World-building on a grand scale is as close as this mere mortal is gonna get to playing God, so I might as well enjoy the shit out of it.

Now that we established the existence of the muse. Let's take a peek at the ensuing sausage-making creative process. Early in the development of my fictional world, I wanted a mysterious organization pulling strings and pushing levers behind a proverbial curtain. My initial ideas devolved into villainy of Bondian proportions with speargun-toting frogmen guarding undersea lairs and orbiting motherships with requisite henchpeople (Like how I slipped that in?) in shiny silver suits. However, my conspiracy-fueled plots require an omniscient extra-governmental organization with more nuance, deeper meaning, and fewer spearguns.



To that end, I fleshed out the backstory of an extraterrestrial guild spectating upon our freedom-loving forebears' struggle against tyranny and oppression. After millennia of non-interference, they revealed themselves to those history-making revolutionaries, resetting the global order toward an enlightened future. *Just to establish, I am not pulling stuff out of thin air; check the legend of George Washington's divine encounter at Valley Forge.*

A new secret alliance called **The Powers That Be** was chartered to advise and guide humanity from the nascent new republic past the present day and onward to a near-future on the brink of human destiny.

The hook behind The Powers That Be is its use in modern-day vernacular as the bogeyman for when things go sideways: job loss, candidate's defeat, stock market fluctuations, sports team collapse, unpunished pols' sleazy shenanigans.

The Powers That Be also explains the acceleration of artificial intelligence and technologies tethered to teeming networks of streaming data, central to everyday life yet beyond the grasp of a vast majority of users. Just press the button, and it works. What if, one day, it doesn't? For the uninitiated, educate yourselves on the sobering apocalyptic threat posed by an EMP event, whether naturally occurring or via a nuclear strike.

In the meantime, before looming calamity wipes out the world's infrastructure, why not follow your muse and never let the peanut gallery get you down. They will be sorry when the grim reaper arrives on their doorstep, and all they have to show for themselves is a lukewarm flat screen and a half-eaten bag of Fritos. Meanwhile, a blank canvas purchased on a whim at the local craft store languishes in the back of their closet behind an old gray overcoat nobody wears.

*See you in the funny papers.*

**JOHN HOPKINS**

# Characters

90,000,000 BC

## **Empire Grays**

Distant cousins to Gray species of varying temperaments inhabiting the universe, these effete monotonal beings employ powerful telepathy to travel wormholes and expand their empire, thus their moniker. Colonizing Cretaceous-era Earth devolved into a humiliating defeat, and in their haste to evacuate, they abandoned a shipwreck holding an apocalyptic payload.

## **The Captain**

Cargo ship captain and veteran of past planetary colonization disasters

## **The Governor**

Hubristic colony administrator ignores warnings of pending doom until it is too late

## 1928 AD – Prologue Flashback

<b>Fordlandia</b>	Henry Ford's idealized rubber plantation along the eastern banks of the Tapajós River cutting through the dense Brazilian jungle
<b>Charles Pike</b>	Civil engineer on Fordlandia payroll whose true mission is to locate the lost ship
<b>Manuel Machado</b>	Brazilian day laborer and lone survivor of deadly encounter with Empire Gray advance scout searching for the lost ship
<b>Paddy McCoy</b>	Anachronistic PTB agent, assigned to foster and train a youthful Pennywell
<b>Artemus Pennywell</b>	Adventurous 18-year-old version of the future PTB CEO learning the ropes under Paddy McCoy's clear-eyed tutelage
<b>Ping</b>	McCoy's alien contact within the Advisers who becomes Pennywell's lifelong friend and confidante
<b>The Advisers</b>	Coalition of pro-human aliens witnessed a revolution in human thought in the 1700s and initiated a collaboration with historical figures that evolved into the 300-plus-year-old PTB
<b>Forest Ghosts</b>	Legendary guardians of the lost ship

## The Powers That Be (PTB)

<b>Artemus Pennywell</b>	134-year-old PTB CEO intent on securing a legendary alien shipwreck's deadly payload before it ends up in the hands of enemies closing in on multiple fronts
<b>Andrew</b>	Kobayashi's uber-advanced replicant masterpiece whose strange transcendence imperils allegiance to Pennywell and the PTB

<b>The Sisters</b>	Kobayashi's final replicant creations before his death. Numbered 1 to 16, their purpose morphs from Richard's tireless lab assistants to sentient graceful beings plagued by memories from a woman named Sarah and troubling communications from the future.
<b>Rachel Haig</b>	24-year-old grappling with the afterglow of her world-saving experience far beneath the Giza Plateau and a new offer from the PTB.
<b>Betty Hill</b>	Rachel Haig's ironic alias provided by The Cowboy while recovering in the hospital
<b>Owen Haig</b>	Craves a normal life with Rachel post cheating death while fate, and the PTB, have other plans.
<b>Barney Hill</b>	Owen Haig's ironic alias provided by The Cowboy while recovering in the hospital
<b>Roy Kendall</b>	PTB psychologist, aka Doubletake, and counselor for the sniping and recuperating Haigs
<b>The Cowboy</b>	aka Dwayne Cooper, proud Texan and former Army Ranger pilot flying missions for the PTB
<b>Terrence O. Flynn Gilliam</b>	PTB field agent whose lunar-bound medevac is highjacked by an Empire Gray battlecruiser
<b>Astrid Brown</b>	Test pilot and astronaut employed by PTB shell company Chrysalis Air.
<b>Nicole Weiss</b>	US Space Force veteran and Astrid's best friend, employed by PTB shell company, Chrysalis Air
<b>Nina Madsen</b>	Stylish and sophisticated PTB administrator raised at an elite Danish all-girls boarding school
<b>Professor Richard King</b>	122-year-old research scientist whose eccentric PTB career spans salad years running a clandestine research facility in the American southwest to the chief scientist of a futuristic laboratory beneath the Scottish Lowlands

**Professor John Stevens** PTB scientist and engineer tasked by Pennywell with locating the lost ship, but vanished in the Amazonian jungle before the Gork invasion

**Josh Jenkins** Former Green Beret turned PTB mercenary

**Dave** Stateside PTB security guard

#### The Council — Pennywell's 12 apostles

**Aldo Santamaria** 66, COO. Rose through the ranks to powerful number two post, drowned in the tsunami that struck Half Moon Bay on Invasion Day.

**Franklin Pierce** 72, CFO. Former floor trader and Wall Street powerbroker, killed in Freedom Tower collapse on Invasion Day

**Mitsuo Kobayashi** 94, Technology Guru. Deceased AI and robotics pioneer whose genius breathed life into a superhuman replicant class that includes Andrew and the Sisters

**Vita Carrera** 38, VP, Legal Affairs. Fiery northern Italian redhead with familial underworld connections

**Millard Lufkin** 70, IOSC Administrator. Former astronaut and NASA chief who steered the IOSC brand through daunting headwinds into a lucrative enterprise financing missions into deep space

**Edward Laughton** 62, Partner at Murdock & Ripley LLP. Proxy for John Murdock, 80, deceased PTB General Counsel who died in the firm's destroyed HQ

**Viraj Patel** 42, Global Logistics. Oxford-educated former Liverpool F.C. star to Mumbai shipping magnate and notorious international playboy. His anti-gravity freighter shipyards were among the Gorks' first-strike targets.

**Aisha Ayad** 49, Intel Chief. Former Mossad spy with ancestral Ethiopian royal family ties whose heroic exploits against Muslim and Fascist extremists first drew the PTB's attention.

<b>Professor Ernest Gann</b>	32, Mathematician. Professor of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at MIT and the PTB's valued number cruncher
<b>Olivia Paquet</b>	52, VP of Communications. Self-made advertising powerhouse whose pioneering use of holographic technology prompted the PTB to buy her agency to shore up their faltering brands
<b>Dr. Gene Simmons</b>	46, VP, Global Medicines and Charities. Former surgeon general and WHO adviser before his pro-life stance and opposition to euthanasia drew the ire of a lockstep consensus. The PTB welcomed the Black father of 8, along with his vast network eager to hitch their stars to the PTB's paradigm-shifting medical advancements.
<b>Anastasia Gabreski</b>	38, PTB UN Ambassador. Former Polish supermodel parlayed fame and social activism into a post as the PTB's first UN Ambassador. She morphed from a pie-in-the-sky egalitarian to a steel-eyed realist after her eye-popping orientation on the PTB's secret history.

### The Powers That Be — Allies

<b>Doctor Farouk Said</b>	Experienced surgeon and Cleopatra Hospital's post-invasion administrator by default
<b>Nurse Zahra</b>	One of Cleopatra Hospital's indomitable caregivers who persevered through invasion
<b>Nurse Cleo</b>	Flirtatious Egyptian ICU nurse overseeing Owen's recovery for the PTB
<b>Julius Hart</b>	Aeronautics wunderkind
<b>President Lena Jackson</b>	56-year-old Black Independent who served as Pratt's VP. Gearing up for easy re-election when the Gork invasion changed everything
<b>Glenn Cohan</b>	Beltway insider serving as Jackson's Chief of Staff

<b>Maggie Williams</b>	Director of National Intelligence married to photojournalist who vanished without a trace with the family dog somewhere in East Africa two weeks before Invasion Day
<b>Zint</b>	Empire Gray with a conscience
<b>Stanley Hobbes</b>	57, proprietor, Hobbes Rare Books
<b>Dr. Aashvi Patel</b>	PTB physician and Viraj Patel's sister
<b>Jaques St. Claire</b>	Heir to French underworld fortune
<b>Villa St. Claire</b>	Haig's French HQ
<b>Detective René Renault</b>	Gendarmerie Nationale in Aix-en-Provence
<b>Edward Pembroke</b>	Chainsmoking mercenary hired by Richard King with an unsettling disposition and a colorful history
<b>Antoine Sheffield</b>	Ex-Navy Seal hired by Pembroke for the Amazon expedition
<b>Elias Solomon</b>	Pembroke's expedition security
<b>Ariel Solomon</b>	Pembroke's expedition security
<b>Captain Manuel Ortega</b>	Grizzled riverman operator of the Piranha
<b>Ignatius</b>	Ortega's young deckhand
<b>Craig</b>	Ex-pat stoner squatting at Fordlandia hovel
<b>Charlie Dunning</b>	Penny Pennywell's CDC boss
<b>Sheriff Briscoe</b>	Compromised Navajo reservation lawman

## The Powers That Be — Enemies

<b>Sebastian Duarte</b>	Portuguese member of parliament harboring a dark secret
<b>Griffin Pike</b>	Megalomaniacal tech mogul and SATstar CEO whose new world order ambitions require his ancestor Charles Pike's notes and maps leading to the lost ship's apocalyptic payload
<b>Sapphire</b>	Pike's beguiling assassin
<b>Nemesis Group</b>	Paris-based mercenary organization
<b>Hugo le Roux</b>	Nemesis Group's shadowy founder
<b>Henri DeVille</b>	38, ruthless freelance mercenary Pike hires through Nemesis Group
<b>Leon Chayefsky</b>	Pilot and weapon expert
<b>Smythe</b>	Nemesis Group henchman
<b>Duke Rollins</b>	Nemesis Group henchman
<b>Senator Marjorie Cahill</b>	Vengeful mother of rapist killed by Rachel

## Artemus Pennywell Family Tree

<b>Paddy Pennywell</b>	Pennywell's estranged son born out of wedlock in 1954
<b>Nathaniel Pennywell</b>	Pennywell's grandson—born in 1979, has a daughter named Emma in 1998 with a girlfriend who vanishes, later learned abducted
<b>Emma Pennywell</b>	Pennywell's great granddaughter—troubled spirit hooked on drugs, in 2018, names newborn girl after dirty penny on bathroom floor where she gives birth
<b>Penny Pennywell</b>	Pennywell's great-great-granddaughter—after her mother's overdose death in 2020, Pennywell puts her through boarding schools and Harvard Med School. Now a CDC physician searching for clues to her past and her mystery benefactor



## Alexander Family Tree

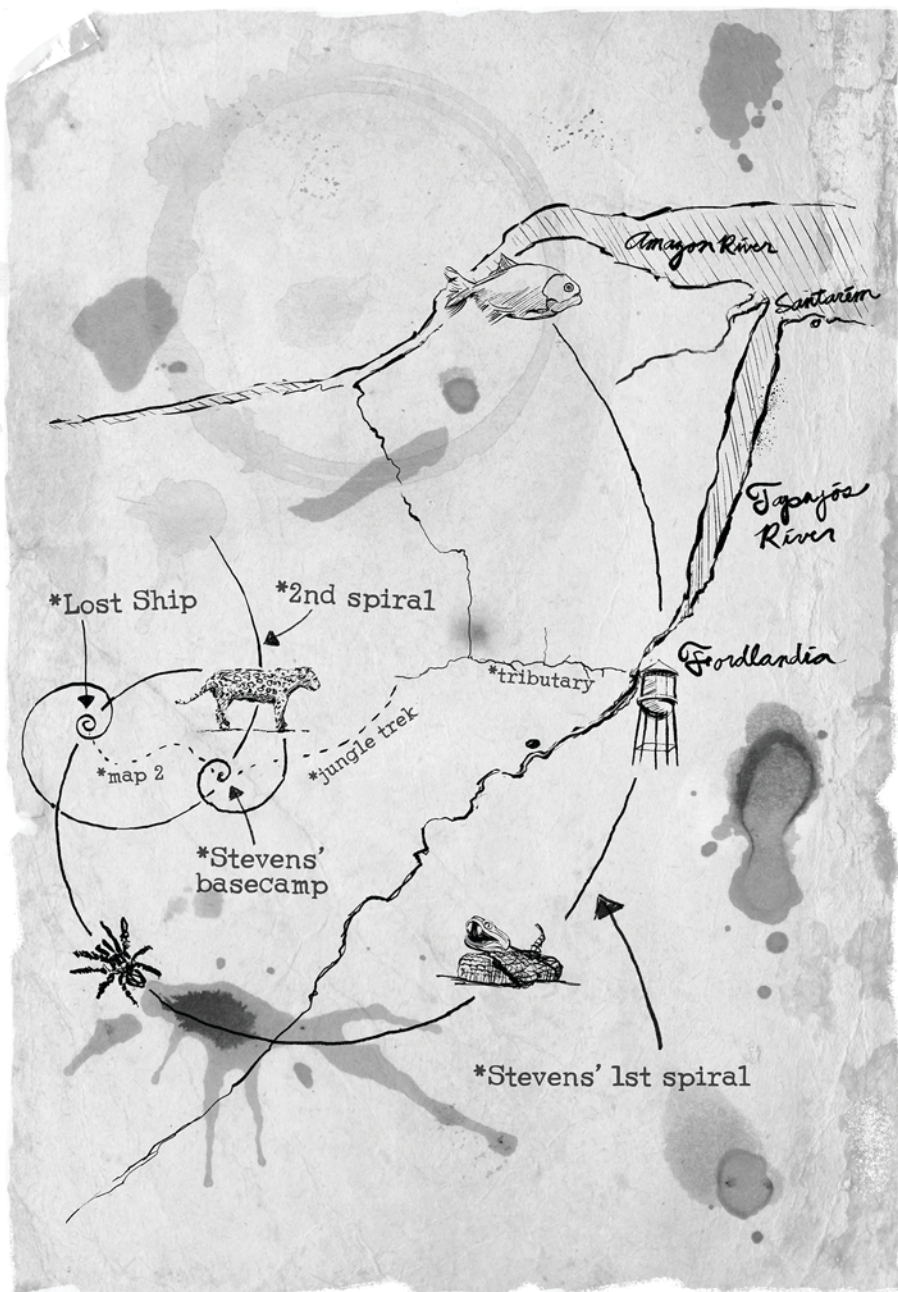
<b>Neil Alexander</b>	Grandfather, 3x removed
<b>The Hilltop Estate</b>	Newport, Rhode Island family home
<b>Marcus Xavier Alexander</b>	70, Father, sports and events promoter, owns multiple venues
<b>Miriam Shirley Alexander</b>	62, Mother, bridge club and active in Newport social scene
<b>Joseph Tyler Alexander</b>	20, Brother, underachieving Brown sophomore

## Haig Family Tree

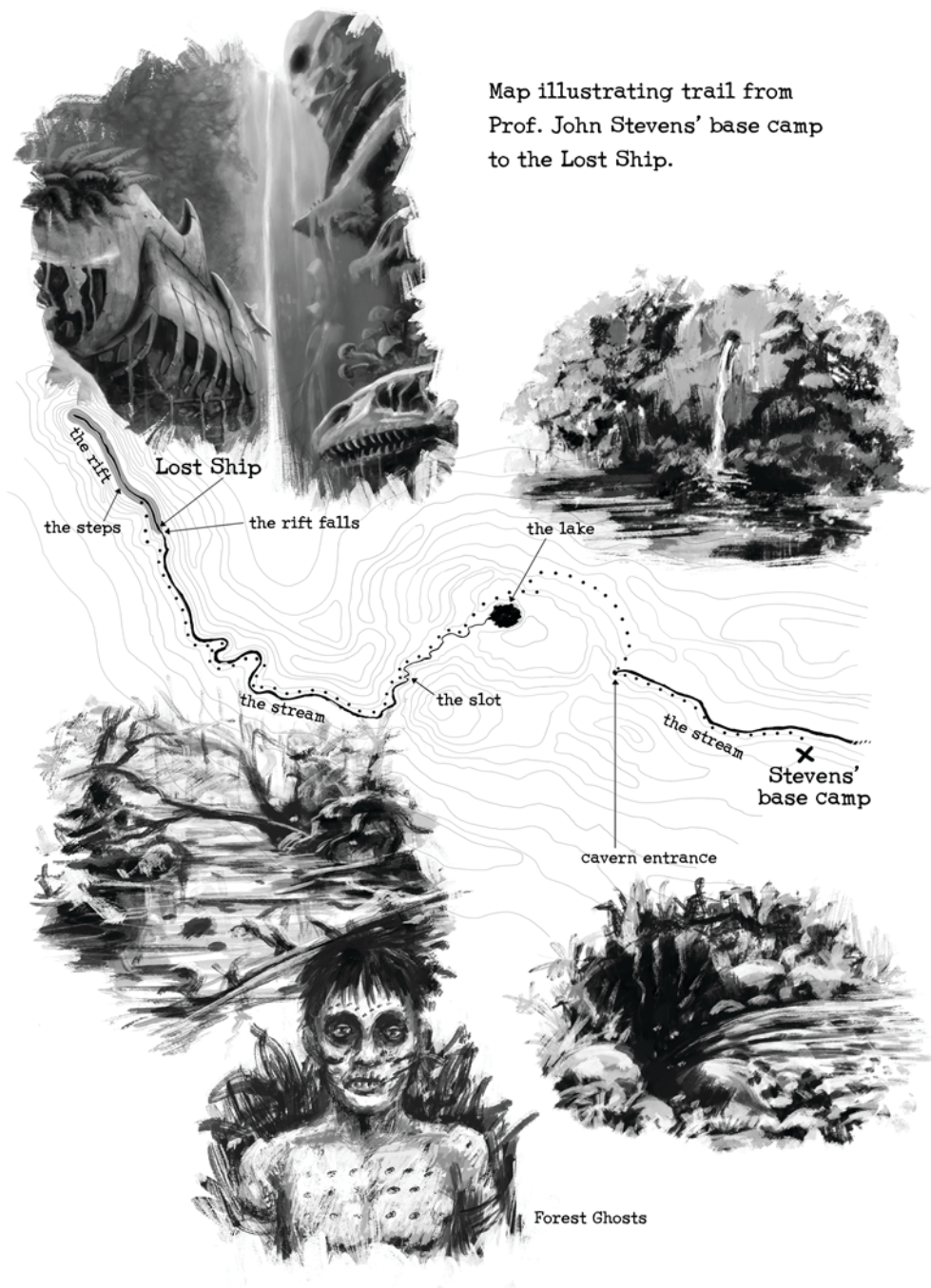
<b>John Allen Haig</b>	75, father, retired. Sold hardware store in Montpelier, VT.
<b>Shirley Jackson Haig</b>	77, mother, retired. Math teacher who gave Owen head for numbers.
<b>Jenny Katherine Haig</b>	32, divorced older sister with 4 kids (Rhett 16, John 14, Katrina 10, and Gary 8) lives on alimony and child support, works as grocery store assistant manager.
<b>Henry Tate</b>	VP at Ford and Poole Capital Management, Owen's friend and boss.

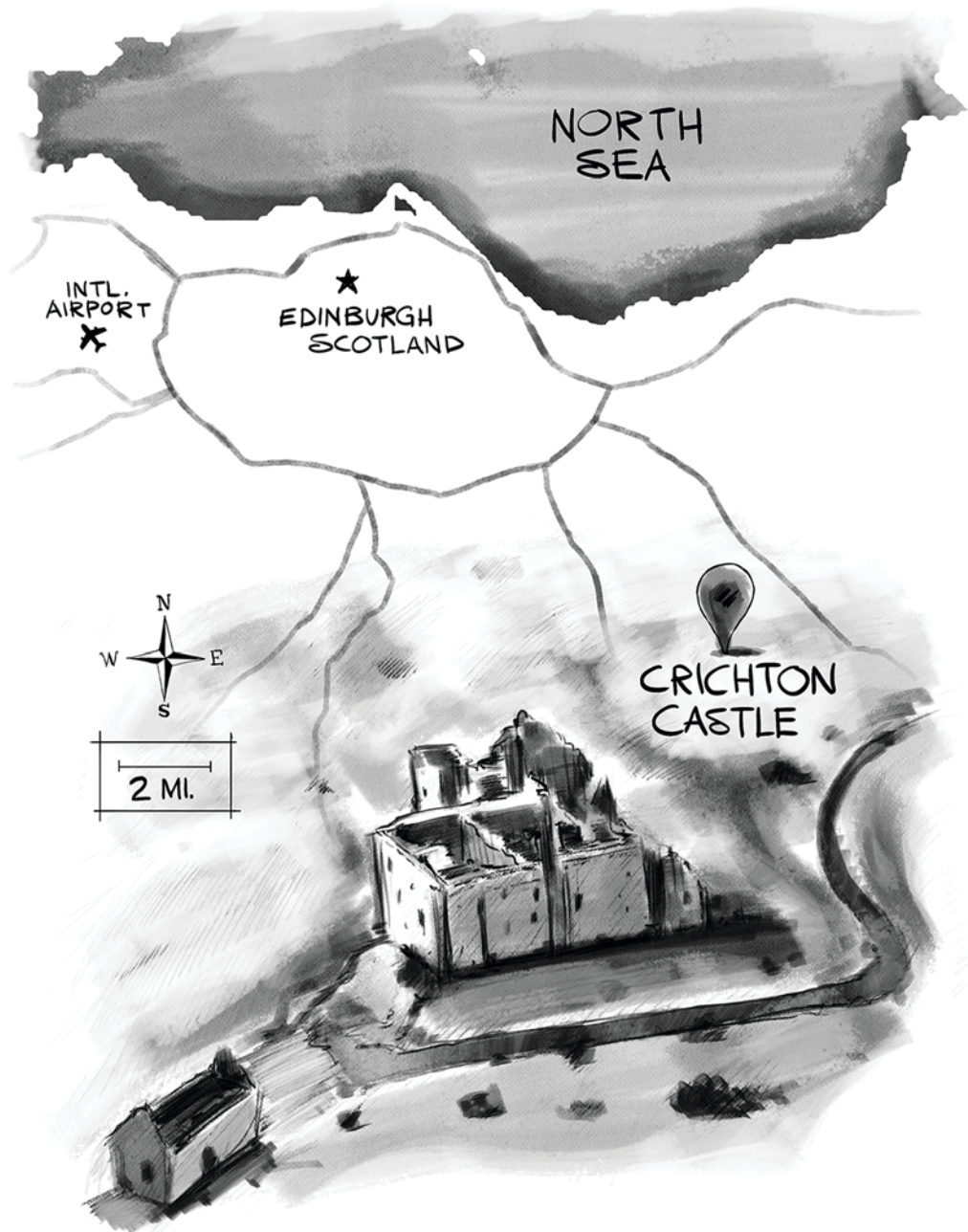
\*All ages are in the year 2044.

The original hand drawn map page from Charles Pike's notebook.  
(Professor Richard King's notes indicated by asterisk.)

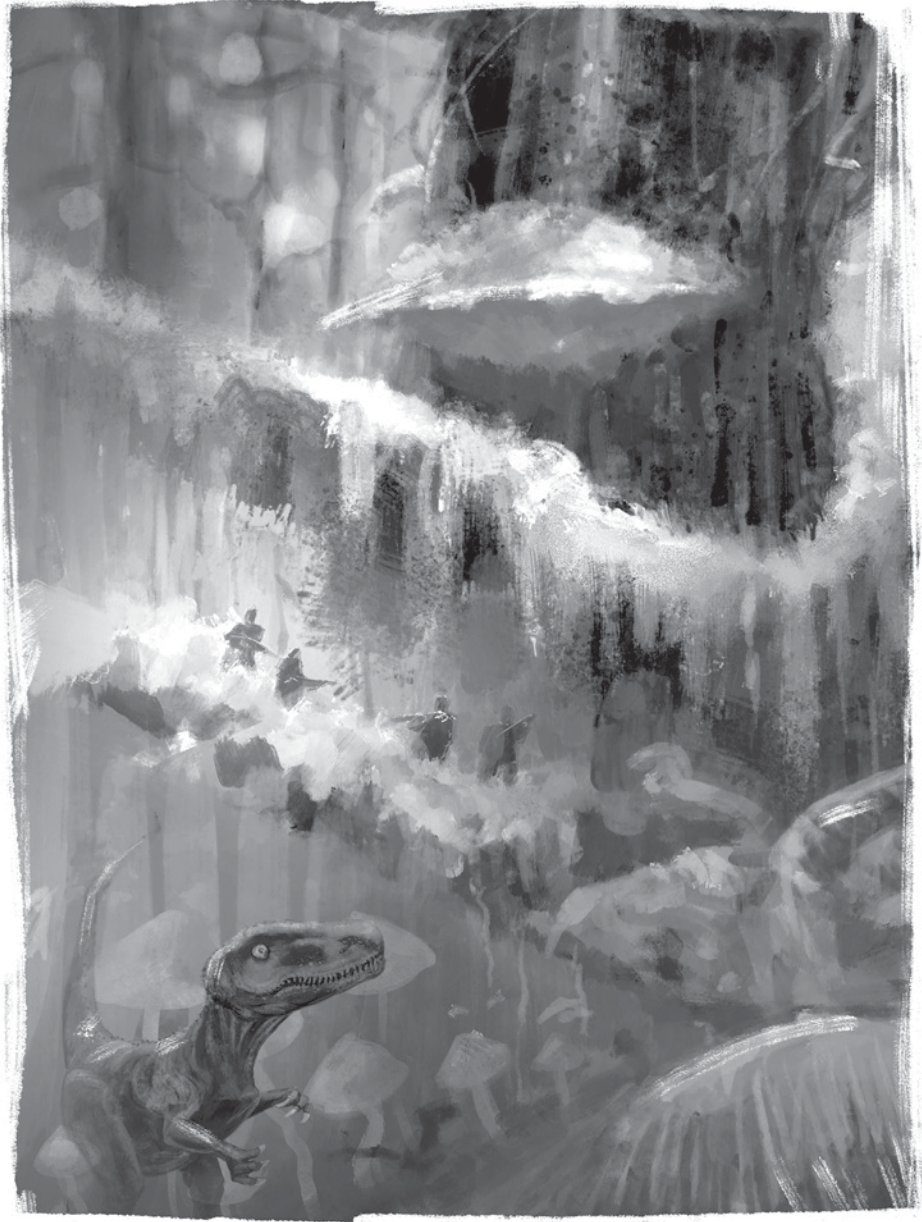


Map illustrating trail from  
Prof. John Stevens' base camp  
to the Lost Ship.





