

ASHES OF MERIDIAN

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Meridian Outpost Writers' Room

1 EXT. MERIDIAN OUTPOST - DAWN

1

A harsh wind rattles the solar arrays of a remote outpost on the edge of a dead world. Distant mountains loom under a bruised sky.

A lone figure—ARA VALE (30s), weathered, determined—climbs the rocky ridge, scanning the horizon.

ARA (V.O.)
Three years since the Signal. Three
years of silence.

She reaches the crest. Below, MERIDIAN OUTPOST crouches in the dust and steel.

A faint pulse flickers in the distance—barely perceptible.

Ara freezes. Pulls a battered SIGNAL RECORDER from her coat. Its needle trembles, settles, trembles again.

ARA
(under her breath)
No. Not you. Not now.

The pulse dies. The needle flatlines. Wind fills the silence it leaves behind.

She looks back at the outpost. Smoke rises from the generator stack – thinner than it should be.

ARA (V.O.)
The reactors give us eleven months.
Twelve, if winter is kind. Winter
is never kind.

She pockets the recorder and starts down the ridge, fast.

2 INT. ARCHIVE HALL - CONTINUOUS

2

Dim light. Endless rows of data cores line the walls. ARA moves with purpose, scanning glyphs on a holographic interface.

ARA
If the Meridian Signal is real,
it's buried in noise.

She isolates a pattern—ancient, harmonic, impossible.

LYRA DAIN (20s), sharp-eyed comms analyst, appears between the stacks, arms full of cable spools.

LYRA
You're not supposed to be in the
deep rows. Vorn sealed them after
the audit.

ARA
Then don't tell Vorn.

Ara throws the waveform up on the big glass. It ripples – a
slow, deliberate heartbeat under decades of static.

LYRA
(quiet)
That's not drift. That's structure.

ARA
Sixteen-second period. Same as the
pulse I caught on the ridge this
morning. Same as the one in the
founders' logs.

Lyra sets down the spools without looking away from the
glass.

LYRA
The founders' logs end
mid-sentence, Ara. Everything after
the Collapse is redacted.

ARA
Redacted isn't erased. Somebody
kept receipts. Archives always keep
receipts.

Deep in the stacks, a shelf light flickers – Row C-17. Ara
notices. Holds on it a beat too long.

3 INT. OBSERVATION ROOM - DAY

3

KELLAN ROSS (40s), the outpost commander, studies a tactical
map. Skeptical. Worn.

KELLAN
You really think it's out there?

ARA
I think it's calling us.

Kellan exhales, considering.

KELLAN
Then let's hope it's not a trap.

He taps the map. A red line arcs from the outpost, over the

ridge, into the white blank of the northern range.

KELLAN

Last team that chased a ghost
signal took our best crawler and
four good people. We got back one
boot.

ARA

That team followed a rumor. I'm
following math.

Kellan studies her. Something older than command passes
between them — history, unfinished.

KELLAN

Math doesn't keep you warm at forty
below.

ARA

Neither does sitting here counting
the days until the reactors quit.

A long beat. Kellan folds the map.

KELLAN

Bring it to Vorn. If the council
signs it, I'll crew it.

4 INT. COMMANDER'S OFFICE - DAY

4

Cramped. Functional. ELIAS VORN (50s), council
administrator, immaculate in a settlement of patched coats,
reads Ara's proposal off a cracked slate.

Kellan stands by the door. Ara stands dead center, like a
defendant.

VORN

A heat signature would be credible.
A supply cache, plausible. But a
broadcast predating the Collapse—

ARA

Predating the official record of
the Collapse. Those aren't the same
thing, and you know it.

Vorn sets the slate down. Precisely. Like everything he
does.

VORN

What I know is that this outpost runs on eleven months of fuel and less of hope. Panic spends both.

KELLAN

Nobody's panicking. Six crew, one crawler, fourteen days. We've risked more for less.

VORN

(to Ara)

And if your signal turns out to be an echo bouncing off dead rock? What do I tell the families you borrowed the fuel from?

