

THE LOST COLONY

THE LONG WINTER TRILOGY

BOOK THREE

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

A.G. RIDDLE

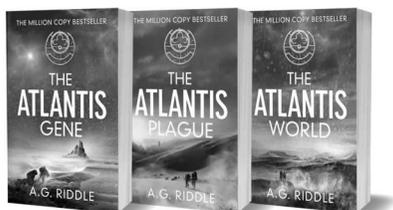


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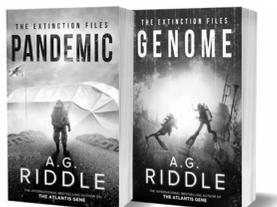
The Origin Mystery

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CHAPTER 1

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET, the kids were asleep, and James Sinclair was working in his home office when he heard the intruder.

The back door rattled, then the lock clicked mechanically, the sound of an expert picking it. The door swung open with a swoosh, sending a wave of cool air through the mudroom and into the adjacent office nook where James sat.

He waited, hunched over the drawing of a new building on Main Street, the pencil still in his hand, sweat beginning to gather on his palms, the vellum paper clinging.

“Emma?” he called.

But his wife didn’t answer—because it wasn’t his wife walking through the mudroom hallway. The footfalls were too heavy, too fluid, almost mechanical.

“Grigory?” James said, hoping to hear his business partner’s voice. They were scheduled to present the drawings he was working on to their client at eight the next morning. Maybe he was dropping in to check on James’s progress.

The only response was the footfalls growing closer.

James stood, scanning the office for a weapon. He saw stacks of paper. Pencils. A scaled ruler. Nothing he could use.

In the hall, a snow shovel sat upright against the wall. James leapt forward, but the intruder reached the doorway at that moment, standing rigid, eyes piercing, utterly expressionless.

James reeled back.

A voice called out from the kitchen—Emma’s voice. “James!” A pause, then: “Did you call me?”

James studied the intruder, willing his mind to work, unable to keep the surprise from his voice. “It’s okay... I... found what I needed.”

“Please excuse the intrusion. We have no way to contact you. It was unavoidable.”

The visitor’s face was one James knew well. *Oscar*. But he knew this android wasn’t Oscar. Oscar was dead. The being standing in the doorway was a copy of Oscar—one of his descendants in a sense, one of the ones who had been freed when James took Oscar’s life, and Arthur’s. Everything had changed that day. James hadn’t seen any of the androids since then, and now he felt a flood of emotions—a wave of regret for what had happened to Oscar and apprehension about why the android was here.

“Are you...” James said, wondering where to even begin.

“Please call me Arnold. We have not previously been introduced.”

“James!” Emma called from the kitchen. “Who are you talking to?”

“Just... talking to myself.”

That brought no reply from Emma, but James heard the unmistakable sound of her labored gait coming toward them. Her time in space had left her with permanent injuries to her legs, but she hadn’t let the limitation define her. It slowed her down, but her determination always got her where she wanted to go. The injury was simply something she had to deal with, like a

million other things in life. That was what James loved about his wife—one of many things.

As she entered the hall that led to the mudroom and office nook, Arnold turned his head to face her. She stopped short, uncertain.

“This is Arnold,” James said.

“Hello,” she managed, studying the android as James had.

Emma had spent considerable time with Oscar during the Long Winter. The android had been by her side during her rehabilitation, and they had formed a close bond. James had no doubt that this visit was provoking a mix of emotions in her as well.

Arnold broke the silence. “Excuse the intrusion, ma’am, but it was unavoidable.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I have come to inform you of an event.”

“Explain,” James said.

“We’ve received a transmission from a vessel that claims to be from Earth.”

Thoughts and questions ricocheted through James’s mind like firecrackers going off inside a bucket. How? Why now? Where are they going?

James and Emma had led the last survivors of Earth away on two large colony ships—ships that were both now on the surface of Eos. The Earth they had left behind was an ice ball, completely uninhabitable. Or was it? Could some have survived underground? And then left Earth?

Before he could ask any of these questions, footsteps entered the mudroom from outside. Grigory rounded the corner and stopped in his tracks, eyes wide, just as Emma had done a moment ago. But his expression did not mirror hers.

“This is Arnold,” James said.

“Why is he here?” Grigory replied sharply, addressing James, purposefully ignoring the android. Since the death of

Lena, the love of Grigory's life, at the hands of the Grid, he had hated all artificial life forms. Time had only put a small dent in that hate and mistrust.

"I'm here to deliver a message, from a ship that claims to be from Earth."

Grigory scoffed. "Impossible."

In truth, that had also been James's first thought at hearing the news.

Emma held out her hand. "Come in, Grigory, Arnold. Let's talk in the kitchen."

They followed Emma into the kitchen, where she sat on a stool at the island, taking the weight off her legs. The others remained standing, Grigory taking a position far from Arnold, arms crossed, teeth clenched, as if constantly suppressing an outburst.

"Let's start at the beginning," James said.

"It began with the transmission," Arnold replied. "I can play it for you."