The Powers That Be subterranean multi-level headquarters, located beneath Crichton Castle (above) and the surrounding Lowlands countryside.



# Prologue

The Grays | Gondwana

Sunrise | Mid-Cretaceous, 90 million years ago

**T**ime-traveling, über-intelligent Grays arrived en masse on Earth's palaeogeographical shores 90 million years ago. The invaders conducted planetary sweeps—armed to their skinny necks—expecting resistance. They discovered a world teeming with life forms of all shapes and sizes but bereft of a dominant sentient species. Astonished by their good fortune, the hegemonic humanoids from a far-off galaxy claimed the fertile, resource-rich world as another subjugated planet in their interstellar empire.

Radiating unabashed confidence in their vaunted telekinesis and technological supremacy, the aliens dismissed the burgeoning biosphere roaming hither and yon as an insignificant, albeit violent, inconvenience. Encounters with a diverse menagerie of ill-tempered

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feathery reptiles brought to mind a fledgling and nasty Gorkian species, except less intelligent and more bloodthirsty, if indeed, that was possible.

With their new world awaiting domination, the Gray power structure, led by a conniving imperialist governor, weighed the pros and cons of erecting a base settlement on amorphous landmasses above and below the equatorial line. Overruling subordinates, he deemed northern hemispheric locations too hot and too many bloodthirsty dinosaurs. Instead, he selected a swath of land south of the equator on a forested shoreline along a shallow prehistoric sea. After clear-cutting mid-Cretaceous conifers and ferns, they erected a home base in prefab clusters forming a geometric grid stretching for miles. The sprawling base included dormitories, laboratories, armories, and warehouse facilities accommodating thousands of colonists.

Arrivals and departures buzzed overhead from the base transportation hub, pocked with circular dirt mounds designated for takeoffs and landings. Meanwhile, engineering teams embarked on missions to install a ring of communication outposts encircling the planet accompanied by cartographers, climatologists, biologists, geologists, and surveyors.

The discovery of endless seams of precious metals and deep pockets of mineral-rich gemstones proved a boon. The untold riches were loaded onto container ships and transported back to their resource-starved home planet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gazing black oval eyes upon the frenzied commotion driven by inbred imperialism and unbridled greed, the captain of an intergalactic hauler watched the frenetic activity from his captain's chair high up in the ship's command bridge with a burgeoning sense of doom. As a veteran of past planetary colonization, he witnessed too many disastrous outcomes to allow this new world's intoxicating allure to lull him into complacency.

Shaking his bulbous head with unmasked revulsion as another hunting squadron laden with inconsolable creatures landed inside circular pads, he knew the poor creatures were condemned to torturous experimentation. Workers swarmed the dinosaur-damaged ships like insects, unloading cages of confused and frightened animals from all corners of the planet to join a growing menagerie of crossbred reptilian creatures pacing within electrified pens like a nightmarish zoo, minus the peanuts. The governor's scientists performed vivisections within the laboratory complex and tinkered with dinosaur DNA and hybridization.

A borderline treasonous rumination conjured in the veteran commander's head: *"We are beyond intelligent but devoid of wisdom and empathy. Torture is not science. This mission will fail spectacularly, forcing a humiliating retreat."*

The malicious base governor and his fawning retinue read the captain's thoughts, summoning him to their fortified HQ nestled within a secure perimeter guarded by sharpshooters standing watch in high towers.

"What is your issue with our settlement, Captain? Your negative thoughts are seeding doubt within the ranks and impacting productivity and morale."

The captain shot back without moving a facial muscle, "We are in danger. It is time to go."

With a dismissive wave of his four-fingered hand, the sneering governor retorts, "Know your place, Captain. Your concern is unfounded. Rampaging dinosaurs and the planet's shifting climate pose little concern for us. Your past misadventures hold no sway here."

The space hauler captain's eyes narrow, "You are making a mistake, governor. We are all going to die here."

"Purge those thoughts, Captain, or I will feed you to one of the big ones."

\*\*\*\*\*



Telepathically manhandled from the governor's quarters by a brutal guard, the captain tromps up a muddy path toward the sanctuary of his ship, perceiving a barometric plunge auguring another massive weather system making landfall off the roiling white-capped sea. A blinding lightning strike followed by a thunderous crack quickened his pace, paralleling a 20-foot-tall, electrified fence. A thick stand of pines shuddered and shook on the untamed opposite side as a snarling camouflaged beast mirrored his footsteps.

*"This is intolerable."*

Months after the captain's unheeded warnings, his proverbial *bad idea* mantra became impossible for even the governor and his hubristic power structure to ignore. The cataclysmic shift in the planet's unpredictable climate battered the seaside equatorial base with gale-force winds and torrential downpours. Amidst the turbulent chaos, an earthquake opened a deep rift swallowing verdant forest miles into the distance. Thousands of lightning strikes ignited timberlands into fiery maelstroms. The uptick in seismic activity foreshadowed volcanic eruptions spewing white-hot ash into the darkening skies, blotting out the sun.

Terrified survivors from outposts ringing the volatile planet retreated to the main settlement on anti-gravity ships covered in dents and gouged with deep claw marks. The mortified colonists recounted horror stories of outer fencing losing power allowing voracious pack-hunting coordinated attacks, and lone reptilian hunters camouflaged to perfection standing right before unsuspecting victims before striking out in furious violence and gore-filled melees.

Unfazed by the Grays' telepathic commands and advanced weaponry, Earth's carnivorous denizens exerted their will on the aliens, opposite the Empire Grays' original plan.

It was time to pack up and leave. Now.

The space hauler captain looked on with disgust as foolhardy colonists followed the governor's edicts, disassembling the colony to the

last fastener and loading it into an ad-hoc evacuation armada, serenaded by the mournful snarls and wails from the hybrid pens. Large indigenous carnivores, drawn by the anguished animals' cries, appeared out of the encroaching forest at the settlement's electrified perimeter, probing for gaps in the fencing. Meanwhile, wave-skimming ships patrolling the coastline fell prey to ravenous monsters churning out of the sea, pulling unsuspecting vessels into the inky depths.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cognizant interplanetary competition watched their colonization failure with unbridled glee; the seething governor commanded his brilliant, scheming scientists to create a world-killing device to mitigate the humiliation associated with the ignominious withdrawal. His henchmen weaponized a virulent pathogen harvested from a species of ferocious winged reptiles and embedded it within replicating nanobots placed into a missile's nuke-tipped nosecone. A ship will carry the autonomous craft to an optimal altitude and release it into the equatorial jet stream. Its cataclysmic detonation will discharge trillions of virus-laden replicating nanobots across the planet. The brain trust projects higher life forms—not wiped out by the initial blast and radioactive fallout—will suffer slow, painful deaths as viral nanobots trigger a cascade of pandemic-driven extinctions.

The blue planet's delicate biosphere will cease to exist, transformed into another inert rock in the vacuum of space.

Packed and ready to leave, the governor issued two final directives: The captain's space hauler cannot liftoff until every treasure vat and animal pen are secure in its voluminous cargo bays. Second, the massive hauler will carry the poisonous nuke into the atmosphere retrofitted to the side of its enormous superstructure.

Adding insult to injury, the governor ordered the weapon's release mechanism mounted to the captain's chair. The burden of pressing a button dooming every creature on Earth rests on the treasonous officer's

thin shoulders.

More violent electrical storms foment across the sea on evacuation day, shorting out the last battered vestiges of fortified fencing. The colonists already aboard evacuation ships begged the pilots to leave even as their fellow colonists struggled through the sucking mud and torrential rainfall, firing on shadowy shapes bursting out of the darkness, illuminated by lightning spidering through the predawn maelstrom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seated in his command chair on the cargo ship's bridge, the captain's patience wore thin overlooking his fellow colonists' panicked retreat. Avoiding the blood-red bomb release button retrofitted at his fingertips, he lamented the time and resources wasted on the wretched planet. Duty-bound by the governor's orders, he lit into muddy laborers pushing the last cartloads of chunky green and red gemstones through the sucking muck toward the cargo bay's gaping 3-story maw.

Disgusted by the cowardice and incompetence on full display, his anger exploded at lieutenants hunkered behind their stations, hoping to escape without getting their four-fingered hands dirty, "You two! Get down to the cargo bay and close those doors! Now!"

After fumbling salutes, the terrified duo disappeared through the portal.

Powerless to do anything but wait, the frustrated captain watched the governor's evacuation ship liftoff out the main view window, followed by the surviving fleet in quick succession.

Tamping down a burgeoning rage, he failed to notice the open and unguarded portal onto the command deck.

Predicting his fellow Grays had already achieved escape velocity to breach a wormhole and live to fight another day, the Gray alien verges on despair at the dire prospect of returning to his wrathful home planet and suffering the consequences of defeat. Musing on what to do, the

wily veteran alights with an idea: “Helmsman, energize the ship’s warp drive.”

The crewman turns to his superior with a look of sheer confusion manifesting under his blank stare, “Captain, it is ill-advisable to do that before launch.”

“We are going to die regardless; just do it.”

“Do you have a target time and place in mind?”

“I leave that to your discretion.”

The reluctant recruit follows the suicidal order, engaging a series of commands on a console while suppressing impertinent thoughts. Inside a cavernous ventricular space interconnected with the ship’s labyrinthine engine decks, the warp drive’s energized 8-meter Möbius strip loops illuminate to blinding glows and accelerate to a singular spinning blur, manifesting a threshold to another time.

The captain senses satisfying shudders and shakes in response to the warp drive’s ignition. A telepathic report stating the final loads of gemstones and dinosaurs were secure snapped him from his reverie.

“Close the bay doors! Do it now!”

Startled by the captain’s clipped tone echoing in his head, a warehouse tech activated the door-close protocols in panicky haste but watched in horror as the enormous doors ground to a snail’s pace over tracks caked in mud and gunk. Sirens wailed in the darkened bay lit up by flashes of lightning in the predawn gloom.

Feet from a perfect sealed closure, a monstrous toothy carnivore blasted through the gap, bending the doors from their tracks at inoperable, dented angles. Meanwhile, a second alert signaled the crew to prepare for liftoff, unaware a 10-ton dinosaur busted inside the cargo hold. The snarling predator’s tail whipped from side to side, smashing containers free of their mounts and sending a king’s ransom of glittering chunks skittering across the mesh decking. The dinosaur’s ear-splitting roar alerted other beasts to breach the hold. A stricken alien defense dissolved before the onslaught of terrible beasts ripping them to shreds,

splattering bluish blood and guts across the Earthly plunder scattered into a chaotic mess inside the cargo bay.

Eager to join the fray, a herd of chirping pint-sized raptors darted through the damaged doors across the chaos, breaching the ship's upper levels. Overwhelmed crew, hunkered in defense of the engine and command decks, succumbed to the voracious creatures' onslaught, ripping and tearing at aqua-colored alien flesh before hopping over the dead and dying, kicking and clawing upward toward the bridge.

The captain ordered the cumbersome unbalanced vessel's liftoff into the intensifying gale-force winds whipping off the raging sea. Lightning flashes illuminated the expansive bridge as the veteran pilot settled into his command chair, releasing the safety on the missile's release switch with agonizing screams from belowdecks jumbling together in his head.

Vaulting thousands of feet through the predawn storm with its warp drive thrumming at the speed of light, an anti-gravity engine stalled, pitching the stricken vessel into an uncontrollable counterclockwise spin. Dead and dying aliens, 10-ton dinosaurs—and everything not tethered to the deck—toppled end-over-end into a crushing heap at the bent cargo bay doors before breaking through and plummeting toward the ground. The massive doors broke free from their hinges, taking flight into the swirling gale as a jumbled tangle of dinosaurs, aliens, crates, machinery, and a hailstorm of rubies and emeralds scattered into the predawn torrent.

The captain watched as ravenous lizards wriggled over each other through the unsecured portal onto the bridge. His protection detail wilted under the onslaught while a rapacious reptilian flanking attack took out his helmsmen, struggling to regain control. Picking off dinosaurs with a sidearm from his command chair, the long-serving officer checked an altimeter as the freighter listed into a sickening spiral at 22,000 feet—far below the nuke's optimal release altitude. "So much, the better."

A furious vortex of unstable air tossed the ship like a toy, causing a chunk of loosened bulkhead to break and slam into the captain's tiny frame, sending him sprawling onto the deck. Cursing his fidelity to the sadistic governor's whims instead of leaving when he had the chance, he willed his broken body back into the seat as a palpable falling sensation overwhelmed his bleeding head. Reaching up with his four-fingered hand to grasp the red bomb release button, opting to go out with a bang, not a whimper, a chicken-sized raptor snatched his thin forearm in its powerful jaws. The prehistoric raptor yanked its head in a violent whipsaw movement, dismembering the captain's hand above the wrist.

At the end of a long and otherwise illustrious career, the space-faring captain attempted to staunch a blue-green geyser of blood from his stumped forearm. Undaunted by the alien's weak defense, vile, primitive creatures swarmed, tearing at him in a snarled frenzy of razor-sharp teeth, slashing claws, and whipping tails. Twisting and writhing in pain and terror, he last saw a thick green forested canopy coming up fast outside the plummeting ship's viewscreen.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Gray alien space hauler crashed back to Earth, bouncing, sliding, and skidding for miles, its momentous mass gouging a wide swath of dirt and rocks through the forest before plunging over a precipitous ledge into a deep chasm.

The broken vessel plunged over 1,400 feet before slamming nose-first into a fast-flowing river coursing through the narrow gorge near the base of a roaring waterfall. The ticking and battered craft jutted from the fast-flowing current before collapsing onto its back downstream with a tremorous thud sending vaporous clouds of dirt and rocks roiling into the humid air.

Warning lights strobed throughout the shipwreck's labyrinthine decks and passages. Dead aliens dangled from tattered restraints in crash seats bolted into the inverted deck, trickling aqua-colored blood from

gaping torsos onto the bulkheads. Dismembered heads, arms, and legs lay scattered amid their still-blinking consoles. The ship's ductwork sparked and crackled as broken pipes leaked hazardous fluids onto toppled crates, boxes, and instrumentation.

An icy flow gushed through a gaping hole in the side-turned command deck, submerging the crew's mangled remains, lapping up to a shard of the captain's skull stuck like glue to the red nuke release button. Meanwhile, the pathogen-carrying nuke-tipped missile remained fixed to the hauler's fuselage, scraped and battered, but with its world-killing nanobot payload operational and awaiting activation.

A rattled menagerie of dinosaurs escaped deactivated pens and cages, creeping through the ship's upturned passages, drawn to the warp drive's thrumming radiant invitation to skulk into another time.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shipwreck remained in its sideways stasis through the ages as the waterfall and fast-flowing river dried to a trickle, exposing thousands of theropod prints in the dried and cracked riverbed. Hardening sand littered with bones and rocks built up in stratified layers preserving the ship's hull in solid rock. Hidden and protected in the deep and narrow chasm, the ship weathered epochal asteroid strikes and drifting strata under tons of sediment that raised, lowered, and moved its Gondwana position hundreds of miles westward through time. From the tumultuous end of the Cretaceous Period and into the Cenozoic epochs, the space hauler was preserved in sedimentary layers stratifying into red and ochre stripes of granite and limestone as a nascent South American continent took shape.

Over the last 10 million years, groundwater seeped toward the hot and humid surface, boring through sedimentary layers and hollowing an expansive chain of subterranean grottos connected by narrow twisting tunnels, dead-end alcoves, and antechambers dripping with deep freshwater pools where most of the lost ship's well-preserved

former glory lies in total darkness.

Skeletal sections of the lost ship's loading bay and the missile jut from jagged limestone at the bottom of a steep, narrow gorge hidden under an impenetrable green mass where prehistoric beasts scrambled through a glowing threshold into a world 90-million years removed from their Gondwana domain. From asexual half-ton *Carcharodontosaurus* juveniles to a panoply of meat and veggie-eating hybrid reptiles, they melded into their new Amazon forest home—a speck on a map lost to the ravages of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

For centuries, a legendary cannibalistic tribe safeguards the narrow rift valley and its strange reptilian denizens with a cunning and zealous fervor, adopting the ghost-white visage of the ancient alien race they discovered upon passing through the portal to another time.

#### Gray Invasion Fleet | Near Ganymede

90 million years later | 1928 AD

Descendants of the empirical Gray species that evacuated Cretaceous Earth in ignominious defeat exited a wormhole at the outskirts of Earth's solar system in 1928. Intent on reclaiming their prize, the invasion fleet assembled behind Ganymede, Jupiter's largest moon, and reconnoitered the situation. Cursing their bad timing, they discovered a cloaked Gorkian armada already prepositioned much closer to Earth, poised for invasion. The reptilian Gorks had 90 million years of evolutionary progress under their thick, scaly hides and were renowned throughout the universe as ruthless and bloodthirsty ravagers of planets.

Another roadblock to reclaimed glory persisted in the form of a repeating message ostensibly installed on the fertile world by none other



than the universe's preeminent enforcers, the Light Specters. The explicit warning stated to leave Earth unmolested or suffer their wrath. With the concept of time now a meaningless abstraction in the Grays' advanced eyeballs, they chose to wait and allow the Light Specters' beacon and the Gork situation to play out.

Like other resource-starved species across the universe, the Empire Grays viewed Earth's untapped riches as ripe for the taking if not for the Light Specters' stern warning. However, it proved only a matter of time before the threatening message was deactivated or rendered moot upon witnessing the humans' knack for self-destruction with the advent of mechanized warfare and clumsy atomic experimentation.

Regardless, the Grays relished the concept of unleashing their ancient world killer on whoever or whatever was left standing in the way. However, one last confounding obstacle thwarted their vengeful return: 90 million years of continental drift left the shipwreck holding their world killer lost within thousands of miles of untamed forest on the South American continent.

Gray scout | Fordlandia

05:22 a.m. | November 1, 1928

The Empire Grays dispatched pill-shaped scout ships on a mad dash for Earth, zigzagging to avoid the violent Gorks—and a bizarre gathering of autonomous cubed bots appearing out of the ether. Slinging past Mars undetected, the squadron slows to breach Earth's atmosphere before shooting across the sky to feet above the dense Brazilian jungle. The reconnaissance craft vector onto preset grids, searching for the long-lost shipwreck and its lethal payload.

One of the pill-shaped ships, approximating the mass of a compact car, oriented a rounded end eastward and moved across the treetops. A deep-blue conical light radiated downward from its reflective,

seamless hull, permeating the strata thousands of feet beneath the forest floor. The consecutive paper-thin two-mile-wide cross-sections scanned a 90-million-year-old paleographical map that no longer existed.

The 3-foot alien pilot ensconced within a spartan cockpit monitored a virtual display, adjusting the scan to stay within a geologic record corresponding with Mid-Cretaceous Earth.

Reaching the end of his first grid assignment, he pressed a four-digit hand atop a cylindrical instrument and popped out a nickel-sized disk. The alien placed the encrypted high-definition recording into a silver pocket on his suit and steered northeast, probing farther into the rugged interior. A sensor alerted the Gray of a new human outpost along a muddy river snaking through the endless sea of trees.

Suspicious of human development so far removed from the nearest population center, the Scout's superiors upgraded his reconnaissance assignment into a surveillance mission: *Permission to land and determine the human outpost's purpose. Avoid contact.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The Gray scout landed in a verdant glade, aware of multiple wary eyes watching his every move: just indigenous lower life forms, nothing of concern.

Pressing through the thick jungle toward the river and the human development, voices pierced the humid air through the trees.

Before he could backtrack onto a different path, two humans wielding primitive cutting instruments parted thick vegetation, staring in slack-jawed disbelief. Before he could react, six more dark-skinned males broke from the underbrush athwart his exit, forming an even-spaced semi-circle around his stance.

The scout mulled his only option: kill the humans and vacate the area. The male on the far right made the first move, stepping forward with a raised metal tool. Without remorse for the lower life forms, the Gray drew a weapon and double-tapped concentrated energy at the

poor man's chest. The human froze in a rictal pose as soft tissue melted from bones into a pool of sticky goo on the loamy ground where he once stood.

Realizing he had no choice but to exterminate the rest, the scout quickly shot each man from right to left. With his weapon pointed at the eighth human, he watched the male subject cower with arms raised in a vain attempt at protection, "*Humans are foolish creatures. This is too easy.*"

The scout pulled the trigger, but the weapon produced a harmless click-clack.

The human lowered his arms and checked himself. Wetness spread down his grubby pants, but otherwise, he was unharmed aside from his pride.

Ten feet apart, yet light years removed from each other's pasts, they exchanged confused stares. The Gray flooded the young man's mind with disorienting threats, but his brain proved impervious to telepathic intimidation.

With the high ground ceded, the human raised his hatchet and charged at the Gray.

The alien caught the glint of a metal blade before it sliced through his silver flight suit with a sickening thwack. The kid yanked the ax free and swung it sideways, severing a skinny arm and thwacking halfway into the alien's torso, bleeding toxic aqua-colored blood. The third whack separated the bulbous gray head from the bony shoulders. The disembodied noggin landed upturned on the dirt with its deep black soulless eyes widened in shock and horror.

Though the clear and present danger had passed, the Portuguese day laborer stomped the head into mush. Crazy with fear and loathing for the hideous murderer, he hacked at the alien until nothing remained but a pile of aqua-colored flesh mixed with weird glowing bones jutting through its tattered silver suit.

Covered in sticky blue-green alien residue and chunks of smelly

gray flesh, the inconsolable young man raced back to the new settlement to report the murderous and ungodly incident to his foreman, Charles Pike.

He will know what to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nickel-sized recording of the day's scan remained secure within a pocket on the alien's tattered silver suit.

The shipwreck's telltale signature was missed on the scout's first sweep—a mistake the Grays would have discovered upon a closer inspection of the reassembled three-dimensional scans when it returned to the fleet.

Another missed opportunity for the Empire Grays.

\* \* \* \* \*

A shadowy form entered the kill box in the early-morning pitch-blackness, with a cacophony of jungle sounds masking his footfalls atop the loamy ground. Mindful not to disturb the crime scene, he steps over the dead humans' melted remains to the mutilated Gray scout's detritus.

Probing a long, four-fingered hand into a tattered pocket, he removed the cylindrical disk. With a sad look at the horrific scene, he made his way back into the jungle.

Charles Pike | Fordlandia

04:35 p.m. | November 14, 1928

14 days after the murders and his cover-up of the disturbing crime scene, Charles Pike was fit to be tied. Recruited by none other than Henry Ford from a posh Detroit civil engineering firm, after a twenty-year stint in the Army Corps of Engineers, the burly man swore at the primitive work conditions in the middle of the Brazilian Amazon.

Pouring another cup of black coffee, he stood before an unfurled topographical map delineating the industrialist's bought-and-paid-for parcel of riverfront jungle atop a worktable, placing rocks at the corners to hold it flat.

"What a waste of time and money."

Pike's head swooned, auguring another pattering of blood dripped onto the parchment from his pugnacious nose. Dabbing his pale, sweaty face with a stained hankie, the troubled man's attention drifted from the wafer-thin pretense of engineering Ford's nascent rubber plantation onto his real mission secured within a duffel bag shoved beneath his drafting table.

Verging on madness, Pike lifted the bag off the wood planks and dropped it atop the table without ceremony. Pulling open the zipped enclosure, Pike removed the enigmatic discovery that prompted Ford's interest in his services: a rough-hewn chunk of limestone found by local Portuguese day-laborers digging a foundation.

Pike turned the two-foot stone toward him and traced a ruddy fingertip through its detailed map and spiral design, resembling a baby snail piggybacked atop its big brother's perfect shell overlaying a chiseled representation of the Tapajós River basin and beyond.

A crooked smile widened under his mustache, admiring the expert craftsmanship, "How did those primitive motherfuckers manage this level of mathematical precision?"

Pike recalled the day he came into possession of the enigmatic discovery. Under the watchful eye of Ford execs huddled around the stone, a shiftless bow-tied archeologist conducted a confidential debrief: *"... Local legends state that an ancient shipwreck lies hidden at the nucleus of the smaller spiral. Moreover, the lost ship contains an untold fortune in rare gems and a world-killer payload. Mr. Pike, your job is determining if this tale holds water."*

"How do I do that?"

One of the suits shot Pike a cold-eyed staredown, "That is your

problem, Pike. Figure it out.”

Pike scoffed at the Ford execs and the haughty academic who had no clue about the perils involved in such an expedition. They all up and left for civilization, leaving him as the only person at Fordlandia with knowledge of the artifact’s existence. To top it off, the ungrateful assholes showed no gratitude for his ad hoc cover-up of a gruesome mass murder and the unwanted attention it would have cast on Ford and his dumbass rubber plantation. Let alone the fucking dead alien that infected his blood, leaving misguided forays into the wilderness out of the question for the foreseeable future.

But the joke was on them. After recovering from the weird alien virus, Pike would set out on his own—or better yet—sell the information to the highest bidder. In the meantime, he needed to hide the artifact from prying eyes.

Producing his trusty notebook from a vest pocket, Pike flipped past sketches, architectural renderings, and notes to a dog-eared page with his hand-drawn reproduction of the stone artifact, “Better check my map against this one more time for good measure.”

With an engineer’s eye for detail, Pike compared his map to the artifact, paying close attention to iconic landmarks he drew in place of the snails’ Fibonacci spirals—disguising the 90-million-year-old shipwreck’s location.

Dipping a fountain pen into an inkwell, Pike added one final inked blotch indicating the baby snail’s central nucleus. “X marks the fucking spot.”

Satisfied with his forgery of the stone’s enigmatic treasure map, Pike grabbed a hammer and broke off the baby snail portion before smashing the remaining artifact into unreadable chunks. Peering outside his tented office to ensure no one was watching, Pike scraped the shards into the bag and set out for the river.

