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THE ATLANTIS WORLD

A.G. RIDDLE

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For my parents, who encouraged me to never give up.

PROLOGUE

Arecibo Observatory
Arecibo, Puerto Rico

For the last forty-eight hours, Dr. Mary Caldwell had spent every waking second studying the signal the radio telescope had received. She was exhausted, exhilarated, and sure of one thing: it was organized, a sign of intelligent life.

Behind her, John Bishop, the other researcher assigned to the observatory, poured himself another drink. He had gone through the scotch, the bourbon, then the rum, and all the other booze the dead researchers had stockpiled until he was down to the peach schnapps. He drank it straight since they had nothing to mix it with. He winced as he took the first sip.

It was nine A.M., and his revulsion at the liquid would only last another twenty minutes, until his third drink.

“You’re imagining it, Mare,” he said as he set the empty glass down and focused on refilling it.

Mary hated when he called her “Mare.” No one had ever called her that. It reminded her of a horse. But he was the only company she had, and the two of them had reached an understanding of sorts.

After the outbreak, when people across Puerto Rico were dying by the tens of thousands, they had holed up in the Observatory, and John had promptly made his first pass at her. She had brushed it off. The second followed two days later. After that, he made a move every day, each more aggressive than the last, until she had kned him in the balls. He had been more docile after that, focusing on alcohol and snide remarks.

Mary stood and walked to the window, which looked out on the lush, green Puerto Rican hills and forests. The only hint of civilization was the satellite dish that lay recessed into a plateau in the hills, pointed straight up at the sky. The radio telescope at Arecibo Observatory was the largest radio telescope in the world, a triumph of human engineering. It was a marriage of sciences that represented the pinnacle of human achievement embedded

in a primitive landscape that symbolized humanity's past. And now it had fulfilled its ultimate mission. Contact.

"It's real," Mary said.

"How do you know?"

"It has our address on it."

John stopped sipping the drink and looked up. "We should get out of here, Mare. Get back to civilization, to people. It will do you good—"

"I can prove it." Mary moved from the window back to the computer, punched a few keys and brought up the signal. "There are two sequences. I don't know what the second one is. I admit that. It's too complex. But the first sequence is composed of a simple repetition. On-Off. 0-1. Binary digits."

"Bits."

"Exactly. And there's a third code—a terminator. It appears after every eighth bit."

"Eight bits. A byte." John set the bottle aside.

"It's a code."

"For what?"

"I don't know yet." Mary walked back to the computer and checked the progress. "Less than an hour before the analysis is complete."

"It could be random chance."

"It's not. The first part, what's decoded, begins with our address."

John laughed out loud and grasped his drink again. "You had me for a minute there, Mare."

"If you were going to send a signal to another planet, what's the first thing you would put in? The address."

John nodded as he dumped more schnapps into the glass. "Uh huh, put the zip code in too."

"The first bytes represent two numbers: 27,624 and 0.00001496."

John paused.

"Think about it," Mary said. "What's the only constant across the entire universe?"

“Gravity?”

“Gravity is constant, but its measure depends on the curvature of spacetime, how close one object of mass is to another. You need a common denominator, something that any civilization, on any planet, no matter its mass or location, anywhere in the universe would know.”

John looked around.

“The speed of light. It’s the universal constant. It never changes, no matter where you are.”

“Right...”

“The first number, 27,624, is Earth’s distance from the center of our galaxy in light years.”

“That distance could apply to a dozen planets—”

“The second number, 0.00001496, is the exact distance of earth to the sun in light years.”

John stared straight ahead for a long moment, then pushed the bottle and half-empty glass out of his vision. He focused on Mary. “This is our ticket.”

Mary bunched her eyebrows.

John leaned back in his chair. “We sell it.”

“For what? I think the malls have all closed.”

“Well, I think the barter system is still in place. We demand protection, decent food, and whatever else we ever want.”

“This is the greatest discovery in human history. We’re not selling it.”

“This is the greatest discovery in human history—at the moment of our greatest despair. This signal is hope. Distraction. Don’t be a fool, Mare.”

