

THE ASHLEY PROTOCOL

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Characters

Buck (M) - An operator
Elliot (M) - His younger friend and partner; a fellow operator
Hannah (F) - A corporate official

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A phenomenon. Inexplicably, there are children in the world who cannot physically develop past their tenth year, and do not degenerate or die of illness nor age. They are identified at birth by clouded corneas and temporary blindness until the age of two. Then, their eyes clear, they can see, and they can live forever.

It is the year 2300, on the eve of the bicentennial for

The Ashley Protocol

Scene One

"The Hub"

The year is purely expositional (given the subject matter of immortality, it is a device to avoid rewriting history).

The aesthetic is more like the 1950's/1960's. It is by no means a white void or cold, sci-fi environment.

The Hub is one of many Government stations in the world. It is essentially a home for the immortal children. It is operated by two men and they live in it, constantly on call, tending to the residents.

Within the lounge can be surfaces and seating (a small kitchenette, couches near a radio and a small bookshelf). There's a stage right entrance and an elevator up centre.

Entering from stage right are ELLIOT and BUCK: the operators.

They wear white lab coats that have brown leather straps/buckles, reminiscent of straight jackets almost.

ELLIOT is holding a small, black, folded bag with one hand, and the door open for BUCK with his other.

BUCK is in a wheelchair and adjusts his glasses upon entering the room.

BUCK

...I also never suspected my parents of lying.

ELLIOT

Well, it's plausible to a child; you just never thought it out as an adult.

BUCK

It's embarrassing.

ELLIOT
It's not like you go swimming often
enough to find out otherwise.

BUCK
I would be the fun thing kids dive
for and retrieve from the bottom.

ELLIOT
Where did this even come from?

BUCK
Chatted with Mr. Stoltz before
assisting him today. He said he had
never swam.

ELLIOT
Never?

BUCK
Never ever. Believe that?

ELLIOT brings BUCK a mug of coffee and goes back to the
counter with his own.

ELLIOT
It's a little off, I guess.

BUCK
Rubs me the wrong way. Asking for
the protocol like that. Missing
out.

ELLIOT
It isn't a milestone.

BUCK
Not an official one, no.

ELLIOT
Wasn't he like, two hundred?

BUCK
And four.

ELLIOT
Awesome.

BUCK
And he never swam.

ELLIOT
How'd you even find out about that?

BUCK

During the protocol. When I asked him what his last meal was.

ELLIOT

Why?-Oh. Your "riveting" book...

BUCK

So when he tells me, I say "Well, lets dive on in then" and I tried to start the machine, but the program stalled.

ELLIOT

I thought they sent some big guy over to fix that.

BUCK

Anki?

ELLIOT

Yeah.

BUCK

Woman.

ELLIOT

Ugh.

BUCK

Now, we're sitting there in an awkward silence waiting for everything to reboot, and I'm just tonguing my cheek and faking business with his IV tube before I joke: "Maybe it knows you didn't wait two hours after your spare ribs!"

ELLIOT

(beat)

He had spare ribs?

BUCK

No-what? Yes. But that's not the joke.

ELLIOT

Horrible joke.

BUCK

I know.

ELLIOT
I only just now found out about the ribs.

BUCK
Forget the ribs. The ribs aren't important.

ELLIOT
Now where does the "pool" come in? That doesn't even-That's absurd.

BUCK
I said "Let's dive in" earlier...

ELLIOT
(beat)
...

BUCK
...going off of that imagery...

ELLIOT
Love ribs.

BUCK
Mr. Stoltz had the same attitude as you: Didn't care for the joke. He says to me, "That's just a lie. A silly, simple lie." Then the protocol began and he chuckled off his mortal coil.

ELLIOT
(beat)
He died laughing at you?

BUCK
Yes.

ELLIOT
That's dark.

BUCK
It's something.

ELLIOT
What an asshole!

BUCK
Hey, keep that kind of-

ELLIOT
Jerk thing to do....

BUCK

-Keep that kind of talk down.

ELLIOT is done his coffee. He picks the black bag up off the counter and FLAPS it open: It is a body bag small enough for a child.

ELLIOT

(making his way to the stage right doors)

Well, Buck, you killed him, so: technically you had the last laugh!

BUCK

(beat)

That's not funny.

(ELLIOT continues on)

Hey.

(He stops and turns)

Come on. They roll back the audio on today, we lose our jobs. It's not funny.

ELLIOT is going to leave again, but something stops him.

ELLIOT

(coming back)

What do you picture when you say things like that? "Roll back the audio". What do you picture?

BUCK

I dunno.

ELLIOT

Do you picture some guy with giant tin can headphones or something? Smoking like a chimney next to archaic...wheels rotating audio film?

BUCK

If you're implying that the security around here is no better than the alarm system stickers "Ma' and Pa'" put on their front door to deter ruffians...

ELLIOT

They only check surveillance in the event of an incident.

BUCK

That's not the point.