After tossing the artifact into the Tapajós, one chunk at a time, Pike followed a path uphill to a spectacular Brazil Nut tree. Reeling with

itchy bumps and sweaty armpits, Pike studied the remarkable specimen, knowing the tree was designated for preservation betwixt the planned water tower and sawmill. With a feverish inspiration, Pike pulled his overweight 42-year-old frame into the Brazil Nut's branches and climbed like a monkey high up into its thick foliage. Looking around, he found a hollow in the massive trunk and dropped the artifact with the baby snail spiral deep inside. Enduring scrapes and cuts, he dropped out of the tree like a lead weight.

Stepping back from the tree, Pike opened his notebook to a new page. With pencil in hand, the expert draftsman rendered a detailed drawing of the tree and hid a small arrow amongst the leaves and branches pointing at the hollow halfway up the trunk.

Wiping more blood, Pike returned to his tent and locked the precious notebook in the drawer beneath his drafting table.

"Ford can go fuck himself; after I recover, I'm selling the lost ship's location to the highest bidder."

Paddy McCoy | Fordlandia

08:35 a.m. | November 16, 1928

The strange ailment afflicting Charles Pike worsened. Swatting at flies drawn to itchy pustules manifesting in the folded nether reaches of his stocky frame, he chomped an unlit cigar below his waxed handlebar mustache, cursed his bad luck, and resisted an urge to scratch like the dickens. *"It can't be from that alien craft and its mutilated occupant. Tell me I'm not infected. Goddammit, Chuck, old boy, get a grip."*

The squeal of wet brakes distracted Pike's focus outside the opened front flaps of his olive-drab canvas tent-cum-office perched atop a three-foot-tall plywood riser. Watching two men in black suits hop from a Model T pickup truck on a beeline toward his tent, he hustled behind the messy table, placed the notebook in a shallow tool drawer

under the tabletop, and slid into his raised swivel office chair.

After an arduous trip culminating with fifteen hours steaming up the Tapajós river from Santarém, the sopping pair hustled to the relative dryness of Pike's elevated space and ducked inside, offering perfunctory hat tips. Neither man deemed it necessary to address their host.

Realizing the two were not much for formal introductions, Pike decided to break the ice, "My name is Pike. Charles Pike. I oversee this parcel of the jungle. Let me guess: you two are overdressed agricultural inspectors from Sao Paulo, or you are here to investigate the strange event from 16 days ago. The suits are a dead giveaway. Shit. The feds didn't waste any time sending you guys down here." Noting the marked age difference between the two men, he mused the clean-shaven younger G-man hefting a backpack could pass for a high school student.

The men exchanged glances while drying off and draping wet suit jackets over chair backs. The older man took in the 20x14-foot workspace with a perfunctory nod while adjusting his shoulder-holstered sidearm but refrained from taking the bait on Pike's fed reference.

Reminiscent of past government interactions throughout his public service career, Pike sipped strong Brazilian coffee from his Ford logo mug, familiar with the unlikely buttoned-down duo's silent treatment. Gesturing to the half-full pot on an extended wooden workbench amidst stacks of rolled blueprints and site plans, "Help yourselves, gentlemen, it's better than the swill you get back in DC."

The wiry six-foot junior G-man slung his backpack on a table and availed himself to the coffee pot. Checking a ceramic mug, he liberated a three-inch centipede onto the floorboards and gave the cup a swipe before filling it halfway with coffee. Retrieving a flask from a deep trouser pocket, he added a shot of Scotch and took a long pull, "That hits the spot."

Pike's gray eyes narrowed on the senior partner, "Since I am doing all of the talking, allow me to clear the air. You guys came down



here to investigate the crime scene and quarantine the” pausing for effect, “so-called evidence. Is that about right?” Seeing the older man with the gray crewcut produce a serious-faced nod in the affirmative, he proceeded, “Well, my job is to turn this shithole into Main Street, USA. I don’t have time to waste with any cloak and dagger bullshit. This incident has already set us back over two weeks, with an entire parcel designated for a grove of rubber trees now off-limits. The sooner you get that thing out of there, the faster I can get back to business, capeesh?”

“Of course, Mr. Pike, you will have our complete cooperation. Your employer wants this to remain classified, as does the US government. Any bullshit, as you so eloquently put it, would likely end this venture before the ceremonial tapping of the first rubber tree.”

The younger man set down his cup and loosened his tie, “Is it always like this down here?”

Pike turned on the kid with mock incredulity, “Like this? This is fucking tolerable. You should have been here when our steamer first made landfall. You needed a snorkel to take a shit!”

The older man raised an eyebrow at Pike’s obvious discomfort and the trickle of blood seeping down his mustache. Averting his eyes from the sick man’s obvious distress, he gazed beyond a sea of tree stumps toward the untamed Amazonian jungle.

Pike took a quick swipe at his nose and tried to change the subject, “I know my way around the capital. Which department are you guys with, again?”

The younger man laughed, “Trust me, you never heard of it.”

“Artemus, that’s enough.”

Pike smiled at the kid in his black trousers and starched-white button-down shirt, “Artemus? Does anybody call you Art or Artie?”

“Just Artemus, or Mr. Pennywell, if you prefer.”

“Look, son, don’t get your knickers in a wad. I’m just making small talk. The locals speak Portuguese, and I’m surrounded by dumb-as-rocks America-hating ex-pats.”

The older man responded in a low and authoritative tone, “Speaking of the locals, where is your eyewitness?”

Swiveling in his chair, Pike indicated toward a less-than-enthusiastic congregation of day laborers malingering in the drizzle. “Well, shit.” Clenching the cigar in his teeth, he wondered why his staff had not cracked the proverbial whip—spotting a clipboard-wielding aide hurrying to complete a headcount in the steady rain, “Mr. Guido! We’re not paying these fuckers to stand around with a collective thumb up their assholes! We got a jungle to clear! Get the tools passed out on the double!”

The man squinted into the shadowed tent beyond the open flaps toward his boss’s disembodied voice, “Yes, sir, Mister Pike.”

Guido Pellegrini, a chain-smoking rail-thin Italian American from Staten Island, New York, directed another worker to unlock a tool-laden trailer hitched behind a Caterpillar tractor. The assembly of fit young men, culled from the local Portuguese Indian population, waited for Guido’s high-pitched mangling of their names before approaching the second banana, passing out the tools. Ambling past Mr. Guido with a machete, ax, or shovel, they proffered odd smiles, some snickering to his perplexed face.

Paranoid, Guido snatched an ax handle from his partner and tossed it at the next recruit in line. Checking his clipboard, he spits out, “Manuel Machado.”

“Yes, sir, that’s my name.” The 26-year-old Brazilian tried not to smile at the Italian.

Squinting from under an oversized hard hat, Guido blew a smoke ring in Manuel’s face, “You got a problem, boy?”

“No problem, boss man. It’s just that you have a spider on your back.”

Noting the furry eight-legged specimen, Guido’s wide-eyed partner raised a spade in self-defense and took a long backward step, “Damn, Guido, that is a big one.”

Mr. Guido's gaunt face turned ghost white as his cigarette dropped to the mud from thin lips curled into a frightful rictus. Upon angling a scrawny arm over his back, sweaty fingertips contacted a furry eight-legged critter, sending it skittering over the opposite shoulder, down his beating chest, and stopping atop his groin. The indigenous carnivore's long legs dug into Guido through his thin khaki trousers, ready for a fight, "Jesus H. Christ, it's latched on to my nuts! I hate this fucking jungle!"

The government men appear annoyed by the comic spectacle transpiring down in the mud; however, it is Pike's first genuine laugh in weeks. Downing the last of his coffee, he squinted faltering eyes onto his harried subordinate, flailing like a ninny, while the laborers formed a circle, rooting for the spider, "What the hell, Mr. Guido? It's just a horny spider. You should be happy. It's the most action you will ever see." He wheeled toward the two men with a nervous laugh, noting their circumspect behavior, "You two play much poker? You got the faces for it."

The locals' laughter faded as they disappeared down a rutted trail toward their assigned tract of the jungle. Meanwhile, the camp doctor arrived on the scene, scratching his balding head while looking from his worn-out bug bite kit to the eight-inch arachnid attached to Mr. Guido's genital region.

\* \* \* \* \*

Swinging the dripping wet ax over his shoulder, Manuel broke into a jog to join a line of laborers heading toward the jungle. The group turned in unison, stopping the young Brazilian man dead in his tracks. The senior laborer pointed his sharp machete at Manuel with a threatening scowl, "You are bad luck, Manuel! Find yourself another group!"

Charles Pike heard the stand-off and trained his hazed vision onto the eyewitness, Manuel Machado, left standing alone in the mud,

“There he is!” Eager to get the suits off his back, the civil engineer rasped out a coughed command at the sole survivor of a nightmare just getting started, “Machado! Get your ass up here!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Standing alone with the ax over his shoulder, like a skinny Brazilian version of Paul Bunyan, the kid spun toward Pike’s rasped command, “Who? Me?”

Slogging across a graded oblong area outlined with yellow string stretched between wood stakes jutting from the mud, Manuel tromped toward the high tent and the three men waiting inside. A conversational English fluency already had the suspicious locals keeping him at arm’s length; however, the promise of a real house, indoor plumbing, and a more than adequate day’s wage beat the alternative: squalid abject poverty.

Hiding a smirk, he decided to downplay his sharp-tongued wit and missionary-taught education during his forthcoming interrogation.

The fledgling outpost along the banks of the Tapajós River is where an American industrialist named Henry Ford set his sights on terraforming dense Brazilian rainforest into the world’s premier rubber plantation, dubbed Fordlandia. The settlement will house an American colony on the high ground, with schools, hotels, libraries, a swimming pool, and a golf course. The locals hunker in two-family bungalows down by the river.

To Manuel, the idea appeared preposterous, “Ford picked a helluva spot to build his utopian paradise.” So far, it was nothing but mosquitos, snakes, and spiders, along with rampant yellow fever and malaria. Not to mention the otherworldly danger he and his unlucky colleagues had the misfortune to stumble across out in the jungle.

Ten feet from the overdressed men standing atop the riser under the olive-green tent, the kid stopped in his muddy tracks, “Yes, sirs. I am Manuel Machado. I was part of the work crew that encountered the

creature.”

Hitting mid-morning in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, hundreds of miles from the nearest civilization, the thermometer passed the century mark, and bright Brazilian sunshine burnt off rain clouds, revealing a cerulean sky and unrelenting humidity, like breathing underwater.

Determining the scared kid was on the level, the older G-man allowed his less intimidating protégé to take the lead—the good cop, bad cop routine. Leaning back in a cross-legged repose, he pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes and loosened his shoulder-holstered Colt 45 revolver. “Proceed with the questioning, Artemus.”

Pennywell jumped off the riser and splashed across a puddle, holding out a hand, “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Machado. My name is Artemus . . .”

Surprised by the flipped seniority, Pike interjected, “Hey Art, bring him on up here so we can all hear what he has to say.”

The young Brazilian stepped up and into American territory, barefoot in a stained and filthy half-buttoned shirt hanging loose on his skinny frame over a pair of holey dungarees. Manuel’s intelligent brown eyes dart around the space: westernized gadgets, coffee mugs, stacks of papers, maps, blueprints, and expensive-looking drafting tools lie scattered about as his gaze lands on a pile of National Geographics.

“Have a seat.”

Manuel looked upon the chiseled face of the clean-cut American whose disarming smile, poise, and gravitas bolstered his athletic straight-shouldered appearance, “Me?”

“Yes, you. Would you care for a cup of coffee? Sans centipedes, of course,” enjoying a little inside joke.

Manuel’s eyes rested on the exposed grip of Artemus’ mean-looking holstered revolver, “Uh, sure.”

Pike huffed a belabored sigh, hunched over the bloodstained topographical map while half-listening to the conversation and

administering to his leaky nostrils.

Artemus Pennywell proffered a piping hot mug and a warm smile to the dark-skinned local, "Where did you learn to speak English, Manuel?"

"My parents were killed when I was a boy. Jesuit missionaries raised me. They taught me English," feeling more at ease; he added, "also, some Spanish."

"Jesuit missionaries, eh? Down here doing the Lord's work, no doubt. Are they still around?"

"No. The missionaries left to convert a tribe of cannibals years ago and never returned."

Pike coughed out a mocking laugh from his raised chair, "Say one thing about those Catholics: they'll turn you into a saint or die trying."

After making a sign of the cross upon hearing the foreman's blasphemy, Manuel continued, "The priests treated me well. They taught me to believe we are all created in God's image. It makes what we found so ... how do I say the words?" Manuel's thin body shuddered, conjuring the repressed memory, "The creature warned bad things will happen. They want to kill us all."

"How did it communicate this to you, Manuel?"

"I, I don't know. It did not speak. Its mouth, its mouth was nothing. Its face was white. But the eyes!" Manuel leaned forward, forgetting the mug cupped in his calloused hands. "The eyes spoke to us."

"When you say us, Manuel. How many of you were out there?"

"It was me and seven others working a section of forest about an hour from here on foot."

Pennywell pulled up a back-turned chair and sat facing the shaken young man, "Manuel, what happened to your friends?"

Pike pushed back from the drafting table in his squeaky-wheeled chair and spoke for his inconsolable employee, "They are dead, Art. All

seven of them. It is why we quarantined the entire parcel and called in the cavalry in the first place. The creature melted the skin right off their bones.”

Masking alarm bells ringing in his head, Artemus turned toward Pike’s pallid, sweating countenance, “You don’t say. Where are they now?”

Memories of the weird event 16 days earlier flooded back into Manuel’s frontal cortex with a vengeance. Doubling over in his seat, the man sobbed as the forgotten coffee cup loosened from his shaking grip and crashed onto the floorboards. “With no time to escape, it killed them where they stood, but I did not die.” Recounting the paranormal episode aloud for the first time, he concluded, “I could hear its thoughts inside my head. The thing was surprised I survived. It tried again.”

“So, what did you do, Manuel?”

The educated and devout 26-year-old baptized father of two wiped his tear-eyed face on a dirty sleeve, “I hacked it to death with my ax. And now, Mr. Pennywell, I will go straight to hell.”

Pike emitted a heavy sigh and coughed up a bloody mass of phlegm into a trash can, “For the love of Christ, kid. That thing was not human! Don’t you get it? That’s why these fellers came down here in the first place.” He wheezed and hacked, spewing more bright red specks atop his map before addressing the elephant in the room, “It came from somewhere else. I don’t even need a Jesuit education to figure that one out.”

The older man snapped awake from his catnap, “Mr. Pike, are you sure no one else has been in the near-vicinity of the murder scene?”

Taken aback, thinking the older guy was asleep the whole time, “Yeah. Why?”

“Have you been out there?”

Pike’s failing eyes widened with a sudden epiphany, “Wait a goddamn minute, here. I know who you guys are.”

Before Pike could finish his sentence, Paddy pulled his revolver

and shot Pike between the eyes.

Manuel gawked at the smoking gun in disbelief. Pennywell addressed his colleague, "Christ, Paddy, was that necessary?"

Paddy holstered his weapon and stood with a weary sigh. "Yes, however, unfortunate for Mr. Pike. Artemus, keep an eye out, will you?" Tipping back his hat, he moved behind the drafting table and wheeled Pike's slumped form out of the way. After memorizing the blood-spattered tabletop in situ, he yanked the topographical map from under the rocks and lit it on fire. Letting it burn from his outheld fingertip grasp, Paddy turned on Machado with a penetrating stare, "Did anybody else, aside from Mr. Pike here, visit the murder scene?"

Gobsmacked by the violent turn of events, Manuel stammered a reply, "Not that I know of, sir. Mr. Pike contained the area immediately afterward. It is already isolated; we operate far out on the fringes of Mr. Ford's plantation."

Paddy noted the kid's sincerity while dropping the smoldering remnant into the metal trash receptacle to finish burning, "What about the doctor? Or that Italian fellow with the spider wrapped around his dick? Or any other outsiders like Art or myself?" Paddy's keen-eyed gaze searched the olive-drab interior while pressing the young man further, "How can you be sure not one other person ventured out there to see what all the fuss was about?"

"No, señor. I don't think so."

The older agent softened his approach, "Okay. Please relax, young man. I believe you." Mumbling to himself, "Now, where the bloody hell is it?" Paddy stepped back and cast his eyes around the tent.

Catching his partner's perplexed gaze, Pennywell offered, "Can I help? What are we looking for?"

"Pike's notebook containing a forged map reproduction leading to a lost ship." Frisking Pike's seated repose, Paddy avoids the trickling of toxic blood seeping down the dead man's forehead and dripping off his chubby cheek, "Nope, he would not carry it on his person." Turning



to examine the drafting table from Pike's angle, Paddy bent low and discovered a wide, shallow, locked drawer underneath. "What have we here?"

Watching the tall man pick the cheap lock and pull out the drawer, Machado reiterated with abject certitude, "Nobody disobeyed Mr. Pike, er, the foreman's orders. Nobody."

Paddy did not reply, preferring to let the young man squirm while sifting through the contents with the tip of his penknife.

"Mr. Pike swore me to secrecy. He even threatened my family. I have not seen my wife and children. Do you know if they are okay?"

Checking the empty grounds outside the tent, Pennywell turned to Machado with a reassuring smile, "Don't worry, Mr. Machado, I am sure the wife and kids are fine."

Suppressing a smile at the young man's genuine concerns for his family, Paddy pulled out a worn leather-bound notebook, "Eureka." Flipping through the pages, he paused at a cryptic map with no coordinates or legend to unlock its secrets. Pocketing it in his jacket, he searched around the tent before turning to the young Brazilian, "Lead us to the crime scene, Mr. Machado."

"Why did you shoot Mr. Pike? Was he infected?"

Pennywell patted the much smaller man on the back and answered for his friend and mentor, "Your boss was already dead. Isn't that right, Paddy?"

"Yes, Artemus, and not a minute too soon."

\* \* \* \* \*

The trio tromped through sucking mud, bisecting a clear-cut parcel toward a hand-painted trail marker spiked into the ground at the jungle's edge. Pennywell smirked at the crude skull and crossbones painted on the sign as they proceeded past without heeding its blunt warning heading single file down a rutted path. Thick green underbrush closed around them, and the narrow footpath dissolved into a suggested

way forward. Up on point, Manuel hacked at large leaves and vines with his razor-sharp blade while huffing an over-the-shoulder comment to the men in black on his heels, "Now you can see why I am certain no one else followed out here over the last two weeks."

In the semi-darkness with the sun blotted out by an impenetrable canopy high above, Pennywell adjusted his backpack, limboing under a low mossy branch. Glancing back to check on his older and wiser partner, he couldn't resist a subtle jibe, "Low bridge, Paddy."

McCoy bent his tall frame, scraping under the sopping obstruction, "I am getting too old for this."

Smoothing aside a monstrous leaf, Pennywell smiled at a bright-green snake coiled on top, "Hello there, little fella." Needling his less-than-agile partner, he laughed, "I will never get too old for fieldwork." Tapping the flask in his left pants pocket, he checked Manuel's position, separating farther ahead. Noting the Brazilian's adeptness with an ax, clearing a path through the leaves and branches with a vengeance, he imagined what the kid did to that unsuspecting alien. Soaked in sweat, he paused to knock mud from his boots and tried to purge the gory image from his head.

An hour-plus into the jungle trek, the trail hit a steep embankment at the wetter than wet reaches of a jungle bog spiked with trees laden with mosses and plants jutting skyward from the tranquil dark water. A cacophony of birds and monkeys screeching overhead drowned out Pennywell's muttered curses as he watched Manuel wade into the tea-colored swamp. Unsure what lurked below the surface, he took a tentative step into the knee-deep murkiness, "You ready for this, Paddy?"

Panting and struggling to keep up, Paddy slid down the slippery trail and splashed into the swamp, "Absolutely, my boy. I grew up exploring the Scottish moors. This obstruction is a mere mud puddle by comparison."

Squishing boots into the swampy bottom disturbed clouds of

decay swirling around his legs, “If you say so, Paddy.”

The audible splash of something big swimming below the surface elicited a low whistle toward Manuel, 40 feet farther ahead, “What happened to our trail, Manuel?”

“It gets worse, Señor Pennywell.”

Fording the bog, Pennywell scanned the semi-transparent brown water for hungry caiman and instead caught a glint of something jutting from decaying Amazonian silt. Scooping it out in a handful of greenish muck, he turned toward his Scottish mentor, “Hey, Paddy, check it out.”

The taller man sloshed to Pennywell’s side, “What did you find, agent?”

Rinsing off goo and muck in the muddy brown water, the younger agent held the strange dripping object into a narrow shaft of midday sun piercing the opaque canopy, “It appears to be a bone; however, it is not human, that’s for sure.”

“It is fluorescent, much like our extraterrestrial friends’ skeletal structure.” Casting a wary eye around the swamp, he continued, “Break out the forensics kit, Artemus. You remembered to bring it with you, right? Don’t tell me we left it on the boat.”

Pennywell produced a box of evidence pouches from a side pocket in his pack, “Don’t worry, chief, I have it right here.” Dropping the alien bone fragment inside, he zipped it shut and peered around the swampy environs. “I bet there is some big bass in here.”

“I didn’t know you liked to fish.”

“I don’t, just saying.”

Manuel called back to the pair with unmasked trepidation, “Sirs, the bog is not a good place to stop and rest. What are you doing?”

“Collecting evidence, Manny. Collecting evidence.”

Paddy slipped into a natural Scottish brogue, eschewing his Americanized accent, and splashed past Pennywell in the hip-deep water, “Come on then, laddy, let’s keep it moving.”

Pennywell lingered behind, peering into the water for more

bones, “You know what this means, Paddy? Scavengers have already consumed the alien’s remains and defecated them all over the goddamn jungle. So much for site containment.”

Fording twenty paces ahead of Pennywell’s perplexed stance, Paddy’s reply echoed across the swamp, “Site containment is not our primary mission.”

Exiting the bog onto a muddy bank of twisted roots and vines, Manuel wrung dirty water from his clinging shirt and checked on the Americans’ slow and dangerous progress with a frustrated sigh. A whisp of air and a sharp sting in the side of his head knocked him sideways. The Brazilian laborer’s trembling hand reached up on reflex and pulled a bamboo dart out of his right temple. His vision went black, garbling an unintelligible warning cry to the others, toppling facedown into the water.

Noting the guide’s inexplicable nosedive with a keen alarm, Paddy drew his weapon and peered into the shadows while splashing toward the young Brazilian, “Artemus, we have company!”

Pulling Manuel’s slumped form out of the dark water, Paddy cursed upon seeing the man’s dead-eyed stare. Another dart shot through the air, piercing the leather-bound notebook tucked inside a pocket sewn into the left breast of his soaked jacket. Before he could take cover, a second dart hit his jugular. The tall Scotsman arched backward in shock and anger, yanking out the feathered dart’s barbed tip in his faltering grasp. Already stricken by its lethal toxin, he crumpled onto a massive clump of kapok tree roots snaking above and below the waterline.

Pennywell splashed through the water to his friend and mentor’s aid and dragged Paddy behind the kapok’s massive trunk as another dart whizzed past his ear. Opening Paddy’s shirt collar, the agent located a telltale trickle of blood leaking from a pinprick wound at the dying man’s jugular, surrounded by a widening yellow-ochre bruise permeating his neck and shoulders.

“Paddy! Don’t leave me here all alone! What is the mission? I

thought we were supposed to take field samples and bury the bodies.”

Paddy’s face whitened, and a trickle of blood seeped from the corners of his distant, gray-eyed stare, “Artemus, the alien was an advance scout.” Shivering despite the oppressive heat, he coughed thick and bloody phlegm before struggling to continue, “It was searching for a shipwreck swallowed in the jungle eons ago.” Wracked by uncontrollable spasms, he kicked his scuffed and muddy boots outward, forcing his body to still through sheer willpower. Blind, he turned toward Pennywell and strained to speak above a hoarse whisper, “Our job was to confiscate Pike’s notebook. I had to kill him. He was infected.” Gasping for air, he clamped onto Pennywell’s left forearm in a vicelike grip and pulled himself forward, “Get to the alien, boy. Find a small disk about the size of a nickel. Take that and Pike’s book back to the PTB.”

Nose-to-nose with the Scotsman, Pennywell perceived his friend and mentor’s formidable life force vacate its poisoned Earthly vessel as the firm grip loosened and his head lolled back and to the side.

After lowering Paddy’s lifeless form to the loamy ground, Pennywell reared back on his haunches, shocked and overwhelmed with grief, “How am I supposed to find the alien? It could be in any direction from here.” Sliding out of the cumbersome, soggy backpack, he peeled out of his jacket in the sweltering heat and rolled his sleeves to the elbows. Frisking Paddy’s dead form, he located Pike’s notebook and a billfold and placed the articles next to his jacket with a sad reverence. Cognizant that an arsenal of deadly tech and gadgets remained in his mentor’s black suit, he decided a Viking funeral was in order. “Sorry, old boy, but you are too heavy to carry, so I will have to send your body to Valhalla in ashes.”

Searching his vest pocket, Pennywell removes a Lucky Star tobacco tin. Popping the lid, he checked its far-out contents and accessed a pouch filled with tiny purple pellets. Snapping the container shut, he pulled the sack’s drawstring wide and poured a neat pile within a coffin-sized protected hollow within the magnificent kapok tree’s massive knot

of twisted roots. Stifling tears, the Powers That Be agent dragged his deceased friend's body by the shoulders and positioned him atop the piling of purplish pellets.

Whispering a prayer, Pennywell ignited the alien fire pellets. Within minutes, he stood before Paddy's rip-roaring deep-purple funeral pyre. Swiping away more tears, he watched sparks snap and crackle into the misty stillness, "I hope the Powers That Be appreciates your sacrifice, my friend."

The crunch of a branch interrupted Pennywell's sad farewell. Feeling a presence looming behind him, he turned, hands raised, locking eyes with a primeval Amazonian hunter.

"You must be the one with the blowgun."

The short, stubby fireplug stood buck-naked, covered in dirty white paint from head to toe. A pattern of bony piercings decorated his chest, medallions from past campaigns. The fellow's probing eyeballs glinted at Pennywell from under a pronounced brow line, flat nose, and thick lips stretched into a sharp-toothed grin over a receding jawline.

Pennywell's gaze latched onto the man's jet-black bowl cut with unruly strands cow licking straight up above his sloped forehead. "You should visit Al's Barber Shop; it's on Massachusetts, just off 2nd Street. Tell Al I sent you. He'll fix that cowlick you call a hairdo in no time flat."

The hunter commanded his prisoner to step forward, grunting guttural sounds while gesticulating his elaborate six-foot carved blowgun toward an opening in the thick underbrush.