“Stop calling me Mare.”

“When the plague broke out, you retreated here because you wanted to do something you loved until your time came. Me, I came here because I knew it was the biggest stockpile of booze anywhere in walking distance, and I knew you would come here. Yes, I’ve had a crush on you since I landed in San Juan.” He held his hands up before Mary could say anything. “That’s not my point. My point is that the world as you know it is over. People are desperate. They act out of self-interest. Sex and alcohol for me. For the folks you’re going to call, it’s about preserving their power. You’re

giving them the means to do that: hope. When you've delivered that, they won't need you anymore. This world isn't the one you remember. It will chew you up and spit you out, Mare."

"We're not selling it."

"You're a fool. This world slaughters idealists."

Behind her, the computer beeped. The analysis was complete.

Before she could read the results, a noise from the other side of the building echoed through the hall outside the office. Someone banging on the door? Mary and John's eyes met. They waited.

The banging grew louder, ending in the sound of glass breaking, scattering across the floor.

Footsteps, pacing slowly.

Mary stepped toward the door of the office, but John caught her arm. "Stay here," he whispered.

He picked up a baseball bat he had brought with him during the outbreak. "Lock this door. If they're here, the island's out of food."

Mary reached for the phone. She knew who she had to call now. Her hands shaking, she dialed the only person who could save them: her ex-husband.

**PART I:
RISE & FALL**

1

Alpha Lander
1,200 Feet Below Sea Level
Off the Northern Coast of Morocco

David Vale was sick of pacing in the small bedroom, wondering if, or when, Kate would return. He glanced at the bloody pillow. The pool that had started as a few drops ten days ago was now a river that stretched from her pillow half-way down the bed.

“I’m fine,” Kate had said each morning.

“Where do you go every day?”

“I just need some time. And space.”

“Time and space for what?” David had asked.

“To get better.”

But she hadn’t gotten better. Every day when Kate returned, she was worse. Each night brought more violent nightmares, sweats, and nosebleeds that David thought might not stop. He had held her, and he had been patient, waiting, hoping the woman who had saved his life, whose life he had saved two weeks ago, would somehow turn the corner and pull through. But she slipped away a little more each day. And now she was late. She had never been late before.

He checked his watch. Three hours late.

She could be anywhere in the massive Atlantean ship, which covered sixty square miles and was buried just off the mountainous coast of Northern Morocco, directly across from Gibraltar.

David had spent the last fourteen days, while Kate was away, learning how to operate the ship’s systems. He was still learning them. Kate had enabled the voice command routines to help with any commands David couldn’t figure out.

“Alpha, what is Dr. Warner’s location?” David asked.

The disembodied computer voice of the *Alpha Lander* boomed into the small room. “That information is classified.”

“Why?”

“You are not a senior member of the research staff.”

It seemed Atlantean computer systems were not immune to stating the obvious. David sat on the bed, just beside the blood stain. *What’s the priority? I need to know if she’s okay.* A thought occurred to him.

“Alpha, can you show me Dr. Warner’s vital signs?”

A wall panel opposite the small bed lit up, and David read the numbers and chart quickly—what he could understand.

Blood Pressure: 92/47

Pulse: 31

She’s hurt. Or worse—dying. What happened to her?

“Alpha, why are Dr. Warner’s vitals abnormal?”

“That information is class—”

“Classified.” David kicked the chair into the desk.

“Does that conclude your query?” Alpha asked.

“Not by a long shot.”

David stepped to the double doors, which hissed open. He paused, then grabbed his sidearm. Just in case.



David had been marching down the dimly lit corridors for almost ten minutes when he heard a figure moving in the shadows. He halted and waited, wishing his eyes would adjust to the faint lights at the floor and ceiling. Maybe the Atlanteans could see in less light or perhaps the ship—the piece of the ship they occupied—was operating in power-saving mode. Either way, it made the alien vessel seem even more mysterious.

A figure stepped out of the shadow.

Milo.

