

Prologue

Stanley Hobbes | Newport, RI

11:43 a.m. | February 3, 2020

Stanley Hobbes fancied himself something of a low-level superhero. Sporting rumpled secondhand clothes under trademark moth-eaten sweaters and Coke-bottle spectacles on his bald head, the affirmed bachelor with a keen eye for the ladies looked more like one of Superman's turds which suited him just fine. His God-given short stature and humble outward appearance proved invaluable superpowers, lulling a cruel world to overlook and underestimate his squat 5-2 frame.

Heat-packing guards and state-of-the-art security systems protecting Newport's notorious debauchery and high society hedonism from the prying eyes of mere mortals proved no match for Stanley. Quick-witted and resourceful, his chameleon-like personae infiltrated elite gatherings, extravagant weddings, bar mitzvahs, glitzy fundraisers,

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and outrageous parties, documenting the inevitable devolution into a shameful and embarrassing smorgasbord of drunken bacchanals, vicious fights, and fumbling awkward trysts.

After uploading salacious high-class hijinks reportage and reputation-damaging hi-res imagery to his editors via anonymous links, he scooped up thick envelopes of cash at dead drop locations, maintaining his secret identity, just like Clark Kent.

On rare occasions, pangs of conscience permeated Stanley's psyche, but a lifetime of derisive mockery at the hands of these same rich assholes assuaged his guilt. Post ten years of countless breaches and narrow escapes, he almost had enough to secure a down payment on a vacant Newport storefront that sold candy back in the day. Stanley's dream: convert the retail space wedged between an antique shop and a maritime art gallery into Hobbes Rare Books, specializing in comics and pulpy fiction from a bygone era. An impressive personal collection of books and manuscripts amassed over his 35 years stored in a climate-controlled facility will stock the shelves before a grand opening.

Stanley Hobbes made a solemn resolution: one more big score, and he would quit the cloak-and-dagger paparazzi racket for good. With his John Hancock on a thick stack of loan papers, his transmogrification into an upstanding business owner and pillar of the community will be realized. He even had half a mind to join the local chamber.

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Through a reliable source, Stanley learned that socialite extraordinaire Miriam Alexander, wife of Marcus Alexander, the Newport-based entertainment mogul, was rushed to the Women & Infants Hospital in Providence. Recovering from an emergency C-section, Mrs. Alexander's condition is guarded, and the six-month-old preemie baby girl is tucked away in the neonatal ICU under heavy security. The mission, should Stanley accept, is to capture pictures of the mother and child.

This was a job for, well, Stanley.

Rachel | Providence, RI

11:43 a.m. | February 4, 2020

Stanley pulled his 2002 Chevy Malibu rust bucket into a handicapped spot in the hospital parking garage, popped the trunk, pulled out his crutches, and snapped a brace around his right leg. Patting the charged smart device in his trouser pocket, the conman hobbled to the elevator to breach the renowned birthing hospital, churning out pampered little brats like a factory.

Struggling through cumbersome glass doors into the lobby, no one offered Stanley assistance—a harmless runt with a bum leg birth defect—not too far from the truth.

Stanley scoped the scene, feigning reading the hospital's directory inside the well-adorned lobby, noting stone-faced men in black impeding access to the bank of elevators. His source was not kidding about the heightened security presence. An anticipatory prickle down the spine informed the veteran reporter that there is more to this story than snapping precious baby photos for slavish masses eking out vicarious lives through the privileged elite.

Limping past the security desk, Stanley waved at a guard and pointed toward the gift shop. The musclebound Black man stared right through him before turning his back to assist another visitor.

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Waltzing down a central corridor like he owned the place, munching on a Snickers bar from the overpriced gift emporium with a pink "It's a Girl!" balloon tied to a crutch, Stanley spied an unattended emergency stairwell. Checking his six, he ditched the crutches behind a potted plant and climbed flights of stairs, huffing, and panting by the

time he reached the sixth-floor Neonatology ward.

Dabbing sweat with a hankie, Stanley held the balloon close, cognizant of cameras up and down the quiet corridor. Walking past floor-to-ceiling glass-fronted intensive care units bathed in serene blue glows to prevent jaundice, he read the handwritten placards by each doorway: Rodriguez, Hoffman, Yang, Simpson, Palmieri No Alexander. Shit. Shit. And more shit.