Pennywell complied, "You want me to go that way? Okay. Okay. Take it easy." Checking the smoldering purple fire in the damp underbrush, he stepped in his squishy wet boots as the long blowgun smacked into his chest. "Ow! Christ, you little motherfucker, that hurt!"

The barefoot warrior chuckled while reaching up and tugging Pennywell's revolver from its holster. Familiar with a loaded gun but preferring his lethal stick, the cannibal tossed the 45 into the brush.

"No weapons, got it, chief." Bookmarking his revolver's position

in the thick green bramble in his photographic memory, four sharp grunts followed by a high note indicated for Pennywell to proceed.

Pennywell pushed through thick undergrowth, leaving behind Paddy's final resting place. Still reeling from his loss, he ducked under a branch and muttered, "low bridge."

Suppressing sadness, he remembered the Brazilian kid was a married father of two. "Sorry to you as well, old boy."

Slogging through the leaves and vines for miles in the sweltering jungle, Pennywell paused at a slippery precipice prompting another jab from the business end of the native's blowgun in his back.

"Hey, that hurts!"

Another sharp poke in the ribs, followed by a series of grunts and whistles, indicated for The Powers That Be agent to get his ass moving.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, Pennywell heard the buzz of insects feasting on something beyond a thick green mangle of Brazil's finest and most impenetrable rainforest. Pushing through regardless, incurring cuts on top of scrapes and bites turning to welts from thorns and bugs no doubt toxic to humans, he halfway stumbled into a carved-out clearing, "Well, what do you know? I'm here."

Eyes watering from the rank stench, Pennywell tied a folded bandana around his neck and pulled it over his nose to filter the abysmal odor of putrefied corpses. Crossing the semi-circular array of bodies, he studied the diced-up mass of glowing bones draped with torn chunks of weird bluish-green flesh, "Blimey! Manuel did quite a number on the scout."

The agent examined the nearest human corpse and noted the baseball-sized hole in the victim's exposed ribcage. Stooping over the next skeletonized repose, he sees a similar entry wound holing that man's ribs in a perfect circle. "Pike shot these men postmortem in a last-ditch effort to cover up the alien angle. Paddy, my friend, you kept too many secrets." A quick backward glance toward the grunting native found the strange little human poking his blowgun into the fetid alien mess.

“I would not do that if I were you.”

The cannibal looked up with a mischievous grin, then stuck out a long pink tongue and licked slimy blue-green residue off the tip. Scrunching his face in a comical reaction, like a Parisian chef taste-testing a new recipe, the native nodded tacit approval before offering the delicacy for Pennywell’s culinary judgment with an inquiring belch.

“Uh, no thanks. I had a big breakfast.”

As if understanding the joke, the primitive hunter broke into a hearty fit of laughter.

His captor’s sudden jocularly surprised Pennywell, but it also bought him time to think. Seeing a discarded machete stenciled *Property of Ford Motor Company* still clutched in a dead laborer’s bony grasp, he examined the body while palming the short blade in his hand.

A deep-throated hoot-hoot while reloading his weapon indicated playtime was over. Cracked white paint showed through to the primitive fellow’s cocoa-brown birthday suit as his mood darkened and his uncircumcised penis rose to half-mast.

None too anxious to resume the forced march to the creepy guy’s camp where he is doubtless the main course, Pennywell brandished the machete, wishing he had his .45 and a pull from his trusty flask. “Okay, you little fuck, this ends right here.”

Evocative of a Samurai, the native wielded his blowgun in a two-handed grip and stomped his right foot into the deceased alien’s rotting torso with a stomach-turning crunch. Embracing the gauntlet thrown before him in the blood-soaked kill box, the seasoned warrior flashed teeth sharpened into fangs and ululated an incomprehensible battle cry.

The machete forgotten in his right-handed grasp, Pennywell looked on with equal fascination and horror as a shocked expression distorted the cannibal’s painted face, knee-deep in the blue-green offal. The Amazonian’s thick-lipped mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but he made no sound as his beady eyes bulged from sockets like



overfilled balloons. Seconds later, the cannibal's stocky form collapsed atop the foul alien remains after every cell in his body melted atop the thick, smelly mound of flesh.

Pennywell stared down at the greasy slop of flesh and bone splattered atop the rotting alien corpse. "Sorry, old boy, but it appears you stepped on an unspent round from one of the alien's weapons. I warned against messing with the remains."

Pennywell scooped up his deceased captor's discarded blowgun and poked through the gooey mess, avoiding unspent rounds mixed in the native and alien offal stew. Searching for the nickel-sized disk from Paddy's final words, he muttered a defeated curse, "Dammit, Paddy, this is like finding a needle in a bloody fucking haystack."

After a tedious hour spent separating the hunter's sticky anatomy from the alien's lifeless form—risking the same fate as the cannibal with every misdirected splatter—Pennywell gave up with a frustrated sigh.

"Sorry, Paddy, time for Plan B. Maybe your clue was never even here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pennywell reached the top of the same slippery embankment the cannibal pushed him down earlier and broke into a dead run. Ticking off a 15-minute countdown in his head, he hacked through a tangle of vines with the Ford machete, trying to get as far away as possible before his clock hit zero. Mid-swing through a thick knot of green, a radiant and intense white light strobed through the jungle preceding a shockwave of destructive energy. Blasted airborne into a verdant patch of soft ferns, he covered his head to deflect a wet mass of vegetation, burying him under a heaped pile of leaves and broken branches.

Pennywell's containment device reduced the kill box to a smoking crater at the center of a quarter-mile blast radius.

Pulling himself out of the pile, Pennywell brushed twigs and

leaves off his clothes and wiped what he hoped was dirt from his forehead, "I screwed this up pretty bad, Paddy."

Retracing a breadcrumb path in silence to the kapok tree where Paddy's ashen remains rested undisturbed amongst the roots, Pennywell recovered the backpack, jackets, and his weapon in the fading light. Stowing the bundle against the massive tree trunk, he produced a lighter and knelt by the smoldering pyre, sifting through the embers to extricate anything useful or proprietary.

While grabbing the backpack to stow the recovered items, Pike's pierced notebook fell out of a pocket and landed between his muddy boots. Although not a soul was within miles, he cast a furtive glance into the undergrowth before scooping up the pierced leather-bound notebook. Plopping onto the dirt, he leaned against a massive root with a burdensome sigh and thumbed through the pages. Renderings of buildings, floorplans, and designs filled the pages in smudgy graphite and black ink notated with a messy fountain pen longhand. A detailed sketch of an oblong pill-shaped craft parked in a jungle clearing with scribbled dimensions drew Pennywell's attention. "Aha! The dead alien's ship." His brow furrowed at a surreal sidenote: Anti-gravity propulsion?

Thumbing through the wet splotchy pages, Pennywell's gaze landed on Pike's map of the Tapajós River basin marked with a random hodge-podge of icons: the Fordlandia water tower, a piranha, snake, spider, and jaguar. The page was a mess of splotches, drips, and coffee rings that appeared almost purposeful in their placement. But why? With a weary yawn after the long awful day, he flipped to the next page and admired a detailed tree drawing. "I wish I could draw. Oh well."

The cacophonous shriek of howling monkeys from high overhead interrupted his snooping reverie. Slapping the notebook closed, he replaced it in the backpack and pondered Paddy's unmarked gravesite. "I better make this official."

The Powers That Be agent used Paddy's sharp penknife to carve a simple cross above the words:

Patrick 'Paddy' James McCoy  
May 8, 1872, to Nov 16, 1928.

“Rest in peace, my friend.”

Satisfied, he swiped at tears welling in his deep-set gray eyes and refocused on his predicament. With the nightmarish day ebbing into a balmy evening in the woods, Pennywell determined a nighttime fording of the swamp would be ill-advised. “If it’s okay, Paddy, I’ll camp here with you tonight.”

Curious indigenous eyeballs spied his every move from the thick green and black mass of rainforest encroaching on his campsite, sending a shiver up his spine, “The forest floor is no place for man or beast in the dark of night.” Spying a thick branch twenty feet above his head growing from the ancient kapok tree, he smiled, “That will do.”

Climbing a twisted mass of vines clinging to the tree, he pulled himself onto the thick, mossy branch and snuggled his aching back against the kapok’s rough and knotted trunk. Pennywell took stock of his high hide and tied the backpack to a nearby limb. Satisfied with his new accommodations, he checked his .45 and buried the machete into the light-gray bark for easy access.

Pennywell’s bare feet dangled in the damp stillness as his boots hung from another spur to dry. Something sharp jabbed his left thigh from a deep pants pocket. Careful not to upset his precarious perch, the agent removed the offending object, “Oh, yeah. I didn’t have time to add this to an evidence bag before all hell broke loose in the swamp.”

A wan smile crossed his face while examining the jagged fluorescent bone, “I guess I don’t need this anymore.” Pennywell tossed the glowing physical evidence of extraterrestrial life into the night.

The Powers That Be agent mourned the loss of Paddy while ignoring a low rumble from his stomach. Before long, the cacophonous nighttime jungle serenaded him into a deep slumber.

Artemus Pennywell | Amazon rainforest

04:11 a.m. | November 17, 1928

In the inky-black predawn hours, a noise snapped Pennywell awake. Grasping his elevated position in total darkness, he controlled his beating heart and peered downward.

A lone figure passed under his perch. Its brilliant lambency glinted off the machete blade stuck in the tree bark to Pennywell's side. Trying to conceal the refraction, he inadvertently knocked it loose. With a winced muttering of epithets, he heard it clatter to the ground. Pulling his feet atop the branch, he cocked the hammer on his .45 and waited with bated breath.

*"It is safe to come down, Artemus. I mean you no harm."*

The appeal resonated in Pennywell's addlepatated head as his body lifted from the perch and floated downward in a steady embrace familiar yet beyond his control.

The disoriented agent regained consciousness, barefoot on the spongy forest floor, blinking to clear his blurred vision. Before him, a short, round-headed, hairless individual stood with arms crossed in a wide-legged stance sporting a silvery jumpsuit glimmering into a sharp focus before Pennywell's gawking countenance.

*"Please holster your weapon, friend of McCoy."*

Pennywell feels the pistol grip in his right hand, holstering the weapon independent of his hand-eye coordination. Unable to disengage from the being's mesmerizing black-eyed gaze, the agent's initial trepidation dissolved, replaced by a warm virtual embrace.

*"My name is Ping. I am here to advise, nothing more, nothing less."*

Pennywell had heard stories of aliens assisting humankind as a relative newcomer to the nebulous and clandestine Powers That Be. They existed. He knew that.

Reading Pennywell like an open book, the alien's telepathy flowed into the young and reckless agent's brain like a running tap,

*“Your knowledge is limited, Pennywell, Artemus. I am here to advise. So, I will. The murdered alien scout was from a distant brethren Gray species with eons-old imperialist intentions. Evil manifests within every sub-atomic particle of their fragile physical forms. However, their mental acuity and technology are well beyond anything at your disposal. Their interest in this swath of jungle stems from a 90-million-year-old shipwreck. They deduced a human faction led by actors within the US government, and a man named Henry Ford was also searching for the lost ship. They are not wrong. Ford’s operative, Charles Pike, somehow discovered its location. That is why you are here in the middle of the Amazonian jungle standing barefoot in the dead of night.”*

Pennywell dared to speak aloud, rubbing his stubbled chin, “What is so important on this ship? Paddy alluded to something, but I never understood what he meant.”

*“The lost ship holds a world-killing device built by an ancestral Gray race over 90 million years ago. Whoever finds it will control Earth’s destiny.”*

Pennywell started to reply but found words spoken aloud unnecessary, “Okay. We’ll do this your way.” His brow furrowing, he posed a troubling question: “The laborers’ remains were liquified, and yet it also appeared someone shot them through the chest. Do you know what happened to them?”

*“The advance scout defended itself. Their deaths were mercifully quick. The last man’s survival was random luck, nothing more.”*

“Yeah. Sure.”

With a wave of his bony gray hand for emphasis, *“The scout was ill-equipped to repel the human’s simple weapon. From a physical perspective, we are like glass, especially enduring your planet’s gravity.”*

“Yeah, Sir Isaac Newton was a real sonofabitch.”

The Gray’s large oval eyes turn toward the early-morning sky filled with stars twinkling through the trees. *“In answer to your query, the man called Pike put a bullet through each man, postmortem, in a vain*

*attempt to make their deaths appear like a human-caused ambush. In so doing, he contacted a microscopic trace of alien blood on his skin. It is quite toxic and transmissible. Our friend, McCoy, ended his misery before he poisoned another human.”*

“I was there, too. Holy shit, am I infected?”

*“You and Paddy were immunized when you joined The Powers That Be. With the passing of McCoy, I am now assigned to you, Artemus Pennywell. I am your advisor.”*

Reaching into its silvery suit, the alien removed a dull nickel-sized disk and held it out for Pennywell.

“Bloody hell, is that the clue Paddy instructed me to find?”

*“Yes. Your task is simple: transport this disk and Pike’s notebook to your superiors at The Powers That Be and await their sage instructions.”*

Projecting an image of Pike’s detailed alien craft illustration in his head, Pennywell inquired if that was indeed the lost ship.

*“No, Artemus, that is the scout’s ship. His kind will soon discover he is missing and recover the craft. They are well aware of the risks of human interactions.”* Gesturing toward the disk held in Pennywell’s right hand, *“The shipwreck is ostensibly within the grid recorded on that disk; however, a septillion bytes obscure the exact coordinates. Please return it to The Powers That Be for safekeeping. As long as the ship remains lost, more pressing concerns will dominate The Powers That Be in the coming decades. However, Artemus, please listen and hear what I say. Your kind will someday develop technologies capable of deciphering the data on the disk. When that day comes, find the shipwreck and destroy it. I would do it myself; however, my group can only advise. We cannot breach our solemn code of non-interference.”*

“Of course. We wouldn’t want to make things too fucking easy now, would we?”

*“McCoy warned me of your quick wit and colorful language. Since the shipwreck dates back over 90 million years when Earth was much different, it is more than likely buried deep underground.”*

“Like a dinosaur fossil?”

*“There is so much of your planet that remains undiscovered.”*

“You referred to yourself as my advisor. What do you mean?”

*“I will be there for you, Pennywell, Artemus, because you must be there for humanity. I advised Paddy to recruit you and shepherd your rise through the ranks of our organization. And now, with his untimely demise, I step from the shadows.”*

“Will we meet again?”

*“Of course. You will ask questions, and I will advise. However, you will make choices with the potential to alter the course of human history. We both know humanity will ignore and disappoint most of the time. Your kind is resourceful and intelligent, but wisdom and logic are not guaranteed. Nevertheless, you must persevere. I have advised others through time and appear before you now under the auspices of a power far greater than myself. The pure energy beings I answer to could swipe me aside like an insect if they chose, but they won’t.”*

“Why not?”

*“It is a wager on good versus evil. The Light Specters desire humanity to fulfill its destiny. Envision your species as a seed cast upon a barren landscape. Will the seed endure its nascency and extend roots into the heavens? Only time will tell. However, the mere presence of the lost ship places the human enterprise at great peril.”*

“I’m sorry, the Light Specters?”

*“That is enough for now.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

Rain droplets splat atop Pennywell’s close-shaved head of thinning light-brown hair. Forcing open his bleary-eyed gaze in the refreshing morning shower, he focused on the comical countenance of a merry little Capuchin monkey. After a hearty chuckle at the furry interloper, he mused, “Okay. I have awoken to worse things in my day.”

The monkey balanced on the branch a safe distance from the

human squatter invading its home among the trees, curling its long tail through the humidity.

Adjusting his back against the uncomfortable tree trunk elicited a screech from the cautious primate.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, little fellow. I’ll be out of your flea-riddled hair in no time.”

Recounting his vivid dream while untying his boots and backpack from the branches, he rasped a throaty suggestion toward the canopy dweller, “Call room service and order a pot of coffee. Put it on my tab.”

The monkey responded by showing Pennywell a dull metal disk held in its nimble monkey fingers.

“What the hell? How did you get that?”

With a defiant hoot, the perspicacious primate pulled the nickel-sized object to its hairy chest, daring Pennywell to take it.

“I am going to need that back.”





**Non est ad astra mollis e terris via.**

**(There is no easy way from  
the earth to the stars.)**

– *Seneca the Younger*

Chapter One:

# The Invaders

Dr. Farouk Said | Cleopatra Hospital, Cairo

04:35 p.m. | August 23, 2044

**A**n exhausted duo in light-blue bloodstained scrubs clomps up flights of metal steps in the echoing emergency stairwell under glaring red emergency lights toward the rooftop level of Cleopatra Hospital's newest medical tower. Ascending to the uppermost landing, winded and mad-as-hell, the ER doctor pushes open a roof access door stenciled 22 in bold yellow numerals. With the nurse falling into lockstep at his side, Farouk Said marches through a choking vortex of dust and smoke toward the helipad where an airship's blades are winding down. Glowering through the swirling haze, the emergency medical team spies the pilot's profile tipping the brim of his cowboy hat in their direction

from inside the airship's cockpit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Farouk and the heroic nurse wrapped up their shifts in the always hectic metro hospital ER yesterday afternoon around half past three when the first alien battleships tore open the sky. After the initial shock and awe subsided, traumatized Cairo residents appeared in growing numbers at the hospital doors, wheeling, carrying, and dragging their dead and dying in a desperate quest for treatment. By early evening, the overwhelmed hospital staff maintaining beleaguered posts were at their wits' end. Across multiple flashpoints escalating into the wee hours of the following morning, employees barricaded behind locked doors while the sick and injured jockeyed for position, enflaming crowded waiting areas into violent mobs. Overtaxed orderlies stifled tears, pushing gurneys stacked with dead people zipped into a dwindling supply of body bags to a sub-level garage and arranged them in neat piles. Around midnight, Farouk's longtime associate and part-time lover took her own life. The ordeal pushed humanity beyond the breaking point.

Following the surprise alien departure sometime after 02:00 a.m., the misery of every conceivable type of injury left the remaining staff in the unfamiliar position of relying on their training. With blown-out windows and wonky emergency generators working in fits and starts, the hospital's state-of-the-art computer network synced to a vast array of cutting-edge medical equipment was rendered useless. Medical professionals whose expertise relied more on a silicon-chipped assist than they cared to admit triaged injuries with a finite supply of pain meds and oral anesthetics, gauze, tape, pills, splints, and old-school analog thermometers and blood pressure pumps plundered from a forgotten storeroom. Worse, no one could find a hard copy of the hospital emergency protocols to save their life. It existed on a cloud in a formerly digital world like everything else.

Farouk and a skeleton crew of unflappable surgeons and nurses

treated critical cases deemed operable, setting fractures, amputating ruined limbs, and delivering two babies. For the terminal patients, they could do nothing but provide an opiate-induced blissful denouement to quell agonized moans and screams echoing down the halls.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hearing a sickening crumpling noise underfoot, Farouk curses the world and tries to wave off the foolish pilot.

“The weight of that chopper could collapse the rooftop!”

The nurse’s eyes widen as she feels the tall building swaying beneath her feet.

Dismissing the pair’s demonstrative fuck off with a toothy grin, the lanky pilot flings off his headset while shutting down the massive engines and engaging the airship’s brakes. Exiting the cockpit, he hustles to open the chopper’s rear hatch adorned with a cryptic butterfly icon. After a quick check inside the darkened cabin, he stomps dust off his boots and turns to the gawking blue-clad duo, “Well, what are you waiting for? Get your asses over here! Now, goddammit!”

Mindful of the rotating blades above his gray head, Dr. Farouk Said jogs up and angles his aching upper body inside the chopper’s jury-rigged passenger cabin. The resourceful nurse slides open the opposite door, ducking her nimble frame inside the cramped space. The Egyptians find two young Caucasians slid feet-first into the narrow fuselage, covered in cuts, scrapes, and bruises under bloody dirt and sand clumps, lying elbow-to-elbow atop a thick layer of gaudy pink blankets.

“What happened to these people?”

The RN maintains her cool, stroking dirty and matted blond hair off the woman’s bruised and bloody face and checking her vitals with a stethoscope. Meanwhile, Farouk visually appraises the male victim’s injuries, shaking his head, “We have already turned away others with less severe injuries than this man. Ethically, I am obliged to decline.”

The pilot ignores the dour assessment, “Let me save you both some time, Doc. The woman is in pretty good shape. We know that already. It’s her man, here, who is scuffed up bad. Now, y’all listen to me; I don’t give a flying fuck about your so-called ethical dilemma. You will treat them at this hospital.”

Working on 24 hours of no sleep, Farouk’s anger and frustration explode in a vitriolic tirade at the rugged American emulating a walking, talking Marlboro man, “Are you insane? We tried to warn you not to land. Everything is down. We cannot run any tests or scans to address this fellow’s obvious injuries. Look around, you fool! This guy is as good as dead already. Join the club because this is just Day One. Wait until tomorrow and the day after that. This hospital will be hell on Earth, making you wish the aliens stayed to finish the job.”

The nurse chimes in, “Farouk, he is right. The woman suffers from blood loss and dehydration, not to mention the strangest burn marks I have ever seen, but her vitals are okay.”

Reaching across the female, she quickly assesses the male’s injuries: “This one has a compound fracture on his right arm, finger dislocations, broken ribs, probably a collapsed lung, and of course, his bleeding head trauma. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has brain swelling and internal hemorrhaging.” Shaking her head in awe, the man is still alive, “God only knows what else.”

Turning nose-to-nose with the pilot, “You made a horrible mistake bringing them here. We have nothing but a backup generator cutting in and out. Every medical device is shot to hell. If you have enough fuel, try flying him to Alexandria. I hear they are in better shape up there.”

Part of The Powers That Be rescue and extraction team retrieving survivors from hundreds of feet beneath the Giza Plateau since predawn, the Texan was in no mood to hear what couldn’t be done. Reaching into a vest pocket, he removes a half-dollar-size gold coin embossed with The Powers That Be symbol opposite a peony flower motif surrounding

the initials PTB. He presents it to the bewildered surgeon with a weary smile, “Doc, I want you to take this coin and remember who gave it to you. Gold is the future, my friend. A team of experts in the medical disciplines and a crack security squad are en route to help you get this place up and running to fix up my friends, here,” winking at the nurse, “and all the other patients. Not just the easy ones, for God’s sake. Hellfire, I could splint a sprained wrist. We want to save every soul who walks through your door from this point forward. Got it?”

Farouk stammers, turning the gold coin in his nimble surgeon’s hand, “I need to confer with my superiors and their superiors. That will take days, if not weeks.”

“Doc, you are thinking like the day before yesterday.” Jabbing two fingers into Farouk’s chest, “As of this very fucking second, you are in charge. There is no one else coming. Do you understand what it is I am telling you?”

The middle-aged doctor glances at his attractive raven-haired nurse, who shrugs back at him, “We need help, Farouk. People are dying downstairs as we speak. What can the administration do, fire us?”

Clad in a western-style denim shirt, worn jeans, and boots, all covered in fine red dust, the grizzled chopper pilot smiles below his horseshoe mustache at the dark-complected nurse, “What’s your name, darling?”

“Zahra.”

“Well, Zahra. That’s a lovely name, by the way. Here’s a coin for you, too.”

Barney and Betty Hill | Cleopatra Hospital, Cairo

12:15 p.m. | August 24, 2044

A resourceful young messenger revs his antique gas-powered moped past windowless buildings along clogged and impassable streets

in the smoldering aftermath of the aborted alien invasion less than two days earlier. Zigging and zagging around abandoned inoperable vehicles, he brakes, accelerates, brakes, block after shattered block. Passing emergency crews, wailing mothers, and a catatonic populace in need of a digital fix not forthcoming anytime soon, he screeches to a stop at another ad hoc checkpoint. Shorthanded local constabularies set up roadblocks in a clumsy effort to appear in charge against multiple fronts of scared and angry citizens transmogrified into panicked mobs of looters and rioters.

Navigating detours, he avoids a loud and chanting throng by steering down an alley that veers left into another dead-end—doubling back, the kid bursts through a torrent of dirty water from busted sewage and water pipes crossing another unrecognizable street. Soaking wet and verging on defeat, he skids to a stop at his destination: the Cleopatra Hospital complex, smack dab in the heart of Cairo, Egypt. Vaulting up the circular driveway under a half-collapsed porte cochère, he leans his bike against a cracked pillar and opens the sopping wicker basket attached to the moped's splattered purple frame behind his seat. He lifts out a simple wooden box and a thick manila envelope wax-sealed with an official-looking stamp. With a start, he notices half the envelope is water-soaked. Hustling toward the shattered front entrance, he waves it in the dry air and steps across the busted glass threshold into Hospital Building C – Main Floor – Front Lobby.

A hulking security guard in full camo gear with an Uzi slung across his back eclipses the boy's advance, "State your business, or turn around and leave."

Stammering before the imposing man's no-nonsense demeanor, "I have a delivery of, uh, pee-o-nees, and this envelope for ..." the teenager looks at the illegible names scribbled on his wet left hand. "Oh no. Uh, sir. Yes, sir. Just a minute, I have their names here somewhere." The kid jabs his hands into empty pockets buying time, trying to remember the western names.

The gruff guard lurches forward, preparing to lift the kid by his scrotum and toss him out the door.

“Wait. I remember. Their names are, uh, hang on. Americans. Yeah, that is right. Uh, Barney and Betty Hill!” With a hesitant pause, “... I think.”

The armed guard huffs a weary sigh, unrolls a scribbled patient registry from a side pocket in his tech vest, and flips through stapled pages, “Sorry kid, those names are not on my list.”

Deflated, wet, and tired, the boy turns to exit through the shattered double doors.

“Hey, kid, wait a minute. Did you say you have peonies? As in flowers, right?”

The skinny 15-year-old turns and holds up a box containing the arrangement. “Yeah. Why?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Cowboy tips his signature Stetson, ferrying another load of alien tech, bottled waters, and pizzas from Chrysalis HQ to Cleopatra Hospital. Aside from miraculous pharmacological remedies and off-world surgical and diagnostic equipment courtesy of The Advisors, the Texan delivers hope in the glint of gold coins to besieged hospital staffers and patients during the chaotic midday hours of *Aliens + 1*.

As Chrysalis technicians repurpose entire floors, installing arrays of mysterious medical instrumentation, the unboxing of a metallic figure catches everyone’s attention. Cleopatra Hospital’s exhausted surgeons pause the endless parade of patients wheeling in and out of pop-up hermetically-sealed operating units, eager to witness the shiny humanoid commence its first procedure: a craniotomy on the shaved head of the critical 27-year-old male from the chopper.

Peering through clear plastic into a confining operating space, Dr. Said watches the multitasking automaton’s dexterous hands move across the anesthetized patient with a magician’s skill. Sensing the



bloody and bedraggled staff's stare-eyed wonder, he quips, "This chap will put us out of business," eliciting nervous laughter.

