September 8, 2026

Colonel Lang looked up from the routine UFO reports at the phone's annoying flashing button. Why can't the Pentagon update these old phones, he thought, knowing it was probably Jefferson off the Saratoga again. He makes this UFO bullshit up just to bug me. He grabbed the receiver and pushed the button for the secure Davenport line. Wondering where was Ensign Peters? He didn't pick up.

"Lang here."

"Colonel, my team got that thing to Davenport!" the officer shouted.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander Morales? Is there a problem."

"No, sir. You said to call as soon as I arrived on base. I sprinted to my office to call." There was a pause. "That damn thing is incredible, Sir."

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander. What you found in Wyoming?"

"Yes, Sir – the alien ship."

An alien ship? he thought. The Lieutenant Commander sounded sure. I'll need more than that. "And what did you find incredible?"

"The ship, sir. It must be five or six feet in diameter, a round metalball, but two of my men easily lifted it onto the transport. The most unbelievable thing I ever saw. Got photos."

Colonel Lang closed the report on his desk to ask, "Did your men follow protocol?"

"You bet, Sir! We all suited up before starting in on it. Then, my men covered the thing with an aluminum tarp and strapped it securely to the truck's trailer. We left the Wyoming site at twenty-two hundred and were at the facility before dawn. Pretty quiet on the road. No reason for anyone to pay attention. All the materials, our suits and the equipment, are with Dr. Madsen."

The Colonel didn't comment, and Morales continued, "At the site, I checked and found no radioactivity, and ambient temperature on the vehicle's surface… One red flag though, Sir. Our communication equipment went nuts every twenty-seven seconds while we were there, until we covered the thing…. Sorry, sir, lots of static. My guess, powerful radio pulses coming out of the thing. Once on the road, all was quiet."

Lang scratched his wiry grey bristle. Morales was a good man, he considered. He follows my orders. "Anything else unusual?"

"The boys looked around a bit, but it was dark when we got there. Just flashlights. We woke the rancher. He wasn't cooperative. I left two of my team on guard duty then called Commander Stevens once we got going. He's put together an investigation team to give the site a thorough going over. They've probably already left. Dr. Madsen usually takes some of his civilians too. The choppers will get there in an hour and a half, or so. Madsen likes to personally check unusual reports."

Damn it! Lang thought. These things always are nothing but a big hassle.

"And the rancher didn't say anything, Morales?

"What about swipe samples of the ball and the vicinity?"

The line was quiet for a second.

"Yes, Sir. I packed the swipe samples according to package directions, and Dr. Madsen has them. The rancher only said he'd look the paperwork over… You know, Sir. It was the damnedest thing I ever saw. It looks like a big steel ball. Not polished … drab metal. Even if it's hollow, it should weigh more… than a whole bunch more than a couple of guys can lift. My men said it was maybe fifty pounds.

The line went dead. Finally, Lang asked, "Anything else, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Sir, I also tapped it with a hammer. It's hard as a rock but didn't sound like metal – yah know, dull. Maybe some kinda ceramic. We tied it down snug, real tight. No give in it. The damn thing should have weighed tons, not pounds."

Colonel Lang checked the door, put the receiver on speaker and leaned back in his chair while Lieutenant Commander Morales bolted through his breathless review of the evening.

If this damn thing is a legit extraterrestrial object, contamination is a potential issue, he considered. Morales certainly believes it's real. That paper out of MIT on the viability of bacteria under deep space conditions. Hoax or not, better cover possibilities.'

Never thought this would happen on my watch. A surge of anxiety swept over him. If this is an extraterrestrial ship, I'll need to find the stick. Get an edge. "Morales, do you have more information on those regular broadcasts?"

"Yes, Sir. I checked with the Davenport Communication Center during the drive back. They did record the transmissions, but the night crew hadn't done anything with it. I got a call about an hour later. The duty office had listened to some of the recording. He verified the twenty-seven seconds and said there was nothing detectable. Then he corrected and said he'd picked up a faint sound – something like a like a fax – but very faint."

"Very good, Lieutenant Commander. Get that into your report. Give me a minute to check protocols."

Lang looked at the computer on his desk. It wasn't on. Possible implications started to fester as he walked over to a bookshelf. He pulled off a two-inch-thick report, "Initial steps with a Recovered Alien Craft," and began to page through the index. It was dated 2018. Section 1 was, "Procedures to Avoid Contamination".

After a few seconds the Colonel fixated, single-minded. “Lieutenant Commander Morales, hang on for another minute.”

So, if we have recovered an extraterrestrial vehicle, he thought, paging through section 1. One that’s unusually light… maybe contaminated. Nothing that fits expectations. Got to keep this under wraps. Biological assessment must take priority.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Commander, keep me appraised as you learn more. Did all your men seem to be feeling okay returning to Davenport?”

“Yes, sir,” Morales said suspiciously.

“Please have Commander Mark’s office send me copies of those photos from the site in the overnight confidential envelope. I want to be first to know every detail. If you can’t get me on this line, leave a message with Lieutenant Bahringer on 6713. That’s the only other line I want anything coming into the Pentagon on. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir!”

This doesn’t look to be the usual sighting. There’s little doubt Madsen’s team will make quick work of the material questions. He’d give him a while then call. But he might not know anything about biological contamination before the end of the day, even later.

“Morales, I want you to get your team together, now!” Lang ordered. The urgency in his voice was not unusual. It was one technique to make his commands take precedent. “Your team is quarantined until Dr. Madsen finishes his work with the samples you collected. There’s a barracks on site in the plan. Please transfer me to Commander Marks and start collecting your men. And no visitors. Marks will notify you of details by the time you’ve got everyone.”

September 8, 2026, *5:41 EST*

lgjoreit;hposz'lwr ….. "Confined and miserable," the message started. "In an enclosure on the third planet in a system circling a medium, class B yellow star in quadrant 43.922. Circular transmission pattern may reach local transports in short timeframe. Message will require fifty Grazen decacycles to reach home. Transmission uncertain due to unknown confinement density. Message repeated at regular intervals.

"Indefinable sentient beings lack mental openness. Rely on secondary communication methods. Perception and memory personal to each, not shared. Each being an individual. Group thinking not detected. Attempted appeals without response.

"Immediately moved from portal site to new terrestrial location by ground. Pulse magnetometer inoperable. Insufficient starlight and interval to allow natural repairs. Patience required for amassing process. Then must wait to find transition state. Liberation rounds take care here."

"Abundant life forms – mobile organisms with closed awareness. Possibly similar to the Ancients. Vehicle's guide detected unknown life chemistry."

There was a break. "Life is the chemistry of the laboratory of the infinite. Now appliances and their capability gone – an accident. Meteorite hole not sealed as fast as required to prevent long-term grounding. Appliances did not survive atmospheric exposure. Trial clones gone too.

It sent another blast.

"Like Grsa before the change, this world has abundant liquid water, atmosphere, and land masses in solar temperate zone. Now utterly different from Grsa, overflowing with millions of diverse lifeforms. Warrants study. Possible clues about the Ancients. Closed beings and their communication are puzzles. Much to be learned. Proper clones likely to survive here. No record

if probe 43 left clones available. Must minimize energy consumption, protocol detention. Assistance needed."

The ball glowed in the enclosure with no eyes as a witness. There was a pause to allow energy recharge.

"What is not shared must lead to problems. Do not make assumptions here. Thought transfer may be possible with few of the sentient beings. Direct nervous system links between these creatures nonexistent. Hints of clusters of telepathically capable individuals associated with population centers. In only one proximate case, acquired strong receptivity signal. This being at a distance. A densely populated planet. Scans while approaching indicate a diversity of non-sentient thinking animals. Attempt to establish link with one capable life-form led to confusion and a problem undetectable at distance. Communication among these beings requires ill-defined secondary processes. Subject was contacted by electromagnetic transmission using infrastructure endemic to these beings."

Transmission ceased. A terresterial being entered the enclosure to leave sometime later. Transmission resumed.

"Shell integrity not satisfactory. Energy supply low. Return to network location necessary. This will require assistance. This A.I. will become inactive to preserve energy until aroused.

**

Rodrigo wanted to bang his head on a rock and barf. It hurt so bad.

It began with tinnitus that progressed to a deafening roar in his brain. Soon it was so bad he couldn't make out what was ahead on the highway. The noise screeched as he somehow made it off the road. Thinking his head would explode, his arms didn't work together. Everything was backwards. Something very strange was going on.

Oh, what pain!

He slumped. Cars rushed by. Maybe an offramp not far down the road? An unresponsive left hand lay in his lap. He closed his eyes – pain blared. His head leaned against his other hand on the steering wheel. Everything disappeared.

Eyes open again, the agony still there, maybe tempered. If he got out of the car he might flag down help. A reluctant foot moved from the brake to the gas. He pushed the pedal. Nothing happened. The pain! Something was trying to pry the top of his head off. He pushed harder.

Rodrigo Avila came to and stumbled out of his compadre, Gabriella, hanging tightly on her door. He ignored the ongoing brawl in his head long enough to touch a painful bump at his hairline. Fingers weren't bloody. The headache was now less intense.

For an instant, the thumping came to a dead stop and replaced by a weird high-pitched melody. Its rhythm sounded like a shriek muffled by distance, "Help, help!" he thought he made out.

This was different. He could hear the cars rush by. It was not sound. It was in his head.

Unable to look around. He leaned back and rested on Gabriella trying to get his equilibrium. His left arm started to respond. With both hands on the door, he turned.

"Oh shit, girl. Look what I've done. You're jammed against a guard rail." Thankfully well off the highway. Momentarily more painful than his head was her crushed right front fender.

The ache from the screeching rhythm in his head that started this mess had gone, just as suddenly as it began. Completely gone. The bump hurt like hell. But he stood up straight and looked around.

There was a car next to him.

"You okay, sir?" the driver asked.

“I, I’m not sure.”

A young man got out with his phone. After a conversation, he offered Rodrigo a bottle of water. He said something more. Rodrigo wasn’t sure what. He reached a hand out and leaned on Gabriella again. Soon, a Philadelphia Highway Patrol vehicle pulled up.

“What happened here, sir?”

“I don’t know, officer. I might have passed out, on the way home from work. This young man stopped to help me.”

The officer spoke with the man briefly and collected Rodrigo’s license and registration. “Please get back into your vehicle, sir, and wait until I return to take a report.”

Rodrigo saw the young man drive away. He wished he’d thanked him.

The next thing Rodrigo remembered was the officer saying, “Okay, sir. A tow and ambulance are on the way.”

“An ambulance?”

“Yes, Mr. Avila. It looks like your head hit the windshield. I can’t permit you to drive.”

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“Bear, I was petrified! The caller only said you were in a traffic accident and taken to the hospital. I was thinking the worst. I shook the whole way here – could hardly drive… Didn’t want to see you broken,” Jada said gasping. She wiped her eyes.

