

THE GOLDEN ELLIPSE

THE POWERS
THAT BE
**BOOK
ONE**



*A heart-pounding odyssey to
return a timeless relic atop
a proto-pyramdic beacon.*

*It's just the fate of the world.
No pressure.*

JOHN HOPKINS

“The golden ellipse contains dark energy that existed before us, and it will be around long after we are gone.”

Rachel Haig awakens with a start, staring into a cream-colored wall. Shivering beneath the full-blast AC vent inside a veranda stateroom aboard the Mediterranean Star, she curls her long legs up under her chin, shifting onto her left side. With a silent sigh, the 24-year-old lifts her toned right arm and tugs a flaxen mess of hair from her face, acknowledging slumber time is over. Twisting into an over-the-shoulder glance toward her new husband, she sees he is sleeping like a baby, cocooned in all of the bedding. Meanwhile, she lays twisted into a pretzel with nothing but a thin smiley-face t-shirt and underwear to shield her goose-bumped skin from the refrigerated air.

This is her new life. From now on, it will be a constant struggle for control of the covers, but she loves Owen. And despite his current cozy repose, she knows he loves her, too. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, the weight of their current predicament floods her mind. Did she possess the mental fortitude to see their strange new journey to a successful resolution? Her long-lost relation's confidence exceeded by leaps and bounds what she had in herself. It's just the fate of the world, no pressure.

**THE POWERS THAT BE SERIES
TRILOGY**

The Golden Ellipse

The Lost Ship (2022)

The Blue Spark (2023)

THE GOLDEN ELLIPSE

**THE POWERS
THAT BE
BOOK ONE**

JOHN HOPKINS



The Golden Ellipse

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Dedicated in memory of Shirley Hopkins.

Preface

I have a confession to make. The roots of my science fiction series begin at the pen-and-ink-blotched nascency of my original aspiration: creating the next *Calvin and Hobbes*. Before scoffing with righteous indignation, understand that I hail from a family of artists. The pie-in-the-sky idea of joining the hallowed ranks of Watterson and Schultz, et al., wasn't far-fetched to a modestly-talented art school student way back in the late 80s before the internet turned the world on its head.

Inspired by my favorite book and author, Michael Crichton's seminal novel, *Jurassic Park*, I hunched over a drawing board and developed a lab-grown dinosaur and bee comic strip duo. However, real-life distractions relegated my hammy, gag-filled strips to a dog-eared folder tucked inside a flat-file. Fast-forward a couple decades to an older, not wiser, version of myself stumbling upon this same folder. While sifting through reams of inked vellum strips, xeroxes, and pencil-sketched character studies unseen for years, the spark to create a comic strip rekindled with gusto. Or, I lost my mind. It depends on who you ask. Following a year of honing my original strip using online resources and digital tech—nonexistent during my initial foray—*Lost*

Cactus came alive in 3-panel comics. Lost Cactus is the eponymous code name of a top-secret base tucked behind a barbed-wire perimeter in the southwestern hinterlands. Sound familiar? It should. In addition to the original bee and dinosaur, I added mutants, zombies, and aliens co-mingling on the ultra-secret base managed by white-coated scientists clashing with quasi-military and bureaucratic foils. Envision *M*A*S*H* meets the *X-Files*, and you get the idea.

Cognizant of the remote chance of success, I mailed submissions to syndicates hither and yon. After too many rejection letters—and an interested party’s suggestion to lose the alien—I realized wedging my creation into a shrinking comics section of a vanishing newspaper industry was a nonstarter. Instead, I coalesced my strips into self-published anthologies. This is the point where I broadened the creative scope of the Lost Cactus shared universe via short stories and humorous essays. While my early fiction writing is indeed cringe-worthy, it is those strange tales that introduced a host of memorable characters and sci-fi plots at the foundation of The Powers That Be series and beyond.

* * * * *

Researching the sometimes controversial topics and principles underlying The Powers That Be series has expanded my armchair knowledge to a deeper, albeit limited, grasp of a host of subjects—Omega Point, artificial intelligence, transhumanism, the Fermi Paradox, and the Fibonacci Rule, to name-drop just a few. Furthermore, the artful inclusion of historical people, places, and events inside this book and its sequels lends invaluable credence to the out-of-this-world storylines.

A final thought: Humanity’s place in the universe is an astonishing mystery to behold. Embrace your inner skeptic by rejecting settled science and daring to imagine: *What if...*

See you in the funny papers.

JOHN HOPKINS

Characters

90,000 BC

Light Specters

Universally-revered energy beings, the proverbial lights in the sky, aka foo fighters

Dark Specters

Splintered Light Specters consumed with a virulent hatred of the human race

The Beacon

Proto-pyramid lighthouse bursting a forbidding message into the cosmos to avoid Planet Earth

The Golden Ellipse

The beacon's enigmatic source of infinite power from before time

The Machine

The beacon's autonomous defensive shield

2550 BC

Khufu

Second Pharaoh of Egypt's Fourth Dynasty, builder of the Great Pyramid of Giza

The Black Cat	Light Specter's emissary dispatched to oversee Khufu's pyramid construction
The Gork	Amiable seven-foot reptilian engineer from an otherwise violent, marauding race
The Surveyors	Squat and furry aliens skilled in mathematics and astronomy
The Designers	Nordic race of alien telepaths renowned for their elegant design aesthetic
The Miners	Ill-tempered race of expert excavators, distant Gray cousins

1799 AD

Napoleon Bonaparte	French emperor and self-proclaimed conqueror of Egypt
Armand Dreyfus	Senior archeologist in the French Expeditionary Force in Egypt, Napoleon's pyramid guide

1944 AD

Captain Neil Alexander	Pilot in 57th Fighter Group, 64th Squadron Black Scorpions, and Rachel's grandfather, twice removed
Lieutenant Harry Stark	Neil's mercurial wingman, flaming-red crew cut, sparkplug build, and bare-knuckle Bronx orphanage past
Colonel William Drake	Chain-smoking commander of 57th Fighter Group
Carol Alexander	Neil's wife, Rachel's grandmother, twice removed
Major General Thompson	British intelligence officer
Black Suits	OSS investigators

Anna	French resistance fighter
Hans Gruber	Nazi spy stationed in Cairo
Hodges	US Army quartermaster
Girl in the pink dress	Harry Stark's netherworld muse

2043 AD

Professor Tarek Hamed	Archeologist obsessed with controversial pyramid theory
Cartwright	Hamed's rotund Cairo Museum colleague
Yasmine Sardouk	Cairo Museum research assistant
Jean-Claude	Ill-fated Provence backpacking enthusiast

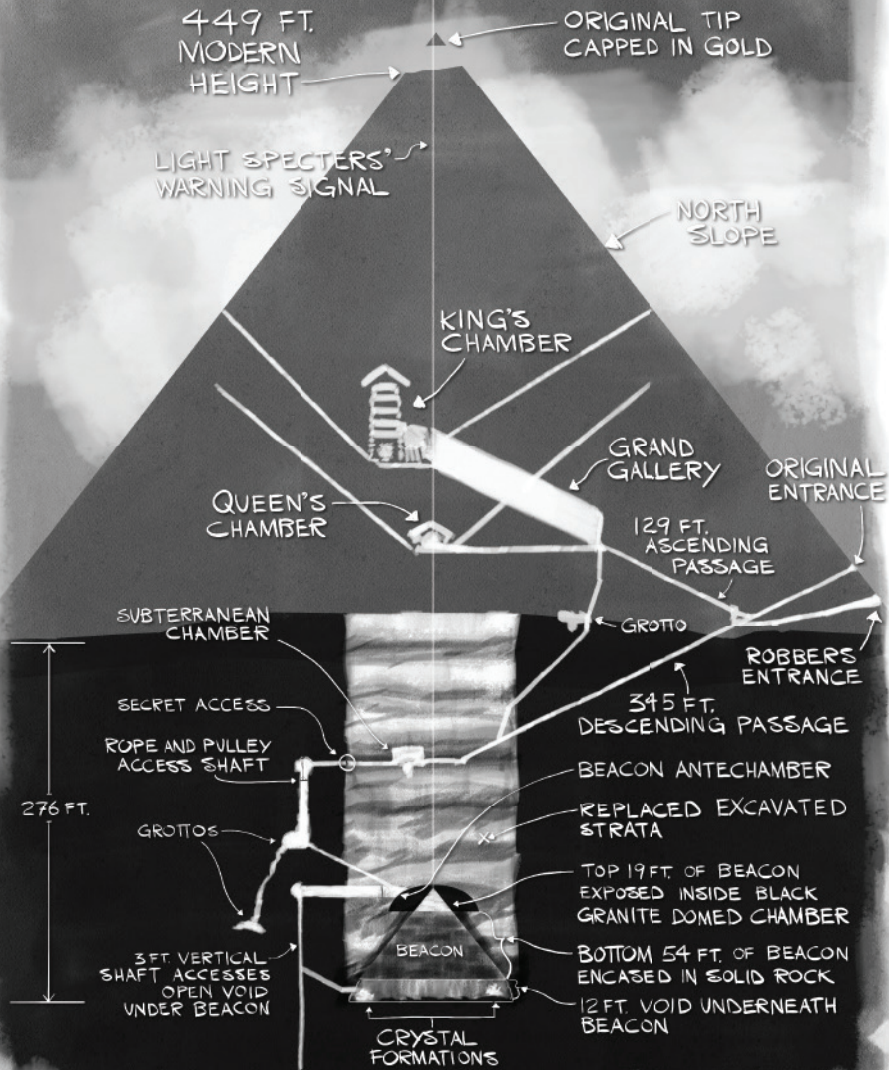
2044 – Present Time

Rachel Haig	24-year-old heiress reconciling her past, married life, and the fate of the world
Owen Haig	27-year-old financier, extreme sportsman, and Rachel's resourceful new spouse
Louie	Kobayashi C-Class robot chauffeur
Niyo	Gray freelance operative employed by the PTB
IOSC	International Outer Space Consortium
The Powers That Be (PTB)	Clandestine organization shepherding humankind toward a transformational omega point
Artemus Pennywell	The Powers That Be CEO
Andrew	Kobayashi C-Class robot, Pennywell's right-hand man, valet, and fixer
Flynn	PTB field agent assigned to Rachel and Owen

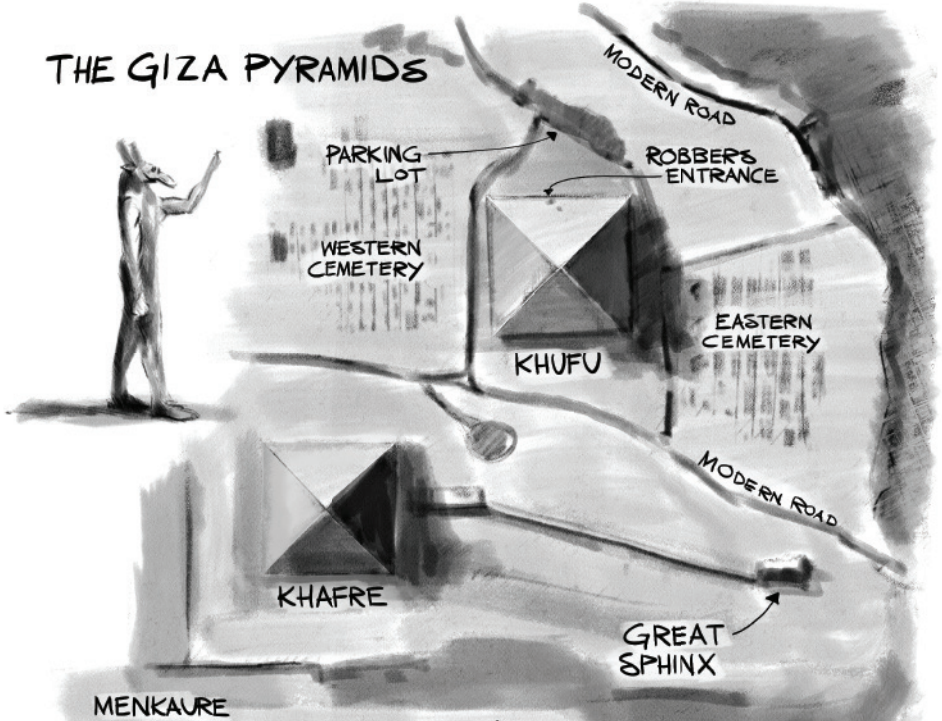
Ping	Gray alien advisor, Pennywell's lifelong friend, and mentor
The Advisors	Coalition of pro-human aliens in collaboration with the PTB
Nina	Fashion-forward administrator with a manicured finger on the PTB pulse, aka Chanel
Chrysalis Air	PTB shell company
Astrid	Chrysalis Air pilot
Nicole	Chrysalis Air pilot
Greta Thornberry	PTB statistician, aka Plain Jane
Roy Kendall	PTB psychologist, aka Doubletake
Dr. Richard King	Eccentric PTB research scientist, aka Doc
Mr. Kobayashi	Reclusive robotics pioneer
Julius Hart	Aeronautics wunderkind
Francois	Unscrupulous robot technician employed by Louie's French cab company
Ahmed	Tunisian car rental salesman and purveyor of antique vehicles
Hassan	OASIS Hotel bellman
Reverend Earl Warren	Texas-based pastor on bucket list Egypt vacation
Mabel Warren	Earl's outspoken wife
Cassandra	Giza Pyramid Complex tour guide
Captain Mohammed Faisel	Burnt-out Egyptian Army officer assigned to guard duty on the Giza Plateau

Maps and Diagrams

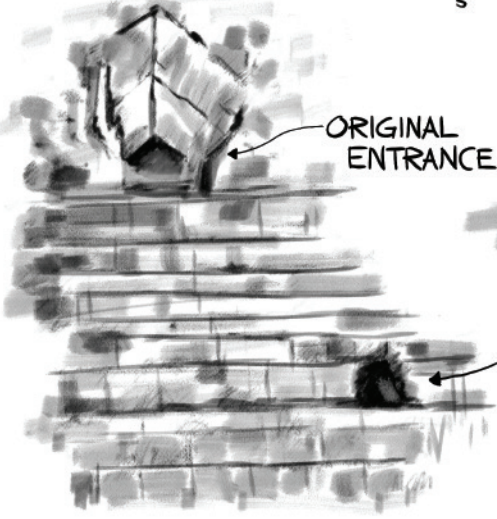
THE GREAT PYRAMID AND BEACON CHAMBER



THE GIZA PYRAMIDS



MENKAURE

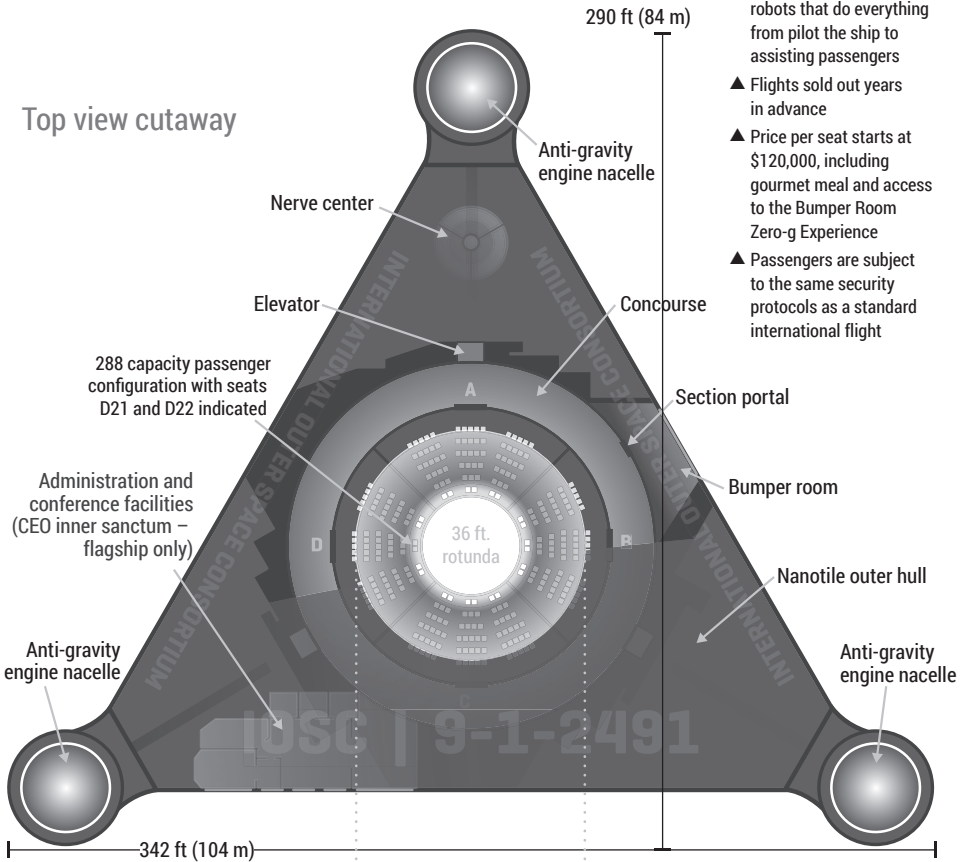


BASTET
WOODEN COFFIN
(CONTAINING
MUMMIFIED
KITTY REMAINS)

ROBBER'S
ENTRANCE
(CIRCA 820 AD)

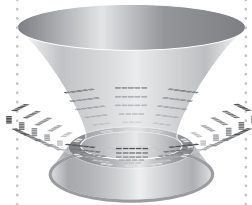
International Outer Space Consortium (IOSC) Passenger Ship

Top view cutaway

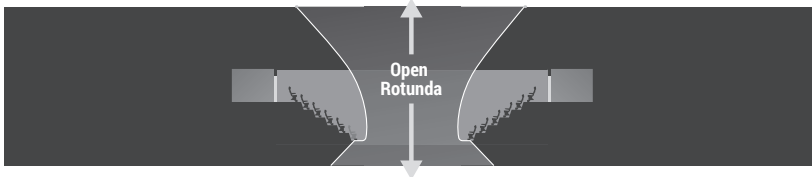


- ▲ Crew = 300+ humanoid robots that do everything from pilot the ship to assisting passengers
- ▲ Flights sold out years in advance
- ▲ Price per seat starts at \$120,000, including gourmet meal and access to the Bumper Room Zero-g Experience
- ▲ Passengers are subject to the same security protocols as a standard international flight

