

ALIENATION

SERIES



SUNRISE
WITH
POTUS



VOLUME 3
RYAN GRAY

Sunrise with POTUS

by Ryan Gray

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PROLOGUE

Her slight frame was revealed by the wind pressing several layers of clothing against her hips and legs. She had paused for a moment and stared up the grey cement steps towards a nondescript light blue building. The office had very little descriptors, other than the suite number, and a white lettered sign against the transparent glass which read: "Family Planning."

Ayan sighed heavily. She straightened the rosewood hijab outlining her face before continuing her long, lonely walk. With every step she ran through her decision process in her head again, looking for a way out of this mess.

She and Jonathon had met after being paired up in 11th-grade computer labs. It was the first time she had spent any time with a boy who was not Muslim, nor Samoli for that matter. He was a thin white boy with glasses, kind blue eyes, blonde hair, and a very gentle smile. After their first homework meeting together, she was smitten. Six months later, they were together. Much to Ayan's surprise, even her parents seemed to like the young man. But this would be another matter, wouldn't it? At sixteen, with her entire life ahead of her, and her family's honor to think of, a baby would ruin everything. She would have to stay home, out of sight, until the child came. She probably would never finish high-school, and be forced to marry the first Muslim man that might be willing.

"Excuse me, Miss, you dropped this"

Ayan turned around to see a 30 something, handsome woman sporting a grey fedora, a black trench coat covering a charcoal grey suit. She held out her hand with a cell phone. To Ayan's surprise, it looked to be hers. She doubted many others would be in the area with a purple iPhone 7 decorated with glitter and unicorns. Curious, she had not heard it bounce off the cement
"How'd that get out...Thank you."

Ayan took three steps back towards the woman and reached her hand to retrieve the misplaced phone. As the younger lady took hold of her phone, she felt the slightest touch from the tip of the stranger's finger. She pulled back sharply and took several defensive steps back. "Who are you?" Ayan demanded.

The stranger grinned with a slight knowing twinkle in her eye, then leaned back on platform boot heels. When she spoke, her voice was of a smooth low alto, the likes of which belonged on stage, "I'll answer that if you tell me what you just felt."

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"I, uh, don't really know." Ayan shared her thoughts as they popped into her mind, something she never did. She had always been taught to guard her words carefully, but for some unknown reason, she felt compelled and excited to open her mind to this random stranger. She laid a gentle hand on her stomach, "I felt a jump, in my stomach."

"That's your baby saying 'Hi.'" The smile on the stranger's face grew in warmth, and the twinkle in her eye intensified.

"But, how is that possible, I'm only eight weeks?"

The stranger continued but ignored the question. "Your baby has a purpose beyond anything you can imagine. The choice you make right now will determine the direction of the entire world."

"Who are you!" Ayan again demanded.

The smile disappeared and an intensity grew in the woman's eyes, for just a split second, the little high-school girl thought she spied a flash of flames in the center of the stranger's corneas. "I'm only a messenger and mean little. The real question you should be asking is, whose messages do I carry?"

"Whose?"

The messenger grinned, "I think you know."

Heat built in the young lady's face and hot tears streamed down her cheeks, "But I am of lthm, such shameful sin!" She turned her back to the stranger with shame and frustration.

The strange lady in the fedora placed a gentle hand on her left shoulder and spoke softly into her ear. "Yes, you made a mistake, but this too can be turned into something miraculous. Your choice is to accept forgiveness, and love that baby, or hide in your shame and make matters worse."

"How...how do I do that?"

The stranger took her hand off Ayan's shoulder and stood straight. "It won't be easy, but no matter what, you will never be alone."

Ayan heaved one last heavy sob, and turned back to the stranger, "Who are you?"

But there was no one there. Ayan turned every which way and she could see at least 150 feet in every direction, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Miss Ayan? We are ready for you now."

A middle-aged woman in blue scrubs and a clipboard in her arm spoke, propped open the front door to the clinic with her foot, and waved the highschool girl over.

ZERO HOUR

The old wooden beams moaned under the weight of moving drywall; another explosion rocked the side of the massive two-hundred-year-old mansion. With the power gone, the emergency lighting was just bright enough to keep evacuees on track for escape. Most had remained calm enough to make it to the exits, however, some of us felt it was too soon for surrender.

Another explosion shook the ground from under my feet. Helplessly, I tumbled straight back. My skull took the brunt of the fall, bouncing hard off the carpeted hardwood flooring. Stars flashed in and out of my vision for a few seconds, but I managed to fight back to my feet just in time to feel a giant meat hook-like hand lift me onto my feet. “No time for napping, Captain” a sarcastic voice chided.

It was ‘agent muscles’, who I had met only a few hours earlier. He dragged me down the hall eleven steps, then stuffed a Sig Suer P228 9mm pistol into my hands. As the hallway turned left, the big man stopped short, pinned me up against the wall with one arm, and peeked around the corner. “Clear.” He declared, then went to work by lifting a P90 machine gun from under his coat and checking its magazine, then he laid down a black remington 870, 12 gauge shotgun on the floor next to us with a large satchel of ammunition. The huge agent exhaled and looked me over. “They’ve breached Castle, uniformed officers and agents are overrun. With everything blown or fried, there’s no safe passage to the bunker. It’s up to us, we hold for the Marines.” He leaned into my face, “We are all that stands between the enemy and the President!”

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THREE HOURS EARLIER:

I scrambled through festive throngs, dodging, ducking, and even pushing a few folks aside to make it through the crowded halls of the White House. Decorators, junior staff, uniformed officers, and more than a few secret service agents were helping to place the finishing touches on what promised to be an incredible holiday bash. I slammed into a mountain of a man. He looked almost cartoon-like, a gorilla of a gent, the butt of his sidearm sticking out of the right side of his suit coat, a submachine gun dangling under his left arm, ironically the terrifying bodyguard was attempting to gingerly pin stringed popcorn to the wall.

When I first stepped foot in the old government mansion, my protocol orientation was concluded by the chief usher. He relayed the unofficial golden rule for all personnel working at the president's residence, 'The president may run the country, but the first lady runs the white house.'

"Watch it kid!" the massive grey-haired secret serviceman barked at me; he was obviously annoyed with his current job, but couldn't take it out on the first lady or her staff, so if I were not careful he would take my head instead."

"Sorry, Sir, but I have urgent info for POTUS." I lifted my ID badge up so the agent could observe it without unloading his decorations.

"Copy that." The agent growled and cocked his head down the hall, then awkwardly tapped his earpiece with the decorations still in hand, "One junior, coming in, claims to have urgent info for POTUS."

I overheard the patronizing label, *junior*, but did not care. I continued my rushed journey down the hall, file in hand. My biggest dreams and worst fears had just been confirmed and on Christmas Day! My position was as a junior officer with the office of the Strategic Planetary Defense Task Force (SPDTF). That mouthful of bureaucracy took constant explaining to anyone with clearance and who cared. Since very few had the necessary clearance and desire, I usually didn't have much practice in explaining who I was and why I reported to the basement of the White House every day.

As I ran down the corridor towards the oval office, endorphins fired up the neurons to my brain exciting me almost beyond all military training. I wanted to scream at every person I blew past, alerting them of the potential danger, or possibly, an exciting breakthrough. My face strained to maintain its professional

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calm. I knew this significance. I knew this was incredible news or horrific news. Either way, I had to alert the president.

A well built, serious-faced African American gent, suddenly appeared in my path. “Who are you?” He demanded. He was one of the president’s lead agents, and he met me at the first of three receptionist desks. If I were to guess, I would have said this pile of muscle was once an all American linebacker for an SEC college football team. The dude was thicker than I was tall. He was flanked by a woman, also an agent. A handsome auburn haired woman, with a tight ponytail, thick neck, and a no-nonsense glare. She was also taller and thicker than I, most definitely ex-military, possibly a Marine. Since I stood at only 5’5” and weighed a buck 45, these two could easily play hackee-sac with my corpse.

After I came to a complete and total stop, I composed myself enough to respond. “Captain JT Cameron, Office of Planetary Defense. I have a probable threat to report.”

The thick agent rolled his eyes, “The alien department, down in the dungeon?”

“Yes, sir, we monitor and track any possible threats from space and or other dimensions. And just cause we are in the dungeon doesn’t mean we still don’t have a job to do.” My team and I did get a little defensive about being tucked away in the section of departments unofficially deemed: *Just in case we need you, you can stay, but let’s pretend you don’t exist.*

“And!?” The female agent prodded me along.

“And we have a major contact,” I checked my watch, “As of 22 minutes ago.”

“Show me.” She commanded.

