

THE FRAGMENTS: Peace Is the First Lie

Pilot Screenplay

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CHAPTER 1

Ash in the Water

Trouble in Paducah never arrived loud.

It didn't storm across the Ohio River with sirens or soldiers. It didn't tear through downtown with smoke and spectacle. Trouble here wore a polo shirt. Trouble carried a clipboard. Trouble offered bottled water and asked if you were feeling okay.

The ash started falling three days before anyone called it an emergency.

At first it was just a haze drifting south from the deep-water eruption upriver—an event the news described as “geologically unusual but manageable.” The sky over Western Kentucky turned the color of wet cement. By the time it reached Paducah, the ash fell fine and gray, coating the riverwalk, settling into the seams of brick buildings, dusting the floodwall murals that told stories of war, trade, and old river glory.

The Ohio River kept moving.

It always did.

Stan Hawkins stood on the riverbank before dawn, hands shoved in his jacket pockets, watching Asian carp explode from the surface like silver missiles. One launched clean out of the water and slapped against a fisherman's aluminum boat with a hollow clang.

“Damn invasive freaks,” the fisherman barked. “We oughta wipe 'em all out.”

Stan didn't answer.

He'd grown up in Paducah. He knew the rhythm of the river, the way fog rolled in, the way the waterline crept during spring floods. He knew the carp were hated—filter-feeding monsters that disrupted ecosystems and knocked unsuspecting boaters unconscious.

But this morning something else felt wrong.

The water looked... calm.

Not river calm. Not surface calm.

Structured calm.

As if it were waiting.

Behind him, a digital billboard flickered through emergency updates.

CITY ANNOUNCEMENT:

TEMPORARY WATER MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP APPROVED

DIJI WATER ASSUMES OPERATIONAL CONTROL

Stan turned and read it again.

Diji Water.

They'd been in the news for weeks—“private-sector stabilization experts,” according to the mayor.

When the ashfall overwhelmed municipal filtration systems and inspectors found “financial irregularities” in the city's water budget, Diji stepped in with federal backing.

A rescue.

That's what they called it.

The mayor had stood on the courthouse steps with a Diji executive and a federal liaison whose smile looked like it had been focus-tested.

“This partnership ensures public safety,” the mayor said. “Hydration is stability.”

No one asked why the federal government moved so quickly.

No one asked how Diji had the infrastructure ready before the vote was finalized.

No one asked why the emergency contract had no expiration date.

In Paducah, people were tired of asking.

The ash thickened overnight. By mid-morning, it fell steady enough to coat the sidewalks like flour.

Schools dismissed early. Businesses taped plastic over vents. The city sent out automated alerts

advising residents to “increase water intake to prevent respiratory stress.”

Increase water intake.

Stan read that line three times on his phone.

He’d worked maintenance jobs most of his adult life. He understood plumbing. Understood flow.

Understood how water moved from intake valves to filtration tanks to distribution lines beneath the streets of Western Kentucky.

He understood enough to know that when a city tells you to drink more water during an environmental crisis, something is either very right—or very wrong.

By noon, Diji’s temporary headquarters had taken over the old municipal treatment facility along the river. The Diji logo—a clean blue drop encased in a geometric circle—hung over the entrance like a corporate halo.

Stan had applied for a short-term contract position there out of necessity. Overtime pay. Hazard bonus.

Ash meant work.

The security gate scanned his badge and chirped approval.

WELCOME, STAN HAWKINS.

HYDRATION IS COMMUNITY.

“That’s new,” he muttered.

Inside, the facility gleamed. Fresh signage. New stainless-steel hydration stations embedded into walls at regular intervals. Employees moved with quiet efficiency, speaking in calm, measured tones.

Too calm.

A woman in a navy blazer intercepted him.

“Stan Hawkins?” she asked, smiling like she already knew the answer.

“Yeah.”

“Beth. People and Culture.”

“HR,” he said.