Seating configuration encircling hyperboloidal inner glass surface



Side view cutaway

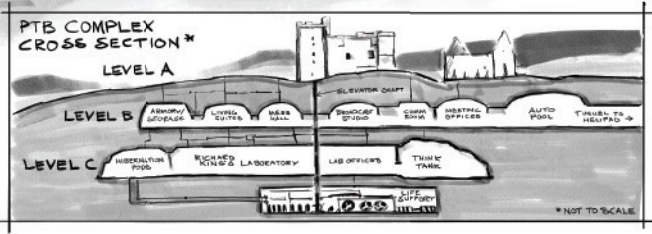
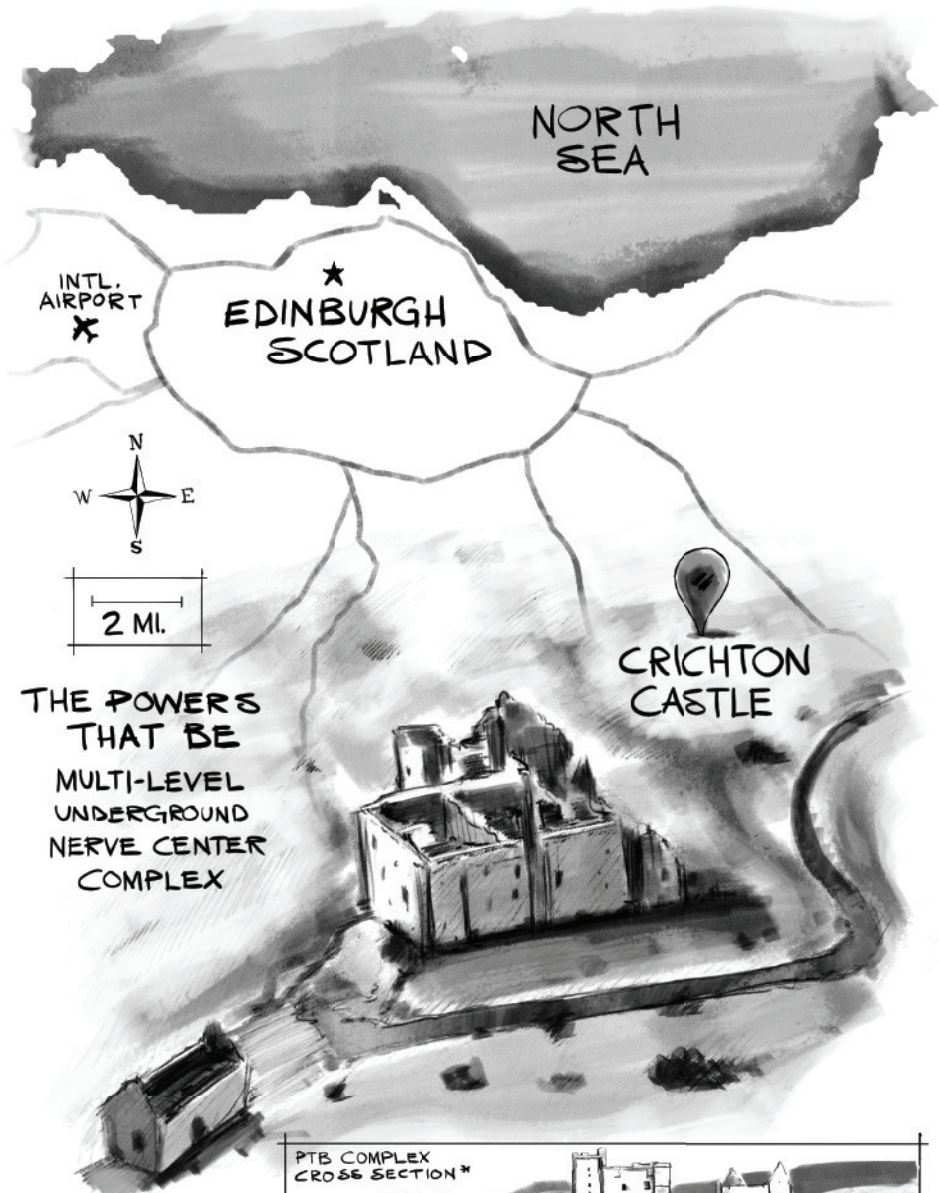


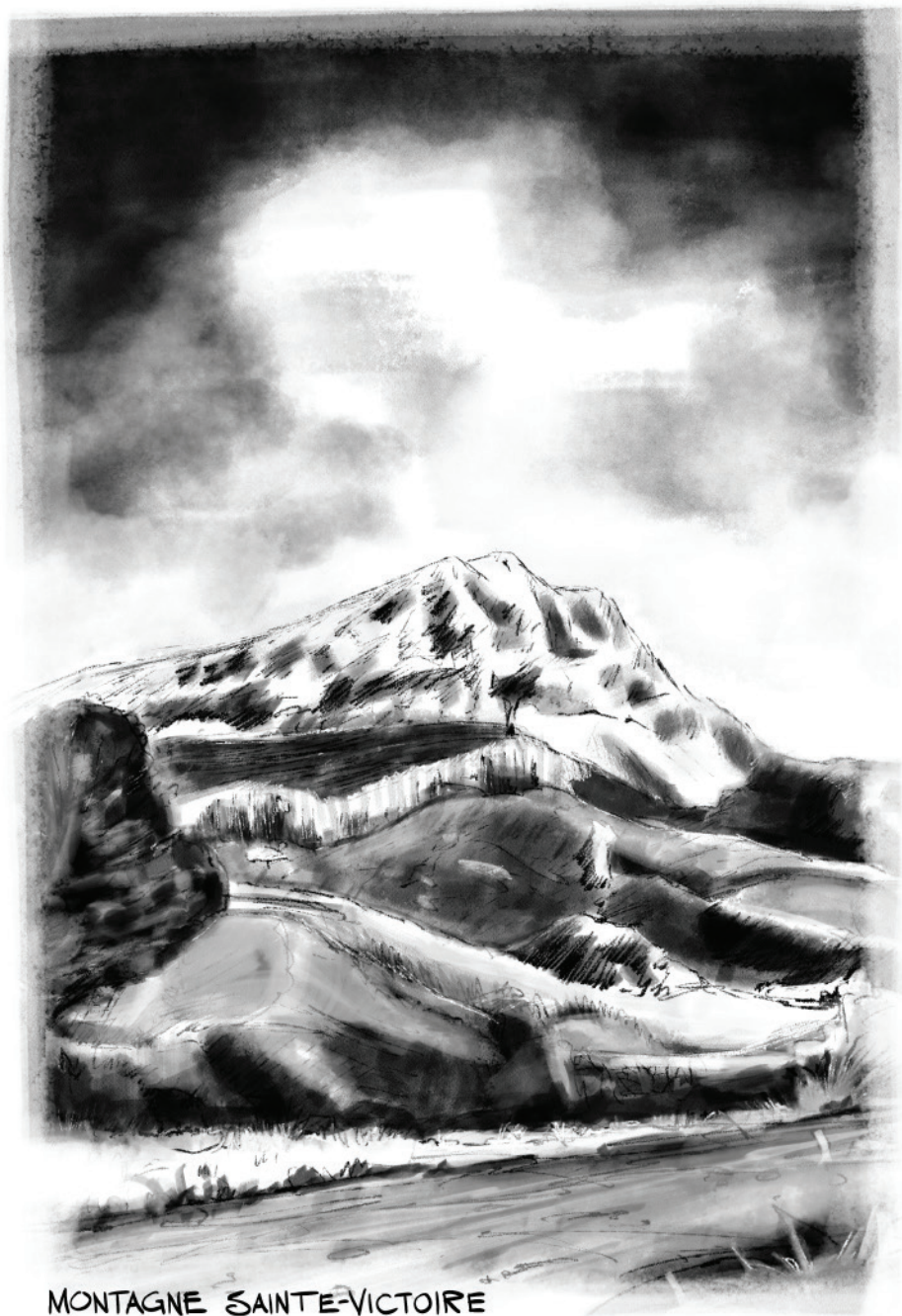


HARRY'S P-47 THUNDERBOLT
IN FLAMES OVER NAZI-OCCUPIED FRANCE
AFTER DARING NIGHTTIME RAID ON THE
AIX-EN-PROVENCE RAILYARD



P-40 TOMAHAWKS
FLOWN BY THE
BLACK SCORPIONS
IN NORTH AFRICA





MONTAGNE SAINTE-VICTOIRE

Prologue

Arrival | Planet Earth

Midday | 90,000 BC

Light Specters. The quintessential life forms in a universal hodgepodge of lesser beings burst from the ether over a primeval world. Jettisoning physical shapes eons before, their brilliance, and keen, curious intellects, compelled their arrival on the third of nine planets orbiting a small star in a spiraling galaxy amongst an infinity in the fickle nebulous cosmos. They came to observe the astonishing wellspring of life thriving in a panoply of ecosystems across quaking landmasses and submerged beneath roiling oceans, flowing rivers, pristine lakes, and turbulent seas.

The ethereal scientists viewed the brutal struggle for existence with dispassionate logic, aware the Earthbound menagerie trod stratified remains of previous eras wiped out by continental drift, climate change, volcanos, pandemics, and wayward asteroids. A debate ignited over a

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potential sixth extinction at the hands of the dominant hominid species roaming the planet.

Spectral optimists countered the dour prognostication, arguing that the bipedal creatures were eons removed from a plethora of apocalyptic scenarios, self-inflicted or otherwise. The journey from puerile to sublime is never a trifling matter, and the path of these primitive creatures would prove no exception.

Flying high above an arid savannah, the Light Specters paused over another charnel mess instigated by the cunning and vicious bipedal omnivores. The savage lopsided melee played out in a bloody amphitheater of flattened grasses and dirt. A cacophony of ripping flesh, snapping bones, primal screams, and pathetic gurgles of last breaths echoed across the vastness of what will become known as the Nile River region of North Africa.

Straddling a gory kill, the barbarous ringmaster, drenched in vanquished foes' blood and guts, held a fleshy offering aloft to the strange balls of light hovering in the sky above his thick matted head. A crack of thunder from a fast-approaching storm broke his hypnotized stare. He tossed the dripping mass and fled into the tall grasses, followed by a band of malicious mates, abandoning a trail of bloodshed and mangled body parts in their wake. The electrical storm shrouded the late afternoon sky in dreaded darkness, and the ensuing torrent of pelting rain transformed the grasslands into a swampy marsh. Shifting silt and sand buried the blood-soaked victims in the killing field for eternity.

The species' proclivity for violence and mayhem, unrestrained by their developing self-awareness and intelligence, indeed disappointed the spectral scientists. Anthropological studies of similar warm-blooded vertebrates throughout the universe informed the majority opinion postulating by this point in their evolution; the latter should modulate the former to a degree.

A vociferous spectral minority made the contentious proposal to abandon aspirations for the wretched beings' future, wipe the slate

clean, and start from scratch. Fortunately for the human race, amongst the Light Specters, cooler heads prevailed.

Marking the end of their study of the small blue planet and its inhabitants as a fleeting instant on a cosmic timeline, the supremely intelligent extraterrestrials were on the cusp of vacating the skies above Earth as if they were never there. However, protecting the rapid ascent of the promising human species compelled deviation from their non-interference mantra. After a frank and heated vetting of various concepts, a plan to construct a proto-pyramidal beacon akin to a cosmic lighthouse won contentious approval.

A survey of the planet revealed the tamped-down savannah, where they witnessed one of the bloodier melees, proved the optimal construction site. It also served as an ironic rebuke of naysayers within their ranks. The Light Specters shape-shifted into beings with physical traits necessary for each step of raising the 73-foot-tall structure from the grassy plain: acquiring an exotic array of materials from Earth and beyond, engineering the sophisticated inner-workings, and chiseling a complex matrix across the surfaces. They adhered to a schedule lost to time. Their labors culminated in one final perilous task—installing a mysterious and infinite energy source encapsulated in a simple oval-shaped gold disk.

On a moonless night under a sea of stars, the last Light Specter inhabiting a physical presence blinked large bulbous eyes, bracing against a stiff breeze atop the proto-pyramid beacon. Its nimble four-fingered hands positioned the golden ellipse inches from the shallow concavity at the confluence of a carved matrix just below the northern apex. Unable to distinguish the outward-facing side, the ageless relic glistened with equal intensity, mocking the being's determination to complete the task. On the cusp of completing the circuit, thereby powering the structure in perpetuity, the engineer recoiled on impulse, unsure and afraid. It knew inverting the volatile golden ellipse would initiate an extinction-level event. The elemental aphorism conveyed through the elliptical

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lynchpin's unforgiving orientation was not lost on the spectral entity. Embracing the sheer randomness while acknowledging the gravity of his decision, he flipped the enigmatic power source, repositioned it in a delicate fingertip grasp, released it, and watched it snap in place with a loud metallic clank.

The golden ellipse shimmered to life with a stellar intensity, illuminating the beacon's matrix while a deafening rhythmic hum filled the nighttime sky. Blinded by the incredible brightness, thankful nonetheless not to be blown to sub-atomic particles, the being transmogrified into a swirling mass of lights and dissolved into the night.

A focused beam burst from the tip of the beacon, piercing the night sky, streaming its unmistakable non-intervention message to the far reaches of the universe on an infinite loop.

* * * * *

A ravenous hunting party skulked along the 118-foot base of the pyramid's northern face, incapable of seeing or hearing the beacon's ethereal lights and sounds. Instead, their primitive gaze fixated beyond the strange pointed rock onto a beastly herd hunkered in a nearby protective hollow, enduring another terrifying night on the savannah.

* * * * *

Interstellar explorers and colonizers indeed intercept and translate the beacon's encoded warning, most abiding by the directive:

Earth is a quarantine biosphere under Light Specter auspices. Trespassers risk severe punishment and retribution. Conversely, cessation of this warning is tantamount to directive expiration.

The Light Specters exited the fertile world, confident the beacon—a proverbial “don't feed the animals” sign pinging into space—will dissuade outside influence for perpetuity.

Could the robust humans who outlived, outsmarted, and outlasted their brethren species, evolve and civilize, as they did billions of years earlier? Or would the beastly creatures consume themselves in a lustful orgy of destruction as species throughout the universe had countless times before?

Primitive humans—and every other living organism on Earth—became unwitting beneficiaries of the unsolicited safeguard. However, the Light Specters' base motivation stemmed from cold and calculative scientific opportunism to study a species' ascendancy. A rare occurrence requiring unobtrusive oversight and protection, like fostering a seed cast upon the surface of a barren, hostile wasteland. The clumsy grasp for human sentience and relevance before an apathetic universe will play out before their advanced eyes. Fascinating.

The Light Specters acknowledged the beacon would not thwart every extraterrestrial race from visiting the planet and meddling with the natives. However, their sober warning would dissuade full-scale invasion—trampling the seed before it could root and germinate. If the sentient human race ends in catastrophic failure, it should derive from their five-digit hands or a naturally occurring event.

While the beacon churned its message into space, bouncing off an exponential number of satellites in the process, unchecked pessimists within the Light Specter ranks remained unimpressed. This hostile faction did not share in the hopeful vision for Earth's dominant species. They persisted in an unfavorable opinion of the crude, carbon-based, knuckle-dragging flesh-eaters as a latent threat requiring extermination, not protection. Their strident demands to lay waste to the tiny planet and start over from scratch were denied outright, ratcheting their frustrations—and burgeoning hatred—to cosmic proportions.

Instead of yielding to the plan and accepting their station in the spectral hierarchy, the malcontents splintered from the altruistic majority and became the Dark Specters. Through the millennia, revealing the mineral and water-rich planet to a universe of aggressive,

malicious, other-worldly monsters twisted into an all-consuming obsession. However, the damnable beacon's ceaseless bursts pinging the far reaches of space thwarted attempts to lure invaders to the planet. Even the vilest amongst the crowded field of sentient races understood contravening the Light Specters' warning would prove ill-advisable. An infinite plunderable expanse is at their disposal. Why disobey a plain-spoken message and risk the vaunted retribution?

Stopping the beacon's ceaseless pings into the cosmos—the axiomatic resolution for the Dark Specters' dilemma—hinged on liberating the golden ellipse from the northern-facing apex and concealing it while ensuing alien invaders ravage the planet down to the last remaining seed.

However, nothing is ever quite that simple. Since the Dark Specters participated in every facet of building the beacon, they knew the essential task of removing the ellipse was, in actuality, a deceitful trap. The structure was ensconced behind a protective shield known as “the Machine.” One-in-a-centillion scattered throughout space and time possessed the grace and agility to bend the Machine to their purpose and remove the ellipse. The Dark Specters surmised someone within their ranks could manifest into a humanoid form and venture an attempt. However, while logic and empathy were blinded by a pervasive enmity for Earth's reigning hominids, the near-certainty of a suicide mission proved to be a bridge not one of the advanced beings was willing to cross.

The paradoxical solution to the Dark Specters' dilemma turned out to be none other than humans. The manipulable sacks of flesh and bones were easy to locate behind rocks and cowering in dark caves. Better yet, the feeble-minded natives succumbed without a flicker of resistance. A refreshing change from obstinate alien races' refusals to violate the Light Specters' preposterous warning beacon. The universe is replete with cowards.

With malicious glee, yet cognizant, the odds of a successful

removal were beyond infinitesimal; the Dark Specters coaxed simple-minded humans from primitive dwellings. Stumbling across the open desert to the strange, pointed rock, the addled bipeds climbed. At the literal apex of existence, each recruit gazed upon a shimmering oval disk in their dirty clutches for a brief moment in time. A nanosecond later, the Machine electrified each victim before launching its flaming mass of flesh and bones into midair from the 7-story height. A fetid mass of charred bodies lying scattered around the beacon left scavenging lions, vultures, and hyenas as the sole beneficiaries of every doomed attempt. Insatiable bloodlust, mixed with hateful obsession, transformed the formerly rational pure-energy beings into human torturers. Without a hint of remorse, they replicated the grotesque procedure through generations of hapless victims.

Over time, ingrained superstitions and evolving self-awareness compelled the Dark Specters to employ a host of temptations to persuade willing recruits. While every tactic enticed with a unique allure, the splintered aliens discovered that the small golden disk's promise of all-consuming power proved the most seductive bait to lure gullible humans. Sex coming in a close second. Human fascination with procreative pursuits compounded the Dark Specters' revulsion of the wild, unpredictable creatures.

For tens of thousands of years, humanity proliferated outward from the fertile geographic region. However, they avoided the incongruous structure towering 73 feet into the Egyptian sky near the banks of a mighty north-flowing river emptying into a mysterious sea. The beacon and its infinite power source remained undisturbed behind a cloak of ignorance, surrounded by death.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the Light Specters' human experiment proceeded apace for thousands of years, albeit with a multitude of indiscreet visitations, flaunting their beacon's directive in plain view of curious

and terrified natives. In an unforeseen twist, the human tendency to worship the incomprehensible enriched their nascent cultures, providing primitive sociological hierarchies a purpose beyond hand-to-mouth survival. Perhaps human evolution required deified influencers, and attempting to dissuade extraterrestrial interlopers, turned into a rare miscalculation. The splintered Dark Specters' nefarious interactions proved their own kind remained far from perfection. As long as the visitors behaved, their presence would be tolerated.

Humankind progressed at an accelerated rate from the knuckle-dragging miscreant studied under a threatening primeval sky in the blood and gore-filled savannah. By the middle of the 26th century BC, a diversity of civilizations spread into the hinterlands around the planet. One of the earliest and most successful flourished along the Nile River's fertile banks in a geographic swath of North Africa where the cosmic lighthouse hid in plain sight for almost 90,000 years. Whether the dynastic Egyptian kingdoms resulted from proximity to the beacon confounded the Light Specters. An ontological theory given considerable weight posited their interest in safeguarding humanity actuated from a power beyond their comprehension.

Hypothesizing their transcendence while monitoring the complexities of life on Earth was preempted by a more immediate concern: concealing the beacon from a heretofore nonexistent human gaze.

Like their splintered brethren, the Light Specters recruited a human being's assistance to complete the task. However, instead of gruesome death, the person will achieve transcendence.

Pharaoh Khufu | Memphis, Egypt
Predawn | 2550 BC

A young Egyptian ruler named Khufu—the second pharaoh

of the Fourth Dynasty—was haunted by visions while lying prone atop his royal bed. His thin form trembled, terrified by the apparent origin: a mysterious edifice protruding from a barren valley since before recorded time. Like his predecessors, undocumented reverence of the symmetrical formation was an unexplained facet of his exalted position. The unspoken rule of law forbade accessing the anomalous structure or loitering in its vicinity. The punishment of death, though heeded through the centuries, ensnared unwitting transgressors from time to time.

In return, the enigma out on the desert hardscrabble left the Egyptians alone until now. Out of the blue, it called out to their controversial ruler, invading his psyche and upsetting his posh lifestyle.

Beset by rumors that his reign was invalid due to his questionable birthright, the pampered and healthy yet beanpole thin young man tossed and turned, suppressing fitful rage, enduring another in a long succession of restless nights. Compounding anxieties at the root of Khufu's insomnia, a hot desert breeze billowed the sheer drapes covering the open windows of his royal sleep chamber within the palatial complex, like an apparition. Desperate for a peaceful night's rest, he lay flat on his back, pulling the sheet under his goatee chin, and stared at shadows dancing across the painted ceiling above his bed. Out of the periphery of his 20-20 vision, he noticed a small glowing ball of light pass through the drapes and enter his room. "Probably a firefly."

For a few halted breaths, the ruler relaxed before a heart-pounding dread flooded his senses watching more lights float through the window. He tried to call his guards as the glowing spheres invaded his quaking personal space, but he couldn't utter a sound, heightening the terror permeating his soul. The spectral intruders appeared to acknowledge his presence, merging into a bright pulsating ball of light. The spacious sleep chamber was illuminated in brilliance, forcing his eyes shut behind the soft palms of his clenched royal hands. Regardless, the light pierced his eyelids, rendering him sightless. Blind and mute, he

awaited the inevitable, but it never came.

Instead, a coursing river of bizarre people, creatures, machines, and flying craft swirled in his mind's eye, illustrative of a long-forgotten past or an unknowable future.

