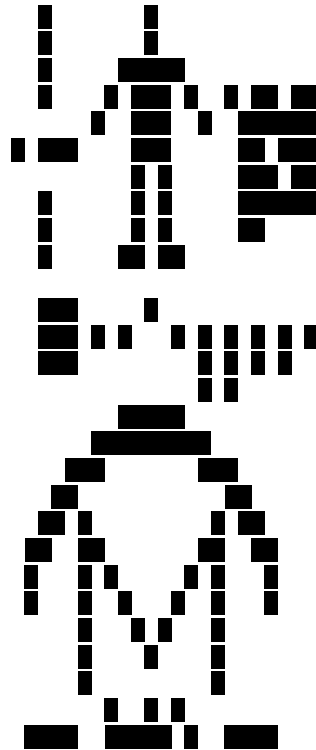


FIRST CONTACT

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"Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other, citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time. A book is proof that humans are capable of working magic."

- Carl Sagan, COSMOS

HOST

And we're joined once again by a longtime friend of the program, Dr. Carl Foster to discuss the TRAPPIST-1 system, where seven Earth-like planets were recently found-

DR. FOSTER

"Earth-like" is a bit of a stretch, I'm afraid. But three of them are in what we call the Goldilocks zone-

HOST

So... bears live there?

The audience laughs at the lame joke. Dr. Foster smiles.

DR. FOSTER

Anything's possible. But really, it means they might have liquid water. Now, water doesn't mean atmosphere, oxygen, or any of the other things that humans - or bears - need. But something could live there. Maybe.

HOST

So how do we find out? Send "something" a postcard?

DR. FOSTER

Believe me, we've tried. So far, nobody's written us back.

HOST

But the hope is that TRAPPIST-1 is different, right? That the question might finally be answered?

While the Host talks, Dr. Foster is looking over his shoulder at the door. He's obviously distracted. We REVERSE TO REVEAL:

KAREN SINGH (30s, bright and hardworking, if a bit of a smart-ass), his head researcher, giving him an urgent "wrap it up!" signal. He tries to shake his head "not now" and turns back to the Host, who's trying to get his attention back.

HOST (CONT'D)

Dr. Foster? Did you hear my question? I said-

DR. FOSTER

Yes, sorry. The thing to remember about all of these exoplanets is that they're a **long** way away.

(MORE)

DR. FOSTER (CONT'D)
Even if they replied instantly, we
wouldn't see it for 80 years-

HOST
And I thought UPS was slow...

Again, a laugh from the audience. Dr. Foster is annoyed by the interruption, but maintains his TV gameface and smiles.

DR. FOSTER
Speculation is all well and good,
but honestly, if we're ever going
to make meaningful contact with
another species, we'll need to be
in the same solar system.
(looking at Karen)
I'm sorry to cut out early, but it
seems I have a science emergency.

He unceremoniously gets up, takes off his microphone, and hurries over to Karen. They walk, as he checks his phone.

KAREN
That's how you "wrap it up?"

DR. FOSTER
Relax. I'm sure whatever paper-
pusher is at Abbot can wait-

KAREN
You think I'd pull you off TV for a
site visit? We have an Alpha Code.

THIS gets his attention. He stops and looks at Karen, a quizzical look on his face.

KAREN (CONT'D)
Yeah, you heard me. Let's go.

She BANGS through the studio doors, and we CUT TO:

4

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY

4

A freezer door opens to reveal NOAH FOSTER (30s, a handsome but disheveled genius). Noah's in his pajamas, staring at his options unenthusiastically. He calls over his shoulder-

NOAH
Hey Jess? Did the waffles run out?

Noah's live-in girlfriend JESSICA DOUGLAS (30s, with the intelligent, probing eyes of a journalist) enters the room, looking much more put together in a linen shirt and jeans.

JESSICA

Waffles can't *run* anywhere. If the question is whether you devoured all our waffles, the answer is yes.

NOAH

Oooh, I love it when you talk grammar to me. Cereal it is.

Noah grabs a box of cereal and pours himself a bowl. He goes over to sit down at the kitchen table, while Jessica grabs a notebook and a laptop and throws them in her bag.

NOAH (CONT'D)

You're visiting the Lingua Franca Institute today, right?

JESSICA

Yeah, I'm gonna head that way now.

Noah grabs a stack of paper, held together by a binder clip.

NOAH

Hang on, I made something for you.
(handing her the papers)
It's a phrasebook. All eight languages the kids will be speaking are in there.

JESSICA

Noah, you didn't have to-

NOAH

I know, but it's not every day you get to speak to a crowd like that. And, y'know, when in Rome-

JESSICA

(playfully)
Get your own job, Mr. Pajamas.

He smiles sheepishly. Jessica thumbs through it, and frowns.

NOAH

You don't like it? What's wrong?

JESSICA

No, nothing, it's really sweet.

NOAH

Babe, we've lived together two years now. I can tell when something's bugging you.

Jessica looks up from the phrasebook, and meets his gaze.

JESSICA

You really wanna know? I'm worried, Noah. I'm worried about money. You sit here making stuff like this-

NOAH

And working on my research! I'm getting close, I can feel it-

JESSICA

And that's great. But I can't keep us afloat forever. What about that job Molly put you up for?

NOAH

Studying teenage linguistics to more effectively advertise to them on social media? Hard pass.

JESSICA

I know you're overqualified, but sometimes beggars can't be choosers. Especially with what happened... just take the meeting?

Noah, seeing the concern in her eyes, softens his stance.

NOAH

You're right. I'm sorry. I'll call them back today.

JESSICA

Thank you. I appreciate it.
(checking her watch)
I gotta run. See you tonight?

NOAH

I'll be here. Making sure no more food runs off.

She smiles, plants a kiss on Noah's cheek, and grabs her bag. As Noah watches her head out the door we WIPE TO:

5

EXT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - DAY - ESTABLISHING

5

A squat brick building with a dome-shaped telescope hood on top of it, surrounded by an open plot of land in northern Jersey. The campus is dotted with FOUR LARGE RADIO TELESCOPES, pointed at the sky. We PUSH INSIDE to find:

6

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - DAY

6

A smaller version of NASA's iconic Mission Control - screens and keyboards everywhere. Colorful graphs of the solar system, atmospheric conditions, and weather maps run on every wall. RESEARCHERS work at terminals, intently focused.

Karen BURSTS through the door of the lab, Dr. Foster right behind her. She scans the room quickly...

KAREN

Rick!

One of the researchers, RICK (30s, nerdy), scurries over.

RICK

I'm glad you're back. The sensor on the Northeast Little Ear has been going nuts - radio waves coming in off the charts.

Rick nervously leads the pair over to his terminal. Karen looks at it a moment, then frowns, skeptical...

KAREN

Any trouble with this one recently?

RICK

None. I can reboot the dish, but I've been recording everything as it comes in. Just in case...

He lets this hang for a moment - he doesn't want to jinx what's happening by saying it out loud.

DR. FOSTER

As you should - the protocol's in place for a reason.

KAREN

Don't get too excited. This could be Green Bank all over again.

DR. FOSTER

Or it could be the day we've all been waiting for. Stay on protocol.

RICK

Yes sir. Of course.

KAREN

Dr. Foster, can I have a word?

She grabs his arm roughly and pulls him into the hallway.

7

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

7

Outside the control room, Karen and Dr. Foster speak in hushed voices.

KAREN

You want to cool it with the "day we've all been waiting for" talk?

DR. FOSTER

Karen, what are you afraid of?

KAREN

Oh I don't know, maybe NASA finding out about our little "unauthorized" transmissions? And throwing us in-

DR. FOSTER

Nobody EVER needs to know about those. Pull yourself together. You think it's a false alarm? Prove it.

He heads for the control room. OFF Karen, shaking her head...

8

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

8

Foster and Karen re-enter - everyone is so engrossed by what's happening they barely notice. Karen beelines for Rick.

KAREN

Which Ear is the signal coming in on again?

RICK

Northeast - why?

She walks over to another terminal, and logs herself in. While typing quickly:

KAREN

I'll point the Northwest at it and see if I can confirm. Coordinates?

Rick peers in to look at his screen, and reads the numbers:

RICK

Right Ascension 10 hours 36 minutes and 4.83 seconds. Declination plus 18.4086 degrees.

Karen types these in and hits a few more keys.