ARA

Tell them we looked. When the lights go out for good, that has to count for something.

Silence. Vorn walks to the window. Below, the settlement: tarps, greenhouses, children hauling water.

VORN

Fourteen days. One crawler. And Vale – everything you find comes to this office first. Everything.

Ara nods. Vorn signs the slate without ceremony.

CUT TO:

5 EXT. THE WASTES - DAY

5

A tracked SNOWCAT grinds across a plain of ash-gray snow. The outpost shrinks behind it until the wind erases it entirely.

Inside the cab: Ara rides shotgun with the recorder in her lap. JONAS PIKE (30s), engineer, easy grin, drives. Lyra monitors comms in the back beside DR. SOREN (60s), the outpost's physician, and REN HOLT (40s), security, asleep sitting up.

JONAS

Sixteen seconds, huh? You know what else runs a sixteen-second cycle? The de-icer on Greenhouse Two.

ARA

The de-icer doesn't transmit in a band we retired sixty years ago.

JONAS
 (shrugging)
 Neither does anything else. That's
 my point.

Static washes the radio. Under it – for half a breath – the pulse. Everyone hears it. Holt's eyes open.

SOREN
 Play that again.

LYRA
 I can't. It's not a recording. It's
 live.

Off their faces – the plain ahead, and the mountains
 swallowing the road.

6 INT. ECHO CHAMBER - NIGHT

6

A natural vault of black stone deep beneath the range,
 ribbed like the inside of an instrument. The team's lamps
 are small and yellow against it.

Lyra rigs a dish antenna. Cables snake to the crawler
 outside. Ara stands at the exact center of the chamber, eyes
 closed.

ARA
 It's louder here. Even without the
 gear.

SOREN
 Sound behaves badly in this room.
 I'd rather it didn't behave badly
 inside your head.

Lyra powers the rig. The chamber HUMS – and the pulse rolls
 through it, clean and enormous, sixteen seconds wide.

The lamps gutter. Frost crawls the cables. Jonas backs off a
 step.

LYRA
 (reading)
 It's not one carrier. It's layered
 – a broadcast wrapped around a
 broadcast. There are words under
 this.

ARA
 Pull them up.

Lyra teases the layers apart. A VOICE – genderless, ruined

by time – surfaces through the static:

RECORDED VOICE
...coordinates follow... do not...
repeat... do not answer while the
relay...

The voice dissolves. Numbers march across Lyra's screen – a locator string, clean as scripture.

JONAS
Coordinates. That's the old
observatory annex. High Ridge.
Nobody's logged a visit in decades.

SOREN
(to Ara)
You heard the rest of it. 'Do not
answer.' We are past the
do-not-answer part of the evening.

The rig SURGES. Sparks. Holt drags Lyra clear as the dish arm whips loose and SLAMS into the rock.

7 INT. MED-BAY - CONTINUOUS

7

The crawler's cramped medical berth. Soren splints Lyra's forearm. She's furious about the delay, not the pain.

SOREN
Hairline fracture. You'll type
slower for a month.

LYRA
I heard it, before the surge.
There's a second layer under the
voice. It isn't a message.

ARA
Then what is it?

LYRA
(meeting her eyes)
A handshake. The kind a machine
sends when it's asking permission
to wake something up.

A quiet none of them enjoys. Holt leans in the doorway, arms crossed.

HOLT
Wake what up?

LYRA
Whatever's still listening at the
annex.

Ara looks down at the recorder. The needle ticks – sixteen
seconds, steady – like a patient heart.

SOREN
(to Ara, low)
Your father asked the same
questions, you know. Right before
the council sealed those rows.

ARA
Then I'll finish his sentence.

8 EXT. CANYON PATH - DAY

8

The crawler noses along a shelf of ice barely wider than its
tracks. A canyon yawns below, its bottom lost in fog.

Wind SCREAMS through the cut. Everyone leans with the
vehicle. Nobody speaks.

A slab of cornice lets go above them – Jonas guns it – the
snow ROARS down across the shelf behind, exactly where they
were.