Her smile widened slightly. “We prefer People and Culture. HR implies enforcement. We’re focused on alignment.”

“Alignment with what?” Stan asked.

She laughed softly.

It landed perfectly. Too perfectly.

“With wellness,” she said. “With stability. With each other.”

She handed him a laminated card.

DIJI HYDRATION COMPLIANCE STANDARD

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP EDITION

Beneath it, bold text:

WATER BREAKS ARE MANDATORY.

REFUSAL MUST BE DOCUMENTED.

Stan looked up. “Mandatory?”

“Public safety protocol,” Beth replied smoothly. “Ash inhalation increases dehydration risk. Dehydration leads to irritability. Irritability leads to instability.”

“Instability,” Stan repeated.

“We can’t afford instability right now.”

She said it like a joke.

It wasn’t.

Orientation took place in a conference room lined with screens showing looping footage of pristine streams and smiling families pouring glasses of water in slow motion.

A presenter in a crisp polo shirt clicked through slides.

“As of this morning,” he said, “Diji Water has assumed full operational control of Paducah’s municipal supply under Environmental Emergency Authority. We are proud to partner with federal agencies to ensure the continued calm and health of Western Kentucky.”

Calm.

The word echoed strangely.

Stan scanned the room instead of the slides.

No fidgeting.

No whispered side conversations.

No eye rolls.

He’d been in enough orientations to know that wasn’t normal.

When the presenter asked for questions, no one raised a hand.

Not even curiosity.

During break, employees filed toward a glowing hydration station.

Clear cups stacked neatly. Water poured perfectly chilled, crystal-clear.

A digital counter blinked above it.

COMMUNITY INTAKE: 99.2% COMPLIANT

A coworker with a name tag reading DEREK handed Stan a cup.

“First day?” Derek asked.

“Yeah.”

“Drink,” Derek said, smiling.

“I’m good.”

Derek’s smile held. “You don’t feel dry?”

“No.”

“That’s unusual,” Derek said softly.

Stan watched as Derek drank his own cup.

The shift was subtle but immediate. Shoulders lowered. Jaw unclenched. Breathing slowed.

Like someone had adjusted a dial.

Not hydration.

Regulation.

Outside, the Ohio River rolled past the intake pipes.

Beneath its surface, Asian carp tore through suspended particulate, thrashing violently through murky water.

What no one in the room knew—

What Diji executives were only beginning to suspect—

Was that the microscopic fragments moving through Paducah’s water system did not thrive in chaos.

They thrived in order.

They thrived in calm.

And the carp, those violent, invasive creatures humans were desperate to eliminate, were shredding fragment clusters wherever they surged.

Deep in the distribution network, something ancient and intelligent recalculated.

The humans were predictable.

The corporations were simple.

The federal government was... convenient.

But the river?

The river was a problem.

And for the first time since the fragments entered Western Kentucky—

The invasion felt something unfamiliar.
Disruption.
Almost fear.
Stan set the untouched cup back into the stack.
Behind him, Beth from People and Culture watched quietly.
She made a small note on her tablet.
“Non-compliant,” she whispered.
Somewhere beneath Paducah, beneath the pipes and pumps and polished corporate optimism, the fragments shifted direction.
Not toward violence.
Toward strategy.

They did not intend to conquer.
They intended to improve.
And in a town tired of crisis, tired of corruption, tired of noise—
Improvement was the most dangerous promise of all.
Stan had learned something about Paducah a long time ago.
People here could survive anything as long as it was explained calmly.
Floods. Layoffs. Corruption investigations. Even the mayor being escorted out of his office by federal auditors last winter. As long as someone in a suit stood behind a podium and said, “We have it under control,” most folks went back to work.
That was the real infrastructure of Western Kentucky.
Reassurance.
The hydration station hummed softly behind him.
Derek took another cup, slower this time. “You sure you’re good?” he asked.
“Yeah,” Stan said. “Got my own.”