OUT ON THE LAWN, one of the satellite dishes ROTATES.

KAREN

How much you wanna bet it's just
another old Russian satellite?
They've left more junk in space-
(she whistles)
Or maybe not. Good lord - are you
guys seeing this wattage?

RICK

The energy scale's enormous.
Whatever - or whoever - is sending
this, it's not an accident.

The control room starts to buzz as people get excited.

KAREN

It's not local, either...

DR. FOSTER

What do you mean?

KAREN

I'm showing the signal's origin as
four to five AU away.

This REALLY sets the room buzzing - this is starting to sound
like the real thing. Dr. Foster eagerly presses for detail-

DR. FOSTER

What's the margin of error on that?

Karen hits a few more keys as she double checks her work.

KAREN

High. It's a tiny parallax, but I'm
confident it's outside the Asteroid
Belt. It looks like the origin
might be right around Jupiter...

Rick looks up from his monitor with a shocked expression.

RICK

Umm... Dr. Foster? This signal is
in **binary**.

Suddenly the room goes silent. Rick hits a few buttons and
his screen fills the entire wall - AN INCOMING STREAM OF ONES
AND ZEROS TOO FAST TO READ.

Everyone looks to Dr. Foster. It's hard to read his face - is
he scared? Excited? Overwhelmed?

DR. FOSTER

My God. They're finally here.

As we take one last look at the first transmission we CUT TO:

9

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME

9

Noah, still in pajamas, sits on his couch with his laptop open. Next to him, his phone BUZZES - the caller ID reads "**Dr. Carl Foster, Ph. Dickhead**". He declines it.

Noah turns his attention back to the laptop, but before long his phone BUZZES again. Same caller. Frustrated, Noah answers-

NOAH

What do you want?

Dr. Foster's voice sounds strange coming through the phone - he speaks in a half-whisper.

DR. FOSTER

Noah, it's your father. I need you to come in. To the Observatory.

NOAH

I don't hear from you for 6 months and you lead with *that*? I'm busy.

DR. FOSTER

Wait! I need your help!

NOAH

Then you shoulda helped me when I needed it. Unless Mom is in the hospital, I'm hanging up.

Dr. Foster is breathing heavily, almost panting.

DR. FOSTER

No, you... you don't understand. All these years we've been looking, and finally... they found us.

NOAH

Dad... what the hell are you talking about?

DR. FOSTER

First Contact, Noah. I'm talking about **First Contact**.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

10

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - LOBBY - DAY

10

Noah enters the lobby of the observatory to find Dr. Foster waiting for him, with Karen at his side.

DR. FOSTER

Noah! Thanks for coming. I-

He halfheartedly goes to shake Noah's hand before thinking better of it. Noah watches him warily.

DR. FOSTER (CONT'D)

We, um, could really use your help.

NOAH

So nobody's debunked this yet?

KAREN

Quite the opposite. The spectrum charts inside-

NOAH

Sorry, who are you?

Dr. Foster goes to introduce her but Karen speaks for herself-

KAREN

Karen Singh - I'm the head of radio wave analysis here at Abbott.

She holds out her hand. Noah hesitates, but shakes it.

DR. FOSTER

Karen is one of our brightest young minds. Graduated from C-SAIL a couple years ago, and has been with me ever since. She's also the, uh-

NOAH

Daughter you never had. I get it.

There's an awkward beat, as Dr. Foster gives his son a pained look. Karen tries to break the tension between the two men.

KAREN

As fun as this family bonding session is, I think we could all use a little hard science talk right now. Come on, this way...

Noah follows her down the hallway and into the...

11

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

11

Karen leads Noah through the room, Dr. Foster just behind.

KAREN

The margin of error's pretty big,
but I'm fairly certain the signal
originated from right near Jupiter.

NOAH

And you're positive this isn't
another energetic anomaly like the
"Wow!" Signal back in the 70's?

DR. FOSTER

What we observed was over 60 times
stronger than the "Wow!"-

Noah lets out a low whistle.

KAREN

But the strength and origin were
simply the *first* indicators we had
that it was... intentional. The
real smoking gun-

She runs a quick command at her terminal and clears the
screen. She presses "Enter" and her screen starts to fill
with HEXADECIMAL TEXT:

6F3DA740A5BF190C14F...

The text continues to scroll, wrapping around the screen and
filling it to the bottom.

KAREN (CONT'D)

It's a UHF radio wave with simple
frequency modulation. Like an FM
radio. We recorded it, and... well,
it was in **binary**. I converted it to
hex to fit it on screen, but still -
you're looking at the first
extraterrestrial communication
mankind has ever received.

Noah takes this in for a moment.

NOAH

Have you started to analyze it?

DR. FOSTER

Of course. The signal repeats 32
times - every 636 hex digits.

KAREN

We've tried every cipher we can think of - we even tried RSA decryption on it. Nothing but snow.

NOAH

Have you heard from any other labs? Maybe they've been able to crack-

DR. FOSTER

No other lab has received the signal. I've put out very careful feelers, and so far it's just us.

NOAH

But what about the IAA Protocols? Don't you have to, like, inform the UN immediately?

DR. FOSTER

Those protocols are there to make the public feel safe. Nobody thinks that's how it really works.

NOAH

So nobody else knows?

DR. FOSTER

Just one person - Jack Cranston, from the DoD. He's a former Marine, almost an astronaut. Woulda been, if we still sent men to space. He runs the SETI program now.

NOAH

SETI? I thought they got rid of that in the 90s...

DR. FOSTER

Officially, they did. Unofficially, they just stopped looking. They've never stopped worrying about being found. Don't worry about Jack - I had to tell someone. He knows space and can keep quiet, and at this point, that's about all we can ask. He'll be here soon.

Off Noah, wary, we CUT TO:

12 **EXT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - DAY - ESTABLISHING** 12

A beautiful two-story glass and steel building on the banks of the Hudson, the LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE. Young, multi-ethnic CHILDREN play outside in the pristine playground. We PUSH IN on a floor-to-ceiling glass window, into...

13 **INT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY** 13

The Dean's Office is spacious, well-lit, and sparsely furnished. Dean GRACE OTAMURA (40s, a sharp, elegant, Japanese Gwyneth Paltrow) sits behind a slab of mahogany.

Jessica sits across from her, leaning forward in her chair with an old school pen-and-paper notebook.

JESSICA

"Groundbreaking" is a pretty big claim, Miss Otamura.

GRACE

Please, call me Grace. And believe me, it's not one I make lightly. But what happens at this school... it's truly astonishing.

JESSICA

It's well understood that children are able to learn languages faster than adults-

GRACE

Yes, of course. But I'm not just talking about proficiency...

Grace gets up and walks over to the enormous window, beckoning Jessica over. Jessica rises to join her.

Outside, they see two YOUNG CHILDREN playing paddycake.

GRACE (CONT'D)

These children invented a language all their own, with rhyme, meter, and grammar. They're savants.

JESSICA

And you think that Lingua Franca's language program is responsible?

GRACE

I know it is. Everyone's heard we teach our students eight languages, but they don't see what we see.

JESSICA

Which is?

GRACE

Once the children learn three or four, the rest just sort of... fall into place. They could learn 10, 15... I've seen a 2nd grader learn Korean in a day. It's like they start seeing past the languages, and manage to internalize the archetypes and structures that make them all work. The math *behind* the language, if you will.

Jessica looks back at the kids playing paddycake. From behind the glass, they look like any other happy kids.

JESSICA

I don't know... It sounds a little mystical.

GRACE

One of the many reasons we plan to research it in detail in the coming years. I just thought you and your magazine might want a little... sneak preview.

JESSICA

Can I hear it?

GRACE

Excuse me?

JESSICA

Their made-up language. Can I hear it?

OFF Grace, smiling at the thought of a cover story...

14

INT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - PLAYGROUND

14

Grace leads Jessica to the two girls, who are now huddled in a corner of the playground, whispering with a boy.

GRACE

Annie, Amy, may I speak to you for a moment?

The girls turn around, revealing the boy behind them is MATEO (last seen digging in Central Park). The three children stare at Jessica - clearly, they don't get many visitors here.

ANNIE

Who are you?

Before Jessica can answer, Grace covers-

GRACE

This is Jessica. She's a friend of mine and Dr. Erich's. She came all this way, and I thought she'd like to hear your special language.

