

Portal in the Pines

A Sci-Fi Novella

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SAMPLE

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Chapter One

Andrew Kinnaird scanned the horizon as the plane dipped below the cloud cover. He could see why Minnesota was called the “Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.” *Which one am I going to?*

He’d steeled himself for the car rental, driving on the wrong side of the road in a strange country, and traveling to his destination by trusting GPS. But he’d never been in the U.S., so the all-expenses-paid invitation to the scientific conference in Minnesota had appealed to him. It would help him forget Gina for a time.

“You’re boring and a cold fish,” she had told him. He didn’t think that was a good reason to break up. *Giovanni, yes—now there was competition.* Andrew’s plain looks, short stature and slim build, Edinburgh speech habits, and penchant for talking about glyphs, runes, and the civilizations that created them, couldn’t compete with Giovanni’s Italian flamboyance.

The car rental wasn’t necessary. A man with the build of an Irish rugby player held a sign that said Andy Kinnaird. *Andy indeed! Oh well....* The fellow looked familiar. *Wasn’t he reading a folded newspaper in the waiting room at New York City’s JFK airport?* The chiseled face, wide shoulders, and bulging biceps reminded Kinnaird of a jerk who had bullied everyone in public school.

Andrew decided that those two people just looked similar. He knew one’s mind often emphasized similarities not differences. Many American men had the build of an ox, and minds to match, if you measured by recent presidential candidates, especially if they were at the gym several times a week. *What a waste of time!* He also knew that they were just kidding themselves—getting old was everyone’s fate.

“I’m Dr. Kinnaird,” he said to the muscle-bound oaf.

The man moved forward into his personal space. A hirsute paw was offered in greeting. “Happy to meet you, doc. I’m Gary Adams. You’re the last one.” He put one of Andrew’s bags under one arm and picked up the other two. “Glad you travel light.” *Irony? Probably not. He won’t know what it means!*

The twinkle in the man’s eye reminded him of an uncle who had a similar build and walked ten miles through the Scottish countryside every morning. Andrew hadn’t inherited any of those genes. He thought that was part of Gina’s problem. Giovanni wasn’t a young Schwarzenegger, but he was a young Brosnan with dark hair and mysterious brown eyes. *I guess it doesn’t matter to her that Giovanni is a narcissistic prick.*

“They said to bring enough for three weeks,” said Andrew. “Any idea why the conference is so open-ended? I have classes this fall to prepare, and I need to set up my return trip.”

“They’ll give you the scoop when you arrive,” Adams said over his shoulder as he led the way through the maze to the parking area at Minneapolis-St. Paul’s Lindbergh Terminal. “We have some beautiful countryside to see on the way, so enjoy the ride. ‘Course, I don’t know much about Scotland except for Nessie. You could have us beat in the scenery business. Probably not the fishing, though.”

“I’m not expected to go fishing, am I?”

“No, but if you didn’t bring trunks, you’ll have to skinny dip in the lake.” He laughed at Andrew’s expression, almost running into an old harridan who used the F-word and glared daggers at him. “Just kiddin’. I’m sure we can find you a wetsuit. The water’s still a bit cold.

Nothing like my home state, Florida. We know what winter's like up here, and sane people avoid it."

"You're from Florida?"

"Live there among the gators and skeeters. It's a great place. You know, Dirac was a professor for a few years there in one of our fine institutions of higher learning. Ever heard of him?"

Andrew smiled. "Yes, I have." He watched Adams toss the suitcases into the back of a large black SUV. He opened the door for Andrew and watched him climb in.

"This is a four-wheel drive, but the agency still puts snow tires on in the winter. You still might see some snow up at the lake, you know."

"The agency? What agency? I thought this was a public conference."

"Like I said, you'll get the scoop when you arrive. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

In spite of worrying about his choice of summer conferences, Andrew enjoyed the ride. Pine forests were abundant. Ancient glaciers had sculpted the land into cairns and creags, leaving many lochs among the low lying moraines. He could imagine Vikings testing their boats on them. *Isn't there evidence for them in Minnesota?* He would have to check that. He remembered the local football team had the Vikings as a mascot.

When they finally pulled off the highway and bounced along a bumpy country road filled with potholes left over from the recent harsh winter, he thought he was in the middle of nowhere. He was also yearning for a nice, warm Edinburgh meal with a steaming mug of tea.

Adams made a hair-raising three-point turn which sprayed loose gravel and dust and then backed the SUV into a space. Andrew got out and looked at the building the back of the vehicle faced. It was large with weathered shingles all over it. Looked like a fire trap to him. Two stainless steel chimneys sent curls of smoke wafting into the intense blue sky.

He noted the large cement block designed to keep cars off the boardwalk. The stenciled name Adams was painted on it. *Is my driver also a VIP?* He knew it was sometimes hard to tell with the Yanks. He smiled. *Maybe I shouldn't say that? The man is from the South!*

"I'll make sure your baggage gets to your room," Adams said. "The mess hall's up the road a bit. This here's Admin, where I hang out mostly." He rubbed his stomach. "You can't miss the mess hall because you can follow the good food aromas. Besides, it says 'mess hall.'" He winked. "And don't worry. The food's great and matches the aromas. This used to be a rich kids' camp, but we took it over and brought in our own staff, including some great chefs. Go check it out. They always have coffee."

"I'll do that. You're going to tell me my room number, I suppose."

"They'll tell you everything at registration. That's at the mess hall, too, just inside the entrance."

Andrew watched Adams leave with his luggage. *What did I get myself into? A kids' camp! Is Adams the camp counselor?*

"Welcome, Dr. Kinnaird," said an older woman who handed him his badge. He had been sitting for twenty minutes filling out forms on a clipboard. The parts he considered intrusive he

left blank. She frowned at the omissions but offered the badge anyway. His picture was on it and his name Prof. Andrew Kinnaird was just below. He was puzzled by the picture. It was recent and not the one on his passport. He couldn't ever remember posing for it.

"There are refreshments inside. We keep them stocked all day long except during the meal hours." She handed him a thick manila envelope. "This contains everything you need to know about the conference, including the agenda."

He opted for tea with some crackers and brie and sat down with the packet. From time to time he would look up and see other people come in and get refreshments. One woman who looked a bit like a female Humpty-Dumpty loaded finger sandwiches onto her plate. He recognized her but couldn't remember her name. She was a German archaeologist whose academic specialty was unrelated to his even though his university labeled him as a linguistic archaeologist—both those words failed to describe his research.

The conference was titled "Communication through the Ages." He'd been surprised when he received the invitation. Communication was a broad topic. He could be considered a specialist in early written communications, communication with symbols and not some primitive kinds of alphabet. But no one had asked him to present a paper.

"There are no tables left."

Andrew looked up. A short woman was standing in front of him holding a tray containing coffee and pastry. He studied her. She wasn't as rotund as the Humpty-Dumpty scientist, but she wasn't a runway model either. She was also much younger, more like a public schoolgirl. Shorter than Kinnaird, she was a bit misshapen and walked with a limp. She wasn't as busty as Gina and lacked that twisted "I'm so sexy" smile. Her short brown hair framed a pleasant face that featured large, blue eyes that twinkled as if she were enjoying a private joke at his expense.

"If you're asking whether you can join me, please do. I apologize. I just arrived and was perusing the conference materials. I'm Andrew Kinnaird."

"Yes, I know. It's on your badge. You're someone trying to make like you're an educated Brit by hiding your Scottish accent. I wonder why."

She popped three of the little cups of half and half and whitened the coffee and then added three spoons of sugar.

"Sugar binge? You are aware of the dangers of granulated sugar, I presume, not to mention the fat and sugar content in those éclairs."

"All right, mother. Duly noted and ignored. I just ran ten miles. I need to replenish my energy. I probably burn more calories per day than you do in a week. I'm Marty Peralta, by the way."

Andrew saw "Prof. Martina Peralta" on her name tag. She offered a hand. He was surprised at her grip considering the short, pudgy fingers.

"My apologies. I just do a wee bit of walking."

"I bet you have one of those special walking sticks. What do they call them?"

"Cromacks. No, I don't use one. I have an uncle who does, though. He thinks I'm a lost soul in the city. Like Americans, we tend to drive even to the chemist."

"Pharmacy in American Standard. Shaw said Americans and Brits are people separated by a common language." She laughed because Andrew smiled. "I walk a lot. New Yorkers use public transportation and walk a lot. I'm at Columbia when I'm not in the field."

She seemed nervous. *Does she think she's too forward asking to join me?* It was true that there weren't many tables left. Several conference attendees had already sit up their laptops staking claim to their domain.

Andrew thumbed through his list of participants. "You're a forensic physicist? What's that?"

"Maybe an understandable confusion." She wiped cream off her upper lip. "Physicists are generalists until they specialize. The first split occurs when one decides to become either an experimentalist or theoretician. Fermi was the last one who did both well. I chose experimentalist. I hooked up with an archaeologist and began specializing in Earth physics related to digs—ground penetrating radar, carbon dating, and so forth. The relationship with the archaeologist didn't work out—he started sleeping around with the department secretary—but I continued with that specialty and made a career out of it."

"You're that Peralta who worked at the Hobbits' site?"

"The same. Not too many people would know that. Congratulations."

"I like old stuff too and am often out and about on regular archaeological digs."

"A quaint way to put it. Hobbits don't have any language to speak of."

"No. Just my curiosity."

"I suppose that's why you wrote two papers on the mysterious patterns in Peru."

He nodded. "The Nazca lines geoglyphs." He smiled. "Some people attribute them to alien landing patterns. And there are figures, even one called 'The Astronaut.'"

She studied him over the brim of her coffee mug, sporting a new white mustache. "Have you been abducted by aliens?"

"I was trying to prove they're the work of the Incas. I'll admit my evidence wasn't conclusive, but it had the new wrinkle of linguistics. I've studied Quechua. The modern form has evolved considerably from the original."

"Most languages do, unless they're dead languages, like Latin. I wonder what word is used for cellphone in the Vatican."

"OK, my turn to badger. What does forensic physics have to do with 'Communication through the Ages'? The conference title is a stretch even for my discipline."

"I have no idea. I just wanted a vacation. When I received the invitation, I thought it was a good opportunity to get a few weeks off, all expenses paid. It's my first time here." She winked at him. "And I bet your motivation is similar. I have you pegged as a recluse spending those terrible Edinburgh winters locked up in your university office deciphering ancient glyphs. Last time I was there I met a dude like you, only he was a Brit. They named a particle after him."

"The Higgs boson. The physicist is Peter Higgs. I haven't seen him for years, not since he received the Nobel. We do have a bit of a scientific tradition I guess, in spite of those dreadful winters. They're not as dreadful as Minnesota's, I'm told."

"New York's are bad enough." She bit off half an éclair, changing the white mustache for a mixture of brown and ivory from the chocolate and filling. "Anyway, I can't criticize you for seeing this as a vacation. I jumped at the chance. But I feel like the gal at a Sadie Hawkins dance without a date." She laughed at his expression. "Google it. A bit of Americana for you to puzzle over. It's a metaphor to describe that I don't know why I'm here."

"I share that opinion." He leaned forward. "My driver spoke of an agency. I didn't see any mentioned in the conference materials."

She shrugged. "Don't know about that. Maybe they have NSF funding? Who cares?" She made a face as she sampled another éclair. "Eww! Too much vanilla in this one."

Andrew had to ask for another blanket. He usually slept in skivvies, but the conference organizers turned the heat way down at night. That and the strange bed with only sheets and a light blanket made for a restless night. He had fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning and overslept. He almost missed breakfast and was still eating when everyone started heading for the main auditorium. He tossed the food down—Adams’s appraisal of the cafeteria offerings was spot on—and sat on a seat in the last row just as they dimmed the lights and a welcoming slide was shown.

A wiry man entered from stage left and bowed. He reminded Andrew of Sméagol AKA Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*, although this little character was dressed in suit and vest. He looked stiff and formal in his shiny loafers and starched shirt with cufflinks. The bow tie gave him a British look. *All he needs is a bumbershoot and bowler*, thought Andrew.

The fellow looked out over the audience, coughed, and began his welcoming speech. It wasn’t what Andrew had expected.

“My name is Samuel McBride, and I work on an interesting project. Before I tell you what it is, *mesdames et messieurs*, I must apologize. We have committed a bit of subterfuge.” He waved a hand and the first slide with a picture of the camp and the word WELCOME changed to MAKING A MOVIE: THE PORTAL IN THE PINES. “You have been hired as technical experts for a science fiction movie. I realize it’s a bit unorthodox, but would you have come if we had been upfront and told you that? Of course, anyone who objects to our subterfuge and wants to leave can ask our staff to make arrangements for your return to your points of origin. Nothing need be reimbursed to us—your stay, no matter what its duration, is on the house. Many might consider this an unusual and interesting vacation, though.” He paced a bit on the stage. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask those who want to leave to exit the auditorium now through the rear. We want to keep this production secret. Anyone who stays after this must sign a non-disclosure agreement in order to continue. The staff will give you that one-page document for you to sign. Once you do so and we confirm that everyone left in the auditorium has signed, we’ll continue discussing our project.”