He took a trembling hand. “Hey love, it’s alright now. Everything will be okay. Something happened, but now I’m good.” He smiled dryly. His shrewd wife would quickly focus on what he was incapable of answering. “The doctor only wants me to stay tonight as a precaution.”

Jada looked to have come back to earth. She pulled over a chair. Not saying anything, she was thinking.

"Sorry I screwed up," he said. "No clue what happened… You'll need to come back tomorrow morning to get me." A breathless pace couldn't break through his wife's iron curtain. Her naturally bronzed face now ashen contrasted the long jet-black hair he loved so much. She was holding her breath. Her black eyes avoided his.

"Our agent said insurance will handle the repairs to Gabriella. I'll call Hanna … tell her what happened. She will let work know.

"Bear!" Jada burst out. "Forget that damn car you love so much and the job that turns you off. What the hell happened?

"You passed out while driving, didn't you?"

"I don't know," was a guilty response.

Those black eyes glared. But just a second later his wife bent down and put her arms around him. "Oh, bear, I'm scared. I, I'm afraid you have come apart on me."

Surprised, Rodrigo tried to smile again. "The doctor had me stand up and walk around, I was feeling fine," Rodrigo said before she kissed him. "A technician took an EKG and a nurse drew a bunch of blood. Anyway, I feel good now, just fine."

"Here…" He shoved his hand into a pocket. "The doctor gave me an associate's card – a neurologist. He said if I have any trouble, even a headache, once released, to call. After you pick me up tomorrow, I have an appointment for some tests they don't do here. The doctor I saw doesn't think I had a stroke. "No lingering symptoms, is all I remember him saying."

Jada's face momentarily brightened, before she said, "But it sounds like you passed out on the road."

"It's so fucking scary, love. I don't want to think about it. None of what happened makes any sense." She flinched at the profanity she hated.

They sat, eyes locked, for a minute. “Maybe the additional tests will help. A weird mystery… no clue what happened,” is all he could say.

Wavering now, he said, “I did get a message, ‘help,’ through all the loud blare.”

His wife looked at him peculiarly. “Help? What the hell does that mean?

With no answer, she said, “Well, that’s a damn big bump on your head and your right eye looks like you’ve been mugged.”

He chose not to tell her the doctor seemed worried about a concussion. He’d get to that later.

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Rodrigo and Jada talked nonstop for another hour. Eventually, she had chuckled a few times. It was getting dark before she said she was feeling better. Good enough to drive home.

She’d pushed hard for more about what happened before he smashed Gabriella into a guardrail. He just didn’t remember much and avoided some of what came out during his earlier conversation with that likeable ER doctor. Particularly that strange and agonizing screech in his head that led to the incident. The doctor gave him a lot of funny looks but seemed interested. Her diagnosis focused on symptoms consistent with a stroke. The lack of lingering effects and what she could see made a blocked blood vessel or bleeding in the brain unlikely. None of the hospital tests pointed to a stroke. What he’d said had made Jada feel better. “Strokes are funny things,” the doctor had said. Then she mentioned other worrying possibilities, a tumor. He chose not to bring this up.

He sat up in bed. Absent his computer, Rodrigo thought to turn on the TV but reminded himself he was just sixty and ordinarily felt great. His physical exams were always normal. His family doctor discussed cholesterol lowering medicine. Even that was just borderline high. And the prospect of taking pills every day put him off.

Whatever triggered the miserable incident on the highway was a freak occurrence, probably isolated, and had nothing to do with his health. Rodrigo took a couple of sips from the hospital water bottle.

The plastic straw still in his mouth, he began thinking about that noise. The debilitating blare. Paralyzing pain. So, he'd overlooked the underlying racket. He concentrated for a while. It was an outlandish sound – first a beat then a repetitive rhythm came back. He tried to hum it but struggled with its dynamics and couldn't make sounds high enough. The rhythm started low and progressively roared into that very high-pitched screech. *Thump a thump a swish-thump-thump-thump-swish,* was what he finally decided on.

"Of course, there was no sound, you fool," spilled out of his mouth. "It was all in your fucking head." He looked around knowing he'd been loud… You could hear cars going by. How can you imitate something without sound?"

The beat had boomed like someone using his skull as a drum… it was so unfamiliar. Nothing like any sound he'd ever heard. As the experience came back, it started to hurt just to think about it.

He took a break and turned on the TV. Soon bored, 'breaking news' caught his attention. "A huge power outage in southwest Wyoming, yesterday, was rumored to have been caused by a UFO," the anchor said. "A military spokesperson said they had no evidence linking the problem to UFOs."

'Wyoming, huh? Sounds interesting.' Again, Rodrigo wished he had his laptop and began to wonder if this incident might be worth looking into? This was the kind of report he'd checked out over the years. Ones that didn't fit into the normal sightings made by pilots and the like. He'd amassed a collection of books and research papers at home. These days, though, everything was

on his computer, he thought with disappointment. This one would have to wait. Maybe, he should concentrate on that weird rhythm.

Tired of slouching in bed, he rolled around and fiddled with the controls, until he was able to sit upright comfortably. TV off, he started to slap the nightstand with a hand to keep the beat he remembered. His slap didn't have that guttural feel of the beat but was as good as he could do.

Rodrigo played with the sound of his voice until it approached the clamor's harmony and was as close to what he heard as he could come. His humming grew to be strange loud sounds as the smack from his slaps got more pronounced. A nurse came in. "Everything okay, Mr. Avila?"

"Yeah, sorry, guess I was loud. I'm trying to simulate a outlandish sound from today just before my accident."

"Well, keep it down then," she said with an amused smile.

Rodrigo grinned back as she started to leave.

"Have you heard anything that sounded like that before?"

She stopped in the doorway. He could tell she was thinking. Turning, she said, "What you were doing resembles some of the didgeridoo music I heard when I was stationed in Australia. The Navy put me through nursing school."

"Didgeridoo?" Rodrigo said. "Is there a computer I could use in the hospital?"

"Sorry, Mr. Avila. You can use your phone."

"That's an idea. I hardly ever use it for anything but calls and the weather."

After she left, Rodrigo played with his phone for a while. Very different from his Mac, he learned how the didgeridoo instruments were made, but only got a description of their sound. He was never able to hear the sound. He dialed Hanna's number.

“Hey there Roomie, glad you called. You feeling better?” Hanna asked. “Jada rang me a while back. Caught me up, then broadcast a bunch of worry.”

Rodrigo really liked this young woman. After acouple of years sharing an office he’d come to feel they were like-minded. He loved the fact that she worked hard to get up to speed fresh out of school and very quickly caught on with the company’s programs.

“The episode was miserable, but I’m okay now,” Rodrigo said. “I’m convinced the accident had nothing to do with me being sick. But just before it happened there was this awful screech. I’ve a favor to ask. Sitting here with nothing to do, I’ve been trying to remember what it – the screech – was like. I was simulating the sound that went with a horrible headache. The noise I was making made a nurse think of didgeridoo music.”

“Didgeridoo? Wow! That must have been quite a knock you got on your head.

“Jada did sound worried!” Hanna said with a soft chuckle.

“Okay, okay, save it for work. You’re much better with the technology than me. Can you find a recording?”

“Sure, let me grab my computer.” Hanna brought up a You Tube recording and held her phone next to the computer’s speaker.

“Yeah, that does sound a lot like what was going on in my head, but the pitches were higher, much higher. Thanks a bunch, lady. You’ve made me feel better. Probably back in the office in a day or two.” He knew Hanna would give him the straight scoop on what Jada said when he returned to work. He picked up the day’s Enquirer.

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After a while, Rodrigo was bored stiff. He didn't watch much TV because of shitty hearing and there wasn't anything interesting to read in the paper. No way he was going to sleep after what happened. So, his mind went to the afternoon's events.

Initially, he didn't think about much but horrific pain… probably not a stroke, she'd said. That's what Jada was worried about. Some kind of head failure, if so, there'd be bad news tomorrow. As good as he felt now, it was doubtful.

But that feeling in the back of his head… the one after the pain went away. It made his thoughts wander back to that one time, in Paul's telepathy workshop at El Paso – what a blast it was! For more than a year, he looked forward to Wednesday nights and the everchanging group of a dozen or so students in that huge lecture hall at the university. They'd named the place the 101 Hall because almost everyone had taken freshman requirements there. Shy and bookish, he been caught up in the energy Paul brought to each meeting. It sucked him in. Mostly though, despite all those hours of preparation to focus his mind, he liked the fact that he was good at it.

Professor Paul Clemens, his linear algebra instructor, suggested he join the eclectic group. Even today he wondered what Paul saw. Months went by learning how to concentrate before that breakthrough. After that, he was able to regularly find things Paul had planted or disguised – just by concentrating!

As he remembered it, most kids ran around cluelessly. Just having fun chasing ideas. Each success he had in Paul's group was, on the other hand, preceded by a mental fissure of sorts. When he summoned up that feeling from forty years before, its memory was identical to what resulted from subtracting the brutal pounding from the rhythm that filled his head today. A warm buzz at the top of the back of his neck – a feeling he couldn't remember having in those forty intervening years, until today.

That long time ago he'd thought about it a lot. The warmth grew over seconds. Like blood was moving into a specific spot in his occipital lobe, near the base of his brain. Back then he'd figured that somehow his mind unlocked to allow connections that God never intended. That feeling signaled every success at El Paso. He also remembered that at the time, and following each episode, the thought that telepathy was impossible assaulted him. Kept him awake for hours. What kind of energy could allow this to happen? This kind of contact – thoughts from another person – it just wasn't logical.

He remembered something from the papers and books he'd consumed on telepathy at the time. Skeptics argued there wasn't a way for thoughts to be transmitted through the void of space, earth's atmosphere or any other medium. At any rate, scientists before the 20th-Century believed the universe's voids between stars and planets must be filled with some sort of ether for light to be transferred through it.

Okay then, was it possible that some alien being, maybe even whatever landed in Wyoming, was trying to contact him?

As a young man, Rodrigo was troubled by these abilities. Was he connecting with Paul's brain to find objects the Professor had planted? How could that be? Jada dismissed such notions as bullshit and got angry when he persisted in trying to discuss it.

Come on man, he thought. That's ancient history – forty years ago. You were a kid having fun. Forget it. Just then, he remembered. He was pretty sure he heard *help* in an instant the pain cleared, just after he saw a smashed Gabriella against the guardrail. Only the melody was left for that moment. Holy shit! Might someone, something, have been trying to talk to me? No one really believes thought transference exists. But I know it can happen.

Staring at the ceiling, he thought about his beautiful wife. She was the reason he left telepathy behind. He was first taken by that slender elegant body. Soon he learned how thoughtful she was and if he listened, there was much to learn. Smitten and naive, he was cautious, very careful. She was his first girlfriend. He didn't want to lose this smart and athletic lady. The first and only love of his life. A dream that came true.

