

## TREATMENT

Aeon Drifter (a themed attraction by Eric Larkin)

We arrive at the Cahokia Aero-Archaeology Platform, just outside St. Louis, having answered a desperate call for research candidates. We're not 100% sure what we're in for, but it involves hot air balloons and, well... someone said time travel. Ridiculous. We check in, and are assigned a group number.

The area where we wait for our group's number to be called, is a liminal space. It is part archaeological field office, part balloon hanger, part communication hub for other similar research stations around the world, and part airport boarding area - all in a converted warehouse of some sort. It's as if it was designed for one purpose, then hastily redesigned for another purpose.... then again, and again, like, *yesterday*. It is *not* for tourists, though there is plenty of seating and plenty to look at. In fact, it looks like they pushed a bunch of their equipment and supplies to the side, and brought in benches borrowed from the local high school just for us.

That is, in fact, exactly what happened.

There are hot air balloon accoutrements (canopies, burners, etc.), camera and archaeological equipment, books, maps, charts, sketches and photographs. The visuals are of landscapes, temples, structures, small and large towns - but not *ruins*. None of this is "memorabilia" in any sense of the word. This is not a museum or an "adventurers' club." This is a working field office. There are screens with apparently live feeds to other similar facilities in different time zones. Some are active, some are dark. There are a few windows through which we can see balloons filling up with other candidates and lifting off.

Our boarding group is called, and we head towards our guide. They are attired with some authority - a captain of sorts? - but not with anything decorative or frivolous. They look like they could drop everything and fix your car within a matter of minutes. They lead us through a double door (the kind you find at the back of a supermarket) and into a wide (but low) utilitarian passageway. They stop us for a quick briefing, which boils down to "We really need help with our research, and stay in your seat." At the other end of the hall, they say simply, "Stay on the path."

Through those doors, we're outside and on a short path leading right into a balloon basket. We can see a few other landing pads in the area, which is laced with small service roads and ringed by trees at some distance. The canopy is fully inflated, reaching up over us. We load straight in, ascending rows, on all four sides. Our Captain joins us in the basket, exchanging a little dialogue with a control tower. Next thing we know, we are aloft - and the ascent is a bit more rapid than we'd assumed it would be. This thing moves.

As our balloon twists and turns a bit, we realize that we can see in every direction. If we look straight ahead or to the left or right, we can see for miles. If we look down, we can see the ground and surrounding buildings, receding quickly: 100 feet, 120 feet, 150 feet. Looking up, too - it's just sky and a few clouds. St. Louis stretches to one side, tangled with the mighty Mississippi - and there's the famous site of the ancient Native American city, now called Cahokia, off to one side. We recognize the grass-covered mounds and the open areas between them - partly covered by trees, a tourist center, and parking lot. It's a little scary to be up this high, but also... it's amazing.

The Captain addresses us with a little background and plan of action. The institute had first been established to study the sites of ancient indigenous civilizations, and the balloons were used for airborne views of the area's vast mound complexes. One day, while aloft, a researcher noticed a sort of quivering loop of discolored air in the sky. Before they knew it, a breeze had pushed them right into *and through* it. The sky looked almost the same, but when the researcher looked over the edge of their basket, they saw that the ruined mounds they'd been mapping were no longer *ruined*, but in perfect condition, at the center of a bustling city, criss-crossed with human activity of every imaginable kind.

They were looking at the original settlement!

The researcher and their colleagues came to the highly unlikely conclusion that they'd actually traveled back in time. The anomaly in the sky, they theorized, is simply a *dimensional overlap*, only visible and approachable from a very specific angle. Using it, they could now study these pre-Columbian civilizations live and in-person, and they'd found more of these overlaps in other parts of the world. Studies of earlier civilizations continue in this revolutionary new way, so much so, in fact, that they need help with all the work. That's why we're here... and we're headed there now for a little introductory tour!

Before we know it, the Captain is pointing out a weird, shimmery blur in the sky - the dimensional overlap - or just "time portal". After a few flame bursts - that is, steering and thrust - we're moving towards it at a fair clip. The basket twists and turns as it rises to the overlap - there's a brief but all-encompassing glimmery colorshift and distortion - and then back to blue skies all around.

It doesn't seem like anything has changed, but the Captain directs us to look over the edge of the basket ---

The vast city of Cahokia stretches out below us, and it is roiling with human activity.