Andrew raised his hand and had to shield his eyes as another spotlight singled him out. He stood, self-conscious about the fact that he wasn’t much taller than McBride, and the spotlight had first hit the top of his head.

“Is there any further reimbursement beyond the travel, food, and lodging? If I understand correctly, we have a consultants’ role for your venture. Some of us might have turned down other lucrative consulting work.”

There were murmurs of approval for his question, one that many had probably considered. Andrew spotted Marty Peralta four rows ahead of him. *Is she thinking I’m a typically frugal Scot?* He smiled at that idea. If she only knew how little he made as a professor!

“Dr. Andrew Kinnaird has asked a very reasonable question. Are we paying consulting fees? The answer is simple and spelled out on the sheet you will sign. In addition to travel, food, and lodging, you will be paid four thousand U.S. dollars per day during your stay here, and free airline tickets and lodging for the premiere of the movie when it takes place in New York City. We’ve studied this offer and found it to be competitive with any other consulting activity you might have had in mind for over the summer.”

Murmurs in the crowd greeted that announcement. Five people left. Andrew stayed with all the rest, nearly a hundred people. Considering his state of curiosity and professorial pay, five hundred dollars per hour seemed like an interesting offer.

He now knew why the conference was open-ended, but the little ghoul had implied it would all be over at the end of the summer. He might even have a chance to get to know Marty Peralta better. He had already learned that she was born in Argentina. *What's her story? Would she sign the agreement?*

He still had a few doubts. Making a somewhat illogical decision to have some fun away from the hallowed halls of academia weighed on his self-esteem, for example. The decision seemed harmless enough, though. And telling Gina about his adventure would either win her back or at least make her realize that he wasn't just a boring scientist!

Chapter Two

Samuel McBride continued to his next slide. It showed the side of a hill with an entrance to a cave.

"We built this entrance of course. The plot of the story is that buried in that hill is something that looks like a sea shell. Next slide, please."

The slide showed two men and a women standing inside a huge circular ring that sat like a washer inside the cave. The metal had a dull sheen that looked more like lead than stainless steel. Andrew could see electrical conduits crisscrossing the surface farther inside; they became lost in shadows.

"Through that ring we find a 3D logarithmic spiral. At the end, it is about twice the height of an average man. Here you see it five times that. The conduits crisscross all along the interior surface. Some unknown power source is at the end. Let us say that this device was constructed by ETs. Next slide."

Shown now was a blueprint of a God's-eye view of the device. McBride used his pointer. "Like I said, a logarithmic spiral," he said tracing the curves. His pointer stopped at the end. "A big black box. We don't know what it's for, but it's presumably a power source."

"Your job, esteemed guests, is to create a very logical story about what the ETs are doing with this device. You won't have to react with our screenwriters right away, but when things get going, that's probably a necessity. We want this sci-fi tale to seem authentic in every way."

Andrew saw Marty jump up. "Am I the only one here wondering why I'm needed for this juvenile activity? I'd spend my time better playing video games!"

"For those who don't know, let me explain that Dr. Martina Peralta is a world-renowned expert in forensic physics who has played an important role at many archaeological digs. To answer your question, professor, we want you to turn that around. We want you to make a convincing story about the physics behind this archaeological artifact. Similarly, Dr. Kinnaird—where is he?" Andrew didn't stand but waved. "We want Dr. Kinnaird and others in his same specialty who have stayed on to create ancient writings, some sort of glyphs we can add to the walls of the device. Only our ancients will be ETs who have visited Earth. Does that make sense?"

Andrew now rose.

“Not much. I can choose almost anything, even texts not decoded, and the average moviegoer won’t know the difference. That’s a pretty easy way to earn my consulting fee.”

“We’d want a bit more than that. You and others will also construct a logical language and give sound to those symbols. The moviegoer will see and hear the remnants of an ancient alien culture.” McBride gestured to the rest of the audience. “Dr. Peralta and others will determine what the device is used for and some reasonable description of how it functions. It will be fun, but there will be science involved. Does that make sense?”

No, Andrew still thought.

“No,” said Marty, “but I can live with it. When do we start?”

“I want to discuss a few more points. We’ve conjectured that one of those extrasolar planets—we have an extensive list now—has life and is where the ETs live. That’s only one example, but it has to seem reasonable. We want this sci-fi story to be as good as anything sci-fi fans can find in any movie or novel. Let’s get to it so I can let you folks leave early to get some R&R and talk about our exciting project among yourselves. Collaboration is encouraged. You were all chosen for your creative minds. Don’t disappoint me.”

Who is this guy? Is Hollywood hiring mentally disturbed individuals to direct their movies now?

Andrew shifted in his chair. *She looks good when she’s pissed!*

“Do you need to gawk at me with binoculars, Andrew?”

Andrew pulled the binoculars away from his face; he knew it was turning red. *This has to look bad.* He had been admiring as she stretched her muscles. Not a model’s body, and a bit plump, but definitely attractive in a sprite-like sort of way. She was preparing for a run around the lake and was dressed in shorts and a halter designed mostly for support. *Maybe she’s as busty as Gina?* The bra straps cut into her shoulders a wee bit.

“It might look that way, but I was looking across the lake.” *That’s true, until I saw her!* “I think someone there with binoculars was looking this way at the group here. I saw flashes from the lenses in the sun.”

“Oh, please. Men are so pathetic.” She was smiling though. “Can’t you think of a better excuse?”

“It’s not an excuse. Here, you can probably see it.”

She climbed up to where he sat on a bench. She put a hand to her brow to shade her eyes and studied the far shore. She nodded.

“You’re right. Someone else is also a peeping Tom.”

“Or, on a surveillance mission. Those nondisclosure rules are strict. And someone could make a lot more than several times \$4000 by leaking this whole project to your tabloid press.”

“Not my tabloid press.” She shook her arms and clapped her hands. “I’ll look you up in the lounge when I return. I want to talk about this movie.”

He watched her awkward lope down the boardwalk and onto the trail that circled the lake. The limp seemed to skew her body. The imperfection seemed to make her more attractive. He’d heard the trip around the lake was five miles or so. *Probably easy for her.* He wouldn’t even attempt it, though.

The first thing Andrew did when he arrived at the lounge was to look for Gary Adams and report what he'd seen. He wasn't around, but the old woman in the security office off the lounge listened to what he had to say.

"Don't worry, Dr. Kinnaird, we'll take care of it. When we were refurbishing the camp to our specs, we caught a few nosy reporters. It's possible some of them have returned. I'm sorry for any inconvenience."

"I think Adams or someone should check on it. Maybe you folks should circle the lake from time to time. I don't want my face plastered all over the tabloids. I'm sure other scientists here will think the same way."

"Yes, above all, we will respect and ensure your privacy. I'll tell Gary. He'll take care of it." She looked past Andrew to the entrance to the lounge. "I believe someone is looking for you?"

Andrew turned to see Marty. Her hair still looked damp. She must have showered quickly after her run before dressing in blue jeans, a Columbia sweatshirt, and sandals. A backpack was slung over one shoulder. She looked like a coed who had just entered college. A laptop?

"OK, thanks. If you find out who it is, let me know." He left the office and walked toward her. "Have a good jog?"

"Fair. I must be eating too much. My time was a bit off."

"Could be those éclairs. Want a drink, though? I need a single malt, to tell you the truth."

"If you're treating, I'll have a strawberry daiquiri and pretend it's healthy because of the fruit."

He bought the drinks at the bar and joined her at the high-top table she'd commandeered.

"I was reporting what I saw to security. I don't want to be in the tabloids. The old woman there said they'd arrested several reporters when they were adapting this camp for our use."

"Guess I won't do any skinny dipping then," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "They told you that story too. Let me guess. A man named Gary Adams?"

"Yes. He's quite the hunk. Smart too." She winked at him. "Maybe not an archaeological linguist, but he can express himself intelligently. Wouldn't look twice at me, of course, but a girl can dream."

He ignored the barb. "You said you want to discuss this crazy project?"

"Yes. Let's assume the device is ancient. Why do those who made it have to be ETs? My job would be a lot easier if they were some ancient civilization. Say, from Atlantis."

"Do you have writings from Atlantis?" said Andrew.

"Of course not. Atlantis didn't exist. But you already said you can take any ancient writings and turn them into that. Moviegoers would never know the difference. There's some where we have a fairly good idea how the language was spoken too because the language evolved into a modern version."

"Like Quechua? That's still spoken."

"No. Different, older candidates. You see, the way I figure it, the sooner we get this done, the better off I'll feel. If there are nosy reporters around, I don't want my face in the tabloids either."

She moved her daiquiri aside and opened her laptop. "Here's an example."

He moved around to look. "Could be ETs' writing as well as ancient humans'," he said, enjoying the subtle mix of apple-scented shampoo and perfume. He went back to his stool. "Make your proposal to McBride. Maybe you did my job for me."

"Not if he wants us to create an entire written and spoken language," said Marty. "You'd need more than the rest of the summer for that. I for one have to be at Columbia in the fall."

"Same for me, with the University of Edinburgh. But I don't have any classes in the fall, just graduate students and research. I can do the latter anywhere. The students are a complication, but I could handle that with a few flights back and forth and Skype. That would be inconvenient, though." She was typing at a furious pace. "You're not listening, are you?"

"Yes, I am, but I was sending an email to McBride, explaining your ideas, my liking them, and including that pic. I'm also telling him he's asking for the impossible."

"I'm not sure he knows what he's asking. Are you going to visit the site tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Want to join me for dinner tonight?"

She smiled. "Sure, but fair warning. You don't want to get involved with me."

"Because it would be a long-distance relationship?"

"Because I can be a bitch. The phrase 'go to hell!' seems to end all my relationships. But most get started wrong anyway. Men feel inferior when dating a woman smarter than they are."

"I'd think you'd have unmarried male university professors from all over the New York City area lining up at your door. Maybe even married ones."

"Oh, please. Flattery will get you nowhere. The alternate phrase I use has the tag, '...you pig.' I've had a few stalkers, but no serious commitments. Either they think they don't have a chance—they usually don't—or I find them boring nerds who expect me to be interested in their esoteric research, competitions for research dollars, jealousies with colleagues, and quests for tenure. I'm not going to be the mousy little academic wife who invites faculty wives over for tea and scones."

"And you're often in the field, just like me," he said. "My conclusion is that I'd better make the most of my time here in Minnesota then." A ping sounded. "Did McBride reply?"

"Yes, he did. The message says, 'Encourage Kinnaird. We need the language to cover the technology too. Old might not cut it, but you can help him add techno-babble to the language. I don't care if they're ancients or ETs. In fact, they're interchangeable.'" She frowned. "A bit glib, don't you think?"

"Longer than a tweet, at least. I think he's saying you should create some sort of technical description, and I can create the language—symbols and sounds—to make it sci-fi-ish. At least he came back with a somewhat intelligent answer."

"OK, Mr. Linguist, the ball's in your court. Produce, or you'll have to pursue someone else for your extracurricular fun."

"I had the distinct impression you were only flirting with me."

"True. Ab initio. I flirt with most men. It's almost expected in the halls of academia unfortunately. Men are career-oriented; women are bitchy or flirty. You're different, though."

"Why's that?"

"You're not looking for a trophy wife, and you can't offer anything that would advance my career. So, you're a new experience. I can flirt with you for no reason at all. You're a bit needy just ending a relationship, which is an advantage."

“Who told you that?”

“Facebook. You haven’t changed your relationship status yet. And your Gina dissed you for not doing it.”

Andrew groaned. “Good lord! You’re from MI-6.”

She frowned. “Don’t kid about that.” She stood. “See you at dinner.”

He watched her leave, wondering about her strange reaction.

Chapter Three

Andrew almost missed the bus. Dinner had been pleasant enough, but Marty seemed distant and no longer flirtatious. He had drunk too much and slept late.

“Still on Edinburgh time, doc?” said McBride as a greeting at the bus door.

“If I were, I’d be too early,” he said. “Am I the last one on board?”

“The last who signed up. I ordered several buses. I guess the late sleepers don’t need to have a visual image of our artifact to make their creations.”

“Or maybe they don’t want to see how unreal your artifact looks,” said Andrew, climbing the steps and moving past the gnome.

“Ouch! That hurts. Just wait and see, Dr. Kinnaird. I guarantee you’ll be impressed.”

Andrew was. McBride’s PowerPoint slides hadn’t done the artifact justice. He watched Marty place both hands on the walls at the entrance.

“There’s a throbbing or a pulsation.” Andrew followed suit. “Feel it? Like it’s alive.”

He smiled. “Simulated equipment rumble. Ever been at CERN?”

“I’ve been in Geneva. I never wanted to go to CERN. I’d rather be whistled at by sanitation workers in New York City.”

“Physicists wouldn’t whistle at you. They’d simply ask you to participate in their experiments.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Anything you want. Don’t be grumpy today.”

