
WILDERNESS OUTTAKE

This excerpt from the forthcoming novel

WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS

by **Nicholas Hallum**

has not been approved for publication.

WildernessofMirrors.net

STORY NOTES

ABOUT LONG LINES

The looming fortress formerly known as the Long Lines Building is located at 33 Thomas Street in New York City. It has been known as a “windowless tower of doom” and the “Men in Black headquarters”. Long known to the public as a major communications hub for AT&T, the building is also a top-secret hub for US National Security Agency (NSA) spying, codenamed TITANPOINTE, where millions upon millions of phone calls, faxes and emails are intercepted daily. AT&T’s partnership with US government surveillance programs is already widely known, but what goes on inside the Long Lines Building has never been officially revealed.

**ALTERNATE SECTION
NEW YORK CITY + PRAGUE**

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NEW YORK CITY

The Long Lines skyscraper rises like an alien megalith from the skyline of lower Manhattan, all black slabs annealed together, creating a joined set of giant black wedges. There are no windows, no visible vents, no penthouses or roof garden. On that October afternoon soon after 9-11, the men and women all arrived separately at 33 Thomas Street just after noon.

A collection of oddly dressed personnel, some in AT&T repairman uniforms, NYPD detective uniforms or official fire department investigation jackets, others in Wall Street suits and ties, and still others in nondescript casual clothing – carefully studied attire designed to be unmemorable.

Yet all of the people who came in the secure front foyer of 33 Thomas Street and went up the elevator inside the brutalist building carried secure ID badges and each of them knew a list of passcodes specific only to the person, which changed every hour.

Peter was a tourist, this time around, his attire jeans, a tourist Weyland-Yutani joke t-shirt and a water-stained old hoodie requisitioned from police custody. He had been to the building before, working on the TITANPOINTE

surveillance system for the NSA and on the SKIDROWE satellite intel system. In fact, in the 1970s, Peter had contributed design parameters to the Long Lines building itself, ensuring its compatibility with the soon-to-be-completed WTC towers, so that the information generated by the secret SKYRISE entities in the twin towers could be fed appropriately through the Long Lines building and into the NSA processing system. Now that the twin towers were down, at least half the purpose of the buildings complex internal computer network was obviated. Peter looked around at the dead workstations, the now-meaningless information terminals and the empty dejected desks. He was sure the NSA team would find new ways to use the facility, but at that moment, the facility felt hollow and purposeless. A vast edifice in service of nothing.

Inside the building was a secure comparted information facility. One by one, the men and women filed into the SCIF, each one scanned outside the door, each one depositing cell phones and laptop computers in the RFID-blocking box by the door, each of the electronics named and labeled for later pickup.

After he found a seat, Peter scanned the room. There were faces he recognized: first he spotted his mathematics mentor from Yale days, a now-ancient Andrew Gleason. Gleason was whispering quietly to Cavendish, the Brit who had been on site during the construction of the very building they were convened inside. Paul Wolfowitz was also there, his hair a little more gray, a little more shaken by events. And Peter recognized as well two from the old days – one a voluble New Yorker named Saul and the other a taciturn military man from Montana named

Miles Garmon, hard-bitten and unblinking. There were other old hands, scattered here and there through a crowd of newer recruits.

The briefing was headlined by a gruff and unsmiling Andrew Marshall. He spoke briefly before he introduced their usual briefer – the inimitable Robinson Gale. A little older, temples a little more silver, posture a little more stiff, yet still the indomitable OSS intelligence chief Peter had known for over forty years. Gale spoke briskly, as if he were running short on time.

“Our team has now spent eighteen days at Ground Zero,” said Gale. “The former site of the Twin Towers. Our team there mined through the debris for shards of the planes and the people. The focus here, you realize, was trying to figure out how exactly the men in the planes had managed to successfully attack and damage the entities.”

Gale spoke *ex tempore*, without audio-visual aids. But despite his lack of technological aids or fancy projected graphics, Peter could visualize exactly Gale described.