Moving toward a centralized nurses' station, Stanley nodded past a weary couple and froze as elevator doors slid apart. Melding behind a metal trash can, he watched a distinguished fellow in a houndstooth sportscoat and red bow tie with dark-gray curly hair leading a team of important-looking white-coated men and women into a meeting room.

Connecting the bow tie wearer to the men in black standing watch on the main floor, Stanley assumed his cloak of invisibility and sauntered past the preoccupied nurses' station. Approaching the closed door to eavesdrop, he heard voices raised in angry tones, realizing it was some kind of high-level ass-chewing. Ducking into an adjacent storage room on impulse, Hobbes searched the tight space and pulled a stethoscope from a shelf crammed with supplies.

"Jesus, I know where to go if I ever need a caseload of rubber gloves."

Jamming the earpieces into his hairy ears, he placed the diaphragm against the wall adjoining the conference room and picked up the superheated conversation.

"... don't care about your damnable ethics! The injections must proceed on schedule."

A woman's voice interjected, *"Professor King, you must agree that the premature birth resulted from your drug trial. If you do not tell me what these injections are designed to do, ethically, I cannot participate. I will not be a party to your human experimentation."*

Red bow tie's authoritative reply resonated through Stanley's earpieces.

“Doctor, you are free to go, but please be mindful of your NDAs. The Powers That Be will not fuck around with whistleblowers.”

A more conciliatory male voice interjected, *“Be reasonable, Doctor Shepherd. Professor King’s organization made a sizable donation. It is just one little girl. And, from what I understand, she is doing amazingly well for a six-month preemie.”*

“Really, Bob? We are so hard up for cash that this so-called scientist can waltz in here, write a check, and we have to inject his untested drug into a tiny baby’s brain? I want no part of this. I quit. Professor King, you and your powers that be can go to hell.”

Readjusting the stethoscope earpieces, Stanley mumbled, *“Powers That Be,”* before the conference room’s door creaked open and slammed shut, shaking the thin wall.

The room fell silent before Stanley heard the man adopt a more conciliatory tone to quell further debate, *“We do not require the close-minded Doctor Shepherd’s approval to proceed with the injections. I assure you that no harm will come to the baby. Case closed.”*

Stanley scrunched closer to the wall, listening as a softer female voice dared to ask: *“Does Mr. and Mrs. Alexander know what you are up to, Professor?”*

“If you must know, Nurse Rahimi, Marcus Alexander, the child’s father, signed off on the procedure in exchange for exclusive rights to build his arenas on a portfolio of high-end properties. Quid pro quo. That is how The Powers That Be operates. By the way, did your mortgage pay-off check clear?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations. Now, Miriam Alexander is still in post-cesarean recovery. She was told that her daughter’s NICU is listed under the last name Hoffman for privacy. Everything is above board as far as the mother is concerned. Proceed with baby Rachel’s injections and ensure no unauthorized hospital personnel enters her NICU. I do not wish to post guards, but I will if it comes to that.”

Nurse Rahimi ventured a follow-up query. *“Do these injections have a name?”*

Hobbes leaned in to hear Professor King’s reply, *“Blue Spark is the codename for the experimental treatment. Miriam and Marcus Alexander’s child is the first of a new kind.”*

Seated atop a cardboard box in stunned silence, Stanley Hobbes removed the stethoscope as the meeting ended. “Blue Spark ... that is catchy.” With his paparazzi task forgotten, Stanley Hobbes exited the storeroom and stumbled past the nurses’ station, mulling the consequential eavesdrop in his active mind.

“Sir! Can I help you?”

Still clutching the balloon, Stanley snapped back to the present, wheeling toward the woman’s familiar soft voice, “Uh, Nurse Rahimi, uh ... I am here with a delivery. Uh, yeah, I was told to deliver this balloon to the Hoffman baby.” With a wide-eyed nod, he mumbled, “Yep, that is why I am here.”

Fresh off her confrontational meeting and in no mood to play around with the blatant liar, Nurse Rahimi’s dark gaze pierced Stanley’s wafer-thin story. “Should I call security?”

Stanley Hobbes tossed caution to the wind, “Please don’t. You are right; that was a lie. I would like to see the Hoffman baby. Is that in any way possible?”

With one eye on the elevator, ensuring that Professor King’s mysterious PTB entourage had vacated the floor, Nurse Rahimi proffered a broad smile, “Sure. Why not? Let me find you a mask and scrubs—sized extra small.”