Mateo WHISPERS something under his breath, and Amy smiles.

AMY

What special language?

Jessica laughs, and crouches down.

JESSICA

The one he just spoke, sweetheart. What did he say?

ANNIE

She can't tell you.

Jessica looks to Grace for help. Amy WHISPERS back to Mateo.

GRACE

Come on, girls. It's okay if it's a bad word...

MATEO

(firm)

They said they didn't want to tell you, Miss Grace.

Mateo's voice is unsettling. Grace stiffens, turns to Jessica-

GRACE

I'm sorry, they're usually not this difficult. I think they're just showing off for someone new-

Jessica locks eyes with Mateo. She never sees him blink.

JESSICA

No, it's fine... I understand. Thank you for your time.

OFF Mateo, staring daggers at her, we CUT TO:

15

EXT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - PARKING LOT - SAME TIME

15

A black SUV with completely blacked out windows pulls up. A BODYGUARD in a suit and an earpiece hops out of the car and runs to the back door. He opens it gingerly, revealing JACK CRANSTON (50s, a steely-eyed, hard-bitten government man).

Cranston steps out and turns to the Bodyguard.

CRANSTON

You tell anyone I was here and I'll have you court-martialled faster'n you can say FUBAR. Got that?

OFF the Bodyguard, nodding and swallowing hard...

16

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

16

Cranston steps confidently into the control room and scans it quickly. He sees Dr. Foster, still at the computer with Noah and Karen, and makes a beeline for him. Dr. Foster sees him coming and gets up to meet him halfway.

CRANSTON

This isn't a call I get everyday. What's the update?

DR. FOSTER

All signs still point to an... extraterrestrial source.

CRANSTON

Then we've got protocol to follow. You and your team are now privy to the most top secret piece of intel the US government has. I'm going to need a list of every single person-

Cranston has been eyeing everyone in the room - he clearly trusts no one. He notices Noah doesn't have a security badge.

CRANSTON (CONT'D)

Where's your ID?

NOAH

I'm uh, not a "full-time" employee-

KAREN

(gesturing to the screens)
He's a cryptolinguist - his dad brought him here to help us turn all these **numbers** into **words**.

Cranston looks Noah dead in the eyes. Noah holds out his hand-

NOAH

Noah Foster. Nice to meet you.

Cranston looks at Noah's hand, then looks at Dr. Foster.

CRANSTON

This is your son? The one who got kicked out of Johns Hopkins? Didn't-

DR. FOSTER

That was a long time ago, Jack.

NOAH

And what's it have to do with any of this anyway?

Cranston ignores Noah, and appeals to Dr. Foster.

CRANSTON

Surely there are some qualified people, doctors of linguistics...

DR. FOSTER

Noah stays, Jack. He's had his issues, but he's the most intuitive linguist I know. He was breaking new ground on the Behistun Inscription as an undergrad.

CRANSTON

That supposed to mean something?

NOAH

Uh... Yeah? It's basically the Sumerian Rosetta Stone.

CRANSTON

I'm not a linguistics expert-

NOAH

Obviously. The point is, Sumerian languages used to be a mystery, until the Behistun Inscription helped us crack the code. I'm really good at cracking codes.

There's a tense beat as Cranston eyes Dr. Foster, who nods.

CRANSTON

Fine. But I want a signed NDA before I leave. Carl, you still have a secure line in your office?

DR. FOSTER

Of course, it's just upstairs. I'll show you.

Cranston turns to exit, and Dr. Foster follows him. Just before the door, he looks back at Noah, who shrugs.

NOAH

What? He was the one being a dick.

DR. FOSTER

I stuck my neck out for you, Noah. Don't make me regret it.

As Dr. Foster exits, Noah rolls his eyes and sits down at the terminal next to Karen. He starts trying to use the keyboard, but all he manages to do is make all the screens GO DARK. He's clearly out of his depth. Karen looks at him, curious.

KAREN

So what happened at Johns Hopkins?
(off his look)
Hey, I got a DUI when I was 19.
Nobody's perfect-

NOAH

Can we just get to work? Please?

Karen side-eyes him, but slides in to take control.

KAREN

Whatever. Putting the sequence up on the main screen.

She hits a few keys and the long hexadecimal string from earlier fills the wall-sized screen. Noah stares at them-

6F3DA740A5BF190C14F...

NOAH

Can you break it back into binary?

She types a quick command, and the string reappears in binary-

0110 1111 0011 1101 1010 0111 0100 0000 1010 0101 1011...

Noah scans the screen, but nothing catches his eye.

NOAH (CONT'D)

How about in decimal?

Karen hits a few more keys. The binary is replaced with:

32832498925116870148431...

KAREN

Anything in particular you're looking for?

NOAH

Just trying to get a sense for any sort of discernible pattern... can you switch it back to binary?

She does so, and Noah stares at the screen, stumped...

0110 1111 0011 1101 1010 0111 0100 0000 1010 0101 1011 ...

17

EXT. CARIBBEAN SEA - DAY - ESTABLISHING

17

The idyllic waters of Quintana Roo, Mexico. A little ways from the coastline of white sand and palm trees sits a large yacht whose stern proclaims her THE APOPHIS. The ship is sleek, with a helicopter pad on top clustered next to a miniature forest of scientific gear - antennas, dishes, etc.

18

INT. "THE APOPHIS" SCIENCE VESSEL - CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS - DAY18

Inside, we meet FRANCIS FRAZIER (40s), the eccentric leader of this expedition. He's a short man, but well built, with close-cropped hair and mesmerizing eyes which flit around the room when he speaks.

Francis is going through a series of GURDJIEFF MOVEMENTS - slow, deliberate contortions of the body somewhere between yoga and ballet. There's a knock on the door, and his long-time First Mate VIJAY OUSPENSKY (50s) comes in. If Vijay's surprised to find Francis dancing shirtless, it doesn't show.

VIJAY

Sorry to interrupt your Work, but we might have found something.

FRANCIS

The Work on oneself is neverending, Vijay, you know that.

Francis walks over casually and puts on his shirt, while Vijay lays a tablet on his desk.

VIJAY

So after today's survey, we were able to combine RF scanning with our acoustic cameras to get a more detailed scan of the Sac Actun-

FRANCIS

Big picture, my friend. The whole,
not the details. What did we find?

VIJAY

A cavern, hollowed out above the
underwater rivers right here-
(he points on the tablet)
It's at least 5 meters tall, and
completely sealed from above and
below. I think it's a tomb.

Francis's eyes light up at this. He peers at the map-

FRANCIS

The Medicine Man of Coba, did he-

VIJAY

For the last 4 years of his life.

FRANCIS

Excellent. How soon can we get a
drill over the site?

VIJAY

That... is where we might have a
problem.

OFF Francis's confusion, we PRE-LAP an angry voice:

KEKCHI TRIBESMAN (PRE-LAP)

It's not about money, Mr. Frazier-

19

EXT. SAC ACTUN CENOTE - DAY

19

Near the mouth of an enormous well in the jungle, Francis argues with a local KEKCHI TRIBESMAN - one of the modern-day descendants of the Mayans. The tribesman is a living illustration of modern compromise, wearing a traditional Mayan sombrero and capixay over Levi's blue jeans.

KEKCHI TRIBESMAN

If it were, we'd have sold our
lands long ago. This is a sacred
site, where many generations have
lived and died.

FRANCIS

This is in the name of *science*-

KEKCHI TRIBESMAN

The answer is still no. One does
not disturb the sleep of the dead.

Francis leans in close to the tribesman, and growls:

FRANCIS

We are all asleep, my good man. We are born asleep, and most of us die asleep. But once, a man lived here who maybe, just maybe, woke up. All I ask is to look for him.

The tribesman thinks on this for a moment. Francis smiles expectantly, but the tribesman shakes his head.

KEKCHI TRIBESMAN

I'm sorry Mr. Frazier. It is wrong.

FRANCIS

Right and wrong are merely constructs, human inventions. All we truly have is our conscience - I suggest you examine yours.

Francis spins around and walks away, stone-faced. As he passes Vijay, he leans over and whispers:

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

We drill tonight. Make it work.

OFF Vijay, nodding resolutely...

20

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

20

It's dark outside when Jessica gets home. She tosses her bag on the couch, and calls out-

JESSICA

Hey hun! Lingua Franca was super weird - you would have loved the woman I spoke to though...