“Something was killed here. There is evidence of *djinn* death everywhere we look in New York City now,” explained Gale. “You all know what you are seeing – that is the same residue that we’ve seen in the upper atmosphere for time immemorial. That unearthly substance is now come to ground. All over New York, their dust is now collecting in corners and subway stations.”

Peter knew what Gale spoke of: he’d seen the eerie corpse-light echo of the creatures permeating the streets, the residue sparkling in the corners of his eyes, a

glowing and ghostly halo of unreality floating between the buildings of mid-town Manhattan.

Gale looked at the small group that of initiates who were hearing his firsthand account. “It’s no secret to those who know – the city is covered with the *djinn* dead bodies.”

Peter rubbed his eyes and scanned the room. None of the old Skyrise hands seemed to be shocked by this turn of events. His core colleagues had been doing this work since at least the 1970s, and they seemed resigned to whatever happened next: jobs went bad, it was part of this arcane spycraft. The general rule of the OSS was that anything could always get worse. He watched Garmon and Cavendish – they were focused and listening.

Gale continued: “Romulus and Remus in the Twin Towers are for certain destroyed entire. No *djinn* escaped the field of action. They are entirely destroyed.”

Yet as Peter glanced around, he also realized that among the old Skyrise hands were scattered a fresh crew of younger newer blood whose faces showed consternation and fear at this statement. A young man to his right with red hair was silently crying at Gale’s words. These newer recruits had not known the full extent of the system they had signed up to build and protect, and this was a shock to their expectations. Peter sighed. Once he’d been this young, this callow.

“Our team has interviewed dozens of survivors,” said Gale. “They tell us that the dust has fallen for hours here, so dense that we can hear particles still falling to the ground, days later.” Peter had heard that sound too. It was a dry, hissing, crackling rain.

Garmon's hand went up, followed rapidly by a gravelly voice. "What does the local medical community make of the dust, of the human impact they're seeing?"

Gale sighed. "Well, such *djinn* dust gives hallucinations to children and brings death to adults. There will be many people who die in the coming days."

"Yes, yes, but what are the doctors saying?"

"Oh, as usual, our team has helped them manufacture some sort of reasonable explanation. They're telling people on CNN that the dust is composed of jet fuel, pulverized concrete and toxic building materials, vaporized in the instant."

"And yes, it's poisonous." Gale nodded sadly. "The dust has an alkaline pH of 11, and burns the respiratory tract. But no one can truly identify the toxic elements that are causing so many respiratory illnesses, and so many early deaths. Yet as most of you understand, the death of a *djinn* is deadly on a level beyond laboratory understanding. Yet we are most concerned about the ordnance used – it's a weapon we did not know existed before now. And we still can't identify its origin or provenance."

Gale stepped back from the podium and motioned forward an Arabic scholar with a trim dark beard. "Our colleague Mahmoud El-Amin was of great assistance on site here at Ground Zero. Professor El-Amin has studied for years in the famous archives of al-Azhar, mining the great repositories of Islamic scholarship found in those ancient stacks, with a special focus on our area of

interest. He's been the lead for our investigation there in New York, which admittedly, given the media attention, has had to be relatively clandestine."

"Thank you," said the soft-spoken Professor El-Amin. Peter saw his slight bearded shape bend towards the podium. Something seemed odd about one of the man's eyes. It flickered in the light. But the professor spoke plainly and directly into the microphone. "As Mister Cavendish has explained, much is unknown and much is mysterious. There is no specific formula to kill a *djinn*. Such knowledge was lost at the Tower of Babel. Or the great Mesopotamian flood. Five to ten thousand years ago or more. Before the time of the Prophet, *alay-hi wa-sallam*."

"Yet we do know one thing for certain., This ability has been rediscovered now, in our generation. A *djinn* – two of the greater ones, encased many decades ago by the United States power in this sphere – has been destroyed not by accident, not by error, but on purpose by those who knew of the *djinn* encasement, and targeted them precisely with weapons we do not have in the United States today. This we can verify. We fight an enemy who has weapons too great for us, powers we do not yet possess."

A murmur broke out among the members of the small group. But El-Amin continued, imperturbable. "You may well ask how they have done this terrible act." He glanced over at Cavendish and Gale for reassurance as the group continued their mutterings. "The truth is, we do not know."