“Grumpy? Was I grumpy last night?”

“Just my perception, I guess. You were serious, at least. You reacted badly to my comment about MI-6. Any particular reason?”

“Leave it alone.” She pounded on the wall. “What do you make of this?”

“They’ve done a good job. It looks ancient and not human made. Let’s explore.”

She followed him into the tunnel.

“What do you think, professors?” said McBride. He had caught up with them. Gary Adams accompanied the gnome and towered above him. He towered above all of them.

“I think you’ve invested your money well,” said Marty. “This is impressive. It looks real, whatever that means. I don’t want to know how much it cost, though. How much farther to the end?”

“The spiral is about five kilometers long,” said McBride. “You’re at about kilometer three. Please follow it all the way. Both of you can make valuable contributions to making the

end of it seem more realistic. Take your time. Gary and I will go on ahead and check on the refreshments.”

“A reward for completing the trek. Coffee, tea, and cookies. Or boring bottles of water.” Adams winked at them.

“No single malt?” said Andrew.

“A little early, don’t you think?” said McBride. He continued down the tunnel.

“What planet is he from?” said Marty.

“A place called Washington, D.C.,” said Adams.

“I thought he was from Hollywood,” said Andrew.

Adams shrugged. “That too. Or maybe he’s a clone.” He also walked off.

“They both act strange,” said Andrew, watching Marty inspect what looked like a power conduit. “Hey, don’t do that! It’s like destroying a work of art.”

Marty had taken out a penknife and was trying to slice into the cable to see if Hollywood’s attention to detail went as far as wires inside the conduit.

“Don’t worry. I can’t even get into this. It’s some kind of ceramic material. Very futuristic looking. They’ve done a great job.” She put the knife away. “But why? Movies are visual. Things just have to look real. There’s no tactile experience.” She grabbed the pipe. “It’s even warm as if high current were flowing, producing resistive heating.”

“They should fix that. Wouldn’t ETs use superconductors?”

She glanced at him and smiled. “That’s very perceptive. We’ll tell them about that. Come on. The others are catching up. I want first choice at the refreshment table.”

“You’re not a starving grad student.”

“You didn’t have time to finish breakfast. I skipped it.”

She stopped. They had reached the beginning of another segment of the spiral. There was a circular seam about two feet wide. She scuffed her feet in the loose sand and gravel of the floor.

“I wish I had a shovel.”

“You’ll just find that the seam continues around,” said Andrew. “They obviously put in filler to make the floor level.”

She dropped to her knees. “Again, why? No one would see it. Come, help me.”

“I feel like I’m in kindergarten playing in the sandbox again,” he said, kneeling beside her. “My old girlfriend would refuse to do this, you know, because she wouldn’t want to damage her nails.”

She shook her head. “Get over her, dude. Look. The seam. You were right. It goes all the way round.”

“It was probably easier to do the construction that way.”

Andrew stood and helped her up.

“Maybe,” she said. “Let’s move along.”

The end of the spiral reminded Andrew of the power plant for a hydroelectric dam. Although more closely spaced, large housings that looked like they might hide turbines were

interconnected by thousands of conduits. It didn't make much sense to him. The entrance to the spiral had been huge, dwarfing the people who entered it. Here at the end the diameter of the tube made for a more normal room size that forced crowding. Andrew climbed around a bit before hitting refreshments.

"Does it look authentic?" said McBride, seeking them out. They were sitting on a six-inch pipe that throbbed like a huge artery.

"It also feels that way," said Marty, "but I have no idea what it's supposed to feel like. Is this supposed to be your idea of a power plant?"

"Of course. You're supposed to imagine what kind."

"My original impression was hydroelectric," she said, seemingly reading Andrew's mind, "but that's silly. I'd say nuclear, but there's no reactor. I'll have to let my imagination run wild."

"Please do so. Everyone else will. The more ideas we have, the better."

"This is an unusual way to make a movie," said Andrew. "Usually you have a well-defined plot from a screenplay or book, and you create the settings afterward. It seems like you're doing it in reverse order."

"That's one way of describing it," said McBride. "That's why this movie will be special. I'm hoping our way leads to the greatest sci-fi movie ever made."

"Depends on who the stars are too, you know," said Marty.

"Others are working on that. Stop!"

McBride moved toward a man with a wrench who was attacking the junction between two small pipes.

Adams beat McBride to the man and put a chokehold on him.

"Enough! Release him." McBride faced the scientist. "What do you think you're doing? This isn't your property."

The man looked sheepish. "I just wanted to see what's in the pipes. I can't imagine what they're for. Isn't that my job?" He rubbed his neck. "If they were empty, I was going to recommend you remove them. From my perspective, they don't belong here."

"By contract, we can't modify the artifact. You'll have to let your imagination run wild, Dr. Sorensen." McBride smiled. "I apologize for Mr. Adams behavior, but he knows our contractual obligations and is only protecting us from lawsuits."

On the way out, Marty nudged Andrew. "Good thing they didn't see us digging in the dirt, right?"

"I'm still trying to get my head around the idea that a major Hollywood studio would sign that kind of contract. It doesn't make sense. And Adams actions were way over the top. This is all highly unusual."

"Eww, a mystery. Just what I needed." She smiled at him. "I'll pay for dinner and drinks to make you feel better."

"Oh, please. That's all free."

"So, I'll pay zero, but I'll still pay. Anything to cheer you up."

And I won't mention MI-6 again, Andrew thought as they followed the spiral back to the entrance.

Chapter Four

“Adams looked like he was ready to kill Sorensen,” said Andrew, cutting into his London broil.

“You’re making way too much out of it,” Marty said. “I sneaked a peek at the studio’s contract. It has clauses consistent with what McBride said.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“Physicists are good with computers,” she said, using a horrendous imitation of a British accent. “I hacked their server.”

“You’d better be careful with that. You can leave trails, you know, depending on how good their security is.”

“It wasn’t good, believe me. McBride’s password was ‘password.’” She laughed. “It was if he were inviting someone to check out the contract.”

Andrew mulled that one over. “Maybe it’s not a real contract.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know. This whole setup seems strange.” He looked around. “Have you seen Sorensen? He’s not here at dinner.”

“I guess he went home.”

“Can we? What are our contractual obligations?”

“I’d suppose the nondisclosure is still binding, that’s all. I imagine the studio has some powerful lawyers ready to pounce if we don’t behave.”

“Or people like Gary Adams. He could have killed Sorensen.”

“You’re being melodramatic. I know some martial arts. A chokehold isn’t the most effective way to take a man down.”

Andrew studied Marty for a moment. “Is it dangerous for me to be your friend?”

She winked. “Dunno, but you’d better behave.”

They took a walk along the lake’s edge in the moonlight. It could have been a romantic interlude, but they continued to discuss McBride and his movie. He felt attracted to Marty. He didn’t know how she’d react to his advances. She was a plain Jane compared to Gina, but maybe he’d get luckier that way.

He could understand why women didn’t pay much attention to him. Here in this more relaxed setting, he wore a sweatshirt, blue jeans, and sneakers, but he still looked nerdy. He had once read Wells’s novella *The Invisible Man* and decided that’s what he was. He was the type of person that people mostly ignored. The relationship with Gina was his longest and might have lasted longer if Giovanni, a better prospect for the secretary, hadn’t come along. He felt a strange relief—he’d always expected someone like Giovanni to come along.

“You’ve got me doing it. I keep asking myself, who makes a movie like this?” said Marty.

“Insane directors?” said Andrew. “I’m more worried about putting language, both written and spoken, to whatever zany idea someone has for describing the artifact. It’s not an artifact, by the way. It’s more like the monolith in *2001*. An alien or ancient construct.”

“2010 was better. And shorter, thank God.” They found a rock and sat, watching the crests of lazy waves from the lake catch the moonlight. “I can work with either one, by the way—alien or ancient construct. And it probably doesn’t matter. McBride’s going to create some godawful mishmash of the ideas people come up with. No one will be able to recognize his or her contribution.”

“All right, my Gaucho genius. Give me some clues. How ‘bout a synopsis?”

“Just for giggles, let’s assume some fisherman stumbles into the cave during a storm and finds a five-thousand-year-old something. Let’s assume it’s what the title of the movie implies, a portal between worlds. The ETs had to come here from a galaxy far, far away to construct it so their relatives could arrive on Earth and start a new life.”

“Why would they do that? Why don’t they just stay where they are?”

“It’s like *Superman*. Their world will be destroyed. Maybe their sun goes nova. I’m not going to write the damn script. All I have to do is explain how the portal works.”

He nodded. “So, how’s it work?”

“There’s nothing that looks like a reactor at the end of that tunnel, and probably a garden variety fission reactor wouldn’t have the instantaneous power available anyway to handle power reqs at short notice. So, it’s a new energy source. I’m going to postulate they can tap into the WIMPs’ zero-point sea of energy, which permeates all of space, and crank this puppy up to create a rift in space-time. How’s that sound?”

“I’m not sure what a WIMP is, except that I used to be called one in public school,” said Andrew with a smile.

She stared at him and then shrugged. “Weakly Interacting Massive Particle, hypothesized to explain dark matter. I think dark matter and energy are just manifestations of physicists’ ignorance, by the way.”

He smiled. “Not a bad story idea then. Don’t all quantum fields have zero-point energies? You don’t need to be precise. The moviegoers won’t care.”

She raised an eyebrow and then smiled. “McBride thinks they will. Why are we here otherwise? But OK, I’ll work with that. I can even give you a list of terms that might be equipment labels, and you can translate them when you pick a language. You should pick one the actors can pronounce, by the way. A lot of actors have trouble with Klingon, for example. With luck, we can turn our material in and enjoy the rest of the time here, the vacation I came for originally.”

She leaned toward him, turning her face toward his. Her lips brushed his cheek. The aroma of her shampoo and perfume set him tingling more than Gina’s presence ever did. “Any particular preferences for that R&R?”

“I have to confess I’m still looking for the words,” he said.

This is going nicely, he thought. She’s doing all the work!

Andrew awoke to bright sunlight and an intense blue sky. He glanced across the room. A trail of clothes led to Marty’s single bed where they were lying together, his front to her back. It was crowded but not unpleasant. The odor of sweat and bodily fluids now combined with her enchanting aroma.

“If I turn, you’ll end up on the floor,” she said, “so I’d better get up first if you’ll release me from your lecherous grip.”

She stood and stretched. “Not bad for two academic nerds. I hope it was good for you too.” *She looks good even when she’s a mess!* “You’re staring, Rob Roy. Cool it, or our friend will stand up and me salute again. I have other needs right now—coffee and breakfast, because more sleep looks to be impossible.”

The shower stall was less crowded than the bed had been. They showered together and went to find breakfast. There wasn’t much left, but the urns had fresh coffee in them.

“Where is everybody?” she wondered as she sat down with a full plate of pastries.

What the hell? He stole what looked like peach strudel. “There was no agenda for today. We’re supposed to be working on our stories for McBride, remember?”

She winked. “We did that last night. Among other things. I think I can take what I came up with and finish it by dinner. You need to embellish your part a bit. Then we’re free to fuck our brains out.”

Andrew looked around while turning red. “Are American women always so aggressive?”

“Be aware of two things, Professor Kinnaird: One, I was, am, and always will be horny as hell. I told you how most jerks are put off by smart women. I get very little action in the romance game as a consequence, without mentioning I’ve been too fat all my life and have to constantly diet. And too many partners I do have don’t know enough about pleasing a woman. You, sir, have one major quality: you seem to care about my needs.” He nodded with a smile. “That’s a big One, but there’s a Two: I’m Hispanic, with Argentine and Italian genes. I might not look like Sofia Vergara, but hot-blooded she-wolf doesn’t begin to describe my temperament. I’m genetically pre-disposed to be a slut.”

“That’s insulting to Latin women.”

“Maybe more so to other women who can’t make the grade in that department. I don’t care. Don’t get the idea I hop into bed with just anybody, though.”

“I feel privileged, then,” Andrew said with a smile. “I’m just a cold Scot with little luck in the romance department as well.”

“You didn’t do too bad, honey, and I know the joke about the captain of the Scottish regiment. Being obsessively frugal—that’s the stereotype, isn’t it?—doesn’t mean you don’t have needs; it just means you won’t buy condoms. That’s why I keep my own supply.” She put her hands on her hips and thought a moment. “Did we use them?”

He frowned. “Dunno. The help might find them in the sheets?”

“Oh Lord! My secret will be out.”

“Except for the possibility of STDs, I doubt they’ll care.”

“If you impregnate me, you cad, you’ll care.”

“You don’t take pills?” Andrew looked at her with a worried expression.

“Just kiddin’. And why is it always the woman’s job to have safe sex?”

He now looked embarrassed. “It’s not. I got carried away. It was wonderful.”

She laughed. “You pathetic, horny bastard. That Gina did a real number on you.” She wrapped up the remaining pastries in a couple of napkins. “Let’s go find a nook or cranny somewhere and work on our projects. The sooner we can get them done, the more fun we can have. I have some positions I’ve never tried.”

