

## OUTRE-BLANC

### CHAPTER 1

*Tuesday, January 19, 2016 – Mount Roraima  
(on the borders of Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil)*

Pain. Heat. Stench. Fear.  
Above all, fear.

The covered truck had been driving for more than an hour between the ruts of a muddy road that meandered through the Amazon jungle. In the distance, the mighty silhouette of Mount Roraima dominated the plain. A subtle mixture of the smell of sweat, diesel and urine, cyclically invaded the back of the truck where the four prisoners sat, wrists firmly bound.

Phil Caldwell did not understand what had happened. Everything was blurred in his mind. He remembered only one thing: shots and shouts.

Then a violent blow. On his neck. And night prevailed.

The shadows of unconsciousness suddenly dissolved into a hell of jolts, violent jumps and squeaks. All the truck's metal struts squealed like a pig being slaughtered. The perpetual swinging from one side to the other constantly kept the exoplanet specialist off-balance. Each movement pulled at his arms. His muscles and tendons were being subjected to a severe test as they were simultaneously stretched, compressed and twisted. Painful, bruised, his body swung around the anchor point like a crazy pendulum shaken by frantic kids.

Having recently left the prestigious Stanford university to join the Orpheus expedition, he had not imagined for a moment that the study of the fauna and flora at the top of the Venezuelan tepui could have ended like this.

Attacked by gunmen, beaten, tied up and now rudely taken to an unknown place, Phil Caldwell wondered for a moment whether he was dreaming. But the groans of pain of his three companions in misfortune quickly destroyed this illusion.

The entire Orpheus expedition had just been kidnapped by men whose intentions were still unknown. However, the attack on Karin Stockhausen's camp had been extremely violent. Against this backdrop of fear, their current silence did not bode well for the future.

His neck still sore from the blow to his spine, Phil tried to turn his head to find out who was being confined along with him. Tied up as he was, he could see only one of their guides: Luis Urube. The head of the little man with skin browned by a thousand equatorial suns nodded. Leaning forward, he was still unconscious. The cries of pain came from behind. But Phil Caldwell's hands were tied together to a horizontal bar at the top of the truck, his movements hindered. His feet, too, were firmly tied to a rail running from the front to the back of the truck, and the redhead spun on himself like a weathervane. Since he had been confined in front of the tarpaulin that protected the contents of the truck from any indiscreet glances, it was impossible for him to pivot 180° to see the other two prisoners.

He settled for asking, "Who's here?"

"Me!" replied a man with a rather deep voice.

Phil Caldwell immediately recognized Gregory Greensberg. Blond, athletic and good at dealing with the most difficult situations, the experienced logistician had organized the route and the various stages of

this expedition, initially dreamt up by Karin Stockhausen, the general manager of the Orpheus Foundation. Specializing in research on biodiversity and ethology in the case of accelerating global warming and the loss of biodiversity, the Orpheus Foundation had been financed for the past two years by the wealthy Stockhausen family of which Karin was the sole heir.

“Who’s next to you?”

“Paula. She’s not doing well at all.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She vomited and is complaining about pain in her . One of these wretches kicked her in the ribs after pushing her down. That didn’t exactly improve her condition!”

It is true that, since the beginning of the expedition, on January 9, 2016 to be precise, the group’s biologist and ethologist had been sick. Paula Cavendish had been suffering for almost a week. As soon as she had arrived, the spicy and unchanging food common to that part of the Amazon, which was located at the junction of three states – Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil – had apparently wreaked havoc with her stomach.

The aggressive intrusion of armed and hyper-violent guards into the expedition’s base camp had worsened her condition considerably.

“Will we be arriving soon?” asked Phil, taking care to keep from screaming in pain.

His tendons and joints were being tested severely. But it was especially his wrists that caused him horrific pain. Burning like acid splashed on gaping wounds, the pain radiated into his arms, shoulders and chest.

Grimacing more and more, the exoplanet specialist nibbled at his lower lip before continuing.

“Where are they taking us?”

“I don’t know,” sighed Gregory Greensberg.

“Who are these madmen?”

“I don’t know that either,” admitted the logistician, whose light gray eyes were dulled by shooting pain.

He groaned for a moment and spat out some drool and blood. The blow he had taken in the face an hour earlier had shattered his right brow and upper lip. The blood had dried a little. But every time the truck, partially mired in deep ruts, jostled, it opened the wounds again.

After a brief moment, Gregory continued, saying “This area is very isolated. We are far from the central power of Caracas. The proximity of Guyana and northern Brazil facilitates flight. This is paradise for all kinds of trafficking.