The nebulous visions ceased, and the royal bedroom plunged into darkness once more. Khufu lowered his sweaty hands and squinted into the abyss. Paralyzed with fear, he made out light specks amassing into a glowing sphere. The tingle of a static electric charge stood his hair on end. Still centered on his royal bed, feet pointing at the ceiling under soft cotton sheets, he bolted upright as the orbs spun around his head, morphing into violent streaks of light. The electrified pulses intensified, and Khufu sensed mystifying weightlessness while choking back panic and utter helplessness. The royal bedsheets fell from around his bent waist, fluttering into a heaping pile on the smooth tile floor.

"Do not be alarmed. You are among friends."

"Where are you taking me?"

"You already know, your majesty."

His vision recovering, Khufu squinted through the thrumming mass of energy, holding him aloft, and gasped. He glided past the flapping drapery outside the open window above his palatial estate's moonlit rooftops into the warm night.

The orbs settled the discombobulated ruler upon the hardscape a stone's throw from the northern side of a 73-foot-tall glowing structure and vanished into the night. Khufu stood alone before the pyramid, listening to its orchestral hum while multi-hued lights illuminated the bewildered expression on his smooth, tanned face. Another attempt to shake himself awake proved futile. "I'm not dreaming, that much I know."

A dry desert breeze ruffled his cotton nightshirt as he made a trepidatious barefoot approach toward the pulsating pointed structure. Reaching the nearest face, he touched the polished surface and felt another static shock permeate his quaking form. Long manicured fingers

probed grooves in the beacon's intricate carved maze eliciting a spectrum of glowing colors mirroring his hand movements. Scanning upward to the apex, he fixated on a mesmerizing golden ellipse, sparkling like a human eye. While pondering the small oval shape's supernatural power, a steady light beam resolved, piercing the heavens from the tip with a rhythmic thrum.

“What is this place?”

As Khufu stumbled backward, a sharp pain stabbed his right foot. Hunching down, he noted bone fragments scattered all over the ground. Snatching a whitish shard and examining it close to his scowling face, he cast it into the shadows, “How can it be my eyes have not seen this before now?”

Though the structure existed before recorded time, he looked upon it in stunned silence, witnessing its rhythmic machinations for the first time in his—or any human—life.

Mindful of the razor-sharp bone fragments scattered among the rocks and buried under the loose gravel and sand, the Egyptian king stepped from the structure's base to clear bright ovals obscuring his vision. A surprised yelp rasped from his mouth as a lean black cat angled out of nowhere, purring against his leg.

Angry and frustrated, he wheeled from the beacon and the cat, seeking solace in the darkness, yearning for someone or something to relieve him of this burdensome fate. A perfect cube, taller than his 6-foot frame, manifested out of thin air thirty paces into the desert scrub. Like the beacon, he had never seen it in his life, yet there it sat, mocking him. Khufu approached the large shape, sidestepping the bones and rocks, the cat following close behind. He touched the cube's smooth surface, this time finding no illuminated patterns, just limestone.

Frowning at his faint reflection in the polished block, anger gave way to confusion, and he acknowledged decisions of consequence were not his strong suit. Despite his misgivings, intuition informed him this impacted his rule. Overcome by indecision, he plopped in an exhausted

heap at the base of the cube, rested his shaved head against the smooth surface, and stared in wonderment at the pyramid.

Frightful recognition of venomous creatures lurking in the desert prompted a whispered prayer for the cat to ward off nearby snakes and scorpions.

As if the gods heard his plea, the black cat slinked to his feet and reclined on the hard ground. Khufu studied the feline's elegant form silhouetted against the luminous proto-pyramid. The unlikely duo rested in silence, watching the glowing structure's rhythmic bursts into the heavens.

"Impressive. Isn't it?"

On reflex, Khufu's head knocked back into the solid limestone, "Ouch! Who said that?"

The petite kitty stood and stretched, swinging its long black tail through the air in a gentle arc. Yellow eyes aglow, it spoke in a sultry feminine tone, "Me, of course. In answer to your earlier query, you had not seen the beacon in all its glory because its true nature lay beyond human perception. You are the first to see its infinite machinations. However, humans are advancing beyond our ability to keep it hidden, so it falls on your narrow shoulders to assist us in burying it. Once it is secured underground, a new pyramid, many times greater in scale, will conceal our beacon, preserving its function and protecting it from the innocent, and more to the point, the malicious amongst humanity. The sheer magnitude of the new pyramid, built in your name, will baffle mankind. Conspiracies, legends, and curses will spring forth from fertile imaginations and persist for millennia. We intend to keep it online until your kind no longer requires protection from a universe of hostile actors."

"Hostile actors?"

"They would have already ravaged your world if not for this beacon."

"How will I build a pyramid?"

The cryptic kitty reply lingered in the air as its slinky black form

transmogrified into a luminous sphere, *“You are leaning against the first limestone block, only 2.3 million more to go.”*

* * * * *

For two weeks, nothing happened. Khufu convinced himself the strange episode emanated from a feverish dream. However, lingering doubts juxtaposed with an unusual vitality compelled his secretive return to the ancient edifice. It appeared as it always had, like a big pointed rock. Laughing at his rampant paranoia, the pharaoh traveled back to his palace. No one of consequence was aware of his absence.

Still, the alien vigor coursing every fiber of his supreme being could not be denied. He felt great. In the darkness, his skin glowed from within, and under the bright Egyptian sunshine, his appearance turned translucent. Meanwhile, a physical transformation added height and muscle mass, providing him with a true ruler’s imposing physique.

Another improvement the young lad could previously only dream of manifested in concubinary groupies loitering about the palace, awaiting an audience with their king.

* * * * *

On the third week, the Light Specters’ feline emissary visited the royal palace. Bisecting a lush, palm-lined courtyard, the kitty scampered up a flight of tiled steps into lavish living quarters opposite an empty colonnaded throne room. Surmising it must be a holiday, she padded past palace guards and functionaries, too distracted by the inexplicable presence of so many beautiful women to notice one stray cat. Raising its whiskered nose into the air, the sleek creature stalked to an antechamber hidden behind flowing drapes. Parting thick swathes like the Red Sea, the kitty entered the ornate confines and hopped onto a gilded settee occupied by the Pharaoh Khufu. The king cast a sideways glance from the small animal and back onto the ravishing half-dressed young woman propped on toned arms ringed in gold bands, situated between his legs.

The cold stare from the black cat spoke volumes. Playtime was over.

Khufu frowned at the cat, cleared his throat, and tapped his mistress' arm, "Pull yourself together and leave. Now."

The woman's pouting hesitation prompted the pharaoh to repeat his command in a thunderous new voice that sounded as if it came from someone else. Her wide-eyed stare into the frightening translucent countenance of Khufu looming above her sent her scurrying from the room, stumbling half-naked through the drapes.

The reborn Egyptian ruler issued a new command for his guards to expel everyone from the royal palace grounds until further notice.

"I told you this was going to happen, yet you appear surprised to see me again." While grooming dainty jet-black paws, feline eyes looked upon the pharaoh, *"I see your transformation is almost complete. That is good. Soon, you will no longer crave that kind of diversion, so I am happy we afforded you time to behave as humans are wont to do."*

"Do you expect me to thank you? What did you do to me?" Khufu lifts his muscular right forearm and watches sparkling lights drawn to the surface of his dark skin.

"We adjusted your lifespan, nothing more. You are still a product of your creator. However, your new role requires upgrades to your physical being." Extending a paw in the darkened chamber, *"Now, let's get down to business."* A holographic representation of a large swath of Egyptian topography glowed in vivid blue and green tones.

Wearing nothing but his semitransparent birthday suit speckled with small animated lights, Khufu leaned forward and studied the 3-dimensional image, "Impressive. That is indeed a part of my kingdom."

"Yes, it is. I need you to instruct your generals to cordon off this entire area to the river and as far out into the surrounding desert as possible. It is imperative that not a single human witness the initial phase of our project. Once the beacon is buried and the ground replaced, we will need scores of able-bodied men and women to carry out the charade."

"Charade?"

Waving a paw through the air, the image fast-forwarded to a final incarnation illustrating a gleaming white pyramid topped in gold. *“It has to appear that humans built this in your name. Why they did it, and to what purpose, I leave to your imagination. Now, put on some clothes. There is much work to be done before our guests arrive.”*

* * * * *

Khufu’s decrees and proclamations filtered down through the ranks and were executed without question. Top advisors and generals feared the young ruler like never before. His reign began with disrespectful smirks and eye rolls, while derogatory comments and rampant insubordination went unchecked behind his back. Not anymore. Every capricious utterance the pharaoh made, no matter how strange, was carried out as if lives depended on it. Which, in fact, they did.

Wielding his army like a blunt instrument, Khufu sealed off a gigantic swath of Egyptian soil under the guise of a leprosy epidemic.

Once the quarantine relocation was complete, Khufu and his feline ambassador welcomed an exotic assemblage of alien contractors from across the Milky Way.

The first arrival was an 8-foot reptilian engineer, introduced to Khufu as a Gork. No name, just Gork.

An initial planning session between the reptilian and the black cat, while Khufu tried to follow, defined the delicate task: beacon removal from its hallowed placement to a temporary new location. The Gorks’ galaxy-wide reputation as world destroyers was well-earned, yet they possessed the right technology to move a large object. The kitty had enlisted worse characters for less critical jobs.

Watching the reptilian offload strange and exotic equipment from his dark-gray block-shaped craft, the pharaoh couldn’t resist an obvious gibe, “I know a few Nile crocodiles I could introduce him to.”

The cat turned to Khufu, *“You are joking, right? I can never tell.”*

“Just trying to help a fellow find a date,” the pharaoh looked on as the iridescent green-scaled alien labored in the North African heat to install large wire-bound anti-gravity cubes around the base of the beacon. “I must say, for such a large, scary creature, he comes across as quite likable.”

“Yes. One on one, the Gorks are fine. However, he comes from a warrior race. You do not want a whole fleet of their ships to appear above your metropolis, unannounced.”

With a bulging silver-eyed glance back toward his black-haired employer, the Gork indicated he was ready to elevate the massive beacon off the plateau. The odd pair spectated as their alien contractor guided the massive structure off the surface in a cloud of dust via a remote held in its deft clawed hands.

Once the beacon elevated into the hot midday air, the black cat studied the asymmetric hexagonal configuration across its underside. *“Interesting.”*

The pharaoh tried to follow the cat’s contemplative gaze, peering at the dark-shaded square constituting the beacon’s bottom side, noting some among the pattern of shapes were aglow while the majority remained dark. Failing to glean any significance, “What is so interesting? Do the blue-glowing hexagons have a special meaning?”

“Everything means something to someone, my friend. The hexagons are part of the ancient design. The blue-lit ones indicate specific quadrants of the universe where the signal’s warning message is received as we speak.”

“And you are telling me—based solely on that warning—aliens will avoid coming here and wiping us out? Seems far-fetched.”

“It has worked so far. You could at least pretend to be grateful.”

Khufu casts his gaze toward the blue sky, “We have been worshipping visitors from other places all of this time, haven’t we?”

Surprised by the pharaoh’s dot-connecting ability, *“We relented on the zero-tolerance policy long ago; our focus now is on human survival. Your kind made the visitors into gods. Not us. Who knows? Perhaps one day,*

mankind will be viewed as gods by a gullible race rising from the mud.”

The young pharaoh squints through the brightness watching the elevated structure’s massive shadow darkening across the uneven hardscape, “You know, I don’t see that happening. Humans will more than likely kill each other long before ever reaching that point.”

“Your pessimism is duly noted.”

* * * * *

Day one ebbed to a sweltering close without a human anywhere in sight and the relocated beacon pinging the sky from its relocated position.

Under a blanket of stars, wide awake and bored to tears, Khufu propped against the original limestone block on a pile of cotton bedding with the cat curled beside him. Feeling the kitty’s purr, he watched the golden ellipse sparkle at the top of the brilliant pyramid-shaped maze through the darkness.

The Gork headed off the plateau in search of food. The Egyptian ruler’s only admonition to the scowling reptilian, “Please refrain from eating anyone who looks important.”

Returning his gaze upon the luminous structure parked askew in the desolate reaches, “It is too bad my people cannot see the beacon the way I do.” After a prolonged silent rumination, Khufu spoke aloud, unsure if the cat was awake or off in kitty dreamland, “What if I climbed the beacon and claimed the golden ellipse for myself? Wouldn’t that make me all-powerful?”

The cat stretched and yawned, *“Purge that thought right now and get some sleep.”*

Khufu stared at the ellipse, unaffected by its brightness in his redefined form, smirking at the kitty’s final words on the issue.

“You wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

* * * * *

The morning started on the quarantined plateau with the touchdown of a dirty and dented orb propped atop three extended legs in a choking cloud of dust and sand.

Khufu stirred awake, entwined in blankets strewn atop the hardscape, and watched as furry creatures lowered from a hole in the bottom of the spherical craft. The weird sight elicited a throaty chuckle; it looked like a bulbous 3-legged animal taking a shit.

The black cat stirred awake and yawned in a husky, sexy morning voice, *“The surveyors are here. Right on time.”*

“What should we call these aliens? Dorks? Sporks? Zorks?”

“That is quite enough. Surveyors will suffice.”

Waddling on short stubby legs, dragging long purple capes across the sand, the heat-stricken aliens followed the cat’s guided tour around the site while Khufu curled back up in the covers, wishing he could have brought a friend.

Post their discussion, verbalized in beeps, squawks, and burps, the hideous-looking bug-eyed mathematicians got to work taking measurements, crunching numbers, and calculating angles. Khufu dragged himself into the new day’s heat, attempting to follow their busy labors, to no avail. He stared up into the bright blue sky, trying to locate spectral points indicated by their elephantine snouts based on dense projected equations. By late afternoon, the extended perimeter of the new and massive pyramid footprint was set with three glowing cubes forming a perfect square with the northwest corner limestone block revealed weeks beforehand.

After hearing Khufu’s complaints of the previous night spent on the uncomfortable dirt and rocks with nothing but thin sheets, the Gork built a temporary throne beyond the original cornerstone before day two ebbed to a close. With Khufu’s tacit promise of more fresh meat, he also transported palace furniture to the raised platform so Khufu could spectate in comfort.

Khufu was quick to realize the regal bearing exuded by his

transformative state prompted unsolicited respect. Just like a real king. Nevertheless, his genuine gratitude turned effusive after the lizard man took it upon himself to erect a tent over the throne providing shade from the blistering daytime sun. With the cat perched at his side, the pharaoh allowed the Gork to set up shop in the shaded recess behind the raised throne.

The black cat also enjoyed the comfort, using the heightened position to confer eye-to-eye with the aliens when questions or technical issues arose.

That evening, wind-whipped sand disrupted the proceedings as a sleek white vessel with swept-back wings shimmered out of the star-filled darkness and settled onto the plateau. A ramp lowered near the front of the fuselage, and a quartet of human-like aliens wearing a bare minimum of clothing approached Khufu's raised throne. The fair-skinned Nordic beings flashed telepathic greetings to the cat and the transformed human.

After an inaudible conversation, excluding the king, the handsome group took positions along each surveyed side, staring inward through an invisible centered point where the beacon used to sit. Waving hands through the dry nighttime breeze, they created glowing shapes, twisting, rotating, and resizing in midair and assembling gigantic blocks, row upon row, across the plateau. Through the night, passages and shafts were integrated with mathematical precision extending deep underground. Eschewing sleep, Khufu and the cat watched spellbound as the Designers rendered a full-scale 3-dimensional pyramid model into the wee hours of the morning, accounting for over 2.3 million blocks to the n th degree.

As the morning sun colored the eastern horizon into purple and pinkish hues, the radiant alien on the southern side drew Khufu's enthralled gaze. A new and mellifluous voice flooded his thoughts, "*This room is for you.*" Mesmerized by her transcendent stare, he peered up through the illuminated translucent blocks to a hidden chamber

accessed by an impressive angled corridor.

The black cat sensed an impertinent communication between his addled human host and the beautiful alien. Not wanting things to veer off-track any more than they already had, the feline vaulted off the perch, padding through the virtual blocks toward the ethereal woman.

With a cobweb clearing headshake, Khufu watched as the unlikely pair's animated conversation concluded. Beaming an effervescent smile, the telekinetic beauty shrugged her sculpted shoulders, and a whispered apology wafted to the ruler's ears.

The non-stop extraterrestrial activity continued into the heat of midday. Without ceremony, the overheated furry surveyors completed their assignment and left in the ugly brown ship without saying goodbye. The Gork collected forgotten purple capes the beings shed while baking under the Egyptian heat and folded them in a pile on the off-chance they returned to retrieve them. They never did.

The ethereal humanoid architects capped their completed design in solid gold later that evening, approximately one Earth day after they arrived. If they were more familiar with humans, they might have chosen a less tempting element for the capstone.

The radiant foursome reduced their full-size structural plan into a luminescent pyramidal crystal held in the palm of the other female's lovely right hand. The blond alien beauty led a chanting procession toward the makeshift throne, where the kitty awaited along with the spellbound pharaoh and the bored Gork. With an effervescent smile, she extended the 1-inch amulet dangling from the bottom of a jeweled collar around the black feline's neck and patted its furry head.

The Nordic beings bowed a solemn farewell, boarded their immaculate craft, and lifted off the plateau. Ground turbulence ripped the tent from its tethered posts and sent lighter articles into a swirling vortex littering across the desert. The Gork hustled to collect the scattered items and repaired the tent.

The hulking reptilian became an imposing, silent partner in the

project, transporting food and supplies to the sight while maintaining the beacon out of view of slack-jawed locals, consuming more than a few of the same.

After the dust settled, the cat curled up on a pillow with the crystal pyramid dangling from its neck. Khufu watched the feline breathe for a while before closing his eyes and falling into a deep slumber.

* * * * *

A horrible grating noise echoed across the plateau, awakening the pharaoh. Looking at the sky, Khufu figured it was around midday and blazing hot. Swiping sweat from his forehead, he saw through his skin like never before while small white lights hovered around his ethereal form.

The cat jumped back onto the throne, *"They are here."*

"Who is here?"

"The miners. Their ship just landed. They are late, as usual."

Holding his right hand high over his head, "Wait just a damn minute, here. Am I through evolving into another man?"

The cat angled its feline head upward, making firm eye contact with the pharaoh, *"Yes. And no. You can now alter your form, but I would recommend doing so only if necessary. We can talk more later. I have to coordinate the next steps with the unpleasant little beings gathering on the plateau."*

More concerned with himself, Khufu grabbed a mirror and studied his face. His round-cheeked baby-faced countenance had indeed transmogrified into the chiseled profile of a rugged and handsome adult male. From a certain angle, he now resembled his father, a tyrant like none other.

The loud clank of a ramp hitting the sand and the murmuring of little alien voices carrying across the plateau shook Khufu from his self-rumination. The Egyptian ruler put down his mirror and squinted outside from his tented throne at a tubular vessel resolving out of the

ether onto the arid plateau in a dusty red cloud. Another ramp dropped from an open hatch, and terraforming alien miners from a distant star spilled onto the plateau in jabbering groups. The weird little creatures busied themselves offloading equipment from the craft's tail section, including two sparkling crystal formations that caught the Egyptian's eye. The beings crammed everything they could not heft on their tiny shoulders onto anti-gravity carts parked just outside the massive squared-off survey lines.

The pharaoh and cat spectated from a safe distance as the beings eschewed formalities and began their contracted excavating duties. Menacing black eyeballs dominated the diminutive aliens' smooth, bone-white heads lending physical form to their universal antisocial reputation. Raygun wielding miners cut precise seams through the ancient strata in 10-foot cubed sections, followed by a second crew moved in and levitated the freed limestone cube, slapping a repositioning symbol onto each section. A third squad guided the floating slabs into the open desert and parked them on the plateau in a reversed order. The excavation of gigantic preserved cubes of striated rock continued as multiple crews pulled chunks from the deepening hole. The process droned on in blistering hot 12-hour shifts into the fourth day.

The cat was furious with their deliberate pace, but the miners' cutting-edge technology was the only way to not only dig a deep and precise 132-foot square but also refill all 306 feet so no one could tell it was ever there.

Bored beyond measure, Khufu wandered into the desert to clear his head and get away from the pasty little bastards roaming around the site. From a distance, the massive scale became evident, and he was overwhelmed with doubt. Was he doing the right thing? His previous safe life was already a distant memory. The massive pyramid built atop this site will forever cement his name in history in a way his predecessors never dreamt possible. He prayed their jealous souls would not seek vengeance from the afterlife.

