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THE ATLANTIS PLAGUE

A.G. RIDDLE

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PROLOGUE

70,000 Years Ago

Near Present-Day Somalia

The scientist opened her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear it. The ship had rushed her awakening sequence. *Why?* The awakening process usually happened more gradually, unless... The thick fog in her tube dissipated a bit, and she saw a flashing red light on the wall—an alarm.

The tube opened, and cold air rushed in around her, biting at her skin and scattering the last wisps of white fog. The scientist stepped out onto the frigid metal floor and stumbled to the control panel. Sparkling waves of green and white light, like a water fountain made of colorful fireflies, sprang up from the panel and engulfed her hand. She wiggled her fingers, and the wall display reacted. Yes—the ten-thousand-year hibernation had ended five hundred years early. She glanced at the two empty tubes behind her, then at the last tube, which held her companion. It was already starting the awakening sequence. She worked her fingers quickly, hoping to stop the process, but it was too late.

His tube hissed opened. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure.”

She brought up a map of the world and a series of statistics. “We have a population alert. Maybe an extinction event.”

“Source?”

She panned the map to a small island surrounded by a massive plume of black smoke. “A supervolcano near the equator. Global temperatures have plummeted.”

“Affected subspecies?” her companion asked as he stepped out of his tube and hobbled over to the control station.

“Just one. 8472. On the central continent.”

“That’s disappointing,” he said. “They were very promising.”

“Yes, they were.” The scientist pushed up from the console, now able to stand on her own. “I’d like to check it out.”

Her companion gave her a questioning look.

“Just to take some samples.”



Four hours later, the scientists had moved the massive ship halfway across the small world. In the ship’s decontamination chamber, the scientist snapped the last buckles on her suit, secured her helmet, then stood and waited for the door to open.

She activated the speaker in her helmet. “Audio check.”

“Audio confirmed,” her partner said. “Also receiving video. You’re cleared for departure.”

The doors parted, revealing a white sandy beach. Twenty feet in, the beach was covered in a thick blanket of ash that stretched to a rocky ridge.

The scientist glanced up at the darkened, ash-filled sky. The remaining ash in the atmosphere would fall eventually, and the sunlight would return, but by then, it would be too late for many of the planet’s inhabitants, including subspecies 8472.

The scientist trudged to the top of the ridge and looked back at the massive black ship, beached like an oversized mechanical whale. The world was dark and still, like many of the pre-life planets she had studied.

“Last recorded life signs are just beyond the ridge, bearing two-five degrees.”

“Copy,” the scientist said as she turned slightly and set out at a brisk pace.

Up ahead, she saw a massive cave, surrounded by a rocky area covered in more ash than the beach. She continued her march to the cave, but the going was slower. Her boots slid against the ash and rock, as if she were walking on glass covered in shredded feathers.

Just before she reached the mouth of the cave, she felt something else under her boot, neither ash nor rock. Flesh and bone. A leg. The scientist stepped back and allowed the display in her helmet to adjust.

“Are you seeing this?” she asked.

“Yes. Enhancing your display.”

The scene came into focus. There were dozens of them: bodies, stacked on top of each other all the way to the opening of the cave. The emaciated,

black corpses blended seamlessly with the rock below them and the ash that had fallen upon them, forming ridges and lumps that looked more like the aboveground roots of a massive tree.

To the scientist's surprise, the bodies were intact. "Extraordinary. No signs of cannibalism. These survivors knew each other. They could have been members of a tribe with a shared moral code. I think they marched here, to the sea, seeking shelter and food."

Her colleague switched her display to infrared, confirming they were all dead. His unspoken message was clear: get on with it.

She bent and withdrew a small cylinder. "Collecting a sample now." She held the cylinder to the closest body and waited for it to collect the DNA sample. When it finished, she stood and spoke in a formal tone. "*Alpha Lander*, Expedition Science Log, Official Entry: Preliminary observations confirm that subspecies 8472 has experienced an extinction-level event. Suspected cause is a supervolcano and subsequent volcanic winter. Species evolved approximately 130,000 local years before log date. Attempting to collect sample from last known survivor."

She turned and walked into the cave. The lights on each side of her helmet flashed on, revealing the scene inside. Bodies lay clumped together at the walls, but the infrared display showed no signs of life. The scientist wandered further into the cave. Several meters in, the bodies stopped. She glanced down. Tracks. Were they recent? She waded deeper into the cave.

On her helmet display, a faint sliver of crimson peeked out from the rock wall. Life signs. She rounded the turn, and the dark red spread into a glow of amber, orange, blues and greens. A survivor.