“Drug? Weapons?”

“Yes. And everything else.”

“What do you mean by *everything else*?”

“There are guerrillas fighting for lost causes, traffickers who feed weapons circuits to terrorists on all sides. There are also bandits who plunder everything they can get their hands on.

“Charming! And we ... we’re now stuck in this wasps’ nest with all our scientific equipment.”

“And our dollars!”

“But... but if they just wanted to rob us, why didn’t they leave after taking what they wanted?”

“I don’t know any more than you do, Phil. They will probably tell us what they really want soon enough.”

“When?”

“Before nightfall.”

Phil grimaced again because the gashes on his wrists were more and painful. The blood had no time to coagulate because the wounds were constantly re-opening. Vermilion rivulets flowed along his arms before disappearing under his armpits and down his torso.

He swallowed painfully and finally asked the logistician, who seemed to be very familiar with the region and its dangers, “Why before nightfall?”

“The jungle is too dense to drive through at night, in the rain and with trucks of this type. We’ll stop at the latest within four or five hours.”

“Four or five hours,” murmured the astrophysicist, telling himself that his wrists and arms wouldn’t withstand such treatment for so long.

The minutes that followed were really distressing because the two men knew that this dreadful episode was only the first of a long series.

Next to them, Paula Cavendish continued to moan.

She finally vomited up the few remnants of the previous evening’s meal that she had not regurgitated yet.

For his part, Luis Urube was still unconscious. Apparently, the hammering his head had taken from gun butts had been extremely violent. “Hammers” was also the word that best defined the armed men who had assaulted the eleven members of the Orpheus expedition while they were preparing to resume their journey in order to arrive at the foot of Mount Roraima that same evening. The brutes spoke little, screamed sometimes, and hammered their victims all the time.

Desperate, Phil glanced furtively at the man who was watching them, constantly clasping his assault rifle, which seemed to be grafted to his hand. Sitting on a solid bench installed the length of the truck cab, he barely noticed the dreadful jolts that shook the vehicle every which way. Dressed in green, the brute caressed his weapon from time to time. In any case, the Stanford University researcher had no intention of testing their guard’s speed and accuracy when it came to dealing with a prisoner trying to escape.

The man had bushy eyebrows and his hair was jet black. A long scar ran across his right cheek, continuing over to his ear. Apart from his fierce and stubborn air, one detail in particular worried Phil Caldwell: the guard had taken no pains at all to conceal his face.

“For hostage takers, that’s very foolhardy,” he thought. “Except, of course, if their final intention is to kill all their prisoners.”

The astrophysicist darted his green eyes towards the grumpy guard.

“Where are you taking us?” he asked in halting Spanish.

The only response he received was the squeaking of the metallic, covered structure at the back of the truck.

He thought it wise not to insist.

“Help me!”

In a frail voice, broken by anguish, the unfortunate biologist beseeched her companions. Her wrists were hurting her. Her belly too. Mud had been running down her cheeks in long silvery furrows since the attack on the Orpheus expedition camp.

Making the most of a brief moment of relative calm in the banging that indicated the shock absorbers were about to give up the ghost, Gregory Greensberg tried to reassure her, saying that the truck was about to stop. The blond logistician with muscular shoulders and an impressive build was trying to put a brave face on and put the scope of the drama that was being played out in this lost place in the Amazon jungle where trafficking of all kinds prospered into perspective. But Paula Cavendish was not fooled. She looked at the man who was trying to dispel her anguish with reassuring words.

Words that were reassuring and meaningless, especially since no one knew when the vehicle along the ruined trail would stop. Above all, none of the hostages could even imagine or foresee the real intentions of their assailants. One thing was certain, they weren’t being taken to a vacation camp.

The dark-haired biologist, with desperate dark eyes, sighed. She moaned several times. Then, haggard, her mouth half open, she seemed to sink into a stupor where physical pain teamed up with despair.

In order to avoid counting the minutes that passed too slowly for his taste, Phil Caldwell tried to recall what had just happened.

Unfortunately, everything was blurred in his head. A few images appeared, like lanterns in a stormy night. But they were fleeting, darkness alternating with blinding flashes. And the taste of blood in his mouth. Blood. Always blood.

Waves of blood!

Dominating all these scattered sensations, screams continued to rumble in his mind. Cries, groans. Swearing. Then the dull sound of rifle butts hammering his companions’ skulls.