No one notices the robot place a thin wafer on the man's brain before replacing the skull section and closing the C-shaped incision on the left side of his head.

Edward Laughton | Private Chiswick estate, West London  
12:25 p.m. | August 25, 2044

Another rap on the front door of his West London home distracts Edward Laughton from just arrived file boxes teetered in haphazard stacks in his cramped living room space. He yells toward the door with an exasperated huff, "Go away! Bloody hell! I can't accommodate any more boxes! We are all full up. Why don't you bugger-off to my mate Travis over in Ealing? The fucker lives in a veritable mansion!"

On the heels of the invasion, word spread like wildfire among London-based PTB shell companies that Murdock & Ripley—Laughton's tony high-rise law firm headquarters—lay in smoldering ruins. The prospect of reams of inculpatory evidence scattered amongst the debris falling into the wrong hands prompted shady PTB operators to crawl from the woodwork and jettison boxloads at Laughton's home address. To the barrister's utter shock and horror, a PTB lackey had posted his renovated former candle factory Chiswick estate on a shielded PTB intranet site as a fallback location for document dumpers.

Furious that his private residence was revealed to London's criminal underworld without his consent, he had already received over a dozen visits from shellshocked Londoners operating for years, sometimes decades, behind PTB's veneer of legitimacy. He had already received boxloads from a Chelsea travel agency deep into the IOSC tourist business this morning, plus foul-smelling ledgers, notes, pictures, and drives from a world-renowned Notting Hill Indian restaurant doubling

as a PTB dead drop location. Another stack contained nothing but bundled high-denomination Euros sequestered from a hole-in-the-wall computer repair business splitting allegiance between MI6 and the PTB.

Sipping bottled water from an emergency stash hidden behind a walled-off pantry—an insider perk—Laughton knew the file boxes contained a fraction of the damning evidence waiting to be revealed to a world lusting for a villain to punish in place of their own apathetic incompetence. However, London was ravaged beyond recognition: Buckingham Palace's luck ran out; Westminster and the Tower of London lay in ruins; bodies logjammed against collapsed bridges along the Thames—a health crisis unseen since the plague. Penny-ante misdeeds of the miscreants showing up at the barrister's private residence would be moot if not for the potential paper trail exposure scattered among the law firm's collapsed edifice.

Focusing on a beat-up old box from the small Chrysalis office out at Heathrow, Laughton attempts to tune out the pervasive knocking, “Go away!” The box labeled with a familiar butterfly logo contained old flight logs, letters, passports, and cash. Unfolding a dog-eared map of the Brazilian jungle, a faded polaroid of two shady characters, standing arm-in-arm, smoking fat stogeys, falls to the floor between his loafers. Opening the map, he sees a runway carved out of the jungle circled in thick black grease pencil. Scooping up the photo, he studies a middle-aged pair striking a jolly pose in full camo gear before pallets of what appears to be cocaine. Grabbing his readers, the barrister flips the photo and reads the scribbled caption on the back: ‘Pablo and Artemus – Christmas 1975.’

“For Christ's sake, what was Artemus doing with the cartel?” With a quick calculation in his tired head, “Wait just one bloody minute here, how the fuck old is he?”

More persistent knocking prompts him to drop the faded polaroid and stretch with a loud yawn. The widower steps over Nancy, whose feline tabby form poises behind a crushed box, ready to pounce

on a loose scrap of paper.

“I’m coming. Hold your horses.”

The door cracks open onto a dapper young man with an expectant smile on his smooth face, “Edward Laughton?”

Laughton scans the uneven walkway looking for another pushcart loaded with boxes, relieved to find nothing but the boy’s parked scooter down at the curb.

“What can I do for you, young man?”

“Quite a lot, sir. My boss, Griffin Pike, would like to retain your services to help us take down your client, the PTB.”

Laughton peers down both directions of his formerly neat and tidy Chiswick street, now littered with inert vehicles under downed lines, fallen branches, crumbled walls, and broken glass, “The Griffin Pike? As in SATstar Industries?”

“One and the same.”

“Really? I’m listening.”

“Excellent, sir; you are indeed a sharp legal mind. We understand your firm’s HQ was destroyed, and your general partner is among the casualties. Our condolences. Nevertheless, my boss needs your assistance to take down the PTB once and for all.”

“Why me? Does Pike understand I am now the senior PTB outside legal counsel by default?”

“He most certainly does, sir. However, your public repudiations of Artemus Pennywell are also common knowledge.”

“Well, young man, Murdock handled the old coot. Our paths rarely crossed, and it was always unpleasant when they did. However, your request puts me in an awkward position. Even entertaining this conversation breaches common ethical standards.”

Sensing the aristocratic barrister’s reticence, the young man cuts to the chase, “I’m sorry, sir, but we only need your eyeball.”

“My eyeball?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Pike seeks the contents of a safe deposit box at a

Royal Bank of Scotland branch adjacent to Trafalgar Square. The entire area was decimated; however, the underground vault is intact, and the grounds are secured by Mr. Pike's guards. But as luck would have it, the biometric security system requires a Murdock & Ripley partner-level retinal scan to access the vault.

The unsolicited query at his doorstep from one of Pike's lackeys was unexpected but not too surprising. What shocked him was the swiftness of his reply, "I can't believe I am saying this, but what the hell, I'll do it."

"Good show, sir! Jolly good show."

"What is Pike looking for in that vault?"

"That information is beyond my need to know. I'm just the messenger."

The deep personal animus Laughton internalized toward his reclusive client, Artemus Pennywell, began long before Invasion Day and a looming list of indictments and finger-pointing. The tall and silver-haired English barrister spent years watching the petulant man humiliate colleagues with brutal and pitiless disregard. He also took more than his share of slings and arrows from the vile old codger while facilitating deals for the *betterment of humanity* with a rogue's gallery of presidents, prime ministers, potentates, religious leaders, dictators, underworld bosses, and high-tech grifters. Men like Griffin Pike.

While The Powers That Be held a well-earned reputation as an untouchable organization above the inanities of the human condition, Pennywell's inner circle, The Council, cut deals through Murdock & Ripley, shepherding projects through dens of wolves—with some in sheep's clothing. Want a pharmaceutical factory in Jakarta? An IOSC launchpad in Ankara? A children's hospital in Sudan? The PTB viewed every transaction through a singular human lens. The 300-plus-year organization's sole redeeming quality men like Laughton used to rationalize a worldwide portfolio of positive outcomes realized through deals with the devil.

Laughton winces, hearing another explosion off in the distance, “One problem, the roads are impassable, and the city is in total anarchy. How would I get there? It’s too far to walk.”

“Well, sir. I can get you there on my bike if you don’t mind a little wind in your face.”

Ill-prepared to leave his house in such a muddled state, Laughton sighs, “Well, I can’t go now. I have to take care of Nancy.”

“Oh. Right, sir. I did not mean to infer straight away. I will contact my superior with your agreement and be in touch within the next few days. Please give the missus my regards.”

Laughton starts to correct the record, then pauses with a smile, “I’ll do that.”

Betty Hill | Cleopatra Hospital, Cairo

07:05 a.m. | August 26, 2044

Bright morning sunshine glows around blackout shades covering a replaced picture window overlooking a besieged Cairo cityscape from a spacious private suite on the Cleopatra Hospital tower’s 20th floor. Stirring awake, Betty Hill turns her head to the blurry light, struggling to recall why she is there. Lifting her right arm to touch itchy facial bandages, she disturbs a looped IV line, setting off an alarm on the stand-mounted monitor next to her raised multifunctional bed.

A nurse enters within seconds and switches off the grating beeping noise. Writing ‘Nurse Zahra’ on the whiteboard in a flowing script, she turns to address her bleary-eyed patient, “Good morning, Mrs. Hill; how are you feeling?”

Mrs. Hill coughs a reply, gesturing at her throat.

“Water? Yes, of course. I will be right back.”

Déjà vu of another instance, awakening alone in a hospital room, sends chills down Betty’s spine. That nightmarish morning after

found her handcuffed to a metal bed rail staring down a lecherous female deputy and a murder charge. She studies her bruised and bandaged, yet unrestrained, right wrist through swollen eyes. Just like that, a lifetime of memories floods back into her brain. Gathering her wits about her, Betty catches a glimpse of Zahra returning with an ice cup.

“Suck on these ice chips, dear, and try to rest your vocal cords. By the way, Dr. Said is quite pleased with your recovery, especially the burns on your hands which are looking much better.”

Her eyes awash with tears, Betty clutches her bandaged right hand around the nurse’s white cuffed sleeve, garbling, “How long?”

Nurse Zahra rests Betty’s thick-wrapped appendage atop the bedsheets with a gentle pat, “You are starting your third day under our care.” Adjusting the twisted IV, she continues, “I know you have questions. We are more than a little curious about you, as well. You and your husband have friends in high places.” The nurse injects a dose of levity with a slight chuckle, “You scream out loud with night terrors featuring someone named Harry. An old boyfriend, perhaps? At any rate, he must have been a real jerk to make you cry out in blood-curdling screams in your sleep. No wonder your voice is so weak.” Before leaving, the nurse notes Betty’s vitals, “I will check back on you soon. Get some rest.”

Watching the kind nurse exit, Betty presses her head against the pillows and stares at a small hole in the ceiling tiles, “You have no idea.”

Muffled voices resonate from the darkened hallway, but Betty cannot interpret the words in her addled mind, “That sounds like Arabic; I need to find Owen.”

Grabbing her bed controller, Betty presses a button, and the hinged side rail angles down. Swinging bare legs covered in cuts and bruises over the side, she slides off the firm mattress and winces as her numb feet contact the cold tile floor. Flinging her IV line over the covers, the dizzy patient checks the door while pulling the wheeled stand within reach for support. Shaking off a heady swoon, she straightens onto shaky

legs, adjusts her grip on the metal pole, and slides her left foot forward. Focusing on a potted palm across the hall outside the half-open door, the room goes sideways, and she crumples to the floor. Undeterred, she pulls onto her hands and knees, mooning the hallway with her hospital gown hanging untied from her shoulders.

A shuffle of footsteps comes from behind, and Betty feels strong arms lift her vulnerable form back atop the bed.

A disembodied voice breaks the silence, “Now, see here, Mrs. Hill, we can’t have you gallivanting off half-cocked and half-dressed to boot.”

Scanning around the low-lit hospital room, her eyes meet the pleasant face of the strapping young orderly with the hairy, muscular arms who lifted her off the floor. Reaching for the ice cup, she pours one over her chapped, peeling lips and focuses past him onto a man sitting in a shadowed recess beside a tall armoire. Leaning forward with a wide-eyed recognition, Betty mouths the man’s name while conjuring the nickname she gave the geeky young fellow only a few days earlier: ‘Doubletake.’

Roy Kendall, the Powers That Be psychologist who participated in her third degree at the Chrysalis Air facility the night before the alien invasion, dismisses the orderly and pulls the shade up a third, letting in more light. “I cannot tell you how excited and relieved everyone was to find you alive, Mrs. Hill.”

About to jump out of her skin, Betty points at the whiteboard.

Roy steps over and unhooks it from the wall. “I see. Here you are.”

Betty props the 3-foot board over her crisscrossed cut-up legs and scribbles her first word: **OWEN?**

Doubletake nods and moves to close the door, “It is good to see you again, Mrs. Haig. Not only did you save the world, but you were spot on about my colleague, Greta. She was in cahoots with Tarek Hamed.”

**BITCH**

“Yeah, well. You are an excellent judge of character. She took me by surprise, and I am trained to recognize psychotic behavior.”

**WHAT ABOUT OWEN?**

“He is in serious condition in the ICU. The last I heard, he had acquired a lung infection which prompted an emergency surgery. His excellent physical shape undoubtedly saved his life. I am sure they will let you see him as soon as he is stable.”

**THANK YOU! WHY BETTY?**

The door swings open, prompting Roy to reach forward and swipe off the last question with the side of his hand.

Zahra shoots him a suspicious glance, “What are we up to? Hangman? Tic-tac-toe? How did you get in here?”

Roy shoots the nurse a nervous smile, holding up his visitor pass hooked to a lanyard over his coral-pink polo and tan slacks. “This patient has a lot of questions.”

Rachel watches Zahra sidle around Doubletake while balancing a syringe and vials atop a metal tray, “What is your pain level, Mrs. Hill?”

With her bandaged hand, Rachel gestures “so-so,” watching the nurse empty a light-yellow fluid from the syringe through the cannula taped inside her left forearm. “That was for the pain, dear.” Replacing the first syringe with a new vial, “This one will ease your anxiety so you can rest.” Betty shakes her head, ‘No!’ furrowing her cut-up brow and retracting her arm to her bruised chest.

Zahra sighs and shrugs her shoulders, “Well, you say that now. I’ll check back in an hour.” Recording Betty’s blood pressure on the chart at the foot of the bed, the Egyptian caregiver snatches the whiteboard off the patient’s lap and rehangs it on the wall. She shoots Roy a devilish smile on her way out the door, “Check for a notepad in the side table drawer and leave my whiteboard on the wall.”

Ensuring the coast is clear, Roy hands Betty a Cleopatra Hospital



pad and pen while leaning over with a conspiratorial whisper, “The staff know you as Betty Hill. Barney is your husband. The Cowboy came up with your new names when he brought you here.”

Rachel takes the paper pad and scribbles: **THEY WERE ABDUCTED.**

“Yeah, I know. The Texan has a wicked sense of humor. What can I say? He has been in and out of here multiple times while you were out.”

#### **WHY AN ALIAS?**

“You and Owen are fast becoming urban legends. Thousands of people witnessed our rescue operation the terrible morning after the invaders’ miraculous retreat. They made a leap of logic between the aliens and our presence on the Giza Plateau. A huge crowd gathered to watch when we finally pulled everyone back to the surface. We had to think fast. We loaded both of you into the black chopper and rushed here. There was not enough time for subterfuge. Your husband was at death’s door. I will not lie to you; he is in serious but guarded condition. People followed the chopper’s path and saw it land on the roof. They know someone in this building is associated with the invasion. We are doing our best to keep you both anonymous.”

#### **FLYNN?**

Aside from you and your husband, we recovered four others from under the pyramid. A deceased female tour guide was murdered by Tarek Hamed, who is in guarded condition and facing a litany of charges. And then there is the Egyptian army captain, Mohammed Faisel. The poor man suffered numerous broken bones and internal injuries, but his rambling account concerns us. People are listening.” Doubletake leans closer and lowers his voice to a whisper, “We handed him back to the Egyptians after extraction, which turned out to be a mistake. The man recounts an incredible tale of your exploits to anyone willing to listen. Fortunately, it sounds like the PTSD ramblings of a

shell-shocked veteran way past retirement. However, given the current circumstances, people will swallow almost anything, spawning wild rumors of a woman who shoots fire from her hands like a superhero.

**SUPERHERO? I DON'T CARE WHAT PEOPLE SAY. I CAN'T DO IT ANYMORE.**

Rachel shows Doubletake the thick bandages covering star-shaped second-degree burns across both palms.

**MY HANDS HURT.**

“I am sorry, Rachel.”

With unmasked frustration, Rachel fumbles the pen in her fingers, sticking out from the thick layers of gauze, circling Flynn’s name.

Doubletake nods, “Okay. Agent Flynn suffered a serious gunshot wound. The alien powder staunched the damage, but he needs a new liver. By now, Nina should be escorting him to our lunar hospital facility.”

**REALLY? THE MOON?**

“Yes. The Moon.” Roy chuckles, “After all you have been through, that is what surprises you?”

Noticing the droopy peony arrangement in a glass vase, “Your flowers look a little thirsty; allow me.” Returning from the bathroom with the vase in hand and a sheepish grin, he replaces it on the side table next to an unopened wax-sealed manila envelope. “How silly of me. There is no running water in the lavatory. Anyway, you need to rest. That is enough for now. You are the only patient on the 20th floor. Every point of entry is under surveillance. Your rather attractive nurse, Zahra, her night shift counterpart, and the muscular young fellow from earlier are a few of the small staff allowed up here per Doctor Said’s orders. All are well-paid to keep their mouths shut and eyes open.”

**THE NURSE LIKES YOU**

Betty and the nerdy young psychologist exchange a smile like a couple of high schoolers.

Richard | PTB HQ, Scotland

11:35 a.m. | August 26, 2044

Numbers 4 and 5 bisect the gleaming white Level C subterranean laboratory, bypassing workbenches brimming with scientific instruments, glassware, microscopes, and test kit paraphernalia abandoned before the invasion. The synthetic sisters pause before a biometric pad mounted at eye level on the smoothed rock wall at the far end of the bright-lit expanse. 4 looks on as 5 positions a dreamy blue retina before the scanner, unlocking thick metal doors fronting a rough-hewn antechamber carved even farther out of eons-old Scottish sediment. Entering the newest addition to The Powers That Be underground headquarters far beneath Crichton Castle's crumbling ramparts, motion-activated ceiling lights illuminate six hibernation chambers in perfect alignment. The gleaming futuristic units reflect multi-hued lights and screens atop contoured lids made of thick smoky glass sealed over plush padded compartments resting at waist height atop sturdy customized carts. Thick bundled wiring and hoses attached to plugs and connectors dedicated to each unit snake across the chiseled floorspace before disappearing through bored openings in the Scottish rock toward shielded life support and power reserves farther underground.

The pair step around an unkempt mass of tubes and blankets spilling out of the emptied first chamber, focusing on the second chamber's occupant. The replicants activate the unit's screen and review the man's vitals. Noting nothing more than a spiked LDL, they initiate the wake-up program. 5 detaches a hose with a loud whoosh and watches condensation collect on the glassy tinted hood before unplugging bundled wires looped into the stand. Executing the coordinated 2-person procedure designed to revive the frail human inside while mitigating physiological complications, 4 sidesteps a loosened mass of hoses and moves to the head of the unit. Acknowledging 5's telepathic thumbs-up, she triggers resuscitation with the press of a button, and

in response, the hibernation chamber's darkened interior strobes to life under the tinted glass. With her task complete, 5 watches 4 lowering her delicate-featured face close to the curved reflective surface, checking her boss's peaceful repose. The man's steady respiration fogs the glass, obscuring her view, a good sign. Exhibiting no outward symptoms of distress, he appears unmoved from when she assisted him inside under terrible duress over three days earlier: supine with folded hands atop his barrel chest and a slight smile on his distinguished face.

With a raised eyebrow of what could be construed as frustration—were 4 capable of such emotion—she instructs 5 to double-check his vitals and the life support stats. All is normal for wake-up, yet the man remains sleeping like an angel. Meeting her partner's dark-eyed gaze, 4 shrugs and taps her ring finger on the curved glass above the man's stubborn sleepy-headed repose. Departing from the well-timed protocol, 4 addresses her boss with words spoken aloud through the thick glass, "Professor King? Richard? You should be waking up by now."

Ensnared within the claustrophobic space, Richard hears a muffled voice with the abject temerity to disturb his vivid dreams. Desperate to maintain his blissful sedation, he bellows in a loud even tone, "Go away!"

An annoying and incessant tapping accompanies the muffled voice, "Professor, it is time to wake up, sir."

Cursing under his breath, Richard King blinks open his crusty eyes and tries to quantify the upside-down countenance staring at him through the foggy glass. Stretching his body with a loud yawn, he feels the temperature rising, "Jesus, it is like an oven in this damn thing."

4 smiles, watching her boss's pudgy index finger drawing a sad face in the steamy glass.

"Okay, playtime is over."

Confident her boss is awake and semi-alert, the robots break the chamber's seal with a loud hiss followed by an ear-popping release of pressure. The curved glass lid opens on a springy hinge, and Richard

King bolts upright at the waist like a vampire rising from its coffin.

Peeling off sensors and pulling oxygen tubes from his nose, Richard looks past his wiggling toes toward a smiling Number 5. Like a smack in the face, the entirety of the alien invasion floods his mind. Scratching his unruly shock of charcoal-gray bedhead, he clears his raspy throat, "How long?"

Number 5 offers a water bottle, "Professor, you were out for 88 hours and 24 minutes."

"Is that all? I must say I am surprised to be alive." Scratching his 3-day growth of beard, he glances around the antechamber, "Of course, I am heartened and relieved to see you both. Are we under alien rule? Should I hide? What is happening on the surface?"

"The CEO will debrief you, Professor. Suffice it to say, humans are still in charge of the planet."

Richard takes a long swig and wipes his mouth on his sleeve, "Well, that has its pluses and minuses, doesn't it?" Noticing the first hibernation chamber's opened lid draped with a tangle of unhooked hoses and wires, Richard hoists himself over the side onto a jelly-legged stance.

In unison, 4 and 5 grapple the unwieldy man by his rounded shoulders and prop him in their sturdy hold, "Please remember, it will take time to regain your strength. You must allow your circulation and muscle memory to return before moving around. Slow and steady."

"Thank you both for your assistance." Turning nose-to-nose with Number 5, King's lined face widens into a sheepish grin, "You know, I had the most remarkable dream. I would ask to stay longer, but it seems I soiled myself during my hibernation."

Propped between Numbers 4 and 5, Professor Richard King, The Powers That Be chief scientist in charge of the Level C laboratory beneath the Scottish Lowlands castle complex, is assisted to his private quarters for much-needed teeth brushing, a hot shower, and a change of clothes.

Andrew | PTB HQ, Scotland  
08:45 p.m. | August 26, 2044

Far below storied castle ramparts situated in verdant Lowlands countryside, Andrew exits the lift onto Level C. Heading across Richard King's laboratory past the sea monkey aquarium, he nods toward Number 16. The white-coated replicant returns a bright smile, standing atop a ladder while dangling raw chicken inches above the murky green water, enticing the sharp-toothed aquatic alien beastie to feast. Reaching the opposite end of the lab, he parts red double doors and enters the PTB think tank.

Intelligent synthetic eyes adjust from the bright lab lighting to a moody multi-hued ambiance as Andrew's sculpted gaze scans an asymmetric assemblage of brainstorming pods. Situated on stepped tiers inside the chiseled-out basketball court-sized expanse, each pod's forward-thinking, unique design stimulates creativity and inventiveness via heightened sensorial experiences while reclining on cutting-edge tech-heavy furniture brimming with gadgetry.

Andrew's keen auditory sensors pick up crackling sounds from a wafer-thin monitor replaying staticky PTB drone feeds monitoring flashpoints raging worldwide. Confident the only two humans on Level C are seated within that elevated pod, Andrew takes a deep breath and pats the folded letter in his pocket. Vaulting up a short flight of steps, he opens the portal and finds Artemus Pennywell's lanky form stretched across a black leather couch, sound asleep. To the CEO's right, Richard King sits on the edge of a Pininfarina chair hunched over a low coffee table, eating fried chicken while availing himself of the multi-function Italian recliner's vibratory feature set.

Richard licks his thick fingers and smiles at the robot, "Hello, Andrew, it's good to see you again. It is amazing how ravished I was after only three days in hibernation. Can you imagine if it had been years? My God, I'd eat a horse."

“Is that from the same chicken supply 16 feeds to the sea monkey, Professor?”

Richard stares at the greasy leg bone pinched between his thumb and forefinger, “She cooked it in my air fryer, Andrew. It tastes delicious.”

Stirring awake on the long sofa with his eyes shut tight, Pennywell addresses his valet, “What is it now, Andrew?”

“Sir, we received a rather troubling communication.”

Scooting his disheveled frame upright on the plush cushions with a burdensome sigh, Pennywell rubs his eyes and yawns, “There is a pile of bullshit communications in every language known to God littering my desk. Why is this one so damned important?”

“It’s from Griffin Pike.”

Pennywell shifts from sleep-deprived senior to sharp-as-nails CEO, “I was hoping he perished in the attack. Go ahead and read it to me, Andrew. What does the smug motherfucker have to say?”

Andrew unfolds the thin faxed sheet, scanning the double-spaced contents, “You will hate this, sir.”

Pennywell smooths back wispy gray hair with an affirmative nod, unrolls his shirt sleeves, and slides socked feet back into his shoes, “I hate everything, Andrew. Why should this be any different?” Distracted by Richard dabbing crumbled chicken remnants off a serving tray on the low coffee table, he mumbles more, “This day of reckoning is long overdue.”

“Okay. Here it goes. Try to hold your comments until I finish.”

**Attention:**

**Artemus Pennywell, CEO, The Powers That Be.**

This correspondence is a formal invitation for you and The Council to attend a post-invasion hearing with YOU as the honored guest. This meeting is open to the

world's surviving public and private entities convening a tribunal inside the World Forum Theater at the Hague on September 1, 2044. You are under no formal subpoena, but this forum will be your only public opportunity to defend against a growing list of indictments targeting you and The Powers That Be. The world suffered an extinction-level disaster impacting every human being on our planet. Someone must pay the price.

In the fiery aftermath of the aliens' unexpected and miraculous retreat, public and private entities crawled from the wreckage, mad as hell and in need of answers. More to the point, they desire someone else to blame. In most quarters of the world, it is common knowledge that The Powers That Be keep their extraterrestrial alliances close to the vest. And yet, despite your close ties, you neglected to warn world leaders of the impending apocalypse. Your silence was unconscionable, immoral, and a crime against humanity, eclipsing Hitler, Stalin, and Mao combined.

With that said, the following counts will be adjudicated during the multi-day proceeding:

**Count One:** The Powers That Be possessed intelligence that an alien invasion was imminent but failed to warn the world's governments.

**Count Two:** The Powers That Be utilized alien shielding to protect their infrastructure from the devastating EMP effects generated by fleets of ships darkening every continent. The cascade of death and destruction in the wake of worldwide darkness is beyond description.



**Count Three:** The Powers That Be mismanagement of the International Outer Space Consortium, or IOSC, resulted in over 4,000 deaths from multiple orbiters crashing back to Earth. Many thousands more innocent civilian casualties resulted from the horrific impacts.

There are additional counts, but those mentioned herein should provide your overpaid legal counsel enough to conjure a defense of the indefensible. I wish you luck, sir.

Further, as the event's host and coordinator, I have commandeered SATstar's immense resources to facilitate this tribunal. We both know I availed myself of your tech. Put that aside. It is of no consequence to the rest of the world lying in ruins. And yet it compelled me to write to you as a courtesy before releasing my official presentation inviting the world to join me in the Netherlands in person or via remote.

I have arranged accommodations and security for you and your team at the adjacent hotel, which came through the onslaught relatively, unscathed like the theater complex. I trust you have access to transportation beyond my capabilities. However, if you need a ride, please let us know."