With the haunting image of his angry forebears projecting in his mind's eye, he heard a sharp whistle screech from the pit and echo across the plateau. "Finally! They reached the bottom." Heading back to his throne, the king purged negative thoughts from his translucent head.

* * * * *

The whistle interrupted the Gork in the middle of its lunch. Trading the still-wriggling snack for its anti-gravity remote control while picking human flesh from its sharp teeth, the reptilian guided the 73-foot-tall beacon into the shaft. Nearing the bottom, another ear-screaming whistle alerted the Gork to brake. A group of seven miners down below scrambled over the rough-hewn floor to stand up 12-foot support columns, preserving a sublevel underneath the beacon's hexagonal-patterned glowing footprint.

With the beacon safely parked 12 feet off the bottom of the 276-foot shaft, the Gork's job was complete. He collected his supplies and materials and said his goodbyes to the kitty and the king. Khufu and the Gork had established a mutual admiration between man and reptile, like never before.

This amused the black cat to no end.

Hours after the Gork took flight ensconced within its single-lizard cruiser, a sharp crack sound rattled the plateau.

Khufu followed from behind. "What was that? Is something wrong?"

"*Someone activated the Machine!*" The black cat leaped from the throne and sprinted to the shaft's edge, ensuring the golden ellipse remained safe and secure atop the beacon.

The foreman peered over the cat into the dark square abyss with a lackluster shrug.

Khufu tried to follow the din of sharp noises, sounding a lot like arguing, ensue between the enraged black cat and the shiftless alien.

After the berated supervisor skulked off, shaking its bulbous head, the cat addressed Khufu, *“It appears that members of the mining crew tried to sabotage the beacon from underneath. A suicide mission from the start. Those damnable Dark Specters. I wondered when they would try to infiltrate the minds of these simpletons.”*

“Dark Specters? I am starting to feel like there is a lot you are not telling me.”

“The Dark Specters are pure evil. And they use sentient beings to do their bidding.”

“Isn’t that what you are doing with me?”

The cat transformed into a threatening black deity with a musclebound human body and an elongated canine head with pointed ears, towering over Khufu with a furious growl, *“Perhaps we should have brought back your father, instead? We chose you because you are the right human at the right moment in time. Do not meddle with destiny. The fate of your species is at stake, not just your petty concerns.”*

* * * * *

Replacement miners tunneled on a downward angle through the sublevel’s southern wall, starting from a claustrophobic vertical tunnel paralleling the shaft, following the plans designed by the good-looking aliens. Activating light from the crystalline instruments situated at the base of the north and south walls, they counted the slain remains of their seven comrades scattered around the blue-cast basement level. Without ceremony for the deceased, they abandoned the in-situ bodies draped under shiny purple cloaks left behind by the heat-stricken furry surveyors.

Back on the surface, work resumed. The miners returned the chunks of strata, one section at a time, to each original position inside the pit. Everything slowed to a crawl as the tedious process of fitting angled midsections against the proto-pyramid beacon, set dead center inside the shaft, required kid-glove treatment. The seamless perfection

of the replaced rock was a critical aspect of the plan. The black kitty ambassador had zero tolerance for the potential of a misaligned gap, cluing some future surveyors to the beacon's hidden subterranean placement.

At rock bottom of the quarter-filled shaft, the upper 19-feet of the operational beacon, with the golden ellipse side oriented north, was left exposed to the stifling air. Next, a 71-foot diameter black granite slab with a 19-foot square cut from its center was lowered into the shaft. Miners scrambled around, yammering at each other, making sure the cut-out middle of huge black circular mass did not contact the Light Specters' precious pyramid on the way down. The irascible little aliens were knocked on their backsides as a whump of hot air shot outward when the huge slab pressed atop the replaced stone deep inside the shaft. Once the dust cleared from this critical phase of construction, a 22-foot tall black granite dome was lowered over the beacon, like a lid, shrouding it in darkness.

Work stopped, and everybody took a break while the kitty trekked the circumference, double-checking the dome's notched alignment atop the shiny black circular base. Her confirmation of a perfect fit prompted relieved sighs from the hair-trigger-tempered stonecutting crews who privately fumed at the fruits of their labors under the animal's scrutiny.

A miner wielding a laser gun climbed to a point eleven feet up the dome's southern side and sliced a 2-foot circular hatch into the smooth black granite. The access point is the confluence of shafts and tunnels beneath the Giza Plateau, leading to the surface and the yet-to-be-built Great Pyramid.

With the beacon chamber secure under its black granite half dome, the precision-cut higher strata cubes were returned with pre-cut concavities where ancient limestone seated against the dome's curvature. Under the black cat's amber-eyed vigilance, more blocks filled the shaft with seamless perfection.

At the halfway point in the refilling process, the black cat

whistled a halt to work and descended into the shaft, scampering through a side tunnel bored into the southern wall. Keen feline vision guided the tiny animal to the tunnel's pitch-black endpoint. Removing the crystal pyramid from her jeweled collar, she inserted it pointy side down into a small keyhole in the rock and rotated it 90-degrees. With a relieved sigh, she watched a chiseled wall slide aside, exposing an additional thirty feet of claustrophobic tunnel. The kitty proceeded through and reached a precipice at the hollowed-out uppermost reaches of a deep, wide vertical elevator shaft.

The cat strode onto a wooden platform, level with the precipice, and inspected the rope and pulley contraption bolted into the ceiling holding it above the dark abyss. Cursing the sloppy miners' failure to dismantle the contraption before burying it under tons of rock, she decided to cut her losses with the irritable creatures and let it slide. Who knows? Someone might need to use it someday.

Khufu watched his feline partner emerge from the square tunnel, "Where does that god-forsaken hole lead?"

"It is the only physical passage to the hatch in the beacon chamber. I wanted to confirm its functionality before progressing further."

Visibly annoyed by the cat's meddling, the grumbling miners filled the shaft to the surface, cutting another 26-degree passage northward connecting the Subterranean Chamber to a planned entry point 56-feet up the north face of the next-phase pyramid project.

Another argument ensued between the black cat and the alien miners when a large asymmetric chunk of the surface was discovered missing adjacent to the filled shaft. The rock was never found, and the hole became a grotto sandwiched between the ancient plateau and the base layer of limestone blocks forming Khufu's resplendent pyramid. It was later bisected by an ascending escape tunnel used by workers during later phases of pyramid construction.

With the plateau reassembled and the beacon now streaming its message from deep underneath the Giza Plateau, the miners' toils on

Earth came to an abrupt end.

There would not be a ceremony, and no pleasantries or gifts were exchanged. They collected their pay with overtime and left without so much as a goodbye. Khufu and the black cat watched the vile little beings go, only to discover later they left their dead saboteur comrades in the twelve-foot tall expanse under the beacon.

“That is not a problem. The ghastly aliens’ demise was recorded and will serve as a warning to future trespassers.”

* * * * *

In 2560 BC, after years of grueling construction, Pharaoh Khufu’s pyramid neared completion. Seated atop his royal throne, he surveyed the expansive network of buildings and canals surrounding the magnificent limestone and granite structure. Thanking his spectral benefactors for an abundance of musclebound humanoid laborers, he squinted into the midday brightness, beaming at his 480.5-foot tall creation, covered in polished white limestone and tipped in gleaming gold. Its 756-foot base aligned with Earth and the stars under the crushing weight of approximately 2.3 million blocks. Deep underneath, the Light Specters’ beacon, powered by its golden elliptical power source, continues to ping its message into the heavens.

On the pharaoh’s lap, the only creature unafraid of Khufu’s transformative state—from a fragile human being who ruled a kingdom to a glimmering translucent guardian of the beacon—purred with contentment.

The Light Specters’ role in the design and engineering, not to mention the transport and precise positioning of the massive stones, each weighing an average of 2.5 to 15 tons, kept the project on schedule. Assuming the all-too-human guises of mathematicians, engineers, contractors, and slaves created the monolithic structure’s mythology, designed to last for millennia, documented as built by human hands.

Tens of centuries later, baffled explorers stumble across the

plateau, hypothesizing massive ramps and rope-and-pulley schemes manned by thousands of slaves acting in concert are the answer, yet fail to budge one pyramid-size block, let alone 2.3 million. This same curiosity and hubris will take them to the stars in a boisterous and haphazard fit of future ingenuity. Humans are intelligent yet predictable, like those who came before them, and more to follow throughout space and time.

The smaller imitations of Khufu's Great Pyramid—both adjacent and across vast oceans—are sources of bemusement amongst the Light Specters. While the stone edifices represent impressive feats of human ingenuity—with assistance from extraterrestrial interlopers—none are as critical as the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Heady with the creation of his own pyramid, Khufu's successor, Khafre, commissioned a gigantic limestone statue behind the Great Pyramid, honoring of all things a cat. The Dark Specters infiltrated his mind with a nightmarish vision forcing him to alter his design and chisel his father's head onto the cat as a lasting rebuke against the entire project.

Within a 71-foot diameter domed expanse, hidden far beneath the colossal Giza pyramid, the top nineteen feet of the proto-pyramidal beacon and its golden elliptical power source jut from a sea of glassy smooth black granite. At its apex, a rhythmic burst of energy penetrates the chamber's 22-foot ceiling, and the Giza pyramid, into the heavens, as it had for millennia. The beacon's electrified strobing light show illuminates floor-to-ceiling hieroglyphics adorning the cavernous void.

Obscured from evolving eyeballs, the Light Specters' stern message of non-interference burst heavenward like clockwork, allowing human civilization to continue its unimpeded march toward relevance while surpassing even the more optimistic prognostications.

All was according to plan on the small blue planet.

* * * * *

In addition to meddling with Khufu's successors, the Dark

Specters never relented from their nefarious schemes. Hiding the damnable structure beneath a massive pyramidal replica elicited derision from the malevolent beings who shift between energy and matter with ease. Assuming human forms throughout the centuries, they preyed upon mankind's weaknesses, searching for the perfect foil. They sought out history's megalomaniacal actors, magnifying wretchedness to terrible extremes. Deceiving power-hungry fools into believing possession of the golden ellipse equaled infinite power proved all-too-easy. However, the whose-who of skeletal remains lost in the pitch-black claustrophobic tunnels beneath the Great Pyramid proved a pathetic outcome for centuries of effort. The handful of bad actors who managed to locate the beacon's hidden expanse all succumbed to the Machine. Instead of glorious power and wealth, their ashen remnants were whisked into oblivion.

Despite multitudinous failures from the advent of civilization to almost 1,800 years past the time of Christ, the Dark Specters believed their persistence would one day pay a dividend.

On a sweltering August evening in 1799, the evilness watched a small, petty man, decked out in full uniform, ride his white stallion to the base of the Great Pyramid, right hand stuck under his waistcoat, like an idiot.

Napoleon | Giza Plateau, Egypt

07:30 p.m. | August 14, 1799

The late-summer Cairo heat and humidity lingered into the early evening hours. Beyond the pyramids, the last vestiges of sunlight radiated through the cumulus, and stars twinkled overhead in the darkening cobalt sky. General Napoleon Bonaparte, commander of the French Expeditionary Force and self-proclaimed conqueror of Egypt—after his decisive victory over the Ottomans—dismounted and handed

the reigns to an attending soldier.

Exuding superiority and purpose, he strode to the base layer of limestone, giving form to the Great Pyramid of Giza, and smiled. Addressing the fawning retinue of generals, lieutenants, soldiers, archeologists, scientists, historians, plus a cadre of pragmatic businessmen and functionaries ingratiating themselves to the victorious French over the vanquished Turks, the diminutive leader found words, for once, escaped him.

Instead, anxious for his transformative adventure full of promise to begin, "Where is Monsieur Dreyfus? Come here at once, Armand!"

Napoleon spied Dreyfus, hidden amidst the crowd, and motioned a short-armed wave for his chief archeologist to join him. Without further ado, the two men climbed prepositioned steps and ladders up the eroded and weather-beaten blocks following a path marked for the occasion. Dreyfus did not share his leader's dogmatic belief; the structure hid undiscovered treasures. He prided himself on his scientific acumen and embraced a godless skepticism at all times. Treasures from Khufu's reign, including the pharaoh's mummified remains, fell prey to looters long ago. That is, if the ruler was ever entombed in the massive monument in the first place.

Dreyfus served for the past year in the 30,000-plus French expedition unearthing an eye-popping wealth of antiquities from all over the Middle East, including the Rosetta Stone. The revelatory discoveries brought about a new field of study, Egyptology. Despite the Giza Plateau's archeological significance, Dreyfus was thunderstruck when informed of the general's desire to spend a night inside the crumbling pile of rocks. And the old man wished he could hide under a rock, as opposed to climbing one, when informed as one of the senior archeological experts on the expedition, Napoleon chose him to be his guide. Still, the elder statesman knew one thing; he did not achieve his advanced age by questioning the whimsical, sometimes farcical, ideas of a megalomaniac like Napoleon.

The Frenchmen picked their way up the side of the Great Pyramid of Giza to the main entrance, sixty feet off the plateau. One, a short and stout leader of men; the other, a tall and gangly elderly man of science.

The agile old man reached the entrance level first. While waiting for his huffing general, he made a quick survey of chiseled clues indicating where a seamless block once concealed the opening from view. “Why go through all of the trouble of building such a massive structure, only to hide the front door? Incredible.” Dreyfus had read a Greek geologist named Strabo’s eyewitness account from 24 BC, describing the engineering marvel before earthquakes, the elements, and looting Arabs crumbled and absconded with most of the pyramid’s smooth limestone outer casing. The Grecian scientist described a hidden hinged stone that could swivel open, revealing a regal threshold and the Great Pyramid’s Descending Passage. Additional eyewitnesses from throughout recorded history corroborated his account.

Eschewing a lower and more readily accessible entrance tunneled by treasure-seeking eighth-century Arabs, due to its rough-hewn appearance and tragic nickname, Dreyfus wiped his brow and waited for his boss to complete his ascent. “Sir, we could have used the robbers’ entrance. It is much easier to navigate.”

With a final labored push, the world leader summited the last block with a grunted French epithet. Ignoring Dreyfus, Napoleon bent low to peer into the dark 4-foot orifice. “Dreyfus, I see my stature has, at last, become an advantage. And you wanted to lead me through a tunnel bored-out by grave robbers! We are not thieves, my friend; we are liberators.”

“As you wish, general.” Hands resting on his hips, Dreyfus took a deep breath of fresh air. He did not bother to advise his boss to do the same. Instead, without thinking, he gestured the diminutive general across the threshold, like a bride and groom on their wedding night. After a final glimpse at the thinning crowds, the old man ducked inside,

realizing the little general was already blocking the way. Muttering under his breath, "This is awkward." Dreyfus squeezed past Napoleon in the cramped space, "All right, general. Please watch your head as it is tight quarters in here."

Without waiting for a reply, Dreyfus hunched his way down the confining passageway. Meanwhile, the general brushed the dust from his royal blue waistcoat and looked down the passage, half-expecting a revelatory experience mere feet inside the entrance.

The experienced antiquities collector knew the scenery would not change from the chiseled limestone blocks, dust, and gritted sand at the opening, but the boondoggle must proceed. "If I keep a steady pace, this nightmare will soon be over, and I can go home." Weeks from retirement, he looked forward to a much-anticipated return to the south of France.

Halting his sure-footed steps halfway down the claustrophobic 26-degree slope, Dreyfus waited for his fearless leader. Looking back toward the entrance, he watched Napoleon's silhouetted form struggling to descend through the narrow space. The soles of the general's leather boots slid from under him on the loose gravel and sand, causing him to fall on his backside and shout a loud expletive, which echoed past the smiling archeologist into the darkness. Stifling an impertinent laugh, the Frenchman mused Pharaonic ghosts lingering within these walls were undoubtedly aware of their intrusion after that outburst.

Sliding to Dreyfus' bent position, Napoleon pointed a chubby finger at the scientist, a wide-eyed expression distorting his cherubic face, "I'm warning you, Monsieur, the footing in this abysmal passage is treacherous at best. You will do well to slow your pace and not get ahead of your commander again. I say this for your own safety, Dreyfus." Napoleon concluded with a dismissive wave. "Now proceed," gesturing his still-pointed finger into the darkness beyond the prepositioned lanterns fading glows.

"My apologies, general. I will try to be more careful."

Napoleon could not make out Dreyfus' surreptitious eye-roll in the darkness but may have sensed the thin-veiled sarcasm in the measured reply from the experienced antiquities collector.

After 97 torturous feet, surrounded by the suffocating weight of millions of tons of solid rock, the string of lanterns ended under a square cavity inches above their heads. "Sir, this plugged shaft is the start of what is known as the Ascending Passage. As you can see, it is blocked by solid granite. Who knows why? Fortunately for our endeavors, the Arabs discovered a detour."

"They are a fascinating and resourceful lot, wouldn't you agree, Dreyfus?"

"If you say so, sir."

Dreyfus leads Napoleon a few hunched steps farther down the Descending Passage. Without exposition, he ventures left through a jagged hole chiseled out of the wall. The taller man twists and pulls himself across the sharp uneven surface into the Ascending Passage beyond, angling his frame through the softer limestone blocks carved out by treasure-seeking Arabs a thousand years earlier, revealing the once-hidden upward passage.

Taking deep labored breaths, waiting for Napoleon, he collapsed on the floor and cursed toward the opposite end of the three stacked granite plugs he just detoured. "Only a masochist would build such an inhospitable structure." Probing through the darkness, he located provisions prepositioned for the final push to the King's Chamber: torches, a box of matches, a satchel containing Napoleon's sleepwear, and a single canteen of lukewarm water. Dreyfus mused on how many intrepid explorers remembered to pack their pajamas.

Wriggling through the Arab's workaround tunnel, Napoleon crawled into the Ascending Passage like a calf exiting the birth canal. He settled on the upslope side of Dreyfus and allowed himself a break. For a few blessed minutes, they sat in the darkness in total silence.

"Dreyfus, did the Arabs take everything a thousand years ago?"

“No, sir, the way I understand it, they found nothing of value.” Too tired to care, he addressed the elephant in the pyramid, “Neither will we.”

The candor was met by more silence in the dark.

Deciding break time was over, Dreyfus struck a match against the rough stone wall, ignited the first torch, and handed it to Napoleon. In his head, he likened it to giving a sparkler to a small boy. Next, the veteran explorer lit his torch, scooped the straps from the satchel and canteen, and flung them over his shoulder. Holding his torch upslope, the flickering light illuminated the claustrophobic passage slanting upward on the same 26-degree angle as the Descending Passage, “Sir, please be mindful of your torch on the way up, so you don’t burn yourself or me.” He allowed himself a soft chuckle.

His words fell on deaf ears. Napoleon stared into the abyss without uttering another sound, his torch illuminating the treacherous incline before the two men.

Dreyfus shrugged and began his ascent. Checking ahead into the frightening darkness with the light from his torch, “I apologize, but this is the only known passage to the King’s Chamber.”

Napoleon broke from his prolonged silence following the scientist’s impertinent candor, “Yes, Dreyfus. The King’s Chamber! Lead the way, my friend!”

Ascending the narrow tunnel, the 6-foot man trod up the steep incline, bent at the waist with both canteens and his satchel swinging from straps digging into his aching neck and shoulder. As the air grew thinner, Dreyfus feared the torches would flame out from a lack of oxygen, abandoning them in the terrifying darkness. He refrained from voicing this concern to his clueless leader.

After 124 grueling feet, enduring scrapes, bruises, obscenities, and a singed boot from Napoleon’s torch, the odd pair exited the Ascending Passage onto a horizontal landing at the base of the Grand Gallery. Both men stood erect and stretched aching muscles.

Dreyfus rejoiced in the relative openness after the tight passages and lost focus on the general for a heartbeat before hearing the man cry out in shocked anger.

“Why is there a hole in the damn floor, Dreyfus! I almost broke my leg! What is the point of having you guide if you are not going to do your job, man!”

Snapping from his momentary lapse in oversight, “That would be the Well Shaft, sir. It exits into a Subterranean Chamber far below the pyramid and connects to the Descending Passage where we started. It was used by laborers to enter and exit this upper area. It is far too narrow and treacherous for us.” Seeing the general was not amused after his brush with a broken leg, Dreyfus continued, “Through there, straight ahead, is the Queen’s Chamber. And no. There is nothing in there but rock.”

Segueing around the dangerous hole in the floor mishap, Dreyfus stepped up a sloped ramp and stood atop the seamless, assembled blocks above the Queen’s Chamber entrance. From his vantage point ten feet above Napoleon, still pouting on the horizontal landing, the archeologist elevated his torch high over his head. “Behold the majesty of the Grand Gallery.”