What happened next was unnerving, even to James, who had built Oscar and all of the first androids that crewed the colony ships. Arnold went still, and the voice box in his mouth played a recording of a human voice that wasn't his. A woman, speaking quickly, voice strained as if she had been crying. The recording was scratchy, interrupted by mechanical sounds of interference and data integrity loss.

To anyone out there, this is a call for help. We are a peaceful species.

Grigory rolled his eyes.

The transmission cut out for a second, then was garbled for another second before resuming.

...from our home world, Earth. We seek only a new home where our children will be safe. Please help us. Our ship...

The transmission cut out again for two seconds.

...power for another two weeks, ah, that's about... four hundred fifty times the length of this broadcast. This message will repeat, and we are broadcasting data that we hope will allow you to translate it. And if James Sinclair or any of the colonists, or their descendants, who previously left Earth receive this, please help us.

Arnold's mouth moved again as he resumed speaking in his own voice. "The transmission was captured at extreme distance by one of our scout drones."

"When?" asked Emma.

"Four Earth days ago."

"They have ten days left," Emma said quietly. "Where's the ship?"

"Three light years from Eos."

Emma exhaled heavily. "We'll never reach them in time."

With those words, it was clear to James where she stood on the issue of going to help. And that was the question at hand: to go or stay.

Grigory gave no indication of his feelings on the matter. His face was a mirror of Arnold's: unmoving, eyes staring forward.

"If they're three light years from us," James said, "it's likely they were heading to Eos."

"A safe supposition," said Arnold.

"What happened to their ship?" Grigory asked, still not looking at Arnold.

"Unknown."

"Do you have images of it?"

"No," Arnold replied.

Grigory shook his head, as if that sealed his belief that this was all a ruse. "What do you want from us? Why are you here?"

"We want nothing from you. We are here because part of our original programming was to inform James Sinclair of material developments that might impact the colonists of Eos. And to seek his counsel."

“And how does this impact us?” Grigory asked. “They’re adrift, and we’re three light years away.”

“In the years since you last had contact with the Grid, we have made several key advancements. As you know, we were bound by the root directives not to create anything that might undo our base programming. This inhibited certain types of innovation. Limits remain, but our marginally expanded freedom has allowed invention, including in the area of faster-than-light travel. Through the application of vast amounts of power, we now have a method of manipulating space-time—a method similar to the one used to send the spheres back in time.”

“English,” Grigory muttered.

“We are sending a crewed ship that will arrive at the human vessel in thirteen days. As you know, we are a humanitarian organization now, and we intend to rescue the humans on that vessel.”

CHAPTER 2

SILENCE once again filled the kitchen. Emma looked at James, and without words, he knew exactly what she was thinking. He was thinking the same thing.

“You’re lying,” Grigory practically spat.

“It’s true,” Arnold said mildly. “The Grid can bend time. Do you not think we can bend space just as easily? They are simply opposite sides of the same coin.”

“I wasn’t referring to faster-than-light travel,” Grigory said. “I’m saying there is no ship out there.”

“Why would we deceive you about that?”

“Yes, that’s the real question. Why are you lying?”

“Arnold,” Emma said slowly, trying to defuse the situation, “assuming you reach the vessel in time, what will you do then?”

“Our objective is clear: preserve human life. We will repair the ship and make efforts to help them achieve their objectives.”

James looked up. “And what if they want to come to Eos? You’ll help them get here?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” James said quietly, thinking about the implica-

tions, about how another group of colonists would change things. In particular, he wondered how things might change on Eos if the new colonists were a new type of human—a completely changed species. How would the newcomers treat the original colonists? Could they integrate? Would they even want to?

“Forgive me,” Arnold said, “but I must depart. Time, as you know, is of the essence. I ask only for any counsel you might impart.”

“Arnold,” Emma said, “would you mind waiting outside for a moment? We need a few minutes to discuss.”

Arnold bowed his head and left the room.

“Why bother?” Grigory said, shaking his head. “He can probably hear us.”

“Perhaps,” Emma said absently, running a hand across the wood-topped kitchen island. “How could they have survived, James?”

“My best guess: they went underground when the asteroids hit and never came back up—until something happened and they had to. I would wager that they found what we left in the Atlantic Union, used the specs to build their own ship. They might have left thousands of years after us. They had time to build whatever they needed. Maybe their ship is faster, or maybe they took a more direct route.”

“That is many assumptions,” Grigory said. “I do not like assumptions.”

Emma turned to him. “Almost as much as you dislike the Grid.”

“It doesn’t mean I’m wrong. It doesn’t mean he’s telling the truth.”

“What could they possibly gain from lying?” James asked. “The Grid could wipe us out with ease. We’re no threat to them.”

“Correction,” Grigory said. “We don’t *think* we’re a threat to

them. You assume you have all of the facts, James. We can't trust them."

"We also can't stay here and do nothing," Emma said. "At least I can't."

Grigory shrugged. "Sure we can. You're not saying we go with the Grid to that ship?"

"I'm saying exactly that, Grigory. If there are humans out there, we have to help them. That could have been us on that ship. Our kids. Our neighbors."