Chapter Five

After finishing their work, they had another wonderful night. The next morning they handed in a three-hundred-plus-page document to McBride after breakfast—printed copy and memory stick. They'd made breakfast in time and gorged on what Andrew considered a real breakfast—eggs, bacon, biscuits, and lots of coffee.

McBride hefted their document. "You know, I had my eye on you two right from the beginning. I always encourage script-writing teams, but this is great. Will I understand any of it?"

"It's all in laypeople's terms," said Marty, "although I'm sure the average moviegoer won't give a rat's ass. My stuff sounds like something from CERN and the language Andrew chose actually has a written form and is spoken by a few experts like me—it's phonetic enough that actors can learn to speak it, at least what the conventional opinion is about how it's spoken."

"We'd like to stay on for the duration and consult, of course," said Andrew.

"You're the first. Congrats. I'd like to ask you to help pool yours and the others' contributions together and reconcile the different ideas." McBride tapped the document. "Sure, you can stay on. You couldn't leave anyway."

"How's that?" said Marty.

"We had to restrict movement in and out of the camp. A few reporters got wind about what's going on, although they're publishing complete and absurd distortions. One tabloid said we're digging up hibernating ETs, for example. That's not bad publicity for the movie, but we don't want to see it get out of control. Unless you need urgent care at a hospital or something, you're staying here. So, you might as well pitch in and have some fun. This is going to be one blockbuster of a movie!"

Pitch in and have some fun? If he only knew! Andrew was looking forward to spending time with Marty, but why did he feel like he was in an internment camp?

"That was a strange speech," he said to her after leaving the building. "What do you make of it?"

She punched him in the shoulder. "A chance for a hedonistic holiday! Say, do you do any kind of exercise at all? Beyond taking advantage of innocent girls?"

"I play golf and tennis. There isn't any golf course here, but there are some tennis courts out behind the cafeteria."

"I wouldn't want to play golf with you. Isn't that the national sport of Scotland?"

"There are a few others—what you Americans call soccer, rugby, and curling. Those are for more rugged types, I'm afraid. I'm a delicate fellow."

"With a Highlander's sword, sure and *begorrah*."

"They say *begorrah* is Irish, not Scottish, but I've never heard it in Ireland. It's probably a bit like 'top o' the mornin' and *chop suey*—just American inventions."

"Don't the Irish and Scots both speak Gaelic?"

He shrugged. "Different versions. And I don't speak either one. Do you speak Spanish?"

"Nope. Just American English, German, and French, and no dead languages or rare ones like Quechua as you do. Our movie language is an exception." A dark shadow seemed to slide down her face. "Let's change and play some tennis," she said, all levity and brightness removed from her voice.

Did I say something wrong again?

“There’s a message from McBride,” said Marty.

She was sitting at the little desk in her room, staring at her computer screen. A face towel on the chair kept her naked butt from sticking to the faux leather.

Andrew came over and stood behind her. “Can’t read it. Doesn’t the bastard know anything about font size? And before you say anything, I can see fine.”

“I was just going to say that you can find my body parts well enough. I’ll read his message: ‘Dear Professors Kinnaird and Peralta.’ Sexist prick, isn’t he? The woman should always go first. Even in macho Argentina that’s the rule. ‘Course that’s just macho men look at girl’s butts.” She smiled. “They forget that goes both ways. Continuing: ‘I’m still reading your excellent document. My screenwriters and I would like to meet with you in the main conference room. Will ten a.m. be OK?’ What’s our answer?”

“Tell him OK. We can have a late breakfast and still make it. I wonder why we’re getting special treatment.”

“Maybe he wants to put us in the movie. I’d like that. I’ve had wet dreams about some actors, so I would enjoy being with them for real.”

Wet dreams? Isn’t that what men have? “I’d be embarrassed to hell to be in a movie under any circumstances. I’m a private guy.”

She studied him in the mirror formed by her laptop screen. “You don’t look so private now. My turn on top?”

“Send your email while I think about it. You beat me badly at tennis. I’ll be sore tomorrow.”

“And not just from tennis,” she said in warning.

“What’s this?”

Marty and Andrew had just entered the conference room when four men in uniform restrained them.

“Mother-fuckin’ fascists!” said Marty. They shut her up with a gag.

McBride faced them from the other end of the table. “Just a precaution. We’re doing a little DNA test. Give them the sedative, Arnold.”

Andrew felt the pinprick in his neck and the ensuing wave of cold flowing through his body. He fought the descending darkness to no avail.

Chapter Six

Andrew awoke, saw he was restrained in a hospital bed, but managed to look around the room. Seeing Marty in the bed next to him, he began to struggle with his bonds.

“If you wait a sec, Andy boy, I’ll get you up.” Gary Adams moved forward into his field of view.

“What the hell? This isn’t about a movie, is it?”

“Nope. Special government project.” He smiled. “We had to make sure. Your scenario was a little too close for comfort. The tunnel is real, and we believe ETs came through there about five thousand years ago.”

“So, what are we? Their fucking slaves?” That was Marty who just spit out her gag.

“Hmm, probably not slaves. No. They’re living among us, maybe. We’re trying to figure it out. McBride had the idea about making it look like a movie project to bring all you nerds together. I personally think that telling you that story biased the results, but it was an interesting experiment. We’re getting a wide variety of reasonable scenarios too. We discount Dr. Kinnaird’s language contributions, but your stuff seemed the most reasonable to our unimaginative scientists. Too reasonable maybe. We wanted to make sure you’re both human.”

“That’s the most incredible load of sewage effluent I’ve ever heard,” said Andrew.
“What’s the real story?”

“It is the real story,” said McBride, who materialized from afar like he was a genie popping out of a lamp. “This is a combined NASA, ESA, and military project, with a nexus to several countries. Here’s the current state of paranoia: if we were invaded once, we can be invaded again.”

“Am I in Roswell by any chance?” said Marty. “You people are fucking crazy!”

“We watched you and Kinnaird exploring the tunnel,” said McBride. “Weren’t you thinking, ‘This seems so real’? It is real, professors. Very real.” He laughed. “The fisherman idea wasn’t that farfetched, by the way. It was a hunter who twisted his ankle and crawled into the cave when an early snow storm hit last fall.” He paced at the foot of the bed, examining a clipboard. “We need to know more about this zero-point energy idea. Is that practical?”

“Are you kidding me?” said Marty. “I was writing science fiction. It was all pulled out of my ass!”

“A few other scientists didn’t think it was so farfetched,” said Adams. “If I release you, will you behave yourself?”

“I think the only good fascist is a dead fascist,” she said.

“I’d prefer to think of us as concerned citizens. Dr. Kinnaird, tell this woman to behave.”

Andrew groaned. “Marty, they’ll leave you tied and maybe drug you again. If they wanted to kill us, we’d already be dead.”

McBride nodded. “The voice of reason. Welcome to the team.”

“I guess you’ve proven we’re not aliens,” said Andrew.

They were now sitting around the conference table. He wondered where the hospital beds had been. They had been blindfolded and driven back to the camp from somewhere.

“Dr. Sorensen will soon join us,” said McBride. “Along with a few others. Let’s wait until they’re all here before we start bringing you folks up to date.”

Andrew studied Marty. He knew controlled rage when he saw it. She was biting her lip and shaking her head a bit, but mostly staring at the far wall. Andrew needed her support, though. *I need to focus her.*

“Dr. Peralta did far more work than I did,” he said, “but if you’re trashing all that, why is she here?”

She turned her head and glared at Andrew. *At least I transferred her wrath from Adams and McBride to me.*

“Because she could be invaluable in deciphering the aliens’ language,” said McBride. “We have operation manuals. You might have heard the acronym, RTFM. Well, we can’t read the fucking manuals. And we must.”

“Manuals for operating the portal?”

He nodded. “Stored as video images. We were able to decipher the video files.”

“We won’t do it,” said Marty. “You people can go to hell!”

“The entire human race might be in danger,” said McBride in a low voice.

“Then tell the entire human race what’s going on and ask for help in figuring this out,” said Andrew. “Why did you have to kidnap us?” Marty nodded. “You’re creating an international incident, you know. Many of your invitees aren’t even American, including me.”

Adams smiled. “Who said we’re all Americans?”

“Please,” said McBride. “When the others arrive, all shall be revealed. Dr. Peralta, please postpone any decisions and give us a chance to explain. It might change the way you think.”

“I’d feel better if you told me who you are. Up ‘til now, you still have the same stink as the fascist pigs who collaborated in the Dirty War.”

That’s it! Andrew now understood Marty’s reaction to his MI-6 comment. But it was the CIA that had collaborated with the Argentine junta, not MI-6, as far as he knew. She might group all similar organizations together, though. *Did some relatives die during that dark period in Argentina’s history?* Now probably wasn’t the time to ask.

The conference room door opened. Sorensen and a few other experts and scientists filed in, accompanied by more guards who took positions along the walls. Andrew studied Sorensen. He scowled a lot but didn’t exhibit any signs of bad treatment except for weariness. *Will we hear his story?*

Chapter Seven

McBride mounted his soapbox. Even stretching up and sometimes balancing on his tiptoes, he wasn’t an imposing figure, but he had a knack for making his audience pay attention. *Is all the bio info about him fake? What is his real background?*

“Welcome. You people are my brain trust. You have been selected from the others for being those with the most promise in helping us figure out what the device in the tunnel really is.”

“It’s obviously not a movie set,” said Sorensen with a growl. “When I get out of here, I’m going to sue you, McBride, and all your collaborators!”

“Let’s ignore the likelihood that courts will ever know whom to sue,” said McBride, “and get on with this information session. Will you allow me that courtesy, professor?”

“Not much he can do about it,” Marty said. She nodded to Sorensen. “They’re all fascists, Eric, so let’s be thankful we’re alive.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic, Dr. Peralta. Let me finish. At that time, all of you can hurl your best verbal barbs in my direction.”

That didn’t happen. When McBride finished, there was a stunned silence.

The story wasn’t complicated. The hunter had made it out after the storm. As soon as he had enough bars on his cellphone, he called his brother-in-law who taught architecture in Minneapolis. By the time anyone thought about returning to the site, the story about a movie set was invented, the security veil descended, and McBride’s people were trying to figure out what

was in the tunnel. They had learned a lot. More details would be accessible on the project's classified intranet.

"I still don't know who you people are," said Andrew.

"Gary, you have the floor." McBride sat down; Gary Adams stood.

"I'm working with Homeland Security, which has taken on a new meaning because of what's in the tunnel. Marty Peralta will be happy to know that we have security reps from most countries, even from Latin America. Our job is mostly focused on keeping a tight lid on this. The last thing we need is worldwide panic. Reporters are *verboden*, and talking to any reps from the media are also prohibited." He nodded at Marty. "There are no disappearances like what occurred in the Dirty War, Dr. Peralta. Those experts who don't remain here will enjoy a long vacation on a previously deserted island with all the comforts of modern civilization. So will those in this group who refuse to work with us now. We respect that choice, but we can't let anything be made public. Professor?"

McBride stood; Adams sat. "So the cat is out of the bag. I was with NASA, chosen because I already had a top secret clearance from the Pentagon for some other projects that I can't mention. Wait, Peralta!" McBride had held up his hand like a traffic cop because Marty was going to object. "Please let me finish. All that really means for this project is that I'm a scientist like most of you, although probably a bit more corrupted by bureaucracy. Claude Girard, from ESA, and Yuri Kuznetsov, from the Russian Space Agency—" The two scientists waved their hands. "—kindly agreed to play like they were invitees to the conference just like you. A bit of subterfuge, I'll admit."

McBride smiled. "But our intentions were and are good. It would have been impossible to invite you here with a full disclosure about what we need to do. Someone would have told the media, and all hell would have occurred. Now we need to get down to serious work. You have all been chosen because you think outside the box, as they say. Science today is a bit stodgy. Peer review in the journals usually means that research results far from the norm never see the light of day. Not that we want to see any results originating with you folks out in the open."

"Can I speak now?" said Marty.

"This session isn't being recorded, so use all the foul language available in your vocabulary." That caused laughs and smiles; even Sorensen smiled.

"I can use many languages to curse at you, McBride, but why waste my energy? I want to know what right you people have to kidnap us against our will. After all this—call it pretense, to be polite—do you really expect me to give a rat's ass about your damn tunnel?"

Andrew shook his head. She still didn't understand the reality of the situation.

"I'd think an apology would suffice," he said.

"Do you want it in writing?" said Kuznetsov. "Don't you people get it? This is the most important thing that has ever happened to the human race. Not only do we have evidence for alien life, they could be among us or ready to visit us again. How could you not want to work on such a project? It's the chance of a lifetime."

"It's the secrecy," said Marty. "Bad things occur when there's secrecy."

"I suppose you're one of those liberal bleeding hearts who applauded what Snowden did," said Adams.

"That's a low blow," said Andrew. "The two cases are hardly comparable."