“With all due respect, agent...”

“Barret”

“With all due respect agent Barrett, this is to be seen by a senior staff member, immediately.” My eyes were wild with urgency.

“Yes, and this is meant to be presented by a senior department head, Captain.” Barret’s retort put me on my heels with sharp words and a glare that reminded me that she needed very little excuse to put me in handcuffs or the hospital. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the agent exhaled then threw me a bone. “Listen, all senior staff are out, the president gave strict instructions not to be disturbed, so if this might be a real threat, then we need to be convinced first, and right now!”

My mind was racing in so many directions, that her simple statement took a few moments to make sense. I snapped into action after I processed what the

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agent was saying, “Oh, yeah..here.”

I laid two large printed black and white photos out on an adjacent table.

“What are we looking at?” The giant football-playing agent asked.

“Here, see these, white dots?”

“Yeah, we see ‘em,” agent barret replied.

“These are Aerial Phenomena, only a million miles on the other side of our moon.”

“So what? They could be comets or glitches.”

“No, the program we have been using and testing for the past three years would detect that, plus I double-checked the results, this is almost 100% verified. I’d say at least a 97% probability that this is contact.”

After staring at the photo for a good ten seconds, Barret asked, “So what makes you think this is a threat?”

I turned to the other printed black and white image. “Because of this.” I pointed at it.

Both agents studied the print for a second, “But I don’t see anything!” Barrett said.

“Exactly,” My eyes almost bulged out of my skull, “This is the same image from 30 min earlier. The phenomenon seemed to appear out of thin air! They could be within our atmosphere within the hour!”

Barret and the other agent looked at one another for a second, nodded their heads in agreement, and as if someone had shifted them both into another gear, they flew into action. The linebacker grabbed my wrist and yanked me towards the oval office, following closely behind me I could hear Barret barking orders into her sleeve, which I surmised was her microphone. “This is Barrent, authentication code: Gamma-Beta-8-5-0-3-Charlie. Sunrise, again I repeat, Sunrise! Additional instructions: possible hostile air and land invasion, imminent.”

Within seconds, I was swept into the oval office in a sea of secret service agents and uniformed officers. A mere 20 seconds later, staff members and military personnel, mostly generals and admirals flooded in. I saw from the lack of coat and tie that the president was even more taken off guard than I was. Almost thirty individuals had suddenly invaded the rare tranquility the leader of the free world enjoyed while he prepped for his favorite party of the year.

“Whoa down, everyone, whoa down?” while still pinching a bow tie between his right index and middle fingers, POTUS motioned for everyone to slow it down.

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“Now, which international crisis threatens to impede on the first lady’s festivities. I warn you...unless it’s an alien invasion, she won’t back down and I’ll be forced to concede to her.” The president’s joke threatened to pop me right out of my skin. I glanced at Barrett, but she shook her head, no, so I waited.

The president’s lame diplomatic humor was genuine; diplomacy and negotiation is what POTUS loved. The country sensed this genuine spirit about him, so most liked him. However, this time, no one laughed. “Come on people, that was funny” The president spoke to his desk phone, “Jim, Susan, what’s this about.” The telephone speaker squawked with the voices of the chief of staff and secretary of state speaking over one another. They made excuses as to why the other should know, with no explanation of their own. “Oh, enough!” The Chief silenced them. “So, then, who?”

Now, I knew it was my turn, but apparently, my legs and tongue had not received the memo. They froze. I felt my insides twist and turn nauseated and something in my lower back ached a little. A sudden devastating thought overwhelmed me. *What if I was wrong, and this was a computer malfunction? Oh Crap! Oh Crap! Oh Crap!*

Barret finally broke the stalemate between my mind and body. She put a strong hand on my back and pushed me to the front until I was three feet from Old Resolute, the famous desk of the president. “Sir,” I snapped to attention.

“Barret, who is this, and what’s going on.”

“Sir, I called for Sunrise, this captain has something you need to see now.”

POTUS looked me over, then flipped his hand at me, “Stop saluting, we don’t have time for that, besides, it’s Christmas!”

I handed him the file.

A female staffer, scribbling notes off to the side interjected, “Sir, Christmas could alienate certain members...”

The president put on reading glasses and peered over, the photos, “Coleen, quiet, please...I’m Catholic so if I wanna...” his voice trailed off. Without looking up, the president asked, “Son, are you with the Planetary Defense, down in the dungeon?”

“Yes sir.”

“Where’s Chris Jenkins?”

“Sir, the Colonel is back in Delaware with his family.”

“Recommendations, son?” The president leaned back and eyed me up and

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down.

I swallowed hard, then replied as best as I could. My answer flew out of my mouth as if I shouted the answer, but mixed with some embarrassing raspy blockage in my throat. “I recommend a confirmation with NASA and a full military alert. I will call my lieutenant for the latest pictures from the NSA satellite that took these photographs, and we can also reach out to the Russians, Indians, and Chinese for confirmations and further data.”

Speculative whispers immediately erupted around the room. Within seconds they became so loud, the president was forced to shut them down himself. “People, quiet! Now, it seems we have a situation. Some unidentified objects have appeared near our moon,”

This time a collective gasp, or sneer of disbelief flowed its way through the room. Like a gathering wave, the exciting statements and whispered speculations from so many in such a small space were almost deafening.

The president stood and slammed a fist into his desk, “Agent Barret”

“Sir,” the agent stood to attention.

“Please draw your weapon”

“Yes sir.” She complied with the request.

“Now, knee cap the next man or woman that does not shut up, and listen... is that clear, agent Barrett?” The agent turned on the crowded room, loaded her weapon, kept it aimed at the floor, yet began eyeing individuals’ knee caps with a coy smile.

“Jill, get NASA on the line, and confirm these NSA reports, now!” He turned to the phone still on ‘speaker,’ “Jim, Susan, if you’re not on your way here by now, you’re fired!”

“Ten minutes,” The Secretary of State responded

Not to be outdone, the Chief of Staff retorted. “Seven Minutes,”

The phone went dead, “I want the conference room turned into a war room, now! Also, I need three volunteers to reach out to China, India, and Russia, Oh and another to advise England and Israel, Canada, etc...”

I began melting into the background, but the giant linebacker/agent caught me and dragged me back to the front of the class. “What do you want to do with this one, sir?”

The President sat back, “What’s your training son, how’d you get here? Oh, and be quick!”

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“Umm, flew an F-35 after graduating from the Academy, after I was discharged, I completed my Ph.D. from MIT. I was recruited by the NSA for liaison work between military and NASA assets for planetary defense protocols.”

“Why did they recruit you?” The president popped some gum into his mouth. As an ex-smoker, this was a compulsion more than a choice.

“My Ph.D. was in astrophysics and dissertation on the scientific evidence associated with the aerial phenomenon and its likelihood of making contact from another dimension or another planet.”

“Why?”

“Why, what sir?”

“Why’d you choose such a risky subject for your thesis?”

“Umm...” the president grunted and rolled his eyes at my hesitation, so I blurted out, “I saw one, sir.”

“Saw one what? An alien?”

“No, sir, an Aerial Phenomenon.”

“Huh, excuse me? A what?” agent muscles butted in.

“That’s what the Air Force calls UFOs.”

“I thought they called them Santa Clause?”

“That’s NASA, officially they are referred to as Aerial Phenomenon.” The president turned back to me. “What did you think of our little green visitors?”

“You knew about them?”

“Of course, son.” The President groaned as he turned his chair just enough to stare out the window as he focused on his own recollection, “My first day here in the Oval after I finished with all the official top-secret briefings, most everyone left the room, then a select few gave me the ‘unofficial briefing.’ Among a few other things, they confirmed what a lot of us have already suspected. Some...things, from somewhere, have been poking around our planet for some time. We just don’t know who they are, or why they do it.”

The president settled back into his chair, and took off his glasses, then looked me square in the eyes. “So, what did you think about ‘em?”

I wish I had time to explain my entire experience, the impossible maneuvers their ships can make, the way they seemed to suspend the laws of gravity at a moments notice and accelerate to impossible speeds within seconds, really all I could do was summarize my experience in one word, “Troubling.”

“What was your conclusion?”

“Sir?”

“In your thesis, what was your conclusion?”

I took a deep breath, “If they are from another planet, then there is a 50/50 chance they would be friendly.”

“And if they are from another dimension?”

“Superior in power, certainly dangerous, most likely hostile.”

The president grinned, “So, this is your greatest dream come true, vindication.” He paused for a moment of contemplation, “and nightmare?” The Commander in Chief drummed his fingers several times while softening the chewing gum between his back molars, deep in thought, “Mine too, Captain, mine too. Ok, let me ask you this: in your opinion, are these possible alien contacts from another planet or dimension?”