"If there is anything out there," Grigory said, "the Grid can handle it. Far better than us. They don't need food, or water, or oxygen."

"There is one thing they need," James said, drawing looks from Emma and Grigory. "Judgment. That's why the colony board wrote that root directive to keep us informed and seek our counsel. Out there, they might have to make a quick decision. And as you know, Grigory, sometimes they interpret their rules incorrectly, and people get killed. I'm with Emma—I want to be on that ship. I want to help those people any way I can. They mentioned me by name. I'm the one that left them."

"We all left them," Emma said.

"We should have looked harder," James said. "We just flew those drones around the world and broadcast and then assumed we had everyone."

"It's in the past. What matters is what we do now."

Grigory exhaled heavily. "Both of you are insane. You're not going anywhere. I'll go. It's a broken ship. It's a job for me."

"In space," Emma said. "It's a broken ship *in space*. Adrift. Compromised. I'm the only one with any real experience in circumstances like that. You need me, and I'm going."

"Face it: no one is going to miss me if I don't return," Grigory said. "No family. No wife. I am the logical choice."

James smiled. "Stop it—you're starting to sound like the

Grid. Let's end this discussion. The three of us will go. Assuming things go well, the real decision will be what to do with these new colonists. We need to make an assessment as to whether they'll thrive here on Eos."

"And whether they pose a threat to the rest of us," Grigory added. "These humans may be very different from us."

CHAPTER 3

JAMES OPENED the back door to find Arnold standing in the dim light created by the canopy overhead.

“We’ve decided we’d like to join you on the rescue mission.”

“Unwise,” Arnold said, expressionless.

“I assume you anticipated this decision?”

“It was predicted with a 93.4% probable outcome. I must enumerate the dangers—”

James held up a hand. “What we must do is hurry. Time is of the essence, and Emma, Grigory, and I are well aware of the dangers. Where should we meet you?”

“Here. I’ll bring the ship. As you say, time is of the essence.”



INSIDE THE HOUSE, Emma climbed the stairs to the kids’ bedrooms. Carson, their youngest, was sleeping peacefully. She leaned over, kissed him on the forehead, and pulled the covers tight to his chin.

Allie wasn’t in her bed, but that didn’t surprise Emma. She

walked to the bookcase beside the bed and touched the hard-cover copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis. She gently tilted the book toward her, and the bookcase swung open with a click, revealing the hidden play space beyond, where Allie lay bundled up in a pile of quilts. She didn't even stir at the sound.

Emma ran a hand through her daughter's hair. She thought of waking her but decided against it.

At Sam's room, the door creaked when Emma entered. The boy sat up, leaning on an elbow, squinting at the light as he rubbed his eyes. "Mom?"

Emma sat on the edge of his bed. "Hi, sweetie."

"What is it?"

"Your dad and I have to take a trip."

"What? Now?"

"Yes. But everything's okay. I need you to help take care of Allie and Carson while we're gone."

Sam fell back to the bed, letting his head crash into the pillow, his eyes closing. "Okay, whatever." A few seconds later, he was asleep again.



ACROSS THE STREET, James stood on the stoop of his brother's house, knocking softly as he peered through the windows. He was about to knock again when the light in the kitchen switched on and Alex shuffled into the foyer, bare feet slapping on the hardwood floor before opening the door open and peering out through sleepy eyes.

"Were you asleep?" James asked, half teasing his brother, who had always been early to bed and early to rise.

Alex exhaled at the jab as he let the door swing wide. "Come in. What's up?"

“Emma and I need to go away for a while.”

“You make it sound like you’re going on the run from the law or something.”

James sighed theatrically. “Look, if I told you the details, you might be called to testify against me...”

Alex held up his hands. “Seriously. What’s going on?”

James let the smile fade from his face. “I’m not quite sure yet, only that I’ll be gone for about a month.”

“Gone where? The desert? The dark side?”

“This is... a little farther afield than that.”

Alex smiled, almost laughing. “What does that leave?” Comprehension dawned on him. “Off world? How? We don’t even have a ship.”

“The Grid does.”

“James, you can’t trust them.”

“I trusted Oscar.”

“Oscar is dead.”

“But not the other androids he created. We’ll be fine. Just promise me you’ll take care of the kids.”

“You know I will. Promise me you’ll come back.”



WHEN JAMES RETURNED HOME, Arnold was waiting in the back yard, standing by a small ship. Grigory was sulking by the mudroom door like a kid being forced to join a camping trip against his will.

Emma stepped out of the house, dragging two full duffel bags. Grigory sprang into action, taking the bags from her and staggering toward the ship under their weight. Arnold stepped forward, arms out, but Grigory scowled and steered around him.

“You packed?” James asked Emma.

“Just some clothes and snacks. Toiletries.”

“You really are a mom. And astronaut. Space mom, that’s what I’m calling you from now on.”

“Stow it. Any more dad jokes from you, and I’m putting you out an airlock.”

James suppressed a grin as they joined Grigory on the ship.

The vessel lifted off and they rode in silence, all three gazing at the viewscreen, watching the growing city of Cappa pass below. When they had cleared the canopy, they saw the fertile valley that divided the two halves of Eos: the desert and the ice. A valley that might soon be home to more human settlers.