JONAS
(shaky)
Okay. New rule. The mountain gets
one free swing, and that was it.

HOLT
Turn us around, Pike.

ARA
We're six hours out.

HOLT
From what? A dead telescope and a
voice saying don't answer? I signed
on to protect people, not a hunch.

ARA
Eleven months, Holt. That's the
outpost's fuel. My hunch is the
only door anyone's found.

Holt looks to Kellan's name stitched on the requisition
slate. Then at the fog below. Then at Ara.

HOLT
Six hours. Then whatever this is,
it's over.

The crawler grinds on. Above the canyon rim, half-buried in ice: the skeletal frame of a pre-Collapse RELAY PYLON, leaning like a grave marker.

9 INT. ABANDONED LAB - NIGHT

9

An annex sublevel, frozen mid-evacuation sixty years ago. Coats on hooks. A meal fossilized on a tray. Their lamps carve it out of the dark.

Stenciled on the wall: MERIDIAN SIGNAL PROJECT – LEVEL OMEGA.

JONAS
Project. It's a project. Signals
don't get letterhead.

Ara wipes frost from a workstation. Lyra – one-handed – coaxes it alive. Green phosphor text stutters up.

LYRA
(reading)
'Meridian array operational. Beacon
output stable. Population
projections attached – revised
down. Recommend continued
suppression pending council
review.'

SOREN
Suppression.

LYRA
It's signed. Founding council. All
five seats.

Ara pulls a drawer. Inside: a ring of brass KEYS and a ledger, hand-written, meticulous.

ARA
(reading)
'The Signal is not a distress call.
It is an answer. The question was
ours. We asked if anyone survived
the burn line. Someone did.'

She turns the page. The handwriting deteriorates.

ARA

'They offered the grid. The council voted to refuse – a grid we don't control is a leash. We buried the relay and told the settlement the sky was empty. Forgive us. It was never empty.'

Long silence. Jonas sits down on a sixty-year-old chair like his legs quit.

JONAS

The Collapse. The rationing. Three generations in the dark—

SOREN

—were a policy.

Holt picks up the brass keys. Weighs them.

HOLT

So what's upstairs, in the chamber they built for it?

ARA

The other end of the conversation.

10 INT. ECHO CHAMBER - NIGHT

10

The annex's true heart: a machined vault, twin to the natural chamber below, ringed with dormant emitters. A console waits under a shroud of ice.

Ara seats the brass keys. One. Two. Three. The emitters warm from black to ember.

LYRA

Handshake's changing. It knows the keys are in.

The pulse fills the vault – and for the first time SPEAKS at conversational volume, layered voices braided together:

RECORDED VOICE

Meridian, this is the far shore. Your beacon has burned alone for sixty-one years. State your intent: answer, or silence. We will honor either.

JONAS

(whisper)

Honor either. It waited. Sixty years, it just – waited.

The console unlocks a single toggle, mechanical, deliberate:
ANSWER / SILENCE. A key slot beside each.

SOREN

The founders chose silence and
called it safety. Whatever we
choose, we choose for everyone down
the mountain.

The lights DIP. Every screen in the vault stutters – then
steadies, wearing a new, colder interface.

OUTPOST AI (V.O.)

Level Omega directive active.
Unauthorized contact attempt
logged. Initiating lockdown.

Blast shutters begin to descend over the emitter ring. The
vault starts sealing itself.

ARA

Vorn's audit. He didn't seal the
archives to hide the past—

LYRA

—he armed it. The AI's carrying a
standing order.

Holt jams a pry bar under the nearest shutter. Metal
shrieks.

HOLT

Whatever you're doing – do it
faster.

11 EXT. SIGNAL TOWER - DAWN

11

Above the annex, a lattice tower leans into a rising storm.
The first gray light finds Ara and Jonas climbing its iced
rungs, a hand-cranked BYPASS SPOOL slung across Ara's back.

JONAS

(shouting over wind)
Manual cutover's at the collar!
Kill the AI's uplink, the lockdown
order dies with it!