"And Snowden violated an oath of secrecy he had agreed to," said Marty, "so he should be in jail. I'd have no problem with that, but it's not what I'm talking about. We had no choice, we signed no agreements before coming here, and we had no idea what we were walking into."

“We seem to be at an impasse,” said Sorensen. “As much as I hate your guts, McBride, let me make the suggestion that you allow us to review the material your people have so far. That should be no problem if you’re going to incarcerate those not willing to stay and help you on an island for the rest of their lives.”

“Only until the project is over with,” said McBride, “but yes, your point is well taken. Shall we agree on a forty-eight hour study period? That will allow us to resettle the other experts who weren’t selected. They’ll be on a different island, of course. We have a few available.”

Adams smiled at that. Andrew didn’t like his smile. He’d seen it on the face of a traffic patrolman who was giving him a ticket for speeding on the highway between Edinburgh and Glasgow. It was a gotcha-smile.

“This is all pretty boring and I don’t understand most of it,” said Marty.

Andrew looked up from his own laptop. “I agree. But I can see why they suspected us. Our fiction was a bit too close to the truth.”

She tapped her screen. “These stone panels weren’t in the tunnel. They must have been removed. What do you make of the symbols?”

“Like Chinese writing, they’re probably ideograms. Sophisticated runes, at least. They won’t be easy to decipher, especially if non-human.”

“I’d like to see the originals. Do you see the beveled edges on the symbols in this close-up?” He nodded. “I’m betting that the symbols were all cut into stone by high-powered lasers. There’s no sign of chipping as you might expect if hammer and chisel were used.”

“An interesting comment. I’d like to see the originals too. Where do you think they have them?”

“Probably in some top secret vault somewhere.” She leaned back in her chair. “I’m only staying here out of curiosity. For now, it trumps the disdain I feel toward the whole deplorable enterprise.”

“McBride’s presence and others’ seem to indicate that the powers that be think this portal has something to do with space travel.”

“Sure. Jumping around the cosmos doesn’t have to be done in spaceships. Didn’t you ever see the show *Stargate*?”

“No, but I watched *Dr. Who*. The tunnel is a bit more than a big blue British police box.”

“That show’s about time and space travel. The stargate was more like our portal and tunnel here.”

Andrew shrugged. “Time travel or space travel, it’s all sci-fi.”

She slapped the table; her laptop jumped. “Time travel? Now there’s a thought. Dr. Who moved in time and space. We know they’re inexorably linked. Here the tunnel is old. I’m not sure I trust their dating techniques, but they estimate about a 3000 B.C. origin. At that time, with whoever used it last, wherever that is, it might be new.”

“And more ETs might be pouring through at any minute? Oh, please.”

“From thinking outside the box to naysayer—that’s quite a transition.”

“From sci-fi to reality—that’s the transition. We need to see the stone panels in person.”

“Now you’re thinking like a scientist, but if you can’t decipher the writing on a computer screen, why could you by studying the real thing?”

“That’s probably the way McBride and others are thinking. By seeing the panels in person, you could verify your laser hypothesis. But I can see the bottom edge is sharp. There was something beneath this writing.”

“We’ll have to ask McBride about it,” said Marty.

“Is that true, Yuri?” said McBride.

The Russian shrugged. “Damned if I know. Your people have the stones. I was never interested in them. Just a bunch of shit no one can decipher.”

After the forty-eight hours, Marty, Andrew, and the others met McBride and friends with their lists of questions. They were now discussing Marty’s theory about the laser etching and Andrew’s observation about the sharp edge at the bottom of the stone panels.

“That’s the job of specialists to decide,” said Andrew. Others with similar backgrounds to his nodded. “We need to see those stones.”

“Where are they?” McBride said to Adams.

“Area 51,” said Adams.

Marty laughed. “With the other alien artifacts?”

“And the spaceships that flew over Roswell?” said Andrew.

Adams looked at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. “It’s a top secret airbase, and there was an empty hanger available. I guess a couple of people could go there. Someone in security would have to go with them.”

“I nominate Kinnaird and Peralta,” said Kuznetsov. “It will get them out of our hair for a while.” His smile at Marty softened that statement.

“Probably a waste of time,” said Adams. “Do you two have something particular in mind?”

“To do more physical tests,” said Marty.

“To see if there’s anything below the sharp edge,” said Andrew.

“I can push on with the reverse engineering effort,” said Sorensen. “I’d really like Dr. Peralta here, but we have some organizational details to get out of the way first. I can spare her for a few days.”

“What are those details?” said McBride.

“First priority is to ensure we’re not going to turn that tunnel and the whole area into a nuclear crater when we start tinkering with it.”

“That wouldn’t be good,” said Kuznetsov.

Chapter Eight

“You will only be allowed in that one hanger,” the USAF colonel told Adams, Peralta, and Kinnaird, “and you will always be accompanied by guards.”

“What if we can’t finish today?” said Marty.

“We’ll provide cots, sandwiches, and coffee right in the hangar. There are shower facilities too. The hangar was used earlier for storing dangerous chemicals. You cannot leave it until you’re ready to go back to Minnesota.”

“You folks aren’t very hospitable,” said Adams.

"I never wanted those stones here in the first place," said the colonel. "I follow orders, but I don't have to like them. I'll call four guards now. Please wait here."

"They're always stiff-backed idiots," Adams said to the two scientists. "It's like the only people in charge of the nation's defense are zombies."

Marty smiled. "You're government too, and presumably a volunteer in the sense you could have taken some other job."

"But not military. But I guess they're a necessary evil."

"Until they get out of control," said Marty.

"Have you been in on this from the beginning?" said Andrew.

"From day one. So far, it's been boring. And I don't think anything will come of it, but maybe I can coast long enough to get my pension."

"Do you think the portal is a hoax?" said Andrew.

"You tell me. I tend to put it in the same category as the pyramids."

"The pyramids don't have strange power sources," said Marty.

"Or strange ideograms," said Andrew.

"Who knows? We haven't done all that much to find the power sources. Does anyone know how they moved those huge blocks for the pyramids? And hieroglyphics were indecipherable until they found the Rosetta Stone. Maybe that gateway was just some Native American chieftain's tomb designed to send him to the happy hunting ground in style."

Andrew looked at Marty with a raised eyebrow and then again at Adams. "I think you're wrong, but I can understand your doubt."

Adams looked at Marty with a leer and then again at Andrew. "And I'm wondering how you two get along. You seem as different as night and day."

"What do you know?" said Marty.

"Enough to respect your privacy. But talk about an odd couple. The Scottish prude and a man-eater Latina chick. Who would have guessed?"

Marty glared at him and fell silent. That comment ended the conversation.

"I knew it!" said Andrew. He was crouched in front of the additional stone panels, ones that had been below the sharp edge seen on their computer screens.

Marty had rubber gloves on and ran her hand across the surface. "There's some roughness here, but I don't think there's writing on them. That explains why they didn't photograph them."

Andrew gestured to her forensics kit. "Anything in there like what they use to dust for fingerprints?"

She gave him a shopping list. "Let's try the talc. This stone is red. It will show up well. Or maybe the graphite powder?"

"I'd choose the talc. What are we looking for?"

"Writing, what else?"

The four guards watched with interest as Marty and Andrew put the stone slabs flat on the floor and began dusting them. Adams watched with indifference, preferring to admire Marty's breasts that were flopping a bit in the T-shirt. Andrew felt like slugging him. Marty was more cute and perky than gorgeous, but she was the only woman around. His opinion of Adams had reached a new low.

“Help me shake them a little,” Andrew said to Adams, and then bit his tongue at the double meaning. “Like panning for gold.”

“How did you know I’m from Alaska?”

Marty laughed. “You spy on us; we spy on you. I could ask to see that scar from your close encounter with the grizzly, but it’s in a dark place where no sane woman would ever venture.”

“Yeah, yeah, gold mining.” But he was smiling. “Say, doc, there is something!”

Ideograms started forming. Soon Andrew was studying the final result.

“You were talking about hieroglyphics? Here you have some. I’m guessing early Egyptian, about 3000 B.C. as you folks suspected.”

“Is that old?” said Adams.

“Geez, don’t you know what B.C. means?” said Marty. “Three thousand years before Christ, Mr. Adams. Add 2000 plus to that and you get 5000 years. Any idea what they say?” The last question was for Andrew.

“I’ll have to work at it. I’m a little rusty, and they’re quite worn, meaning the glyphs aren’t clear. My guess is they’re a key to translating the other ideograms, a Rosetta Stone for the ET writing.”

“From the middle of Minnesota? Come on, doc! And why are those more worn than those on the other panels?”

“Because the other writing was etched in stone by lasers,” said Marty. “That’s confirmed. This was done later.”

“So some Egyptians left us a dictionary for an ET publication?” said Adams.

“Something like that,” said Andrew. “Or the ETs themselves, writing in Egyptian. McBride will be happy he didn’t waste the taxpayers’ money.”

The trio returned to the portal site. Others joined Andrew as they tried to decipher the ancient hieroglyphics. They compared them to the alien symbols that would have been above them.

“There’s almost a one-to-one correspondence,” said one linguist. “But you say it didn’t cover all the bottom?”

“If there’s enough, we can decipher the rest too,” said Andrew. “Just like with the Rosetta Stone.”

“How’s it going?” said McBride, entering the work area.

“We’ll need some time,” said Andrew. “How are the others doing?”

“Everyone’s working hard. I’m doing what I can too, because there’s not much I can do here. When you’re done, will you be able to provide some confidence level for your translation?”

“That’s probably impossible.” Others who were working with Andrew nodded in agreement. “You’ll get our best guess. You’re not going to find a better team than this.”

“I would have liked for some of our island guests to have stayed on,” said McBride. “Especially Thorndike. He’s an expert in hieroglyphics.”

“I know, but later ones. And these are very old and unclear. We essentially have to do a double translation.” Andrew pointed to one symbol. “That’s confusing with multiple meanings, for example. Chinese would be easier.”

McBride shrugged. "Do your best. I need to be away a few days. Carry on."

Andrew watched the gnome leave. He already knew McBride was going to the Pentagon. Adams had told him that. *Why doesn't McBride just say it?* Marty's paranoia might be contagious, but the whole business hadn't begun very openly.

Marty opened Andrew's closet and stared at the junk food.

"I think what they feed us is pretty good. Why do you need this crap?"

He put a finger to his lips and wrote something on a notepad.

Marty read in silence: "Insurance. Supplies for an escape. I don't trust these guys."

She took the pad and wrote beneath that: "And I thought I was paranoid! What about the curiosity factor?"

He shrugged and wrote another line: "McBride's at the Pentagon. The military is too involved. You're paranoid about the military? They're paranoid about everything. They don't like someone with fancier technology."

"ETs?" said Marty, only mouthing the words. He nodded. "Are you a pacifist?" she wrote. He nodded again. "I love that!" she wrote. Then: "Why are we writing?"

"Bugs." He pointed to his bathroom. She followed him in. He turned the tap water on high and ran the shower. "Adams said he gave us privacy. I'm hoping that means he doesn't bug bathrooms." Andrew still spoke nearly in a whisper.

"So, when's the Great Escape?" Marty said.

"When we find out more about the ETs and/or what the Pentagon plans to do."

"But there are other countries involved. My government can't act alone."

"I'm guessing the worry about ET superweapons is pretty universal," said Andrew.

"I think you're overreacting. I can understand not wanting to cause a panic. You'd have flocks of UFO nuts exploring the tunnel at the very least. Orson Welles proved how gullible people can be. And conspiracy theorists are a dime a dozen nowadays."

"I'm still preparing. We might need to tell the world."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure about that 'we.' I'm seeing some exciting science. Curiosity is winning over caution."

He frowned. "Then I'll go alone."

Chapter Nine

The conversation two days earlier had put a stop to the hot and heavy sex with Andrew. Marty tossed and turned alone in her bed. She missed him. She chided herself. She usually didn't become involved with men. When they found out what she did for a living, they often backed off anyway, even academics.

Andrew was different. He seemed attracted to her brains as well as her body, and the feeling was mutual. But he was also a stubborn SOB who didn't always agree with her just to keep on her good side. She liked that too.

She turned onto her back and used her hands to perk up her breasts. She'd always thought it was hard to be a woman. First, the good old boys dominated academia, especially the hard sciences and engineering. She knew some of that stemmed from girls at an early age being told

they weren't good at science and mathematics and shouldn't try to be. Second, men treated women as sex objects. As an overweight teen with acne, she'd wanted so much to be a sex object, but when she got laid in the back seat of a bus as the high school band headed home from an away-game, it changed her mind a bit. After that she had a lot more fun showing up the STEM boys and worrying less about being fat and having zits.

College was different, though. Respect for her brains increased and sexual liaisons became more satisfying. It was still hard to find a guy who'd make a commitment, though. Her mother, an ER doctor, had told her not to rush into anything; the right guy would come along. *Is that person Andrew? If so, why does he piss me off so much?*

Some of the functionality of the ET technology was easy to understand—power conduits, laser-tailored tunnel walls, bulk electronic components, and nearly all the mechanical engineering. How they accomplished these things was harder to comprehend. Everything was strange. Some of the materials were unusual—ceramics were often used. There were circuit boards, but the scientists thought they might have organic components. Similar ideograms to those on the large stone panels were common.