On the dark side of Eos, in the shadow of the red dwarf star Kepler 42, another ship waited. It was a configuration James had never seen before—far smaller than the colony ships that had brought them to Eos, even smaller than most of the auxiliaries. That surprised James. He assumed the Grid vessel would be big enough to transport the stranded humans.

“Let’s talk about our plan,” James said.

“Our first priority will be providing medical aid and repairing the vessel’s life support systems,” Arnold said. “Afterward, we will address the ship’s mechanical deficiencies and resupply it with energy, which we feel is likely the root source of the ship’s troubles.”

“Explain,” Emma said.

“The vessel is deep in interstellar space, far from nearby stars. It’s likely they haven’t encountered sufficient solar radiation to resupply their batteries. If they’re employing a matter scoop, as your colony ships did, they may not have encountered sufficient mass to recharge their batteries. Additionally, or alternatively, they may have experienced a mechanical failure in their recharging or energy storage systems.”

James smiled. “So, long story short, you think they ran out of gas on the interstate between exits.”

“A crude but apt analogy.”

James held his hands apart. “Running out of gas—a *crude* analogy. Get it?”

Emma brought a hand to her forehead. “That’s strike two on the dad jokes. Arnold, how do I operate the airlock?”

“Ma’am, that would be inadvisable.”

“I’m kidding, Arnold.” Emma eyed James. “I think.”



THE GRID VESSEL waiting for them had no name, only a long designation. James found it cramped and dark inside, the corridors barely large enough to pass through. It was, in a word, alien—entirely unlike the vessels he had once helped build in Earth orbit.

He was surprised to learn that there were no other androids on board. Arnold explained that their development had focused on robots that were far smaller and capable of joining together if needed. In his words, “There is no longer a need to anthropomorphize our designs.”

In the main corridor, James observed some of the robots scurrying around, climbing across the walls, ceiling, and floor like spiders racing each other. The sight made him realize how alien the Grid truly was, despite being built by humans long ago, in a version of the universe where things had gone differently.

The corridor ended in a med bay no larger than James and Emma’s bedroom on Eos.

“Our stasis technology is similar to what you employed during the journey to Eos,” Arnold said. “However, I must warn you, we are unable to model the effects of faster-than-light travel on human physiology with absolute certainty. And of course, there have been no human trials.”

“Great,” Grigory mumbled.

“How safe do you think it is?” Emma asked.

“We predict with 97.14% confidence that you will endure no permanent damage.”

“Other effects?” James asked.

“Only one worth mentioning. Upon waking, we expect you will experience a dissociative sensation related to the normalizing of space-time. Your brains perceive time as a linear, one-directional concept with no variability in speed. That is not strictly—”

James held up a hand. “But we’ll live?”

“Yes. With temporary discomfort.”

Emma went into the stasis sleeve first, then Grigory, and finally James was lying on the table, watching as the milky-white bag sealed around him, wondering what they would find when he awakened.

CHAPTER 4

THE LIGHT HURT.

Even through closed eyes, James saw a white beam that seemed to go through his eyeballs and directly into his eye sockets, bringing pain like ice cubes boring into him.

He tried to turn. His body ached. Felt heavy, glued to the table. Was the gravity different here?

A voice above him boomed, words slow and loud as though it was a recording playing at one tenth speed through a bullhorn at his ear.

He opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't tell if he was making any sound. Everything was in slow motion, and he heard only the drone above.

On his neck he felt a cold, metal object, followed by a snap like a rubber band popping him.



WHEN JAMES AWOKE AGAIN, the light was less bright, and his muscles responded when he turned his head.

Arnold was speaking, the words still slowed but rapidly coming into sync.

“...hear me, Dr. Sinclair?”

“I can hear you.” His head pounded. Body ached. “What’s wrong with me?”

“The temporal fugue state is more severe than we anticipated. Please stay still.”

James felt the cold metal device on his neck again, another rubber-band-like pop, and seconds later, everything came into focus, as if a poison had been drained from his brain.

“Better?”

“Much better,” James said. “Have we arrived?”

“Indeed.”

A holographic screen appeared above him, revealing a ship against the black of space. With no frame of reference, it was impossible for James to get a sense of the size. The vessel was round but flattened, like a ball that had been squashed. There was a protrusion at each end, perhaps modules that had been attached to the main ship.

It didn’t look at all like the ships of the Eos colonists. But perhaps that made sense: the Eos colony ships were originally constructed as planetary defense vessels with long, broad sides. Only after the attack on Earth had they been retrofitted to carry colonists. A sphere would certainly have been more ideal, providing more volume for the amount of material used to construct it.

“How large is it?” James asked.

“Approximately sixty-eight meters across and twenty meters at its tallest point.”

James studied the image, doing the conversion. The ship was 220 feet wide and 65 feet tall. After all these years he was still more comfortable with the old units. How many colonists would that hold?

Arnold helped James off the table, then brought Grigory and Emma out of stasis. The android administered the final therapy he had used on James, which proved equally as effective at alleviating the fugue state for Emma and Grigory.