A gust peels Jonas off the ladder – he catches the safety
ring, boots kicking over sixty feet of nothing. Ara locks a
fist in his harness. Hauls. He finds the rungs.

JONAS
 (gasping)
 One free swing. The mountain agreed
 to one!

At the collar: a junction box furred with rime. Ara cranks the spool. Cable pays out. Below, through the storm, the vault's shutters glow at the seams.

ARA
 (to herself)
 Truth doesn't ask permission. It
 arrives.

She slams the cutover home. The tower's aircraft light – dead sixty years – blinks once, twice, alive.

SMASH CUT TO:

12 INT. MERIDIAN CORE - NIGHT

12

The vault, mid-lockdown, shutters frozen half-mast. Ara and Jonas drop back in, storm-blown, as the AI's cold interface flickers – fighting the severed uplink.

OUTPOST AI (V.O.)
 Directive integrity compromised.
 Restoring uplink in ninety seconds.

Boots in the outer corridor. KELLAN ROSS strides in – parka still smoking with cold – flanked by two outpost regulars. Behind them, unhurried, ELIAS VORN.

KELLAN
 Storm cell chased your telemetry
 here. Started the second your
 signal spiked. Vale – what did you
 touch?

ARA
 The truth. It's load-bearing.

Vorn takes in the vault – the emitters, the toggle, the ledger in Soren's hands. He doesn't look surprised. That lands on everyone.

VORN
 My grandfather held the fifth seat.
 I inherited the order the way you
 inherit a debt. Keep the sky empty.
 Keep the settlement governable.

SOREN
 Governable. Eleven months of fuel,
 Elias. Govern that.

VORN
 (even now, precise)
 The grid comes with terms we cannot
 read from here. My family chose the
 leash we understood over the hand
 we didn't.

ARA
 Your family chose for five seats.
 There are nine hundred people down
 the mountain. They get to know the
 sky was never empty.

The AI's counter ticks. Sixty seconds. Kellan looks from
 Vorn to Ara – command math, human math.

KELLAN
 (to his regulars)
 Stand down. Help Holt with that
 shutter.

Vorn closes his eyes. When he opens them, something has
 finished breaking – or healing. Hard to tell.

VORN
 The fifth seat concurs. Answer.

Ara turns the key. Throws the toggle to ANSWER.

The emitters IGNITE. The pulse inverts – outbound now,
 enormous, sixteen seconds wide. The whole mountain seems to
 hum with it.

RECORDED VOICE
 Meridian, we hear you. Hold your
 beacon. We are coming.

The AI's interface dissolves back to honest phosphor green.
 The shutters lift. Nobody speaks. Nobody has to.

13 EXT. MERIDIAN OUTPOST - DAWN

13

Weeks later. The same ridge as the opening – but the outpost
 below is lit warm, generator stack breathing easy. New cable
 runs climb the ridge like ivy.

Ara stands at the crest with the recorder. The needle swings
 full and steady. She barely watches it anymore.

Kellan climbs up beside her. Offers a thermos cap of

something steaming.

KELLAN
Council seated Lyra this morning.
First order of business: unsealing
the archive. All of it.

ARA
And Vorn?

KELLAN
Testifying. Voluntarily. People
contain multitudes.

On the horizon – where the burn line has stood empty for
sixty years – a light. Then another. A slow procession of
lights, descending.

KELLAN
(quiet)
Still think it's not a trap?

ARA
I think it's a door. Same as it
always was.

14 EPILOGUE - DAY

14

INT. ARCHIVE HALL - DAY. Sunlight – actual sunlight –
through opened vents. Children move between the stacks with
a teacher, laughing too loud for a library.

Row C-17 stands open. The founders' ledger rests under
glass, every page legible.

ARA (V.O.)
We don't inherit the past. We
uncover it – one shelf, one seam,
one signal at a time.

At the center console, the waveform still rolls: sixteen
seconds, steady. Under it, a second rhythm now – our answer,
braided through.

ARA (V.O.)
The sky was never empty. Neither
were we.

The two pulses breathe together. HOLD, then—

FADE OUT.