Covered from head to toe, Stanley Hobbes followed the dark-complected nurse into the blue-lit NICU.

“Here she is. Isn’t she a beauty?”

Bathed in a peaceful blue ambiance, overwhelmed with a dizzying sense of grace, Stanley Hobbes moved before the tall glass incubator, staring enrapt at the delicate creature ensconced within, lying

atop a cute animal print blanket. “She is the most perfect thing I have ever seen.”

As if hearing Stanley’s words, baby Rachel’s eyes opened, and her tiny head swiveled onto his watery gaze.

Swallowing hard, Stanley noted the miniaturized cannula and thin tube extending from the delicate preemie’s left temple with a wince. Replaying the stern man’s profound statement that this child is the first of a new kind, he proffers a delicate wave, “Hello, Rachel. My name is Stanley Hobbes.”

Upon saying the words aloud, the nebbish little paparazzo knew his life was irrevocably altered in ways that would play out over time. Taking a deep breath through his mask, Stanley returned Rachel’s mesmerizing gaze through his glowing reflection in the incubator glass, “I will watch over you, Rachel. That’s a promise.”

Perceiving the gravitational pull between the tiny baby and the strange little man, Nurse Rahimi remained vigilant while administering a prescribed dosage of Professor Richard King’s mystery drug from an IV bag. Monitoring the blue fluid coursing through the thin tube and into baby Rachel, the veteran NICU nurse hears people coming down the hall, “Okay, Mr. Hobbes, it is time to go.”

Stanley removed his thick spectacles and swiped more tears from his eyes before pivoting toward Nurse Rahimi, “Tell me everything you know about The Powers That Be and the Blue Spark.”

Eppur si muove.

Galileo Galilei

Chapter One:

The Maverick

Professor Ian Dury | Gobekli Tepe

4:45 p.m. | August 7, 2034

Alien Disclosure Day in early 2034 confirmed once and for all what most people already suspected—we are not alone in the universe. For Professor Ian Dury, the official pronouncement from a historic gathering of world leaders in the Nevada desert also reaffirmed his POV that human civilization had reached a climax. His proof? Coddled within a technological ennui, the distractible world quickly tuned out the second most important story in human history. Absent little green men landing on the White House lawn—which no one said was forthcoming anytime soon—they returned to standard programming: politics, sports, entertainment, and the latest titillating scandal du jour.

Disclosure Day had another annoying after-effect for Dury and a new generation of fresh-faced, open-minded young archeologists.

Years spent studying geographical and structural mysteries for clues to advanced human societies that flourished for eons before vanishing off the face of Earth were defunded in favor of the sexier and more accessible alien angle. In the mainstream, proponents of theoretical former human civilizations were cast as borderline insane nutjobs, and their ridiculous evidence was deemed downright preposterous and unworthy of academic scrutiny. Case closed.

Despite maintaining his staunch beliefs, interview requests filled Ian's inbox, requesting his learned opinion on alien links to sites like Nan Madol and Gobekli Tepe. Total horseshit, but now almost impossible to refute. Turning down lucrative offers from news producers and podcasters like Fred Beaman with his twelve million+ followers, Ian seethed at his colleagues' greed, selling their souls to sit behind microphones, repeating ancient alien propagandized drivel.

Liberated from the consensus-driven herd and weary of the nagging requests, Ian hoisted a middle-finger salute to the unholy public-private alliance and their confounding desire to project Mr. Alien onto flimsy ad-hoc narratives and return to business as usual, whatever that is.

Countering the noise, Ian decided to fight fire with fire by bootstrapping a documentary spotlighting his controversial research on former human civilizations. On a shoestring budget, the maverick archeologist—and a thorn in the side of mainstream academe—hired a crew of eager-beaver film school students willing to work for peanuts and, better yet, had their own equipment.

Gwen Stevens, a struggling American actress, signed on as the documentary's moderator and interviewer. Ian knew she brought nothing to the project but knock-out good looks, a great voice, and a brash, outspoken reputation. Still, the last thing he needed was a passive milquetoast afraid to take on the big dog. With Ms. Stevens, that was not a concern—he was pretty sure she disliked him from their initial meeting in Los Angeles. So much the better.