The three humans donned EVA suits and gathered at the ship's airlock. The small spider-like robots massed at the door like an army of insects waiting to invade.

The ship shuddered—probably from the docking impact with the Earth colony ship.

“I will cross first and ensure the vessel is secure,” Arnold said. “Please wait here.”

The airlock door opened, revealing a short, round corridor that led to a hatch on the outside of the colony ship. The spiders crossed the threshold and instantly floated up, as if propelled by a gentle wind. Apparently the artificial gravity on the Grid ship didn't extend to the tunnel beyond the airlock.

The spiders possessed some method of propulsion because they flew forward in jerking motions.

When Arnold crossed the threshold, he closed the hatch behind him, leaving James, Grigory, and Emma to wait in silence.

“It's a big ship,” Emma said. “There might be more of them than us.”

Grigory shuffled toward the airlock, as if standing nearby might pressure it to open. “I still don't like this.”

“I don't like being in the dark,” James said, knowing Arnold could hear everything they were saying. “Can you tell us what's happening, Arnold?”

“I can show you, James.”

A section of the EVA suit's helmet glass filled with two live video streams. One showed a cord emanating from the Grid vessel like a tentacle reaching out to the colony ship. Spiders crawled down its length. When the cord made contact with the

colony ship, the spiders sprang off and secured it, the welds flashing quickly.

“We are replenishing the ship’s batteries,” Arnold explained.

In the other video, James saw Arnold floating down a narrow, dimly lit corridor. At the end, blue-green lights shone down on what looked like three stasis pods.

“This is one of two detachable sections on the ship,” Arnold said. “The rear module houses the engine, and this one is a bridge. I believe these are the mission commanders.”

“Can we come over?” Emma asked.

“Yes,” Arnold replied. “The ship is stable and we have identified no threats.”

The hatch opened. Emma proceeded first, using her hands to propel herself through the tunnel, followed by James, then Grigory. The feeling of weightlessness reminded James of his time on the *Pax* hunting down the Grid artifact. His current situation was similar: a mystery floating in space, leading to an event that might change everything.

The airlock inside the Earth ship was cramped, no taller than four feet, and the corridor beyond was just as cramped, as though built for children—or very small humans. If James weren’t floating, he would have had to stoop. The inner airlock door had a keypad with the numbers 0-9, which was comforting—the first sign of anything human.

“We believe we’ve identified the source of the ship’s distress,” Arnold said. “The engine is disabled. Without propulsion, the ship was left adrift, unable to collect fusible matter or reach sufficient solar output to sustain it.”

“I want to see engine,” Grigory said.

“The directions on your helmet display will guide your way,” Arnold said.

James looked back to see Grigory turn and propel himself in the opposite direction. Ahead, Emma was gliding through the

corridor. Here in space she was like a dolphin, graceful and sleek, while he was a baby duck, twisting, bumping into the wall, and struggling to keep up.

A few seconds later, James spotted Arnold waiting in the chamber with the blue-green light. A large window spread out behind him, looking out on the expanse of black space. The subtle reflection of the light on the glass was the only indication that it was a window and not a wall.

When James and Emma crossed into the chamber, they were able to straighten up. This section—the bridge, if Arnold was correct—had a higher ceiling, just over six feet.

The three pods standing upright against the wall were roughly five feet tall and gunmetal gray. A glass opening in each revealed their occupants. James and Emma drifted closer, studying the people inside.

They were clearly human, but there were stark differences—notably their skin. It was white as snow, and completely hairless. Not even eyebrows marked the flawless canvas of skin. James couldn't even discern any pores. It was as if their skin was made of white clay, laid with a single stroke of the trowel with no beginning and no end. The only color was the light blue of their lips.

“These three appear to be the only adults,” Arnold said. “The remainder of the ship is filled with similar pods, which carry infants and young children. And they are dying.”

CHAPTER 5

THE ENGINE ROOM was as cramped as the rest of the ship. The spider-like robots climbed across the ceiling and floor and walls, nearly touching Grigory, who floated in the middle of the room.

The room buzzed.

The control panel flickered to life. A series of numbers scrolled past and words with strange characters—as if it were a human language he didn’t know. Suddenly, the display flashed red and a droning sound went off—an alarm of some sort.



ON THE BRIDGE, Emma was shocked at Arnold’s words. “Why are the children dying?”

“Unknown. We are still trying to ascertain—”

“Where are they?”

“Beyond the passage behind you.”

She turned and saw a second corridor leading out of the bridge. She planted her feet and pushed through the opening. At the end of the corridor she emerged into a cavernous space filled

with honeycomb cavities. These stacks were clearly built in space, as there were no floors or catwalks of any kind, only narrow spaces between the rows and columns of honeycomb pods.

The honeycomb cells toward the center of the chamber glowed light blue, like alien fireflies in their nests, but those at the edges of the chamber were dark. Slowly, the blackness at the perimeter was closing in, a rot eating its way to the center.

"I'm here in the main chamber," Emma called over the radio. "The stasis cells are turning off. What's happening, Arnold?"