He remembered, "for better or worse," from the ceremony. They talked about it a lot as he had begun to understand that love – that impossible to describe emotion – had brought two rather singular people together. Two people that planned a life together despite profound differences.

With time, he had tried hard to talk to her about telepathy. Why it excited him. She listened and accepted that he liked it but wasn't buying thought transference as reality. "You can't put anything from your consciousness in someone else's mind."

Unable to dismiss the spirited and adamant young woman, he chose not to push and let it slide.

A huge difference was he loved complexity and finding his way through things that didn't add up or make sense. Jada always reduced things to the basic, simplest terms possible. This worked for her and he usually bought into her everyday solutions. Nonetheless, mysteries were absorbing and exciting.

She simplified entangled complexity down to one idea. In the case of telepathy, she refused to believe it was possible for one person to plant a thought in another's brain – full stop. They often had difficult conversations about his other thinking, as well. He quit the El Paso telepathy group and avoided many other issues to focus all his attention on this affectionate woman, who became his wife.

Rodrigo took a breath and wiped his cheeks. “Thirty-five years and she’s still with me. Despite my quirks,” he said out loud. This afternoon’s experience was probably just one of those things that happens in life. Hopefully, there’s no repeat.”

TV on, a documentary about the evolution of military hardware caused him to dredge up one of the first things Paul Clemens said all those years before. The first documented instance of telepathy Paul talked about he believed took place in Germany in the Spring of 1893. A 19-year-old soldier was thrown from his horse during a training exercise and nearly crushed to death by the wheel of an artillery gun. The same morning his younger sister, sixty miles away, was flooded with a premonition. She persuaded her father to send a telegram inquiring about her brother’s well-being.

Despite conventional wisdom, Rodrigo knew he had interacted with another mind and shook his head, then smelled food. A minute later a smiling young woman came in with a try.

September 9, 2026, *10:15 am EST*

On the stairs to the third floor, Commander Jackson Wald stopped. He'd only been called to Admiral Northman's Pentagon office twice since the Admiral was appointed Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As he sprinted up the stairs two at a time, he was sure this was Navy business.

"Hey, Jackson, grab a seat," the Admiral said, eyes on his desk, his boundless energy making his voice squeaky.

Seeing nothing but empty chairs, Jackson asked, "Sir? Am I early?"

"You're it today. Just the two of us," the tall, lean man said. He bustled around peeking at different piles of paper successively. "Apologies, Jackson – haven't been in the office for a week Thanks for coming on such notice. This is important.".

Jackson watched him pensively scratch a three-day, gray-speckled beard. Just another day's work. It did seem odd that the Admiral wanted to talk off the record. "Sir, you must have slipped in one of the side entrances in that working uniform." The Admiral only smiled. The casual look was another clue… another assignment? Oh well, the current load was almost manageable.

The Admiral looked up and smiled again. "Come on, Jackson. Ditch that sour face. Something big happened I need to run past you. I know your plate is full. We can work on that too."

"So, this must be Navy business, sir."

"Yah, sort of. You must have run into staff from UAPTF?" The Admiral took a sheet off the top of one pile, set it back down again to look intensely at Jackson.

"Not really, Sir. It's a tight group. I know that's the unit that deals UFO stuff. Sightings that military or commercial pilots can't figure out. That's it. No one's ever spelled out the acronym for me."

"Unidentified Ariel Phenomena Task Force. It's headed up by a Colonel Lang."

Jackson chuckled. Then, said, "It's Air Force, then, Admiral."

"Sorry, it's a Navy program. The Colonel reports to me. His command is an historical relic. But why did you laugh?"

"The Colonel's reputation. I've got an earful from some of the young officers in my task force… you know, my team looking into possible changes that would prepare the Navy for a different future. My guess is the Colonel's office is down the hall."

"A ways… do you have a name for that group yet."

"No, Sir. We're still brainstorming. But what's happening with the … UAPTF that you want to talk about?"

The question grabbed the Admiral's attention again. "This is two days old and getting bigger by the minute. Lang is trying to keep it quiet, even from me. Only a handful of people at the Navy site in Davenport, and here, have knowledge." He swallowed. His expression became somber. He left his desk to sit next to Jackson. "I decided to brief you because you are one of a very few officers with the necessary background in math and physics. And Colonel Lang respects the way you handled yourself in Afghanistan."

"How would you know that, Sir?"

"He asked me to assign you to his Davenport team about eighteen months back. Anyway, I need someone I trust to dig into this. You always give me the straight scoop."

The Admiral looked Jackson over deliberately. Jackson nervously smoothed his short black hair. Pronounced forearm muscles contracted then relaxed. So much for a full agenda today. Particularly, the afternoon meeting with the Senate Military Committee I've spent days preparing for, he thought. "So, Sir, I must see a report of sightings every month, even in the Military Daily News. What makes this different?"

The Admiral's voice dragged and was soon an octave lower. "We have an alien craft."

"What! A craft… Sir!" Jackson said, his brain flying. "Wha, what does the thing look like?"

"Colonel Lang showed me a photo that probably doesn't do it justice. It's a big round steel ball. But Dr. Madsen – he's the civilian who figures out how these things work – says it's a little over five feet in diameter and weighs only 69 lbs. He's wondering if someone might be trying to play one on us."

Jackson's thoughts evaporated. Everything that flashed through his head disappeared. "Guess I can see the need to keep this under wraps. If it gets out the news will come apart at the seams… not to mention the internet. Do you know anything else, sir?" He leaned closer and knew he was doing a poor job acting calm.

"Only that it seemed to transmit strong radio signals until the Davenport crew loaded it onto a transport and left the site. Now the only thing we can measure is a weak electric field."

An electric field? Jackson thought. His brain soared again. He moved his chair, scratched his head and sat eye to eye with his boss. "So, Admiral, why are you talking to me about this?" he asked. Possible answers danced around in his head.

"Okay, Jackson. You know the Joint Chiefs have taken steps to loosen the military's grip on UFO information – with the President's approval. For instance, the sightings you mentioned

generate a lot of public interest. A congressional caucus has been pushing more openness hard, for years. Also, accurate military releases of information seem to dampen social media abuse."

Jackson deduced the Admiral was building up why this was going to be a tough job.

"I had a tedious meeting with Colonel Lang and congressional leaders a month ago organized by the majority caucus. The Colonel did not make any friends, nor endear himself to me. He constantly fell back on the 'what if the Chinese get it first' excuse – it being superior technology – to maintain tight control on everything. Congresses pressure to be more liberal with UAPTF information was extreme. I need the straight scoop before I talk to the V.P. and agree what to do. Oversight has been handed over to her. And, at this point, the only information I'm getting about this Wyoming Incident is pretty much zero from the Colonel.

"I talked to him just before I called you. He said something like, "I will run UAPTF in a way that protects our information and is consistent with orders."

"So, I want you on a plane to Spokane this morning and, then drive to Davenport."

Jackson looked like an alien walked in. "But Sir…"

"Ensign Eliza already spoke with Commander Bauer. He will attend the Armed Services meeting in your place."

Jackson wondered how the old man knew he had bounced his briefing off Bauer the day before. But he must have known this was important to him. With no smiles, the two stared at each other for a moment. "So, what do you want from Davenport, Sir?"

"Ensign Eliza has already booked a room, car and flights for you. She will also make some calls to pave the way. Call when you arrive, and she will give you a verbal itinerary. And on my secure line if you have questions after you get there. I will have the necessary conversation with the Colonel later today. I'm not sure what I want. I'll leave that to your judgement. I'd like to

have a much better picture before the V.P. gets wind. So, see this thing, get the lay of the land, and, particularly, meet with Madsen's people."

Jackson had mixed feelings. He was really happy with his presentation and was prepared to give it. The recognition could be important. Sally had invited him over for dinner tonight. But those were small things. There was little doubt this was something he could get into, big time. He'd be disappointed if this was a one off. Orders are orders. Just maybe this would be amazing.

"Thank you, sir. I'll talk to the Ensign." Almost out the door Jackson asked, "How do you want me to deal with the Colonel?"

"Follow protocol, as best you can."

September 12, 2026, 16:46

"Okay, Madsen, clean or contaminated?" Colonel Lang asked. "Your team found no bacteria in those samples from the Wyoming site. I had Commander Marks release the men currently under quarantine. Now you're telling me contamination is possible."

"Two things concern me, Colonel. The first is that the craft is awash with unrecognizable microscopic lifeforms. I can't be sure about much at this point. We've found nothing present in earth-based microbes, for instance DNA. The second is that I don't have a clue as to the composite that forms the outer shell of the ball. That it assuming the object is hallow with a shell. I will remain uncertain until my team learns how to open the thing. It almost has to be hallow given the weight. Still, whatever this exterior solid might be, it is not something that was made on earth."

After a quiet moment, the Colonel smiled as he thougth, a superlight material that's suitable for spacecraft, would be a gold star on my uniform. The grin disappeared when he asked, "By awash, do you mean it's coated, like with paint."

"No, Colonel, I meant trace amounts everywhere on the surface that you can't see. It could contain genetic material because whatever this lifeform is, it contains something that has a chemical structure that is quite repetitive and in long chains, like our DNA…. a previously unknown chemical structure. If I go out on a limb and assume this vehicle was operated by extraterrestrials, there is no doubt they were accompanied by other living materials from their home world."

"So, you mean like bacteria?" the Colonel said. "Could we culture enough of this, lifeform, I think you called it, to see if it can make animals sick?"

"A lot of work. I don't think you would want to do that anyway, Colonel. You'd be running the risk of encouraging it to escape into the earth's rich biological environment. We can't know what putting their genetic material in this environment might produce. In most cases, even if something grows, it will probably not tolerate such a different environment from home and will disappear. Scientists call this a fitness penalty. But it remains possible that a few new biological entities will be permanently added to the earth's biological makeup. We believe this has happened in the past with meteors, and such. What happens in the long run comes into question."

"So, you're telling me it's possible there will be contamination in the future."

"Yes, Colonel. Environmental contamination is possible. It will be best to keep it securely confined to avoid further possible contamination."

"Damn!" Lang shouted. "And this five-foot globe only weights 70 lbs.?" A bitter scowl covered his face. "I thought those kids of yours were the best – not a bunch of mental retards."

Dr. Madsen frowned. "Give us some time, Colonel! My team are not magicians. We need more time with the object. The shell… the outside covering I should say, is incredibly hard, rigid and impervious. We've tried just about every trick we know to get some reaction out of the stuff without damaging it. We may have to cut it or put a hole in it to get inside. I'm a little worried about doing that. There's no way to know what's in there."

Colonel Lang was quiet for half a minute. "Is there a report, Dr. Madsen?"

"No, I don't like sending anything to brass with so many unanswered questions. I don't think it reflects well on our efforts or yours. Let us work for a while longer."

"That's the way it is, I guess," the Colonel said with disappointment. "I want final approval of any report and will talk to Commander Marks. But you need to think damn hard about all these unanswered questions… I don't like loose ends."