To get the ball rolling, the renowned professor opted to throw all his cards on the table and take the film crew to the infamous archeological wonder, Gobekli Tepe, in southeastern Turkey to record the initial segments of his film. A sink-or-swim test for the team, and Gwen can break in her shiny new Italian leather boots as a bonus.

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The low-budget three-vehicle caravan parked in the empty Gobekli Tepe visitor lot near a dead-quiet museum complex built for hordes of tourists that never materialized. By contrast, better-known wonders like Giza and Stonehenge had reservations booked out a year in advance to control throngs of ET acolytes flocking to the sites in search of aliens.

Noting the tattered remnants of open-air tented structures designed to protect the site and its surrounding digs from the harsh Turkish elements, Ian spit on the hot pavement, “It looks like we can leave the incidental release forms in the car. We are the only ones here.”

Tuning out grumblings from the youthful film crew getting its first taste of the less-than-optimal Turkish climate, a dizzying headrush caused Dury to grab the nearest car door to stop himself from faceplanting on the pavement.

“Are you okay, Professor?”

“Yes, Chet. It’s the heat; you would think I’d be used to it by now.”

Leaving Chet Andersen, his de facto director/producer, to supervise unloading the equipment, Ian scouted ahead down a familiar pathway of weather-beaten planks into the sprawling ruins. With a dismissive huff, he shunned a nagging thought that his arrival at Gobekli Tepe fulfilled part of a larger plan.

Noting discarded tools and equipment scattered about aborted excavations eroding under harsh elements leaking through gaping holes in a ripped canopy stretched between bent and rusted stanchions, the

48-year-old mused, "It is easier to put everything on ET than to chisel away under the hot sun. Sensible, really."

Shaking off another dizzy spell, a voice called from behind.

"Hey, Professor, I think it is too hot to play outside today."

Ian turned his tanned visage onto Gwen's pleasant countenance as the inexperienced Spielbergian wannabes struggled to unpack equipment and stage a two-minute opening interview scene before a massive stone pillar near the site's concentric epicenter.

Wearing a floppy sun hat and sporting an open-collar white button-down tied at the waist over skin-tight khakis tucked into her dusty boots, the actress found her mark while perusing an outline of the first day's shoot schedule. "There is no way we will get all these shots in a day."

Ian smiled, avoiding staring at her pert breasts visible under the thin cotton blouse, "I know; shoot for the stars, settle for the Moon." Dabbing sweat from his forehead, "This opening bit is designed for me to riff on the alien angle, but feel free to interject. I am not remaking *Citizen Kane*. I want this documentary to have an unscripted quality to allow us the freedom to take the conversation where it leads. I just need to get my points across in a coherent fashion using this extraordinary location to buttress my view."

"Yeah. I get it, Mr. Dury."

"Please, Gwen, call me Ian."

Standing before a tall pillar adorned with exquisite animal carvings, they watched as a purple-haired young lady struggled to attach a reflector to a stand on the uneven surface to redirect the natural light. In the awkward silence, Ian noted Gwen's bored and aloof posture translated to an utter lack of interest in the production. He was not stupid. The actress had lost out on several roles and signed the contract under duress, nothing more. And to make matters worse, she preferred women, which left the prospect of sleeping with his co-star a non-starter.

Watching the company makeup artist touch up her model-

perfect features, he proffered a broad signature smile, “Ready, my dear?”

Nudging back her floppy hat, she waved her script as a fan, “I guess. It is 110 degrees. I should have asked for hazard pay.”

Signaling Chet to get this shitshow rolling, Ian leaned close and whispered in Gwen’s left ear, “The joke is on you, sweetheart. I am flat broke.”

Hearing her genuine laugh, he felt the tension evaporate into the dry air.

Chet checked the camera and called for quiet, “Okay, Mr. Dury. We are ready for you.”

A veteran of on-camera appearances that made him a household name, Professor Ian Dury left his mark to check the scene through the viewfinder, “Thank you, Chet. You might want to redirect more light on that pillar.”

“Uh, good point. Hey Teresa, grab another reflector from the bag.”

Dury chuckled toward Gwen while retaking his place by her side, “They mean well.”

“Uh-huh. How many days will we be out here?”

On the cusp of a cheeky reply, Ian bit his tongue as his young director yelled, “Ready on set,” like the second coming of Orson Welles.