“Sir, I couldn’t begin to speculate without further data.” I stuck to the professional protocol, as I was trained to.

“Captain, I don’t have time for this, I will order James here, to break a body part if I have to.”

Agent linebacker waved and smiled. “James, by the way...Not Jim!”

“Ok,” I took a deep breath to collect my thoughts and slowly leaned onto Resolute, and spilled my guts, “These are most definitely dimensional travelers: First, any evidence we have of alien life, shows an unexplained ability to appear and disappear instantaneously, Secondly, according to witnesses, said aliens, have only acted with hostility. Spying on earth, abductions, and experimentations on unwilling human subjects. Finally,” I pointed to the photos still in front of the president, “the images show no signs of slowing down. If they come from tens of thousands of light-years away, a super-drive of some kind would have been required.”

“Like a hyperspeed or lightspeed?” agent James suggested.

“Yeah,” I begrudgingly agreed. Those concepts were fundamentally inaccurate and flawed, but good enough for a layman’s understanding. “Point is, that if it was slowing down as our satellites took images, they would have appeared as more of a long blurry white blob. These just showed up immediately, with no warning, and not nearly enough blurring.”

“So,” The linebacker, James summarized aloud, “These fellers ain’t from Trek; they’re from Doom?”

“Yes, Sir, they might actually be the mythological “demons” we have grown

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accustomed to thinking of from folklore.”

The president stood, “Son, I’m Catholic, demons have been real for my family since before I was born.” He walked around the desk and towards the growing war-room.

“Follow me” He commanded, James and I obeyed.

“James, you are now assigned to the Captain. Make sure he gets anything he needs and is safe.”

“Yes, sir!” agent James complied with the emotional excitement of an android. He said something into his cuff mic, which I assumed was to announce his new assignment.

“Captain...” The President leaned in to read my name. “Cameron, is it? Well, you will take charge of this room and everyone in it.

“But I ...” Stammering, I tried to figure a way to refuse

“Nah, Nah, I’ll be around, so just keep things flowing. First, I need confirmations, and my joint chiefs need intel, the faster the better.” He smiled for a second, which at first I thought was a vote of confidence. But it hit me, he wasn’t smiling, but grinning, like a politician on election night, unsure as to the coming result, so the only choice was a brave “happy face.” The commander in chief button had been activated and I was one of the pieces on his metaphoric chessboard. After all, in times like these, all the people of the United States wanted was a guy who could outmaneuver the other guy. We wanted someone who would win. So I was game to be his pawn.

Lost in my own thoughts, the President walked away, but agent James wasn’t so gentle, “Move!” he barked. And like that, I got to work, organizing ‘first contact’ with probable hostile intruders from another dimension.

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TWO HOURS EARLIER:

After twenty minutes of a barrage of phone calls, NASA, India, and Russia all confirmed our contacts and put their military on alert. France, England, and Israel were informed and spinning up their fast reaction military units.

“Captain, help me!” I turned to see James holding my assistant by the collar. “James, he works for me!”

The pile of muscles dropped him, “Sir, next time, tell your little assistant to identify himself before he comes storming in and to keep his badge on him!”

I helped the younger man up and dragged him to my spot in the middle of the huge boardroom table. “Hey, Mike, you can’t just run in here, man. We ain’t down in the dungeon anymore!” I sat him down, “This is the big leagues. Where’s your badge?”

Mike rubbed his neck and tried clearing his throat, “I must have left it on my desk, I can’t think straight, JT, this sh...” A cute female staffer entered the room, stealing Mike’s attention.

“Mike, focus!” I almost slapped the kid, but restrained myself, “I need that report.

Where is it?”

“Here,” Mike pulled out his phone. And starting scrolling through, “Of all the days, the printer went bust, now! Can you believe it?”

“I believe it” I sneered, “That evil piece of junk has had it out for me since I got here...doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“Here, see, they’ve started moving apart after they cleared the moon. Looks like...”

“...They’re positioning around the planet.” I completed his thought as I got lost into my own, but a terrifying idea suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

“Mike, where is the time stamp on these images? How long ago were they taken?”

The young lieutenant thought for a second, “Well, it took me about seven minutes to get up here and the images.”

“Now, Mike, now!”

“Ok, JT, Ok, um 15-20 minutes, tops!”

“Oh no,” My stomach dropped to my ankles, “Too late, they’re here, and we

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had no way of knowing it!”

I'd been on and off the phone with NASA for the past 20 minutes, but their people were all away on vacation, as was the Pentagon, Langley, most of the NSA, and all other government entities we needed information from. A few of the NASA engineers were working hard on repositioning satellites for clearer images, however, they were all aimed and focused on deep space exploration. No one paid millions of dollars a year to maintain or upgrade a telescope or satellite to see the moon. That was, old hat, therefore, our ability to accurately summarize what was heading for us was hampered by our own advancement in technology and curiosity. Maybe there was something to be said for the military who wanted to defend space. However, “We are the World” international space station lovers had won that battle. Conquest hadn't been cool for centuries, and militarizing space had been viewed as a conquest.

Even in the 50's the idea of alien invaders meant that we should be cautious and ready for a fight, just in case. But as the decades rolled on, more and more science fiction writers surmised, fantasized really, that most aliens from other planets would be fairly nice beings, superior in knowledge and technology; therefore, we should assume more enlightened.

Of course, then came the 90's and the birth of Mulder and Scully. The mixture of fiction and fact and the gritty realism about the nefarious nature of the alien visitors were exposed through the world of conspiracy. This, however, did not seem to be enough to sway enough of society back towards caution. The 2000s ushered in an age of 30-year-old billionaires and rock star inventors. These geniuses were suddenly hailed as sages, capable of incredible wisdom beyond their years. Truth was, they were just one of the thousands of young men and women developing new tech at the time. Their tech was good, and more importantly it was the right tech for the time. Yes, they were incredibly smart, hard-working geniuses, but they were also very lucky and young.

Even at my limited 36 years of life, I had surmised that a person's wisdom ran only as deep as their greatest failure they had learned to overcome, which took decades. A 30-something billionaire who hadn't lived like a regular American for almost a decade had lost most of their grasp of the real world. Yet, when the billionaire tech giants declared the search for life beyond our world essential to progress, then backed it with hundreds of millions of dollars in grants, the scientific community did what most would in those circumstances....they chased the money.

Back in 2017, Stephen Hawking, the world-renowned physicist, warned against

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the continued attempt to contact alien life. He wisely surmised if we succeeded, and the theorized alien species could contact us, or heaven forbid, visit us, their vastly superior technology would leave earth at their mercy. Everyone loved the wheelchair-bound cynical genius until his views became inconvenient and even worse...unpopular.

Yet a coalition made up of internet billionaires, idealistic space hippies and politicians pushed through a planetary peace bill, only a decade after the famous scientist's death. This led to a treaty, not only banning weapons from space to be used against earth or a hostile invader from another galaxy, but all spy equipment, sensors, or satellites to warn the planet of any incoming bogies.

Fortunately for us, the former president wasn't sold and was convinced to make a backroom deal with China, Russia, India, and France to leave a few satellites in orbit, pointing towards the great unknown. The U.S. included Israel, England, Korea, Japan, and Germany as allies, but they hadn't any satellites of their own, so they all relied on the other superpowers to maintain watch.

The baffling amount of hubris required to lead the entire world up to this point, swirled in my head as I absentmindedly opened the oval office door. At the same time, Barret swiftly pulled open the president's door. The movement pulled my equilibrium well over my toes, and I came tumbling to the oval office carpet.

"Found him, sir," Barret quipped sarcastically.

"Sorry, Sir," I popped up and straightened my blue uniform and turned to talk, but POTUS covered his face with his hand and shook his head back and forth, "Sir?" I enquired and looked to Barret. She betrayed nothing but a subtle smirk.

I looked back at the president. He motioned that I should turn around. Behind me were the joint chiefs of staff, the secretary of state and vice president, all gathered on three sofas. In front of them were three massive 75" televisions containing the faces of 20 major world leaders, "Oh..." I shot them all a beet red grin and waived, then slid out of frame, to the president's side, and leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

POTUS glared at me sideways, "Did I make a mistake putting you in charge of the war room."

I choked down that little bit of criticism while attempting to stay focused, "I don't know, Sir, but at the moment, you have no choice..."

"Oh," The president looked amused that anyone would presume to give him an ultimatum, "Why's that, Captain?"

"Because the air phenomenon is entering our atmosphere within 30 minutes."