Since the sweet, sickly taste of the partially coagulated blood that had flowed in his mouth obstinately refused to dispel, Phil Caldwell decided to go back over the entire thread of this exciting expedition that was brutally transforming into a nightmare, from the very beginning.

He had arrived last at Manaus. Coming directly from Stanford University, he had suffered a bit from the suffocating equatorial heat that characterizes that large Brazilian city located in the heart of the Amazon and along the Rio Negro, one of the major tributaries of the Amazon River. Knowing that the rainy season ran from October to May he naturally expected to be welcomed by a warm shower. It was completely different from the climate of San Francisco where he had lived for five years.

The other members of the Orpheus expedition had been welcomed warmly at the Tropical Manaus Ecoresort. Karin Stockhausen had chosen this hotel because it was very comfortable and ideally located 10 minutes from the city and 10 minutes from Eduardo Gomes International Airport.

Exhausted by his long journey, the researcher, who specialized in specialist exoplanets and their possible capacities for sheltering strange forms of life collapsed on his bed. Without eating. But, the next morning, he caught up with an enormous breakfast: tropical fruits and the tastiest cakes piled up in pyramids, circles, and mountains of delicious food.

Karin and the other members of the expedition joined him quickly. Amused, they watched the brilliant astrophysicist dig in as if he had not eaten for a week. The discussion began immediately.

Gregory Greensberg gave him an outline of the schedule in logistical terms while Alexander Haffington and Paula Cavendish told him about the current state of their research. Alexandra and Paula were high-level biologists and biochemists who would work closely with Phil on their research into the unique biotope that characterizes tepuis. These *islands in the sky*, as some scientists called them with an innate sense of metaphor and lyricism, formed, as it were, separate worlds in which unexpected forms of life developed without regard for the abundance of vegetation and animals that swarmed 1,000 or 2,000 meters below. Namely, in the thick jungle where heat and humidity multiplied the forces of an exuberant nature tenfold.

This was precisely the aim of this expedition which had been organized and was financed by Karin Stockhausen. Since its creation in 2014, the Orpheus Foundation had specialized in a particular field that highlighted the convergences between ethology and the study of the most surprising forms of life that swarm over our planet, as well as at the bottom of the oceans or in hydrothermal sources. This confluence was by no means incongruous if ethology is applied in keeping with its broadest definition: the biological study of the interactions between species.

However, since the Orpheus Foundation received virtually unlimited funding as a result of the colossal fortune of the Stockhausen family, this ambition now intersected with specific research carried out by NASA as part of the study of exoplanets. That is why Phil Caldwell found himself at the foot of Mount Roraima with a team of biologists, edaphologists<sup>1</sup>, biochemists and climatologists.

The link between the study of the most extravagant forms of life that exist on Earth and the hope of one day discovering living beings on a distant planet nestled in the heart of our galaxy may seem tenuous. Nevertheless, reality reinforced the relevance of this experiment. As evidence, some extremophilic bacteria thrive under conditions that far exceed the worst environments within stellar systems. They survive even in a vacuum and under conditions of temperature, pressure or radioactivity, making them almost immortal beings. In Mono Lake, California, a bacterium bearing the sweet name of GFAJ-1, was discovered. This bacterium reproduces and thrives in a bath of phosphorus and arsenic.

This discovery, which was made in 2010 and whose results were modified two years later, led Karin Stockhausen to establish the Foundation. And then to organize this first great expedition, which had just fallen into a trap, even before reaching the first foothills of Mount Roraima.

Still hanging by his arms in a stinking truck that jolted on ruts that ran on endlessly, Phil recalled his surprise when the head of the Department of Astrophysics at Stanford University called him late one evening in December 2015. In a few words, he told Phil that Karin Stockhausen wanted to organize an expedition at the top of the tepuis that run along the border between Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edaphology is the study of soils as a natural habitat for plants.

His mouth slightly open and his eyes as round as marbles revealed his astonishment. His lack of comprehension, even. But, when Paul Henderson clarified the joint objectives of the Stockhausen Foundation and NASA, Phil did not hesitate. Some stammering – and a “yes!” – rang out at the end of the discussion.

Phil left San Francisco on Monday, January 11 to fly to Brazil. Following a brief stop in Miami, he arrived at Manaus.

After two pleasant days at the Tropical Manaus, the serious work began. As there are more than 600 kilometers of difficult roads between Manaus and Boa Vista – the usual starting point for the tepuis – Karin Stockhausen and Gregory Greensberg opted for a domestic flight with one of the three companies connecting the two Amazonian cities.