With the camera light blinking red, Ian adopted the authoritative yet accessible demeanor and Indiana Jones-style swagger that vaulted him from obscurity to a viral star and popular talk show guest. “As you can see by the deteriorated state of Gobekli Tepe, my esteemed colleagues have moved on from this important site. After years spent with their heads buried in the superheated sand, they still ignore the obvious: this place—and many others like it worldwide—were built by human civilizations with a superior grasp of technology well beyond our current understanding.”

Chiming in for the first time, Gwen played her part to a tee, countering Ian’s open, “Professor Dury, how can you be so sure that this

pillar,” she reached out and tapped the gritty surface, “was not the result of extraterrestrials?”

Eager to address the ET nonsense and progress to more important aspects of his extensive research, “You know what, Gwen? We don’t have to guess.” Nudging the pretty woman whose previous claim to fame was starring in a series of hammy Netflix romcoms, “Since we now have the official confirmation of aliens in our midst, someone should just ask them.”

“Cut! Cut!” Chet scowled at his boom operator, “Shit, Loretta, watch that fucking thing. It dropped enough to cast a shadow right behind Gwen.” After reshuffling the deck amid a chorus of groans, Chet plopped back into his canvas director’s chair with a raised finger, “And ... action!”

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After a long and tedious day-one shoot, the film crew staggered back to their hotel tired, grumpy, and covered in gritty sand.

Averse to wasting a second of valuable time, Ian blocked the corridor to the rooms, “Hang on, everybody, I know you are all tired, but let’s meet down here in an hour to review tomorrow’s schedule.”

Taking the mean stares and muttered curses as an enthusiastic yes, Ian stepped aside, watching the young film students trundle past him to their triple occupancy rooms. “Good job today. It gets easier, I promise.”

Trailing the rest of the group, Gwen stretched her long frame with a loud yawn and mumbled a halfhearted goodnight.

“See you in the morning, Ms. Stevens. Bright and early, 5:30 sharp.”

Ian watched the tall woman head down the hallway, calling after her, “I meant what I said this morning, Gwen. The aliens know we have had previous civilizational incarnations for millennia. What about the Eye of the Sahara, otherwise known as the Richat Structure? We are

heading there next.”

Shaking her head, she waved back at her employer, “Yeah. Yeah. Too tired to care right now.”

Alone in the darkened lobby, Ian turned to find the desk clerk staring at him with a slackened jaw, “Close your mouth, son. The flies will get out.”

* * *

In total darkness, Ian Dury bolted upright in his bed, shivering, and drenched in sweat.

A disembodied voice shattered the stillness, “*Return to Gobekli Tèpe.*”

Unable to shake off his addled, dreamlike state, Ian answered, “Right now?”

* * *

Pulling into the empty visitor lot, Ian checked the time, “It is 2:30 in the morning. I must be out of my mind.”

Recalling the weird hunch that he was brought here for an ulterior purpose; the archeologist grabbed a flashlight and retraced the path into the UNESCO World Heritage site. Taking careful steps, cognizant of snakes, scorpions, and spiders lurking in the dark, he stumbled to the tall pillar where they managed to record the two-minute opening interview in only twelve mind-numbing takes—the extent of the progress on day one.

Sleep-deprived and confused, Ian cast his light over the recognizable animal shapes carved out of the heavy blocks, noting their deep cast shadows playing across the sandblasted surfaces under the narrow beam of his high-powered torch.

Trying to shake off whatever had hijacked his consciousness, Ian yelled into the starry night, “I’m here. What do you want from me?”

A ball of light brightened from the ether as if in response,

illuminating Ian's trembling stance in a brilliant glow before transforming into a tall, naked male human carrying a matte-gray one-foot cube.

"This is a test. This is not a test. But it is a test. You are so close. You are far away."

Swallowing back palpable trepidation mixing with sheer confusion, Ian struggled to form a sentence, "Test? What kind of test?"

"It is a soul cage. The one who can use it will use it as a last hope before the Overlords. The Overlords."

"Who are you? Who are the Overlords?"

"It is more important who you are: the messenger. Nothing more. Nothing less. The Overlords will return to reclaim what was. Your existence is in great peril. They will spare no one. The cube. The soul cage. It must pass from your hands to the one who can use it."

With its task completed, the glowing man disappeared into thin air, leaving the cube resting on the dirt at Dury's boots. Squatting down for a closer look, he studied it for a long time before smoothing his hands along its sides, "Good Christ, this thing is freezing cold."