No response. Jessica pokes her head into the hall-

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Noah? You home?

She checks a side table by the door, where she sees a NOTE - **"Went to see about a job. Don't wait up. XOXO, N"**

She checks the clock, a little surprised, but shrugs and smiles. She pulls her laptop out of her bag and takes a seat. OFF Jessica, getting to work...

21

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

21

The lab is just Noah and Karen. They stare blankly at the screen, the epiphany eludes them. Noah YAWNS.

KAREN

Oh man, my brain is fried. I need to take a minute, reset the system.

But as Karen begins a yawn of her own, Noah's eyes light up.

NOAH

Reset... Hang on, can you bring back the points in the transmission where the sequence repeats?

She types, and the screen fills with chunks of binary:

```
01101001011011 110111100111101
01101001011011 110111100111101
01101001011011 110111100111101
```

NOAH (CONT'D)

What happened to the leading zero?

KAREN

What leading zero?

NOAH

When you showed me the binary earlier, it started with a zero. I'm sure - I remember clocking it as a possible signal bit.

Karen furrows her brow and rolls to a different terminal.

KAREN

Don't touch anything - let me check the original log and conversion.

She types furiously at the new screen, too fast for Noah to follow.

KAREN (CONT'D)

It looks like the repeated segment was an odd number of bits, so the computer auto-added a leading zero for the hex conversion. Since it happened on arrival, it's been stored that way everywhere-

Noah has stopped paying attention and interrupts her.

NOAH

So they sent us an odd number of bits? That's kind of... *odd*, right?

KAREN

Somewhat...

She checks the screen and hits just a few buttons.

KAREN (CONT'D)

Now this is interesting. I decomposed the total number of bits, 2,545, and it's a semi-prime.
(off his confused look)
It's only got two factors - 5 and 509. Have you heard of the Arecibo message?

NOAH

Of course. It's a pretty picture we sent into space 30 years ago.

KAREN

(miffed)

It's more than just a picture - some would call it the most distilled representation of humanity of all time.

NOAH

Others would call it a publicity stunt. What's your point?

KAREN

One of the *geniuses* of the message was using a semi-prime number of bits. So the number corresponds to only one possible grid of pixels.

NOAH

You think this is an image?

KAREN

You have a better idea?

They look at each other, and let this hang for a moment.

NOAH

Well, let's see it then.

Karen keys in some commands. The long rectangle appears on screen in chunks, like Escher's *Metamorphosis*.

KAREN

I'm going to treat each one inch square as a pixel, and fill them according to the binary string - white for one and black for zero.

She does this, and the rectangle quickly fills - with nothing but incomprehensible NOISE. Noah looks back, disappointed.

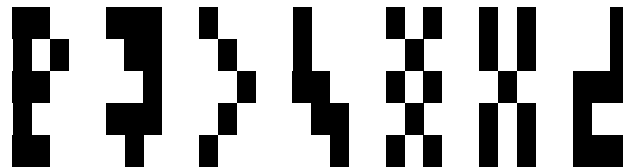
NOAH

Pretty clever idea, though.

KAREN

There's one more option - I can fill it horizontally instead of vertically.

She re-runs the program, and the signal FALLS INTO PLACE as a sequence of simple shapes-



Both Noah and the Karen are **stunned**.

KAREN (CONT'D)

I can't believe that really worked.

NOAH

It's in cuneiform!

He starts throwing notebooks into a bag, to Karen's surprise.

KAREN

Where are you going??

NOAH

I've seen this script before! I need to look at some notes in my office. Don't show this to anyone yet. I'll be back as soon as I can.

He runs out, elated by this new breakthrough.

OFF Karen, staring at the strange symbols, enraptured...

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

22

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

22

Noah comes in to find Jessica at the kitchen table, typing away at her laptop. He sees two dinner plates, and is immediately apologetic-

NOAH

Sorry - my phone died, and I got held up...

JESSICA

All good. But your lasagna did run away. How'd the job thing go?

NOAH

Well, it's not a job *exactly*... my dad asked me to help him out.

Jessica's surprised by this, but covers quickly.

JESSICA

Your dad, huh? That's unexpected-

NOAH

Not my first choice, but like you said, beggars can't be choosers. And he's paying me, so...

JESSICA

It's great. I really appreciate it - what's he have you doing?

NOAH

I mean, you know him - I had to sign an NDA and everything. As always, it's super top secret.

JESSICA

I'm sure it is, Mr. Bond.

She gives a sly smile and turns back to her laptop. Noah walks around behind her and starts rubbing her back.

NOAH

How'd it go at Lingua Franca? You talk to any of the kids? Phrasebook come in handy?

JESSICA

It was... interesting. The kids have their own little language, but they wouldn't tell us what they were saying.

NOAH

A secret language, huh? They just made it up?

JESSICA

Apparently. The Dean told me that once the kids learn three or four languages, they start picking up new ones in *days*. She said it's amazing, like they're seeing "the math behind the language." I think they're just verbalizing that...

Noah nods, fascinated by this - it's right up his alley.

NOAH

Uh huh. Like they're tapping into a universal unconscious language. I mean, that's really incredible...
(a lightbulb goes off)
... and also kind of genius. Oh wow-

JESSICA

I can ask about writing a paper on it, if you want. I'm talking to the founder, Erich von Hippel, tomorrow-

NOAH

No, no need. There's tons of research. There probably was a universal language once - you remember the Tower of Babel?

JESSICA

The Bible story?

NOAH

Kinda. It's one of those myths that occurs across cultures, and usually when there's that much smoke...
Sorry, I gotta go check something.

Noah, lost in thought, heads for the office. OFF Jessica, unsure how to feel about this new, driven Noah...

FRANCIS
 (leaning into the mic)
 It's OK - it's dry in there.
 Somehow. You can get out if you
 override the airlock.

IN THE SUB, one of the DIVERS messes with the door and POPS it open, revealing dry, musty air. The divers step out into-

26

INT. CAVERN - SAME TIME

26

A MASSIVE underground cavern. STRANGE SHAPES cover the walls, barely visible in the dark. The Divers look around, awed-

DIVER #1
 Jesus - are you guys seeing this?

DIVER #2
 We've gotta be 100 feet under-

ON THE BRIDGE, Francis looks at the cameras - all FUZZED OUT or out of focus. He turns to Vijay.

FRANCIS
 Why aren't we getting anything?

VIJAY
 They're calibrated for the water -
 that cave should be full of it...

IN THE CAVERN, the Divers start unloading equipment.

DIVER #1
 You hear that?

The other Diver looks around, and a faint WHISTLING sound comes from the hole their sub left in the ground.

DIVER #2
 You think that's from-

WHOOSH!!! A jet of water comes SCREAMING through the floor, lifting both Divers and tossing them like ragdolls against the sides of the cave, then collapsing the floor-

ON THE BRIDGE, Francis and Vijay watch the screens FUZZ OUT. They listen helplessly, until Francis grabs the mic:

FRANCIS
 Hello? Come in! Can you hear me??

But there's no answer. He looks at Vijay, who can't bear to look back at him. Francis SLAMS the microphone in rage.

27

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - STUDY - EARLY MORNING

27

Noah sits at his desk in the center of a massive, sprawling investigation. Three half-empty mugs are scattered among the mess, and a stack of NOTECARDS is laid out to his side.

On each card, he's written in SUMERIAN CUNEIFORM (ancient, angular looking words), with English underneath. They read:

**is/to be (positive linking)
concept of ownership
affirmative/negative
individual/collective**

Noah's laptop is playing a YOUTUBE VIDEO OF HIM GIVING A LECTURE. He's in a classroom, symbols on the whiteboard...

NOAH (ON LAPTOP)

The Tower of Babel, or confusion of tongues, is one of the few myths that appears across almost all ancient cultures. It's likely that all mankind spoke a single language during our early development, but at some point that clearly changed. Every culture explains it their own way. In Sumerian legend, a god-king cast a spell to confuse the tongues of his enemies. It is, after all, awfully hard to fight together when you can't communicate. Now, in Celtic lore it's a different story-

KNOCK KNOCK. Noah snaps around to look at the door as Jessica quietly enters. He presses pause on the video, while she takes in the scene and sees the manic energy in Noah's eyes.

JESSICA

(delicately)

Have you been in here all night?