Napoleon’s brush with injury was forgotten as his eyes widened upon the flickering vision of a regal 7-foot wide corridor towering 28 feet following the same angle as the Ascending Passage along its 153-foot incline.

Dreyfus turned from the shallow man to the engineering marvel beyond his torch. Exploring the Great Pyramid was more a matter of endurance than discovery, but the Grand Gallery reignited his curiosity regarding ancient Egyptian civilization. It made little sense, yet there it was. Priceless antiquities be damned, mathematical feats such as this incredible passage held the real answers. The art of his endeavors was the pursuit of the question. Replaying this conundrum in his balding head, he redirected his torch upon Napoleon, “Sir, without our modern

knowledge of mathematics, such as the Pythagorean Theorem, no one can conceive how the Egyptians managed to construct this gallery.” With a follow-up chuckle, “Not to mention the rest of the pyramid.”

Redirecting his torchlight around the ancient space, he smoothed a bony hand across a corbeled 7-foot slab of limestone. Six more corbeled sections pinch inward in 3-inch increments to the narrowed 28-foot ceiling. “The engineering and mathematical precision it took to build this, the last of the original Seven Wonders of World, defies imagination. However, the most advanced country in the history of the modern civilized world is here. We shall soon come to understand all of its hidden secrets.”

Dreyfus looked down toward Napoleon at the bottom of the Grand Gallery, expecting an inappropriate or ignorant reply. Instead, he watched the small man place his torch onto the floor, stretch kinks from his back, adjust his uniform, and brush the dirt from his lapels and sleeves. Satisfied, he grabbed the torch and climbed to Dreyfus’ position. Stopping next to the much taller archeologist, “Dreyfus, you are misguided in your notion of who built this place.”

Napoleon continued up the stepped pathway bordered by mysterious slotted ramps on both sides toward the top of the Grand Gallery. His chief scientist left speechless in his wake.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Dreyfus muttered to himself while adjusting the straps on his shoulder. He marveled at how a nutjob like this guy somehow rose through the ranks and became a world leader. Sweating like a pig, he also decided to take a breather and regroup. Ditching his coat, Dreyfus took a swig from the canteen and stood on the steep incline in his dingy-white, open-collar silk blouse hanging untucked over torn breeches and scuffed and singed leather boots. He swiped his brow using a dirty cloth from the satchel and looked on in amazement at Napoleon. Thirty paces ahead, the little man struck a statue-worthy pose, bathed in the flickering light from the torch held outstretched in his left hand, staring into the darkness, still sporting his

complete, albeit torn and dirty, uniform.

The old man shook his head, noting once again his commander's famed resilience. Deciding break time ended, Dreyfus plodded upward to his motionless leader, "We are virtually there, sir. The King's Chamber lies beyond the Great Step at the top."

Frozen in a familiar pose, Napoleon replied in a commanding voice reverberating through the Grand Gallery, "Wouldn't it be glorious if treasures did remain somewhere within these walls? Something greater than trinkets, statues, jewels, and mummies." His laugh had an uncharacteristic derisiveness, "So many damnable mummies!"

Dreyfus sensed the journey had taken a strange turn and proceeded toward his leader, trepidation creeping up his spine. Furrowing his weather-beaten brow, he strained to draw meaning from the maniacal rant.

"Not more worthless junk, dammit all! I want to find something of real value!"

Dreyfus reached Napoleon's side and saw him trembling with frustration. The round-faced little man wheeled toward him, continuing his tirade, "I just don't understand what it's supposed to look like! Is it some kind of a tool? Or maybe a weapon?" Napoleon's maniacal eyes darted around the cavernous space as if searching for a lost key. "All I know, Armand, is I was drawn here in the same manner as Alexander the Great! There is a power here for the taking. I can feel it in my bones! Just think of it, man! A treasure I can use to rule the world would be the greatest archeological discovery in the history of mankind, wouldn't you agree? Of course, you do! Follow me, Armand!"

The general thrust himself from Dreyfus' side and stumbled uphill as if taking the high ground amid pitched battle. His incoherent exhortations for the scientist to follow echoed through the chamber into the abyss.

Dreyfus embraced his independence from the hapless ranks of the French military. Despite his current task babysitting Napoleon, he

rebelled against petulant army commands whenever feasible. Standing in the darkness, the fading torch held loose at his side, he shakes his head in wonderment. The maniacal rant elicited an impertinent chuckle, “Armand, is it?” Swiping sweat from his brow, “I’m on a first-name basis with the Conqueror of Egypt—just in time for his complete mental breakdown. How fitting.”

The obstinate scientist relented, taking long uphill strides to assist the harried little man before he hurt himself. Peering ahead, he spied what could only be Napoleon Bonaparte. The diminutive fellow made it to the top of the Grand Gallery and now stood atop the Great Step, silhouetted against the inky blackness beyond, uplit by his dim torch.

What manifested before Dreyfus’ dilated eyeballs prompted the noted atheist to utter an out-of-character expression: “Dear God in Heaven, what is that?”

An amorphous creature, darker than the inky blackness, shimmering with specks of light, appeared out of the ether over Napoleon’s frozen pose. Shocked and horrified, Dreyfus watched the phantasm engulf his stricken leader in its malevolence from head to toe. The lights spun around the dictator’s diminutive silhouette in a violent, blurry maelstrom, piercing the quaking man like Swiss cheese. Scared witless yet rapt in a fascinated stare, Dreyfus repeated, “For the love of God, what is that?”

Swallowing back abject fear, Dreyfus attempted to call out as loud as he could muster in the stale air. However, Napoleon vanished from the 8-foot granite landing fronting the knee-height access passage leading to the King’s Chamber in the blink of an eye. Stunned by the phantasmagorical display, the scientist shuffled forward, the last dying embers from his flame, the only thing between himself and utter madness; however, his satchel held his box of wooden matches, so not to worry.

Napoleon proved another terrible disappointment for the Dark Specters, like the power-hungry figures who came and went before him. They met the little general with great expectations on the elevated granite block above the Grand Gallery's high end, feet from the knee-height passage into the King's Chamber. However, instead of embracing their hollow promise of sheer power and control over the civilized world of the late 1700s, the French general panicked. The Dark Specters dragged him into the red granite chamber and threw the coward against the lidless granite coffin in an ignominious heap. They considered the efficacy of smothering the life from the shallow man but perceived his ultimate fate lay before him. Instead, the malevolent beings who fell from grace eons beforehand abandoned the weeping fool.

Napoleon curled into a fetal repose, cowering in a state of fear, propped against the empty sarcophagus.

Desperate to find a competent human to break the Machine and remove the ellipse atop the beacon, the Dark Specters refocused their evilness onto the elderly fellow who accompanied Napoleon. They watched him climb atop the Great Step outside the King's Chamber, quaking in fear. That is fine; he should be afraid.

Pulling himself atop the Great Step at the high end of the Grand Gallery's 153-foot incline, Dreyfus now stood where he saw Napoleon last stand. Trying not to hyperventilate, he peered into the low square portal, hopeful the horrifying vision was a figment of his imagination, "General? Are you in there?" No reply. "Damn. How am I going to explain losing the emperor of France?"

Lowering onto his arthritic knees atop the hard granite, Dreyfus positioned himself to shimmy through the square portal leading into the King's Chamber—where Napoleon must have gone.

A glowing orb greeted him at the portal, hovering before

Dreyfus' crooked nose, illuminating his petrified face. Awash in an alien light, the gawky old man scrambled onto his feet in a heart-pounding panic. Stumbling backward across the raised platform to the 8-foot-high ledge, an invisible push sent him reeling off the Great Step. Slamming his head and shoulders into the hard limestone at an awkward angle, he tumbled halfway down the stepped corridor before rolling to a stop. Writhing in abject pain, broken and defenseless on his side, his eyes widened onto the light growing into a luminous star-filled apparition above his battered body. Dreyfus' terrorized screams were drowned by the phantasm's explosive release of malevolent energy, casting the ancient corridor in sharp relief before total blackness consumed his stricken form.

Rendered sightless following the explosion, mind-numbing paralysis, and an unnerving out-of-body sensation overwhelmed Dreyfus. The man of science felt his body lift off the floor. His torch released from arthritic fingers, clanking to the bottom of the Grand Gallery. Elevating toward the high ceiling inside the chamber, he searched his mind for answers but found it impossible to concentrate, as if drugged. Floating through the nebulous miasma, random thoughts addled his brain. "Am I still inside the pyramid? Hard to say. Am I moving up or down? Impossible to tell the difference."

Dreyfus closed his eyes and thought of his farmhouse outside Aix-en-Provence. How he wished he could experience it one more time. Mere weeks from an idyllic retired life, wry laughter resounded in his ears as if the spiteful chortle came from someone else. His muddled mind tripped over a random lucidity: "I am suffering from oxygen-deprived hallucinations, and reality is now a strange illusion."

Fully-realized visions flooded his mind's eye: Civilizations populated not only with humans but bizarre creatures from somewhere else. Machines of war filled the skies. He realized the vision exposed a war-torn future, or perhaps the ancient past. A youthful man and woman in strange attire appeared like actors on a cosmic stage. The

ravishing woman is clutching a golden elliptical shape tight against her chest. They are fleeing the same alien phantasm responsible for his current plight.

* * * * *

Sprawled on a black granite floor polished to a reflective sheen, Dreyfus' eyelids snapped open, revealing rheumy bloodshot eyeballs. His shirt clung to his skin from dried sweat and dust, and thinning hair hung over his dirt-streaked face in gray strands. A foul mixture of drool and sand caked on his stubbled cheeks and chin. He wiped bloody grit from his swollen eyes on a tattered sleeve. "How long was I asleep? What is this place? How did I get here?"

The ambient glow from a triangular edifice pierced his blurred vision. At the top, a bright ovular shape, like the ellipse held by the woman in his dream, held his gaze in an iron grip. Its brilliance dazzled the scientist, overwhelming his soulless bearing with an uncharacteristic wanton craving for its all-consuming power. His cracked skull pounded with the all-too-evident reality before him: the structure's vivid pulsations, symphonic overture, and shimmering ellipse lay beyond his woeful and pathetic human intellect.

Dreyfus struggled onto bruised and battered legs, feeling his way to the base of the top nineteen feet of the beacon's exposed height, like an untold number of recruits back to the prehistoric past. He extended a bony right hand toward the golden brightness piercing his foggy vision in a vain attempt to touch it, "I am standing before the most significant archeological find in the history of mankind, and I'm blind as a bat. Damn, my bad fortune."

A chorus of voices filled his mind, "*Yes, Armand, it is yours for the taking. All you have to do is climb the beacon and remove the golden ellipse! The archeological mysteries will all be revealed. Your v's pursuits will be fulfilled.*"

The old man collapsed upon the beacon's north-facing facade.

Probing his hands across the carved matrix, he sought handholds to pull himself upward. Electric shocks jolted his form and singed his skin, while rhythmic vibrations permeated his arthritic bones as he willed himself toward the bright, blurry shape. Dreyfus' left boot caught in a deep groove, and one heave later, he pulled his worn-out frame to the elliptical power source.

More strange voices filled the old man's head, "*Dreyfus, it is right in front of you! Remove the ellipse and embrace its power.*"

The archeologist lay face down, spread-eagled against the beacon, twenty feet off the shiny black floor. Fumbling hands across the glowing shape below his bloody nose, tears of relief welled in his useless eyes when his fingertips felt the curved edge of the elliptical shape. Weeping like a fragile child, he pushed his fingertips underneath as far as they would go and slid them up the sides. With his crooked fingers positioned at both ends of the oval, he pressed long bony thumbs down onto the brilliant honeycombed surface to achieve the firmest grip he could muster. After one tentative tug, Dreyfus cried out loud and pulled back as hard as his broken body could muster.

The old man's ignited form was expelled from the beacon with violent and impenitent force. The Machine slammed Dreyfus into the hieroglyphic-covered interior of the black granite dome like a rag doll, rebounding onto the unforgiving chamber floor where he lay sprawled in a smoking heap of flesh and bone, burned beyond recognition.

Above his smoldering form, the golden ellipse remained functional and secure in its concave cradle, and the Machine resumed its normal operating mode.

* * * * *

The Dark Specters were not through with Armand Dreyfus. They reappeared out of the charged air inside the hidden chamber underneath the Great Pyramid of Giza, radiating hatred and disgust for the worthless, charred mess littering the stone floor. A powerful gust

swirled the burnt, lifeless body into a dark vortex and spirited him to a faraway place.

Armand Dreyfus awoke to the familiar sounds of rustling leaves and chirping birds. The rich aroma of tobacco smoke wafted to his crooked nose from his favorite pipe nestled in his gnarled hand as he swayed to and fro, slumped in his trusty bent-wood rocking chair. Gazing at the bucolic countryside and the familiar outline of Montagne Sainte-Victoire on the horizon from the vantage of his farmhouse porch in the South of France, he produced a contented smile across his stubbled face.

A disembodied voice invaded his tranquil repose. *“Monsieur Dreyfus, you can remain here for as long as you desire. All we ask in return is your assistance at a point in the future.”*

Dreyfus’ gaze never left the horizon, “Will it involve the flying machines from my dreams?”

“Yes, Armand, you are correct.”

The exhausted Frenchman acquiesced, drifting into a deep slumber. While his consciousness rested, his physical manifestation ebbed into a black silhouette of malevolent stars before returning to the visage of a retired man of science named Armand Dreyfus.

* * * * *

Hours before sunrise, the morning after Napoleon’s much-ballyhooed night in the pyramid, the general stumbled out of the robbers’ entrance into the invigorating morning air and collapsed in a heap. Soldiers abandoned their posts, raced to their leader’s aid, carried him off the weathered blocks, and placed him on an outstretched blanket. Within minutes, Napoleon’s personal physician arrived on the scene in a harried and disheveled state, thinning gray hair askew, and last evening’s alcoholic binge still lingering on his breath.

The doctor knelt beside Napoleon and elevated his head so he could drink from a canteen. “What happened inside the pyramid, sir?”

Casting his eyes around the scene, he asks the heaving man, “And where is Dreyfus?”

The disheveled general did not reply. Bolting upright, he drained the canteen, oblivious of the gathering crowd, eager to hear about the legendary general’s experience inside the infamous pyramid.

Napoleon Bonaparte, the conqueror of Egypt, turned to his physician, “Even If I told you, you would not believe me.”

**Space tourism is a logical outgrowth of the
adventure tourist market.**

– *Buzz Aldrin*

Chapter One:

The Honeymoon

Rachel and Owen | IOSC Buzz Aldrin Spaceport, Nevada
08:35 a.m. | August 16, 2044

Honeymooners Rachel and Owen Haig screech to a halt at the white curb in front of the brand-new Buzz Aldrin Spaceport Terminal, waving goodbye—and good riddance—to their lead-footed autonomous ride. The e-car is already humming out into traffic toward Las Vegas as they finish rolling their bags onto the curb. Owen wipes his brow in the early morning desert heat and stares in awe through his mirrored shades at the massive terminal and its soaring glass facade reflecting the cerulean Nevada sky. He produces a broad white smile, appreciative of this iconic chapter in his young and adventurous life. To add icing to the cake, he is sharing it with the love of his life. “I can’t believe we’re finally here. This is going to be epic. Right, Rachel?” Glancing sideways

to where he assumed his new wife stood, “Rachel?”

Squinting through the bright morning sunshine, Owen spies his new wife wheeling cumbersome luggage through throngs of travelers while circumnavigating a spectacular water fountain fronting the terminal’s main entrance. His focus shifts onto the spaceport namesake’s larger-than-life heavenward gaze cast in bronze and standing atop a chiseled base centered within the 58-foot diameter crystal-clear bubbling waters.

Grappling suitcases under both arms with another wheeled monster in tow, Owen excuses himself through a group of spry seniors on a day trip to visit the terminal. Hastening his pace, oblivious to the sour looks while angling toward Rachel, his attention is diverted by an informative space exploration timeline etched into the fountain’s black granite retaining wall starting from the 1950s to the revolutionary seed change heralding the advent of space tourism in 2034. Craning over and around the tanned, well-heeled retirees, Owen skims chiseled dates to the last marker commemorating the Nevada IOSC hub’s ribbon-cutting ceremony on January 9, 2044, “Wow, a lot has happened in eight short months.”

Ignoring his new wife’s already familiar hand-on-hip impatient stance, “Hey, Rachel, hold up. I want to take your picture in front of the Buzz Aldrin fountain before we head inside.”

Oversized tortoiseshell designer frames conceal her flustered eye roll, “Owen, we’re barely out of the cab, and you’re already breaking your promise about turning everything into a photoshoot. Plus, what did I say about reading every sign?”

“Don’t do it?”

“Bingo.”

Deflecting Rachel’s annoyed reply, Owen palms his precious credit-card-thin Nikon hi-def holographic camera in his raised right hand and flashes his most persuasive smile, “Just one picture, I swear.”

Recalling battles with her little brother on family trips, she

acquiesces, but with a caveat, “Okay. But make it quick. All of these people are heading in the same direction as us.”

“That’s true, but there are two liftoffs out of here today, ours and the Sapporo flight. The rest of these too-tan snowbirds are out here enjoying the nickel tour.”

Post capturing a photo of his beautiful new bride in hologram mode, along with a few candid shots for posterity, Owen notes more luggage-bound space tourists crowding past, “Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s head to the counter and ditch these damn things. For as much as they cost, I wish I figured out how to activate the autonomous mode. Oh, well.”

Pulling the bulky suitcases, smaller versions stacked atop, Owen readjusts thick straps from a backpack and a satchel on his broad shoulders. His bride, carrying two more bags, follows her lead blocker through the bustle of spaceport employees, security personnel, and the growing crowd of fellow nascent space tourists.

The natural beauty’s lithesome frame and graceful stride draw furtive glances from men, women, and even a few more advanced synthetic humanoids. Rachel is blind to what they see. Although she despises false modesty, her honest self-appraisal details a litany of physical shortcomings: mousy-colored straight hair, too tall, too skinny, and flat-chested. Her wedding day lineup of bridesmaids put her to shame. Those girls, she had known since kindergarten, had grown into ravishing beauties. She doubted she would see much more of them after her wedding. They remained the same catty group from high school; she was the one who had changed.

Aware of her husband’s propensity for posting images without her consent, “I want to approve photos before you share them, Owen.”

“No problem, Rachel,” laughing while maneuvering his right-hand suitcase around uncooperative strangers, within inches of dead-legging a guy, “You never take a bad picture.”

“Says you, Owen Haig. You are not exactly an unbiased observer.”

“Trust me; I observe plenty.”

Rachel’s side-parted dark-blond tresses frame her expressive green eyes and fresh face, cascading in subtle waves over toned shoulders to the small of her back. Sunny highlights and a trace of freckles sprinkled across her straight pert nose are souvenirs from the past two languorous days spent poolside at their posh Vegas hotel, drink in hand. Her idea of a vacation. Now it was Owen’s turn.

Matching her athletic husband’s long gait, the unpretentious 24-year-old bites her lower lip and attempts a nervous smile while sidestepping another tour group. With growing unease inside the crowded terminal, Rachel tugs at bag straps hanging from the shoulder of her tassel-sleeved, chocolate-brown suede jacket. With a frustrated sigh, she wonders when the promised fun starts. Patting a side pocket in her olive safari shorts, she double-checks for the tissue-wrapped anxiety pills her Mom gave her, just in case.

A tall scarecrow of a man with a bandana-wrapped head and long gray beard notices the vintage Ziggy Stardust t-shirt under Rachel’s jacket and shoots her a wink while shuffling past. She stumbled upon the 70s throwback in the Hard Rock Hotel gift shop on the Vegas Strip and decided to wear it in honor of the iconic rocker’s space travel fascination.

The new Mrs. Rachel Haig is not alone in loathing what passes for popular culture in 2044. While the topic fails to interest a tin-eared number-cruncher, like Owen, she nonetheless favors art, style, and especially the music of the bygone yet easily accessible analog era. Her fortress of solitude is wearing old-fashioned noise-canceling headphones while spinning LP records on the antique turntable her father finally relented and gave to her when he couldn’t stop her from borrowing it anyway.

A worn-in pair of vintage brown leather Chelsea boots—her favorite thing—complete her eclectic ensemble, accentuating her long tan legs and taut calves. While far from a health nut, Rachel’s daily yoga

and on-again, off-again exercise regimen in the lead-up to squeezing into her wedding dress have her honed and ready for anything, she hopes.