Mahmoud El-Amin looked around the room as the muted discourse continued.

Gale stepped forward. When it was silent again, Gale continued speaking. “At first, we assumed the knowledge would be contained somewhere in the Middle East. That was where human knowledge of *djinn* began, and that was where the deepest knowledge of them now resides – other than the mountains of Tibet, where they are known as *tiānlóng*.”

Peter shuddered. He had already been to Tibet, and visited the things that lived in the high mountains there. And he did not want to go back.

Gale spoke up again. “We believe now that there is a new and surprising source for the weapon used by the team funded by *Al Qaeda*, the base group that the Bush administration is already naming as responsible for this act of terror. Specifically, the leader of the *Al Qaeda* ground team here, a man named Mohammed Atta, the knowledge we have of his advance work, this can help us.”

Now a map appeared on the blank screen behind the two speakers. This map showed a line of travel between various locations in Europe and the Middle East. The origin point was Egypt, with additional stop-overs in Hamburg, Afghanistan, the UAE and surprisingly, the Czech republic.”

Professor El-Amin tapped a finger on the map. “The Czech ministry tell to us that Mohammed Atta made a trip to Prague on April 8. The people of the press, they will be told that Atta met with *eamil aistikhbarat aleiraq* – an *Iraqi* intelligence agent – Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani. This is not true. The truth is, we do not know why Mohammed Atta visited Prague.”

Gale leaned into the microphone. “This is the truth, we do not know. But we’ve had it put about to the media that he was meeting with Iraq because we want

to lead reporters down that path. The Administration believes Iraq was involved in the attack, so this is convenient.”

“So why – ?” began a loud voice in the group.

Gale held up his hand for silence. “To be absolutely clear, team, we believe that Atta’s visit to Prague was somehow related to his use of *djinn* tools. And we have found one remnant in the ashes of the Twin Towers, one fragment of Mohammed Atta’s remains, which several of you will further investigate in Prague.” Gale gestured at the professor.

Professor El-Amin spoke again. “Yes, and this item which we have found is part of a jacket pocket.” He held up a zip locked evidence bag with a charred bit of blue cloth inside. “*Huna hu alshay!*” He pushed a button and behind him, the image on the screen changed to a smudged bit of paper, folded and unfolded. On the paper could be read a string of numbers.

“This bit of paper bears the resonance of *djinn* activity.” He tapped again at the podium, and the image zoomed in and enhanced. The numbers “135797531” appeared on a thin strip of paper. “And it is just such a number as *djinn* would appreciate, for it is a *raqm mutanazir*, an ancient device used to communicate with *djinn*. I do not know the English.”

Gale stepped forward. “A palindrome. The digits can be numerated as a sequence of ascending and descending odd numbers, read the same backwards and forward. 1 3 5 7 9 – as you can see, it reads the same the other direction. Attractive to *djinn*.”

“Thank you,” said Professor El-Amin to Gale. “What do such numbers mean? We do not know. We believe, from resonance patterns and analysis of the paper, that the numbers were written in Prague by Mohammed Atta.”

Robinson Gale stepped up the microphone. “Right then. This brings us to the end of this briefing. We’ll sort out another for next week. For now, I’m assigning a small party – El-Amin here, along with Fisher – yes, you – to go direct to Prague tonight to determine the source of the numbers and their use by Atta. Petersen and Chanaya, you two will go with Fisher and El-Amin as support and operational crew, to support their efforts. Understood?”

Peter nodded.

“The rest of you will either be working the crash in Pennsylvania or the one at the Pentagon over the coming week, to try to uncover anything further we can find out about the tools Atta and his crew used to destroy the entities in the towers. Later, we’ll be assigning personnel to enter Iraq and other locations known to Mohammed Atta.”

Gale clasped his hands together on the podium, as always professorial to the end. “Now then, gents, the briefing is over. We’re moving on this at 1700 hours. Any additional intel to share with the team, people? Questions?”