NOAH

Yeah - I've just been working on the thing for my dad.

JESSICA

What's that have to do with your old Sumerian research? Some old almanac to translate?

NOAH

("zipping" his lips)

NDA, remember?

He looks Jessica in the eye and tries to sound sincere.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Sorry, I'm not trying to cut you out. But I figure if I'm going to be rebuilding my relationship with my dad, I have to play by his rules-

JESSICA

It's fine, I get it. But for the record, you guys are super weird. And you still need to sleep.

NOAH

I will... but not right now. Right now I actually have to go back.

JESSICA

Back to the Observatory? Babe, you really need to rest-

NOAH

It's important. I'm sorry - I'll explain everything soon.

JESSICA

Will you, though?

Noah looks up, unsure what to say. He gathers up the stack of cards and his laptop and hurries past a bewildered Jessica.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

At least drink some coffee-

But he's already gone. She shakes her head, and goes over to his desk to clean up a little bit. When she moves one of the coffee mugs, she uncovers a BROCHURE for the Sumerian Exhibit at the Met. On the cover is a large BLACK OBELISK, circled in red pen. She picks it up, intrigued, and wanders into...

28

INT. NOAH'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

28

Jessica pulls out her cellphone and dials a number.

JESSICA

Hi, Erich? It's Jessica Douglas, from the magazine. How would you feel about doing our interview somewhere a little different today? When's the last time you went to the Met? ... Great. See you there.

Jessica hangs up. OFF the "Sumerian Exhibit" brochure...

29

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - DAY

29

Dr. Foster is in the control room with Karen - the CUNEIFORM is on the big screen.

DR. FOSTER

It's modeled after the Arecibo?

KAREN

Mathematically, yes. But the content is wholly unique. Noah thinks it's a cuneiform script.

Dr. Foster, turns back to the screens.

DR. FOSTER

Do you know anything about Sumer?

KAREN

I had a hard enough time learning computers and astrophysics... dead civilizations never interested me.

DR. FOSTER

Nor me. History is a discipline for those too unimaginative to make it.

KAREN

Until it repeats itself, I guess...

She looks down, now focused on her keyboard. Dr. Foster walks around to look over her shoulder at the screen.

DR. FOSTER

What's that bit there? The little lopsided asterisk-

KAREN

(focused)

I don't know yet.

DR. FOSTER

Have you considered uploading our database into the NMNH-

Karen turns over her shoulder, frustrated-

KAREN

Look, this isn't gonna go any faster with you backseat driving. I'm modeling the characters as fast as I can. Just let me do my thing, and I'll make you look plenty smart. Like I always do.

32

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - DR. FOSTER'S OFFICE - DAY

32

A spacious office, with a panoramic view of the MASSIVE TELESCOPE DISHES out the window. FRAMED IMAGES cover the wall: news reports on UFOs, the Hessdalen Lights, redacted FBI documents, etc. Dr. Foster stares at it, lost in thought.

Noah barges in, still going a mile a minute-

NOAH

OK, what's going on? You figure something out?

Dr. Foster doesn't respond to this, or even turn around-

DR. FOSTER

I always thought things would feel different after we made contact, didn't you? But now we're here and... Plus ça change, I suppose.

NOAH

Don't get solipsistic on me - we've got miles to go before we sleep.

Foster goes over to his desk and sits down. He speaks calmly:

DR. FOSTER

Noah, my reputation is very important to this Observatory. I trust that you understand why.

NOAH

Yeah, sure. People see you on TV, donate to the Observatory, the lights stay on. Rinse and repeat.

DR. FOSTER

Right. But you're not the most... reputable person. And a stunning discovery like this coming from you... well, it would draw attention to your past.

NOAH

(disbelieving)

You think my *past* is going to discredit this report? *Our* report?

DR. FOSTER

Maybe. Maybe not. But it would be embarrassing. For everyone.

Noah puts his hands on his father's desk, leaning in-

NOAH

Maybe I wouldn't be such an embarrassment if you'd made a little more time to help-

DR. FOSTER

(raising his voice)

Do NOT turn this around on me! A man's reputation is nobody's responsibility but his own. *You* screwed up. That's not going away.

NOAH

Whatever. You can take credit for all of it. You always do.

(turning to go)

I've got work to do.

As Noah heads for the door, Dr. Foster calls after him-

DR. FOSTER

Don't forget who brought you back in from the wild! This is *first contact*, Noah. The turning point in human history!

Noah stops, and considers his response for a second.

NOAH

Maybe. Maybe not.

DR. FOSTER

What are you talking about?

NOAH

(turning around)

You're just so unshakably sure that this is humanity's *first contact*.

DR. FOSTER

Don't be ridiculous. You're not a conspiracy theorist.

NOAH

I'm not saying these guys built the pyramids. But after the last 48 hours, I'm ready to question any and all assumptions. I suggest you do the same, rather than worry about your *reputation*.

Noah turns and exits, leaving his father to consider this...

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

33 **EXT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - DAY - ESTABLISHING** 33

The iconic arches of the Met, perched on the edge of Central Park. As people hurry up Fifth Ave, we PRE-LAP a TOUR GUIDE:

TOUR GUIDE (PRE-LAP)

And that base 60 number system is why you can thank the Sumerians for a circle having 360 degrees.

34 **INT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - SUMERIAN WING - DAY** 34

Inside an exhibit filled with Mesopotamian art and artifacts, Jessica stands in front of the OBELISK from Noah's brochure. The TOUR GROUP passes by and Jessica approaches the Guide...

JESSICA

Um, excuse me?

(pointing to the obelisk)

Do you know if this thing has anything to do with astronomy?

TOUR GUIDE

Nope - that was actually the gravestone of a king. Stars are at the end of the tour. Stick around!

The Tour Guide smiles wide, and Jessica joins the group. As they walk, she's surprised to see MATEO, walking through the museum alone. The Tour Guide gestures to a STONE BUST with a long beard as Jessica watches Mateo, curious...

TOUR GUIDE (CONT'D)

This is a statue depicting Enmerkar - a Sumerian god-king who, legend has it, invented permanent writing by using clay tablets and a letter system called "cuneiform."

Jessica watches Mateo slip into a HALLWAY and out of sight.

TOUR GUIDE (CONT'D)

Cuneiform script is a unique kind of writing - somewhere between pictures and letters. Without it, we never would have made it from hieroglyphics to our ABC's.

OFF Jessica, breaking off to follow Mateo, we CUT TO:

35

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

35

Noah and Cranston are in a conference room - Cranston has his head in his hands.

CRANSTON

I still don't understand-

NOAH

The transmission we received was also in cuneiform.

Now THIS is news. Cranston perks up.

CRANSTON

But... that doesn't make any sense. How could they know Sumerian?

NOAH

I have an idea, but it's a little crazy.

CRANSTON

Try me. My bar for crazy is pretty high these days...

Noah takes a deep breath, then launches into a nerdy rant:

NOAH

OK, so: a long time ago, the Babylonians had this god named **Oannes**. But he wasn't just their god. He was known to the Semites as **Dagon**, and the Sumerians as **Adapa**. And while those cultures never interacted, he's depicted in all three identically, with "the skin of a fish and the body of a man."

CRANSTON

So what, he was actually an alien?

NOAH

Maybe. In all three cultures, he emerged from the sea each morning to "teach" mankind, and returned there each night. He taught humans to build cities, construct laws, plant crops - even read and write.

CRANSTON

(shaking his head)

I thought you said the Sumerian guy invented writing - Benatar.

NOAH

En-mer-kar. And he invented writing on *clay*. But here's where it gets crazy: Enmerkar's father began the Uruk dynasty - the greatest dynasty of the ancient world. After ruling for 325 years, his father *walked into the ocean* and was never seen again. No ancient texts mention him "dying"- he just kind of goes away.

CRANSTON

So you think his "father" was actually this Oannes guy, and he flew off in some kinda spaceship?

NOAH

Like you said, the bar for crazy's getting pretty high.

OFF Noah, his eyes a mixture of fear and excitement...

36

INT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - HALLWAY - DAY

36

Jessica is arguing with a SECURITY GUARD in the hallway, in front of a door marked "MUSEUM PERSONNEL ONLY."

SECURITY GUARD

Read the sign, ma'am. That's a restricted area-

JESSICA

What about the little boy?