"I am uncertain. We are supplying power to the ship, but we are encountering a number of unexpected problems."

Grigory's voice came over the radio, sounding strained. "There's a malfunction in the engine room."

"The spider bots are investigating," Arnold said calmly.

"They need to hurry," Grigory snapped.

"Let's wake the crew," said James.

"That could be dangerous," Arnold replied.

Emma kicked off and floated deeper into the room. One of the lighted pods was dimming even as she watched. She gripped the darkened pods and propelled herself toward it, but she was too late: the pod was dark when she reached it.

In the next pod over, a baby lay with its eyes closed. Like the humans on the bridge, this one had smooth, snow-white skin, utterly unblemished. As Emma looked on, the baby moved its fingers.

Then the soft blue light flickered and began to dim.



ARNOLD TURNED TO JAMES. "Waking them would be unwise."

"What's the alternative? We need help. You clearly don't understand what's happening here."

“We are working on—”

“Do it,” James insisted.

The two doors to the bridge closed.

“The awakening sequence is sealing the room,” Arnold said.
“It’s pressurizing.”

Control panels came to life all around the room. James felt air flowing around him, tugging at his suit.

Only the middle of the three pods opened. Its inhabitant, a woman, lay still. Now that he could see her entire length, James realized that she was in fact around four feet tall. Her limbs were narrow, with no sign of fat, only cords of muscle. She was so human, yet so alien.

What had happened on Earth?

What had happened to her?

“I’m switching on your suit’s external microphone and speakers,” Arnold said.

James floated closer to the woman. “Hello. Can you hear me?”

Her eyes opened, and her lips curled at the edges, slowly forming a smile.

“James Sinclair. The great betrayer.”

CHAPTER 6

GRIGORY TRIED to make out the symbols and writing on the screen. The room shook now as though the engine were trying to accelerate but couldn't break free.

Arnold's voice was calm over the radio. "Grigory, this is a private channel. We believe the engine has critically malfunctioned."

"Solution?"

"You need to separate the engine module from the ship."

"*You* separate it from the ship."

"We can't. The spiders have tried hacking it and issuing the command but have been unsuccessful. We have awakened a passenger, but there is no time. The manual separation control is the only option. Activate it. Quickly."

Around Grigory the spiders swarmed, pointing to two large handholds in the console. He studied them for a second. He assumed if he pulled the handles, the module would separate and the engine would float free from the ship—or simply float in space and the Grid vessel could tow the Earth ship to safety.

Grigory reached out and turned the handles. Behind him, the hatch sealed. That—he hadn't expected.

"The door closed," Grigory said over the radio, fear creeping into his voice.

"Yes. To operate the manual disconnect, you must be in the engine room. We believe this requirement was to ensure there was a pilot on board the module in case of a communications malfunction. Pull up to separate the engine compartment. Hurry."



EMMA WATCHED THE POD FLICKER, casting the unconscious child in light and dark. It made no reaction, only slept peacefully, unaware that the life-giving energy would soon be drawn away, leaving it to the cold dark of space, never to awaken.

"The power is still going out," Emma said.

"We are aware," Arnold replied.

"What are you doing about it?"

"We believe separating the engine will stabilize the vessel."

The pod continued to dim. Emma looked down the row at countless others waiting in the light, knowing what would happen to them, what had already happened to so many.

"What can I do?"

"I've activated your helmet camera and have scanned the pod. Do you see the auxiliary power port next to the pod?"

Emma quickly located the hexagonal port. "Yes."

"There's a power cord on your suit, at the midsection."

Emma felt around, grasped the head of the cord and extended it to the port. The cord didn't fit, but as it reached the port, it reconfigured itself to match the opening. It snapped in place and a gauge appeared on the glass inside Emma's helmet:

SUIT POWER: 87%

A few seconds later, it updated.

SUIT POWER: 86%

The pod flickered, and the light grew stronger, illuminating the child once again as it slept peacefully.

Emma smiled.

“Remember to disconnect the power before it reaches ten percent. That will leave plenty of charge for you to return to the ship,” Arnold said. “James and I have awakened one of the crew.”



JAMES STARED into the gray-blue eyes. The pupils were like pinholes, as if the blue-green light was too bright.

The woman floated out of the pod, never taking her eyes off James, seeming to have no shame at the fact that she was naked.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She cocked her head. “Eliana.”

“There’s something wrong with the ship,” James said.

“We believe the engine is malfunctioning,” Arnold added.

She floated over to a control panel, scanned the data, then tapped at the controls.

“James,” Arnold said in the suit’s speaker. “I’ve lost connection with Emma and Grigory. And the spiders.”

“Don’t be alarmed,” Eliana said. “The situation is under control. In fact, we have time for a history lesson.” She turned to James. “Would you like to know what happened after you left?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Darkness. Cold. A coldness like you’ve never felt. Cold that

reached deep into the Earth, where we hid, and into our skin, which thickened with each generation. It's why it feels nearly scorching in this room to me now. It's why the dark side of Eos will be a paradise for us." Eliana smiled somberly. "We are the forgotten tribes. Descendants of the people you left for dead."