2002

**PRAGUE
CZECH REPUBLIC**

They landed in Prague on a snowy day in the middle of January, 2002. The Danube River was frozen, and the statues and gargoyles on the St. Charles Bridge looked to him like a set of frozen effigies waiting to come to life after the ice and snow passed by.

To familiarize themselves with the city, and with the possible movements of Mohammed Atta in the city, the two of them signed up for a tourist excursion with a guide. Underneath their guide's prattle, everything here echoed to Peter's ears of djinn activity. There was the Faust House – where Faust had apparently sold his soul to the devil and the English alchemist Edward Kelley had lived and worked on unearthly magic. And then there was the legend of Chanina, the daughter of a Jewish merchant, who refused the bridegrooms offered her and, drawn by her love of a mysterious Lord of the River Vltava, stepped into the river and returned to the roofs and towers of Prague only in the shape of a green cat. There were stories of midnight meetings between the Emperor Rudolf II and the great mystic of Jewish legend, Rabbi Löwe, who was contracted to create an army of homunculus Golem. And last but not least, there was the legend of the Orloj Astronomical Clock, placed in the clock tower over the Old Town fountain. The Clock, said their guide in accented sing-song English, was made so perfectly that the clockmaker had his eyes put out: Peter flinched when they came to that part of the story, for it reminded him too much of his bizarre experience with frequencies and timing, calling down something unspeakable to a fountain at Yale.

On their tourist trip, Peter could feel how ancient Prague was, in its very bones. Prague had been here far before the United States, far before the Washington Monument, and far before the city of London. There were structures and symbols in the city even older than those he had encountered in the hinterlands of China.

Mahmud and he shared endless cups of coffee at the famous old Café on the bridge – *Kavárna Slavia* – and became quite familiar with Prague. On nightly walks around Prague, they often followed Mostecka Street to the Charles Bridge. The stone Gothic bridge was wide, and lit with colored lights that illuminated a long line of statues. A backpacker played his guitar in front of a hat while a street artist used charcoal to draw a sketch of elderly female tourists. A statue of a Czech martyr saint was placed halfway across the bridge... it was a good luck charm. There was a bronze plaque below the statue, to tell the tourists to touch it.

But Peter could hardly look at the statues on the bridge. Because he was feeling something in the back of his mind, it was ringing louder every day they were there. It was an ancient death-knell.

He could feel the death of a djinn reverberating like a distant tremor in the soil. He could sense it underneath the plants on the ground that had been growing there for the past hundred years, he could sense it under the buildings the now covered this territory, he could sense it regardless of the people that walked back-and-forth over this poisoned ground. The ground to him felt like a place where a titanic oil spill had once covered the land, and a great patch of toxicity that leached into the topsoil, and penetrated all the way to the granite bones of the land.

It was the same sensation of terrible morbidity he had felt in New York City. Something that was supposed to be a creature of the air – and never touch the ground – had been grounded terminally here. The fight for life by the creature had been rigorous, but it had been welded to the ground here, as a human being would be held to the ground by a very strong electrical current. Peter could feel it drawing on his flesh, he could

imagine that killing current pulsating through flesh until it steamed and burned away and his consciousness collapsed on the dead land. And he kept finding himself drawn back towards the ancient St. Charles Bridge. Something waited for him there.

One evening three days after their arrival, Peter rented a boat. He then rowed his little boat underneath the bridge. And there, carved deep in the stone, he found an ancient inscription on the bridge: “135797531.” Peter pulled out the slip of paper found in the coat he knew to be Mohammed Atta’s: these numbers were a precise match for the numbers Mohamed Atta carried.

The next day, Peter found a guide, and a city inspector, and brought them with him to the bridge, and pointed at the numbers. Through two different translators, he finally got the meaning of this ancient list of numerals.

The number “135797531” was in fact a palindromic number that was considered a prophecy. In the year 1357, the Holy Roman Emperor listened to astrologers and was convinced to lay the foundation stone of the Charles Bridge in Prague on a precise time and date: in the Year 1357, 9 July, 5:31 a.m. They told the story of the events after the bridge’s foundation stone was laid, and before it was completed. In 1420, as the bridge neared completion, a massive army of 150,000 Crusaders marched on the city of Prague and laid siege. A small number of Hussite peasants retreated rapidly into the city. And after they retreated into the city, they managed to route the numerically much larger Crusader army. Peter felt sure this was a sign of some sort of protection afforded by the djinn’s death in this city.