SECURITY GUARD

Like I told you, I ain't seen any little boys. You sure you don't want to lie down-

He's interrupted by her phone ringing - it's ERICH VON HIPPEL. She glares at the Guard and turns to pick it up.

JESSICA

Jessica here ... Of course, sorry, be right there... Just one sec-

She hangs up, and turns back to the Security Guard.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

I'm not crazy, OK?

OFF the Guard's skeptical look, as Jessica turns to go...

37

EXT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - PICNIC TABLES - DAY

37

Food trucks and tourists fill the sidewalk outside the Met. ERICH VON HIPPEL (50s), a ruffled man with a professorial vibe, sits across from a still-on-edge Jessica at a small metal table. He speaks with a slight German accent:

ERICH

Mateo? Our Mateo?

JESSICA

I know, it's silly-

ERICH

No, no. You're right to peg him as a troublemaker. But don't worry, the children are all at school, performing their daily reveries. It certainly wasn't him. A trick of the mind, perhaps someone from another tour. Boys of a certain age all seem to come out the same, no?

Jessica's surprised by the comment. She shakes it off and puts on her game face, focusing on the questions on her pad:

JESSICA

I suppose so... Speaking of that certain age - why is it that all of LFI's students are so young?

ERICH

Well, we're trying to do something revolutionary, you see. Teach these children the underlying mechanisms of language. The deep structures.

JESSICA

Sure, but why not try with high-schoolers? Or college students?

There's a beat, as Erich considers his response.

ERICH

There's a certain... hard-wiring, that happens to the human brain around puberty. The language of your childhood becomes the language of your thoughts, and your brain calcifies. We are trying to reach these children before that point. Re-wire them, if you will.

Jessica writes this all down, fascinated, as she continues-

JESSICA

How do the parents feel about this "re-wiring"? I'd like to speak to some, but I haven't found any-

ERICH

Oh, didn't Grace tell you?

JESSICA

(looking up from her pad)
Tell me what?

ERICH

All the children at the LFI are orphans - saved from high-risk situations domestically and abroad. I assumed you knew...

JESSICA

Orphans? Doesn't that raise... ethical questions about untested education methods?

ERICH

These aren't drug trials, Miss Douglas. These children are getting a chance - a chance so few of us ever get. The chance to become fully realized human beings.

JESSICA

What if that's not what they want?

Erich looks at her, genuinely puzzled.

ERICH

Who wouldn't want that?

OFF Jessica, skeptical of this man and his mission...

38

INT. "THE APOPHIS" SCIENCE VESSEL - CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Francis sits cross-legged on his bed, trying to remain calm while Vijay nervously paces back and forth, scotch in hand.

VIJAY

Do you hear yourself right now? Two men DIED in that cavern. How long are we going to do this?

FRANCIS

As long as it takes, Vijay.

VIJAY

It's been seven years-

FRANCIS

You said yourself the chamber was stable. No measurable Richter activity, right? You think that was **science** that killed our men?

Vijay looks away, and takes a long drink.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

We're close. I can feel it.

VIJAY

We've **been** close. We were close at Bimini, and then at Giza. I froze my nuts off in the Dyatlov Pass while we were close. Maybe... maybe there's just nothing out there.

Francis gets out of bed, and clasps Vijay by the arm.

FRANCIS

The road is long, my friend, so that few men find their way to the end. We must keep walking. We must-

Before he can finish, Francis is interrupted by the BUZZING of a cell phone. He looks down, and his eyebrows arch when he sees the number. He picks it up, placing it on speakerphone:

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

This is Francis.

Erich von Hippel's voice crackles through from the other side-

ERICH (OVER PHONE)

Francis? It's Erich. Erich von Hippel. Something's... happened.

FRANCIS

What? Are the children alright?

As Francis listens, we see the emotions play across his face - from curiosity, to anticipation, then excitement-

ERICH (OVER PHONE)

Yes, they're fine. Well... remember when you told me to watch for signs of "manifestations"? I think you should come to New York...

As Francis looks to Vijay, eyes aflame, we CUT TO:

39 INT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - SECURITY ROOM - SAME TIME 39

Erich stands in the Security Office of the Met, watching grainy footage on a small screen. He watches Mateo approach the Guard, whisper something, and get waved through.

ERICH

You're going to want to see this.

In the chair next to him, the Security Guard watches the tape loop around to when Mateo approached him. OFF the Guard's face, a mixture of fear and confusion...

40 INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY 40

Noah tries summing up his theory to Cranston succinctly:

NOAH

It boils down to Clarke's Law: "*Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.*" In Sumer, **writing** was the technology. And to a culture that only knew spoken language, that **was** magic.

Cranston looks at Noah gravely, and shakes his head.

CRANSTON

If I go to the Secretary of Defense with this crackpot theory about a 5,000 year old alien-turned-god I'll get put in a straitjacket.

NOAH

You can tell her many scientists have researched this very idea - Carl Sagan, Josif Shklovsky...

CRANSTON

But none of them said it happened.

NOAH

None of them said it *didn't*.

Cranston rubs his forehead, frustration rising.

CRANSTON

Noah, I like you. And seeing how your mind works, I'm even starting to believe in you. But you gotta give me something I can use. A translation-

NOAH

I was trying, until *someone* forced me to come give a "Status Report"-

CRANSTON

Yet somehow you still found time to come up with this insane theory-

But before their argument can escalate-

RED LIGHTS and ALARMS fill the room!

Noah and Cranston exchange a quick look, then dash to the-

41

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

41

Cranston and Noah rush into the control room to find Dr. Foster yelling at Karen over the alarms-

DR. FOSTER

What the hell is going on?

KAREN

It's another spike on the Little Ear! Another transmission!

Dr. Foster is suddenly gripped with excitement-

DR. FOSTER

Are you recording?

KAREN

Obviously! I'm analyzing it against the first signal for similar patterns... check out Terminal 4.

Noah runs over to one of the wall monitors and sees two lines of binary scrolling across it - both are shaded GREEN.

NOAH

It's all green - this is the same message! Bit for bit.

CRANSTON

They sent it again?

NOAH

If at first you don't succeed...

Dr. Foster's phone RINGS - as he picks up we INTERCUT WITH:

42 **INT. INSTITUTE OF RADIO ASTRONOMY - CONTROL ROOM - INTERCUT 42**

On the other end of the phone, in a similar looking control room, is DR. JAMES NIX (60s, a contemporary of Dr. Foster's).

DR. NIX
Carl? It's James Nix over at IRA.

DR. FOSTER
Jim! What can I do for you?

DR. NIX
I just detected the damndest radio wave transmission from Northeast...

DR. FOSTER
Yeah, we're seeing that too. It's just a little government test- I heard from a buddy at the DoD.

Dr. Nix is skeptical, but inclined to trust his friend.

DR. NIX
Oh? OK then. At least my dishes aren't malfunctioning.

DR. FOSTER
(avoidant)
Listen, Jim, I'd love to chat, but I'm kind of busy over here...

DR. NIX
Of course, go! Best to the family.

43 **INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

43

Dr. Foster hangs up, unsure if his lie will hold for long. His eyes move from Noah to Cranston, and finally to Karen:

DR. FOSTER
This is **bad**. The signal's been broadcast wide - if we don't respond soon, someone else will.

CRANSTON
That can't happen. We can't lose control of the message.

NOAH
God forbid we actually trust people to do the right thing-

CRANSTON

It's not that simple, Noah. This is a major international incident. If the Russians, or God forbid the North Koreans manage to get ahead of us here we might never recover.

DR. FOSTER

I'm with Jack. If Earth is to be taken seriously, we need to speak with one voice. And given our unique circumstance, I believe it should be ours.

NOAH

Maybe our circumstance isn't so unique after all. Who's to say the first signal wasn't received by a dozen other countries?

DR. FOSTER

I highly doubt that.

NOAH

But why? What makes you so special, out of all the people on the planet, that they would target you?

Karen, who's been on the verge of bursting, finally does-

KAREN

We've been broadcasting to them!

Noah and Cranston turn to look at Karen, who shrinks back a little. She looks to Dr. Foster, his face unreadable.

KAREN (CONT'D)

You were gonna find out sooner or later, right? Dr. Foster and I have been sending untargeted broadcasts of the Arecibo message every few hours for a year now. Just in case there was anybody out there... listening. I think they heard us.