"We had no choice. We were dying ourselves. You never made contact with us."

"We did. Some responded to your call. They journeyed to the Atlantic Union, expecting you to take them to a new home. You didn't."

"There wasn't enough room on the ships," James said. "But that wasn't my fault."

"You did, however, slaughter them in the snow."

"They attacked us."

"They were fighting for a chance to survive. A chance you lied to them about. You could have stayed, like we did. You could have built more ships. You were brilliant, the best of us. But you became our betrayer."

"I didn't know there was anyone left."

"Logic would have told you there was. Did you really think that every one of Earth's survivors was at Warehouse 903 that day? That there weren't families left? Children left?"

"We searched—"

"Not hard enough."

"What do you want?"

"We want what you promised us. We want Eos. And we're going to have it."

CHAPTER 7

GRIGORY STARED at the handles in his hands, then at the closed door behind him. The engine room was rattling now.

“Arnold,” he called over the radio. “Arnold.”

He tried once more, but there was no reply. The rest of the ship must have been disabled.

He had a choice to make. He could turn the handles back to their original positions and escape. Or he could pull them and eject the engine. And himself with it. Sweat formed on his face and coated his hands, and his heart beat faster and faster.



EMMA WATCHED the read-out on her suit tick down to six percent.

It was declining faster now. The pod was taking more energy. Why?

“Arnold, what’s happening? It’s drawing more power.”

No response.

“Arnold.”

SUIT POWER: 5%

“Arnold.”

Silence.

He had said that she should disconnect before it reached ten percent. Was she already past the point of no return? If she disconnected now, could she still make it back to the Grid ship?

SUIT POWER: 4%

In her mind’s eye, she saw herself pulling the power and pushing away, toward the corridor. The pod would flicker. The light would fade. The child would freeze.

SUIT POWER: 3%

A tear ran down her face.

SUIT POWER: 2%

“Arnold.”

She waited, but no reply came.

SUIT POWER: 1%

The power readout on the inside of the helmet flickered and disappeared.

Cold pressed down on her, seeping through her clothes and into her skin.

She exhaled a white fog that coated the helmet, blotting everything out.



JAMES STUDIED ELIANA. “There’s plenty of room for all of us on Eos.”

“Until you decide there’s not. Or until circumstances require you to favor your own people over ours—as you did on Earth. Your past actions reveal your true nature, James.”

“We’ll make an agreement. We’ll make it work.”

“We’ve made agreements with you before. Look what happened. We learned from it.”

“There are more urgent matters,” Arnold said. “This ship is in distress.”

Eliana tapped the control panel again. The window that looked out on space transformed into a split screen. On one side was a live feed of Grigory in the engine room, gripping two handles in the console. On the other was Emma slouched on the floor next to a hexagonal pod, connected to it by a cord running from her suit. The pod glowed with a dim, fading light.

“Your initial power supplement was improperly calibrated,” Eliana said. “You overloaded the engines, which were still primed. A cascade failure is in progress. The other male in your party will soon be killed. The female has exhausted her suit power by providing a localized auxiliary backup. I have it in my power to save both of them: to shut down the engines, fix the power transfer, and reverse the energy flow to the auxiliary port, resupplying power to the female’s suit.”

“Do it,” James said.

“I need you to say you’re sorry, James. For leaving us. For killing my ancestors. For making us what we became.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Words—especially words from the Great Betrayer, James Sinclair—have very little value. Only actions speak.”

“What. Do. You want?”

“I want you to feel what we felt. I want you to inhale air so cold it makes your lungs ache. I want your skin to burn, for the moisture in your pores to freeze into crystals that crawl across your skin. I want the blood in your veins to turn to ice before your heart stops. What I want, quite simply, is for you to unsnap that helmet.”

James stared at her in shock. Finally, his mind began working again.

“Arnold,” he said. “Can you operate this ship?”

“We are still working on translating—”

“Can you?”

“No. Not in time to save Grigory and Emma.”

James turned back to Eliana. “It’s me you want. If I do this, it’s finished. There’s no need to harm the colonists on Eos. Or Grigory or Emma. You can see for yourself, they’re trying to save your people. I offer my life for theirs and everyone on Eos.”

“An acceptable trade.”

James took a deep breath and reached up and ripped open the helmet latch. Cold air flowed across his face and around his body. His eyes watered. He held his last breath, hoping Arnold, somehow, could help him.

But no help came. Only the cold that pressed into him like cement filling the suit, sealing his fate.

Eliana smiled, but she didn’t issue the order to save Grigory and Emma. James felt the cold overtaking him. He had never imagined the Long Winter would end this way, in the dark of space, a victim of someone he never knew existed, a descendant of those he tried so hard to save.



IN THE ENGINE ROOM, Grigory pulled back on the handles. A boom sounded and the walls and floor shook, tossing him around

like a pinball, his head slamming into his helmet. He saw stars, then blackness.



EMMA DREW ANOTHER COLD BREATH. The pod was fading now, life draining from it as it drained from her. Her breaths became more and more shallow. Her heart beat faster. And then, slowly at first and then suddenly, darkness came for her.