Sidling through the sea of humanity within the echoing atrium, Rachel brushes past an attractive female information attendant. Excusing herself, she wonders: human or synthetic? It is almost impossible to tell the difference. Regardless, all spaceport personnel dressed to the nines in the same military-style space-gray uniforms, performing their assigned duties, and greeting apprehensive space tourism pioneers with confident and courteous “Everything will be all right” smiles.

When the Haigs’ take their turn at the luggage counter, they heft the baggage onto large scales, similar to any airport counter in the world. Bionic arms grapple the suitcases onto a conveyor rolling through a dark square portal. An observant supervisor realizes the couple has no idea what to do next and motions toward a device, like a miniaturized overhead projector, instructing them how to scan luggage SKUs onto their forearm ticket implants. “You don’t want your stuff to end up in Sapporo, right?” Rachel raises a brown eyebrow in agreement with the woman’s rhetorical question, watching a greenish light beam penetrate to the embedded chip under the smooth skin on the inside of her upheld left forearm.

On the cusp of completing the procedure, a distinguished-looking Egyptian in a tailored light-tan suit bumps her arm while grabbing a handful of old-school name tags from the adjacent countertop. After a brief awkward silence, the dark-complexioned man, sporting a clean-shaved head, apologizes with a disarming smile and heavily accented, “Excuse me, madame.”

Owen watches the guy meld into the crowd, “Do you know him, Rachel?”

“Never seen him before in my life, yet he looked at me like he knew me.”

“Or maybe he wanted to make your acquaintance if you get my drift.”

“If he is a wealthy sheik. Who knows?”

Owen addresses the smirking supervisor enjoying the conversation from across the counter, “Ma’am, are we through here?”

Double-checking her screen, a thin smile lingering on her thin red lips, the lady sends Owen and Rachel on their way with a rote, “Enjoy the ride.” while motioning for the next space tourist to come on down.

Liberated from their cumbersome luggage, the Haigs follow signage pointing toward the security line. Meanwhile, their bulky suitcases embark on an underground journey toward LaunchPad B, bumping, grinding, and twirling across mechanized conveyors through pitch-black tunnels far beneath the broiling Nevada desert.

Parting through the unfinished terminal, Rachel notes the presence of so many engineers and hard-hatted worker bees with thin-veiled apprehension, worrying her life is in the hands of a not-ready-for-primetime outfit. She hears more than sees drones buzzing about the steel-beam rafters, high overhead in the cavernous glass-enclosed terminal, operated by white-coated technicians consulting holographic site plans. Rounding a corner beyond a row of chic storefronts still touting their grand openings—and a Starbucks—toward security, they trail behind others through a plywood-lined pathway bisecting a construction zone stamped with Coming Soon! Maria’s Cantina Bar and Restaurant. Maria’s first frozen margarita is still months away if the din from hammering and screeching saws coupled with the incandescent glows of welding torches from the opposite sides of the 8-foot wooden barriers are any indication. That’s too bad. Rachel glances above the planks at the razor-sharp 2-story video walls looming high above their heads, morphing through a litany of sponsors, eager to establish a presence in the space tourism arena. “I hope our spaceship is finished by the time we get there.”

“This is all window dressing, Rachel. The important stuff is fully operational.”

Exiting the construction chokepoint dumps them at the back end of a serpentine security line where the couple drops their carry-ons at their feet.

Suppressing a sudden urge to run out into the sweltering parking lot where there is a little more elbow room, Rachel instead loops a flaxen strand behind her ear, “This is the security line? I feel like a mouse in a maze.”

Ignoring the mouse comment, her new husband, with his rakish appearance and short auburn hair, rolls the left sleeve of his mint-green button-down L.L. Bean shirt. Verging on giving the bio-absorbable ticket implant buried in his sinewy forearm a good scratch, Rachel admonishes him to leave it alone.

“You’re going to break it.”

“The darn thing itches like crazy!” Owen attempts to distract from the palpable anxiety masked behind his beautiful new wife’s worried face with a muscular shrug. Raising thick eyebrows while spreading a mischievous smile, dimpling clean-shaven cheeks, he scoots backward to clear a little floor space around their place in line, “How’s that? Better?”

“A little.” Reciprocating a bright smile, Rachel looks into the compassionate hazel eyes of the man she married, wondering if her life will ever be ordinary. It was hard to believe their ceremony for the ages was just four short days ago. The raucous reception was probably still going on for all she knew.

Ignoring his effortless masculine charms, she opts to play along with his diversion, “Owen, the implants were your idea. We could have chosen a paper ticket voucher like my friend back at the luggage counter. I’m sure we could have squeezed one thin sheet of paper into our bags.”

“I am trying to make sure we experience everything to the fullest extent possible. We are about to travel into space on the most advanced craft ever built by humankind, not flying coach on a redeye flight to O’Hare. It’s just a little forewarning that this microchip in

my arm would itch so bad would have been nice.” Raising a defiant index finger to accentuate the faux seriousness behind his point, “They figured out anti-gravity, but this,” pointing at his arm, “is beyond their ability to reverse engineer.” Rolling his sleeve back down, he turns to the eavesdropping woman standing behind him and nods, “How are you doing?” The woman’s face reminds him of the actress from the insurance commercials, but he refrains from saying so aloud.

“You’ll live, big guy,” Rachel concludes, moving on from one of their first and most inconsequential spats. Scanning the line in front of them and beyond the nosy woman to new groups arriving on their heels, she can’t help but notice there is no way out.

Catching everyone’s attention, a tall and dark man sporting the standard space-gray uniform delineated with thin gold braiding and a triangular medallion on his left breast pocket saunters past their position. A recollection of endless lines waiting to enter Space Mountain and the less-than-unenthusiastic Disneyland ride operators springs into Rachel’s active mind.

The man reached the high-tech podium at the front of the cue as if time had no meaning. With every eye upon him in rapt anticipation, he presses a button, and a screen hums to life reflected in his dark eyes. More agonizing minutes pass, watching him log in and stare at the bright display as if perusing a message from his robot relations union. Finally, an impatient wave moves the first group forward, scanning forearm ticket implants along with a smattering of non-itchy paper vouchers at a plodding rhythmic pace.

Slow-walking along the line, Rachel can’t resist a subtle jab at her new spouse, “We would be a lot further up in line if not for your impromptu photoshoot outside. If we don’t make it onto the next ground shuttle, it can take over an hour for another to return and transport the next load of passengers.”

“We’ll make it. We have a secret weapon.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Check out the folks in front of us; if we can’t race past a bunch of them, we’re doing something wrong.”

A middle-aged man glances over his shoulder at Owen, an irritated expression on his face.

Rachel gestures toward the man, “Indoor voice, Owen.”

Winding to the front of the security checkpoint, the honeymooners shift carry-on bags to their right sides to position left forearms beneath the scanner under the watchful stare of the stone-faced robot. He cross-checks them on his display and sends them through with a dismissive wave.

Owen can’t resist an impertinent snipe, “You know the Starbucks is open back there; perhaps a little caffeine will help you speed things along. It works every time, even for a humanoid.”

The cold return stare freaks Owen out, “Bad idea.”

Leaving Mr. Personality in their wake, the Haigs race down a long concourse, cutting past the slow family and several other passenger clusters in no apparent rush to wedge into the standing room only shuttle up ahead. Owen and Rachel reach the open portal and vault side-by-side through the people mover’s glass doors before they slide airtight with a whoosh of air. Forward momentum pushes the couple into fellow passengers jockeying for position inside the 10-wheeled behemoth as it lurches toward Launchpad B.

Owen emits a relieved sigh, grateful they were not among those awaiting the next people mover in the uncomfortable makeshift waiting area at the terminus of the long concourse, enduring Rachel’s, “I told you so.” on an endless loop.

The transport lumbers around a curve in the deep-trodden tracks. Rachel’s stance widens, maintaining balance while sensing male and female passengers’ sideways glances in her direction. Grabbing the nearest unused handhold dangling from the ceiling, she shakes an unruly blond lock from her face and glares at a smiling Owen, “You had better lose the shit-eating grin, my friend. You swore I would not regret

agreeing to your outer space adventure. So far, I am not impressed. We could be sipping daiquiris by the pool at the Bellagio right now. Margo made them just the way I like them, full of alcohol.”

“Funny, Rachel. In my defense, I showed you the rendering of the high-speed monorail in the brochure. It’s going to replace this bumpy ride out to the launchpads. It will be the ultimate experience. Since this facility is still under construction, we have to make do. Next time we can stop at Maria’s Cantina and have a margarita. How about that?”

“The next time? Let’s get through this time, first.”

A deep voice resonates inside the people mover, *“Greetings, space tourism pioneers! Welcome once again to the Buzz Aldrin International Spaceport. We are at about the halfway point on the short ride out to LaunchPad B. The passenger area is crowded, please try to make room for everybody. Sorry for the inconvenience. If you can see outside the windows on the left side of the transport, you’ll note pillars and track under construction for the monorail scheduled for completion by mid-2045. The International Outer Space Consortium is working hard to make your trip into space a safe, comfortable, and memorable experience for all. Enjoy the ride.”*

Angling his view between two bobbing heads silhouetted by the bright sunshine out the tinted windows, the avid photographer zooms onto the most technologically advanced engineering project to hit the Nevada desert since the Hoover Dam. The massive pillars and mesh of interlocking rebar and thin steel beams connecting at the tops of the even-spaced structures jutting out of the scrub and brush, surrounded by cranes, earthmovers, drones, and workers, toiling in the heat to realize the Consortium’s aggressive timeline is an impressive sight. For Owen, that is.

In place of the monorail, the enormous people mover gouges a deepening track in the desert hardpan transporting space tourists from the centralized air-conditioned comfort of the terminal across 20 miles of open desert to the awe-inspiring launchpads. On other days, these same

transports trundle through the desert to ferry wobbly-knee astronaut arrivals back to the terminal. Though operational, the International Outer Space Consortium's Nevada hub lagged behind other locations, such as the Toulouse, France hub. The destination for all of the travelers crowded inside the people mover like a can of sardines.

Owen twists the grasp on his handhold, peering outside to get his first look at the ship resting atop sixteen stories of trestles, girders, and beams as it comes into view over a ridge. The ride gains speed, descending into the deep valley toward their launchpad, one of three situated in the desert, each approximately 20 miles equidistant from the centrally-located terminal.

Rachel cannot help but smile at the excited look on her husband's face.

Despite an advertising blitz for the ages, the growing fleet of black triangular spacecraft prompts breathless reports of UFO sightings too numerous to bother counting anymore. The majestic ship sits atop the launchpad superstructure teeming with preflight activity. After a few more bumpy minutes, the people mover reaches a turnaround, jerks to a halt, and reverses into a receiving alcove below a video wall animating Welcome to LaunchPad B in multiple languages. A hexagonal tube telescopes from the terminal structure and attaches to the rear of the dusty transport. A melodious chime and blinking lights indicate it is time to disembark.

The deep disembodied voice repeats: *"Enjoy the ride."*

Standing in front of what is now the exit, the double doors they vaulted through earlier swoosh open, and the couple hefts their bags and hastens to depart with a stampede of eager passengers on their heels. Entering the launchpad receiving area, they follow a marked path allowing fellow travelers to bustle past. Owen ignores a cloned welcome bot, navigating an iron forest of beams, trestles, pipes, and ductwork with an eye out for the nearest lavatory facility, "Lingering inside the ground level of this massive superstructure is obviously discouraged.

Not a restroom in sight.”

“You are going to have to wait. I’m fine, by the way.”

Ignoring his bladder, Owen guides Rachel toward banks of elevators and the promise of facilities somewhere beyond. A perky female humanoid blocks their path, asking to touch Rachel’s forearm. Owen huffs an impatient sigh, and Rachel suppresses a smile, realizing this lovely bot is delaying his much-needed trip to the loo. “Of course. Here you are. Which way do we need to go?”

“*Welcome aboard, Mr. and Mrs. Haig.*” Twirling with a stiff-arm, mannequin-like pose, she motions toward the bank of elevators farthest to the left.

“You are enjoying this a little too much.”

“Why, Owen Haig, whatever do you mean?”

The jolt of the high-speed elevator ride compounds Rachel’s motion sickness started on the drive from Vegas and magnified by the cramped trip aboard the people mover. The doors glide open, and she steps onto the spaceship’s crowded promenade deck. In both directions along the curved concourse, passengers move toward assigned seating areas farther within the ship’s midsection through portals emblazoned with large backlit numbers. Rachel scans the illuminated signage in both directions as far as she can see. They were nowhere near their section—stupid robot.

Waiting for Owen to do his business, Rachel breathes the filtered air and takes in the reserved vibe inside the ship, reminiscent of pre-game jitters inside a tense locker room at one of her father’s arenas. Her first impressions of the featureless interior are: dull, drab, and unappealing, in that order. The smooth, seamless surfaces appear formed from one giant mold from floor to ceiling, lacking any human aesthetic whatsoever. The only visual stimulation comes from muted blue and green lighting. Her inner cynic postulates the cool-toned palette emanated from an overpaid interior design firm’s mission to calm jangled nerves. Armchair psychology would not work in her case.

More than a little anxious, she considers abandoning her new husband right on the promenade deck before he can exit the restroom.

Instead, Rachel joins a group of fellow disoriented passengers studying a holographic seating chart, searching for the shortest routes to their assigned seats. When it's her turn, she removes her chip arm from her tasseled jacket sleeve and positions it under the scanner. A glowing line animates from **You Are Here** to Section D on the opposite side of the ship before snaking down to Seats 21 and 22 in the front row, facing inward toward the circular void constituting the middle of the triangular ship.

Her familiarity with the ship's state-of-the-art passenger layout was due to hearing Owen's verbatim recitation from his precious brochure on a loop. Friends and family members—grocery store clerks—anyone showing even a feint amount of interest got the spiel: "It's no different than a theater in the round, except the 36-foot diameter stage is the cold vacuum of space with Earth and a limitless expanse of stars the ultimate backdrop."

The punchline was left to her improvisational skills, which typically went like this: "Hamlet had better be wearing a spacesuit."

The happy thought causes her pouting lips to curve into a slight smile, which Owen, exiting the loo, attributes to her, making eye contact with him.

* * * * *

Relieved, just in the nick of time, Owen exits the restroom and, without a hint of self-awareness, double-checks his zip. Catching Rachel's smile in his direction while making new acquaintances around a holographic seat chart alleviates his concern that she is not enjoying herself. Not wanting to interfere with what she is up to, he gestures down the corridor, mouthing, "Stay there; I'll be back in a moment." He wanders off, disappearing into the crowd along the promenade deck, missing her, "What the hell?" pantomime reply.

Owen's initial reaction, admiring the ship's relaxing interior ambiance: the blue and green lighting calms jangled nerves—a brilliant choice—and no doubt, money well spent.

Parting a quartet of Asians in blithe conversation, he discovers a paper-thin widescreen display featuring an interactive timeline of space tourism languishing in a forgotten corner. Glancing around, Owen shrugs, a little disappointed but not too surprised by the general apathy toward anything with a whiff of educational content.

Since his homeschooled youth, Owen read every placard or display he happened across, a post-engagement quirk Rachel discovered on an interminable day trip to a natural history museum. In keeping with his reputation, he peruses the touchscreen's interactive navigation while tuning out the commotion behind his wide-legged stance. He selects **Annotated History of Space Exploration** with a firm tap, and a series of conspiracy-fueled Atomic Age newspaper headlines morph across the screen, including the Roswell incident. A smirk crosses Owen's dimpled face while adding his own commentary: "One of the worst kept secrets in modern history."

On borrowed time, Owen fast-forwards from Project Mercury through the space shuttle and the ISS to astronaut, scientist, engineer profiles, the Space Force, and NASA's Artemis Program. As planned, the public and private venture did indeed return humankind to the Moon in 2024. And again, numerous more times after that, culminating in a permanent base under Chinese auspices. The scheduled mission to Mars in 2030 was shelved when the revelation of a game-changing mode of propulsion was teased. Owen slows his scroll on February 2, 2034, studying a hi-resolution wide-angle image of a v-shaped craft hovering 20-feet above the desert floor. A 3-row shoulder-to-shoulder assemblage of 53 world leaders with President Christopher Pratt beaming from the middle of the front row stands in its angular shadow. The politicians are flanked on both sides by an international gathering of white-coated scientists and engineers. Owen zooms in on an older man in an

undertaker-style black suit, barely making the crop on the left edge of the image. He notices a cactus-shaped bolo tie gleaming at the man's starched white shirt collar and the jaunty grin on his distinguished face. "One of these things is not like the others."

The caption below the historic image describes the paradigm shift unveiling of the first anti-gravity propulsion craft before an impressive gathering of leaders and a thunderstruck human populace. However, the floating ship—as remarkable as it was—paled next to the real story of the day: disclosure of how, when, and where a clandestine cadre of engineers and scientists came to possess the advanced alien technology in the first place. The levitating craft represented the culmination of decades of top-secret work accomplished under strange and mysterious circumstances by multiple generations of individuals from science, industry, and the military, not to mention a select few advisors from more exotic locales.

At the bottom of the graphical composition, his eyes scan across a pull quote from Pope John Paul III:

“After decades of secrecy, I pray the revelation we are indeed not alone in the universe will compel all of God’s creation to live in peace and harmony.”

“Nice try.”

The historical event did portend a cascade of consequences for humanity. Owen breezes through the highlights. Some good. Some not so good.

The conspiracy theory crowd was not to be denied in their fanatic attempts to see little green men. On a low simmer since the days of Project Blue Book and sci-fi shows like the *X-Files*, the UFO subculture ethos boiled over after Disclosure Day in 2034. A new **I KNEW IT** movement went through the stratosphere. The arid southwestern desert around Area 51 became ground zero for every attention-seeking freak and lunatic from the world over.

Unfortunately for the vloggers and documentarians, ET selfies were not forthcoming any time soon. And even for a world marinating in science fiction since H.G. Wells, anti-gravity failed to hold the widespread interest post its initial shock value. After all, staged technology announcements were so commonplace by the late twenties, Apple eschewed them altogether. Their first female CEO broke it down ably enough at the time: “Just put it out there, and people will buy it. That simple.” Furthering her point, the levitating black triangle ceremony was hardly the first time a new invention was made possible with backward-engineered technology. She should know.

Savvy observers who devoted entire lifetimes to the subject of UFOs and related conspiracies were left dumbfounded by their governments’ sudden affinity for candor. A burgeoning group among the commentariat remained skeptical after Disclosure Day. They proposed the unnerving hypothesis that humans were being preconditioned to **WE ARE NOT ALONE** because something more portentous loomed over the horizon. But what?

In an ironic twist, the iconic photo’s exact location, marked by a well-maintained bronze plaque, is not far from where Owen now stood aboard the spaceship.

Second, the war on terror, ratcheted to an untenable level by the late 20s and early 30s, was squashed in its bloody tracks by the stunning announcement. The dogmatic and hysterical rants of authoritarian terrorist leaders were laid bare by the news humans were not alone in our crowded universe. Nevertheless, an obstinate group of deniers held sway over large clusters of malleable acolytes in dangerous hotspots worldwide.

In Owen’s estimation, the most significant aspect of Disclosure Day is what followed because it led to his current position aboard this ship. The announcement of a new agency with the all-encompassing moniker of the **International Outer Space Consortium**. The mission of this noble enterprise, to answer the question: “What’s next?” And the

less sexy yet pragmatic follow-up query: “And how do we pay for it?”

Owen’s hand accidentally grazes a button, and a litany of celebrity ruminations, starting with a 71-year-old Brad Pitt, hijacks the screen. Uninterested in celebrity ramblings on the most important date in history, he swipes left and glances over his shoulder, wondering what happened to Rachel. Returning to the screen, he selects the presentation’s final section, a non-engineer dissertation on the revolutionary, anti-gravity propulsion technology.

“Sorry. Still beyond my pay grade.”

Moving on, he sees an animated infographic illustrating how 288 passengers are launched 250 miles above Earth before orbiting a predetermined number of few times and touching down at one of five other IOSC sites around the globe.

Avoiding the celebrity tribute button, he taps another icon, opening a dramatic clip of an orbiting triangular ship with the same baritone narration. Owen’s mind wanders, trying to identify the actor behind the deep, mellifluous voice. Definitely not Mr. Pitt.