They still hadn't figured out the power source. At the narrow part of the tunnel, heavy cables dove deep; they weren't quite bold enough yet to probe where they went. They didn't even have the heavy equipment to follow the cables.

"I don't think we're talking reactors," Sorensen had said.

Marty often felt like a child in a toy store from another country. There were all sorts of toys available, but she didn't know how to play with them.

It was all great fun until they found a video file with different content.

"There's no sound," said McBride, as they watched the grainy images.

"We don't know that," said Sorensen. "It took us two days to figure out how to convert the damn thing. Don't miss what's coming!"

Marty grabbed Andrew's hand. He hadn't seen the video. The blurred recording had been made at the entrance to the tunnel. The audience watched as heavily armed ETs marched out accompanied by things that looked like tanks and artillery.

"They look like us!" said Adams.

"Hard to tell with all the body armor," said Andrew, squeezing Marty's hand now.

"They're humanoid at least, and, if it's any comfort, they're not as muscle-bound as you are."

"I'm looking at a futuristic SWAT team," said Yuri Kuznetsov.

"More like an army platoon," said Claude Girard. "And not futuristic, if this film is from the same epoch as the tunnel."

"This is an invasion force," said Andrew in a whisper.

"You don't know that," said Marty.

"They're not going to a kid's birthday party," said Adams. "Can we stop it there?" He grabbed a laser pointer. "That's a good view of a face. Indo-European maybe, but dark features, square chin, broad nose. They don't look like Egyptians, though. At least not like the pharaohs portrayed in those tombs."

"Those are stylized portraits," said Andrew. "Photoshopped, to use modern terminology. No one believes pharaohs really looked like that."

McBride waved a hand and the lights came on. “While it’s probably useful to study this more, we might be wasting time. Observation 1: these guys mean business. Observation 2: they had some serious-looking firepower, although they could just be sci-fi fakes—for what reason, I don’t know. Observation 3: it’s imperative to know whether they’re returning anytime soon.”

“Observation 4: No one expected this!” said Sorensen. “I would have been much happier seeing some real ETs coming out to pick wildflowers like in that damn movie.”

Chapter Ten

Randall Wilcox studied Andrew’s notes. He had called in the astronomer when the translators reached an unusual point in their efforts. They had gone far beyond the part of the stone panels where both ET writing and hieroglyphics were found. In reference to the tunnel’s entrance, they had reached a section of the ET writing toward the beginning.

“I believe you’re right,” said Randall. “They’re talking about planets here. Although we must assume the ETs know about all the solar system’s planets, they’re referring to the ones the ancients knew about, the five visible to the naked eye. I call them the astrological standbys. Ancient oracles used them to forecast the future.”

“Are they forecasting the future here?” Andrew said.

“This part is indicative of what we saw on the video—the description of a small platoon of heavily armed gents leaving the gateway. The planets are aligned. That happens more often than you might think, but the next closest alignment is around September 8, 2040.”

“OK. Given the text surrounding this, would you agree with me that this probably means that the ETs are returning in 2040?” said Andrew.

“Agree? It’s an interesting theory. It could be later; it could be earlier. Maybe it’s already happened.” Randall smiled. “They arrive in modest numbers, so that force size could hardly take over the planet. You might as well become a UFO nut.”

“Was the video digitized?”

“Yes, but it still took a while to figure it out. Think of all the digital formats we have now. No one can keep them all straight.”

“I wonder who made that video record?” said Andrew.

“The ETs’ CNN? Who cares? Maybe this whole thing’s a hoax! Remember, we were initially brought here to contribute to a sci-fi movie. Has anyone checked the authenticity of the video?”

Andrew’s answer was a shrug.

“Just update McBride and friends and let them decide,” said Randall.

“Decide what? Marty and I think he’s the Pentagon’s toady. No, we should keep this secret for now.”

But someone on Andrew’s team leaked the discovery.

“While I’d like to commend you on your work,” said McBride, “I feel I no longer can trust you, Dr. Kinnaird. You’re no longer heading up that effort with the panels. In fact, you’re

confined to your quarters until we can ship you off to one of our little island paradises. Mr. Adams will escort you there.”

McBride left and Adams held up handcuffs. “Sorry, doc, I like you, but I have to put these on. National security and all that.”

“I will lodge a complaint with my government.”

Adams smiled. “Fat chance of that doing any good. You won’t be talking to anyone. And the U.K. is just as involved in this as the US. You’ll have to wait a few years before you can bend anyone’s ear, if ever. By then, you’ll have a nice tan. You might be bored to death on the island, but the weather’s excellent there, except for the occasional hurricane.”

Andrew held out his arms. “What will McBride suggest doing?”

“2040’s a bit off, so maybe nothing for now. I can imagine him eventually blowing the gateway to kingdom come, though. All your comments were duly noted. I think you’re right: we don’t know what will come out that tunnel. The prudent tactic is to make sure nothing does.”

“Mantra taken from a Xenophobia 101 textbook: the ETs must be bad.”

“They look like bad asses in the video. Why take the chance?”

“Because I have a feeling we don’t really know what’s going on.”

“We have some time to work more on that. Not including you, of course. Let’s go.”

They didn’t even leave Andrew his laptop. He was watching Gilligan’s Island reruns on the camp’s TV service trying to get in the mood for his coming trip to the island when he heard a thump outside his door. *Has the guard fallen asleep and slid out of his chair?*

He put his ear to the door. He heard the keypad entry and security keys rattling and backed away from the door. *So soon?* I haven’t even packed my swimwear.

He grabbed a towel from the bathroom, thinking he might be able to strangle the guard with it. Standing at the side of the door, he prepared to do battle. *No way am I going without a fight!*

The door whisked open. He didn’t follow through with the towel attack.

“Marty! What’s going on?”

She put a finger to her lips and stepped aside so he could see the guard’s body on the floor. “Ta da! Peralta the Green Lantern to the rescue.”

“Did-did you kill him?”

“Of course not.” She showed him a crescent wrench. “Experimental physics to the rescue. If he had received a few more blows, he might be ready to join that new NFL class action suit, but he should be just fine with the teeny love taps.” She grabbed his hand. “C’mon dude, let’s go.”

“I thought McBride was keeping this under wraps.”

“Randall’s a gossip. Or, just worried about you. Either way, we’re out of here.”

“But where are we going?”

“Anywhere but here, Andrew.”

“We’ll end up on the island together.”

“Yep, but if that’s your worst case scenario, it’s not all that bad.”

Chapter Eleven

As Marty peered around the corner of a corridor, Andrew noted she had the guard's gun tucked into the waistband of her sweatpants.

"I hope you put the safety on that gun."

She rolled her eyes. "No, I want to shoot myself in the privates so I can't have any children. We'll be more exposed outside, so shut up and follow me. We might need the gun. Remember: The only good fascist is a dead fascist."

They followed the lake around to the dam and then the creek that continued from the spillway, all the time keeping to the woods. At one point they came across a small waterfall. Over the sound of rushing waters they heard sirens. Following Andrew's lead, they crawled on their stomachs to a ledge and looked down on a road that crossed over the rivulet not far ahead. Four SUVs sped down the road.

"There's a village that way. I remember passing through there when coming here. Gas station, general store, and stables for horseback riders. We'll have to avoid it." He started to wriggle back away from the ledge.

"No," she said. "They'll check out the village and then keep on searching. That's when we'll steal some transportation."

"Doesn't that just compound our crimes?"

"It would be our only crime so far."

"You KO'd the guard."

"That's not a crime. He deserved it. I just wish it had been Adams."

"Should we wait for dusk?" said Andrew.

"Good idea. What do people do in such a place?"

"Take care of hikers, hunters, and other tourists, I suppose. We can't be that far from somewhere with more population, right?"

"Compared to the whole U.S., yeah. That's why we need a car. You're not in great physical shape, and I'm beat. I didn't sleep thinking about them taking you away."

"Or a lorry."

She stared at him. "Truck? No, we need some speed. A pickup will also do." She rolled over. "It's peaceful here." She seemed to study the clouds. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Same here." He looked at the sand around them. "The water must get this high sometimes. And there might be bugs."

She kicked her shoes off. "Forget the bugs. Tell me about Scotland."

They napped, awaking once when one SUV returned from the village with lights flashing but no siren, heading for the lake. Andrew had heard the motor straining against the grade.

"Told you. One's going back to check that part of the road, the others are probably continuing on."

"Or one is waiting for us in the village."

"One is OK. We'll commandeer his SUV then. Remember, I've got a gun."

"We're not bank robbers!"

"No, we're more desperate than that. Come on. I want to hit the village just before dark."

"It's not very far."

“If you’re Superman and planning to fly. We mortals have to get from here to down there and past whatever obstacles might occur down the road. I’m game, but I’m not carrying you when you poop out. I can see the village from here, in fact, but I can’t see the entire road. We might have to stick to the road because there’s no cover on either side, so let’s be stealthy.”

“And you say I’m negative. Shall I lead the way? This isn’t much compared to the Highlands.”

She stood and stretched. “Let me get my bagpipes inflated, Rob Roy.” She waved him on.

They found their way to the back of the general store just as the few lights in the little village started to come on.

“The General Store has a little snack bar,” Andrew said looking through a dirty window. “I’d sure like some of that real food.”

“Make do with your snacks for now,” said Marty. She pointed. “There’s our target.”

“That old pickup? It might not even run.”

“Chances are it perks along just fine. People out here probably aren’t loved by the car dealers because they keep a car or truck for more than ten years and take good care of it. With luck, the keys are in it.”

They were. Marty also found a pen and an old notebook containing to-do lists. She ripped out a page.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m telling the owner we’re just borrowing the truck and will leave it somewhere for him.”

“Is that still considered stealing?”

“I don’t know. You leave keys in a car in New York City, it’s just considered stupid. Hop in. We’re off to see the wizard. Or at least the next decent town.”

Marty and Andrew passed through two hamlets similar to the one they had left. The third was bigger: Ely, Minnesota, population 3578. They stayed on the main drag until Marty made a right turn and pulled up behind the back of a shop.

“The Ely Times?” said Andrew. “A newspaper?”

“Probably a weekly. Maybe even a monthly. I’m guessing the editor is also the reporter and production staff. We’ll only have to convince one guy.”

“To do what?”

“Broadcast our story to the world.”

“You don’t even know they have internet connections.”

She pointed to a pole with wires running from it to the building. “He’s got a landline at least. Probably uses an old telephone modem. That’s all we need. Just follow my lead.”

Marty went in through the backdoor.

“That you, Jenny?” said a gruff voice.

Marty strode right past the old man and pulled down the shades. She turned the “open” sign to “closed,” pivoted, and pointed the gun.

“Hey, what’s going on? I don’t have any money even if you’re hurtin’ for a fix.”

“What’s your name, old man?”

“Donald. Donald Streit.”

“And you’re the editor?”

“I’m everything. I just haven’t got around to sweeping the floor yet.”

Marty winked at Andrew. She stuffed the gun in her belt and moved forward, hand outstretched. “My name is Marty Peralta, and I’m an applied physicist. My friend here from Scotland is Andrew Kinnaird, an archaeological linguist. We were working at that top secret project on Bear’s Paw Lake.”

Donald still eyed the gun. “I heard about it. I’m still listening.”

Marty went to Donald’s one guest chair and sat down, crossing her short legs. Andrew went to stand behind her, still surprised at her boldness.

“Donald, do you want a really great story for your local rag?”

“What? Write my own obituary?”

Marty leaned back and sighed.

“I’m not going to shoot you, Mr. Streit.” She took the gun from the belt and handed it to him. “It still has the safety on. You can take that gun and shoot us, Donald, but we want to tell you about a government conspiracy before you do that. OK?” He nodded. “A true government conspiracy.”

Marty began their tale, making Andrew add entire chapters as she went along. When they finished, they waited for Donald to digest it.

“That’s pretty incredible,” said the editor, scratching his bald pate. “So incredible I don’t believe it. Not a word. This is some kind of joke.”

Marty handed him a memory stick. “Check that out. Got any coffee?”

Donald was plugging the stick into his laptop that didn’t have any internet connections, just as Marty had predicted. Not even an old modem.

“In the kitchen in the back.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“Low-cal creamer and Splenda for me.”

Marty already knew Andrew’s tastes. She went to get the coffee.

“She’s crazy,” Donald said to Andrew after Marty left.

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Andrew, “but the story’s true. We’re thinking that if you get this out to news services, all hell will break loose up at the lake. We think the world should know about this.”

“It might create worldwide panic if it’s true.”

“A temporary hysteria maybe. But the world should know. I don’t want a few government types blowing the whole portal to kingdom come without having some input from the general public. Your prez and my PM probably don’t even know about the project because of the secrecy.”

“What a story! Let me read some of this.”

Marty returned with the coffee.