After a backbreaking struggle, he shoved the heavy cube in the back of the Land Rover under a tarp, overwhelmed with a heady sense of purpose well beyond the fucking documentary, and floored it back to the hotel.

Grabbing his go-bag with the first glimmer of morning coloring the eastern horizon in purple, pink, and orange hues, Ian climbed behind the wheel and paused to consider the paranormal turn of events, "Let's see ... I'm supposed to deliver the cube to the one who can use it. Who the fuck is that? First, I need to get it out of Turkey"

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His mind scrambled; in a dead panic, Professor Ian Dury took the main highway out of Turkey toward Damascus, Syria. Thankful he remembered his passport; he experienced nothing beyond the usual third-degree from dead-eyed guards at the border crossings—no one

asked to inspect the back of the Land Rover.

Making the last few miles of the eight-hour-plus drive on fumes, the bone-tired scientist pulled the ticking, overheated Land Rover to a stop at an upscale downtown hotel.

Secreting the heavy cube to his room on a luggage cart in a fit of paranoia, Ian bolted the door, closed the drapes, and hefted the cube atop the room's work desk. Scrutinizing the perplexing mystery for the first time, Ian shook his weary head in wonderment, "What are you?"

Smelling his own BO, Ian pulled his gaze from the cube's magnetic presence to shower in the tight hotel bathroom. Letting the lukewarm water run over his head, the scientist replayed the previous 18 hours, "Oh shit. I better call Chet."

Leaving short messages for Chet and Gwen, Ian surmised they packed up and headed back to the airport. "Just as well. I will apologize later."

Taking a long pull from a pricey hotel room vodka, Ian recalled meeting an intelligence operative at a dinner party in Tel Aviv. The tall, angular Nigerian woman tried to recruit him to work for Mossad, an offer he declined, preferring to keep his head where it belonged, atop his shoulders. Swiping through the contacts on his smart device, he found the mystery woman's number under M for Mossad. Smart. "Maybe she can help."

After three rings, a resonant voice broke his paranoid reverie.

"Damascus House of Sweets. How may I help you?"

Taken aback by the gruff tone, Ian garbled a reply, "Oh, I think I have the wrong number"

"Do you know your password?"

"My what?"

"Come on, Ian, you must know the password."

"Who is this? How do you know my name?"

"Wait there. I will come to you."

* * *

A loud knock broke Ian's spellbound gape, staring at the cube from the foot of the bed. Heart racing, he moved to the door. "Yes?"

"Open the fucking door, Ian."

Unlatching the bolt, Ian opened the door, revealing an imposing Black man sporting a thick GI Joe beard. Brushing past Ian, the man moved across the crushed pile carpet to the cube, "Who knows you are here?"

"I left a message for Chet. What's his last name? Uh, back at the hotel in Gobekli Tepe. I abandoned the whole crew"

"The Turkish authorities have your team in custody."

"What? As in arrested. What the hell for?"

The bearded man approached the window and peered through the drapes, "How did you know to come here?"

Ian moved between the man and the cube, producing his phone from a pocket, "I am not sure how much I should tell you. I want to call Chet for myself."

The human beard snatched Ian's phone, removed the SIM card, and smashed it under the butt of his .45. "No more calls. You are in danger. I will take you and the cube to Aisha Ayad."

Awash with relief, Ian nodded, "That was her name! Aisha Ayad, She works for Mossad."

The man studied the cube, dismissing Ian's naive recollection, "She works for us now."

"Is that so? Can you tell me what is happening? Why is my crew locked up in a Turkish fucking jail?"

"For a professor, you are one clueless SOB. Your midnight rendezvous was captured by our satellites—and at least five other governments competing to gain the upper hand in the new techno race brought about after Disclosure Day. Turkish intelligence arrested them at the behest of the CIA."

"CIA? I'm just an archeologist trying to make a documentary."

What does any of this have to do with the Americans?”

The man grabbed Ian’s repacked duffel and dumped the contents on the bed. Pushing Ian aside in the tight space, “What was your plan? Sell the cube to the highest bidder?” Zipping the cube inside the emptied bag, he dropped it back onto the luggage cart with a thud.

Sensing the man’s impatience, Ian rushed to grab a clean trash bag from the bathroom receptacle and fill it with his scatted stuff, “I did not have a plan. I carried out the glowing man’s wishes.”

“Yes. We know, Ian. Let’s go. Ms. Ayad is waiting.”