“Bottled?” Derek asked, tone still friendly.
“Filtered.”
Derek nodded thoughtfully, like Stan had just announced he preferred oat milk.
“You’ll adjust,” Derek said.
It wasn’t a threat.
It wasn’t encouragement.
It was an assessment.
Across the room, a large screen switched to a live broadcast from City Hall.
The mayor stood at a podium flanked by the Diji executive and a federal liaison whose suit cost more than Stan’s truck.
“Let me be clear,” the mayor said. “There is no contamination. There is no foreign biological event. There is no cause for alarm.”
Stan tilted his head.
No one had said anything about foreign biological events.

The liaison stepped forward. His voice carried that polished D.C. cadence—warm, measured, deeply rehearsed.
“The federal government is proud to support Paducah during this period of environmental adjustment. Diji Water has demonstrated exemplary operational readiness. Hydration compliance is critical to public stability.”
Hydration compliance.
That phrase again.
A worker near the back raised a hand timidly. “What about the carp problem?” she asked.
The mayor’s smile tightened.
“We are addressing invasive species concerns separately,” he said. “Federal funding has been approved for expanded removal operations.”

On screen, footage rolled of massive nets dragging through the Ohio River. Boats churned the surface. Carp leapt in chaotic silver arcs before slamming into mesh barriers.
“Those things are dangerous,” the mayor added. “They destabilize our ecosystem.”
Stan watched the carp hit the nets.
Violent. Uncooperative. Impossible to calm.
A thought crept into his mind and refused to leave.

What if destabilizing was the point?
The broadcast ended with applause.
In the conference room, employees mirrored it automatically.
Stan didn't clap.
Beth from People and Culture noticed.
She moved closer, tablet in hand.
“You seem... hesitant,” she said pleasantly.
“About fish?” Stan asked.
“About alignment.”
“You ever been knocked in the face by a carp?” Stan said. “Hard to align with that.”
Beth smiled faintly.
“Chaos is inefficient,” she said. “Stability allows growth.”

“Growth for who?”
Her eyes flickered for half a second.
“For everyone.”
The answer was too smooth.
Outside, the ash thickened again.
Diji's intake pumps drew river water steadily into filtration chambers below the facility. Inside those chambers, microscopic fragments flowed through advanced membranes designed to remove everything except what could not be measured.
The fragments learned quickly.
They mapped pressure systems.
They catalogued chemical profiles.
They studied human neural pathways the way humans studied fish migration.
And they laughed.
Not with sound.

With understanding.
Humans believed themselves intelligent because they could build systems.
The fragments understood something simpler:
Whoever controlled the system controlled the species.
They had expected to fight.
Instead, they were offered contracts.
Offered federal authority.
Offered a public desperate for calm.
They did not need to overpower Paducah.
Paducah invited them in.
Below the intake pipes, a massive school of Asian carp surged through the murk. Their bodies churned the sediment, swallowing suspended particulates in blind, instinctive feeding patterns.
Several fragment clusters dissolved instantly inside their digestive systems.

The fragments registered the loss.
They recalibrated.
Human hosts were stable.
Corporate hosts were efficient.

Political hosts were valuable.
But these river organisms—
They were noise.
And noise complicated perfection.
In the filtration chamber, a microcurrent shifted direction.
The fragments began prioritizing removal protocols.
Through their human extensions, funding would increase.
Removal nets would multiply.

Shock barriers would expand.
The invasive species would be classified as a threat to public order.
And the river would be quiet.
Stan stepped outside during the next break.
Ash clung to the floodwall murals, dulling colors that once celebrated history. The Ohio River moved dark and heavy beneath the gray sky.
A carp launched from the water and landed hard on the concrete near him, flopping violently.
He stared down at it.
The fish's body convulsed with chaotic energy, muscles firing in patterns no one had taught it. No smoothing. No compliance. Just blind, furious life.
For a strange moment, Stan felt something like respect.
Behind him, the Dijon building gleamed, humming softly with order.
In front of him, the river thrashed.
Paducah sat between them.