Griffin Pike, *CEO, SATstar Industries*

**PS** – Do not preempt the tribunal by leaking this communique to the press. The Fourth Estate is dead, dark, or in my pocket. A new and better human civilization will rise from the ashes. It is you and your organization on the verge of extinction. However, I am offering an

opportunity to plead your case before bowing out with grace and dignity. The kind of exit you and Paddy McCoy denied my ancestor, Charles Pike, in 1928 when you murdered him in cold blood. Yes, Mr. Pennywell, I know about your Amazon misadventure and the existence of a lost ship described in great detail in a notebook that, by rights, belongs to me.

*Your reckoning day is nigh.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew folds the letter and replaces it in his pocket for safekeeping.

Richard dabs his mouth with a napkin and stands to make a hasty exit, “Andrew, please let me know if I can be of assistance. I am not an expert on the legalities, but I believe in the PTB’s mission. We are not guilty of any of those crimes.”

Pennywell and Andrew exchange a quick glance before the CEO proffers a gentle nod toward his old friend, “Yes, Richard. That would be great.”

Andrew steps aside, accommodating Richard’s quick exit from the pod while noting Pennywell’s calm reaction to the letter with faint robot surprise.

Pennywell senses Andrew’s disapproving stare without needing to look up. “Before you say anything, Andrew, let Richard catch up on his own. Everybody has a job down here. If you must know, I put Professor John Stevens on the lost ship because I needed King’s focus square on the Gorks and the golden ellipse situation.”

“That does not square with reality, sir.”

“Reality? You want to talk about reality?” Turning toward the 160-inch paper-thin monitor, Pennywell watches drone footage of the iconic Burj Khalifa in Dubai lighting up the screen, akin to a roman

candle. The fully engulfed structural marvel breaks apart in a terrifying cascade of sections before pancaking to the ground in a tidal wave of smoke and debris. “There’s your reality, my friend. And I don’t give a flying fuck what Pike says; I’m not paying for shit like that.”

“Sir, please don’t underestimate this situation. Griffin Pike only gives us a few days to set up a defense and get our people to the Netherlands. Do I have your permission to convene an emergency meeting of The Council?”

“That depends. Do we know which members survived the invasion?”

“I included an up-to-date list in your morning briefing, which I take it you never read.”

“Don’t be a wise-ass, Andrew. Just give me the bad news.”

“Yes, sir. On a positive note, eight are alive and well. And I think we can assemble them in London in short order and form a cohesive defense.”

“I hate being on defense.” Scrutinizing his android valet, Pennywell’s famous short temper finally erupts, “Jesus H. Christ, Andrew, give me the casualty report. Aside from Kobayashi’s heart attack, which Council members died during the fucking invasion?”

“My apologies, sir. Aldo Santamaria was at a seaside resort in Half Moon Bay attending his daughter’s wedding when a tidal wave swept everything out into the Pacific.”

“Jesus. Now we need a new COO.” Switching his demeanor to glib on a dime, he flashes a toothy smile toward Andrew, “You want a job?”

“No. How would you say it? Hell no.” Andrew proceeds with a subtle head shake, “Franklin Pierce was also confirmed killed in the Freedom Tower collapse.”

“Bad luck for Frank, wrong place at the wrong time. Okay, we’re down a COO and a CFO. Who else?”

“John Murdock.”

Huffing a weary sigh, Pennywell hunches over and swipes away a genuine tear. “Goddammit, not old John.”

“The Murdock and Ripley building was flattened by the Gorks. The firm lost over 80 percent of their people, including Mr. Murdock.”

“That is a devastating loss for them and a potential intelligence disaster. Is the site secure?”

“Viraj Patel ...” Andrew notes Pennywell’s blank stare, “your Chief of Global Logistics. Come on, sir.”

“Yeah, of course, the footballer, I know whom you mean. Throws a helluva party.”

“One and the same. Viraj is activating our contacts in the London police department and Scotland Yard to seal the site. In the meantime, we’re advising any London operatives who feel they may be exposed to document dump at Edward Laughton’s home address.”

“Why Laughton? That prick hates us.”

“As of today, he is Murdock and Ripley’s senior surviving shareholder. And while he has maintained a steady animus against us through the years, he is our outside legal counsel by default.”

“Not for long, Andrew. I’m sure Ed would stab me in the back, Brutus style, given the opportunity.”

“Nevertheless, we will need Mr. Laughton’s international law expertise.”

“What about that firecracker of an in-house lawyer we brought onto the Council last year?”

“Vita Carrera?”

“Yes, that’s her name! Get her ass to The Hague. I want eyes on the ground to see what we are up against.”

“Okay, but I think we may want to include her in our London meeting first. We need all the help we can get. This could spell the end of The Powers That Be.”

Waving a dismissive hand toward his too-serious valet, Pennywell leans back on the plush couch, a mischievous grin creasing

his expressive face, “Andrew, we have the truth on our side. Griffin Pike admitted he availed himself of the Advisors’ EMP shielding tech on his satellites. I’m glad he did. We use that network too. Otherwise, the motherfucker would be reduced to eating beans out of a can like that asshole Canadian PM. Pike is jockeying for the pole position in the race for post-apocalypse world domination. We are the only functioning entity standing in his way.”

“There are others, sir. The United States government used our technology on over half of its resources.”

“Yes, but the aliens spent extra time churning the air over North America. That’s where we lost our COO and CFO. The shielding is rather useless if the infrastructure is kaput.”

“Sad, but true.”

“With humanity regressing to full caveman mode in less than a week, what the Gorks failed to destroy, the locals are burning to the ground.” Staring at another fiery spectacle on the screen, Pennywell mutters, “What a curious lot we are.”

“I will see to the arrangements in London. I understand the Brits are using the Savoy Hotel as a base for emergency operations. We can set up the meeting there. By the way, King George is asking for our assistance. What should we tell him?”

“I am not going to screw the royals. They have been good to us over the years. Provide George with as many autonomous trucks full of relief supplies as we can spare.”

Human-worthy perplexion crosses Andrew’s face, “I’ll get in touch with our people out at Heathrow.”

“What is it, Andrew? There is one more thing rattling your synthetic noggin.”

“I have extensive knowledge of The Powers That Be history, but the Amazon misadventure and lost ship mentioned in Griffin Pike’s postscript does not compute.”

Pennywell laughs despite the gravity of the situation. “Jesus

Christ, Andrew, sometimes I need to remind myself that you are just a bucket of bolts and wires.”

“I prefer to think of myself as more than that, sir.”

“Oh, but you are. Much more, in fact.” After pausing, considering his friend’s chiseled features, Pennywell shrugs, “Our new friend Griffin Pike refers to an incident involving myself and another PTB agent named Paddy McCoy.”

“*The* Paddy McCoy? Your former mentor?”

“One and the same.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir, what happened?”

Propping his long frame back into the couch cushions and angling his left leg over his right knee, Pennywell gestures for his friend and fixer to take a seat, “Allow me to revel in this moment of knowing something you don’t before telling the story.”

Andrew takes Richard’s chair, brushing a chicken crumb off the soft leather cushioned seat. “Take your time, Artemus. I’m all ears whenever you are ready to proceed.”

Pennywell coughs and clears his throat, “It happened way back in 1928, Andrew. My God, things were a helluva lot simpler back then. Paddy and I were dispatched to the Amazon to interview a local Brazilian man who survived an alien altercation while working as a day laborer at Henry Ford’s pipedream of a rubber plantation, Fordlandia.”

“Fordlandia? He named it after himself?”

Pennywell laughs, “Yeah, how about that. Do you think that son-of-a-bitch had an ego the size of Detroit? Anyway, I digress. I thought the assignment involved burying evidence of the reported alien encounter and paying off witnesses. In other words, typical PTB protocol. Paddy knew we were there to see a man named Charles Pike.” Pennywell raises a hand, stopping further interruption, “I later learned Pike was hired by Henry Ford and the Feds to locate an ancient alien shipwreck in the goddamn Amazon rainforest.”

“So what? Earth is littered with ET crash sites.”

Pennywell smiles, “Not like this ship, Andrew.”

Andrew shrugs, “Okay, Artemus, I’ll bite. What makes this shipwreck so special?”

“It contains an unimaginable treasure and a world-killer weapon in its payload.”

“Once again, how do we know that?”

“A mythical alien shipwreck from another time lost in the Amazon is the stuff of legend, like El Dorado. Perhaps they are one and the same. As fate would have it, Ford’s day laborers dug up a stone artifact with a detailed map of the Amazon surrounding Fordlandia. Griffin’s ancestor—Charles Pike—was hired to survey clues within the map and determine if they pointed to the lost ship—a discovery that would rock a late 20s civilization verging on depression and another world war. Well, Ford did not want that. He craved the ancient alien technology to vault his ass light years ahead of the competition. And in return, he would hand the world killer to the US government as a quid-pro-quo.”

Andrew checks the time, “Sorry, sir. A lot to absorb.”

“I will cut to the chase. When Paddy and I arrived at Fordlandia, we noticed Pike’s symptoms of contact with toxic Gray blood. The man was a walking pandemic. Paddy put the bloke out of his misery with a single shot between the eyes.”

“So you never learned if Charles Pike found the lost ship?”

“It is worse. Paddy killed him before we could interrogate the bastard and learn where he hid the original stone artifact. The only record of its existence is a hand-drawn copy we found in Pike’s notebook. I spent years comparing that map to satellite imagery but came up empty. The damn thing is as useful as an old pirate map without an X marking the spot.”

Andrew raises his hand to interrupt, “What if Griffin Pike holds the key to unlocking the map?”

“I doubt it, Andrew, but hold that thought. Through Professor

Stevens' latest efforts, we can't even manage to decrypt the nickel-sized disk Ping removed from the dead alien scout. The tech is beyond our capabilities."

"It sounds like Pike's notebook and the scout's disk are dead-ends."

"Not so fast, my friend. Stevens did make a rather brilliant discovery."

"What did he find?"

Pennywell uncrosses his long legs and leans forward, "Pike embellished his map copy with five specific icons: *a piranha, tree, snake, spider, and jaguar*. As God is my witness, I never saw it, but Stevens realized they trace a perfect fucking spiral. He theorized the lost ship rests at the nucleus. I know it's not much to go on, but it is too perfect to be a coincidence. And damned if I wasn't desperate to close the chapter on Paddy's last mission. I sent Stevens to Brazil to check out his best guess of the exact spot, and now he is missing. Perhaps he took a dart to the carotid like dear old Paddy for all I know."

Andrew frowns, "I can't help noticing you did not seek Richard King's input. Why not?"

"Christ, Andrew. Do I have to explain every decision I make? If you must know, before the invasion, finding the lost ship was nothing more than an abstract puzzle piece in my life's work that I wanted to resolve before I died."

"Okay. I'm not aware of you dying anytime soon. My apologies for prying into your personal decision-making process."

"I can't tell if you are being facetious. I hate that."

Andrew offers a sly smile, "It's a gift. Okay, you said to hold that thought. Do you think Griffin Pike's motivations amount to nothing more than revenge for his murdered ancestor?"

"Hell no! He doesn't give a flying fuck about old Chuck. Nobody did. The world's ruined status is the opportunity of a lifetime for Griffin. Not only that, his ridiculous tribunal is meant to distract the PTB while



he goes after the lost ship. It troubles me to no end wondering what he plans to do with the world killer.”

“I apologize for not being up to speed on this, sir.”

“Andrew, my friend. You do quite enough. In fact, if not for your quick thinking, I would be dead already, just like poor John, Frank, and Aldo. I’m sorry to say this tempest in a teacup between myself and Pike has been brewing for quite some time.”

Multiple scenarios play out inside Andrew’s brain core, “The PTB has partnered with SATstar on numerous projects. In fact, we considered an acquisition of Pike’s company a few years back.”

Pennywell nods, “That’s true. I bet dollars to donuts he knows Uncle Chuck’s old notebook sits in a long-forgotten lockbox at a Bank of Scotland branch right off Trafalgar Square.”

“I will have Viraj secure it.”

“Let it be. If Griffin makes a play for the notebook, let him have it. We can kill two birds with one stone: learn if Griffin has a key to the map and ferret out any traitors within our ranks in one fell swoop.”

“Sir, I doubt you need to worry about that.”

“Andrew, you never can tell.”

“Okay, Artemus, just to be clear: you want Griffin Pike to steal the notebook from the bank vault?”

“You ever fish, Andrew?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, I hate the fucking sport with a white-hot passion. But I know that if one plans to fish, it is paramount to use the proper bait.”

“Charles Pike’s notebook.”

“Yes.” Pennywell stands and stretches with a loud yawn. “As for our meeting in London to prep for Pike’s kangaroo trial, assemble what’s left of The Council—like I know you are already planning to do—at the Savoy. I want Griffin’s spies to see us in full meltdown mode. We’re going to put on a scene for the ages. In the meantime, I will get Richard’s ass up to speed on the lost ship. He can take the lead in assembling a team

and head to Brazil. Perhaps even recover Stevens, dead or alive.”

Invigorated by the semblance of a proactive plan, Pennywell’s eyes widen, “Hey! We can enlist our new recruits to accompany Richard. Any news from the Haigs?”

“Not a word, sir. It has only been a few days. Give them time.”

“Good Christ, how much time do they need? I wish Flynn was here. We are short on manpower.”

“And womanpower.”

“Yes, Andrew, that, too.” Pennywell musses the carefully coiffed hair on Andrew’s head, “You know, this is the first time I used one of these damn pods for anything other than a place to nap.”

Brushing an unruly dark auburn lock off his forehead, Andrew rolls his eyes, “Good show, sir. Jolly good show.”

Astrid | En route to PTB lunar black site

09:42 p.m. | August 26, 2044

The hulking silhouette of a cargo vessel wobbles aloft, hovering above a cordoned-off section of Cairo’s decimated international airport smoldering in post-invasion ruins. After a gravity-defying, “All systems go for launch,” the ship lurches into the ruddy smoke-filled Egyptian sky with the grace of a drunken elephant on a medical transport mission to a lunar base.

Post shedding Earth’s gravitational pull with reversed alien tech ease, Captain Astrid Brown stretches from her co-pilot seat restraints in the weightlessness, gliding nimble fingertips across a bank of overhead switches. In response, tiny jets whisk the space-going commercial freighter in minute increments, correcting its trajectory toward a PTB black site erected atop the remains of an infamous Chinese Moonbase abandoned in the early 30s. A poker-faced robotic medical team awaits

the commandeered vessel's arrival with Agent Flynn's spanking new lab-grown human liver ready for transplant. A high-octane corpuscular rehab program to accelerate growth will constitute the Powers That Be agent's post-op regimen for weeks to follow.

Preferring the gut-churning intensity of piloting cutting-edge aerial marvels beyond their breaking points, Astrid, the sometimes astronaut, laments her current ship as the antithesis of the sleek and beautiful craft that inspired her love of flight. However, she accepts that the advent of anti-gravity propulsion rendered aerodynamics moot years ago. The unnatural act of taking flight morphed from forward thrust and the science of lift to an indelicate vault through the ether in utilitarian vessels liberated from gravitational constraints. Screw physics.

Astrid yawns aloud, bored to tears, glancing through a port side window beyond Nicole's vacant command seat. With a bemused head shake, she replays her friend's litany of *I'm over the lout* declarations.

"Yeah, sure you are, Nicole."

While Astrid maintains a solo watch on the flight deck, Nicole dotes over Agent Flynn in a makeshift ICU retrofitted into the cargo bay, nudging aside an equally concerned Nina Madsen to watch over the PTB agent strapped atop a gurney in a medically induced coma.

Despite having grave concern for Agent Flynn's life-threatening situation, Nina stepped aside, allowing Nicole to nursemaid the stricken man. Wise and worldly beyond her 56 years, the senior-level PTB administrator had experienced the turbulence of complicated relationships too many times and recognized true love when she saw it.

Meanwhile, caretaking the autonomous ship's flight deck, Astrid dons her personal headset and plays *Straight to Hell* by her favorite Edinburgh band, Dog Snot. With the anything-but-dulcet tones thumping in her head, she breaks the silence, "Deep space and a sea of stars filled with creepy aliens who want us dead. Ain't life grand?"

Right on cue, Astrid nods a smile toward Nicole, wriggling her long and fit frame through the narrow portal, gracing the flight deck

with her commanding presence.

Commander Nicole Weiss checks a warning light blinking red on her virtual screen, settling into her seat. The Space Force veteran shrugs a blue-eyed sigh, “Let’s keep an eye on these wonky scrubbers. Man, this boat is a piece of shit.” Realizing Astrid can’t hear a word over her noise-canceling headphones, she pantomimes to gain her co-pilot’s attention with a sardonic smile. “What’s grand, my dear, is I finally have Flynn by the balls. Isn’t it ironic that I escort his sorry ass to the Moon?”

Tickled by her friend’s lack of self-awareness, Astrid releases her headphones in the zero-g and breaks into laughter.

Nicole leans over her tech-heavy armrest, inches from the pretty Scot’s pert nose. Her expressive gaze narrows on the discombobulated co-pilot trying to regain her composure, “What’s so funny? Do you think losing our air scrubbers is a joke?”

Astrid ignores her friend’s misdirected concern, “Nicole, don’t you remember? Before hell broke loose, you threatened to dump Flynn on the Moon. This is your big opportunity.”

A blaring alarm in rhythm with a bank of lights glowing bright red drowns Nicole’s witty reply, “Ah shit, Astrid! Something hit us! I thought this thing was tuned to avoid space debris. Release the autopilot and inform Nina to suit up. I want control of this bucket on the off-chance we contact anything larger than a golf ball.”

“Aye-aye, captain. You now have the stick.” Astrid pulls a life support helmet over her close-shorn head and projects a three-dimensional kilometer-wide sweep inside her visor, “Huh. That’s odd.”

Struggling to get a feel for the unresponsive boat, Nicole blurts out, “What? Speak up, girl.”

“There is nothing larger than a pinhead close to our trajectory.”

“This fucking hunk of junk. God, what I would give to have a proper dam ship for this medevac moonshot.”

“Well, false alarms happen, but now you steered us off course.”

“The fuck you say. Are you questioning my piloting skills?”

“No. It’s just that this tub is pulling over two degrees to port.”

Nicole activates the VR display inside her visor, studying the boxy ship’s off-course path, hurtling through space at over 22,000 MPH.

A long silence ensues as the pair tag-team troubleshooting protocols, attempting to correct their course, to no avail.

“It’s like we are caught in a rip current.”

“Not quite, Astrid. We’re pulling toward that dark mass. Do you see it?”

“Oh man, what is that thing? I thought the Gorks were gone.”

“Astrid, there are at least two other fleets out here, remember?”

“I was hoping they left, too.”

“Doesn’t look that way.”

“We are accelerating past the point of no return.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re stuck in their tractor beam.”

“The question is: Who the fuck are they?”

Nicole presses her comm button, “Nina, how are you and Flynn doing down there?”

Nina shimmies into a suit and fumbles a helmet onto her head so she can assist Flynn, who is already on oxygen, “He’s fine. What’s wrong? And don’t you dare lie to me, Missy.”

“Jesus, Nina, I hate when you call me that.”

The freighter jolts and lurches from side to side.

Nina’s distressed voice resonates over the comm, “What the hell, Nicole? Did we hit something?”

Nicole grips her useless wheel and tries to initiate a reverse thrust, but it is too little, too late. Flinging the rudder to the side, she smashes her hand on the comm button, “Nina, listen to me. We are about to be boarded by fucking aliens. Buckle up and stay calm. Oh, and make sure Flynn’s lines are secure.”

A loud thunk followed by the unmistakable sound of loosening rivets reverberates between the scared pilots. Astrid turns her helmeted head toward her partner, “They are right outside.”

A frightening hiss permeates the flight deck as both pilots are enveloped in an anesthetizing cloud of neon green gas.

Flynn | Gray battlecruiser  
03:02 a.m. | August 27, 2044

A cloaked spy ship lurks beyond Earth's thinnest atmospheric layer, almost halfway between the coveted planet and its lone orbiting moon. Dispatched from the Gray alien fleet for a front-row seat to observe and report on the Gork invasion in real-time, they dodged the decimated lizard invaders' haphazard departure instead.

The aborted Gork invasion reaffirmed the planet's resilience to outside threats. In the words of an august Gray historian, "The Gorks now understand what we learned eons ago: invading Earth is fraught with known and unknown obstacles, biding time, lying in wait."

Maneuvering to maintain proximity with a phalanx of functioning satellites that survived the Gorkian EMP onslaught, the diminutive Grays recognize the shielding tech and seethe upon learning a pacifistic brethren race conspired with an organization called The Powers That Be to help humanity stave off extinction. The revelation adds a new wrinkle to a hegemonic master plan percolating on hold since their mistimed wormhole exit into the solar system back in 1928.

In the wake of the abrupt Gorkian defeat and cessation of the Light Specters' beacon, the Grays determine The Powers That Be—and a host of patronizing alien allies—are the only viable obstacles athwart their righteous return to Earth eons after ignominious defeat. However, to ensure history does not repeat, searching for the lost ship and its world-killing device becomes paramount. The Grays dispatch more patrols to the planet, collecting human specimens and reconnoitering with the squadron of pill-shaped survey vessels combing the South American continent, continuing a century-long search for the lost ship.

While docking craft laden with scores of human abductees, the cruiser's sensor array identifies a human vessel on a trajectory toward the moon, blundering through space in plain sight.

The order comes fast and furious from the main fleet hunkered in Ganymede's shadow: "*Seize the ship, interrogate the crew, and then process their flesh.*"

The cruiser swallows the tiny hauler inside a loading bay where an assault team storms the ship and pries it open, like cracking a walnut. Finding only three unconscious females and one comatose male, the aliens verge on spacing the prisoners and destroying the worthless vessel before reaching the older woman and discovering their PTB ties.

With a renewed interest in the captives' health, the aliens triage the man's internal injuries and find he requires a liver transplant before squeezing him for intel and then killing him. A quick scan of the gallows reveals a man swept up with an entire village from a remote parcel of Somali farmland as the most suitable donor among the prisoners.

Meanwhile, the trio of women from the small vessel is prepped for hybridized impregnation like dozens of female abductees languishing in dingy cells belowdecks.

Guards yank the Somali man from a clinging human throng of fellow villagers using violent telekinesis, his screams echoing down a long, dank corridor as he is dragged to the ship's infirmary deck. Fully conscious but out of his mind with unadulterated terror, he sees a 7-foot alien receive orders from much smaller counterparts. Meanwhile, a second tall figure emerges and straps the inconsolable African's arms and legs to a metal table like a slab of meat. Without warning, a pistol-like device lowers from the ceiling and pierces his gut with an aqua-colored laser, making a surgical incision across his abdomen. The tall and imposing pair busy themselves removing the man's internal organs, oblivious to his pleas for mercy. The dying man's final image through eyes bulging from darkened sockets is the profile of another Black man sleeping like an angel on a gleaming metal surface slid into place beside

him.

The aliens cut out the African's eyeballs, too. Waste not, want not.

\* \* \* \* \*

A nightmarish sensation of spiders burrowing under his skin jostles Agent Flynn from a dreamless sleep. Straining filmy swollen eyeballs beyond his prone body strapped atop a cold metal surface, he fixates on a blurry grid blinking green, orange, and blue like squinting at Christmas lights. A weird and inexplicable form ambles past and disappears beyond his periphery. Unable to move, he feels a cold draft on his naked body causing his teeth to clench into a thick intubation tube snaking down his parched throat. Quelling panic, The Powers That Be Agent controls his breathing and struggles to quantify his bloody awful predicament. The metallic smell of blood permeates his nostrils past a cannula shoved up his nose from a gooey substance clinging between his exposed skin and the smooth tabletop. "Christ, is that my blood?"

Peering upward from his vulnerable splayed position, he follows intravenous lines coursing with neon fluids extending from an intricate web of glowing tubes hanging from meshy shapes, like stereo speakers, before looping into multiple catheters fixed to both forearms.

A terrible sting alerts Flynn to another catheter extending out of his penis and winding into a glassy assemblage bubbling with a bright green fluid.

Despite the direness of his situation, Flynn can't resist thinking of a joke: Man, these PTB drug tests are getting weirder and weirder.

A blinding electrified pain washes over his body as the towering figure reemerges from the shadows. Paralyzed by the horrific jolt, a voice echoes in Flynn's throbbing head: "We decide your fate. Lie still, and it will be over soon."

Out of the darkness, the rail-thin 7-foot humanoid figure lowers its bulbous head to inches above Flynn's face. The agent's watery



eyes focus on his sad reflection in the alien's menacing stare, crushing vestigial resolve while killing any further attempts at gallows humor.

Flynn watches the alien, known throughout high-level PTB circles as a scarecrow—crossbred from Gray and human DNA—straighten its lanky form and smooth long pale gray fingers over the human's sutured lower right abdomen.

Reacting to the prisoner's scarecrow reference, the alien oozes telepathic malevolence while admonishing the agent: *“Your body accepts the new organ. Soon you will reciprocate by telling us everything you know about your organization.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

Flynn closes his eyes and lies ramrod still—as if he had a choice in the matter—eavesdropping on more Grays entering the darkened alien OR. Straining to recognize a syllable of their gibberish broadcasting inside his head, he realizes the dialect is foreign to his trained ear. Instead, he muddies his thoughts with imagery: A bucket of frosty longnecks on a tropical beach. His antique 1968 Aston-Martin collects dust in an East London garage, most likely leveled to the ground. A fucking decent hamburger with a side of salty chips. Nicole's naked body spread across a bearskin rug before a roaring fireplace. Uh-oh. His penile catheter twitches, prompting one of his captors to slam him with another telekinetic blast of pain.

Reeling from the mind-bending trauma, Flynn digs deep within himself, “Well, at least one body part is still in working order. That's a start.”

Nina | Gray battlecruiser

04:12 a.m. | August 27, 2044

Within the shadowed recesses of a darkened cell, Nina Madsen awakens from a deep anesthetized slumber and pushes to a seated

position against the cold and unforgiving rear wall. Interminable whimpering punctuated by bone-chilling shrieks, screams, and an odd bark pierces the oxygen-deprived mustiness. Swiping at her face, the PTB administrator is relieved to find herself wearing the same envirosuit she donned before all hell broke loose. Nevertheless, the anesthetic after-effects dull her senses and muddle cogent thought in the cramped and inhospitable space.

*“Holy Mother of God. We were transporting Flynn to the moon.”*

Pulling scabby knees under her chin, Nina hugs bruised forearms around her calves, rocking in a gentle movement, staring out thick metal bars fronting the 12-foot space. As the blurriness ebbs, her watery gaze resolves Nicole’s naked form bathed in bluish light and shadows with a dead-eyed stare, long tubes snaking from her arms, and a jumpsuit bundled at her feet.

Movement and a cough alert Nina to a presence inside the cell across the corridor beyond Nicole’s curled position.

