

If he hadn't unearthed the artefact, Riley could have faced death in blissful ignorance.

A few weeks earlier, Riley couldn't stop grinning. "The professor believes the device is over ten thousand years old."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "That's a bit hard to swallow."

"Yeah, it is. We've seen some weird stuff over the years, but none of us imagined it could be a computer chip. Especially after they carbon-dated it."

Although Ben shook his head, Riley was thankful his brother was listening, at least. In the past, Ben had made no secret of his opinion regarding his twin's choice to study archaeology. 'Playing around in the dirt,' had been the snide comment given when Riley started his course. Riley gave as good as he got, however, albeit with childish nicknames.

"Pft. Good luck trying to read it," Ben said.

"Believe it or not, Brainiac, the techies think they'll get information off it."

"Really? Okay, have you heard who's looking at it? Because, you know, I have some top I.T. contacts."

Trust his brother to big-note himself. Despite their rivalry, or perhaps because of it, Riley laughed.

"No worries, Astro-Boy," he said. "Sarah and her team are on it."

Ben acknowledged the news with a low whistle. The first time Riley had turned up at their parents' house with Sarah in tow, he'd sensed Ben's interest. Back then, Riley worried his more outgoing brother would whisk the gorgeous redhead out from under his nose.

He needn't have worried. Sarah had quickly berated Ben for his arrogant attitude. She was no dizzy teenager to be dazzled by his monologue on 'computational fluid dynamics'. Ben soon found computer-savvy Sarah could talk him under the table on several topics.

"I fly out tomorrow. My guys should unearth new material at the dig any day now," Riley said. "Once we find more gadgets we can get an idea of who created the technology."

Ben smirked. "You expect to excavate an alien spaceship?"

"Who knows? It could be the lost city of Atlantis."

A skeptical eyebrow rose. "In New Guinea?"

"Why not? If that gizmo sat there for thousands of years, there's bound to be more.

We just have a few tons of jungle to move aside first." Riley pulled a paper from his pocket and unfolded it.

"Bugger of a place to do archaeological research. What's this computer chip look like, anyway?" Ben rolled an impatient hand towards the paper.

Riley passed over the rough sketch. "Would you believe a pock-marked marble indented at one end?"

"Pft. Do you get trained to recognise stuff like this? I would've dismissed it as a kid's toy."

"It's like those bizarre equations you fiddle with, Captain Kirk. I do my thing, you do yours."

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Riley flopped onto his camp bed at the archaeological site to check his phone. Eight texts from Ben demanded he call immediately. One crudely suggested what to do with his outdated phone. Sighing, he dialed his brother's number.

"What's up Mars Bar?"

"Riley?" The connection crackled. "Where are you?"

"On Jupiter. What's so urgent?"

"You sitting down?"

"Ben? What's wrong?" Riley sat upright, his gut knotted. "Is Mum okay? Is it Dad?"

"-seen any newspapers?"

"What? Say again. I didn't catch that." He was shouting, as if that might accelerate his brother's response.



"There's been a signal from space. Alien contact!"

Riley stared at the phone as if he didn't know how he came to be holding it.

"Are you there? Riley? Riley!"

He whooshed out an unsteady breath. "Gee mate, I almost had a heart attack. I thought someone must've died."

"They've already figured out one or two words are related to an early dialect of Chinese." Ben sounded breathless.

"What? What are you talking about?" Had he stumbled on a weird cross-connection, like an ancient party-line phone?

"Scientists...at NASA." Ben enunciated each word carefully, as if Riley suffered a hearing loss. "They've been monitoring a signal from space for months. Someone out there wants to meet us. Aliens. They know an ancient Earth language. They're broadcasting it from deep space."

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A few hours later, Riley punched in his brother's number again and tried to keep his voice even. "Ben? I've been in touch with Sarah."

"Mmm, what's up?"

Riley prepared himself with a slow exhale. "They've lifted some information from the sphere."

"The computer chip?" Like a flipped switch, Ben's tone revved into top gear. "What'd they find?"

"There's a triangular pattern of signals embedded in the sphere's surface."

"Like binary code?"

"Er, I suppose." Riley almost kept the rest to himself, as if by doing so he could stall future events.

"Did they make sense of it?"

"It's pretty degraded, but what they've got so far seems related to an ancient dialect of Chinese or Mongolian."

"Like the signal from space?"

"You got it." Riley took another deep breath. "The linguists found words with similar meanings to *defeated* and *contamination*. Another seems to indicate *lethal infection*, although it could be describing head-lice for all I know. There's been a heated debate over that one."

"Damn. You think aliens attacked earth thousands of years ago? With bacterial warfare?"

"I don't know, Rocket-Man." Riley sighed. "It's possible."

"Maybe they're back to see if the planet's all clear." Ben swore softly.

"I hope we're wrong, but it doesn't look good."

Riley promised to keep his twin posted on any new information from Sarah, while Ben volunteered to chase up his contacts in the aerospace industry for inside-news.

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Days passed with little progress. Riley returned from the New Guinea site, disappointed at the lack of progress. The steamy jungle refused to yield any more technological gems, although the museum directors were delighted with the number of World War II relics oozing up from the mud.

The sphere's decoding had also stalled, with too many untraceable language patterns that had disappeared over the centuries.