Their arrival at the Aipana Plaza Hotel was smooth. The comfort was completely different from the luxury displayed at the Tropical Manaus. But the members of the expedition were not on holiday. And they knew that full well. Moreover, in January the climate is much drier at Boa Vista. It is easier to breathe and the humidity is much more acceptable for Westerners unaccustomed to humidity levels of 98%.

The departure from Boa Vista on Saturday, January 16 was more complicated because it had been necessary to arrange for a bus for the members of the expedition and a large truck to carry all the equipment they needed. Moreover, precautions had to be taken for handling the very fragile and sophisticated scientific instruments they carried with them.

In addition to all these constraints, it was necessary to take the utmost care with respect to the indispensable medical equipment of Linda Griffith, the doctor assigned to the expedition.

The biologists, biochemists and ecophysicologists of the group were maniacs; they kept a constant watch over the comfort of their instruments. At every delicate crossing, they insisted that the driver stop the bus. Then they accompanied Fernando Pinzon, the driver of the truck who also acted as a guide, to make sure that the shocks and jolts of the road would not risk damaging their precious scientific equipment.

Normally, it takes about four hours to reach Santa Elena de Uairén from Boa Vista. But, given the careful monitoring, the trip dragged on for half a day.

Gregory was fuming, but Karin calmed things down by explaining that the goal was to make many observations for a whole month and that it was absurd to take the risk of breaking essential research tools on the false pretext of cutting travel time by four or six hours.

The blond logistician repeatedly glared with his light gray eyes to express his displeasure. But Karin was an efficient and wealthy expedition leader. These two qualities prevailed under all circumstances.

Phil groaned a bit just then because the truck carrying all four of them had just bounced heavily over a succession of holes that tortured shock absorbers already in poor shape.

The pain in his wrists was so violent that he fainted for a moment. But he quickly recovered his wits. The juxtaposition of metallic grinding from the structure of the vehicle and the howls of his three suffering companions eliminated any possibility of drowsiness.

The astrophysicist glanced hastily at Luis Urube, who had finally emerged from his lengthy faint. A bloody wound decorated their guide's left temple. His cheek was marbled with a mixture of mud and blood that formed a macabre tree shape that mimed the skein of streams that characterizes the deltas of the great rivers.

But, in this case, it was simply the result of blood from a large wound that continually flowed down his cheek mingling brown and red. The redhead tried to speak to him, but the surrounding noise was too loud. The unfortunate Venezuelan guide opened his eyes like a tortured man being taken to the stake. At that moment, the Stanford researcher that Luis Urube perhaps knew the men who had attacked them and tied them up in this truck stinking of sweat and urine. He shuddered at the thought.

Phil Caldwell stealthily observed the armed guard whose body lolled this way and that to the rhythm of the jolts. His beard was shaggy, his eyes black.

Apart from the scar that stretched over his right cheek and continued to his ear, another large scar ran through his upper lip and chin. All these war trophies indicated a shady temperament. Since the man was

still armed, Phil cautiously decided not to insist by asking him a question to which the brute would respond, either with an insult or a blow of his gun.

The unfortunate man then tried to recall the last moments before this brutal drop into a black abyss, his awakening sanctioned by only two words: fear and suffering.

After a night spent in precarious conditions in Santa Elena de Uairén, they continued in the direction of the village of Paraitepuy, where many Pemon lived. This little town is home to the Canaima National Park office and is the transit point for those wishing to climb the steep slopes of Mount Roraima, which is 3,000 meters at its highest point. The Venezuelan government wants to control the flow of visitors while verifying their identity and the amount of equipment they carry.

Unfortunately, the convoy, consisting of a bus and the truck that carried the equipment, never arrived at Paraitepuy. Bogged down in mud, the heavy vehicle came to a halt in the middle of the trail.

Fernando Pinzon cursed in Spanish.

Then he turned to Karin Stockhausen, who had rushed to determine the reason for the unexpected stop.

“The front right wheel broke on a piece of metal that some assholes left in the middle of the road! Worse yet, it really seems like that debris was placed there on purpose!”

“It's not the end of the world. We'll all help you fix it...”

The words of consolation uttered by the head of the expedition stuck in her throat.

Many armed men arrived from all sides and encircled both vehicles. There were more than twenty. Orders were given. Blows rained down on the expedition members.

A large, black cloud invaded Phil Caldwell's mind.

At this painful recollection, tears began to flow down his cheeks. And the pain returned. Atrocious. Consuming.

Almost unbearable.