ELLIOT

Well it's not like there's gonna be a fire, or a theft, and they're gonna roll everything back and happen to hear me make a joke and-

BUCK

-The problem isn't w-

ELLIOT

-a simple, passive joke to respond to what was (if you don't mind me saying so) a pretty messed-

BUCK

-The problem isn't with getting caught or whether it'll be heard, Elliot! It's about where it's coming from. That's why they screen us so hard-core before we can start working here. They want to make sure people are here for healthy reasons.

ELLIOT

People don't work here to punch tickets and play executioner, they do it for the money and the "list bumps".

BUCK

Well it's joking like that that'll make them wonder if you're just h-

ELLIOT

Thank you, Buck.

BUCK

-just here for a power rush instead of money or a donor bump.

ELLIOT

Thank you, Buck.

A phone RINGS.

ELLIOT is closest and walks to it.

BUCK

I'm looking out for you.

The phone RINGS again.

ELLIOT
You told a joke too!
(answers the phone)
What?
(beat. hangs up)
Ugh. Everybody is at it today...

BUCK
At what?

ELLIOT
"Inappropriate joking", Buck.

BUCK
So you-

ELLIOT
(leaving)
No, I don't think I was outta line.

BUCK
Just saying be careful.

ELLIOT
No need.

BUCK
Anything could happen.

ELLIOT
(faces him)
You gonna turn me in?

BUCK
No.

ELLIOT
(laughs)
Turn me in because I made a joke?

BUCK
Wasn't funny.

ELLIOT
Neither was yours.

BUCK
Mine wasn't inappropriate.

ELLIOT
Neither was mine. It was a joke.

BUCK
Not to me.

ELLIOT
(scoffs)
Now that's a problem.

ELLIOT would laugh, but a realization stops him.

BUCK closes the gap between he and ELLIOT from across the room to maybe halfway.

BUCK
(beat)
I'm sorry.

ELLIOT
(quickly)
It's fine.

BUCK
What was the phone call all about?

ELLIOT
Bomb threat.

BUCK
Again?

ELLIOT
I at first thought they were activists trying to stall the press event, but only a child would be stupid enough to keep calling.

BUCK
I'll wave Anders. Their screening has been lazy, and Hannah won't have any of it.

ELLIOT
What time is she coming in?

BUCK
"Big, big, day!"

ELLIOT
What?

BUCK
"Big, big, day!", That's all she said earlier.

ELLIOT
But what time is that?

BUCK
Just don't know.

ELLIOT
Okay. Well, "shit". I can't plan my day properly around her maybe coming in.

BUCK
Oh, she definitely is, just a matter of when. I think she was meeting with the caterer before stopping by. I can't remember the message fully.

ELLIOT
'Least there'll be food.

BUCK
I was surprised, actually.

ELLIOT
It's a fancy occasion; why not? It would be weird to have no food, really - it's ceremonial for us to attach it to function. Turkey for the holidays, cake for birthdays, chips and dip for shindigs; food's huge.

BUCK
What kind of food suits a bicentennial?

ELLIOT
Those don't get celebrated very often.

BUCK
Four generations, and all, I mean...

ELLIOT
Exactly: did you give a shit about what your great grand parents gave a shit about?

BUCK
(nodding)
So maybe a generic pasta with shrimp and bacon bites on side plates.

ELLIOT

(oh!)
I'm sorry!

BUCK

What?

ELLIOT

I think I laughed at your book earlier because of the spare rib thing.

BUCK

I was thinking about that too, just now - didn't wanna mention.

ELLIOT

I guess food does indeed mark the milestone. Can't rightly say what my own last meal would be, though; I don't think I'd be too hungry if I knew it were my last and all. Not really, no...

BUCK

"Milestones": I have to bring Mr. Lerche a bicycle, he's turning eleven.

ELLIOT

Eleven? The lucky dog. "Lucky dog Lerche" - ha.

(so!)

I've gotta assist with a 'Col right now: since your thing will be done quicker, can you be the one to wait around for Hannah?

BUCK

That'd be great, actually

ELLIOT

(leaving)
Thanks.

BUCK

You'll have to stay here until I get it over with, then - I have to get him that bike before you go.

ELLIOT

Here's the thing: if I get this one protocol done, it puts me way ahead of my-

BUCK
Who's doing the favor, here?

ELLIOT
So she'll be in an empty room for a couple minutes, my thing takes half an hour! I thought-

BUCK
One of us should be here - I'll be quick, you said it yourself. Then you can take your time.

ELLIOT
I was lying, you take forever; it's a bike delivery and you're in a wheelchair. I never know just how you...

BUCK
Simple: I hop on the bike and let my weight roll me to their room. Then, as thanks, they let me double up on the handlebars so they can take me back to my chair.

ELLIOT
(beat)
Really! Because I had a feel-

BUCK
-No.

ELLIOT
-Okay. Yeah.

BUCK is getting ready to leave.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)
Wait! Wait. I'll do it. You stay here for Hannah. If I can't go first I might as well do both. One bike, yes? Mr. Lerche?
(leaving)
"Happy eleventh, Mr. Lerche."

ELLIOT leaves, BUCK is alone.