ONE HOUR EARLIER:

Apparently, I spoke louder than I should have. No sooner had the words “30 minutes” exploded from my mouth, then the 20 major world leaders all descended into panic and disbelief. Several of middle eastern countries fell into a practiced tirade of blame-shifting and threats.

Unable to reign in the conversations, POTUS sat back in defeat. Reality had shot fear and adrenaline into the heart of every world leader. The time to come together, in order to meet this threat was years ago. An unexpected marriage of convenience was not practical, especially in 30 minutes or less. Now, every nation was on its own, and they all knew it.

At least the military could communicate with our allies. The English, French, and Israeli prime ministers left their video feed open until we had successfully determined where the Aerial Phenoms would land. That’s when the pooh really started hitting the fan.

“Captain Cameron!” I rushed back to the war room, dodging around James standing just inside the oval office doorway. *That no-good agent had stood at the door the entire time watching me make a fool of myself!* I thought to myself.

An aid stuffed a report towards me on my way to a world map set up on the wall. I used a sharpie to draw large “Xs” at the estimated landing spot of every Phenom.

“Outside Cleveland,” I muttered to myself, “200 miles outside of Moscow” Then a thought struck me, “Who’s on the phone with Russia?” A blonde female naval officer raised her hand, “Report these coordinates to them. That goes for all of you, I want every country to know everything we know as it’s happening! If the individual militaries can contain any landing spot, maybe we can avoid an interdimensional war.” Reports continued flooding in. I don’t know why, but at number 20, I expected the reports to cease, as if the aliens, whoever they were, would only send an even number. But that wasn’t the case.

29, that’s where the counting stopped. 6 in the United States, 8 spread across Europe, with 2 in the U.K. 4 in Russia and 5 in China. The rest scattered about Asia and one was landing out in New South Wales, Australia, but oddly, in the middle

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of nowhere. As a matter of fact, we were lucky that none of these phenoms were landing anywhere but cornfields, deserts, and in the case of the Western United States west coast, forest. It was all lucky, very lucky...possibly too lucky.

“Captain?”

I turned to see one of the staffers with “Media”, boldly printed across his badge holding up his phone for me to see, “Cat’s out of the bag, the press is onto the UFOs.”

“Ah, Hell...” I absentmindedly swore under my breath, but then turned to the media staffer, “I’ll update POTUS, you get me at least two live TVs in here, like five minutes ago!”

“Got it,” he confirmed.

“James, back to the Oval.” James and I marched through the hall, dodging bodies, agents, and military personnel all desperately trying to contribute or at least look like they were contributing to the crisis.

On the way there, Irony seeped into my thoughts. I begrudgingly came to work today, in order to operate a system no one ever took seriously, and on Christmas as well, because I was the lowest man on the totem pole. This should have made me laugh. But now, I was heading a task force directly under the authority of the President of the United States. As this crept into the back of my mind, I could have stopped to either enjoy the moment or freak out and begin a well-earned series of panic attacks. Fortunately, my passion, excitement, and speed of the developing situation kept me from thinking too much about it.

I eased myself into the presidential office this time with caution, but James didn’t like beating around the bush, he nudged me and whispered under his breath, “Grow some cojones man!”

I was going to ignore the comment but instead glared back at muscles. He shrugged his shoulders and shot me a look of, *what are you gonna do about it?*

Jocks will always be jocks, I thought to myself and stepped up to POTUS’s desk as he looked to be finishing two phone calls and starting three more. I calculated that my information would be his priority. I may have been right, but his face told me that if I interrupted him, I may find myself bleeding to death on the presidential seal sown into the rug.

“Mr. President, we have 29 contacts, they look to have spread themselves out fairly evenly around the planet, And unfortunately, the media has gotten wind of this...” my voice trailed off as I noticed one of the giant flat-screen televisions was broadcasting a 3D model of the globe, with sightings of the alien craft landing. A

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thought struck me in the gut, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Sir,” I turned to the president, but his back was to me. I assumed that since my last bit of info had been scooped by CNN, Fox, and...well, everyone! I wasn’t a priority at the moment. Politics had no time for politeness - if the cameras were not rolling.

All that being said, worry continued to worm its way to the front of my mind. The more this worry worked its way through my mind, the more I believed the world was in danger.

“Sir!”

He stuffed an index finger in my direction, and then used it to plug his other ear and focused harder on his telephone conversation.

“Ah stuff it!” I decided to gamble, and take control of the conversation. If I was right, we were all in big trouble, if I was wrong, I could end my career maintaining a radar station in the antarctic.

I reached over the Resolute desk and slammed my fist down on the telephone termination button on his landline. “Sir, this cannot wait.”

The President swiveled in his chair in disbelief. “Barrett!” He commanded, and in came the terrifying lady agent with two additional scary agents in tow. The President didn’t say anything else other than pointing an index finger at me, and then jerking his thumb towards the door.

Crap, I didn’t think I’d be thrown out without a chance to explain myself. Think, Think!

The only person of interest I saw was agent muscles. “Help!” I pleaded in a hushed tone, “I’m showing my ‘cojones’ just as you suggested!”

The big man shrugged his shoulders, but thankfully nodded his head in agreement and spoke up, “Barrett!”

Agent Barrett stopped two feet short of snatching up my scrawny neck. She glanced left at James, “Agent?” She asked.

James made it simple, “The Captain needs to be heard.”

The two locked eyes for only a fraction of a second. It seemed to be enough to communicate what James needed to.

Barrett turned to me then checked her watch, “It will take me approximately sixty seconds to comply with the president’s order.” She raised an eyebrow, then for emphasis began counting, “59, 58, 57...”

“Barrett, I gave an order!” The president bellowed.

“With all due respect, Mr. President, my mandate is to protect you, not obey

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your orders. The best way for me to do that is to listen to the people who understand the situation the best.” She turned back to me, “ 45,44,43”

“Fine, but this had better be good, otherwise you are both out on your butt!” POTUS pointed at James, “You too!”

“Sir, in about 45 minutes, I think you will need all the help you can get.”

“What are you talking about, Captain? Now, what?” Partially from exhaustion but mostly from frustration, the commander in chief plopped down into his chair.

I quickly strode over to a U.S. map on the wall, talking as I went. “Mr. President, where the spacecraft are all landing didn’t make sense at first. But, it just hit me. What they are up to. It’s all strategic.”

“Nah, it’s only so they could just be introducing themselves to the entire world, simultaneously.” The secretary of state argued.

“Yes, I considered the same thing, but look at this position. The Aerial Phenomenon,”

“Just say UFO!” The Sec State demanded.

“Yes Ma’am, the UFO, here,” I pulled a sharpie from my pocket and marked the map with an X, “between Cleveland and Columbus. They choose a spot that is rural, and between two cities, but not close to either? Why not closer to Cleveland, or go just go less than 500 miles east to New York, entering from the outer atmosphere, it would have been a few extra minutes.”

“What is your point, Captain?”

I drew a large circle around the area, “Within 400 miles of this spot is Chicago, New York City, Toronto, Detroit, Philadelphia. If this UFO has a weapon comparable to it’s flying and interdimensional capabilities, it could in one fell swoop cripple the Eastern seaboard.”

“That’s impossible, Captain,” It was the General of the Army, “There isn’t anything on earth that could do that!”

“Not that we know of sir, but this unknown entity is not from earth.”

“EMP.”

Everyone searched the room to find the owner of the voice that added to the conversation. Eventually, the contributor spoke up again, I was shocked to discover that it was agent James. “A few years ago, we had to set aside spare electronics and computers in bunkers around the White House, Capitol Building, and Camp David stored in something called a Faraday cage. They said it was in case of an EMP blast or device.”

“Exactly, agent James,” I took the thought back, but appreciated the backup,

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I should have thought of an EMP sooner. “Now, if humans can create a decent EMP device, think what an advanced alien race can do?” Another thought occurred to me. I turned back to the president. “Sir, please, one more minute, let me get my map from my office.”

He flipped an apathetic hand at me and I heard his sarcastic tone chase me down the hall, “Fine, whatever, it’s not like I’m really in charge around here anymore.”

Two minutes later, myself, a staffer, and two secret service agents wheeled a second world map into the oval office. I didn’t waste any time, but quickly drew circles around every confirmed landing site in the world, which had been marked by my X. “Captain Cameron if you please?” The president begged. He stood from behind his desk and hurried me along with the wave of his right hand.