Marty and Andrew stayed with Donald long into the night as he made calls. He also made copies of the memory stick to send out by mail first thing in the morning. The two left and made it to Madison, Wisconsin, where they were apprehended.

They'd already seen the headlines in the NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post in the early editions.

They held hands all the way back to the camp, enjoying their success.

Chapter Twelve

"There's someone to see you, Professor Kinnaird."

Andrew waved the guard off. "I'm not talking to another reporter. They have all the facts, yet the media still lets them keep us in solitary."

"It's a general. General Thomas White. From the Pentagon. You might want to talk to him."

Andrew had considered the irony of being held at Andrews AFB. A solicitor from the U.K. was trying to free him but had made little progress. He had warned Andrew that he might want to reconsider—he'd just be arrested again as soon as he returned to the U.K. because the U.K. was a partner of the U.S. in the portal project.

"Sure. I can yell at him some more about illegally detaining a British citizen." Andrew flexed his fingers. "Or just strangle him on general principles."

"I'll tell him to be careful," said the guard, saluting and smiling.

He left and returned with an older man who had white hair and a beard and could only walk with the help of a cane. The guard saluted and left again.

"It's General White, retired, son," the old man said, sticking his hand through the bars. Andrew ignored it, so the man withdrew his hand. "I want to congratulate you on stirring up hornets' nests all over the world, from ET and UFO nuts to rogue nations clamoring the West is trying to keep the ETs' weaponry for themselves in order to destroy all opposition."

Andrew shrugged. "You asked for it. I don't feel guilty. If you had been forthcoming at the beginning, none of this would have happened. I don't feel guilty about anything. I'm not guilty of anything. Neither is Marty Peralta."

"You used the word 'you' generically, I suppose. Like I said, I'm retired. I had nothing to do with what happened to Marty and you and the other scientists. I probably should mention that some of them don't agree with what you did—quite adamantly, as a matter of fact."

"They can go to hell. If you're not part of the conspiracy, why are you here? To beat me with your cane?"

"As much as I might like to do that, that's not my role. Things have changed a bit. Mr. Streit has waged a decisive campaign against the governments running the project, especially since he got on the internet. His video taken when Marty and you broke into his office has gone viral on YouTube and other sites. I think that's how you say it, but 'viral' gives me negative feelings, while I'm sure that most of the reaction to the video is positive."

"The old dog!" said Andrew with a laugh. "How'd he manage that?"

"Old fashioned recorder and a security camera's footage. He paid someone to synch them up. Not very professional, but I guess it's part of the charm. Gave him another scoop and a powerful rep for his old rag. That and all the media coverage has made Marty and you, and by extension the other scientists, very famous."

“They’d be salivating if they saw the video of the ETs coming from the tunnel.”

“Accounts of that have probably been greatly exaggerated because the Pentagon still refuses to release it.”

“Sounds like you’re a bit ambivalent, Thomas.”

“I’m paid to be. I’m heading up a civilian review board.”

“An ex-general heading up a civilian review board? That’s a joke!”

White smiled. “Yes, I suppose it sounds a bit weird. I’m still recruiting board members. I’d like to have Marty and you as members.”

Andrew shook the bars. “Depending on the number of members, this cell might be a bit small. And I have no idea where Marty is.”

“That doesn’t matter right now. You two will wear GPS units on your ankles while you await your trials and serve on the board.”

“Yeah, about those trials. When can I know the charges? I’m a British citizen. You might not have due process here in America, but I can demand it as a British citizen. I want to be tried in my own country.”

“I might be able to arrange that, but I’d rather get the charges dropped. You two have a strong argument. You were brought into the project with a lie and then held captive. It hardly matters that the project was a multinational effort.”

Andrew stuck his hand threw the bars to shake the man’s hand. “That I can shake on, Thomas.”

Marty flew into Andrew’s arms.

“I’ll let you two get reacquainted,” said General White. “Please don’t leave the main premises, even for a romantic walk around the lake.”

They were back at the project site, separated from the group of scientists, new and old, still working to solve the mystery of the portal.

“Did they treat you well?” said Andrew.

“No waterboarding or cigar burns, but being in solitary confinement isn’t charming either. The only positive is that I got a lot of reading done.”

“And I did a lot of pacing. What do you think of White?”

“He’s a nice man who is too damn confused about a lot of things. Maybe senile to boot. He has worked to convince the governments involved not to destroy the gate, though.”

“With the weight of public opinion on our side now, he couldn’t help but do that. I need to find out if the press knows about the review board.” Andrew held her at arms-length and smiled at her. “Any idea about where to start?”

“We’re so cloistered we might as well be in a convent. They call it the Minnesota Commission, by the way. Some of your British tabloids are demanding the ETs have representation, though. Of course, they have no idea who’s on the commission. ‘Group of concerned citizens’ is a bit nebulous.” She broke free and handed him a clipping from a NYC tabloid. “A guard smuggled this to me. Americans are a bit more caustic.”

“‘ET Tourists Don’t Want to Go to Disney World!’ That’s clever. Of course, the ETs in that video didn’t exactly look like this picture. These big-eyed, big-headed fellows look like a stereotype out of a 1950s sci-fi B-movie. It’s a bit disparaging, too. I’ve been to Disney World. There’s something for everyone.”

She laughed. "Humor from across the pond is too dry. These guys are just mocking the whole situation. Lighten up. But I'd like to see what *The Guardian* has to say."

White found them in the cafeteria about two hours later. "Our first meeting will be at 2:30 in the conference room. We'll discuss our charter and come up with an agenda."

"Can I bring a book to read?" said Marty.

"You're implying you will be bored. You won't be. Part of our charter is to figure out how to approach and greet the ETs. From experience, I know the military doesn't know how to be diplomatic, so that's an important task."

"Are we also supposed to determine if we need to kill them all?" said Andrew.

"Leave the negativity to the military minds who are quivering in their boots," said White. "I want to stick to the positive. We need to look at this as a chance to establish relations with a highly technological extraterrestrial society."

"If we map out something reasonable and they don't follow the plan, what then?" said Andrew.

White shrugged. "I suspect the ETs aren't going to take kindly that we're bent on destroying them. We might only be able to say 'we told you so' just before we're vaporized."

"Oh, goody. That would make a fine epitaph on our tombstones."

White studied her. "Will you be there at 2:30? I need both your inputs. You're the only ones on the commission with any direct knowledge about the tunnel."

Marty shrugged but nodded.

"I have a physics question," said Andrew when they later sat down for a light and early lunch. Marty bit into her BLT club sandwich and nodded. "Actually two. First, why can the ETs only come when the planets align? Second, how does the damn tunnel really work? Could it be a time machine and not a star gate?"

They were eating in her room. A woman had brought their orders from the cafeteria. They weren't allowed to mingle with the others, not even the commission members until after the first meeting.

She chewed a minute and then sipped enough milk to swallow. "That's really three questions. I'll attempt to answer the last two first. We're ignorant savages with respect to this technology. If that video is real and not some young moviemaker's attempt to make a sci-fi flick, the aliens could just be advanced humans from the future. In other words, the star gate could be a time machine. Or it could be both a star gate and a time machine. I'm not competent enough to decide how time factors into how the tunnel operates." She pointed a dill pickle at him. "I think the first question is easier to answer. The ancient Egyptians who created that dictionary were a superstitious lot, probably all into gods and omens and all that claptrap. The aliens or whatever they are probably created that story so they'd behave in the interim while they were gone. Humans obviously didn't toe the line."

"Are you saying they're like U.N. peacekeepers from the future?"

"No, I'm basically saying they could come tonight and not wait for 2040. I had lots of time to think about these things in solitary."

“And here I was thinking about you.”

She turned the pickle around as if it were some specimen in a biological lab and smiled. “That too. I was channeling Spock about the other stuff, though, looking at things logically. You were probably channeling Kirk.” She smiled.

“Can’t say I’m a Trekkie. I’m more a fan of Indiana Jones.”

“He’s another emotional wreck too, who could never make a commitment to a woman.”

“I’m committed.”

Now she frowned. “This conversation is taking a weird turn. Finish your beer so we can go hear what the old geezer has to say before I get all hot and bothered.”

Chapter Thirteen

“OK, I get it,” said Marty a bit into the first meeting of the commission. “We’re supposed to keep the cowboys in the military from shooting first and asking questions later.”

“I’m just glad to see destruction of the tunnel off the table,” said Andrew.

“We should extend that a bit,” said Art Dresden, a Buddhist monk from Brooklyn.

“Caution is in order, but we should be welcoming at first.”

“That didn’t work very well for the Native Americans, Hawaiians, or Australian aborigines,” said Pam Carvajal, a newspaper reporter from Chile. “As long as the American government is in charge, I’m not happy with the situation.”

Marty nodded at her. “Maybe you’re going about this the wrong way, White. Let’s consider scenarios and our responses to them. Even if the ETs come out shooting, restraint might be in order as a first reaction, as Art suggests.”

They tossed around ideas until Jean Chang, a computer expert from California’s Silicon Valley, tossed out an important idea. She had been quiet until then, so the rest gave her their attention.

“Has anyone ever considered the possibility that the video was computer-generated?” she said. “We can already make films with characters so lifelike that no one can tell the difference. And this video was blurry. Did we ever figure out whether there was sound, by the way?”

“No sound,” said White, “as far as we know. Some of the blurring is probably due to the compression scheme. They used one, and we don’t know the ins and outs of it all that well. I’m not competent to say more about that, but I’m told people are working on cleaning it up, and yes, they have checking authenticity on their agenda. How would you determine that, Ms. Chang?”

“The best bet is to get a few experts in computer forensics together. Maybe you already have them. I could be on that team, but it would probably be considered a conflict of interest.”

White jotted that down. “I’ll report ideas like that to the appropriate people, even though they might already be considering them.”

“Jean makes a good point,” said Marty. “If that video is proven fake, we will know next to nothing about the ETs who designed the portal. They could be fire-breathing dragons.”

“Carbon dating shows the tunnel isn’t a fake,” said White. “They used many local materials in the construction, although we don’t understand completely how they were used. And it’s not that old in geological terms; that makes the error bars more significant.”

“Have materials been tested extensively?” said Andrew. “Not the dating, but to figure out if we could use them ourselves?”

“I believe so. I’m told that the materials technology is beyond anything we possess.” White seemed to have a reverent respect for the technical information.

“Having examined the tunnel, I’d say our working assumption that the tunnel isn’t a fake is a good one,” said Marty. “I’d pursue Jean’s idea. Proving that video is fake could imply that the ETs are just putting on a show to impress us, the ignorant Earth savages they knew at the time.”

“I’ve always asked myself: why the connection with ancient Egypt?” said Andrew. “I have a theory for that, in case anyone is interested. The construction of the tunnel was contemporary with the early days of Egypt’s civilization. The ETs probably extrapolated as best they could and thought eventually that civilization would become planet-wide. They were incorrect in that extrapolation, but if I’d been around at the time, I might have made the same one.”

White jotted that down. “People have been asking that, so I’ll pass on your theory, Andrew. It’s as good as any ideas that have been batted around. There were conjectures that the Egyptian gods were modeled after the ETs, but it was hard to reconcile that with the video and the fact that the tunnel is here in Minnesota, not Egypt. At least the ETs were right in assuming that the Egyptian writing would serve as a dictionary for us.” He looked around the group. “This has been a good first meeting. Keep up the good work.”

Someone knocked on Andrew’s door.

“You can just come in any time,” he said, opening it to see Marty.

“For all I know, you’re in here humping that cute little Jean Chang. She’s making eyes at you all the time, you know.”

He frowned. “Jealousy doesn’t become you. First, I hadn’t noticed she was doing that. Second, I’m hoping we’re becoming committed to each other and that what other women think of me shouldn’t bother you. And third, you didn’t come here to show your jealousy.” He smiled. “I was a bit distracted last night. I’ll admit I’m becoming more certain that the planetary alignment thing is bogus, which might imply the video is bogus too.”

“You can make love to me and think of things like that?”

“I said I was really distracted. Please understand. There’s a lot of stress associated with this commission. With the whole project, in fact. The only thing good about these last few months is that I met you.”

She sat on his bed and motioned for him to join her. “That merits a kiss.”

The kiss was long and her tongue probing. When he started to react, she jumped up.

“That’s payback for the future, for any peccadilloes you might commit, including distraction caused by another woman. Don’t ever think of doing what we do with that witch Chang.”

“Point taken,” he said with a groan. “You’re too much of a tease. Now, why did you come to see me? Really?”

She sat down beside him again. “I’m worried. White bent my ear a bit after our meeting. He doesn’t like Jack Davidson.”

“Who the hell is Jack Davidson?”

“White calls him General Jack. That’s General as in Air Force General. There are contingency plans now. Destruction of the tunnel is back on the table, Andrew, and General Jack is leading the military effort to implement it.”

“I guess they’d have to have that contingency. Call it an insurance policy. No one has proven that video is fake. I can understand having a small military contingent as backup. Public opinion should keep the military in check, though.”