“Astrid? Is that you?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Zint performs his assigned duty of monitoring the latest batch of rattled human specimens on a bank of virtual screens inside a guardroom at the terminus of the near-capacity 10-cell block in the dingy bowels of the surveillance ship.

A loud bark resonates from the far end of the dim blue corridor, prompting the third-mate apprentice to select the noisy four-legged beast’s cell. Struck by its stubborn loyalty, sitting on its haunches in a protective posture before its shellshocked human. Zint was advised the dumb animal would not part from its master, insisting the alien kidnappers bring it along. Tapping an update along the bottom of the screen, he reads the poor animal’s vivisection is imminent.

Having never set foot on his home planet beyond the stars, the 80-year-old conscript spent his entire life aboard the ship, indoctrinated

in hating Earth and its filthy primitive life forms. Despite his immersive upbringing, Zint feels unusual remorse for the animal in the pits of his stomachs.

Mortified his superiors would read his treasonous thought, the Gray sailor purges his brain and swipes the screen closed.

A female stirring awake four cells down on the aft side distracts Zint from his perilous rumination. Zooming in on the charcoal-haired woman, he watches her attempt to communicate with occupants in the opposite cell—a transgression calling for a painful telekinetic slap. Heaving a burdensome sigh, he taps a circle at the bottom of her screen and reads the updated status: Failed hybridization. Terminate after interrogation.

He beams an electrifying jolt, lowering his round head, eliciting a surprised, painful yelp from the woman in Cell 4.

Exuding a bare minimum of telepathic effort, Zint recites a scripted admonishment into her head: *Communication among the prisoners is forbidden. Transgressors will suffer pain. Consider this your first and only warning.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Nina wipes a long string of drool from her mouth. The painful blast and stern warning melt her brave façade into a pool of self-pity and worry for her friends. Curling back into a fetal position, she sobs, wracked by a familiar sense of loss overwhelming her thoughts. Her body ached in ways she had not experienced since a miscarriage in her late 30s squashed dreams of motherhood. Placing both hands between her legs, she feels wetness permeating the thick enviro suit material. Bolting upright, she checks herself and realizes she is soaked from the waist down in blood.

Betty Hill | Cleopatra Hospital, Cairo

09:12 a.m. | August 27, 2044

An odd *click-click-click* punctuates the rhythmic hums and whirs of Rachel's tech-laden bedside monitors and paraphernalia. Opening swollen eyelids, she turns her messy blond bedhead propped up on thick Egyptian cotton pillows onto a burly fellow standing with his back turned in ill-fitting blue scrubs, fiddling with something on a rolling cart. Pretending to sleep, she listens and tries to figure out what he is doing. As the squeaky-wheeled cart is rolled toward her, she hears a familiar clank of a cup and saucer and assumes the fellow is delivering her breakfast. She opens her eyes and sees a swarthy-looking man recording pictures with a cubed device squeezed between his stubby thumb and index finger from behind the cart.

Bolting upright, Rachel snatches a cup of piping hot tea and flings it across the man's arms and face, sending him staggering backward and falling over a chair.

Surprised by her defensive action, he snarls like a beaten dog, pulling onto his feet and swiping a scorched forearm across his pocked and ruddy face. Checking the device squeezed in his meat hook hand, a contact-sized lens falls out and clinks onto the floor.

Rachel shakes her head and rasps, "Aww, you broke your little camera. Too bad for you, now get the fuck out of my room!"

None too keen to follow the command of a woman, he drops the ruined device and crushes it under his shoe. "No. Too bad for you. The pictures had already been uploaded to my partner waiting downstairs. We will sell your images and feed our families for a year. Everybody wants to see the face that conspired with the aliens."

In Rachel's altered mental state, she cannot fathom the awful man's accusation, "Conspired? We, I did not; I tried to help. What is wrong with you? Why would I do that?" Monitors squawking and beeping in her ears, she shuts her eyes and raises her bandaged hands to

her head to make it all go away. The palms of her hands pressed to her head burn like fire.

“Mrs. Hill? Mrs. Hill? Can you hear me? Wake up, dear! You are having another nightmare.”

Rachel’s bruised eye sockets open onto Zahra’s pleasant face. “Did you catch the guy?”

“Dear, you were screaming in your sleep. Normally, I let that pass, but we had to move recovering patients up here last night. We ran out of room on the lower floors, so I need to keep the noise level down.”

“But he was in here, taking pictures. I saw him.” Rachel’s voice falters, and she turns sideways in a coughing spasm.

“Rest, Mrs. Hill. No one is up here taking pictures, I assure you. The patients allowed on this floor are all pre-screened, and your room is under constant guard.” The nurse straightens the room, wheeling the squeaky cart beside the bed.

Rachel notes the lukewarm teacup sitting where she left it the evening before, “Huh. I guess you are right.”

Zahra moves around the bed and crunches something under her shoe, “What is this?” The olive-skinned beauty lifts a sugar-cube-sized object in her hand and examines it by the light leaking around the closed window shade.

Rachel starts to cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

An overweight fellow in ill-fitted stolen scrubs sneaks back into an over-capacity recovery room after a successful foray past security and crushes atop his rickety field hospital cot. Placing a burned forearm behind his fat bearded head, he looks at his neighbor in a full-body cast, then scans the indigent cases piled onto cots from wall to wall. “Fear not, my friends, revenge on the infidel will be sweet.”

Richard | PTB HQ, Scotland  
02:28 p.m. | August 27, 2044

Fit as a fiddle and rejuvenated following his 3-day forced hibernation, Professor Richard King polishes off the last corner of a peanut butter and bacon sandwich and allows a satisfied burp. Seated at his vintage pine desk inside a private office crammed with pictures, awards, and memorabilia, he studies a computer-generated reconstruction of Cretaceous-era Gondwana topography following his debriefing from none other than the PTB CEO, Artemus Pennywell. Swiping away his hi-def 30-inch virtual display with an exasperated huff, Richard tamps down sheer frustration, “This is the epitome of a wild goose chase.”

Downing dregs from a *Lost Cactus* coffee mug—a souvenir from a previous life—he pushes back from the messy desk and stretches his 122-year-old frame with a loud yawn.

\* \* \* \* \*

In post-war 1947, Richard King, a brilliant MIT grad student, was plucked from anonymity at the tender age of 25 and handed the keys to a clandestine PTB research facility under construction at an off-the-grid location in the American southwest. During those halcyon years, he tag-teamed with an alien scientific community and the PTB brass. Growing the laboratory codenamed *Lost Cactus* into ground zero for human advancements meted out to a gullible public through public and private entities. However, PTB staff consultants, from sociologists and philosophers to theologians and ethicists, deemed the most mind-blowing discoveries, including a cure for baldness, too radical for public consumption.

Locked in sealed crates, each breakthrough remains warehoused on the long-since shuttered desert base, including one of King’s more controversial experiments—a fountain of youth. Infuriated by the PTB’s

decision to halt his research on the top-secret cell regeneration cocktail, a young and impetuous Richard King, who preferred the name Doc, rebelled by testing its efficacy on himself.

In 2044, with the world in ruins, an older and wiser Richard King looks upon the sum total of his possessions crammed into an office far below the bucolic Scottish countryside. Half a world from the abandoned desert base where he invested the best years of life, the scientist laments the rash and hubristic decision to prolong his lifespan. “Some aspects of human existence are better left in God’s hands. I see that now.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Pulling into a white lab coat over his cardigan, a necessity in the underground lab’s chilly temperature-controlled environment, King strides into the maze of aisles like a lab rat. Crossing the wide central artery bisecting the expansive concentric layout past a thick support column covered in pinned safety regs, switches, outlets, and emergency paraphernalia, he pauses at the sea monkey’s floor-standing aquarium. Not finding the little guy amongst the floating algae and aquatic plants swaying in the greenish water, he tamps down air-fried chicken cravings and heads toward the far side of the lab, where he finds 11’s back-turned stance before a trio of flat screens atop a cocktail-height lab bench. Richard’s eyes glaze at the endless scroll of alien code under her intense cybernetic scrutiny.

Atop another bench on her right, the alien scout’s nickel-sized disk floats on a column of air above an 8-inch black box, processing terabytes of raw ET code into PTB storage arrays sealed inside a contaminant-free clean room behind the adjacent wall. Stevens’ custom disambiguating software crunches the data, jumping over the redacted sections, converting the decrypted leftovers into binary code displayed on the triple-screen workstation where 11 searches for anomalies or clues that may lead to the lost ship.

Sensing Richard's presence over her shoulder, 11 presses pause on the streaming code and unfolds her cross-armed pose. Turning her robotic gaze toward her boss, she morphs from an expressionless automaton into an intelligent young woman in an artificial heartbeat, "Hello, Professor. 8 tells me you are fully recovered from hibernation. That is welcome news."

"Thank you, Number 11. I'm just so damned hungry." Receiving no reaction from the attractive robot, he smiles and gestures at the screens, "No matter. Have you cracked the code?"

Showing genuine chagrin, 11's angelic features scrunch into a look of sheer wonderment. Pulling an unruly blue-dyed lock behind a studded left ear, 11 sighs and offers a shrug, "No. Almost half of the disk's contents will not decompress. It may be a security feature, or perhaps the disk is damaged. At any rate, the missing code creates gaping holes in the reconstructed 3D topography. At this point, there are as many variables as leaves in the rainforest canopy from above. And add into the mix, for the past century since the disk's recording, large parcels have been clear-cut by logging interests, soybean farmers, and strip mining operations, causing soil erosion and flooding."

"The landscape has changed a lot since the alien scout recorded his scans on the disk."

11 produces a serious-faced frown, "I'm afraid so. We are only seeing half the picture at best. The lost ship may sit at the bottom of a manmade reservoir under a mile of solid rock. At worst, we may be looking on the wrong continent altogether."

"Good Christ, let's hope not. What about lidar?"

"Okay. Where would you start? It is a big continent."

Surprised by 11's terse reply, King decides to drop the idea altogether.

However, his professional curiosity remains beyond piqued, "Yes, 11, the area is thousands of miles of untamed wilderness. I once heard it described as the Green Inferno."



11's face brightens, "Oh, I like that. It sounds pretty."

"11?"

"Yes, Professor?"

King motions for her to follow him to the tiny disk floating half a foot above the shiny black processor, "If this disk is a worthless piece of crap, what prompted Stevens to embark on his solo Amazon expedition?"

11 scrunches her pert nose and tugs on her shoulder-length cerulean hair, "I am really not at liberty to say."

"Out with it, or I will ... well, I'll think of something."

The robot replies, "Professor Stevens found a key to the map inside that old notebook."

A little hurt that he had to pry the information from his robot assistant, Richard masks frustration at Pennywell's failure to mention Charles Pike's notebook during his 5-minute debrief earlier that morning. "My dear, that notebook has undergone more scrutiny over the last century than any book since the Holy Bible. What the hell do you mean, Stevens found a key? And drop the coy act; it does not suit you."

Glancing back to ensure the alien code remained paused on the screen, she fidgets like a schoolgirl caught in a fib, "Dr. Stevens traced over the seemingly random landmarks on the hand-drawn map and discovered they form a perfect Fibonacci spiral."

With the flick of her thin wrist, 11 displays a virtual scan of Charles Pike's all-too-familiar hand-drawn map, "By overlaying the spiral made by connecting the map's landmarks on a reconstructed sector of Brazilian topography from the alien disk, Dr. Stevens centered the spiral's nucleus in a 10-mile radius of Amazon jungle over 100 miles southwest of Fordlandia."

Professor King watches a line animate between a fish and a tree to a snake and a spider before curving inward at a cat icon. The resulting perfect spiral resizes and syncs in place atop a dense tree canopy

indistinguishable from its surroundings. “Pennywell signed off on the expedition based on this flimsy evidence?”

11 continues, “It is actually worse than you think. If the scale and orientation shift a fraction of a degree, the spiral’s nucleus could be off by miles in any direction.”

Richard shakes his head in disgust, “Stevens should have sought my assistance. Now I am left to clean up his mess.”

11 swipes the screen closed, “That is the sum total of what I know. I am sorry to keep that from you, Professor.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear. You are not responsible for the vagaries of your human counterparts.” Tapping the benchtop holding Stevens’ high-tech Rube Goldberg contraption, “Why is Pennywell insisting we continue running forensics on the disk? Since Stevens took it upon himself to be the hero, why not wait and see what he brings back?”

Realizing she has already violated her NDA protocols, 11 lowers her voice to just above a whisper, “Professor Stevens last communication indicated he reached the spiral’s nucleus but found nothing but jungle. On August 9, two weeks before the invasion, he missed a scheduled call. We never heard from him again.”

“Thank you, 11; you have been more than helpful. Pull 7 and 12 from whatever those two are doing to assist you in decompressing the alien code. Also, don’t let the sisters tease you about your hair. Blue is my favorite color.”

Returning to his office, Richard King mutters, “What madness.” Pulling a hardbound replica of Charles Pike’s notebook from a drawer, he flips through the pages, admiring the man’s obvious talent at draftsmanship. Flipping past the map, his gaze lands on a beautiful inked rendering labeled “Brazil Nut tree.” King studies the intricate cross-hatched art, musing that the Fordlandia spot on Pike’s map is also represented by a tree. Rubbing tired eyes, his brow furrows, peering closer at an arrow hidden in the etched linework pointing toward a hole

midway up the thick tree trunk. “Hello ... What have we here?”

Pennywell | PTB HQ, Scotland

03:05 p.m. | August 27, 2044

Artemus Pennywell fidgets with an empty tumbler, waiting on a satellite uplink to the Chrysalis offices at the Cairo airport. A reliance on satellite comms in the post-invasion world was bad enough. Adding insult to injury, the only functioning communication satellites belonged to SATstar, owned by Griffin Pike. Mumbling under his breath, “He literally has the world by the balls. Fuck. I should have seen that coming.”

Andrew ducks his head inside Pennywell’s dark-lit inner sanctum. “Sir, Professor King is here to see you.”

“That’s fine, send him in. In the meantime, babysit this call to Cairo. They are past due, providing an update on Flynn’s medevac.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

Richard enters, removing his tweed cap, exposing a messy head of charcoal curls, angling past Andrew into Pennywell’s well-appointed office. Sliding into a seat opposite the massive desk fit for a CEO, the scientist’s corduroy pants settle onto the brushed leather cushion eliciting a loud squeak.

Andrew’s steady voice pierces the silence between the two men, “*Okay, sir. I will let you know when the call goes through.*”

With the ice broken, Richard leans forward in the voluminous chair and raps the edge of the desk with a thick knuckle, “Is this mahogany?”

“Teak, Richard. It’s teak. You ask me that every time you pay a visit.”

“You know, my old desk at Lost Cactus was teak. I miss that desk.”

“From what I gather, you miss more than just your old desk.”

Recognizing his chief scientist's out-of-character evasiveness, Pennywell presses his longtime friend, "What's up, Richard? You seem a little agitated."

Ratcheting up his courage, Richard lowers his voice to a deep baritone and lets Pennywell have it with both barrels. "Maybe my agitation, as you put it, stems from the fact that I lost your trust at some point over the past few months."

Pennywell starts to interject, "Now Richard . . ."

"Quiet. Now you listen to me. You had Number 11 working with Stevens behind my back for months before the invasion. Artemus, why didn't you tell me what he discovered in the notebook? I checked his so-called perfect spiral. It is no more than an educated guess without scale and orientation. Instead of squeezing that damn disk for the remaining data, he's wandering around the Amazon."

Richard leans back and slows his breathing, cognizant of the risk when confronting the mercurial Artemus Pennywell—*desperate times, desperate measures*.

A rueful smile transforms Pennywell's face, moving to refill a glass at his well-stocked bar, "What is this world coming to when you can't count on a robot to keep her mouth shut? However, I am pleased you got that off your chest, Richard. Can I offer a glass of nerve soothing elixir?"

Richard shakes his head, "No. I need to continue my work. Don't blame 11. Since the invaders left the world in shambles, our docket has many other issues. I need her assistance."

Brandishing a half-filled tumbler, Pennywell pivots, "Not your concern, Richard. I have surviving members of The Council taking the lead in coordinating relief efforts on every continent. And I assure you, you are now up to speed. Stay focused on the disk. See what you can accomplish that Stevens could not."

Richard stands to leave, hat in hand, "When I agreed to come here, we shook hands that I would have complete autonomy over the

lab.”

“You do, Richard. Locating the lost ship was personal, and I intended to keep it that way. I even kept Andrew out of the loop. We are having this conversation because a new cast of bad actors—from Gray invaders inexplicably biding their time to Griffin Pike—are suddenly in hot pursuit of the world killer on the lost ship’s manifest. I cannot determine which scenario would prove worse for humankind.”

Thunderstruck by Pennywell’s blithe candor, Richard mumbles, “Probably the aliens, I suppose,” and turns to exit.

Pennywell raises a hand, “Hold up, Richard. I lied. There is one more thing.” Sliding open a desk drawer, the CEO removes a satchel and tosses it to his chief scientist.

Richard dumps a small fluorescent object from the cloth onto his meaty palm. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes. But not only that. It is from the alien scout who recorded the encrypted disk. What if you were able to pull DNA from that bone and somehow use it to unlock a complete 3D topographic scan from the disk.”

“Did you have Stevens try that?”

“Are you kidding? Hell no. This hypothesis came from none other than Ping, and it screams for a brilliant DNA scientist who went by the name Doc many years ago.”

Richard smiles, “You are right; I miss those days.”

Pennywell downs the scotch and slams the glass atop his desk. “Well then, Doc. What the fuck are you waiting for? Get your corduroy ass back to the lab! We need to find that damn ship!”

As Richard turns to leave with the alien bone in hand, Andrew blocks the door. “Sir, I have bad news.”

Richard’s eyes widen in anticipation of the latest clusterfuck report from Andrew, who is never wrong.

Pennywell slumps back in his desk chair. “Andrew, for the love of ... I just got Richard here back online. Can I catch a break for five

lousy minutes?”

The advanced replicant shakes his head and wipes a genuine tear from his eyes, “I just got off the line with Cairo. Flynn’s medevac never arrived.”

Flynn | Gray battlecruiser  
09:05 p.m. | August 27, 2044

Agent Flynn gasps for air while absorbing a punishing combination of head and body blows from his invisible whip-fast tormenter inside a rank torture box. Already bruised and beaten, he forces a swollen-eyed glance at his sutured abdomen and raises his bloodied hands, flinging IVs burrowed deep into his arms like fringe, “Bloody hell, mate, stop kicking the crap out of me! Why did you nutters bother shoving some bloke’s liver inside my guts to knock it out again?”

The beating stops for a fast 3-count before the 10-foot space strobes with blinding flashes synced to cacophonous screeches. The dizzying, mind-altering effects prompt Flynn to projectile vomit bright yellow fluid, the viscous splatterings merging into a singular blob before oozing through a crisscrossed slot in the deck to somewhere below.

Horrified by whatever the hell just expelled from his insides, the PTB agent attempts to access his training, but the disorienting light show permeates his addled brain, impeding coherence. Grunting like an animal, he squints through the madness in a vain attempt to locate his torturer, “Where are you? Show yourself!” A wriggling sensation diverts his attention onto squirming green maggots oozing out of the L-shaped incision across his torso, “What the shit did you do to me? I can’t tell you anything if I’m dead!”

His rasped pleas beckon the cube’s reversion to a colorless void. Flynn exhales a relieved sigh, finding his incision intact and free of squiggling larvae. The 36-year-old Black Englishman coughs up a wad

of noxious phlegm and spits neon particles at the wall. He watches the spatters fuse into a glob and wriggle through the nearest slot, leaving a slimy trail across the dullness. Monotonal memories of his brutal youth growing up in Liverpool flood his thoughts from out of the blue, “Bloody hell, I’m losing it.”

*“Agent Flynn.”*

Flynn’s twisted form transfixes on two Grays dressed to the nines in silvery bodysuits with mesmerizing black eyes dominating oversized heads. The circumspect pair appearing almost amused, were emotions such as humor possible for the über-advanced species.

Verging on insanity, Flynn blurts out the first words entering his enfeebled mind, “You lot resemble my friend, Ping, and that bloke gives me the fucking creeps.”

*“Is the one you call Ping allied with your organization? Why does he cause you discomfort? How many advisors conspire with your species?”*

Enraged at the ease with which their mind tricks had him blabbing Ping’s name, Flynn bull rushes the inquisitors. Bad move. An electrified shock sends him sprawling backward onto the slotted metal deck in a painful heap. Virtual flames rise through the grates like a human-sized barbeque. Like little gray gargoyles, the alien duo remains motionless, watching the pitiful human writhing in pain.

*“Agent Flynn, cooperation is key to your survival.”*

The inquisitors end the flaming projection and study their beaten subject’s reaction: curled into a fetal repose, secreting ocular fluid while asking for his mother. Exploiting the impetus behind the human’s curious emotional response, the manipulative interrogators elevate a 5-year-old version of the human to his frontal lobe.

Under deep hypnosis, Flynn transforms into a young boy crouched beside a dresser, hiding from his abusive father: “Are you there, Mom? Don’t let him hit me; I can’t take it. Make him stop. Please, make him stop!”

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Upon breaching the man's inner psyche, the interrogators—who never physically touched their subject—uncovered the human's traumatic childhood at the hands of his progenitors. Animals. They will all suffer a horrible and well-deserved fate.

The silver suits submit a report on their prized prisoner—and the one called Ping—to their superiors in the main fleet beyond Ganymede.

The human resumes beating closed fists into his bruised and bloodied head inside the interrogation cell.

Nina | Gray battlecruiser

01:05 a.m. | August 28, 2044

Nina Madsen huddles in the shadows against the hard, unforgiving back wall, rubbing bloody scars on her shaved head while shivering in the cold, dank cell. The Powers That Be administrator has not budged her 56-year-old frame since discovering the bloody mess leaked from between her legs. While her last period came and went years ago, there it was. She muses most women's lockups must have tampon machines around every corner, but doubtful this stinky barge even has a soda machine. Shelving the mysterious reappearance of Aunt Flo, she checks her cellmate, Nicole, unconscious on the damp floor but breathing the thin air, in and out.

A curious and diminutive Gray guard trod past her cell numerous times, feigning attending to other prisoners. To Nina's surprise, the Gray, who introduced himself as Zint, professed remorse for exacting telepathic punishment in response to her attempted communication with other prisoners.

"Why would he do that? Perhaps not all of the Grays on this ship hate humanity." Unable to focus, bone-tired and anemic after the



inexplicable blood loss, Nina's eyes grow heavy, and she falls into a deep sleep. Her mind drifts back to her privileged childhood. Her father was a NATO general, and her mother represented the *Nye Borgerlige* party in the Danish Parliament. Their careers left no time to raise an independent and intelligent Nina Madsen, so she spent the better part of her youth at an elite all-girls boarding academy outside Copenhagen.

*The young Danish schoolgirl skips along a manicured cobblestone path with youthful, carefree strides, catching up with her "mean girls" clique. Her vaunted reputation as a flirt and a troublemaker garnered plenty of friends, yet her underperformance in class troubled her parents.*

*Bored to tears in Ms. Dykstra's seventh-grade classroom, Nina tosses a paper airplane, hitting the middle-aged woman's backside, causing the class to erupt in laughter. Nicknamed the Dyke, for obvious reasons, the woman's empty threat to smack Nina with a meterstick for the insubordinate act leaves the classroom of giggling schoolgirls in stitches. Nina assumes her too-cool attitude knowing the bitch would never risk her posh teaching job by exacting corporal punishment with the splintered tip of her stupid measuring stick. No. But she could hold Nina in afterschool detention, where the Danish seventh grader finds herself as the dank cell transforms into Ms. Dykstra's classroom.*

*Time slows to a crawl. Nina sits amid the emptied rows, tapping a chewed pencil atop her homeroom desk. Below the class clock, which appears stuck at half-past four, a massive whiteboard adorned with graded reports on the Holocaust mocks Nina's bored and fidgeting woe-is-me gaze. With little else to do but sit and stare straight ahead, she searches for her half-assed contribution. Finding it hung dead center, embellished with an obnoxious red D, evokes an eye roll predicting a concerned call from dear old Mum.*

*The Dyke reenters the classroom and plops into the swivel chair behind her cluttered teacher's desk. The tall and severe blond woman slides open a side drawer and pulls out a half-empty vodka bottle, taking a long swig before proffering it forward with a lusty smile.*

The startling incident jolts Nina from a deep hypnotic slumber.

Swallowing back bitter-tasting bile down her sore throat, she furrows her brow, visualizing a repressed image of the woman's leering face, "But what happened next? Hold on for just a goddamn second; I remember now. Oh my God! She made me drink the vodka while forcing her hand up my skirt. I have repressed that memory my whole life."

Movement outside her cell interrupts Nina's painful and embarrassing recollection. Scooching sideways, she trains her hazed vision on Zint, ushering a hooded prisoner into the cell across the dark corridor.

The figure raises a bloodied dark brown hand and produces a surreptitious thumbs-up, sensing her watchful gaze.

Nina's heart soars: It is Flynn!

Zint latches the thick barred door and burns an admonition into Nina's psyche: "*Keep your head down and stay quiet. Your friend needs rest.*"

Overwhelmed with relief, tinged with sadness and guilt for her wasted and foolhardy youthful indiscretions, Nina starts to cry. Digging bloodied fingertips into her legs, she regains control of her fragile emotional state and whispers under her breath, "I am Nina Madsen. Anyone eavesdropping on my thoughts right now can kiss my ass and fuck off."

What matters is that Flynn is alive. She wants to shout it from the rooftops but knows that would end badly.

Betty Hill | Cleopatra Hospital, Cairo

11:55 a.m. | August 28, 2044

Nurse Zahra allows the huddled mass of humanity to exit Cleopatra Hospital's lone functional freight elevator into the 8th-floor chaos before pushing Betty's wheelchair off the lift. Leaning close to her VIP patient's ear, the nurse raises her voice over the commotion, "I told

you, Mrs. Hill, life on the 20th floor is a world away from what's going on down here."

Stunned by the spectacle of Cairo's teeming throngs crowding the 8th-floor's ad hoc check-in and waiting areas congregating in groups jamming the central corridor, Betty shrinks into the chair, "This is madness. Are all of the other floors like this?"

"Only 4, 8, 16, and 20 have electrical and plumbing. The other floors remain dark, and the street level is a disaster. Hence the crowds. Before the invasion, this floor was administration and human resources. But look at us now."

Zahra guides her enigmatic patient through the bustle and gets hung up behind a group of young deer-in-the-headlight recruits undergoing on-the-job training leaving Betty eye-to-eye with a matronly dark-skinned woman wearing an eye patch. Seated at the end of a bench beside a potted palm, the lady perceives Betty's discomfort and shows off a spanking new orange 3D-printed cast holding her left forearm in one piece with a toothless fatalistic smile that speaks volumes: "*Why the sad face, deary? I lost everything.*"

Rolling forward, Betty turns toward Zahra, "How many people has the hospital treated since the invasion?"