He nudged the carp back into the water with his boot.
It vanished instantly into the dark.
His phone buzzed.
Unknown number.
He hesitated, then answered.
"Stan Hawkins," a calm male voice said. "This is Special Liaison Grant with Federal Environmental Stabilization."
"That a real department?" Stan asked.
A soft chuckle on the other end.
"Real enough."
"What can I do for you?"
"We've noticed," Grant said, "that you declined hydration compliance during your first cycle."
Stan's stomach tightened.

"I wasn't aware that was federal business."
"Everything is federal business during stabilization," Grant replied gently. "We just want to ensure you're feeling aligned."
The word again.
"I'm fine," Stan said.
"Good," Grant said. "We value independent thinkers."
A pause.
"They make the best converts."
The line went dead.
Stan lowered the phone slowly.
Above him, the ash began to thin just enough to let a weak shaft of sunlight through.
For a moment, the river glittered.
Peaceful.

Controlled.

Almost beautiful.
But beneath the surface, fragments moved.
And beneath those fragments, chaos waited.
Paducah had always depended on the river.
It just hadn't realized the river might be choosing sides.

CHAPTER 2

Stability Metrics

By the second week, Paducah stopped arguing.
It didn't happen all at once.
It happened in increments.
Fewer honking cars at intersections near Broadway. Shorter lines at the courthouse. A bar fight downtown that dissolved into a polite discussion about feelings. Even social media, usually a reliable battlefield, softened into something resembling mutual understanding.

The local news called it "a silver lining during environmental hardship."

Diji called it "community stabilization."

The federal liaison called it "expected behavioral correction."

Stan called it wrong.

He stood in the Diji maintenance corridor just before dawn, staring at a screen labeled STABILITY METRICS.

It wasn't labeled for public viewing.

It wasn't even labeled clearly.

But Stan had learned how to read between software lines.

The data stream showed intake volume, distribution pressure, and something else—an algorithmic tracking graph mapping reported incidents across the city.

Violent crime: down 63%.

Domestic disputes: down 48%.

Emergency room psychiatric visits: down 71%.

Productivity across municipal departments: up 22%.

"That's not water," Stan muttered.

Derek appeared beside him without sound.

"It's influence," Derek corrected softly.

Stan didn't flinch, though he wanted to.

"Influence isn't water treatment."

"Water touches everything," Derek said. "Why wouldn't influence follow?"

He said it casually, like he was explaining a traffic pattern.

Stan leaned back against the console. "You really believe that?"

Derek tilted his head slightly.

"Belief implies uncertainty," he said.

Then he smiled.

It was almost human.

Almost.

Outside the facility, the Ohio River churned under a cloudy Kentucky sky. Federal barges moved slowly along the channel, deploying new net arrays across carp-heavy zones.

The official statement read:

EXPANDED INVASIVE SPECIES MITIGATION

PROTECTING WESTERN KENTUCKY'S FUTURE

Stan watched footage of carp being hauled into containment barges, thrashing violently as mechanized lifts dumped them into industrial grinders.

He couldn't explain why it unsettled him more than the ash.

It felt surgical.

Targeted.

Personal.

Inside Dijj's executive conference room, a different kind of harvesting took place.

Special Liaison Grant stood at the head of the table beside a projected map of the Ohio River basin.

Fragment density zones glowed faintly in areas of high human compliance.

Carp concentration zones flickered in disruptive red.

"Removal efficiency is improving," Grant said. "Fragment loss in river systems has decreased by twelve percent since expanded eradication."

The Dijj executive folded his hands. "Public sentiment?"

"Supportive," Grant replied. "The invasive narrative is holding."

"And the anomaly?" another executive asked.

Grant smiled faintly.

"The anomaly is stabilizing."

None of them used the word alien.

The fragments did not require the word.

They required flow.

Beneath the river surface, schools of Asian carp moved in erratic patterns, filter-feeding through suspended biological matter. Every pass through fragment clusters resulted in microscopic dissolution.