The date Charles dedicated the bridge, was the same date that Mohamed Atta carried around. Peter heard their story, and he became convinced that was the date on which the djinn was married to the substance of the bridge itself. Somehow, the peasants managed to use the Emperor's gift to their city to repel invaders. 135797531.

But what was it about those numbers that helped Mohamed Atta? Had he just come here to look at the last site that an entity was killed, hundreds of years before? Surely he wasn't engaged in the same sort of painstaking investigation that Mahmud and Peter now had to engage in – Mahmud and he were only on the ground here in Prague for two days. It seemed to Peter that Atta knew what he had come to Prague for, and he had flown into Prague specifically to retrieve it. Someone had told him what to look for.

But Peter had no such luck. He had to figure out everything he knew by trial and error. First he eliminated the library, then he eliminated the Jewish quarter, then he tried to eliminate the legend of the clockmaker who had made the clock that was so beautiful that he was blinded by it. He was unable to ignore this story though: this part felt real. Something resonated in his bones when he touched the tower with the clock.

The very next morning after his realization, Peter dragged Mahmud with him and they went to the great Astronomical Clock together. They paid the city inspector a large bribe to look the other way while they climbed the stairs inside the clock tower building. Inside that tower, he could feel time being counted in increasingly rapid intervals, backwards it went, and it stopped at the moment of a djinn's death. The clock tower had been a weapon in that great act of a killing, much as the planes on 9/11 had been used as vehicles of destruction. Peter could not understand all the elements that had gone into that act, but from that great height of the Clock Tower, Peter determined exactly where the

djinn had fallen. He could not determine exactly what made the djinn fall -- he thought it probably had something to do with a complex mathematical and sound pattern created by the clocks in meshing gears. Whatever compulsion that caused the entity to die – a science, art or magic – it was lost to them now. But he knew now precisely where the dead djinn had fallen, all those many centuries ago. He knew where the body lay, and he also knew the bridge intersected that death precisely: the bridge was the center of the death.

Here in Prague, other people had sensed its presence across several neighborhoods, for across the ground it had touched, few gardens were near it, and no flowers grew at all. All around that area, rusted old iron implements were stabbed into the ground, as if to hold down the ghost of whatever had died there. To Peter's eyes, it was unburied and still rotting in the open air, for there was no way to bury something like this, not even with a million pounds of concrete.

On their walk back from the Astronomical Clock, he reached down and touched the bridge's substance, and it was then – by touch and feel – that he realized St. Charles Bridge had been built with the same terrible shards that he had found at the 9/11 World Trade Center Tower site. The same gray choking horrific dust had gone into its bricks 600 years before. A djinn's death was baked into the bridge.

Late on their last Sunday night in Prague, Peter rented a second boat and returned to the dark cave under the bridge. This time, he took Mahmud with him, to examine the bridge. The old lights in the fog at night in Prague make Peter feel as if they were temporarily in Narnia, but a Narnia twisted into wreck and ruin by some ancient White

Witch who had not died at all, not at all. The unearthly bones and blood were still there, under their feet, and those bones still stank of all the cast-off malevolence of the djinn.

As they rowed carefully through the fog, waves slapped up against the side of the boat. Peter looked down at the waves and remembered that a djinn could absorb the waves of other creatures, and be influenced by them, much as one had been influenced by the waves that Su-Linn and he had sent out in that Yale courtyard all those years ago.

But what if a wave could cancel out another? Perhaps if one wave – an entity's wave – took on the pattern of another, it could sense that reality for a moment.

Mahmud had come to the same realization, and he spoke of it aloud, which Peter felt was inadvisable. But the manner in which he spoke was hardly understandable to anyone except Peter.