The scientist tapped quickly at her palm controls, switching to normal view. The survivor was female. Her ribs protruded unnaturally, stretching her black skin as if they could rip through with every shallow breath she drew. Below the ribs, the abdomen wasn't as sunken as the scientist would have expected. She activated the infrared again and confirmed her suspicion. The female was pregnant.

The scientist reached for another sample cylinder but stopped abruptly. Behind her, she heard a sound—footsteps, heavy, like feet dragging on the rock.

She turned her head just in time to see a massive male survivor stumble into the cramped space. He was almost twenty percent taller than the average height of the other male bodies she had seen and more broad-

shouldered. The tribe's chief? His ribs protruded grotesquely, worse than the female's. He held a forearm up, shielding his eyes from the lights that shone from the scientist's helmet. He lurched toward the scientist. He had something in his hand. The scientist reached for her stun baton and staggered backward, away from the female, but the massive man kept coming. The scientist activated the baton, but just before the male reached her, he veered away, collapsing against the wall at the female's side. He handed her the item in his hand—a mottled, rotten clump of flesh. She bit into it wildly, and he let his head fall back against the rock wall as his eyes closed.

The scientist fought to control her breathing.

Her partner's voice inside her helmet was crisp, urgent. "Alpha Lander One, I'm reading abnormal vitals. Are you in danger?"

The scientist tapped hastily on her palm control, disabling the suit's sensors and video feed. "Negative, Lander Two." She paused. "Possible suit malfunction. Proceeding to collect samples from last known survivors of subspecies 8472."

She withdrew a cylinder, knelt beside the large male, and placed the cylinder inside the elbow of his right arm. The second it made contact, the male lifted his other arm toward her. He placed his hand on the scientist's forearm, gripping gently, the only embrace the dying man could manage. Beside him, the female had finished the meal of rotten flesh, likely her last, and looked on through nearly lifeless eyes.

The sample cylinder beeped full once, then again, but the scientist didn't draw it away. She sat there, frozen. Something was happening to her. Then the male's hand slipped off her forearm, and his head rolled back against the wall. Before the scientist knew what was happening, she had hoisted the male up, slung him over her shoulder, and placed the female on her other shoulder. The suit's exoskeleton easily supported the weight, but once she cleared the cave, keeping her balance was more difficult on the ash-covered rocky ridge.

Ten minutes later, she crossed the beach, and the doors of the ship parted. Inside the ship, she placed the bodies on two rolling stretchers, shed her suit, and quickly moved the survivors to an operating room. She looked over her shoulder, then focused on the workstation. She ran several simulations and began adjusting the algorithms.

Behind her, a voice called out, "What are you doing?"

She whipped around, startled. She hadn't heard the door open. Her companion stood in the doorway, surveying the room. Confusion, then alarm spread across his face. "Are you—"

"I'm..." Her mind raced. She said the only thing she could. "I'm conducting an experiment."

PART I: SECRETS

1

Orchid District
Marbella, Spain

Dr. Kate Warner watched the woman convulse and strain against the straps of the makeshift operating table. The seizures grew more violent, and blood flowed from her mouth and ears.

There was nothing Kate could do for the woman, and that bothered her more than anything. Even during medical school and her residency, Kate had never gotten used to seeing a patient die. She hoped she never would.

She stepped forward, gripped the woman's left hand, and stood there until the shaking stopped. The woman blew out her last breath as her head rolled to the side.

The room fell silent except for the pitter-patter of blood falling from the table, splattering on the plastic below. The entire room was wrapped in heavy sheet plastic. The room was the closest thing the resort had to an operating room—a massage room in the spa building. Kate used the table where wealthy tourists had been pampered three months before to conduct experiments she still didn't understand.

Above her, the low whine of an electric motor broke the silence as the tiny video camera panned away from the woman to face Kate, prompting her, saying: file your report.

Kate jerked her mask down and gently placed the woman's hand on her abdomen. "Atlantis Plague Trial Alpha-493: Result Negative. Subject Marbella-2918." Kate eyed the woman, trying to think of a name. They refused to name the subjects, but Kate made up a name for every one of them. It wasn't like they could punish her for it. Maybe they thought withholding the names would make her job easier. It didn't. No one deserved to be a number or to die without a name.

Kate cleared her throat. "Subject's name is Marie Romero. Time of death: 15:14 local time. Suspected cause of death... Cause of death is the same as the last thirty people on this table."

Kate pulled her rubber gloves off with a loud crack and tossed them on the plastic-covered floor next to the growing pool of blood. She turned and reached for the door.

The speakers in the ceiling crackled to life.

“You need to do an autopsy.”

Kate glared at the camera. “Do it yourself.”

“Please, Kate.”