“Ok,” I started slowly, “Stay with me. We know that if an electronic magnetic pulse blast that is released at high altitude, specifically from nuclear weapons would, in all likelihood, wipe out electronics up to 1000 miles. So, I have circled every Arial...” I glanced at Susan, the secretary of state, “I mean UFO landing spot on the planet, and since they all seem to be landing, I’m using a conservative radius of 400-500 miles. If each one of these UFOs emits an electronic pulse with an approximate 450-mile radius, everything in these circles would be taken out of play immediately.”

Everyone sat forward, a few of the military personnel stood and drifted closer to the board, the president spoke aloud, “Moscow, London, Tokyo, New York, San Francisco, Cairo, Jerusalem, Beijing...” realization sunk into the president’s brain. He took off his glasses and dropped them to the Resolute and stared down at the antique mahogany deep in thought. POTUS tapped his fingers on the desk for only a few seconds. Since my heart was currently running at about 150 beats a second, those few seconds felt like an hour.

Finally, he spoke up, “Folks, I think we may be in a bit of a pickle!”

THIRTY MINUTES EARLIER:

Within five minutes, the level of chaos in the White House exploded to a feverish pitch that could only be seen to be believed. Several staff and military members suffered mild concussions by running around a blind corner and colliding noggins. In my old Airforce Academy days, it would be laughed at and used as banter for weeks, but in this crisis, we had time only to slap a bandaid on it, get back to work, dizzy and bleeding wasn't a big deal right now.

"Copy that," James confirmed into his cufflink microphone.

My main job had become organizing all photos, maps, and other pertinent information of the incoming UFOs. From there one of my team of buzzing staffers put it up on the corresponding board and relayed it to the proper country. After my analysis of the air phenom positions, the president and generals decided to hedge their bets and advised our allies to do the same. In the U.S. that meant sending several national guards units and local police units to the secure landing sites, while moving as much military weaponry and equipment away from the UFOs as possible, in case of an EMP attack or other surprise weaponry beyond our comprehension.

"What was that about James?" I enquired about his short conversation over the radio without taking my eyes off the latest batch of reports.

"Marines from the Barracks are 45 miles out."

I turned from what I was looking at and glanced over at him, "But they're only a few miles from here."

"Yes, sir," James heaved a heavy sigh, "and like all of our on-call agents, most are out celebrating or home with families."

"Worst day for this to happen." I mused aloud as I went back to work. "Bad luck."

"Bad luck? I don't believe in luck. For them, this is the perfect day to strike. Most of the world's strongest military powers celebrate Christmas."

"You think December 25th was chosen."

"I don't think E.T. is dumb, sir."

"We have a visual, Captain."

We both turned to the televisions set up in the conference room. They had two separate feeds, one from the BBC the other a local CBS station out of Cleveland.

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“It’s like I woke up at a Comicon from the 1960s.” One young staffer commented.

“It’s almost as if these aliens have been following our alien lore and just copied it!”

“That’s enough,” I had to be the grown-up in the room, “Everyone back to work, or I’m sending you home.” To an average observer, the threat would mean nothing, but after only a few months at the White House, I knew why most staffers were here. For a handful of true believers, they were there to make a difference. Most, especially the young ones, it was pure ego. To be sent home during the biggest crisis since Pearl Harbor was unthinkable. As I suspected, at the mention of going home, they all snapped back to work and the shuffling of papers and phone conversations started up again.

However, I was a hypocrite. I stood and watched the landings of the various spacecraft being broadcast around the world. They were correct, the craft looked like they came out of a 1950s novel or movie. It was exactly as I would have pictured it, which means it was exactly what I did not expect. New discoveries and foreign objects are never what you expect, yet, this was almost designed to the specifications of human expectations.

I snatched up a phone and called down to my office. “Mike, it’s me, when will you have the latest satellite images? Yes, I know they have landed, but I want new ones...Yes, that’s right.” I slammed the phone down...I swore under my breath “We are still playing catch up, this is not good, not good.”

“Captain, how can we help?”

“Huh?”

Agent James stood with three others in dark suits, hands out of their pockets, ready to work. “These agents are assigned to intel, which makes our current intel sources invalid. If there’s an invasion, we need confirmation. So how do we find out?”

“Do any of you have experience with space imagery?”

Two raised their hands.

“Ok, I need one of you to get down to my office, and analyze the images from my assistant, his name is Mike, and he’s a great tech guy, but is just not cut out for this sort of thing. So, be careful with him, he breaks easily.” I grinned.

The agent raised an unimpressed eyebrow but moved the conversation along. “Then what?”

“If you see any more unidentified objects, sound the alarm, we’re in trouble!”

FIFTEEN MINUTES EARLIER:

I made the mistake of closing my eyes. Without much resistance, I drifted away. Not surprisingly, my mind took me back in time, nine years to be exact. My body was transported to the cockpit of my F-35. Gliding just above canyon walls of hewn sandstone and shale, I was back to my favorite training ground. I pulled on the yolk, and shot into the sky, climbing at an aggressive angle with incredible speed. It was as if I were floating alongside angels...with twelve Harley Davidson's strapped to my butt. It had the grace of a demon, sure it was fast and amazing, but it could malfunction and kill me, be shot down by the enemy, and kill me, or I could make a very small error and kill myself. Yet, when I opened up the throttle and felt "Lightning" push past Mach 1 towards 12,000mph, I would not change my job for the world.

Suddenly, something zipped past my windshield. I placed my gloved hand on the underside of my canopy and twisted my body around to follow it, then looked to my instruments. I turned to my radio, "Delta Sierra! Nellis, this is Moonbeam 8-7, which dead man just crossed my nose, over!" I bellowed into my radio.

No one spoke for a few seconds, but eventually, a confused voice crackled in my headset, "Negative, Moonbeam, possible bogey, you are ordered to investigate, Vector 9-0-9, over."

I cocked my head in surprise.

What the.... "Roger that, Nellis, Moonbeam 8-7 with fangs out."

After years of training, I was eager for some action. I was training in Nevada and very doubtful that either a Mexican or Canadian fighter jet had gone rogue. However, knowing who this was did not matter, I was eager to see what my training and the F-35 Lightning could do.

It took me over twenty minutes to reach the merge plot. "Nellis this is Moonbeam 8-7, Judy," Yet, as I radioed in my contact and caught sight of the object, just a distant dark dot on the horizon, the bogey did something impossible; it disappeared right in front of my eyes. At first I thought it was gone, but then my radar read the bogey back at 2 o'clock, so I turned to intercept, but as I did it blipped again and the radar reacquired the contact at my 6 o'clock, directly behind me, in perfect firing position! I jinked hard, evading any radar lock. I barely had time to think before the bogey blipped again to 3 o'clock, then again to 9 o'clock! The

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craft was painting me, yet no discernible missile lock.

“Bandit, Bandit, Bandit, Moonbeam 8-7, I have a knife fight up here, bandit unknown. He has me naked, need some help here, pronto, over!”

“Roger 8-7, ETA, 2-0 Mikes, standby.”

I juked left, but then banked right before heading for the deck. “Negative Nellis, at this rate, I’ll be bingo fuel, and joining the MB fan club before then.” I checked the ejection system, just in case I really had to punch out and ditch the 80 million dollar aircraft, effectively saying goodbye to my jet fighter career before it had a chance to actually begin.

“Roger that 8-7, RTB, two cousins joining the party, will meet on route.”

The order to return to base (RTB) was a relief, but also completely impractical. Bugging out would allow this unknown to track and shoot me out of the sky at any moment. I’d have to firewall and throw everything I could towards the base and hope the bandit followed me into a trap. But, at those speeds, a nylon letdown would be impossible. 800mph was the top speed any pilot has survived an ejection, and I was about to push Lightning up to 1200mph. An ejection would not be an option. I checked my instruments and looked like the bandit was following me down to the bottom of the canyons. I needed timing, and a little bit of crazy, which wasn’t a problem since crazy was a key component of all fighter jocks.

2,000 feet

1500 feet

1,000 feet, the ground was coming up fast,

500 feet

200 feet, I pulled out of the dive with only feet to spare, and darted my way through the canyon, exploring my foe’s maneuverability. It still gained. “Alright, here we go, Lightning. ”

I forced my plane into a nasty yank and bank, then opened the throttle and drove myself to 30,000 feet and braced for G-loc. It took just over thirty seconds. As I hit the thin upper atmosphere, momentary darkness filled my eye sockets. Fortunately, I fought back to consciousness, gritted my teeth, checked my gauges, then the radar.

I had put some distance between the bandit and me, but that wouldn’t last long, it was closing the gap. I reached my top speed of almost 1200mph, but so too had the bandit. It was right on my tail, and still, it didn’t stop! My radar showed it drifting up to me, atop me, almost through me.