“At least tell me where we are going.”

“Cairo International Airport. That is the closest PTB facility.”

“PTB? As in The Powers That Be? Are they for real?”

“If they weren’t, you would not have made it this far.”

* * *

The swept-wing passenger jet taxied to a stop in front of the imposing PTB hangar in a cordoned-off section of the sprawling Cairo airport, allowing Professor Ian Dury to deplane, followed by GI Joe with his kung-fu grip on the duffel holding the cube.

Gawking at the PTB’s extensive collection of vintage aircraft, from biplanes to supersonic jets filling the hangar’s echoing interior, Ian followed the agent through a door and down a fluorescent corridor to a bank of elevators.

“How far down are we going?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

Ian smiled at his reflection in the metal elevator door, “I’m a scientist; that’s my job. I never got your name?”

“You can call me Agent Flynn.”

The duo’s wordless traverse of a long underground passage ends at an expansive, darkened conference room, motion-activated lighting illuminating a long mahogany table surrounded by plush chairs.

“Have a seat, Mr. Dury.”

GI Joe, aka Agent Flynn, dropped the heavy bag on the table, removed the cube, and left.

Alone in the well-appointed boardroom, Ian pulled out the nearest chair, sunk into the plush leather seat, and fell into a deep slumber.

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Snoring like a freight train, Ian awakened from a dreamless sleep, hearing hushed voices. Forcing open bloodshot eyes, his bleary gaze focused on a host of faces in the SRO room, returning his stare.

With a loud yawn, he stretched stiff muscles in the cushy seat, “I must have fallen asleep.”

At the far end of the conference table, a dapper Asian man with a long gray ponytail closed a binder and folded his hands, “You have had a long day, Mr. Dury.”

Ian squinted past the cube still centered atop the long table, “Hey, I know you. You are the robot pioneer, Mitsuo Kobayashi. Can someone here tell me what in the hell is going on?”

Kobayashi paused, making eye contact with Aisha Ayad midway down the left side, sipping coffee from a paper cup. “While it is not your concern, we are searching for a relic.” Gesturing at the cube centerpiece, “However, it is almost certainly shaped like an oval disk consisting of an element similar to gold, but not gold. I am sorry for the confusion.”

Ian looked around at the poker-faced assemblage, “Can I keep the cube?”

Another woman in a white lab coat looks up from her stack of notes, “Most certainly not. While it is not the object of our search, its appearance from the Light Specters is undoubtedly significant.”

A cascade of memories flooded Ian’s brain, “Can you all spring my friends from the Turkish prison?”

Aisha Ayad, the PTB’s Intelligence Chief, put down her cup and leaned in, “It is good to see you again, Mr. Dury. Your people were

released on their own recognizance. It was obvious from the start that you acted alone.”

Gathering what was left of his tattered wits, Professor Ian Dury leaned back, “I think the angels were on my side.”

Mitsuo Kobayashi smiled, “Not angels, Professor, Light Specters.”

Dury pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off a headache under the canned lights, “Uh, look, the being told me something ... the cube is more than a fucking cube. What did he call it? Ah, yes, a soul cage.”

Noticing Kobayashi’s renewed interest, Dury’s thick brow rises, “He said the one who could use it will use it.”

Professor Richard King | PTB HQ

12:01 p.m. | August 14, 2034

Disappointed that the cube was another false lead in decades of fruitless searches for the elusive golden ellipse, Mitsuo Kobayashi shipped the mysterious object to his chief scientist, Professor Richard King, at the underground PTB HQ in Scotland.

“The archeologist referred to the cube as a soul cage.”

Listening to his long-time colleague and intellectual rival’s voice through a speaker in his gleaming new white underground laboratory, Richard studied the dull-gray cube atop a high lab bench under a bright color-corrected light, “Soul cage. That’s a new one. Mitsuo, can you send the satellite recording of the archeologist receiving the cube from the glowing naked fellow?”

“Done, Richard. Anything else?”

Richard King tugged his white lab coat collar and reached for his tuna fish sandwich from a plate beside the one-foot non-reflective cube. Taking a large bite, he laughed with his mouth full of bread and

fish, “You forgot to send the instruction manual.”

“Okay, Richard, nice talking to you. Gotta run.”

Richard King ended the call, leaning back against the counter with a shrug and another bite off his sandwich as a new voice resonated in his head.