They had kept Kate almost completely in the dark, but she knew one thing: they needed her. She was immune to the Atlantis Plague, the perfect person to carry out their trials. She had gone along for weeks now, since Martin Grey, her adoptive father, had brought her here. Gradually, she had begun demanding answers. There were always promises, but the revelations never came.

She cleared her throat and spoke with more force. “I’m done for the day.” She pulled the door open.

“Stop. I know you want answers. Just take the sample, and we’ll talk.”

Kate inspected the metal cart that waited outside the room, just as it had thirty times before. A single thought ran through her mind: leverage. She took the blood draw kit, returned to Marie, and inserted the needle into the crook of her arm. It always took longer after the heart had stopped.

When the tube was full, she withdrew the needle, walked back to the cart, and placed the tube in the centrifuge. A few minutes passed while the tube spun. Behind her, the speakers called out an order. She knew what it was. She eyed the centrifuge as it came to a stop. She grabbed the tube, tucked it in her pocket, and walked down the hall.

She usually looked in on the boys after she finished work, but today she needed to do something else first. She entered her tiny room and plopped down on the “bed.” The room was almost like a jail cell: no windows, nothing on the walls, and a steel-frame cot with a mattress from the Middle Ages. She assumed it had previously housed a member of the cleaning staff. Kate considered it to be barely humane.

She bent over and began feeling around in the darkness under the cot. Finally, she grasped the bottle of vodka and brought it out. She grabbed a paper cup from the bedside table, blew out the dust, poured a sailor-sized gulp, and turned the bottom up.

She set the bottle down and stretched out on the bed. She extended her arm past her head and punched the button to turn the old radio on. It was

her only source of information on the outside world, but what she heard she hardly believed.

The radio reports described a world that had been saved from the Atlantis Plague by a miracle drug: Orchid. In the wake of the global outbreak, industrialized nations had closed their borders and declared martial law. She had never heard how many had died from the pandemic. The surviving population, however many there were, had been herded into Orchid Districts—massive camps where the people clung to life and took their daily dose of Orchid, a drug that kept the plague at bay but never fully cured it.

Kate had spent the last ten years doing clinical research, most recently focused on finding a cure for autism. Drugs weren't developed overnight, no matter how much money was spent or how urgent the need. Orchid had to be a lie. And if it was, what was the world outside really like?

She had only seen glimpses. Three weeks ago, Martin had saved her and two of the boys in her autism trial from certain death in a massive structure buried under the Bay of Gibraltar. Kate and the boys had escaped to the Gibraltar structure—what she now believed to be the lost city of Atlantis—from a similar complex two miles below the surface of Antarctica. Her biological father, Patrick Pierce, had covered their retreat in Gibraltar by exploding two nuclear bombs, destroying the ancient ruin and spewing debris into the straits, almost closing them. Martin had spirited them away in a short-range submersible just minutes before the blasts. The sub barely had enough power to navigate the debris field and reach Marbella, Spain—a resort town roughly fifty miles up the coast from Gibraltar. They had abandoned the sub in the marina and entered Marbella under the cover of night. Martin had said it would only be temporary, and Kate hadn't taken any notice of her surroundings. She knew they had entered a guarded complex, and she and the two boys had been confined to the spa building since.

Martin had told Kate that she could contribute to the research being done here—trying to find a cure for the Atlantis Plague. But since her arrival, she had rarely seen him or anyone else, save for the handlers who brought food and instructions for her work.

She turned the tube around in her hand, wondering why it was so important to them and when they would come for it. And who would come for it.

She looked over at the clock. The afternoon update would come on soon. She never missed it. She told herself she wanted to know what was happening out there, but the truth was more simple. What she really wanted to hear was news of one person: David Vale. But that report never came, and it probably wouldn't. There were two ways out of the tombs in Antarctica—through the ice entrance there in Antarctica or via the portal to Gibraltar. Her father had closed the Gibraltar exit permanently, and the Immari army was waiting in Antarctica. They would never let David live. Kate tried to push the thought away as the radio announcer came on.

You're listening to the BBC, the voice of human triumph on this, the 78th day of the Atlantis Plague. In this hour, we bring you three special reports. First, a group of four offshore oil rig operators who survived three days at sea without food to reach safety and salvation in the Orchid District of Corpus Christi, Texas. Second, a special report from Hugo Gordon, who visited the massive Orchid production facility outside Dresden, Germany and dispels vicious rumors that production of the plague-fighting drug is slowing. We end the hour with a roundtable discussion featuring four distinguished members of the royal society who predict a cure could come in weeks, not months.

But first, reports of courage and perseverance from Southern Brazil, where freedom fighters won a decisive victory yesterday against guerrilla forces from Immari-controlled Argentina...