It wanted to say hi!

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Easing itself above me twenty feet out, the bandit flew with me, as if playing a game. It was silver and long in shape. A cylinder, the size of a southern mansion column, but with no wings, windows, or aerodynamics. Even more confusing, I could not see any propulsion of any kind.

“This can’t be real, can it?” I questioned my own sanity aloud. “A dream maybe?”

Then the silver craft moved in closer: *15 feet 12 feet, 10 feet.*

Thinking the UFO was only drifting a bit off course, I tried to move away and gave it more space, but it only moved closer: *8 feet, 6 feet, 4 feet.*

My traffic collision avoidance system was screaming at me that we were about to collide with another plane, “Shut it, Tee-Kas...” I muted the alarm and focused back on what the insane pilot flying Silver Surfer’s cousin was doing: *3 feet, 2 feet.*

Now, at this point, my heart rate was at about 190, and every nerve in my body on edge, my mouth was dry as the rest of my excess fluid had sweated into my flight suit. I was maneuvering almost 15 tons of a fighter jet at 1182mph, with a suicidal UFO trying to play tag, so I was not my usual calm self. All that being said, I never forgot the feeling I got down into the very core of my gut when that psychotic cylinder was so close.

My entire life, I’d been taught by my mom to listen to my gut. If something or someone felt wrong, play it safe, and get out of there. I’m convinced that wisdom has saved my life more than once. This time, on the verge of being shredded into a thousand pieces at 30,000 feet, my guts screamed at me, even over the voice of my radar and Tee-Kas. Whoever was on that ship, was bad, and I didn’t like him.

“Piss off!” I screamed “Now, follow this.” I dropped my engines down to minimum power, the bandit flew past, then I throttled forward, but in a different and odd angle. I knew he’d reacquire and blimp back to my six, so I juked left and hit my throttle, counted to six, switched direction, and pushed back in the other direction. Gravity was crushing me, pulling my innards one way, then the other. At this rate, my body would run out of fuel before Lightning. No matter; I had to hold on. Even though I couldn’t see the enemy, I knew I was in a dog fight, staying one step ahead by pushing my F-35 beyond its limits. If I was going to beat this guy, I needed help.

“Moonmean 8-7, this is Banshee 7-2 and Falcon 3-1, one playmate and one puke inbound, over.” I breathed a sigh of relief, it was my C.O. also flying an F-35 and my lead instructor in an F-16. An instructor who was the only active-duty flying Ace in the country. Relief washed over my body as I chuckled to myself, but then

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got serious, “Good to hear from you, cousins. Be advised, unknown advanced capability, bandit can move sectors without detection and push Mach 2, over.”

“Roger that, tiger, continue RTB and give us a shot at your gomer, over.”

I juked once more, just to make sure the bandit didn’t try to re-engage at the last moment, “Roger,” I acknowledge my C.O. “Recommend more cousins join the party, also request texico so I can stay in the fight, over. ”

This time the ace spoke up, “Negative, RTB. Moonbeam is Hotel Sierra, but we got this.”

I tore off my oxygen mask and smiled. Boy, did I want another shot at that gomer, but my fuel was almost to fumes, and I had just been complimented by the best fighter pilot in the world. I figured I’d quit while ahead.

Suddenly, my plane shuddered and shook violently back and forth. A sign on my computer monitor flashed a warning light I had never seen before. It was in huge, red bold letters, “WAKE UP!”

“Uh, Base, this is 8-7 again, I have a warning light, telling me to...wake up?”
Lightning shook again, violently.

“Affirmative Moonbeam 8-7, wake up.”

Suddenly, my eyes shot open and came awake to a huge hand slapping my face, it was agent James. “Captain, wake up, wake up! We have more incoming!”

SEVEN MINUTES AGO:

Papers were strewn about the long hall, bordering the edge of the plush maroon carpet leading to and from the West Wing. Three staffers stood to the side, arguing, talking points for the next news brief, whilst another sat on the hall floor crunching numbers for some logistics problem the chief of staff had assigned to her. We marched our way from the war-room back to the oval office. James frightened or shoved anyone, man or woman, out of our way, like a snow-plow but with less grace.

I was still waking up, so it took me a few seconds to focus on what James was saying. "...so the satellite images are being run up to us now, but from what agent Johnson and your top nerd down in the dungeon says..."

"Geek," I interjected.

"Huh?"

"Geek, we prefer to be called geeks. It's more of a tech pride thing. A nerd cares about anything....uh, never mind, go on."

James shook his head a bit in frustration, but continued his thought, "Anyways, from what it sounded like, we have what looks to be as many as 30-40 new contacts."

"Ah hell!" I pounded the side of the hallway wall, "NO!"

"What?" James demanded.

"The first arrival showed up as six to seven contacts."

"So?"

"So....seven contacts equaled 29 different ships!"

"So forty would be..."

"A fleet...and that's probably just the first wave!"

James snapped up his sleeve, and barked into his cuff mic, "This is James, Gold Star plus VIPs to P.E.O.C. Authorization - Echo, Charlie, Zulu Tango, 9-5-6. ETA to Oval: one-half Mike.

James bellowed into the hallway, "Move! Make a hole." The traffic mostly parted, he gripped my arm and drug me at a double-quick pace through the swirling bureaucratic mess of bodies and paperwork.

"What's going on?"

"We are moving all of you down to the bunker, you can continue your

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work there.”

I called after James as he continued hauling me down the corridor. “What about an EMP?”

James did not slow but continued his strict guidance of my movements through the halls as he replied, “The Presidential Emergency Operations Center, P.E.O.C., has been wrapped in a faraday cage and equipped with many sources of communications. including back up shortwave radios.”

Something didn’t feel right, again, that awkward gut-churning my mom warned me about like I was going to make a mistake or maybe miss something. No, wait, something was definitely not right. We turned the corner to the Oval and stood off to one side as the president, joint chiefs and the rest of the secret service gathered what they needed for their quick jaunt to the bunker.

“Wait, James, how long will it take to get down to P.E.O.C.?”

“Five minutes and eight seconds, exactly”

“And that will leave four minutes to transfer computers, turn on systems, and...”

I absentmindedly nodded my head in thought as I leaned against the off white wall of the rounded office. Still dazed from my power nap, and the sudden rush to the Oval, my eyes lazily settled onto one of the many televisions. A young female was excitedly saying something, “Turn that up!” I demanded. A staffer tossed me the remote, but then went back to work,

The off-camera voice of the female reporter was excited and desperately trying to get her voice over the sound of a high pitch metallic whine. “The object seems to have started getting louder and louder as if it is about to do something....”

“We can’t go, it’s too late...” I muttered to myself, but then repeated myself as I absent-mindedly shouted out yet another command to the Commander in Chief. “We can’t go! It’s too late!”

James grabbed my arm and yanked my ear to his lips and hissed, “Captain, I can’t save your scrawny neck this time!”

The entire room’s roaring essence calmed to an eerie quiet that twisted yet another knot into my already nauseated stomach. The president stopped his packing and glared at me with weary, tense eyes, “Captain, you are the one who spotted an incoming fleet, so we are taking precautions to continue running this country and if need be, protect the world. Now, Captain, why can’t we leave? Speak!” He commanded

I stepped forward and winced, “Because, Mr. President, it’s too late. The Saucers are spinning up their weapons, and their fleet will be in a position to attack

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in 5 minutes. By the time we are in the bunker, with computers and communications operational, the enemy will have attacked with unknown weapons, taking out who knows how many of our assets. However, if we continue operations from here, then...”

“Then we can stay in the fight.” The General of the Army concluded.

“What about the EMP?” agent Barret had stopped what she was doing and had her own list of questions.’

“We are well out of its range sir.”

“Ok...” The president said, but I had to cut him off.

“However...”

“What?” POTUS groaned.

“Well..”

“Spit it out, Captain!”

“As agent James pointed out to me earlier, it’s too convenient to think these aliens chose Christmas day randomly, as it’s the worst possible day for this to happen to us. If you add the fact that they copied the exact expectations of what a non-threatening alien spacecraft might look like from science fiction stories and movies, plus I have reason to believe their attack craft looks much different, then we have to assume they know about the pentagon and White House. They want you captured and the world’s strongest military under its control as fast as possible.” I shrugged my shoulders “At least, if I were them, that’s what I would do.”