The video drones on, and Owen refocuses his attention, “... *passenger-carrying spaceship operated by the International Outer Space Consortium is an aeronautical marvel to behold. Measuring over the length of a football field on each equilateral side, the ship’s matte-black finish is made from trillions of nano-sized tiles lending its signature undulating visual effect. Comparisons range from a windblown wheat field to the shimmering surface of a lake. However they appear to your eyes, those tiny tiles are engineered to withstand the immutable physical laws imposed on a spacecraft elevating fragile humans, meaning you (laughs) into the thermosphere. Meanwhile, you and your loved ones are kept safe and comfortable inside the craft.*”

The video transitions onto a mechanical head with the left side of its handsome facial features missing, revealing a mass of wires, chips, and a gooey, pinkish substance. A human technician enters the frame of view and installs the missing half of the face. Seconds later,

the head blinks and smiles for the camera. The narrator continues, “*On your voyage into space, you will be in the capable hands of top-of-the-line, Kobayashi Corporation synthetic attendants. They are at your disposal, and unlike you and me, they are at ease in the microgravity weightlessness aboard the craft. If you need anything while in orbit, just give them a holler, and they will float over and attend to your needs. Believe me, they have seen it all. And please remember to be courteous to our manmade friends.*”

As the short movie enters its third and final act, a montage of space tourism imagery morphs across the screen. The narrator addresses the salient query from earlier: How to pay for this expensive venture into space. “... *While space tourism is a diversion enjoyed by influential movers and shakers, such as yourself, remember four to fifteen ships filled with space tourists are in orbit each day. From every walk of life, our outreach program to the young and old alike ensures citizens from every continent enjoy a sense of ownership in humanity’s mission to the stars. After all, the first astronaut to leave our solar system using this technology exists somewhere out there, even as I speak.*

From our inaugural trips into space a mere two years ago in 2042 through to the tickets you purchased for your trip, the price per seat has reduced from six figures into the high 5-digit range, subject to your tier and seat locations, of course. By taking a ride on one of our new spaceships, you contribute to humankind’s quest for knowledge, and the International Outer Space Consortium, through the purchase of your tickets, upgrades, souvenirs, and generous donations. Even with the giant leap forward provided by the backward-engineered extraterrestrial technology, without the help of space tourists like you, extraplanetary ventures to Mars, for example, would be impossible. So, thanks again for listening, and oh, by the way, enjoy the ride.”

Owen produces a rhetorical chuckle, “I didn’t realize throwing a huge wad of cash to impress a girl could appear so magnanimous.” Owen’s splurge on the equivalent of front row seats directly behind home plate indeed cost a small fortune. “She’s worth every penny.”

Rachel, ears burning, pokes him in the shoulder, “Who is worth every penny?”

“You are, but you better stop sneaking up like that, or I may change my mind.”

Rachel shakes her head, seeing her husband getting his inner nerd on reading this widescreen distraction, “I’m having flashbacks to waiting around for you at the Field Museum. If I can pull you from your 2-dimensional friend here, I found the best path to our seats. I’d like to sit down and relax with a drink before launching into orbit. Would you care to join me?”

* * * * *

The pair enter at the upper end of their wedge-shaped Section D and nod past fellow travelers down to front row seats 21 and 22. After stowing carry-ons in sealed under-seat compartments, Rachel perches on the edge of Seat 22 and looks out the floor-to-ceiling window curved around the ship’s centered, open rotunda. “I’m getting vertigo, and we have not even left the ground.”

Peering across the 36-foot circular void, she watches their opposite numbers discovering assigned seats and stowing bags. A little boy holds up a toy replica of the triangle-shaped spaceship, beaming across the vastness with an adorable smile toward Rachel. Owen notes her magnetic charm for the millionth time, watching her reciprocate a friendly wave.

The equilateral spaceship’s curved window onto the expansive centered rotunda affords every passenger an unobstructed view of the only home humanity has ever known. One minor detail Rachel failed to glean from Owen’s brochure is how the clear glass bends underneath the innermost circle of seats. The ultra-clear-polymer design broadens the perspective and heightens the sensation of being on the float. With another bite at her lower lip, she taps the heel of her Chelsea boot on the transparent floor, eliciting a dull thud in return. The dizzying straight-

down perspective reminds her of the bridge extending over the Grand Canyon—the one she adamantly refused to traverse on an earlier, Owen-inspired trip. Yet here she sits.

“Man, it is a long way down. Can you call over one of those helpful attendants? I need some liquid courage right about now.”

A short time later, after the semi-flirtatious sommelier comes and goes, Rachel opts to remain seated with her first pouch of wine while Owen ventures on an impromptu exploration of the ship. Sinking her back into seat 22, she glances left across the narrow aisle toward seats 23 and 24, occupied by an older Asian couple. Sipping from the plastic pouch, she surreptitiously watches them holding hands across their middle armrest while smiling out the window. To her right, across from Owen’s empty seat, she notices the same distinguished-looking Egyptian man in the light-tan suit hammering away at the keys on his holographic keyboard, “Geez, give it a break.”

The bald man glances her way like he could read her thoughts, nodding a curt hello, and returns to typing. Rachel contemplates whether the odd fellow recalls cutting in front of her at the counter. Watching him tap glowing translucent keys hovering above his lap, she tries to remember when physical devices became obsolete. As if in response, her earphone chimes.

“Hello gorgeous, anybody hit on you while I’m away?”

“Not yet, Owen. But I have my eye on the sommelier. She is quite a charmer.”

“That’s a new one. I’m almost finished exploring the ship. Can I get you anything before I return?”

“Another pouch of chardonnay would be nice.”

A couple minutes later, Owen plops down in his seat and hands his new bride her liquid courage. “Just like the astronauts, but don’t get drunk and pass out on me. You’ll miss the launch!”

“I can assure you, there is not enough alcohol on this entire ship to make me bombed enough to sleep through the liftoff.”

Rachel did not want to admit it, but the extended time aboard the ship quelled her uneasiness. Her active, what-if imagination relaxed, softening her notion of space flight.

Her handsome spouse is a perpetual daredevil, unafraid to try new things, especially if it involves heights. Conversely, Rachel's personality leans more along the lines of measure twice, cut once. Throughout their 2-year engagement, a theory is bandied about by nosy family members on both sides of the aisle: They will balance each other's predilections, achieve marital equilibrium, and create great-looking offspring in the process. Time will tell.

From the moment they met at another wedding, for someone she barely knew—the daughter of one of her mother's bridge club friends—the scales were tipped in Owen's direction. Rachel found herself doing crazy stuff she never thought she would do in her life. And now, here she sat, sipping wine from a plastic bag with her feet dangling at a perilous height above a threatening mass of girders, beams, wires, and ducts. She watches geysers of steam and gas venting in all directions, waiting for a controlled liftoff to take place below her well-defined bottom.

The Haig's honeymoon trip consists of hurtling into orbit from the desert two hours north of Las Vegas and performing 3-plus breathtaking circuits before touching down in Toulouse, France, seven hours later. Back on Mother Earth, they will embark upon their French honeymoon. The return journey to their brand-new Manhattan apartment will come via boring yet comfortable, first-class seats on a commercial flight out of Paris.

The couple gazes downward with anticipation and trepidation, watching massive grips at the end of articulated mechanical arms release from the ship and fold into the launchpad like a Swiss Army knife.

"It won't be long now, Rachel," Owen says in the excited, annoying, singsong tone.

"Oh boy," she mutters while sucking the last few drops of crushed grapes from the collapsed wine pouch squeezed tight in her

quivering hand.

A razor-thin woman in a no-nonsense light-gray suit strides into their section, announcing, “May I please have your attention.”

Startled by the abrasive voice coming from up and behind their front row seats, Rachel’s eyes widen onto a stern woman with black hair pulled off her prominent forehead into a severe bun framing dark bespectacled eyes, pointed nose, and thin lips.

“Who the hell is this?”

The boisterous passengers fall silent, prompting the woman’s lips to curl into a gratuitous smile, “Good. Now that I have your attention, it is time to buckle up. I will check each and every one of you to ensure your restraints are secure. If you have trouble engaging the buckled apparatus, raise a hand, and I will come by to assist.

Owen’s brow furrows onto the tangle of belts and buckles he had ignored until now. “You know, Rach, I don’t think ‘buckle up’ quite describes this rig.” Looking at his wife, already halfway buckled for well over two hours, he catches up to her, and together they complete the process. The stern inspector takes particular relish in giving Owen’s shoulder belt a solid yank.

“Well done, young man.”

As the woman moves to check the Asian couple, Owen leans toward Rachel and whispers, “I bet she moonlights at Matilda’s House of Perpetual Bondage.”

“Owen, sometimes you are too weird for words.”

A mechanical voice over the PA interrupts Owen’s snarky reply. *“All systems go for launch.”*

Sensing small tremors through their seats, followed by the ship swaying and wobbling, Rachel turns to Owen, “Are we floating off the ground already?” Owen shrugs in reply. Maybe too much chardonnay. Or not enough.

Never one to overlook life’s little ironies, Owen laughed when he discovered the Nevada hub honored Buzz Aldrin, whose missions into

space looked nothing like this: No mission control. No cumbersome tinfoil spacesuits and helmets. No squeezing into a claustrophobic capsule. No dramatic countdown. No radio blackouts. No grainy camera footage. No splashdown and rescue by an aircraft carrier group. No three days of quarantine upon return.

From its nascency in the early 20s as government-subsidized billionaire passion projects competing for rocket size bragging rights, the notion of space tourism finally came to fruition with the International Outer Space Consortium formation in 2034. A decade later, but just two short years after the first official paid public flights, IOOSC quickly became a risk-free diversion for well-heeled patrons like himself. Depending on the hub, the waitlist exceeded a year; with substantial deposits and endless streams of revenue overflowing the coffers, space exploration was full steam ahead.

Aside from pre- and post-flight physical exams, a stunner of a view out the window, and the microgravity, space tourism resembles a ho-hum trans-continental flight. With the confiscatory ticket price and passports in hand, passengers were cleared for takeoff.

The triangular IOOSC ships employ a fraction of their astronomical potential, ferrying humans into orbit and back. Engineered around three anti-gravity engines built into streamlined nacelles ball-jointed at each vertex, the omnidirectional craft can hover, accelerate, decelerate, and maneuver on a dime. The backward-engineered ships' flight characteristics would turn fragile human compositions into thick and greasy pools of corpuscular pudding at full throttle.

Early in the test flight phase, The Powers That Be sent one of the expensive ships and a synthetic crew on a Martian trajectory. The entire trip should have taken less than a week to complete at incredible speeds, but the ship vanished into the vacuum of space. The disappointing and expensive loss stymied the PTB engineers and scientists until alien advisors revealed the craft was destroyed by a lurking alien presence.

Time was running out.

Another well-kept secret is the periodic table's worth of gasses vented into the atmosphere before, during, and post-launch are due to human engineering limitations. The alien anti-gravity technology has zero effect on its environment. It merely moves things around for a bit, but they spring right back. Like a good magic trick, it's best not to know too much.

The Gordian knot of ducts and pipelines snaking around the 16-story Platform B recovering every harmful molecule would be much less obtrusive if not for the International Outer Space Consortium's resolute commitment to a green agenda. A requirement for approval in the early years, the mindset permeates every aspect of day-to-day operations like a cancerous growth too invasive to remove. With the money flowing and everything on fast forward with little to no oversight, why rock the boat?

The Consortium's ET advisors view knee-jerk impulses to modulate advancements with inconsequential environmental add-ons as ridiculous wastes of time and resources. If they could laugh, they most certainly would.

Liftoff | Launchpad B

01:00 p.m. | August 16, 2044

A rumbling sensation vibrates through hand-sewn leather seats mixed with a chorus of anxious background chatter and an unsettling noise banging in a steady rhythm throughout the ship's interior.

Rachel grabs Owen's left hand, "What the hell is that horrible noise? It sounds like we are inside a giant MRI machine."

"Funny you should say that way, Rachel. An MRI is how the sound is described in the preflight brochure I wanted you to read."

* * * * *

Beneath the spaceship, anti-gravity propulsion technology generates a warped field, obscuring the launchpad superstructure from view. Shimmering pillars of blue light pierce the desert from the three nacelles, appearing to hold the craft aloft, like a 3-legged stool. As the gleaming black triangle rises into the air, the pad wobbles and distorts back into view.

* * * * *

Travelogue videos watched by the couple with beer and popcorn prove no substitute for the sensorial onslaught of the craft coming alive around their restrained positions. A stout fellow sporting a Stetson hat, seated four rows back, shouts an elated whoop-whoop in rhythm with the escalating banging noise. Catching Rachel's pained expression, Owen surmises she would more than likely relocate the man's hat to where the sun doesn't shine if she could reach him.

The frightening din softens to a rhythmic thumping in 3/4 time as the ship lifts off the pad. As the gigantic black spacecraft shoots into the deep-blue sky, the noise blurs to an inaudible frequency. Meanwhile, Rachel's gaze fixates on the launchpad shrinking to a tiny speck in the southwestern desert below her quivering knees and Chelsea boots.

She is crushing Owen's hand.

The airship accelerates, achieving an altitude of 55,000 feet in no time flat. Suspended at the dizzying, dramatic height, passengers witness Earth's curvature while the crew executes a litany of safety checks. If a life support system malfunctioned or a propulsion engine flashed a warning signal, an emergency return to the same launchpad would be feasible. After ten dramatic minutes, ground control clears a couple minor glitches and gives the go-for-orbit command. Every living soul experiences a brief falling sensation in the pits of their stomachs before the anti-gravitational propulsion sheds Earth's pull with staggering efficiency.

"Here we go, Rachel! Next stop, outer space!"

“I hate you, Owen Haig!”

Pressed into leather seats harder than the brochures would ever admit, every passenger hangs tight to something or someone as the ship vaults to its designated orbit. As the human cargo starts breathing easier and heart rates return to semi-normal, the crew synchs to the nearest ground station far below, transmitting real-time flight data, addressing errors and anomalies, and avoiding the growing ring of space junk. Nothing for the passengers to worry about. *“Enjoy the ride.”*

After the safety checks are completed, seatbelt warning lights switch to OFF; however, many, including Rachel, remain half-belted. Faint murmurs spring forth from passengers expressing varying degrees of awe and trepidation at the fascinating cloud formations and landmasses far below. Meanwhile, attendants float to and fro, taking refreshment orders and attending to apprehensive queries. Unobtrusive janitorial bots dangling hosed vacuum devices suck unfortunate space tourist mishaps and miscellaneous loose articles out of the recycled air.

Adventurous passengers, including Owen, unshackle seconds after the green *“You are free to float about the cabin.”* lights illuminate in his section for a preplanned weightless frolic. He asks his new bride to join him, but she passes on the invitation, not wanting to embarrass herself, projectile vomiting in a room full of hovering strangers. An unfortunate soul in her section had already tossed their breakfast; it was not a pretty sight.

Owen Haig floats into the relative darkness within the ship’s interior alone, surrounded by a group of kindred daredevils, while the more reserved astronauts remain behind.

* * * * *

Flying solo after Owen’s departure, Rachel tames crazy-hair weightlessness by pulling her flowing locks into a loose-braided ponytail at the nape of her neck. As she finishes, a stylus floats past her face triggering a terrifying self-awareness. Her heart starts to race as vertigo

overwhelms her senses.

“Oh no, not now.”

Leaning forward, resting her head in her hands, Rachel closes her eyes and inhales recycled air deep into her lungs before a slow and steady exhalation from her mouth. Repeat. A self-taught tried-and-true technique to stave off panic attacks without resorting to the happy pills. Opening her eyes, she concentrates on the confusing mass of greens and blues, splotted with puffy clouds, below her feet. With a mumbled curse, she snatches the floating pen still within reach, shoving it into a Velcro pouch below her left armrest.

Noticing the reflection of her Ziggy Stardust t-shirt in the smooth curved window, a stanza from the iconic song, “*Space Oddity*,” conjures in her dizzy head, “Well, this is some tin can, and Planet Earth is most definitely blue.”

Chastising herself for the sudden panic attack, she recalls her father’s wedding speech, which deviated into a commentary on living in a time of such technological achievement. Here she is, experiencing what only a select few in previous generations could imagine doing. No more panic attacks and that would be the end of it.

* * * * *

For Owen Haig, the best part of space tourism, and what made it the ultimate thrill ride, comes after the ship settles into orbit. Attendants escort passengers, one section at a time, to an area nicknamed the Bumper Room. Dominated by a massive window facing out from one of the ship’s sides, well-heeled Earth dwellers get to play astronaut: experiencing weightlessness, performing acrobatic stunts, and in general, horsing around inside the 2-story padded chamber.

The just-as-advertised crazy hair selfies with Earth as the ultimate backdrop, plus frolicking, backflipping, and laughter, leave Owen wistful Rachel demurred when their section’s turn came. However, he was surprised she agreed to this unconventional start to

their honeymoon in the first place. Best not to push his luck. While enjoying the solo experience upside-down, staring at an unidentifiable landmass outside the large, thick-glass portal, the elderly Asian couple eclipses his view. Extending a tiny camera, beaming from ear to ear, they pantomime for Owen to take their picture.

Accepting the camera with a universally recognized smile, “Okay. No problem. Hang there for a moment while I snap a few shots.”

* * * * *

Comfortable and in complete control, ensconced in her leather-bound astronaut seat, Rachel catches the eyes of the small boy who waved earlier. He smiles at her from across the expanse and gives a thumbs-up. She is about to hand-signal a reply when bright lights burst out of the ether and dance around in the open space rotunda between them, generating surprised gasps from the seated passengers.

While excited space tourists remark on the spectacle, a static electric buzz permeates the weightlessness around Rachel. Wishing Owen could be by her side to witness this real-life space oddity happening outside the curved viewing window, “He sure has a knack for missing the important stuff.”

Rachel oohs with the rest of the seated space tourists while a prickly sensation stimulates goosebumps on her arms and legs.

The orbs glow in a spectacular array of colors and patterns, zooming, bouncing, and spiraling in a synchronized choreography reminiscent of an Esther Williams water ballet from an old MGM movie performed in the cold hard vacuum of space.

As the stunning show continues, a single orb breaks formation and floats to the curved glass opposite Rachel, pulsating on and off like Morse code. Mesmerized, she pushes from her seat to the window, pressing her right hand flat against the glass, attempting to make contact with the basketball-sized luminous sphere. A strange familial sensation fills her with a mixture of sheer joy and profound sadness. The light

speeds off, rejoining the show, and she snaps from her hypnotic state with the dreadful self-awareness she is sobbing for no apparent reason.

The show culminates with a spectacular blast of light before dissolving into the ether.

“I believe it tried to communicate with you.” The comment comes from Tan Suit, her new nickname for the Egyptian man across the aisle.

Realizing how ridiculous she looked to her fellow passengers who watched the lights and the bonus of her dramatic display, Rachel emits a self-deprecating chuckle while launching through the weightlessness, back to the relative safety of her seat, “Yeah, it sure looked like it.”

Pulling her lap belt secure around her waist, she wipes tears from her eyes and frowns at her reflection, cringing at the handprint she left on the glass.

Tan Suit returned to his typing, oblivious to any societal norm suggesting a polite reply. A man of few words, she surmises, and answers for him under her breath: “Why yes, the strange light did try to communicate with you, Madame. How odd. By the way, you look lovely, and I’m so sorry for almost knocking you over at the luggage counter.”

Finishing her chardonnay, Rachel crumples the empty plastic pouch into the waste compartment below her left armrest. She would be mortified if it floated off and scared somebody like the pen did to her earlier in the flight.

Scooching her bottom into the seat, Rachel ponders why the International Outer Space Consortium felt the need for an impromptu light show. One would assume hurtling along at over 19,000 miles per hour, sipping French wine, and dining on a gourmet meal through a straw would be entertaining enough. The modern-day consumer is never satisfied. The more advancements humanity achieves, the more jaded they become. How sad. Glancing right, she watches Tan Suit pecking at his holographic keys. The too-cute-for-their-own-good Asian

couple to her left and her husband, Mr. Adventure, had yet to return.

* * * * *

An hour later, with Owen seated for the duration, meal service begins with waves of attendants delivering food and taking drink orders. Owen and Rachel checked off their dinner choices months before, and neither could recall their picks for the 4-course meal.

“I like surprises.”

Rachel counters, “I don’t.”