“White also told me there are nuts out there who see the portal as a menace to human beings and our planet.”

“Very unlikely. The worst case scenario is that it’s like the settlers of the New World and the Native Americans—one superior culture forcefully absorbing an inferior one, technologically speaking. But think about what we could learn from them!”

“You don’t have to convince me.”

Andrew sighed. “I know that. And convincing them is practically impossible. You can’t reason with fanatics.”

“Hopefully the military personnel aren’t in that crowd, but I have my doubts after talking to White.”

When General White went to Washington to report on the commission’s progress but didn’t return, Marty and Andrew’s worries gathered more steam. Some members of the commission were lunching together for in the conference room dedicated to their deliberations.

“What can we do?” said Pam Carvajal. “Do you think the commission’s role has ended?”

“White was just presenting a tentative report,” said Art Dresden. “We’re jumping to conclusions.”

Marty spilled the beans about Jack Davidson and White’s opinion of him. “He told me this in confidence,” she said, “but his not returning forces me to break my code of silence.”

“Davidson might torpedo the commission,” said Andrew.

“That’s Navy,” said Carvajal with a smile. “He’s Air Force.”

“Whatever. And we’re the proverbial mushrooms,” said Jean Chang. “Kept in the dark until they bury us in shit.”

“Always loved that metaphor,” said Marty. “We need to find out if your suggestion about testing that video file bore any fruit. Any ideas on how to do that?”

“Mrs. Ito,” said Art. “She and a few other workers in the cafeteria have contacts with all of us, including the scientific group.”

“She’s brought us lunch a few times,” said Andrew. “She’s nice.”

“But we’re not allowed to talk to her either,” said Marty. “And she hardly speaks English.”

“Who said anything about talking? She brought our lunch. When she brings dinner, I can slip her a letter in Japanese.”

“And to whom shall she deliver it?” said Andrew.

“Sorensen,” said Marty. “He knows the language and hasn’t liked this setup since day one. He might even be in charge of testing the video, but I bet he at least knows if there are results along those lines.”

The plan worked. They discussed the results at the next lunch. White still hadn’t returned.

"I think we can relax," Art said. "Knowing that the video is fake and probably just a way of scaring us, meaning the ex-savages who now have the technology to watch it, puts the military back to square one. They know nothing about the ETs."

"Neither do we," said Andrew. "In some sense, I liked it better when we thought they were brutish warriors."

"They could be little white rabbits with death rays," said Chang with a laugh. "I don't think we can relax at all. Fear of the unknown is often greater than the known, and that has caused some deplorable actions throughout human history."

"I second that," said Carvajal. "And adding that to the distrust I have for any military group, we're in a bad position. Mrs. Ito isn't exactly an efficient conduit to the outside world. They have us boxed in where they want us."

Mrs. Ito reveled in her new role, though. Through Sorensen, they also learned that the portal was cycling as if someone was bringing it online. It had to be the ETs. He conjectured that would ramp up the military's xenophobia.

"The planetary alignment thing is a hoax too. They must have used it to bamboozle the primitive humans who were here into a false sense of security." Andrew looked around the group. "I conclude that means they have no ill will against us. On the contrary, they wanted to give us time to develop. They extrapolated pretty well in my opinion."

"It might take them a couple of decades to bring the portal online," said Marty. "I doubt the military will have the patience to wait."

Art Dresden nodded. "This place will soon be a military encampment. I'm betting they'll destroy the portal and tunnel now. It's only a matter of time."

Marty sagged in her chair. "Over my dead body," she said.

Chapter Fourteen

Nineteen years later, Marty and Andrew were surprised to receive an invitation to attend the opening of the portal. They had managed to keep in contact with Donald Streit, the owner of the weekly that had exposed the conspiracy perpetrated by a number of governments. They had lost contact with others who had been involved with the project, though.

Ten years earlier, General White had died of heart failure. General Davidson was now a four-star with tours in Africa and the Middle East added to his résumé, giving him considerable weight in Washington. His ideas about the portal were well known in the media and gathered new steam as P-Day approached, as did more peaceful ones of many people who were enthusiastic about meeting the ETs and learning from them.

"Can you believe they're still bickering about this" said Marty.

Now they both led sheltered lives at the University of Edinburgh. Their son, Adam, was studying economics in London, and daughter Stella, two years to go before graduation from public school, wanted to be a physicist, like her mother. Marty and Andrew would soon be empty-nesters.

"I'm not surprised," said Andrew, looking up from his paper and over his glasses at her. *The only love of my life!* "What's curious is the invitation, considering our history, old woman."

She smiled. “I have a theory. Davidson’s resurrecting the commission so he can cover his ass later. I don’t trust him. If White didn’t, how could we?”

He thought a bit. “We were saying we need a vacation,” he said. “And we were wondering if we could afford it. I’m game if you are.”

“It’s now winter in Minnesota.” She thought a moment. “Maybe that’s an omen?”

“No, it only means we’ll need to take some warm clothing. Hopefully we’re inside most of the time.”

There were a few familiar faces. Sorensen showed his age, but there was no separation between the portal scientists and commission now. And their fears were confirmed. The old kids’ camp had become a military base.

“Are you allowed to bring us up to date?” Marty said. Others in the group at the cafeteria table nodded.

“Sure. Nothing about nothing.” Sorensen said it with a growl. “Mostly a damn waste of time. The portal continues to cycle. The frequency has increased a bit, and there’s been a few shakes, but SOS for the most part. Hell, we don’t even know if it will open when the planets align. Obviously, that’s just the ETs’ PR gimmick—no one believes that it has anything to do with the technology. And we’re stumped by the alien technology, just savages trying to understand magical high tech.” The old man leaned back in his chair like he used to do, but almost went backwards. He caught himself and frowned. “I’m just a consultant now. The only thing that’s changed is that the military is on everyone’s case to deliver something, anything, but especially something about what’s going to happen on P-Day, if something happens then.”

“That’s not good,” said Marty. “Davidson’s probably used to bullying scientists to give him what he wants. He’s probably one frustrated SOB.”

“That I am,” said a stumpy man who entered the cafeteria and approached their table.

Jack Davidson’s uniform was full of medals and ribbons. Gilbert and Sullivan’s lyrics popped into Andrew’s head: “I am the model of a modern Major-General...,” only this fellow was a four-star now. Andrew also recalled that hoax video—General Davidson looked like the brutish warriors leading the charge out of the tunnel.

They shook hands without enthusiasm. “Let’s get this straight once and for all. You’re not welcome here, but I had to invite you because the media is giving us such a hard time. The ET lovers, the damned fools, don’t realize the danger that we face. At the very least, our Earth cultures will be overwhelmed by theirs; in the worst case, we’ll be annihilated.”

“That’s quite a strong opinion when you don’t possess the facts to back them up,” said Marty. Sorensen and Andrew nodded. So did a few others. “From my point of view, we’re here to stop your bigoted xenophobia from causing our first encounter with extraterrestrials to be a complete disaster.”

He smiled. “Fortunately my dear, I don’t have to give a damn what you think. Just stay out of our way. We have this under control.”

Most of the invitees, scientists or commission members, felt helpless as P-Day approached. The military buildup was impressive.

“What do you think’s going to happen?” said Marty late one night after they both enjoyed a bit of the old aftermath that had characterized their first lovemaking. “I want to control Jackson. Can you think of a way?”

“Our options are limited, old woman. He can pretty much do what he wants. Washington, London, and the others are acting like they’re Pontius Pilate, washing their hands of the ETs’ crucifixion.”

“That’s very poetic.” She thought a moment. “I have an idea. It will work if that pompous brute has any human decency at all left in him.”

“Let’s hear it then,” said Andrew.

After listening to Marty’s bold plan, he agreed it was their only option. They then wrote old-fashioned letters to Adam and Stella. Emails were still out of the question.

On P-Day two days later, which occurred at night, the entire commission and group of scientists were allowed to observe the opening of the portal.

Marty and Andrew had counted on the large crowd. No one saw them don their parkas and slip away from the group of observers.

Chapter Fifteen

Marty and Andrew ran toward the tunnel. It didn’t take long for one of the military types to spot them.

“You won’t stop us!” The PA system made General Davidson’s voice sound harsh and distorted.

When they arrived at the tunnel, they turned. Marty gave whoever was watching two middle fingers. Andrew shook his fist. They then turned again and gazed into the tunnel.

There was no magical shimmer or brightly colored lights. There was no fanfare, sounds from chimes, or any other music. The ETs simply walked out, stomping in the snow a bit, some rubbing their eyes in the beams from the huge spotlights. Marty grabbed Andrew’s hand; they watched the ETs approach.

They were furry creatures who wore something like a Highlander’s skirt, looking a bit odd in the intense cold. The skirts shimmered, though, pulsing through the colors of the rainbow. The ones not rubbing their eyes held their hands out, palms up, in a sign of peace—leathery black four-fingered hands with knobby knuckles and fur on the backsides. They looked a bit like lemurs but with smaller eyes, but the eyes were still the most prominent features in the little faces.

That much Marty and Andrew took in before the cruise missiles tore across the terrain, plowed through them and the ETs, and into the tunnel.

The explosion was more than the military had bargained for. First there was an implosion and then the explosion. Helicopters circulating over the area and carrying observers from the media were knocked out of the sky with the shock wave or turned to cinders by the rising fireball. Davidson’s forces and all the observers were completely vaporized.

When it was all over, there was a new, smoldering fifty-mile-radius crater in the Minnesota wilderness with enough radiation wafting into the breezes to make most of the Great Lakes region's human population die from radiation sickness. Lake water one hundred miles away from the epicenter turned into radioactive steam that rose to form clouds that rained down deadly radiation elsewhere.

At first the world was stunned. With time it was aghast at what had occurred. Politicians and the military tried to cover their asses to no avail. Ethicists debated human culpability and whether retaliation by the ETs would be justified. The media went on and on, debating everything and pointing its fingers of blame.

Donald Streit, who had been in the make-up room for his appearance on *Good Morning U.S.A.*, listened to the report in dismay. "I have to get out of here!" The octogenarian threw off the make-up apron and dashed out of the TV studios.

He found a sports bar near Times Square, ordered a beer, and tried not to watch TVs. That wasn't hard. He crossed his arms, put his head down, and wept. For Marty and Andrew, who had kept in contact the last nineteen years. For all those civilian observers at the site he hadn't know personally but respected. He also wept for his beloved Minnesota, knowing he could never return there. He shed no tears for the military involved, and his hatred for the governments who had allowed the travesty only increased.

I wonder if it's possible to commit suicide by drowning in Jack Daniels.

Stella and Adam received their letters one week later. Even with the pride they felt for their parents, they wept too.

Note from Steve: You have just finished the novella “Portal in the Pines.” I hope you enjoyed it.

If you enjoyed reading this free PDF, please check out the list of other ones available—you’ll find it on the “Free Stuff & Contests” web page at my website <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

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Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgments

Reacting to this what-if from my extensive list I've collected during my lifetime has taken me awhile. Years ago I attended a scientific conference in the woods near Plymouth, NH. A rich kids' summer camp was moonlighting as a summer conference site. Yeah, I didn't concentrate much on the boring lectures. I was moving into a new area of research, so I needed to get some exposure to a very arcane research topic, but they were talking about what *had been done*—I was under contract to *push the envelope* to new frontiers. Given that woodsy but boring setting, it's no surprise my mind wandered a bit as I came up with new story ideas. This one didn't turn out too badly, despite the time lag. (And neither did the research.)

First contact is a common theme in sci-fi. From *The War of the Worlds* by Wells to *Footfall* by Niven and Pournelle, authors have treated the theme in various ways with some clever twists and turns (we'll ignore Hollywood's feeble attempts). In my novels *Sing a Samba Galactica* and *More than Human: The Mensa Contagion*, things go a lot better than they do here, or in those earlier novels I mentioned. There were several possible endings for this novella, of course—for this theme, there often are, depending on how pessimistic the author wants to be. I chose the ending here to reflect my general pessimism about the way the country and the world are going in the 21st century. If we can't be receptive to refugees from foreign lands, how could we possibly be receptive to strange ETs?

I purposely avoided going into details about the ETs' technology beyond saying that humans basically just aren't advanced enough to understand it. I also didn't want the ETs to seem naïve—given human nature, why wouldn't they expect the worst until they could confirm that Earth hasn't become stuck in savagery in spite of technological advancement (there's plenty of evidence that this is occurring, of course).

Someone is bound to ask: what were ancient Egyptians doing in Minnesota? Andrew Kinnaird offers one theory—it's as good as any. I could have chosen the Vikings instead, but their prowess as explorers didn't quite match the advances in ancient Egypt's civilization. The ETs made an incorrect extrapolation as far as how Earth culture would develop. Given the lapse in time, their extrapolation was a reasonable one—they worked with the data they had available.

Here human beings aren't the good guys for the most part. If this little story goes beyond entertainment to where that resonates for some people, all the better. If not, I'll just be happy to have entertained you.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ
October, 2016

About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.