"Our linguists are working with experts who've had success regenerating 'dead' indigenous dialects," Sarah said. "They've made breakthroughs with traditional songs. If you apply the existing grammar, you can extrapolate other words from the lyrics."

She giggled at Riley's blank expression. "They're just thinking outside the box. It might provide a way to identify more words on the sphere."

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A few days later, Ben dropped in. His persistence had paid off, with a friend sharing NASA's latest in-house gossip.

"The signal's getting closer." Ben drummed his hands on the table. "The NASA workers are getting very antsy."

"I bet the military leaders have their knickers in a knot, too." Riley handed over a can of beer.

"Thanks." Ben popped his can open. "The news is, the aliens are on a quest to find their ancestors."

"Holey Dooley, they're in for a shock." Riley waved his fist at the ceiling. "Listen here, you little green buggers. Ain't no folks here but us earthlings."

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A few hours after Ben left, Sarah arrived. She perched on the edge of the lounge as if ready to leap up again.

"The technicians decoded several key phrases," she said. "We now know the aliens were defeated in some kind of battle, and the survivors retreated to isolated regions. It's confusing. Other segments indicate the humans helped them."

Riley waited, sensing she would say more.

"The strangest part was over the perspective of the writers. Some claim the sphere's data wasn't written by the extra-terrestrials, but by humans."

"That's odd," Riley said. "Unless they were doctors looking after the sick aliens, recording their last days and—"

The doorbell sounded. Riley found Ben pacing the verandah.

"Back so soon, Spock? Come inside before you wear a hole in my floorboards." Riley playfully punched Ben's shoulder, but his brother didn't respond.

He also declined the seat Sarah offered. "I'm off to the States," he said. "Our avionics department is testing a new guidance system. They want input for 'something big'."

Riley laughed. "You mean top secret?"

"I don't have much information. There's always those 'need to know' directives. What I can share, on the quiet, is the alien spacecraft will soon be within visual range."

"So, will your guidance system have 'something big' attached...like a weapon?" Riley asked.

Ben just stared at his twin, a look that spoke volumes. Riley felt as if every hair on his body wanted to escape the confines of his skin.

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Days flew past. Sarah shared each new puzzle piece from the linguistics team, whereas Ben offered up only silence from his new post overseas. While the majority of the population fizzed along at its usual frenetic pace in complete ignorance, Riley fidgeted helplessly on the sideline. Ben's silence and the contradictory pictures emerging from the sphere's data must surely spell disaster.

"Loath as I am to endorse your doom-and-gloom mood," Sarah said, "the latest results don't spell out a straightforward scenario." She wouldn't explain. The one crumb she offered was to say her team expected to have the full picture by week's end.

Two days later, a long-awaited call came from Ben. "What have you been up to, Missile-Man?" Riley pushed for a tone more jovial than he felt.

"The news is pretty dark, mate," Ben said.

"What's going on?"

"Our 'visitors' have upped the ante. Since they didn't get the response they wanted, they've turned hostile."

Riley's gut churned. "How bad is it?"

"Word's kept pretty tight in the military. It's only hearsay from the fringes... Since the 'ancestral representatives' of the aliens haven't responded, they've threatened to attack."

"Oh, crap."



Ben gave a drawn-out sigh. “Yeah. It’s expected they’ll use biological warfare. The worst of it...they suspect these aliens – the Avari – have already launched something. It’s too late to stop them.”

“Haven’t our guys been able to communicate with them using the chip’s data?”

“Seems we weren’t quick enough putting it all together. Now the aliens aren’t responding,” Ben said. “World governments have mobilised medical teams. I’m afraid the crap’s going to hit the fan, big-time, within the next twenty-four hours, Bub.”

Riley swallowed the lump building in his throat. His twin was the elder by four minutes, but Ben hadn’t used that term of endearment for years.

“They’ve predicted an Extinction Event, mate.”

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Since Ben’s call, Riley struggled for calm under a suffocating blanket of gloom. When Sarah arrived, he ushered her through to the living room in silence, wondering how he would broach the topic of his brother’s news. White-faced, she dropped onto the sofa and spoke first.

“We finished the decoding. The sphere is definitely of human origin. An advanced race lived here several thousand years ago, with amazing technology.”

“What happened to them?”

“The aliens wanted the technology, but the humans feared they’d misuse it.” Sarah gave a weak smile. “If you’d found more spheres we might’ve had the full story.”

Riley shrugged.

“The humans attacked. They wiped out most of the aliens.”

“Why’s there no trace of the humans?”

Sarah shook her head. “The alien survivors deployed a lethal virus that spread rapidly.”

Riley’s frown deepened. “I still don’t understand. Why haven’t we found artefacts from an advanced human population?”

“Several devices were detonated in retaliation against the aliens – something akin to our nuclear weapons but apparently much more destructive. Between the weapons and the virus, all traces of the civilization disappeared.”

“No one survived?”

“The human species was made extinct.”

Riley sat up. “But we’re still here. I mean, the human race survived. You and I are still here.” He ignored the shrieking sirens blaring inside his head. What was he missing?

Sarah shook her head. “The sphere spells it out quite clearly.”

“No. That’s impossible. We’re here.”

“Yes,” Sarah whispered. “Our ancestors tried to win a war with a deadly virus, and now our brethren in space will do the same to us. They’ll wipe us out. We’ve come full circle. The people living on this planet are still here, as you say Riley, but we’re not human. We’re the remnants of the alien race. We are the Avari.”