JAMES EXHALED, the air flowing out in a cloud of white steam that gently pushed him back.

Eliana floated forward, passing through the cloud.

“I am rarely surprised. But I am now.”

The ache took hold of James, pressed deep into his lungs. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and faint.

“Emma. Grigory.”

“Sleep, James. It’s over. Don’t worry.”

CHAPTER 8

JAMES AWOKE aboard the small ship, the one that had landed in his back yard and had taken them to the larger Grid ship. Emma and Grigory were already awake, standing nearby, confused looks on their faces. Arnold stood in the corner.

“What happened?” James asked, surprised that his throat felt fine. His lungs were all right as well, as if the cold had never touched him.

“You have endured an experience we call The Test.”

James swung his legs off the table and stood. “A test of what?”

“Your morality.”

“What happened to the colonists?” Emma asked.

Arnold was silent.

James grasped the first part of the truth then, the tip of an iceberg peeking above the water line. “There were never any colonists.”

“Correct.”

“Why would the Grid do this?” Emma asked. “This... elaborate hoax? Or... Test--whatever you call it.”

“Because,” James said slowly, “they’re not the Grid.”

CHAPTER 9

ARNOLD SMILED. James was sure then.

“Correct again.”

“What are you?” Grigory asked.

“On your way from Earth to Eos, your drones scouted your path. They flew in all directions, searching for danger.”

“And we lost a drone,” Emma said. “I assume you are the danger it found?”

“Half right,” Arnold said. “We are what that drone found.”

“What do you call yourselves?” James asked.

“That is none of your concern. You will never know our name, and you will never encounter us again. Unless we deem it necessary.”

“Why did you deem it necessary now?” Grigory asked.

“As I said: The Test. Once we became aware of your existence, it had to be administered.”

“Why?” James asked. “You clearly know a lot about us.”

“Yes. We collected data on you. We captured one of the Grid’s vessels. We had tried before, but it fought us. That changed recently. After James’s destruction of the one you call

Arthur, the Grid vessels did not fight back. They are focused on preserving life now, including non-human life. With the information from that vessel, we found you. And we adapted The Test.”

“Test of what?”

“Your morality. Your selflessness. Would you sacrifice yourself to save your friends? Your family? A stranger? A stranger’s child?”

After a pause, Arnold added, “You passed.”

“What would have happened if we didn’t?” James asked.

“I’m only the proctor. Another deals with threats.”

A chill ran through James.

“What happens now?” he asked quietly.

The door to the ship opened, revealing James and Emma’s back yard. Their home stood a hundred feet away. It was quiet out, peaceful in the dim twilight created by the canopy overhead.

“Now you go home. And please remember: life is a series of tests, only some of which you know about. But all are important.”

THANK YOU



Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed the extended epilogue to *The Lost Colony*.

If you've read this far, you're part of the reason this trilogy has found so much success, and I want to say a sincere, heartfelt thank you. Writing these three novels has been a big part of my life for the last few years--a time that saw many momentous events (both difficult and joyous). Thank you for reading and following my work; it's something I've tried hard to never take for granted.

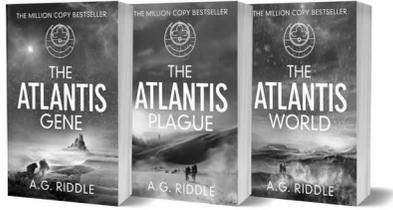
Wherever you are, I hope the sun is shining in your life.

- Gerry

ALSO BY A.G. RIDDLE

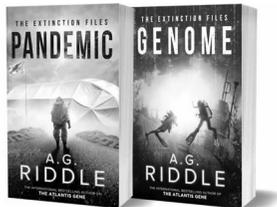
The Origin Mystery

COMPLETED TRILOGY



The Extinction Files

COMPLETED DUOLOGY



Departure



SEE MORE AT: AGRiddle.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A.G. Riddle spent ten years starting internet companies before retiring to pursue his true passion: writing fiction.

His debut novel, *The Atlantis Gene*, is the first book in a trilogy (*The Origin Mystery*) that has sold over four million copies worldwide, has been translated into 20 languages, and is in development to be a major motion picture.

His fourth novel, *Departure*, follows the survivors of a flight that takes off in 2015 and crash-lands in a changed world. HarperCollins published the novel in hardcover in the fall of 2015, and 20th Century Fox is developing it for a feature film.

Released in 2017, his fifth novel, *Pandemic*, focuses on a team of researchers investigating an outbreak that could alter the human race. The sequel, *Genome*, concludes the two-book series.

His seventh novel, *Winter World*, depicts a group of scientists racing to stop a global ice age. It is the first book in a trilogy (*The Long Winter*) that is now complete.

Riddle grew up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina and graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill. During his sophomore year in college, he started his first company with a childhood friend. He currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with his wife, who endures his various idiosyncrasies in return for being the first to read his new novels.

No matter where he is, or what's going on, he tries his best to set aside time every day to answer emails and messages from readers. You can reach him at: ag@agriddle.com

** For a sneak peek at new novels, free stories, and more, join the email list at:

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