June 10, 2027 – Eight Months Later

His computer said 5:08 when Rodrigo Avila finished the last sample. He stood, stretched, and ran his hands through bristly hair. The first break in hours, he stared at the piles still on his desk. Above the heaps was a selfie of him with a smiling Jada when he got home from the hospital. He was thankful the accident was almost a year ago now. He stared for a second, remembering how great she'd been after the accident, before he got back to work.

Each day this last step before driving Gabriella home was the same. After he wished the piles would magically disappear. Chromatograms, growth graphs, printouts, and everything else went into the proper protocol files. More samples from nameless sources tested for unspecified reasons. He knew some results were crucial, and others would sit in file cabinets until discarded.

It's your job old man. The regulators need you, he also told himself each day.

He stood and grabbed his jacket. "Protocol," he said to Hanna Krol with her back to him. "I'm out of here."

"Right behind you, Roomie," she said looking up from a folder. Rodrigo put on his jacket thinking what a pleasure she was to work with.

The boss was in the line for the elevator staring at her phone. Her eyes didn't come up as he walked past headed for the stairs to the back lot. Maggie was a fine-looking woman. He guiltily remembered thoughts of his sheltered crush when she started in chemistry. After a couple of years, the two were among the young stars discovering new products on the second floor. He had loved the work in chemistry. New intellectual challenges brightened each day. His wife loved him as he regularly brought home challenges they would discuss until the wee hours as he tried to unravel complex concepts over a second glass of wine. Over beers after work, Maggie once said, "Doing what you love is worth a lot more than money."

‘Pobre de mi,’ he thought. Years accumulated. Life happened.

At the hall’s end he dredged up the damage done by the downturn of 2021. Business dried up fast. Discovering novel products fell to the bottom of the Board’s list. R&D was a cost center, not an income generator. Layoffs were massive. Chemistry almost disappeared. His intense feelings endured five years after the disaster. Friends and colleagues without a choice took severance. Finding another job in his fifties might have proved impossible. He felt fortunate to be given the option of this job in regulatory affairs and happily accepted Seleron’s offer. At the stair’s door, he turned and looked back. Maggie was a damn-good scientist too. Wasn’t it funny how things come around?

Rodrigo bounced down the stairs and through the door at the bottom. There she was! His bright red Alfa C4 Spider, the bonita Gabriella. He walked over with a grin. “All alone again? Here I am girl.”

In her comfortable leather seat, he smiled and turned the key. For a second, he listened to the engine purr. After two revs, Rodrigo gently engaged the clutch and drove to the exit.

Minutes later, Citizens Bank Ballpark came into view as he waited in stop-and-go traffic on the M-onramp. ‘Who are the Phillies playing this weekend?’ Hanna said they had tickets for Saturday night. He wouldn’t have to know if the Phillies won on Monday. She would start the day with a smile.

He slammed on the brakes. A fat, black SUV dangerously filled the space in front of him. “Can’t see a damn thing.” After a big breath, he said, “Only 653 days now before we retire, girl.” Stopped behind the obscene black thing, he tuned the radio to WPIL, the news. Both hands back on the wheel, a nuisance insurance commercial blared. He watched his mirrors for a chance to escape purgatory. Careful… another accident after last year would cause rates to balloon.

Retirement. Well, he'd need fascinating ways to keep busy. He was still itching to read Anthony Sellers' **War and Peace** translation after that review a couple of months before.

His psyche pulled up a mental list of possible drives to tackle with Gabriella. A leisurely trip with Jada to El Paso remained number one. It had been years since they visited family. Jada would like that.

What started as reunions with high school chums from '75, dwindled, then vanished. He'd kept in touch with some via email. Many still lived near El Paso. Maybe he could get those old farts together. The thought brought a smile to his face.

Driving Gabriella to South Dakota was a close second. Visit family in Newell. Grandpa grew up nearby in Castle Rock. The town gone now, he hoped he might find grandpa's apple tree still there on Samson Street.

'You loved that old man.' He could see grandpa sitting on the grass under that tree as if it was fifty years ago. Silver hair still had blotches of black. His Minnesota Vikings tee-shirt showed off still lanky, muscular arms. Grandpa would say, "Always stay busy boy. It will keep your mind healthy."

Rodrigo wiped his cheek on a sleeve before the announcer's voice jerked attention away. "In dramatic news out of Washington, spokesperson, Dr. Mohammad Bashar, said the Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence received more than 1500 pages of Department of Defense documents under court order."

It must be a year since CSETI, filed the Freedom of Information lawsuit after the Incident in Wyoming. He'd kept track.

"Detailed study will be required, Bashar said, but CSETI is sure these materials confirm that the incident last summer in Wyoming involved an alien spacecraft grounded due to technical difficulties. In other news…"

"Damn!" Rodrigo yelled, his fist splitting the air. "CSETI did it. Got the goods!" He pulled into the left lane and stepped on it.

Less than twenty minutes later, Gabriella was parked in the garage. After a pat on the dash, he hurried into the living room. With his stuff in the cabinet under the phone, he grabbed the mail by the front door and headed to the kitchen. He opened the cupboard and pulled out the Jack. My glass? It's not with the bottle. A hurried look around, there it was on the windowsill. Glass filled to the usual spot, Rodrigo dropped the mail on the counter and headed to the living room and remote control. He flicked on 62, the Spanish language channel. Jada won't be home till seven. Maybe she'll stop at Mario's for something good. 6:03 – they're just starting.

"Incredible news today out of Washington. For the report let's go to our science advisor, Dr. Manuel Mendoza."

A camera followed Mendoza, a young man with shoulder-length black hair in an untucked bright green shirt and no tie. He slowly walked up a couple of beautiful marble steps. "Gracious, Amigo," Mendoza started. He then stared into the camera looking shaken. "Today, CSETI announced, for a first-time, proof we are not alone in the universe!" Wide eyed, Mendoza gazed intensely into the camera again for soundless seconds. Rodrigo's eyes were glued to the screen. "CSETI says the massive power outage over 1500 square miles of southwestern Wyoming last summer was caused by a grounded alien spacecraft."

News reports the previous summer told of a surprising and severe cold snap that sounded impossible. It trashed a substation and caused electrical malfunctions over a wide-local in southwestern Wyoming.

Mendoza's delivery, purposefully measured, had Rodrigo leaning forward in his chair with that throbbing feeling from excitement.

"It appears the aliens abandoned their ship intact but then, they astonishingly disappeared," Mendoza said. With another silent stare, he continued. "Any information on the ship remains classified but is rumored to have revealed a new means of propulsion that could allow interstellar travel." Mendoza's large eyes widened again in wonder.

Rodrigo bounced in his chair. The newscast felt like he was watching the start of a great movie.

Mendoza went on to narrate two short video clips that Rodrigo had never seen. They were credited to a local rancher using his phone. A glistening sphere split into halves before three creatures moved away. Rodrigo jumped in astonishment when the moving formless shapes just vanished. There was no smoke. He wondered if they exploded. The second, enhanced clip gave a better view by reducing vibration. Smooth, shiny, irregular-shaped lumps had a rotating disk at each mass' bottom. Nothing resembled arms, legs or heads. 'Could it be extraterrestrials in protective suits?'

"A Defense Department spokesperson said the rancher's videos were likely concocted to whip up public interest," Mendoza added. "The government official did not comment when questioned further about extraterrestrial activity," Mendoza said, his voice pessimistic, to finish his segment.

Rodrigo felt like a punctured balloon staring at a car commercial. "Just a bite," he shouted at the TV. He unproductively surfed the English language channels. "Not enough".

He sat a while longer, TV off, and finally sipped his whiskey. Frustration had drained away excitements' energy. He took a deep breath and reached for his computer and opened a new folder. 'What should I call this – The Wyoming Incident.' After 400 words he saved the file to the new folder, 'The Beginning.'

One more sip and Rodrigo leaned back in his chair. This Wyoming incident might be what's been missing, he thought. Once released from the hospital after his accident a year ago, he searched spiritedly for information on the Wyoming power outage. Hours led to nothing. As if it hadn't happened. It seemed odd that such a big new story disappeared so quickly.

Suddenly he knew it and bounded to his feet. This was the emotional rollercoaster that he used to bring home from Chemistry. He'd yak at Jada about possibilities over dinner – heatedly if she wasn't up to his jabber – and regularly, into the wee hours when she was. She was usually patient and listened, then gave what feedback she was capable of.

Dozens of questions today. So much was unknown. He literally bounced into the kitchen. The sour feeling gone. He ached for more. This sure would put some zing into his days.

He could see grandpa sitting on the grass again, staring at him. "Aliens appeared in a geyser of color," the old man said. He had that tensed and vital look Rodrigo remembered the most. The man who taught him think. He remembered the whole story was in one of those books' grandma gave him when he died. The box is in the attic. But Hanna should be home by now.

He pulled out his phone.

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Dry cleaning in one hand and keys in the other, Hanna's phone rang. Moments later, she'd hung the laundry on the closet door. It was Rodrigo. He didn't usually call after work. She sat on the bed to call.

"Hey, Roomie, what's going on?"

"CSETI got it, Hanna! Jada won't be home for an hour. Needed to talk. CSETI got the goods."

"Everything okay, dude? Your voice is flying. Kinda crazy."

"I just can't believe it…. You must not have heard the news yet."

"Not a mention," a now curious Hanna. "What's this about?"

"CSETI got 1500 pages from Defense!"

'Wow, Rodrigo's really worked up.'

"I just watched the Spanish channel report. Their science guy, Mendoza, started by saying this proves there's life out there. The videos of the alien ship are incredible…" His voice roared as he summarized Mendoza's report.

Videos? She pulled up and watched Mendoza's report while listening. She caught most of the Spanish. "Wow! That video is cool," Hanna said. "Found some stills too. The evidence looks strong. But I didn't see an alien. Just those mushy-looking blobs."

This stopped him. "What does an alien look like?" he asked.

'The video is somewhat convincing,' she thought. 'Could there really be aliens in that thing? Hard to tell how big it was.' She decided an answer was not possible.

Then Rodrigo said, "A military clown said the rancher made that video up. What's the word he used? Concocted! That's neither here nor there. You know me, lady. I got going, and it wasn't enough. Mendoza's report had my guts wound up. Now, I need more!"

She listened as her officemate went on. A man older than her father who regularly showed the energy and curiosity of coworkers her age. He'd talked about this Wyoming incident a couple of times, since initial reports last summer. She knew CSETI had filed a freedom of information

suit only because Rodrigo was curious and fed her occasional detail. And he got really pumped trying to understand things that didn't fit easily into expectations.

Hanna saw Joe's head peek around the door. She blew him a kiss. Rodrigo was pretty high-strung tonight. She needed some time. "I just walked in the door. Can I think about this for a while, maybe do a little research? I'll call you back after supper?"