A sampler of gourmet French cheeses came first, followed by warm tubes of Toulouse-style Cassoulet. The initial courses are designed for passengers’ acclimation to eating like astronauts. By the time the main course is served, the theory follows that everyone is proficient enough to keep their food from floating off in the recycled weightlessness. After the delicious tubes of pureed filet mignon, Gratin Dauphinois, and root vegetables are devoured, berry-infused ice cream is served to cleanse passenger palettes.

The newlywed couple sucks down their ice cream, watching Earth pass under their shoes a third and final time.

Owen pulls the last precious remnants of the best vanilla ice cream he has ever tasted and decides to address the elephant in the room, “Apparently, I missed quite a performance while I was off floating around like an idiot. I’m a little disappointed; a light show was not part of the scheduled flight itinerary. If you want, I can check my brochure and see if it says anything about light shows.”

Rachel suppresses an unladylike belch, “Owen, if you take out one of those damn brochures again, I will push you out an airlock myself.”

“You know it is unhealthy to keep that inside.” Handing his spent ice cream pouch to an attendant over his shoulder, he turns toward his lovely wife, noticing a tiny dab of vanilla on her upper lip’s pouty curve. Slightly aroused, he tamps down his male instincts and

continues, “I get the message. I’m a lot smarter than I appear. You know what I think you experienced? Aliens. They are up here, Rachel!” He peers outside the window, awestruck by the majestic view. “And it’s because of their advanced technology, we are up here, eating ice cream and goofing around. I know ET is still considered taboo, but they are out there buzzing around, just like always. My uncle was a Navy pilot; the stories he used to tell were better than a sci-fi movie.” Owen’s erudite explanation is meant to quell his new wife’s unease, but the perplexed expression on her pretty face informs him otherwise, so he decides to change subjects. “Guess what? My bio-whatever ticket implant stopped itching, too.”

Laughing despite her misgivings, she turns to her smiling husband, “You are one lucky guy.”

Leaning in for a soft vanilla-flavored kiss, “I know.” Staring deep into her emerald eyes, “I’m not surprised they reached out to say hello. I can’t imagine even an alien who wouldn’t want to make your acquaintance.”

* * * * *

Reentry is a fiery inverted nosedive behind the advanced protection of the craft’s deployed nanotech heat deflector shields—a miraculous feat of aerospace engineering. However, the sensation of free-falling tens of thousands of feet could not be engineered out of the human body, a fact highlighted in bold type on the contract every space tourist consents to with an e-signature John Hancock before finalizing their ticket purchase. Plummeting through the stratosphere at 55,000 feet, a graceful maneuver reorients the craft upright while the resilient tiles respond to Earth’s gravity. With passenger bottoms once more pointing toward the solid ground, the controlled descent ensues at an alarming speed.

Peering at the verdant French patchwork below his feet, Owen spies their landing pad destination, along with two others jutting above

greenish pastures off in the distance through the early-morning haze. The snake-like elevated rails of a high-speed people mover resolve into view, and he leans over to point this out to his white-knuckled wife. “Rachel, I can see the monorail.”

Staring straight ahead, Rachel blurts out, “Great, Owen. Just wonderful.” She refrains from casting her eyes downward at the dizzying view.

The ship’s flight computer and cybernetic crew execute the final approach via a smooth, decelerating, corkscrew descent and set the gigantic spaceship down pillow-soft onto the towering 16-story Landing Pad #3, situated in a serene valley out in the idyllic French countryside. Rachel confirms with a relieved sigh the comfortable fifteen-minute commute aboard the high-speed monorail to the Space Terminal Hub situated on the vast acreage of the venerable, reimagined Toulouse Space Center.

In the first few minutes after touchdown, the only sounds aboard the craft are a low crackle of murmuring voices from the control tower through the ship’s PA system intermingling with whooshes of air, beeps, whistles, and the clicking and clacking of passengers beginning the process of undoing their restraints. Other than the low background din, the passengers seem to be in a collective daze. A faint stench of vomit wafts past their noses reminding Rachel it could always be worse.

The Stetson-wearing cowboy breaks the icy silence and yells aloud an exuberant: “Woo-Wee! What a ride!” obliterating the church-like atmosphere inside Passenger Section D. Everyone begins clapping, laughing, and cheering the perfect landing.

Owen leans over to kiss and hug a relieved Rachel. “Thanks for doing this with me. It means a lot.”

Their tender moment is shattered by a dizzy passenger faceplanting on the stairs a few rows behind them. A courteous attendant assists the stricken fellow, one-handing him with inhuman strength back into his seat. Suppressing smiles, they look on while the attendant calls

for the vacuum squad, admonishing the light-headed fellow, “Careful, sir. It may take time to regain your balance.”

Rachel turns from eavesdropping on the poor man, shrugging a perfect smile, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Owen. I love you. And be careful when you stand; I don’t want you to fall flat on your ass like the poor fellow a few rows behind us. You’ll embarrass me.” About to reciprocate Owen’s affectionate kiss, she pauses to replay her paranormal experience, “I can’t put my finger on it, but something happened in orbit I can’t explain. I felt a presence invade my mind.”

“You might be overthinking your encounter of the weird kind if you don’t mind me saying so.”

The dark-blond beauty punches his arm, “You’re probably right.” Reaching under her seat, she grabs her carry-ons and heads up the stairs, sidestepping the odorous mishap toward the open double doors and the ship’s main concourse beyond.

The collective sense of relief among the departing passengers cannot be denied, giving way to jubilation. They had all done it now. They were in the astronaut club. Like a tiny yet growing subset of humanity, they broke Earth’s surly bonds and all of that nonsense.

IOSC Spaceport Terminal | Toulouse, France

05:00 a.m. | August 17, 2044

Owen pats a stone-faced attendant on the shoulder while passing through the exit, “Thanks, that was fun!”

Reentering the ship’s promenade deck, Rachel turns and catches one last glimpse toward their seats and the handprint she left on the curved glass. Trailing behind Owen, she heads to the back of a line waiting on wide elevator doors to slide open. While hefting her bags, she lets out a loud yawn to relieve pressure in her ears.

Crammed into an elevator with fellow wobbly-knee passengers

too amped for jet lag, the couple descends 16 stories to Ground Level. As the gleaming metal doors glide apart, fresh, clean air greets their senses.

“Bienvenue en France.” smiles a pleasant fellow in full IOSC uniform, gesturing toward the waiting monorail.

Following the unsolicited directions into early-morning French sunshine, Owen takes a deep breath, “This sure beats the stale air on the ship, especially after mealtime. I think I’ll leave a comment regarding the onboard odors.”

Rachel laughs, trying to get her leg muscles moving again, “You are one of those people? I didn’t know that about you.”

“What? It smelled like a bus station toilet in there.”

A vision of her mother’s persnickety sister springs into her head, “This way to the monorail, Aunt Mildred.”

“Was she the one who tried to hit on my Uncle Phil at our reception?”

The whisper-quiet tram whisking passengers between the launchpad sites and the main terminal is a revelation in comfort and elegance. Water bottles and hot hand towels are arranged on the wide armrests of each plush seat. They collapse into two of the last unoccupied spots across from each other, Rachel facing backward.

Peering at the massive platform outside their spotless window, “There’s our ship atop the launchpad. It’s hard to believe we really did it.”

Rachel nods in agreement but is in full move-on mode, anxious to get on with their trip, “Hey, Owen. Real seats. We are sitting down,” goading him into a playful spate.

“Yeah, I get it, Rachel. You hated the people mover in Nevada, and I will never live it down. Got it.”

Rachel laughs and smacks him on the knee, “Lighten up; we’re here, you dummy!”

“Exactly how many wine pouches did you have on the flight?”

They rehydrate while dabbing the warm towels here and there as the sleek transport whooshes toward the towering French neo-Gothic Main Terminal. Owen notes its stark architectural contrast to the ultra-modern, yet sterile and impersonal, steel-and-glass-edifice they left in the Nevada desert. Spires, flying buttresses, steep-pitched rooflines, and lancet windows of stained-glass framed by sheer facades of intricate stonework are impressive to behold. And gargoyles, lots of them. A sidebar in one of Owen's brochures hints at locations around the complex where the expressive statues resemble little gray aliens. Cool.

Disembarking from the monorail, Rachel snatches a water bottle and slides it into her satchel. Clones of the attendant at the launchpad usher everyone through heavy ornate doors into the terminal's echoing, cathedral-like interior. Owen gives an appreciative whistle, admiring the attention to detail the International Outer Space Consortium applied to this high-tech homage to Western Civilization's architectural past. The exquisite stained-glass and the Michelangelo-inspired murals and frescos depicting space travel and the universe on a grand scale are awe-inspiring. The incredible structure is fast becoming a focal point for the French tourism industry, rivaling the transformative yet controversial Notre Dame Cathedral. Forget space tourism; gate sales just to partake in a guided tour of the facility are a revenue boon. The Nevada site, and hubs in Sapporo, Ankara, New Delhi, and Cape Canaveral, struggle to match their success.

After a few minutes exploring the impressive building and much-needed side-trips to the male and female lounges, Owen gestures toward the signs for Ground Transportation, their waiting ride, and the remainder of their honeymoon.

However, Rachel reminds her new husband, before they can get on with their day, there's a matter delineated in the fine print on their tickets to space. Each astronaut agreed to a routine post-flight physical exam, which IOSC medical staff cross-check against their preflight health data.

“Oh shit, you are right. I forgot. Do we have to?” Following Rachel’s lovely hand toward a growing queue outside open double doors, he grimaces while watching a nurse escort Stetson, the Yee-Haw Man, across the threshold. “What a buzzkill this is going to be.”

“What’s the matter? Wasn’t this part of the trip highlighted in your brochures?”

“You are purposely trying to push my buttons, young lady.”

Stopping at the tail-end of another long line, Owen scratches his head and laughs, “I can’t help noticing we always seem to be last.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the last shall be first?”

“Oh, okay. We’re inside this cathedral to the stars, and you get all Bible on me. Is that it?”

“Sometimes, you are just too weird.” She scans past Owen to the crowded main terminal and catches a glimpse of Tan Suit excusing himself through a large tour group.

Like most aspects of the Toulouse facility, the post-flight checkup routine is a well-organized affair in contrast to the Nevada hub. Arrivals are funneled into the adjoining hall, where the exams are administered assembly line-style by teams of robotic physician assistants manning partitioned cubicles.

Rachel is detoured across the hall to another set of draped-off cubes dedicated to the fairer sex. “See you on the other side.”

“I hope this is covered by my HMO.”

Owen is greeted by a shiny-faced robot proffering a box of anti-bacterial wipes. With an overt eye-roll, he snatches a wet, smelly cloth and navigates to the first checkpoint. He endures a blood pressure check followed by a cold stethoscope respiratory check, followed by a battery of vision, hearing, and reflex tests administered with blinding penlights, say-ah tongue-depressors, and *Maxwell’s Silver Hammer* style bangs to the kneecap.

At the last cube, the put-upon astronaut named Owen Haig is screened for cognitive and physical impairment via a litany of personal

questions by a monotone attendant perched on a metal stool:

"State your name, nationality, and date of birth."

"Owen Haig. American. May 9, 2017."

"Who is president of the United States?"

"Jackson, uh, Lena Jackson."

"Are you experiencing dizziness?"

"No."

"Do you have a headache?"

"No."

"What about fatigue?"

"No."

"Do you have muscle cramps?"

"No."

"Respiratory issues?"

"No."

"Erectile dysfunction?"

"Excuse Me? I just got off the ship, for Christ's sake. And no. Hell no."

"Last question, which entree did you choose for your in-flight meal?"

"Steak, I guess. Hard to tell since it came out of a tube."

"Can I go now?"

"Yes."

Exiting the last station, Owen stops before a woman standing behind a cocktail-height counter, already double-checking his results and personal information on her handheld display. Noticing his prying gaze, she swipes the screen closed and begins to speak, "Are you ... ?"

"Stop right there, lady. I feel fine. My wife feels fine. Just pass us the forms promising not to sue the International Outer Space Consortium, and we can get on our way."

The dark-skinned woman gives Owen a brown-eyed frown, adjusting the jet-black bun atop her head. Leaning across the metal counter, a gold cross dangles over a stethoscope draped from the open

collar of her lemon-yellow blouse under her white lab coat, “Sir, I’m not sure what you are implying, but just between you and me, I am as human as you are. I would appreciate it if you would treat me with a little more respect. After all, we need to make sure even an impressive physical specimen, such as yourself, doesn’t leave our facility and suffer a brain hemorrhage in the parking structure. It would be bad for our business. Plus, someone would have to clean the mess you leave behind.”

Chagrined, he complies with the remainder of the questions and receives a clean bill of health. The last item on the medical list is a prick on his forearm from a handheld appliance administered by the smiling woman.

“Hey, take it easy! Is the chip removal supposed to hurt?”

“Just for you,” glancing down at the display with a surreptitious smile, “uh, Mr. Haig.” She presents a clear pouch containing Owen’s chip updated with the new health screening data. “You may want to pin this to your shirt, so you won’t lose it. You will need it to retrieve your luggage.”

“Thanks a lot, Nurse Ratched. If that is your real name.”

“My pleasure. Maybe we’ll cross paths again someday.”

Owen accepts the baggie, deposits it into his carry-on, and turns to search the crowd for his wife. After a few minutes, shuffling from foot to foot, he spies Rachel smiling back toward somebody while exiting the last cube at the opposite end of the health screening area.

“Boy Owen, you certainly do have a way with people, don’t you?”

Owen ignores her snarky observation, “Well, that took forever. We might as well head to the Medieval Times Food Court. I’m starving. It’s a long ride to Le Tholonet.”

“Hey, big guy, get over it! We’re in France. I could go for an authentic French croissant and some strong coffee right about now.” Glancing at a wall clock, “Wait a minute. What about our driver?”

“Our guy will just have to cool his jets until we get there.

I'm tired of being ordered around by a bunch of robots."

* * * * *

The pair breakfast at a café table next to a gurgling fountain filled teeming with koi fish. Mid-morning sunlight dapples the bright and cheery interior space, filtered through an ornate glass dome above the food court atrium. Owen finishes his omelet and spreads local-sourced blackberry jam on his last slice of fresh-baked sourdough. Tearing a corner of the crust and tossing it onto the tiled floor behind Rachel's seat instigates a riotous scrum of screechy black-feathered birds battling over the crumbly morsel.

"Knock it off! You are attracting the little beggars all around my feet." Distracted by the chirping melee, she spills coffee on the tabletop while spooning it into the French press. "I would drink less coffee every day if I had to complete this science experiment for every cup."

A solitary feathered creature hops onto the table and bobs its little head from side to side looking at Rachel.

"The little guy is eyeballing you. Even birds are enthralled by your beauty."

"Yep. I'm a veritable Snow White."

"Not exactly."

"Watch it, Owen."

While finishing their repast, Rachel catches the eye of Tan Suit speaking to someone on his earphone, lingering near the hostess stand, "We should head over to the luggage pick-up and meet our driver out at the Ground Transportation."

Owen washes down his last bite with a sip of tea and dabs at his mouth. Summoning his best Inspector Clouseau-inspired French accent, "Absolutely mademoiselle, let us be on our way."

"Knock it off."

"Okay. Sorry."

* * * * *

The luggage area bustled with disoriented travelers, helpful robots, and vigilant French security. The efficient IOSC luggage pick-up system has the couple at the counter presenting see-through chip baggies to the metal-skinned attendant within minutes.

Rachel notes this vintage humanoid robot has none of the warmth and charm of newer models, but he scans the chips through the clear plastic and presses a button on his display. Thirty seconds later, heavy luggage earmarked for the Haig family autonomously wheels through an opening in the wall and brakes in front of the counter.

Owen is amazed. “How did you get the suitcases to roll on their own? I tried for weeks and could not figure it out. I feared our bags would venture off behind a stranger when we weren’t paying attention.”

The silver-skinned bot replies with a glassy-eye stare, “I synced the bar codes on your luggage to your chips. It is much easier than pulling them yourselves, sir.”

“Yeah, I guess that would be true if you can figure out how it works. Thanks.”

With a tap near the handles, the suitcases follow the couple out to the pick-up curb like well-trained pets.

Owen glances at Rachel with a sheepish smile, expecting a “See? I told you so.” to cross her lips.

“What? I didn’t say anything. I could not figure it out, either. And we both know I am the smart one.”

“Not fair, Rachel. You can’t be the good-looking one and the smart one. What’s left for me?”

“Goofy sidekick?”

Laughing at their private joke, the pair quicken their pace, eager to get on with the next part of their trip: a luxurious 2-week stay at a historic chateau in the picturesque Provence countryside. The lodging comes complete with an attentive staff to assist with sundry details like fiddling with a French press.

The jet-setting honeymooners fail to notice the small orb of light mirroring their path through the Arrival Terminal and outside to

a cacophony of honking cabs and buses jockeying for curbside spots along the Pickup Zone. For an inexplicable, only in France reason, Ground Transportation is situated atop the gargantuan 5-story parking structure where Louie, their robotic driver, fumes at the tardiness of his prepaid fare.

Niyo | IOSC Ground Transportation Pickup Zone

12:00 p.m. | August 17, 2044

A pill-shaped vessel cloaked against the clear blue French sky hovers 500 feet above the parking garage rooftop. Ensnared inside the stealth ship, an ET freelance operative hired by The Powers That Be maintains a vigilant watch on the chaotic proceedings down below. Codenamed Niyo, he awaits the Alexander female's exit from the IOSC terminal. Sifting through throngs of humans heading toward an array of vehicular transports, the child-size Gray scratches his smooth head and levers back his seat in the cramped cockpit, "Where is she?"

From the moment the veteran tracker initiated high-altitude surveillance over Rachel Alexander Haig's Las Vegas hotel, his sixth sense was on overdrive. Upon witnessing the Light Specters' orbital spectacle, his intuition was affirmed. While Niyo understood the vaunted pure-energy masters of the universe indeed revealed their radiant presence to a host of lower life forms, their latest grandiose light show had to be for the benefit of none other than Rachel Alexander Haig. Niyo pressed his employer with a renewed sense of urgency: "The presence of Light Specters has transformed my routine surveillance into a consequential intel-gathering mission with potential Earth-shattering implications. I request to continue monitoring the Alexander girl's movements in France. Something else is about to happen. I know it."

Niyo's PTB handler responded with a curt one-word reply: "*Denied.*" Spying on a young couple's honeymoon crossed an ethical line, even for an extra-governmental organization like the PTB.

Hailing from an ancient Gray race, the operative was aware the Light Specters' ultimate vision for humanity hinged on the recovery of a gold artifact missing for over a century. "Damn those skeptical PTB bureaucrats, time is running out for the good people of Earth."

The Powers That Be circumspection and demand for indisputable evidence stemmed from 100 years of dead-ends and heart-stopping false alarms. Moreover, surveillance of generations of Alexanders had produced nothing. A growing chorus of PTB insiders lobbied for an end to trailing Alexanders every time one of them left the house. The freelancer's report of foo fighters floating around an IOSC craft while an Alexander happened to be aboard was the latest in a long line of coincidences, nothing more.

Knowing in his walnut-sized gray heart muscle that he was right but needing tangible proof of the Light Specters' transcendent intentions for the girl, the alien operative peers downward through a magnifying eyepiece and spies his mark. "There she is!" Painting the target, Rachel, with photon pellet trackers, just in case, he watches the blond-headed young woman and her spouse stride on a beeline toward an animated robot chauffeur. Smiling at the driver's consternated body language, gesturing the pair inside the back of his green vehicle, the ET wonders if the robot can squeeze all the couple's luggage into the narrow cargo space, "At least this should prove entertaining."

From his high perch spectating on the driver's struggles, Niyo's black oval eyes widen onto a bright white orb manifesting out of the ether. A halted breath later, the baseball-sized sphere passes through the robot's shiny skin and disappears.

Checking his screen, he watches a zoomed replay in slow-motion and indeed sees a ball of light enter the robot's cybernetic head.

Seconds after beaming the zoomed movie file to the PTB Scottish nerve center, Niyo receives new orders: "*Clearance granted to proceed with high altitude surveillance into France, but do not attempt to land or make contact with the human.*"

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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 Golden Ellipse* is the first full-length novel in his new **The Powers That Be Trilogy**. Its sci-fi action-adventure roots harken back to the alien and conspiracy theory themes in his original comic strip inspiration. The second and third books are in development and scheduled for release starting in 2022.

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