Noah and Cranston exchange a look.

NOAH

And you thought I was crazy...

OFF Dr. Foster, looking at his shoes, but saying nothing...

END ACT FOUR

Cranston paces back and forth in the rear of the control room, where Dr. Foster is seated. They watch Noah work away at the screens, with Karen helping him navigate.

CRANSTON

Are you following any of this?

Dr. Foster looks at Noah with a mixture of pride and envy.

DR. FOSTER

For the most part, no. But I know he'll figure it out.

We move to Noah, who is dictating a final rearrangement-

NOAH

Okay, now give me A3 and A4, followed by B3 and B6.

Karen works the keyboard, as strings of symbols fall in line.

NOAH (CONT'D)

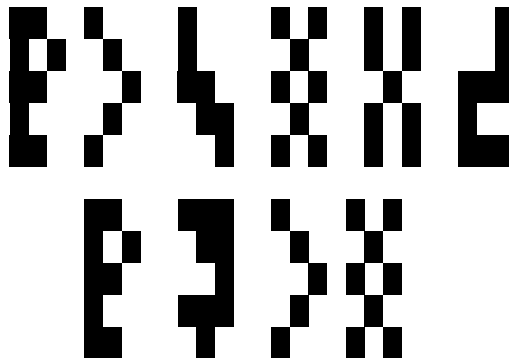
Now A5 and A6 with D1, D2, and D3.

More cuneiform characters arrange across the screen.

NOAH (CONT'D)

That's it. I think this is the message they intended us to read.

They both take in the strange arrangement for a moment:



Cranston sees that they've stopped, and walks over.

CRANSTON

What does it say?

NOAH

It reads left to right, like English.

(MORE)

NOAH (CONT'D)

This repeated symbol here seems to be a part of speech that doesn't exist in our grammar - it's best understood as "communication."

CRANSTON

What. Does. It. Say.

Noah points to individual groups of symbols as he speaks.

NOAH

We (communication) you light. You (communication) you light. Positive (communication) you we light.

CRANSTON

Why so much about "light?"

KAREN

They mean electromagnetic waves - clearly they've seen the activity coming from Earth. "Light" in the visual sense is just a sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Cranston's expression turns to one of grave concern.

CRANSTON

So they've been watching us.

(to Noah)

We need to know their intentions. Right away

NOAH

Intentions? I can barely understand their word for "communication"-

CRANSTON

Then I'm taking this to the Joint Chiefs. We'll compose an even-handed but strong reply-

NOAH

You can't. Ever heard the phrase 'lost in translation'? If you ask me to send back some political message demanding peace, I might well end up declaring war.

Cranston looks to Dr. Foster, then Karen, looking for someone to be the voice of reason. He turns back to Noah-

CRANSTON

You have to translate *something*-

NOAH

Translating is the problem. Let me compose a reply in their language.

CRANSTON

And say what?

NOAH

That's what I'm trying to figure out.

Cranston steps in closer, menacing-

CRANSTON

Look, this might just be some fun science project to you, but the future of humanity is at stake.

NOAH

All the more reason not to hand our fate to a bunch of military killers-

CRANSTON

Who make it our job to ensure the Earth is ready. History is littered with cases of "visitors" showing up with new technology. And not many have "come in peace."

NOAH

If there was someone else who could do what I do, they'd be here right now. So you can talk all the shit you want, but we're gonna do this my way. Because you need me.

Cranston glares at Noah, then turns to Dr. Foster-

CRANSTON

Carl, a word?

CUT TO:

47

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

47

Cranston and Dr. Foster huddle out in the hallway, speaking animatedly but in hushed tones.

CRANSTON

There are plenty of Sumerian scholars in New York, I'm sure. Now that we know the language-

DR. FOSTER

Noah isn't translating *Sumerian cuneiform* in there. Our computers could do that. He's getting some archaic pseudo-dialect and building grammar on the fly. Asking Sumerian scholars to do that is like asking rednecks to translate Beowulf because it's all basically English.

CRANSTON

(resigned)

So there really is nobody else.

DR. FOSTER

Have a little faith, Jack. I've never seen Noah care this much about anything.

OFF Cranston, frustrated by his lack of options...

48

INT. JESSICA'S OFFICE - NIGHT

48

Jessica is in her office, doing research. It's after-hours, and she's the only one here besides the cleaning crew. On her dual-screen computer monitors are articles and pictures about the Lingua Franca Institute.

She leans in to examine a picture of the school's opening - next to Erich von Hippel stands a smiling FRANCIS FRAZIER.

JESSICA

(to herself)

Francis... Frazier? Who the hell are **you**?

She searches his name and is inundated with puff pieces. She tries adding "language" to the search and some LFI materials come up alongside something called PROJECT BECUNA. She clicks her way through a few links, then pulls out her phone.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Noah, it's me. Call me back when you get this... There's something weird going on with that school.

She hangs up. OFF Jessica, rubbing her eyes, we CUT TO:

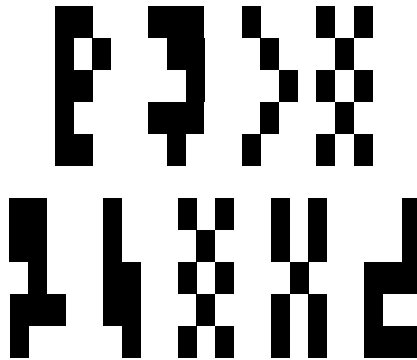
49

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - LATE NIGHT

49

Noah's eyes flit back and forth - they are bloodshot and weary, but focused. He cracks a smile.

REVERSE ON: a new string of cuneiform dominating the screen.



Cranston is seated in the row behind with Dr. Foster - they both watch the screen intently. Rick and the rest of Foster's team sits with them as well.

CRANSTON

What's it say?

NOAH

It says: "**(Communication) positive.**
You more (communication) light."
 This is what I want to send.

Karen calls back over her shoulder.

KAREN

Rick - can you come help us set the Northwest Little Ear for transmission? We need to adjust its Ascension by a few seconds...

Rick comes forward and gets on a terminal - he works quickly and confidently.

OUT IN THE FIELD, the radio telescope ROTATES into position.

DR. FOSTER

Don't we want to... I don't know, explain more? Ask them a question?

NOAH

It's best to be clear and concise.
 We can't send too much too soon.

RICK

Little Ear's in place. Ready for transmission.

Karen looks over her shoulder and locks eyes with Noah. It's a heavy moment, and they know it. He nods. She turns to Rick:

KAREN

Let her rip.

The cuneiform disappears and is replaced by a STATUS SCREEN. It reads "**Transmission in Progress**" for a moment, then: "**Transmission Complete.**" Noah looks around the room, beaming.

NOAH

How 'bout that, everybody? We just talked to aliens.

Dr. Foster smiles at him, and Karen exhales deeply. Relief is palpable on every face in the room but one:

CRANSTON

You better hope you didn't say the wrong thing.

OFF Cranston, headed for the door...

50 **INT. JESSICA'S OFFICE - SAME TIME**

50

Jessica is still at her desk, looking at articles. There's a lot more "BECUNA" stuff, along with some Gurdjieff circles and a few other occultisms. Her phone RINGS.

JESSICA

Hey.

While Jessica puts it on speaker, we INTERCUT WITH:

51 **INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONFERENCE ROOM**

51

Noah sits, doodling on a piece of paper. He's drawing ALIENS.

NOAH

Hey! Sorry I missed you. What's up?

JESSICA

Oh, you know. Just trying to see how deep this rabbit hole goes.

NOAH

This is about Lingua Franca?

JESSICA

Yeah. There's this Francis Frazier guy - kind of a weirdo - but he helped found the school. Orphanage slash school, I found out today.

She clicks over to an internet article about Project BECUNA.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Back in the early aughts he tried to get government funding for this Project BECUNA in Bolivia, something about... Callo-wallo?

NOAH

Kallawaya? The Andean healers' secret language?

JESSICA

That's it. Anyway, he withdrew before the proposal was made public and disappeared. Five years later, the "BECUNA Group" buys two acres of prime land along the Hudson River. Land that recently became... the Lingua Franca Institute. Which, according to tax records is "BECUNA Medical Research Incorporated."

She pauses, expecting a reaction, but Noah is distracted-

NOAH

Hang on, are you saying "becuna?"