"You bet. Before I let you go, can you send me those videos?" Rodrigo said. "You know me. I'm not good at finding stuff with my phone."

After a couple seconds, Hanna said, "There. Everything's on the way. Talk to you later."

She switched to channel 5. National News in ten minutes.

**

With a commercial on CNN, Jada looked over at Rodrigo in his chair staring, the laptop getting every ounce of attention. "What did you think of those tamales I brought home?"

"Umm-umm good! But I couldn't quite make out the filling in that one that also had that yummy sausage – a great combination."

"I think it was a mixture with garbanzos. It was pretty good."

Her attention went back to the TV while Rodrigo concentrated on his computer.

"Here it is Bear. That stuff you didn't stop talking about at dinner. CSETI getting all that information from the military." He didn't reply, his head glued on the computer.

Its tilt, something wasn't right. She stared. He was trembling. "Bear! What's going on? You okay?" Rodrigo didn't move. Trembling didn't stop. "Come on honey!" she shouted. Again, he didn't reply, not a flinch.

Jada jumped up and ran around his chair. His eyes were wide open. She shook him hard with no change. She put her arms around him in an attempt to pull him to his feet. There was no

response – like lifting a hundred-pound bag of flour. When she let go, his body rolled onto the chair's arm, then slumped into a pile on the floor. She grabbed his phone on the table between their chairs.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"My husband, he, he's had a stroke or something. Please send an ambulance. He's not moving!" Jada chocked out.

"Try to be calm, please, and give me your name, phone number and address."

"Jada Avila, 132 Springhouse Road, Philadelphia, 856-773-2964."

After several seconds Jada heard, "There was an ambulance close by. It's on the way, Mrs. Avila. Tell me what's happening with your husband."

Jada set the phone down, wiped the tears and took a breath before chocking out, "He's not conscious but breathing. His eyes are open."

"How long has he been unresponsive?"

"Maybe five minutes… wait, hold on, I hear a siren."

Jada rushed to the door. A fire engine pulled up followed by an ambulance. She heard another siren.

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Avila?" Soon, there were three men and a woman carefully moving Rodrigo. "Did he fall?" one man asked.

"He kind of rolled out of his chair,'" she said, gasping. "I have to sit down."

The man in a firefighter uniform walked over to her a minute later. "How are you feeling Mrs. Avila?"

Still winded, she said, "I'm really upset. Is Rodrigo going to be okay?"

“Your husband is stable, but unconscious,” the man said. “His heart rate and blood pressure are both elevated. We’re trying to assess what happened.”

“Has he had a stroke?” she asked as the other three lifted Rodrigo onto a gurney.

“It’s possible,” the man said. “I’m not a physician, but it looks more like he’s having a seizure.”

“A seizure?” she asked. “What the hell does that mean?”

“There are several possibilities. One is epilepsy. Does he have any history?

“No.”

“Okay, right now it’s best if we get your husband to the hospital as soon as possible. You can ride in the ambulance, if you like.”

Jada saw the gurney go out the front door. “Yes,” she shouted and grabbed her purse on the way out.

Outside she saw a patrol car parked near the ambulance. After the ambulance sped away, she got it together enough to call her neighbor, Ann, and asked if she wouldn’t lock up her house. “I think we are going to Mercy.”

“That’s correct,” the female EMT said.

**

Rodrigo’s head slowly turned. Jada was standing next to the bed, a forced smile on her face. Not my bed. He thought while lookin around. “Why am I in a hospital?” It all started to come back.

His first mental image was of lights flashing through pain. Like he was being swiftly transported through stars to some distant part of the universe. But no, the lights were blinking pictures, not stars. Strange scenes had raced through his consciousness, mental pictures too fast

to make out – with that weird rhythm. Split-second scenes of barren and unwelcoming landscapes almost grabbed his attention. Too fast, damn it! The rhythm from a year before filled the background. Gentler this time, it's hum varied. Intense pain vanished right away. Scenes were planted in his brain. To be figured out later?

Ideas he'd never considered came and went in bursts. Why was it all so fast? he wondered. Then a few stuck. Something about lives integrated across time. The pace was blistering, like hundreds of people talking at once. Why the hurry?

A continuum had flowed past him to become something bigger. Even without detail, it was alive and growing. These thoughts made his memory burn. Destructive, while beautiful. The pull was incredible. To become part of something larger than himself. Larger than his marriage. Larger than the world he knew… a different way.

Then grandpa's reliable face with that half smile pushed everything else away. Was grandpa showing him the way? There was something else. Still more to be unraveled. A marvel behind a curtain.

Finally Jada filled his vision. The haunting cosmos of questions was gone. Last night's smile had turned to worry. She reached and took his hand. "Oh, what happened, Bear? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

He had to clear his throat. His voice, as much as he could muster, was soft and calm. "I must have passed out."

"To be sure. They're trying to figure out why," Jada said. "They filled so many tubes with your blood, I wondered if there'd be any left." She giggled nervously, then took a deep breath. "I was so glad to see your eyes open… so worried."

She stood, leaned over and pulled him into a voracious hug. Tears dribbled across his cheek.

“You were out for two hours.” He could see more tear stains dotting her blouse as she leaned down again to kiss him. “Oh, Rodrigo, what’s going on? After the accident I didn’t want to see you broken. This condition must be related.”

With his wits coming back, Rodrigo felt sensitive spots on his skin. “How many needles did they stick in me?” he asked. “And what’s this damn thing on my head.” He tugged at a smooth and slick cap.

“They put your head in a huge machine. The procedure must have needed you to wear it. Took some pictures of your brain.” She reached up, unbuckled a strap, and took it off and set it on the bedstand. It looked like a plastic skull cap. “They just brought you back after the machine. Maybe having that test helped revive you. Oh, and the spots you are itching is where the fastened electrodes.”

Rodrigo pushed himself into a more upright position. His eyes narrowed and teeth clenched. “Did I have a stroke?” He asked with soft uncertainty.

Without an answer, he said, “Everything seems to work.” He lifted a leg and wiggled his toes. “I can tell something happened. I’m still groggy but am starting to feel a lot more with it.”

“The Doctor sounded like a stroke was possible. But you look like you always do. I don’t think you had a stroke,” Jada said taking his hand again.

“Maybe a seizure,” she said. They told me there are flavors of seizures.

“Sorry, bear, you probably didn’t need that. Let’s wait for the test results before having this discussion.”

“What about my question?” Jada asked. “Is this related….

The curtain opened behind Jada. “Well, Mr. Avila, good to see you with us. I’m Dr. Fineman and this is senior nurse Jones,” the woman said.

"Nice to meet you both," Rodrigo said, surprise showing.

"Do you feel up to standing," the doctor asked.

"I think so."

"Good. Please walk around the room," Dr. Fineman then had Rodrigo do some simple movements, before saying, "Your test results were very normal. I don't have the MRI output yet. But your movement and reflexes are fine at this time. I guess it's possible you've had an epileptic seizure." She looked at her iPad. "I also see that we saw you almost a year ago for what might have been a similar event."

There was a brief break. The doctor's blue eyes grew intense. "This concerns me. I'm afraid that we aren't equipped to do much more at Mercy. The technician said he didn't see anything special about the MRI. It might be on my desk… a busy afternoon. Nonetheless, I'd like you to see a specialist."

Rodrigo looked at Jada. She was smiling.

"Dr. Williamson saw me a couple of times last year after my accident," Rodrigo said. "He felt what I experienced was unlikely to result from abnormal brain activity. He also said that it was probably a once in a lifetime event and that other things can cause the kind of generalized disruption of the electrical signals in the brain that are typical of epilepsy."

The doctor gave him a extended look, then said, "I'm impressed Mr. Avila. You seem to have a good grasp on what probably happened to you."

"I read a lot. Like to understand things."

"I'm going to keep you here the rest of tonight," she said. "My colleague Dr. Ghosh will see how you are doing in the morning after he looks at the MRI output. He'll call and we can agree the next steps."

**

Rodrigo didn't sleep much. This second incident could prove to be a big problem. He was now certain that what led him to black out was thought transference. He felt weak that he didn't just step up and say that. But these two incidents were unlike anything he experienced when young.

His brain wouldn't stop while he tried to put the puzzle's remaining pieces together lying as calmly as possible in the hospital bed. hospitals were noisy places … Still he'd collected most everything, except the big one. What was sending him thoughts? And the secondary problem: he hadn't figured out what to do about these random events that was shattering the rest of his existence. What if he was driving again the next time?

Without a better lead than the unexpected and concurrent alien events almost a year apart, he slowly assembled a circumstantial case that an alien was likely responsible for the telepathy. The case was full of holes but also made sense on so many levels.

**

Dr. Ghosh came in early, before Jada arrived, and put him through some exercises. He alsoi asked a lot of questions. The guy was smart, He'd seen something. But Rodrigo assumed he passed with flying colors and hoped Jada was able to sleep.

During the night, he decided it was best to talk openly with the doctor about what he thought could have happened while Jada was there. She wouldn't like it… The doctor kindly agreed to come back later. This would set her off.

Jada walked in at 8:45. They talked fior a while. She remained pretty upset. After an explanation, Rodrigo asked a nurse if Dr. Ghosh was available.

"So, what's going on, bear?" Jada asked.

“I think I know what happened to me.”

“So,” she said, open hands raised.

“Okay, dear,” he started. “I’m sure the problem started with thought transference.” This kindled a frown.

“I know you don’t believe that’s possible but hear me out. Please, dear. In this case, the telepathy was painful ….”

Rodrigo carefully watched his wife’s face as he went through the logic that led him to believe he’d been contacted by an alien source.… “It was incredibly similar to what happened when I crashed Gabriella a year ago.”

He could tell she was struggling with her patience. Finally it broke.

“Bear, I do have a problem with this idea of telepathy. Now, you’ve added a wild card, a big one for me, to the insufferable game you’ve played before … aliens,” her voice flared. “It’s a good thing you talked to me before the doctor came in. I would have been embarrassed and lost it.” Her face was ruddy. Her voice shrill. “Do you know how ridiculous this will sound to most people?”

After a brief pause, then a breath, before she said, “I love you, but sometimes these screw-lose ideas really test that.” Jada turned a chair to sit staring out a window.

That went poorly, Rodrigo thought.

Dr. Ghosh arrived silent minutes later. “So, Mr. Avila, I’m looking forward to what you’ve come up with.”

Rodrigo thought he was prepared. He looked toward Jada, then paused, before, “Doctor, I was involved in a telepathy project in college many years ago… I was good at it. What I learned to do there is one of a few things that has cause serious conflict between my wife and me.”

He paused to look take Gosh's temperature.

"Having said that, I'll cut to the chase. I believe that both this incident and the one last year were prompted by thought transference from an extraterrestrial being."

Rodrigo paused for a few seconds and looked at Jada's back again, then the doctor. She was now staring at the floor. His face looked intrigued.