The modern landscape is gone, and in its place are the mounds - not muted by dirt and grass, but crisp, with well-manicured walkways and steps - covered in and surrounded by crowds of people & surrounded by smaller, colorful structures. There are marketplaces, walls, cooking areas, rows of busy huts, clusters of children running around, men and women leading animals or carrying baskets, textiles, and produce, and in every direction, more of the same. In the distance, we see agriculture and irrigation, roads, orchards, more mounds, more huts and buildings -- in short, the center of a bustling civilization.

Then we notice *the scents*. We can smell fresh maize, squash, and fruit (plums, cranberries), clean air - and even clear water at a distance - cook fires, grass, and scents we can't identify, all

rich and clean and invigorating. It has an olfactory impact like your first trip back to the beach or the mountains after a long time away.

Our Captain points out a few areas of special interest, and brings us down for a closer look.

*Again - the movement of the balloon is relatively quick. The "drift" in Aeon Drifter is less like drifting downstream and more like drifting in the Fast & Furious sense. Okay, not quite that, but much livelier than we'd thought.*

Closer to the city, we can make out details of activity. Different scenes are visible depending on where we're sitting. One minute, we are looking at the open plaza in front of a large structure. When the balloon swivels in a different direction, we see a group of kids sitting on the edge of a pyramid mound. One of them waves at us. There is too much to see in one visit.

The Captain shares with us what we know of the eventual fate of Cahokia. They remind us that this is not some kind of paradise. Cahokia is every bit as complex a society as any human civilization, with both glorious achievement and a dark underbelly.

Abruptly, storm clouds appear in the near distance. As we are forced to head back through the portal to our own time - balloons do not do well in storms - the Captain notices a *different* time portal, higher up in the sky. They offer us a choice: go straight home through the original rift or explore this other rift - which is new and unexplored. We'd be the first - *but* the storm looms.

Naturally, we dare the new portal.

Pleased with our intrepidity, our Captain guides the balloon towards the new rift -- at top speed, with the storm in pursuit.

The storm catches us, as we rise through dark, towering clouds. Wind - spritzes of rain -- lightning! *Too close* - but we press on, bursting through the last threatening billows until - *boom* - we're through the rift.... and....

Where are we?

The Captain is a bit alarmed. It is darker here, but not from the storm, as there is no moisture in the air, and we can see a haze-covered sun. Gone is the blue sky, the white clouds, the crisp air, the clear and distant landscape. It's like we're trapped inside a plastic bag over a giant ashtray. The Captain has made calculations, and informs us that we've gone into the future, to about the year 2100. He confirms that we're in the same geographic location, but almost 100 years after our own time.

Looking over the edge of the basket and down... there's not much to see, or not much you'd want to see. There are a few straggling buildings and a very degraded St. Louis. The Cahokia mounds... not sure if we can tell them from the heaps of debris scattered around. It doesn't look

exactly like the aftermath of a war, more like a vast vacant lot on the edge of a once lively town. Or a broken civilization.

And the scents: stale, a bit greasy. A bit like we've been punched in the nose: just a haze and the taste of iron. The whole scene is darn near lifeless.

The Captain, obviously shocked, confesses that this is the very first dimensional overlap to the future. They're not sure what to make of this. Is this really our future?

Thankfully, it doesn't last long.

Abruptly, *almost right on top of us*, there is an electrical hiss, color flashes, and a rush of air - the scene changes like a crashing wave, and suddenly we see bright blue sky and green fields, pockets of agriculture - laced with elegant touches of human civilization. It's a city of the future, but not antiseptic or totally unlike our own time. It's both old and new - somehow... vibrant... And the river! Looking gorgeous and lively. The scene is not perfect, but it's inviting.

The scents are what give it away. They are very much like when we were in Cahokia: verdant, crisp, invigorating.

The Captain is flabbergasted - *it's still the year 2100*.

As we swoop down for a closer look at this mystery, the Captain thinks out loud: maybe because it's the future, it's not fully determined yet. The future is constantly in flux.

We create the future as we go.

Something is coming straight for us. It's... a flying car. Of course it is. Quiet as a whisper, it floats up and around, its driver (pilot? aviator?) casually examining us. As they pull away, they give us a little wave, and slip into the distance, towards another far off green-nestled jewel.

The Captain spots our original dimensional overlap and starts to move towards it. We'd love to stay, but our time is up.

On our way back, we're thinking about the kind of future we are creating with every moment.

Back through the rift, we look down on our own St. Louis. We descend towards the Platform. To complete our applications for Research Candidate, we're given the option to finish the paperwork for the program, then the obstacle course, physical fitness test, written exam and psych evaluation -- or, if we want to think about it a bit more, we can just sneak out through the gift shop.