"I don't know, a lot." Jostling around another human roadblock, Zahra heaves a frustrated sigh, "Hey, we're trying to get through here! Can you move?" Parting a cluster of sick, injured, and just plain gawkers spilling out of the dangerous stairwell exit, the veteran nurse continues, "Once the word got out that we were open for business, people from near and far crawled from the woodwork and showed up at our doors." Tapping Betty on her robed shoulder, "It is your fault."

Betty scrunches her bandaged face into a quizzical expression, "My fault? How can any of this be my fault?"

"Our chief surgeon, Dr. Said, made a deal with your Cowboy friend. We take care of you and your husband and quid pro quo; your people provided the resources to administer aid to everyone else. Of

course, no one realized how fast the word would spread. These people are desperate. There is no electricity or potable water anywhere in Cairo.”

“What do you tell them?”

“Whatever works. We hand out water bottles and MREs by the caseload and tell anyone who asks, which isn’t very many, that we invested in solar panels or some green energy bullshit. Anything to calm them down so we can patch them up and send them on their way. The truth is we have no clue, so that helps.” Leaning close, Zahra whispers the burning question on everyone’s minds into Betty’s left ear: “Your technology is not from *here*, is it?”

Betty flinches away from a shoving match breaking out over boxes of Beef Stroganoff MREs before providing an honest answer. “First off, they are not my people, at least not yet.” Fingering the unsealed manila envelope tucked beside her in the wheelchair, she furthers her point, “And second, I know as much about the Cowboy as you do. Probably less.”

“Well, whoever you all are, you came through with food, water, and some mind-blowing high-tech shit. And to be honest ....” Two beefy orderlies dart across their path toward the altercation in time with another code red blaring over the din. Zahra swings the wheelchair off to the side without warning as a fellow nurse rushes into the stricken person’s room. “Sit tight, Mrs. Hill. She is going to need another pair of hands. I will be right back.”

Feeling exposed and in the way, Rachel cinches her robe and stands out of the wheelchair in her socked feet, “Screw it; I can walk.”

A sweaty hospital recruit heaping discarded laundry and trash into a rolling bin blocks her advance. After the young man rolls out of the way, she slides a socked foot forward and almost loses a toe as an intern pushes a mobile crash cart into the darkened room where the poor soul is coding bright red. On her third try, wary of the potential hazards, the fair-skinned blond patient, who resembles an airplane crash survivor, wards off dizziness, trekking past rooms packed with the sick,

wounded, and dying. Looking back toward her wheelchair, she spots the envelope stuffed next to her blanket, “Well, shit.”

Sidestepping through the bedlam for the second time with the manila envelope in hand, she checks a directional sign and mutters, “Everything is in Arabic; how am I going to find the ICU?”

Betty grabs an attendant by the sleeve, “Can you tell me which direction to the ICU?”

The woman smiles and shakes her head before yanking free and melding into the crowd.

“Thanks for nothing, lady.”

Reaching another 4-way intersection in the labyrinthine 22-floor hospital tower, she checks the arrows, ignoring the Arabic, and ventures left where it appears quieter and calmer. Shuffling down the long corridor, she hangs a right and comes upon a set of swinging double doors stenciled **ICU** in plain English. Thanking Allah or God or whoever at this point, she pushes through the doors, leaving the 8th-floor mayhem in her wake.

Realizing she also left her cane in the wheelchair in the commotion, Betty remembers her PT instructor’s words: “Heel to toe. Heel to toe. Bend your knees.” Unable to hide a smile, she begins to feel like herself for the first time in days. No months. In all honesty, it has been years since Betty felt normal.

After a stumble, she pulls up her rubber-soled hospital footsies and perseveres down another long, empty hallway, “I should have remembered my cane and a fucking map.”

Heaving an exhausted sigh, Betty pushes through another set of doors into the path of a musclebound security guard with a mean-looking weapon slung over his shoulder, blocking Betty’s progress.

“State your business.”

A thunderstruck Betty stammers, “ICU? Is this the ICU?”

Behind a tall counter in the expansive and bright-lit receiving area, an authoritative female voice calls out, “Let her pass, Abdul.”

The Cleopatra Hospital employee moves around the counter in her standard-issue blue scrubs with a warm and welcoming white smile across her pretty, olive-skinned face, “You are late, Mrs. Hill.”

Betty catches her breath after the long trek, noting the nurse’s trendy jet-black mini bun hairstyle and a smattering of tattoos on her arms and neck. “I got a little lost.”

Sidling next to Betty, the nurse places a hand on her back and leads her into Cleopatra Hospital’s work-in-progress brand new ICU.

Workers in beige coveralls with butterfly logo patches on their backs swarmed over the gutted administrative offices and conference facilities, transforming them into post-op recovery rooms and intensive care units.

With a deafening din of power saws, nail guns, and clanking pipes in the background, the nurse shakes her head, “Would you believe this floor used to be billing and HR? Now it is our brand-new ICU. I am amazed at the speed and efficiency of your people. It is stunning.”

Rachel almost blows her cover before replying, “They aren’t my people. Um, is Barney, Mr. Hill? Is he here?”

The nurse nods and stifles a laugh, “Yeah, he is here. You are Betty Hill, right?” With a sudden look of recognition, she adds, “Hey, what happened to Zahra?”

“She got hung up with a patient, so I moved on without her.” Attempting to affect an air of normalcy, Betty adds, “I like your hair.”

The nurse grabs a wheelchair, “My apartment doesn’t have running water, so it was either this or shaving my head.”

“It’s cool. I like it.”

“Well, if I had your beautiful blond head of hair, I might opt for a ponytail like yours. Have a seat, Mrs. Hill. I insist.”

Aching, exhausted, and feeling her concussion medication wearing off, Betty acquiesces without a fuss.

The nurse pushes past a glass-fronted row of prefab ICUs ready for installation toward an occupied and private end unit. Before

reaching the door, the nervous Mrs. Hill applies the handbrake, “Please give me a minute.”

The nurse gives Betty a reassuring pat on the shoulders, “You got this, Mrs. Hill. Just shout over the hammering if you need anything.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rachel brushes blond locks off her healing face covered in small bandages over dark-bruised eyes and cheeks, stalling to collect her thoughts before reuniting with Owen for the first time since their extraction from far beneath the Giza Plateau. The young newlywed takes a deep breath, straightens her pajamas under the white hospital robe, and wheels herself through the door.

Rhythmic beeps and whirs of Owen’s life support equipment replace the construction noise inside the soundproof room. Rachel peers through the darkened intensive care unit and lets out an audible gasp upon seeing his swollen face and the top of his thick head wrapped in tape and gauze. “Owen. It’s me, Rachel. Are you awake?”

No reply.

Assessing the intricate array of medical paraphernalia from near and far amassed around him, the tall blond stands and pushes the bulky wheelchair out the door. Fighting off lightheadedness, Rachel reaches for the extra pain pill in her robe pocket and swallows it past her dry throat before grasping the edge of a bedside table to sidle up to the raised safety rail. She places the manila envelope on the bed and touches Owen’s exposed left hand resting atop the covers and sheets.

“Now what?”

Having spent the better part of her waking hours imagining their reunion, Rachel realizes there are no words to describe her feelings in the incredible aftermath of what they went through far beneath the Great Pyramid. Instead, she swipes at tears and caresses Owen’s bandaged hand with her own while her vision adjusts to the low-lit room. Focusing on the complex rope and pulley rig elevating his broken

right arm, she recognizes his bright orange 3D-printed mesh arm cast is the same design as the old lady in the hallway.

Below a shuttered window on the room's opposite side, Rachel spies a cardboard box beside a cheap plastic chair. As quiet as a mouse, she lets go of Owen's bandaged fingers, noting his corrected digital alignment, shuffling around the foot of the bed. Ignoring her nagging migraine, she hefts the carton onto the seat. Pulling the flaps open loosens grit and sand onto the floor around her feet. Inside, the tattered and bloodstained remnants of Owen's breaching the pyramids ensemble—courtesy of Nina—are folded atop his unlaced Timberlands. Rachel staggers backward as the nightmarish image of Owen's limp body cartwheeling through the swirling debris inside the beacon chamber projects in her mind's eye. Her tears make it difficult to close the lid and replace the box where she found it before retreating to her original spot.

“Owen, I am so sorry.”

With his disfigured face fixed forward in a neck brace atop thick pillows, lying at a shallow angle, Owen awakens and shifts his swollen-eyed gaze onto an angel.

Their eyes meet for the first time in days ripping Rachel's emotional floodgates asunder. Lowering the safety rail with practiced ease, avoiding a half-inch tube draining pinkish-red liquid from his side into a large glass receptacle at her feet, she hugs her right arm around his bandaged head. Lost in the moment, the enigma known around Cleopatra Hospital as Betty showers kisses upon Barney before coming up for air.

Owen reaches out with his left hand, ensuring she is real.

“I'm here, Owen. I'm here.”

“What happened? Where am I?”

Rachel closes her eyes and brushes soft lips across Owen's pugilistic face, whispering, “You are here with me. Everything will be all right.” Swooning from the strong painkiller kicking into gear, she throws caution to the wind and produces a sultry smile while sliding



her hand down the sheets seconds before the monitors mounted behind Owen's bed go off like July 4th fireworks. The noise startles Rachel from acting on her passionate bedside fantasy. Stumbling backward into an IV stand, she grabs the bedside table to avoid falling flat on her ass and knocks a 1-liter hospital cup filled with water, crashing onto the floor.

The veteran RN who has seen it all—and endured the post-invasion onslaught—bursts into the room, moving around Owen's bedside to quiet the squawking heart rate monitor. Cool as a cucumber, she checks Barney's vitals and adjusts the tension on his arm traction while mouthing, "Don't worry, he will be fine."

"How are we doing, Mr. Hill?" Making eye contact with a guilt-ridden Betty, she continues, "You need to rest and avoid excitement. How is your pain level?"

Owen raises his hand and points at his fractured arm hanging aloft over the soft covers at an awkward 45-degree angle.

"Okay. Let's see here." The savvy RN adjusts the pain management cocktail from an intravenous pump and checks the bags hanging from his IV stand. "That should do it."

An orderly appears with a mop and bucket to sop up the water spill. Embarrassed and disappointed, Betty steps out of the way, "Sorry about that. I'm a little klutzy these days." Cursing herself for abusing the potent pain pills, she muses how real life is never like the movies. Never.

The nurse exits the unit allowing the orderly elbow room to clean up the mess, motioning for Betty to follow, "Mrs. Hill, can I speak with you outside?"

The brightness and noise level in the main ICU space outside the darkened room exacerbates Betty's headache. Her heart racing like a hummingbird, she reaches for the wheelchair and plops into the seat. "I am so sorry. Is he okay?"

"No apology is necessary. Can I offer you a water bottle?" She adds, reading the label, "Courtesy of our new friends at Chrysalis Air, no less."

“Yeah, sure. I guess I got swept up in the moment.”

“Mrs. Hill, I’m a nurse in a major metropolitan hospital. I have seen it all. Besides, everyone knows hospital sex is almost as good as airline sex.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Yeah, sure.” The nurse proffers the room temperature bottled water with a familiar butterfly logo label and moves behind the counter with a sly smile.

Rachel takes a drink and swishes to eliminate the bitter aftertaste of the antibacterial skin cream from kissing Owen’s beaten face.

Returning from behind the counter with a first aid kit, the nurse takes a knee next to the wheelchair and places two fingers over Betty’s thumping carotid artery. After a prolonged silence, her hand lingers an extra second before pulling away, “You have an elevated heart rate, Mrs. Hill. Probably from the Oxy. No matter, that too shall pass.” Tearing open an antiseptic wipe, the nurse checks the myriad cuts and scrapes, patting the soft wet gauze on her face and neck with a gentle touch. “You are quite beautiful, Mrs. Hill. Have you done any modeling?”

Avoiding an impertinent spit take in response to the unexpected compliment, Betty fumbles for words, “Who me? God, no.”

Betty’s humble reply prompts a hearty laugh from the Egyptian, “All of that beauty and a sense of modesty, too? My. My. How are things up on the 20th floor? My key card only gets me to the 8th floor. Perhaps I can come up for a visit during your stay. We can swap fashion notes.”

Not sure where the conversation is heading, Betty decides to play it cool, “Yeah, sure. I’ll talk to Zahra.”

“Has our mutual friend, Zahra, mentioned the rumors swirling around you and your husband? There is even an office pool of sorts. CIA is a popular bet.” Peeling a blood-encrusted bandage from Betty’s left cheek, she admits, “I can’t place a bet since I know your real identity.”

Betty winces from the sting of peroxide, cleaning the fizzing facial cut before feigning indifference and swiping at her runny nose, “Is

that so? What's the buy-in? Maybe I'll play."

With a slight chuckle, the nurse snips a length of gauze and holds it atop the inch-long gash, "Don't worry, dear. Your organization's NDAs prohibit me from saying a word." Taping the new dressing in place, she puts her hand on Betty's leg and leans close to whisper in her ear, "I would never risk ruining things for everybody, Rachel Haig. Your secret is safe with me."

Struggling to maintain her composure, the outed patient flips the table on the sultry nurse, "I'm sorry, I never got your name."

"Cleo. Short for Cleopatra." She makes a sweeping arm gesture around the ICU ward with a flirtatious smile, "And this is my kingdom."

The double doors swing wide as Nurse Zahra bursts into the ICU, "There you are, Mrs. Hill! I thought I had lost you. You forgot your cane."

Betty's eyes widen, struggling to remember where she left the manila envelope. "Oh shit."

Standing out of the wheelchair, she stumbles to Barney's ICU and freezes at the threshold, finding him awake and alert, holding the envelope in his left hand with a quizzical look on his face.

Mindful of his fragile condition, Betty enters and pulls the envelope from his weak grasp. "We can talk about this later. Get some rest. I love you, Owen."

With tears in his eyes, Barney struggles to reply, "I love you, too."

Nina | Gray battlecruiser

03:22 p.m. | August 28, 2044

Another rheumy hacking cough reverberates the dark, clammy bleakness stirring Nina from a restless slumber. Staring beyond Nicole's catatonic state, her watery eyes focus outside her wide-open door.

A voice beckons her to rise and exit the cell.

Nina stretches her aching muscles and straightens her stinky enviro suit before stepping over Nicole and into the deep-blue corridor. Cognizant, the constant crying and fits of coughs—plus the occasional dog bark—emanate from the opposite direction; the Danish national casts a wary glance at Flynn and moves past empty cells toward the exit. Outside the cell block, she moves before a glassed-off guard room where her friend, Zint, manipulates buttons and controls before a bank of blue-tinged monitors.

*“Hello, Nina. Someone wants to talk with you.”*

Nina ignores the tiny alien, transfixed on a bank of screens above his round head. Locating her covert cell feed, she sees Nicole curled on her side. Another displays Flynn in a similar repose. Other screens reveal holding cells containing various groups of abductees. With a slight smile creasing her parched lips, she finds the dog, a German Shepherd, huddled next to its master. Her gaze moves to the last screen, where a lone prisoner sits hunched in the corner. Astrid.

Zint urges Nina to move along with a telepathic tap.

*“Someone is waiting for you.”*

Warding off dizziness, Nina Madsen shuffles down the curved passage in the musty bowels of a massive and deadly alien battlecruiser. Her bare feet appear to know the way forward, so she turns off alarm bells ringing in her head and quashes impertinent stomach growls.

A Gray escort detours her path into a cavernous hangar bay parked end-to-end with pill-shaped craft. Nina clears her mind and keeps her eyes forward past pilots and technicians prepping the ships for recon missions to Earth. Reaching the far end of the hangar, Nina follows her guide into a clear tube. The being taps a button, vaulting the odd pair past countless decks to the battlecruiser’s bridge.

Unable to contain a bit of wry humor, Nina smiles, “That was fun.”

*“Quiet.”*

Following the skinny Gray in his silvery suit across the ship's uppermost command deck, the unmistakable aroma of cooked meat assaults her stuffy nose. "Excuse me? Is that Steak au Poivre? I say there, did you read me to conjure up my last meal? How thoughtful."

The gallows humor falls flat, as expected. The alien opens another portal and turns to his prisoner: "*Enter.*"

Surmising a failed fertilization sealed her fate and left her suit covered in blood; Nina braces for the cold vacuum of space and steps into the narrow tunnel. Disorienting lightness hurts her eyes as she falls to her knees and crawls to the opposite end, "Am I going to die or not? Fuck, kill me already."

Spilling headfirst out of the narrowing tunnel onto a cold, hard solid surface, Nina scrambles onto her feet and finds herself inside a bright, cheery vaulted dining room. Denying her captors even a small victory, she stifles a surprised gasp. Sliding bare feet over cool Italian marble, Nina enters *Le Cinq*; a five-star Paris restaurant recreated in holographic detail from her picked-clean memory. Looking through draped windows arching to an ornate gilded ceiling, she notes the jaw-dropping view of Earth amid a sea of stars. "What the hell, close enough."

Underdressed for the tony venue, she passes potted palms under crystalline chandeliers refracting across fine set tables with long-stemmed red roses jutting heavenward from shimmering centerpieces.

Brushing her hip through the hyper-real corner of a linen-draped table, she studies a gleaming polished table knife before purging the thought. A quick backward glance finds the portal replaced by more draped windows and tall potted palms. Starving beyond measure, Nina steps around the tables to a dessert cart brimming with pastries, fruits, berries, and an impressive collection of French wines. After a brief hesitation, she reaches out and touches a plump strawberry. Withdrawing her hand, she is startled to find it has mass.

"Tsk, tsk, Ms. Madsen. You should know it is improper to

partake of the dessert offerings before enjoying a proper dinner.”

Wheeling on her bare heels, Nina scans the tables and spies a man wearing a fine tailored suit and tie, holding a half-empty wine glass raised in his right hand.

“Please, join me, Ms. Madsen, I insist. The setting may be fake, but the food is authentic. And delicious, I might add.

Grabbing a bottle of 2016 *Margaux*, Nina complies. “Why not.”

“Excellent!”

Placing the bottle on the table, half expecting it to crash right through to the hard floor, Nina takes the proffered seat, “Thank you.”

Angling into the chair opposite his guest, the distinguished man creases a dimpled smile on his tanned and handsome face, “You are most welcome, Nina.”

“So what is this? Am I hallucinating? Or perhaps I am dead, and purgatory is an eternity waiting for a table at *Le Cinq*.”

“I assure you, you are alive and well. However, you endured a painful, bloody procedure. For that, you have my deepest apologies.”

“Spare me your bullshit. The stirrup-shaped bruises on my calves and ankles were a dead giveaway. If you hurt Nicole and Astrid, I will kill you.”

Dismissing her hollow threat with a carefree laugh, “As I said, the procedure is a little rough, but you have my apologies. A clean enviro suit from your vessel awaits inside your cell. That is the best I can do at the moment.”

“Who are you?”

“You must be hungry.” Snapping his fingers, a youthful wait staff appears out of nowhere, filling water glasses and placing a basket of warm bread on the table.

Nina’s waiter attempts to assist with her napkin, causing her to recoil from the teenager, “That’s okay. I got it.”

Perplexed, the boy stumbles backward.

Nina looks into the boy’s dark eyes, “I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head and places an index finger over his mouth, “No need to apologize.”

A young female server pops Nina’s pilfered wine and pours a sample into a crystal goblet, “Would you care to taste the wine, Madam?”

Nina looks at the pretty young girl with those same dark-black piercing eyes, “No need; I’m beyond sure it will be perfect.”

After filling the glass, the girl joins her fellow wait staff at attention.

Sensing Nina’s unease and the awkwardness of the situation, the man chuckles with a merry glint in his deep-set gray eyes, “Thank you all. Our guest is starving. Please return to the kitchen and speed up the main course.”

Alone in the holographic room across from the distinguished man, Nina ventures a long sip from the goblet, “Are you real, or can I put my fist right through your head?” Before he can reply, a dizzying rush swirls through her messy charcoal bedhead.

“Take it easy, Ms. Madsen. Throwing back a glass of aged French wine on an empty stomach with your anemic cell count is ill-advised.”

“Fuck off. I’ve held my own with everyone from Russian oligarchs to a college of Cardinals in Rome.”

“You had an impressive career with The Powers That Be.”

Nina places the glass on the table and nods with sudden recognition, “Of course. I can’t push out a baby hybrid—I could have told you that was a non-starter. However, I have value as a high-level officer with the only entity on Earth that is not curled into a fetal position sucking on their collective thumbs.” Shaking her head in disgust, “How utterly predictable.”

The man leans across the table, his casual demeanor tinged with desperation, “We can make your life quite comfortable, Nina.”

“No thanks. I want to go home now.”

“That is not an option, but I think you know that already.” After a pregnant pause, the man presses further, “Your allies may resemble

these Grays, but this species is hellbent on righting an ancient wrong. Every human on Earth will die. However, I can negotiate safe passage for you and your friends if you agree to help them locate a lost ship.”

Nina’s surprised laugh echoes through the space, “Really? A lost ship. How does one lose a ship?”

The man winces at her glibness, “Ms. Madsen, I had to beg my superiors to allow this meeting; otherwise, you would already be dead.”

Nina absorbs the man’s words and reaches for the bottle to refill her glass, “I guess you will have to kill me because I know nothing about a lost ship. That is beyond ludicrous.” Studying the attractive man’s face, “You may be human, but I don’t think you comprehend how our species persevered throughout history. We will not roll over and let your alien friends wipe us out, ship or no ship.”

Ignoring her reply, the man presses further, “The Grays watched the Gork invasion devolve into a spectacular defeat similar to a humiliation their ancestors suffered millions of years ago. They seek a weapon buried in the ship’s manifest to assure that history will not repeat.”

Nina swirls her glass and pretends to consider his words, buying time, “Let me think about it.”

“My superiors demand an answer.”

“Tough. I don’t even know your name.”

“My name is Sebastian Duarte. I am from Lisbon. I was 12 when they abducted myself and my sister, Maria.”

“Where is she?”

“She is a breeder with over fifty children spread across Earth. We saw the writing on the wall and escaped a life of poverty.” Leaning back in his seat, “As for myself, with the assistance of *my* advisors, as you like to refer to *your* Gray friends, I am a member of the Portuguese Parliament.”

Nina nods with a smirk, “No shit. My dear departed mother was a Danish MP. Small world.”



“We know.”

“Of course you do.” After another sip, she pries for information, “What about these half breeds roaming the planet? What could the Grays possibly gain from that horrible plan.”

“To be frank, Ms. Madsen, individuals with alien DNA inhabit lofty and powerful positions from Davos to Beijing to DC. Due to those blasted Gorks, many are now among the millions dead and dying.”

“Yeah, too bad.”

Sebastian winces at her recalcitrance and snaps his fingers. The hologram evaporates, leaving them seated at the lone table amid an echoing empty hangar bay. A male server appears from the shadows and places an aromatic Steak au Poivre atop the table midway between Nina and Sebastian. Meanwhile, a young female server circles to the opposite side, placing her dish containing a grayish pill atop the linen tablecloth.

The pair recede into the shadows leaving Nina to contemplate the gastronomical Sophie’s Choice. Reaching for her glass, she finds it gone and expresses an exasperated huff, “I’m sorry, I don’t follow your symbolism here. Which one of these means *screw humanity*, and which is the equivalent of *go to hell*?”

Surprised by her obtuse reaction, he replies, “I thought it rather obvious. No matter. The gray pill provides enough sustenance to sustain human life. It is the same feed keeping your fellow abductees alive. However, you will still be hungry afterward.”

Pushing the plate holding the steak closer to Nina, he continues, “On the other hand, consuming the flesh of another living organism holds a special significance for the Grays, akin to a religious experience.”

Nina shakes her head in disbelief, “No. That can’t be correct. In my experience with Grays, the subject of nutrition never came up, and it never occurred to me what they ate.”

Sebastian smiles at his guest’s naive reaction, “There are multiple species of Grays throughout the universe, Ms. Madsen. Too many to count. Some are pacifistic intellectuals above puerile pursuits such as

nourishment. But others, like my friends up here prepping to invade Earth, take great pleasure in consuming the flesh of their victims. The rampant cattle mutilations and crop circles through the years were abject warnings, not hoaxes by drunken teenagers. No offense, Nina, but humanity is a stupid species begging for extinction, and your loyalty is misguided.”

Disheartened and starving, Nina fingers the plate and looks closer at the cooked meat under the thick congealing mustard-colored sauce, “What is this?”

With a hearty laugh, “To be honest, I never got the chap’s name.”

Nina almost vomits, realizing the meat is human flesh.

“I know, it’s vile and disgusting. You must understand that this Gray species is millions of years beyond human civilization. They do not view us as equals.” Pausing for effect, Sebastian Duarte stands from his chair and places his napkin on the table, “More like cattle.”

The horrifying revelation leaves Nina shocked, staring at the inch-thick slab of meat cooked to perfection.

“I would love to stay and chat longer, but I must return to our planet and tend to my decimated constituents. The nasty Gorks left a disastrous mess, even in a shithole country like mine. The unwashed masses are elbowing for space at government troughs like herds of rutting farm animals.” Catching his unintentional reference, “Farm animals, get it?”

Nina stares at the plates as Sebastian disappears into the dark hangar bay. From a distance, his deep and melodic voice rings in her ears.

“Plans are afoot to topple The Powers That Be. You do not have much time. The choice is yours, Nina. Enjoy your meal.” His voice trails off as he steps into a ship headed to Earth.

Nina picks up the gray pill and swallows it.

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**The Powers That Be Trilogy | Book Two**

# ***THE LOST SHIP***

\* \* \* \* \*

The author recommends starting with

**The Powers That Be Trilogy | Book One**

# ***THE GOLDEN ELLIPSE***

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John Hopkins** is an author and artist based in the great state of Texas with his wife and dog. Following his muse, while still active in an accomplished career in communication arts, John published two award-winning *Lost Cactus* comic strip anthologies filled with a shared universe of short stories, essays, and illustrations.

*The Lost Ship* follows his first full-length novel, *The Golden Ellipse*, in **The Powers That Be** trilogy of science fiction epics with roots harkening to his original comic strip inspiration. *The Blue Spark*, Book Three, is scheduled for release in late 2023.

In the meantime, enjoy reading his **The Powers That Be** short stories and look for more short tales and graphic novels pulled from the **Lost Cactus Archives**.

Visit [johnhopkinsauthor.com](http://johnhopkinsauthor.com) to stay current on all things relating to **The Powers That Be** series, an informative, entertaining blog focusing on the writing process, tips and tricks on print and digital techniques, giveaways, free downloads, character bios, artwork, and reader contests.