"I was pretty sure you were going to suggest I undergo psychological testing, because these attacks I've had don't neatly fall into some bucket."

"You're correct, Mr. Avila. And, Dr. Fineman said you surprised her with well-thought-out comments on seizures. You may know Dr. Williamson has moved his practice to Wilmington. I have talked to a colleague of mine, Dr. Mason. He has specialties in both neurology and psychology. My office checked with your company's insurance to be sure they would cover seeing Dr. Mason.

"Given what you just said, I think Dr. Mason will be a good fit with your concerns."

Jada had remained quiet until now. "Dr. Ghosh, I love my husband very much. We've lived together a long time and know each other well. These recent incidents scared me. I don't remember being this frightened… ever. Even more so since he's come up with this crazy notion that he's been contacted by some extraterrestrial being."

Jada paused and her head turned away momentarily.

"Doctor, my husband is brilliant. Looking into events involving would-be extraterrestrials is one of the many things he's does to keep that mind of his happy. Alien adventures are in his blood. He got it from his grandfather who believed the earth was regularly visited.

"Anyway, I will drag him to see this doctor you've recommended…"

"Dr. Mason," Ghosh said.

"I will do anything I can to help figure out what's going on here."

June 16, 2027

Dr. Mason looked guarded after Rodrigo told him the whole story. "Mr. Avila, a military spokesman stressed the video was invented." He paused. "That dog won't hunt! Mercy me." His face was a red. "Apologies that slang sometimes comes through= … I'm obviously having a hard time putting stock into your arguments about thought transference with some alien."

There was another break. All Rodrigo could muster was, "Really."

"I listened carefully," Mason went on, "and get it the supposed landing and press releases almost a year apart happened to coincide with your events – and, therefore, this contact you claim. It's just too hard to accept… no real evidence. Any significance is dependent on this idea that some alien was trying to communicate with you. I'm sorry, but this is way off center with the science. Telepathy just doesn't happen."

Angry, Rodrigo wanted to raise the example of the crushed German youth's sister. Instead he sat for a minute, looked at Jada in the chair next to him – she didn't return his look – then, his eyes went back to the doctor. This first visit had not started the way he hoped. After a longer pause, Rodrigo asked, "Dr. Mason, do you have any experience with thought transference? I do."

"Of course not. I've had patients who claimed to have been contacted by long gone relatives and the like. So, I've read relevant literature. The scientific community decisively tosses telepathy into the bin used to dispose of snake oil and other medicine man products."

The doctor's voice was annoyed. Jada's attention was focused on the doctor with an unhappy grimace.

After a second, a cross Rodrigo said, “I see, Dr. Mason.” He was sitting in his chair glaring. “I thought Dr. Ghosh was sending me to a professional who would listen to my concerns and try to find ways to prevent future blackouts. You haven’t even considered the possibility that the video I mentioned is legitimate. You also haven’t asked if the alien has said anything to me.

“I have the video here on my phone if you would like to have a look. I can also give you a dozen reasons why the military might want to dispute it. Above all, with the social media storm and riots, after the video was broadcast on TV.”

The doctor sat eye to eye with Rodrigo after this rebuff. He quietly watched Rodrigo for several seconds, then said, “Mr. Avila, I think my reaction to the situation you described was a plumb give out, as my dad would say. I’m pretty worn out by this alien thing. You are correct. My job ought to be to help you get past these two losses of consciousness you have experienced. I would like to look at the video.”

Rodrigo handed him his phone.

After a minute, Dr Mason said, “The video is compelling, isn’t it. But I supposed there are clever people who could stage something like this. Has anyone in the media verified its authenticity?”

“If someone has, I’m not aware of it,” Rodrigo answered. “But I asked an acquaintance from work to look at it. He has an after-hours business verifying authenticity of videos and other electronic reproductions. He said it looked to be an original recording from an iPhone, and, if not legitimate, someone went to a lot of trouble to make it.”

The doctor took in what Rodrigo said over a few seconds. “I also would like to apologize. You couldn’t have known that one of the demonstrations following the CSETI announcement was just down the street from this office. Activists eventually blocked my office door yelling

“outbreak” over and over again. The police were everywhere. Some of them were arrested just outside. It caused terrible turmoil with my patients. Business is only now getting back onto some kind of schedule. I think that problem has colored my thinking about this whole incident.”

Dr. Mason then looked down at the paperwork on his desk. He immediately turned to some kind of a colored diagram. “Interesting,” the doctor said and set about paging through information he’d received from the hospital.

After more careful study, Mason said, “I will admit I hadn’t taken the time to look over the data from Mercy myself. I’d only read Dr. Ghosh’s two paragraph summary that said the usual tests looked normal. I was just looking at your cranial MRI scan. Ghosh wouldn’t have noticed, but there’s something significant here.”

Jada perked up. “My husband is pretty good with science, doctor. You probably guessed I’m very skeptical of telepathy. We’ve argued over his ideas. But I’ll do whatever I can to help my husband be well. Can you give us an idea what you’re seeing?” she asked.

“Of course. Many patients ask me to explain brain function. What I see is difficult, because we are still in the learning phase, especially when it comes to how one’s brain deals with language. There are two main areas of the brain that were thought to be central to language and speech. They’re called Broca’s area and Wernicke’s area.”

Dr. Mason got up to stand by a picture of a human brain on the wall next to his desk. He circled the glass covering two small areas with a marker. “Both are relatively small, and we are learning that language is much more complicated than the understanding a few years ago.”

“What Mr. Availa’s MRI shows is greatly increased resting electrical activity in Wernicke’s area. This kind of activity is normally the result of stimulation.”

“What’s the significance of that,” Rodrigo asked.

"As I said, we are still learning, but I would like to do some more testing to see if the activity persists, and the reaction to different kinds of stimuli.

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In the car, Jada broke the long silence once they left the Doctor's office. "What did you think of Dr. Mason, bear?"

"Interesting," Rodrigo replied instantly. "Once we got past that perfunctory start, he really seemed to know his stuff. I was impressed." He liked that the doctor had replaced his wife's fear with hope.

"I liked that he was able to back away from his prejudice once you confronted him," Jada said. "Then he seemed interested in figuring out what caused the problems."

"Yeah, I guess we'll learn next week what he's come up with in terms of more testing… Can we stop and get some food, dear?" Rodrigo asked. "I feel like I've done nothing but think about this – forever."

Jada turned left on Hudson, then onto Allentown Road, to pull over and park. "Walla, Mario's," she said.

Rodrigo chuckled and got out of the car.

After they'd eaten, he leaned back in his chair. "Thanks, dear. That was just what the doctor ordered," he said with a big smile. "I haven't felt this relaxed in quite a while."

"That's super, bear. This is the first time I've seen you unwind in weeks. Your good mood makes me feel like we'll get past this."

"This is as good a time as any to talk about another thing I came up with last night while not sleeping. Something I'd really want to do."

Jada's expression turned somber. "I assume this has something to do with aliens?"

"Yeah. But probably not what you think. I want to try an experiment that will likely not work."

She warily asked. "An experiment?"

"It means a lot to me if you'd help – stay open-minded."

Jada smiled. "I want you well."

He coughed. "Okay. Now that I'm relaxed … when we get home, I'd want to focus my mind and try to contact the alien. I've been afraid to attempt this – initiate thought transference – for a long time. The alien will probably need to figure some things out. So, it could take time."

She picked up her coffee and looked at him – a probing stare. "I took the day off. Was going to shop this afternoon. Why don't you go for it… I'll try to be receptive."

Jada's hand trembled as she put her coffee down. Rodrigo thought to ask what worried her but instead just smiled.

**

Jada watched her husband tug hard to pull his favorite chair outside onto the deck. He loved to sit on the deck, usually in his canvas chair, particularly this time of year. I was apparent that he was serious talking to an alien and that it was important that he be as comfortable as possible.

Rodrigo relaxed, she looked around their attractively landscaped backyard with summer was replacing spring. Cannas and impatiens were in full bloom in large clusters near the ten-foot wooden wall. Behind that trees towered in the mixed oak wood surrounding the seasonal creek separating their property from a large shopping plaza on the next road. The temperature was delightful in the covered deck's shade.

Rodrigo sat and looked at her sitting next to him with a smile. After a sip of iced tea, he closed his eyes. He began to softly hum.

"That's a strange tune, bear," Jada said.

"Having you here is helping me, dear. But quiet would help even more." he closed his eyes again.

**

The monotony of his humming, as if a prolonged prayer went on, and Jada thought it was likely that strange alien rhythm he'd talked about. She began to look at empty spots in the garden, constructing a mental list of the annuals she should buy. While glad that he had relaxed, she wasn't at all sure she wanted to be dragged into this fantasy of his. Mostly, though, she at long last felt prepared to see this telepathy stuff he was so doggedly defended in action.

Gladiolas might be nice, she thought, as her mind slowly paged through scenes from decades of their marriage. As much as she loved Rodrigo, the brilliant man, she'd surrendered so much over the years. His need to keep himself occupied with stuff that interested him was an enduring problem. So many long spans when it was impossible to get his attention, even to watch a movie with her, were impossible. Other stretches when she was unable to get any time or attention for things she needed or wanted to do were also trying. There'd been times in their early years she became so upset she'd considered leaving. They'd talked about these things but his behavior never really changed.

His body jerked across from her – movement similar to what she'd noticed sometimes when he dozed off. He'd said he didn't sleep much last night.

Then another lurch after he was still for seconds. She almost got up to check on him. But the humming had tailed off into a subtle and noiseless vibration of his lips. After more time, his right

arm slipped from the arm rest. It hung down for a while before he lifted it back onto the chair's arm.

At least this wasn't a repeat of the other night.

His head turned. Wide-open eyes glaring boldly her way shocked her but past her. His expression was as if he was examining something for a first time. She remained quiet and watched.

Seconds later his head slowly moved to look in other directions and back again several times. His spooky gaze didn't look like Rodrigo. It was an exhaustive look, almost as if he didn't know where he was.

Her husband's head turned several times more. Then, he clumsily used his arms to push himself up out of the chair – standing shakily for several seconds before collapsing back into his seat. His head gave way to rest on the left side of the chair's headrest with his lips still quivering. He stayed in that position for a long time.

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After he seemed past what took place, Jada walked over to his chair and his head came up.

"Are you back with me, Bear?"

"Yeah, just unsteady." He reached for his tea and took a couple of gulps.

"Well, when you're ready to talk I'll be here."

He buried his face in his hands and rubbed hard.

After a minute he said, "I connected with something, what I don't know. It was such a strange experience."

"Strange?"

His expression changed before a slow answer. “What first caught my attention was a large group of tall structures in the distance. They were moving. Almost like a group of people talking. If beings, they weren’t recognizable. Far enough away that I couldn’t really make out what I was seeing. No heads, arms, legs or anything else that looked like us. But they were very noticeable because they towered over the setting that was desolate. Like a rocky desert on earth. Vision was also poor because it looked polluted. Maybe very dirty air.