The president dug through his pants, “Son of a bi...” The Catholic POTUS stuffed his swear words back into his guts and emerged with a different explosion of words, “General, move every asset you can away from the incoming until we know what type of weapons we are up against.” He barely paused and turned on an older gent next to him, dressed in his Navy blues, “Admiral, your priority are those aircraft carriers, protect them at all costs and do NOT let them engage unless defending themselves or we give the order.” Then he was back at me, with hard, commanding eyes, “Captain, find me a freaking cigarette before I lose it completely and accidentally snap your little neck.”

“Yes Sir!” I snapped to but turned to see agent Barrett already yanking out a Marlboro Light. He lit up just as Barret hit a switch from a remote she carried on her person. It slid open a metal trap door in the ceiling just above the Resolute Desk. Barret pressed another button on the remote and a small but powerful fan clicked into gear, sucking up the cancer sticks smoke.

My job was pretty much over. It would take at least 45 minutes to get another

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image from the NSA or NASA, so I knew that wouldn't make a difference. Plus, even with exact positions fixed on every object in space, the enemy could move effortlessly a few minutes in one direction and then enter the Earth's atmosphere hundreds or thousands of miles from where we predicted.

No, the only way to have a shot at fighting back was to give them their beachheads they were about to make with their flying saucers meant to act as "Trojan horses". But, then once they committed, we would have targets to attack.

Unless the enemy decided to reload all of their gear back onto their ships, then take off again, they wouldn't be able to use such large EMP weapons again. Besides, We too had EMP tech, so how much more damage would they inflict on us, then we could on them? Not to mention, no matter how many fleets the enemy had, human soldiers would almost certainly outnumber the aliens at least 20 to 1. It was their superior technology they would rely on. We needed to know how to exploit or destroy that technology. In the meantime, save every piece of military hardware we could by any means necessary.

All this was supposing that my theories were all correct. Technically, not one of the Aerial Phenomenon had done anything overtly aggressive, so finishing my military career in that remote arctic post was still a possibility in the back of my mind. However, the Arctic Circle was not to be. As I stared back at the televisions. They all stared back at me blank as white static snow. At that moment, I knew all my theories to be true and our nightmare had begun. We were under attack.

"Sir, here they come!"

BACK TO ZERO HOUR

I eased back against the wall and tried to calm my nerves before my death.

“Your tie.” agent James peering around the corner quipped over his shoulder.

“Come again?”

“Take your tie off and unbutton your top button, Captain. I don’t need you hyperventilating on me.”

I rolled my eyes but complied. I yanked the tie off and threw it at the ground and tore the top button of my shirt off, “James, this is my mess. I think I screwed us, royally! POTUS didn’t go to the bunker cause of me, now we’ll probably lose most of our leadership, because of me.” I grunted, stood up then stacked my body against the much larger James, ready to provide his back up.

James snorted and looked back at me, “Don’t be such a baby. You got more than 60% of our military away from the target zones of those EMPs. We still have a military to fight these suckers with. Only you saw them coming, even though it was a surprise attack, so we actually have a fighting chance of kicking E.T.s butt back to the eighth dimension or wherever the hell he’s from!” He went back to covering the hall with his P90.

“I’m sorry,” I felt scared and a bit frustrated.

James sat down against the wall for a minute to rest “Captain, even if we all die, you still had a pretty good day.”

“How’s that?” I shot back a wary look.

“We have what we do, thanks to you. You might have just saved the world, like a bonafide superhero.”

“Hah!” I chuckled, then deepened my voice to something dark and gravely, “That’s what heroes do! Right?”

“Captain, you were cool for a minute, now you’re just a nerd again.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know, I was a fighter jock in the Air Force before all this, I was dope!”

“Except my dad stopped using the word “dope” when he was fifteen!”

“I’m bringing it back.”

“Yeah, you and what nerd army?”

“Geeks, you have to call us geeks!”

James went back to peering around the corner, “Hey, if you insist on calling

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me muscles and jock, then you're going to be a white boy nerd!"

I laughed lightly and shrugged my shoulders, "Fair enough."

Staring at the wall opposite me, I found myself lost in thought. This journey had largely been guided by my mom's insistence on listening to your gut...well, she called it spirit, but I was a man of science now, and did not believe in that nonsense. Not since I was 12 and began to understand what it meant to be raised in a Muslim community without knowing my dad and only partially looking like my mom. No God I should believe in would do that to an innocent little boy.

"I ain't white."

"Huh?"

"I'm not a white boy, my mom was Somalian from Minneapolis."

"Oh, sorry, brother, didn't know."

"Yeah, my dad was pretty fricken white" I chuckled but diverted the subject. "You know what's crazy?"

James still wasn't looking at me, but I knew I had his ear, what else was there to do while holding a corner in the West Wing hallway. "What's that?" He asked.

"I wasn't supposed to be born."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, my mom was unmarried, sixteen, Muslim, pregnant by a white boy. She felt the only choice she had was...well, you know."

"Why'd she change her mind?"

"This is gonna sound nuts, but she said God...or Allah...whatever, sent a messenger..."

"Like an angel?"

"...Yeah, I guess," I snorted, still sounded looney to repeat aloud, "Anyways, this person told her I had a huge purpose to save the world. Can you believe that?"

James said nothing for a few seconds, letting awkward silence soak up the faint noise of gunshots and explosions creeping towards us. But then, he slowly responded, "Any other day, I'd think you're crazy or it would just be a nice religious tale, but today, you literally did save the world. Shoot, I don't know, maybe if I get outa here alive, I'll start going to church with my wife."

"You don't think it's weird and nuts?"

James chuckled, "Yeah, it's weird, but you know what? Albert Einstein was weird and so was Abe Lincoln. That didn't make them wrong. Most world changers are pretty weird." James sat up and looked at me, "Come to think of it, I don't think you can accomplish your best on this earth if you don't be at least a little weird. I

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mean look at me.”

“What about you?”

“I walked away from the NFL draft, cause I never wanted to play pro football. I wanted to protect the president. Most everyone back in my hometown thought I was really weird. Actually they thought I was down right stupid. But, I wanted to be in the Secret Service since I was a kid. Now, here I am.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

“However, I have to let you know, all this ‘bonding’ stuff aside,” James changed his tone of voice to something overly serious, “you have outlived your usefulness.”

Apparently we had enough vulnerability for the time, so I chuckled, “It’s like that, huh, brother?”

“Yep, you’re just lucky I need your body as a human shield, or I’d end you now.”

I burst into a chuckle. I was about to face off against an unknown alien force, with a guy I had only met hours ago. Might as well antagonize the geek for fun, it was that type of a day.

Suddenly, a burst of green light momentarily blinded me. Ringing in my ears and stinging eyeballs threatened to incapacitate me. Fortunately, my fighter pilot’s G-loc training had gotten me ready for much worse.

I shook my head out of the fog and noticed a smoking dinner plate-sized hole in the right wall adjacent to our corner of the hall. James was on the ground, clenching his ears with both hands and groaning to himself. I didn’t think, I just moved.

I snatched up the 870 tactical shotgun, dropped to a kneeling position, and aimed. I saw nothing but hazy smoke. So I sent a midlevel blast downrange. I heard what I thought was a hiss or a grunt. Either way, I hit something and it was getting close. I fired again, this time a hissing growl was evident and a dark silhouetted figure made its way through the darkness as it returned fire. Some type of laser cannon in the shape of an oddly formed bazooka fired green discharge at me. I took cover just in time. The Alien’s weapon notched a 2-foot hole in the corner I was meant to guard. I glanced up at the smoking hole from my back, “Holy Crap!”

“What’s wrong?” James asked while sitting up.

“Frick’n alien almost vaporized my head!”

The agent rubbed the back of his head, “Well then kill the sucker, Captain!”

Still on my back, leaning against the special agent’s massive shoulder, I looked right and spied four shotgun shells on the ground near me, I snatched them

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up and stuffed them into the belly of the weapon and pumped the action, ready for round two. But I was too late. A massive boot toe stepped from behind the corner of the baseboard and a looming figure peaked around the bend in the hallway.

“James, brace!” I commanded. I used a double-fisted grip to aim the big weapon like a giant pistol, stuffed the big 12 gauge into the notched hole still smoking from the laser cannon, and fired all 12 of its deadly BB-sized pellets from point-blank range. The shotgun leaped in my hands. The blast expelled every bit of force and led into the thigh of the intruder, but the alien still would not go down. “Give me a push, James,” His big hand hoisted my 5’5” frame onto my feet and I charged around the corner, reloaded, located a mountain of flesh, writhing in pain and fired again, and again, pinning it against the far wall. Still, it was moving forward, desperate to attack. I let it close. It towered over me, but I wasn’t thinking about its size, but rather its neckline. As a fellow biped, this Alien being must also have some sort of throat and spine. I noticed it was wearing a tactical helmet of some kind, so I aimed the barrel just below the chin and fired. It was enough. A smoking hole emerged from its throat as it toppled to the ground.