David was surprised to see the Tibetan teenager this deep in the ship. Milo was the only other person who shared the ship with Kate and David, but he spent most of his time outside of it. He slept outside, just beyond the inclining shaft that led from the buried ship to the mountaintop, where the Berbers left food for them. Milo loved sleeping under the stars and rising with the sun. David often found him sitting cross-legged, meditating when he and Kate went to join him for dinner each night. Milo had been their morale officer for the last two weeks, but through the dim light, David now saw only concern on the young man's face.

"I haven't seen her," Milo said.

"Call me on ship's comm if you do." David resumed his rapid pace.

Milo fell in behind him, pumping his legs to keep up. David's muscular frame and six-foot three-inch height dwarfed Milo, who was a full foot shorter. Together, they looked like a giant and his young sidekick barreling through a darkened labyrinth.

"I won't need to," Milo said, panting.

David glanced back at him.

"I'll be with you."

"You should go back up top."

"You know I can't," Milo said.

"She'll be angry."

"If she's safe, I will not care."

Same here, David thought. They walked in silence, the only sound the rhythmic beating of David's boots pounding the metallic floor followed by Milo's fainter footfalls.

David stopped before a large set of double doors and activated the wall panel. The display read:

Auxiliary Medical Bay 12

It was the only medical bay in their part of the ship, and it was David's best guess about where Kate went each day.

He moved his hand deeper into the green cloud of light that emerged from the wall panel, worked his fingers a few seconds, and the doors hissed open.

David crossed the room quickly.

There were four medical tables in the center. Holographic wall displays ran the length of the room—the empty room. Could she have already left?

“Alpha, can you tell me the last time this bay was used?”

“This bay was last used on mission date, 9.12.38.28, standard date 12.39.12.47.29—”

David shook his head. “How many local days ago?”

“Nine million, one hundred twenty eight thousand—”

“Okay, fine. Is there another medical bay within our section of the ship?”

“Negative.”

Where else would she go? Maybe there was another way to track her.

“Alpha, can you show me which sections of the ship are currently consuming the most power?”

A wall screen lit up, and a holographic model of the ship materialized. Three sections glowed: Arc 1701-D, Auxiliary Medical Bay 12, and Adaptive Research Lab 47.

“Alpha, what is Adaptive Research Lab 47?”

“An Adaptive Research Lab can be configured for a variety of biological and other experiments.”

“How is Adaptive Research Lab 47 currently configured?” David braced for the response.

“That information is classified—”

“Classified,” David muttered. “Right...”

Milo held out a protein bar. “For the walk.”

David led Milo back into the corridor, where he ripped the wrapper open, bit off a large chunk of the brown bar, and chewed in silence. It

seemed to help with the frustration.



David stopped in the corridor, and Milo almost slammed into the back of him.

David squatted and examined something on the floor.

“What is it?” Milo asked.

“Blood.”

David walked faster after that, and the blood on the floor increased from a few drops to long stretches.

At the double doors to Adaptive Research Lab 47, David worked his fingers in the green light of the wall panel. He entered the open command six times, and each time, the display flashed the same message:

Insufficient Access

“Alpha! Why can’t I open this door?”

“You have insufficient access—”

“How can I get inside this door?”

“You cannot,” Alpha’s voice echoed through the corridor with finality.

David and Milo stood for a moment.

David spoke quietly. “Alpha, show me Dr. Warner’s vital signs.”

The wall display transformed, and the numbers and charts appeared.

Blood Pressure: 87/43

Pulse: 30

Milo turned to David.

“Dropping,” David said.

“What now?”

“Now we wait.”

Milo sat cross-legged and closed his eyes. David knew he was seeking the stillness, and in that moment, David wished he could do the same, could put everything out of his mind. Fear clouded his thoughts. He desperately wanted that door to hiss open, but he dreaded it as well, dreaded finding out what had happened to Kate, what experiment she was running, what she was doing to herself.



David had almost fallen asleep when the alarm went off. Alpha’s voice thundered through the cramped corridor.

“Subject medical emergency. Condition critical. Access overrides executed.”

The wide double doors to the research lab slid open.

David rushed in and rubbed his eyes, trying to understand what he saw.

Behind him, Milo spoke in awe, “Whoa.”