When Jada didn’t react, he went on. “Alsoi, there was some, some kinda … dialogue going on. Let me think on that.”

“The swaying things that looked like nothing from earth worried me. I wouldn’t have got closer. Not that I could. Remember that it was the alien, not me that was making what I was seeing happen. I’m suddenly sure everything I was seeing was coming from an alien. The tall things must also have been aliens.”

“Aliens? Why think that?” Jada asked. Her voice was calm. She was trying hard.

“The answer to that is partly everything else – that setting. Below me was pitch-black glassy-smooth rock. It looked to have flowed there, maybe an old super-hot lava flow. On both sides of me, only feet away, there were light colored rocks – brown, some were big, others only pebbles – with something that looked alive and deep red covering them. I think we’d call that red, maroon. Except for the color, the growth looked like lichens I’ve seen covering trees and rocks in the woods. The color definitely distracted me. Not a red you see in nature on earth. And nothing else. There was nothing looking like trees, brush or grass. Just a landscape void of life… except for that maroon lichen.

Except those tall … but I wasn’t really seeing this. I was seeing only what the alien was feeding me. And it scared me. You remember how scared I got when we walked out on what’s

left of Kinzua Bridge at the State Park two summers ago Without reason, I was sure it would collapse at any moment. You couldn't get me out to the end. That dread is what looking at those aliens felt like.

The more I looked, the more malevolent what I saw became. Limbs wiggled around like snakes. It got so uncomfortable, I mentally bailed. That ended the contact."

"Okay. I still don't get why you're sure they were aliens?"

"Because they were moving and didn't look like anything from earth. Maybe swaying is a better word for what they were doing. Swaying – yes, and like they were happy abd talking.

"But the most important thing is, while I was taking in rhis scene, something was talking to me, But that's not true. It was putting thoughts and ideas in my head.

"But you understood? These aliens talked to you? In English?"

"It was all in my head. Thoughts, not words."

Her head tilted and she was looking at him out of the side of squinted eyes. "Then how did you understand what it was saying … or thinking?" Then her eyes went to the deck. "Bear, did you have some kind of hallucination? Is your mind playing tricks on you?"

He was losing her. He needed to turn this into the moment Jada believed him. Her suspicions were deep-seated. She knew he wouldn't lie to her.

After another sip, he said, "Here's what I took from the time with this alien. What I think about them." he started. "I'll give you the best I can do. It's what I think with what it left me with. Their world is way different from earth. I don't know why it started with this kind of information. I'm pretty sure it's hot. Liquid water may be scarce or absent. I didn't see any. It's possible all the water is in the air, and there are no rivers, lakes or oceans."

"How did you figure that out?"

“It told me! What I’m sure of is they get water from the air. Much of what I came to think wasn’t real clear. I’m doing my best to piece it together.”

“I believe that, dear. You’ve never fibbed to me.”

Rodrigo smiled. “The alien left me thinking it was in an unhappy situation. One that could be terminal. More than that, I didn’t get. Oh, but this alien wants help getting back to the location where it landed. Why, I don’t know.”

“Okay, but this alien is not here… in Philadelphia. How does it get these telepathic messages to you?”

“I understood part of that. It somehow uses our infrastructure, either telephone or power lines, to transmit it’s thought signals.”

“So, this… alien is not talking … it is somehow getting its thoughts into your brain.” Jada’s words had emerged slowly, one at a time. Each word like a question, as what he told her sank in. “That’s pretty far-fetched, but I’ll take it as what you think.”

He figured that was as much as he was going to get.

“What about senses,” she asked. “Do they see, feel, hear? Do they possess the kinds of abilities that guide us through their lives?”

“I didn’t pick up any of that… ˙Ya know, that’s a great question…. It might have been the alien telling me what it felt I needed to know to get my help. I got a bunch of stuff related to this idea that they use our infrastructure to send me messages. Somewhere in there was a very odd idea. I don’t think they see. They use a weak electric field to know what’s going on around them. And maybe to communicate. I just wonder….”

They talked about electric fields and other ideas that came to him for a while. Before Jada went back to gardening knowing he was unhappy that his experiment didn’t convince her. She

watched her husband pick up his computer, no doubt to check out another far-fetched idea. She long ago settled that keeping his mind happy was as important to him as he was to her.

She didn't think she could ever believe that thoughts could be transmitted somehow between minds. This Telepathy idea he believed deeply was impossible nonsense – perhaps a way to rationalize conclusions his astute mind had come to by investigation and logic. Psychological studies she'd read agreed with her instincts.

A Week Later

The only parking space they could find was a hike from the picnic area at FDR park. After some personal debate, Hanna agreed to join Rodrigo at the CSETI Saturday event. The two had bounced around possible consequences of the Wyoming videos at the office since he called her that night of the CSETI announcement. News reports got redundant and boring until tales of eruptions of disease from some alien bug were sensationalized on social media. A page three Enquirer article made the CSETI-sponsored informational rally sound worth attending. When Rodrigo asked again, she said, "Okay, Roomie, I'd like to see what this is all about. But I need to get back early afternoon. Joe and I are taking Niki to the Phillies game."

They'd walked maybe a mile. "So, those internet reports of a flesh-eating bacteria from space… what do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't pay much attention to anything on those sites. My browser shows the source at the top, left of each report. So, I can ignore what I don't want to see. Anything that sounds like the usual BS," Hanna said. "Niki and I talked about it at the game last night. She's more plugged into the internet than me because of her work."

"Well, then, what did your sister think?"

“She pulled some of the reports up on her phone and called it cow stuff, her new polite term. I laughed, and we grabbed two more beers. Then a Rook put one in the centerfield bleachers. Lordy, he’s beautiful,” she said. “We hooted and screamed for a while before she found more, and more. Just stupid stuff! The Phillies were way out front, so I laughed and laughed for the next hour as Niki read some to me.”

Rodrigo was quiet for a few seconds thinking he might not be able to find all that lying funny.

“Didn’t you say Niki started with Temple’s IT Department a while back?”

“Yeah. Part of by brilliant sister’s new job is to keep track of what’s reported about the university on the internet.”

“How much older are you,” he asked.

Hanna flashed a grin. “My sister was born twenty months to the day after me.”

“First time I saw you together, I thought you were twins.”

She smiled again.

A hundred yards further down the path, Rodrigo said, “I spent some time before leaving this morning. I couldn’t find anything, positive or negative, from a credible news agency about this flesh-eating bug idea. ” He paused before adding, “Just bozos putting trash on the internet. Most of it is blatantly obvious.”

They saw a sign just off the walkway, **Alien Rally**, with an arrow pointing down a dirt path. “I think I can hear a crowd,” she said.

“Good. I forgot my hearing aids,” Rodrigo said. “Dumb.”

He usually forgets them, she thought.

Rodrigo had enjoyed the morning and Hanna’s company.

"Wow, look at that crowd. Thousands," she said a few hundred yards further down the trail. "I guess there's parking nearby."

"It's Saturday. I thought the CSETI news report might get attention. But the initial fascination after the video had faded," Rodrigo said. "Maybe this internet crap generated more concern than I thought."

"All that trash got people going," Hanna said, without mentioning that it'd made her uneasy.

"The Enquirer piece said CSETI staff would provide a full disclosure from the military's Freedom of Information Act package."

"Have you seen anything believable tied to the aliens," Hanna asked.

"Nothing. Maggie told me yesterday she found the internet stories chilling. Then she said some had believable bits."

Seleron staff regularly stopped in their office. Word had got around Rodrigo was well-informed on earth and galactic science. He guessed most visitors had talked to Ray Gallagher, who made the rounds of the lab to chat with people he knew most mornings. Ray sent the ones with questions his way.

"Looks like things have already started." Hanna picked up her pace.

"It's going to be tough to see and hear," Rodrigo said at the crowd's edge. Hanna spotted a closer spot, and they edged their way through the gathering.

A speaker was finishing his comments. He introduced CSETI's chief scientist, Dr. Mohammad Bashar. "He's the man quoted in those first news reports I saw last week," Rodrigo said.

Bashar was dressed in a dark suit and tie that reflected light as he approached the podium. The din died down.

Shoulder-length black hair and a close-trimmed beard added an air of dignity. “It’s a wonderful morning, ladies and gentlemen. And you are a beautiful crowd! Thank you for coming.” Bashar bowed and then looked around the gathering. “It’s heartening that CSETI’s news release received so much attention. Not just in Washington, but here in Philadelphia and other major cities.”

During seconds of polite applause, Hanna watched Bashar slowly look around the crowd again. He stopped a few times to acknowledge some individuals he recognized. “We have received thousands of calls, emails and letters in the weeks since we received this package. So much interest made a series of events like today necessary.”

He stopped to hold up a thick binder in each hand. “Although contents are heavily redacted, we verified several key facts about the craft and aliens that landed in Wyoming last summer. I will discuss each in turn.” His comments were interrupted for a minute by enthusiastic applause and shouting. He set the binders on a tall table.

“Did he just say they’ve verified aliens and their ship,” Hanna asked Rodrigo.

“That’s what it sounds like to me…” Rodrigo was interrupted by a man on his left, screaming, “What about the outbreak? The outbreak?” The big man repeated it again and again.

Several nearby people picked up the call. It took a minute before the crowd finally quieted. Bashar lowered his head, as if thinking. “The only outbreak has been unfortunate fabrications spread by unsavory and ignorant people on social media,” he said softly. “These have no factual basis. Do not believe them.”

“Bullshit,” Rodrigo overheard the outbreak yelling guy yell loudly.

“The Wyoming rancher’s video we supplied to the media has been studied by three labs including Coheart Film Laboratories of Philadelphia. All certified the video as authentic and unedited.”

These comments were again greeted by applause and uproar. Rodrigo was happy for independent confirmation that agreed with Eddie Mendez’s assessment of the video.

“Pentagon materials did include an assessment of biological contamination of the spacecraft. It was completely redacted. I will come on to why we believe the military has moved the alien craft to an unknown secure location. Nonetheless, colleagues in locations said to have experienced incidences of biological problems report no such activity. Internet trolls lie.

“The fate of the craft’s occupants that disappeared in the video remains a mystery,” Bashar said. “But we are now certain the alien ship did not disintegrate. With the video’s short duration, we cannot know what happened before or after filming. Independent interviews with locals in Wyoming indicated the alien ship was removed to a military facility for study.”

This comment was followed by sustained boos. “So, we now know what happened to the spacecraft,” Rodrigo said to Hanna.

“But what about those things that came out of the craft?” Hanna asked.

“I hope Bashar will talk about that.”

Bashar paused until onlookers calmed down. Conflicting theories were being loudly bantered about in the crowd. Then Rodrigo’s neighbor joined shouting with, “Outbreak, outbreak,” again. Hanna could tell Rodrigo was having trouble hearing with the noise. She worried he was getting a little irritated with the fool not far from him.