I suddenly realized how hard I was breathing and how fast my heart was pounding. I glanced left to see agent James locating and checking the action on the P90, “Hey, I got him!” I bragged.

The agent reloaded the top mountain magazine then locked the first bullet into place. “Yep, I see that, sir, nice work. Now, kindly, get your butt back behind cover!” He bellowed.

“Oh, yeah,” I turned to get back to our corner, now turned Swiss cheese but stopped short. “What’s that...” I glanced down the hall following the sound of a growing hum. In the faded emergency lighting, I spied five green lights staring at me, growing in intensity. I turned to dive to safety as I shouted, “James, run...” but I was too late. Everything faded to black.

ZERO HOUR + TWENTY-THREE MINUTES:

“Captain, Captain, you ok?” echoed distantly in my ears, “Captain? Can you hear me?” Again the faint voice spoke but wormed its way further into my head. My vision was blurred, focused, then blurred again. It was a woman, with a handsome face and kind eyes. “Captain, come on, you gotta talk to me.”

I reached up and laid my hand on her face, “Mom?”

“Sir, can’t I just put him out of his misery.” Now the voice was just mean.

“Barrett, the man’s a hero, he may have saved the entire world, be nice,” POTUS replied loud enough so I would hear.

Barret growled a bit but looked back at me.

Suddenly, I remembered who everyone was, “Oh, I know you, you’re agent Barret right?” It also dawned on me that my head was cradled in her warm soft arms to stabilize my neck. I felt suddenly warm and happy.

“Move your toes and your fingers for me.” She demanded with the bedside manner of a troll.

I complied, “Ok, now what.”

“You’re fine,” Barrett concluded, dropped my head onto the hard carpet floor, and stood.

Happy feeling gone! “Owww, dang it, Barrett, that hurt.” My skull seemed to be taking most of today’s abuse.

“Here,” The no-nonsense agent offered me her hand and helped me to my feet. But, she pulled me in just a little closer than she had to and spoke in a hushed tone, “By the way, Sir,” she shot me the briefest of smiles, “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“Thanks, Barret.” I blushed a bit and grinned like an idiot.

She shrugged, “You earned it, and call me Susan, if POTUS isn’t around.”

“Susan, then,” I looked around, “Where’s James?”

“Over there.” She cocked her to the left, and just like that, agent Susan Barret was back into agent android mode. She turned and barked orders into her mic cuff, “POTUS on the route to P.E.O.C.” A mass exodus of staff, Secret Service agents and Marines began their way out of the West Wing.

“JT, give me a hand!”

“Who...” I glanced left trying to find the source of the voice. “James, you made it!” I wrapped my thin arms around the giant of a man.

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“Ouch....good to see you too buddy.”

“Oops, sorry,” Just didn’t think we’d hold these guys off, much less both be alive!

He nodded his head while being treated by a Marine Corpsman.

“I can’t believe we’re both still alive!”

“Yeah, well, still a good chance of not staying that way if we don’t keep up with the group, give us a hand would you, Cap?”

“Of course” I quipped back, “I need you around to tell me what to do the next time one of those things attacks.” I chuckled as I fitted my shoulder under the agent’s massive arm.

“That’s what I’m here for, inspiration and instruction.” James grinned.

As we made our way down the hall, past our defended corner, a thought hit me, “Wait, how are we still alive.” I glanced down the hall, at least seven huge green masked figures lay sprawled out in awkward gruesome positions. I looked up at agent muscles, “Did you do all that?”

James flashed a toothy smile at me and with a twinkle in his eye said, “It’s what heroes do, remember?”

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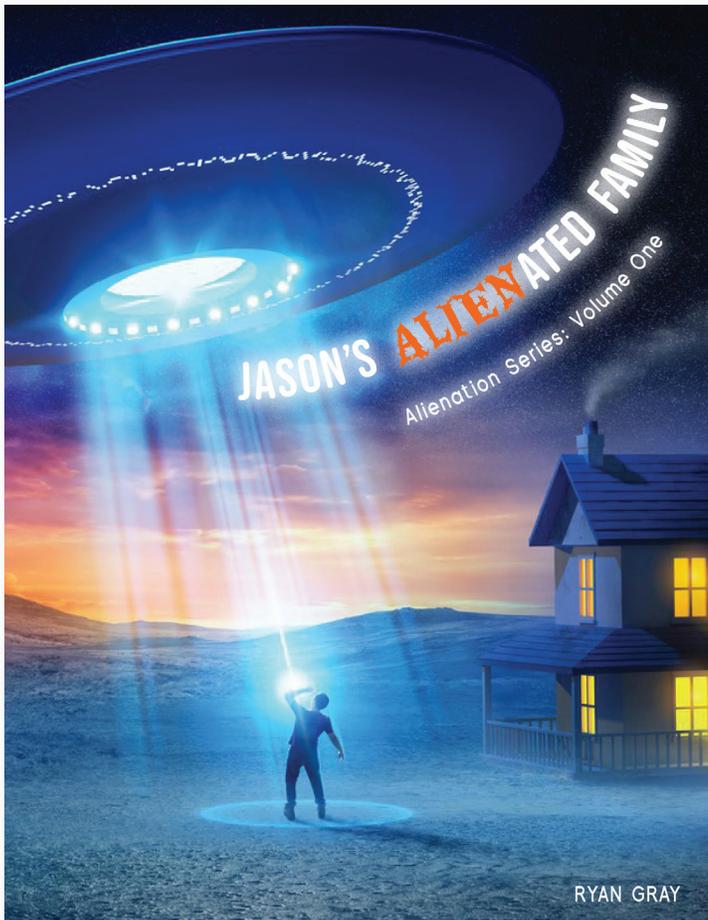
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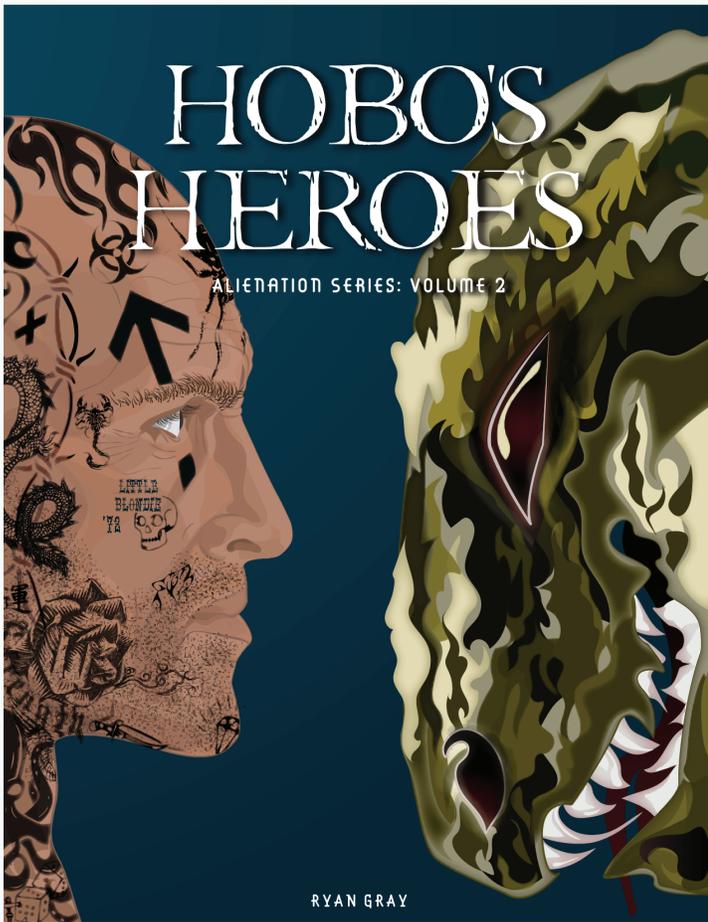
JASON'S ALIENATED FAMILY: VOLUME ONE



How can I describe a day like today?

The food was almost gone, clean water scarce, neighbors killing neighbors, and the military fighting an unknown enemy for the very survival over our planet! Yet, I feel more complete and joyful than I have in a very long time, calm even. How do I describe such redemption in my heart amongst so much destruction? Honestly, I don't know if I can. But if I don't try, I might just explode...

HOBO'S HEROES: VOLUME TWO



I turned to my audience.
“Now, since you’re gonna bleed to death, cause I shot you, like 7 times. I think it’s only fair, that I tell you why. Let me start from the beginning. Around here, I’m known as a bum...”