“Richard.”

Choking down the dry bite, Richard straightened and stared at an almost imperceptible presence near the cube.

“Who are you?”

“The cube is for you, Richard. When the time is right, you will enter its protection.”

“How will I know what to do? The cube has no controls ... or instructions of any kind ... I need more information.”

“You will know how and when, Richard, only when the time comes. It is how it is done.”

“Why did you give it to the archeologist in Turkey? Why not just deliver it here?”

“You have it now and will use it. It is how it is done.”

* * *

Gifted from the Light Specters—for reasons beyond the PTB’s collected comprehension—the cubed enigma remained a mystery, like many other secrets held close by the PTB.

Only Professor Richard King knew he was the cube’s purpose. He told no one except Mitsuo Kobayashi how it chose him to transcend its incalculable mechanisms and upload his essence at an indeterminate future moment.

Assured he would know when the time was right, Richard shipped the cube to Lost Cactus, his former research laboratory hidden in the southwestern American hinterlands, where it became the latest addition to an expansive warehouse filled to its rafters with crated mystery objects, secured from overzealous governments seeking an

upper hand in a ruthless race for hyper-advanced alien tech and gadgets.

Professor Ian Dury | Fred Beaman Podcast

10:30 a.m. | March 13, 2035

Expressing effusive apologies and promises to double their pay, Professor Ian Dury convinced Chet to round up the film school students and continue the documentary shoot, minus Gwen, who had lawyered up and threatened legal action, refusing to take his call.

Over the next six months, Ian's film crew traveled the world, making a solid case that technologically advanced human civilizations flourished for millennia before disappearing. The crumbling structures these mysterious multitudes had left behind were used, reused, reimagined, rebuilt, and buried under newer stone monuments to societies, gods, and potentates coming and going through the ages, making it impossible to determine the original builder.

Satisfied with the final cut of his latest documentary, Professor Ian Dury made the usual rounds to promote the film. Visiting the uber-popular podcaster Fred Beaman's Los Angeles studio, he took the infamous hot seat behind a mike and donned the proffered headphones.

Sporting a fire engine red velour jogging suit over his wide girth, Fred Beaman, the pugilist turned podcaster, lit a signature Cuban, and blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air, "Welcome back, famed archeologist Professor Ian Dury."

"Thanks for having me back, Fred."

Fred crushed back in his custom ergonomic chair and proffered a wily grin tinged with sarcasm, "So, another documentary on past human civilizations from the world-famous archeologist." Clenching the stogie in his porcelain veneers, he poured a double shot of his private label bourbon with a throaty chuckle, "I hear the flick bombed."

Ian leaned forward, his eyes watering from the cigar smoke,

“It will break even, like my other projects, but whether it makes a dime is irrelevant. The documentary counters the myopic fascination with ET, which obfuscates a much more important story about past civilizations—human or otherwise—that no one but me and a handful of colleagues has the balls to investigate.”

Fred cut Ian off at the pass with an incredulous guffaw, “Come on, Ian. Read the room, my man! The fucking ET disclosure the world has been waiting for finally happened last year. People can’t get enough of that alien shit.”

Puffing his cigar, Fred’s dark eyes narrow on his guest’s implacable expression, “Okay, I’ll bite. We do have two hours to kill. Let’s talk about your film. Enlighten my millions of followers on why it is more crucial to human fucking civilization than confirmation of other sentient life forms in the universe.”

Accustomed to Fred Beaman’s dismissive mockery from past visits to the famous podcaster’s studio, Ian poured two fingers of Fred’s over-priced hooch into a mug and took a long pull, waiting for the smoke to clear. “Okay, Fred, here it goes: In the not-too-distant future, a previous civilization far more advanced than us—that left without a trace—will return. And Fred, you and I, your millions of listeners—and billions more around the globe—are not invited to their homecoming party.”



About the Author

Author and artist John Hopkins' curiosity for what lies beyond common knowledge shapes his character-driven storytelling. Following his muse, John created **Lost Cactus**, a comic strip set on an off-the-grid top-secret research base—think Area 51. The three-panel sci-fi comic's humor and supernatural mythology evolved to include a shared universe of short stories, laying the foundations of **The Powers That Be** trilogy and a wellspring of thought-provoking and entertaining projects in the pipeline.

Stay tuned and keep an eye on the sky.



johnhopkinsauthor.com