JESSICA

Yeah, that's the name he keeps using. It's some kinda fish-

NOAH

Have you ever heard of ROT-13?

JESSICA

What? Noah, are you even listening?

NOAH

Yes! Okay, ROT-13 is super basic encryption - it's just... inverted words. Coders use it to send each other dirty jokes sometimes. A few words come out legible both ways: "clerk & pyrex" or "gnat & tang." But only like 20 words actually pair up. "Becuna" is one of them.

JESSICA

What's it pair with?

NOAH

(a beat, then:)
Orphan.

OFF Jessica, wondering just how scary Francis really is...

Mateo waits in Grace Otamura's office, unnervingly calm, as always. But when the door opens, it's not Grace, but Francis Frazier who enters the room. He takes a seat at the desk.

FRANCIS

Hello, Mateo. My name is Francis. I want to talk about your language.

MATEO

No, you want **me** to talk about it.

Mateo's eyes are like ice, but Francis just smiles and pulls out a tablet. On it, the SECURITY VIDEO from the Met plays.

FRANCIS

I'd settle for you talking **in** it.
What did you say to this man?
(off Mateo's silence)
Come on, Mateo. I need to hear you speak your language-

MATEO

It's not my language. I found it, but that does not make it mine.

FRANCIS

I don't care where you got it. I just want to hear it.

MATEO

What if I got it in Mexico? Would you care then?

This catches Francis off guard- he drops his friendly facade.

FRANCIS

The hell do you know about Mexico?

MATEO

I could say, but YOU won't hear it. Not all of you. You came here to see me, but left yourself. I am here, I am one, but you are many. And the many you's are searching...

FRANCIS

(growing impatient)
Don't lecture me on the Illusion of Unity. Just tell me what you know about Sac Actun before I-

But when Mateo interrupts him, Francis goes SILENT-

MATEO

You know the detail but not the whole. You live in sleep, preaching the glory of consciousness. Your words are your weapons, but you wield them without aim. So go - you will never find what you seek.

With that Mateo starts WHISPERING - it's his language, but not what Francis hoped to hear. OFF Francis, turning white...

53

INT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - HALLWAY

53

Francis comes out of the office to find Vijay waiting for him. He looks exhausted, and for the first time, scared.

FRANCIS

Can it wait?

VIJAY

I'm afraid not. The entire crew of the Apophis just quit.

FRANCIS

Jesus. Mutiny?

VIJAY

Not exactly. I had them isolate the audio from the ah- accident, to map the cave's internal acoustics. They modeled the projection, and well...

He hands Francis a tablet, showing a 3-D rendering of the cavern. The walls are covered in STRANGE ARROW-LIKE SHAPES. Francis takes them in, noticing-

FRANCIS

Why are they all pointing down?

VIJAY

That's the other thing. A new sonar survey showed the cavern floor is gone and in its place is a sinkhole that doesn't seem to have a bottom. The crew thought... I mean thinks-

Francis gives Vijay a grave look. In light of his conversation with Mateo, it's all hitting too close to home.

FRANCIS

They think we found a gate to Hell.

END ACT FIVE

BUTTON

54

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - PRE-DAWN

54

The control room is quiet - Karen, Dr. Foster, and Noah are all asleep in various spots around the room. Only Rick is awake, drinking coffee and glancing absently at the many screens. He reaches over, grabs his cellphone, and poses for a selfie when EVERY ALARM IN THE ROOM starts going off.

Karen WAKES UP immediately, and clocks Rick's guilty, bewildered look at his cell phone.

RICK

It was just a Snapchat!

While Noah and Dr. Foster slowly come to in the noise and confusion, Karen stumbles over to her terminal - the telescope is going nuts - **ANOTHER SIGNAL IS COMING IN!!**

KAREN

Rick...? RICK!

RICK

Yeah, I'm here-

KAREN

All these dishes are aligned, right? And recording? Noah, Carl, wake up!! We've got a live one.
(seeing readout on screen)
Looks like a brand new message.

OFF her excitement, we CUT TO:

55

EXT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - COURTYARD - DAWN

55

The school is quiet in the wee hours of the morning, as Francis and Erich walk through the courtyard.

FRANCIS

While I'm in Mexico, I need you to keep a very close eye on Mateo.

ERICH

Of course. He and his group of friends have been restricted to campus, placed in intensive study-

FRANCIS

No. Don't restrict him. Let him flourish. The boy is gifted, Erich.

ERICH

He can't be running around the city, he's twelve years old-

FRANCIS

And Blaise Pascal was a published mathematician at eight. Some people are just special. All I ask is for Mateo to tell me what these mean...

He hands Erich a printout of the markings from the cavern walls - jumbled arrows, all pointing down. Erich peers at the paper, intrigued. He rotates the paper 90 degrees.

ERICH

You found this in the Yucatan?

FRANCIS

That's right. The locals think it's some sort of "gateway to hell" - the arrows are pointing down, see-

Francis moves to adjust the page, but Erich shakes him off.

ERICH

No, they're not arrows. This... this is cuneiform script.

FRANCIS

That's impossible. What language?

ERICH

Sumerian, Akkadian - I'm not sure, but it's definitely Afro-Asiatic.

FRANCIS

What the hell's it doing in Mexico?

ERICH

Your guess is as good as mine...

OFF Francis, unsure what to make of this new bombshell...

56

INT. LINGUA FRANCA INSTITUTE - DORMITORY - SAME TIME

56

We find Mateo, Annie, Dmitri, and Rajesh in pajamas, sitting in a circle between beds. The door opens, and Amy comes in. She pulls a supersolid from her pocket, and smiles.

The kids unwrap the other 4 pieces, all carefully hidden in blankets, and put them together into their cracked egg shape. The SWIRLS OF LIGHT and BUZZING start as soon as the pieces touch, growing louder with each connection.

Finally, Mateo takes the last piece from Amy and puts it in, making the combination a PERFECT OVOID. The light swirls tighter and tighter, like electrons circling an atom. The children look at each other as the buzzing RESOLVES - it's now a WHISPERING VOICE, growing LOUDER and LOUDER...

57

INT. ABBOT OBSERVATORY - CONTROL ROOM - MORNING

57

Cranston arrives at the control room to find Noah and Dr. Foster in a heated argument in the corner while Karen works at the terminal.

DR. FOSTER

It's a repeating sequence again -
of almost TWELVE THOUSAND bits!
It's practically a novella!

NOAH

The length is irrelevant! Maybe
they wanted to send us something
nuanced, language in HD-

Cranston avoids the argument, and heads over to Karen.

CRANSTON

What'd I miss?

KAREN

You're actually right on time - I
just got the signal processed.
Putting up the image now.
(over her shoulder)
Noah, you wanna check this out?

She hits a key, and the walls FILL with symbols, too many to count. Noah gapes. Foster gives him an "I told you so" look-

CRANSTON

Any idea what it says?

NOAH

Not yet. I mean, I recognize some
of the basic vocabulary, but-

CRANSTON

Tell me what you're seeing. I need
to know what you know.

Noah walks up to the screens, close enough to touch them. He points to a symbol, a set of horizontal lines joining two curves together, though the pixelation makes it hard to tell.

NOAH

Okay. This symbol? Means "Earth"...
And these over here-
(he points to another)
These have to do with light and
time. I think that's something else-

CRANSTON

What are they trying to say? Is
light plus time some kind of bomb?

NOAH

No, Jesus! *Please* remember this is
a rough translation. It's really
hard to pin down syntax without
pointer words and connotations-

DR. FOSTER

Noah, can you just give us a rough
idea of what they're talking about-

CRANSTON

Time is of the essence.

Noah looks at the two men, insisting on a translation, but
powerless without him. He decides to flex that power-

NOAH

Nope. I'm not gonna do it. Language
is a delicate art, and translations
take time. I'm not going to rush
this so you can run off half-cocked
and order some sort of pre-emptive
strike. You'll just have to wait.

Dr. Foster, stunned by the outburst, looks to Cranston,
seething with rage at Noah's impudence. But before he can get
out a reply, Karen turns around from her computer terminal:

KAREN

Uh, Noah? You might wanna get to
work. I just got the parallax
results. This transmission came
from about two million miles closer
than the last. Whatever's out
there... it's **coming towards us**.

Everyone looks at each other, unsure how to react, as we...

SMASH TO BLACK

END SHOW