“Such ancient angels, as your Christian Bible says, they enjoyed the offerings to be burnt, and this was why a murdered lamb must be waved in the air, a wave offering, and a smoke offering.” Peter nodded: he remembered the Old Testament texts, and all the specific instructions in Leviticus.

“Why is this, *sadiqi*?” continued Mahmud. “I will tell you why! I think that experiencing another death in the air was a feeling of great enthrallment for these creatures. A djinn drinking of death would sense it like the intoxicating poison of alcohol: it would bring his senses to confusion. In fact, you should listen to me on this – ”

Peter looked up from the confusing waves on the surface of the Danube River. He pointed at Mahmud. “You have said something there. Something profound.”

“I do?” Mahmud looked confused. “I was merely telling to you this truth – ”

“You were telling me that if a djinn gets too close to death, they may die themselves. If they inhale too much of another’s death, it would be deadly.” Peter picked up the oars and rowed forward, pondering the implications.

He spoke again to Mahmud. “This dust we have examined, that is the substance that a djinn becomes at the moment of its death, am I right?”

“True, *min sadiq*,” said Mahmud. “Instead of merely being a creature of the air, djinn become solid matter at the end of their unholy life, *in’shallah*.”

“So perhaps absorbing any of this singularly solid matter would result in the same death.” Peter found the tie-up ring under the bridge and hitched his rope to it. Underneath the St. Charles Bridge was a wettened ledge of old stone, on which fishermen could stop. Carefully, he helped Mahmud out of the boat and they both crouched on the ledge together. He fumbled for the flashlight in his pocket.

Peter pointed the flickering beam of the flashlight up, over their heads, at the rising curve of the bridge and the frozen statues far above. There, inscribed deep into the stone, were the same numbers he’d seen in Mohammed Atta’s coat pocket, numbers he had almost memorized by now: 135797531.

Above the numbers were ragged fresh holes in the concrete, missed stones.

“There are pieces of the bridge missing,” he said to Mahmud.

“No,” said Mahmud. “I can see it now. The pieces missing are the flesh of djinn which were planted into this same bridge here, centuries ago.”

Mahmud was right. Peter realized now that what Mohammed Atta had done was take some of the dead djinn’s substance and inject it into a living djinn. He had flown bits of a djinn’s death into another djinn, and that was sufficient to cause death.

Peter stood up slowly. He balanced carefully on their ledge, and then he reached into the empty holes in the bridge where the bits of djinn bones had previously been laid – he could feel their outlines in the solidified dust and ancient dirt. There was no remnant – no stones – left from the 12th century djinn’s death.

“They took this – Mohammed Atta took these pieces from the bridge.”

“*Na’am*. He took them to cause the death on 9-11,” said Mahmud slowly, understanding his point. “He took these stones, and the men flew these stones into the Towers, to inject such death into the djinn there. This is what you are saying, *na’am*?”

“*Na’am*,” Peter agreed. “Yes, that is what I am saying. These stones of an ancient djinn’s death caused this new death at the Twin Towers.” Peter sat down heavily in the boat, and waves shook it anew. Waves and stones, death and enthrallment. The truth had been under the bridge all along, their entire time in Prague.

He wondered now if this was where the legends of the Gollum came from. A bit of djinn, injected into unliving flesh, brought it into a sort of half-life. If you took the spell from off of the head of a djinn tied to clay, would it have collapsed to the ground? The scripture was the name of a djinn, and once you removed it, the thing would collapse into a pile of dust? So many spells – so much knowledge – lost to the ravages of time.

But someone still knew how to do this. Someone had managed to remove the name from the Twin Towers, and they had collapsed to a pile of dust. The great Golems of the Western world, emptied of all power.

One week later, Peter was still investigating what techniques Mohammed Atta when each of them received orders for the next stage of their work. Mahmud’s research

request to return to the library archives in al-Azhar had been approved: he would investigate further in the ancient texts. But Peter was moving on, this time to Syria and Iraq. Iraq was going to fall, and somehow, his strange skills might play a part.

So Peter and Mahmud shared what they thought to be their last coffee at *Kavárna Slavia* and bid each other farewell, not knowing if they'd ever see each other again.

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