The fragments registered the loss.

They did not panic.

They adapted.

Through their human extensions, they adjusted removal budgets.

Through their political extensions, they fast-tracked emergency legislation.

Through their corporate extensions, they refined compliance messaging.

"Peace is trending upward," one Dijj analyst noted.

Grant allowed himself a quiet laugh.

"Peace is profitable," he corrected.

Back on the maintenance floor, Stan received another compliance alert on his phone.

HYDRATION CYCLE MISSED.

PLEASE REPORT TO ALIGNMENT STATION.

He locked the screen.

Across the room, Beth from People and Culture observed from behind a glass partition.

"He resists," she said softly.

Derek nodded.

"For now."

"Do we escalate?"

Derek considered the question.

"No," he said. "Pressure requires patience."

Outside, a city council meeting convened to discuss increased funding for carp extermination.

"These fish are destabilizing our river economy," a councilman argued. "They jump into boats. They damage equipment. They represent chaos."

No one questioned the word choice.

Chaos.

The fragments listened through damp air and condensation on the ceiling of City Hall.

Chaos was inefficient.

Chaos destroyed pattern recognition.

Chaos consumed fragments indiscriminately.

The carp did not respond to influence.

They did not smooth.

They did not align.
They devoured.
And that, more than human resistance, complicated expansion.
Stan left the facility at dusk and drove toward the river.
Ash had thinned, but the sky remained heavy.

He parked near a stretch of bank where fishermen once gathered and walked to the edge.
The water looked calm.
Too calm.
Then a carp broke the surface, slamming back down with a violent splash.
Stan watched the ripples.
“You’re the only ones fighting,” he muttered.
His phone buzzed again.
Special Liaison Grant.
Stan answered this time.
“You’re spending a lot of time near carp zones,” Grant said pleasantly.
“You’re spending a lot of time tracking me,” Stan replied.
A pause.

“We monitor anomalies,” Grant said.
“Am I an anomaly?”
“Statistically,” Grant answered, “yes.”
Stan exhaled slowly.
“You ever think maybe the fish aren’t the problem?”
Another soft chuckle.
“Mr. Hawkins,” Grant said, “humans fear what disrupts order. That is why we are effective.”
“We?”
Silence stretched just long enough to confirm everything.
“Enjoy the river,” Grant said gently, and disconnected.
The surface of the Ohio shimmered in the fading light.
Beneath it, fragments reorganized.

They did not fear humans.
Humans could be guided.
They feared only what could not be guided.
And as federal nets tightened across the water, the fragments calculated one unavoidable conclusion:
The carp would have to disappear.
Paducah believed it was solving an invasive species problem.
The fragments believed they were clearing resistance.
Stan stood at the edge of the river and realized something worse than invasion was happening.
The city was improving.
And no one was asking who defined improvement.

CHAPTER 3 River Teeth

The first time someone described Paducah as peaceful, it made the evening news.
“I don’t know what it is,” a woman said into a local reporter’s microphone. “But people just seem...
better.”
The clip played three times in a single broadcast.
Better.
The word carried weight.
Stan watched it from his living room while Lena stood in the kitchen running the tap longer than
necessary.

"It's clearer," she said.

"Water's supposed to be clear," Stan replied.

"No," she said quietly. "This is different."

He didn't argue.

He'd noticed it too.

The way the water poured—steady, uniform, without air pockets or hesitation. The way steam from the shower clung to surfaces in symmetrical patterns before fading.

Structure.

That was the word he kept coming back to.

Lena shut off the faucet and leaned against the counter.

"My dad hasn't yelled at the TV in four days," she said.

"That might be a miracle," Stan muttered.

She didn't smile.

"He just sits there. Calm. Like nothing matters."

Stan looked at her carefully.

"You drink today?" he asked.

Lena hesitated.

"Everyone does," she said.

That wasn't an answer.

He stood and crossed the room, taking her hands.

"How much?"

"Enough," she said softly.