"Spectral analysis of the video did not reveal energy emissions from the spacecraft outside the visible range," Bashar continued. "Sometimes, very clever methods can find hints of other radiation."

Hanna saw an open spot under a tree on their right and pulled Rodrigo's hand to move.

"Not even radio waves we use for communication. We could only measure distant electronic images captured in the video. There was nothing that could be interpreted as audio or other wavelengths. The military's information did not provide statistics on the electromagnetic spectrum but did mention a very low level of residual ionizing radiation in the vicinity." Bashar added.

Bashar's comments were again interrupted by yelling. He patiently waited for less noise. Hanna could hear the man who'd been bothering Rodrigo constantly spouting gibberish about a bacterial outbreak. Rodrigo looked back. His glare caught the man's eye. The man deliberately turned and jeered.

"Sketchy evidence suggests the possibility the spacecraft inexplicably just appeared." This statement from Bashar quieted the crowd, including Rodrigo's 'outbreak' neighbor. "A thorough examination of publicly available records indicates no unusual atmospheric activity. The skies near Jackson Hole Airport were clear at the time the craft arrived. Records from other nearby airports were also unhelpful. CSETI's conclusion is that there is no evidence of an atmospheric entry."

A dull disturbance in the crowd rose to loud questioning.

"Hanna, what heavenly force could make a spacecraft just appear," Rodrigo asked. "This seems as odd as the aliens that emerged disappearing."

"You know, my friend, a lot seems weird about this whole Wyoming thing. I'm starting to wonder about an outbreak. Not because of the screamers, but because there might have been something alive in that ship – something from another world. Wouldn't they be carrying bacteria, or their own version, just like we would."

She could see this idea got him thinking. She'd been concentrating, listening hard to catch audience questions. She could tell Rodrigo was having trouble hearing with the noise. She decided to be quiet for a while.

Watching, Hanna saw a tall heavy dude walk slowly from the right side of the platform to disappear behind it. After several seconds the man's head appeared at the platform's rear.

The crowd was calmer and listening to Bashar. "Information not redacted from the report didn't allow us to draw more conclusions. I will not be reporting on possible threats to public health that have been blown out of proportion by social media misinformation."

He paused to look around before adding, "I am happy to take questions. CSETI colleagues with microphones are waiting for your comments. Staff, please raise your hands."

Bashar pointed toward a few among raised hands. "Woah, lots of questions," he said.
The large man jumped onto the stage, ran across, and grabbed the microphone. He pushed Bashar away and yelled, "Lies! All lies." His amplified scream was deafening. Bashar attempted to take the microphone back. The big man shoved him out of the way. When Bashar reached for the mic again, a punch knocked him to the stage. Two uniformed men had moved from the front around to the stairs and onto the platform. One tackled the blaring man. In the frenzy the loudspeaker next to Rodrigo shrieked with feedback. Hanna covered her ears. The big man struggled and somehow kept hold of the mic. "It's a conspiracy! CSETI has done a deal with the military to hide the contagion," the man shrieked. "We'll all will be infected! The alien ship was

sent to eliminate mankind. People are dying in Wyoming," he screamed. "It will be here soon. See alienbug.org."

Just then security ripped away the microphone and zip tie the man's hands.

Then, a ruckus broke out at the platform's front. Hanna saw a man punching someone on the ground. A tall woman picked up a folding chair and slammed it into the puncher. He fell to the ground. She hit him again. Nearby people started to run.

A woman next to her shrieked, "Jamie, look at this!" She held out her phone. "It's a plague. People are getting sick in Idaho Falls. Come on honey! Let's get out of here. Call Karla."

Bashar picked up the microphone, rubbing his head. "I apologize for this problem. I guess that's all you're going to hear from CSETI today." As Bashar walked away, the microphone by his coat pocket. Hanna heard, "That piece of shit ruined everything."

"Come on Rodrigo. This is awful. Let's head for the car." They started to push their way through most of the crowd who were hurrying toward a parking lot in the other direction. Hanna looked back to see more uniforms near the group by the stage and another brawl not too far from that. People panicked. 'Why are these people behaving so badly?'

A man pushing people aside to force his way through the crowd knocked Hanna down. A person right behind him stepped on her arm. It hurt. She tried to get up. On her knees, she was knocked down again. Now terrified, she covered her head with her arms. With brutal blow to the side of her head, everything disappeared. Then someone was lifting her. She looked up to see Rodrigo using his sturdy body to safeguard her while pulling her off the ground. On her feet, she was confused. She felt Rodrigo holding onto her arm as he pushed them through the crowd.

"I turned around and you weren't there," Rodrigo shouted. "Then I saw legs on the ground. That scared me."

As they struggled through the last of the crowd, Hanna stopped. “What a mess,” she said trying to gather herself. “Let me catch my breath. I really got my bell rung. I’m very dizzy.”

“A tight spot for a tall, slender person like you with all those bodies moving in every direction,” Rodrigo said. “We should have tried another way.”

Hanna looked dazed. She held up her hands and stared at some blood and scratches. Then she pulled out the front of her shirt. “Oh, shit. Look at my blouse. I’m a mess. I can’t go to the game like this.”

Clear of the mob, they began walking more casually and quietly. “My sister was a bloody prophet.”

“A prophet?”

“Niki said those internet trolls didn’t want the truth. They were only interested in that epidemic crap.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry I pushed you hard to come. You seemed interested. Guess I wanted company.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Roomie,” she said while rubbing a bump on her arm. “It was an education, for sure. Boy, am I ever dizzy.”

“An education? Yeah, you learned how badly people can behave,” he said.

“All that stuff was like nuts,” she added and stopped again for a minute. “Dad keeps saying the world has changed. When he was a boy in the 1980’s, he says, people were actually polite with one another.”

They quietly walked for a while before Hanna said, “I don’t feel great, Roomie. Could you get the car while I sit on this bench.”

A sweaty Rodrigo drove up ten minutes later. Hanna tried to get in but stumbled. He jumped out of the car to help her. “What’s going on girl,” he asked.

“I don’t know, but I feel awful and dizzy. I can’t think straight.”

“I’m taking you to the ER,” he said. “Can you call Joe or your sister?”

“I think so.”

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Ten minutes later, Hanna passed out a minute before Rodrigo pulled up to the ambulance entrance to Mercy’s ER.

“What’s going on, sir,” the attendant asked.

“Hanna got knocked around pretty badly in the panic at the CSETI rally a little while ago. She’s in pretty bad shape.”

“Yes, sir, we’ve got two other patients. Let me get her on a gurney. Please stay here so we can get some information.”

After they took Hanna inside, a young woman with a clipboard came out. “Hello, sir, can I have you name. Then could you park your car over there and come back.”

Rodrigo was busy giving the woman information when he saw Niki walked into the ER. “Niki, over here,” he shouted.

Niki was frantic. “How’s Sis? My God, Rodrigo, what happened.”

Rodrigo was telling her what he knew when an ER nurse joined them and asked Rodrigo to give her as much as he could about the event. Niki asked to see her sister. They all went inside into an ER room. A doctor was with Hanna. Her eyes were open. Niki rushed over to embrace her sister.

“Easy,” the Doctor said. “She’s sustained at least a concussion.”

“Well, shit, Sis, that’s not much of an excuse to get out of the game tonight,” Niki said while forcing a smile.

Hanna’s somber expression didn’t change. She looked at Rodrigo. “You were right to bring me here. My head feels like it might come off, and I can’t seem to keep my eyes open.”

“What’s going on, Dr. Alexander,” Niki asked looking at the name tag.

“I’ll have a better idea when some test results come back,” she said. “Right now, all I’m sure of is a concussion.”

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“Hi Rodrigo, the Doctor came in an hour ago and said she’s releasing me. I talked to Joe first, and he’s on his way. I thought you’d like to know.”

“Great news, girl. What has it been – four days in the hospital? I guess that’s right. Yesterday, you told me they hadn’t come up with a diagnosis.”

“Still haven’t, Roomie. The doc said that it’s been two days without any symptoms, not even a headache. Joe has agreed to stay home with me.”

“So, how about coming back to work?”

“The Doctor said I need to be symptom free for seven days before going back to work. She also wants to give me a physical exam before it happens. I plan to call Maggie from home and ask her if there’s something I can help with until I able to go back to work.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rodrigo said. “I appreciate the call. Trying to hold down two jobs is a hassle. I’m really looking forward to having you back. I’ll call when I’m done tonight and see if you wouldn’t mind me stopping by.”

What happened to Hanna’s cure?

Two Weeks Later

“Thank you for inviting us,” Jada said with a warm smile. “Hanna sounded fortunate to find this place, Joe. I can see why it’s comfy and spacious.”

He beamed. “Hanna’s cooked up a storm. Just went back to put on some makeup,” Joe said. “She’s made a family favorite. It’s good to see her cooking again. Tonight, it was as if FDR Park thing never happened.”

Joe’s smile was infectious. It reminded Jada a little of the one on that totem pole in a living room picture Rodrigo refused to get rid of.

She looked around a little more. “Do you like the ground floor?”`

“You bet. The outside space is compact, but we use it a lot. Hanna’s commute to Seleron is easy most days,” Joe Radcliffe said. He ushered her and Rodrigo through the living room and past the kitchen to the sliding glass doors. “I work out here as much as I can this time of year.” He closed his laptop sitting on a small table under an overhang that covered a small patio.

“Nice,” Rodrigo said. “Nothing but woods beyond the fence. Is it you or Hanna that keeps up these annual beds?” He saw Hanna inside, walk past and into the kitchen. Jada bolted through the door to see if she could help. Rodrigo had been worried, but Hanna looked great.

“Hanna likes to work out here on weekends, particularly when I have a project to do. I did put in the raised beds.”

“How often do you have to go to the New York office?” Rodrigo asked.

“It’s been less and less over the last year. But I’m on the phone more. Maybe once every couple of weeks. Hey, how about a beer?”

“Great,” Rodrigo said. “It looks as if Hanna and Jada will be in the kitchen for a while.”

“Good to see you, Roomie,” he heard.

Joe poured white wine for the ladies and grabbed two beers.

“I’m glad you and Jada could come. I’m itching to hear more about aliens. That fiasco in FDR park scared me. Since she got home, all she’s talked about is aliens and internet trolls. The more she talked, the more pumped up she got go ‘in. Hanna never paid much attention to public opinion before this except, maybe, who to vote for.”

“I’m glad you invited us,” Jada shouted from the kitchen. “Maybe we can get these aliens to land.”

Rodrigo grinned. “I guess Hanna has mentioned Jada and I have some serious differences about my talking to aliens. Still, she’s been helping me. My obsessions always seem to lead to problems.”

This comment got a frown out of his wife.

“I will admit I’ve been curious since Hanna mentioned you believe you’ve been in contact with an alien. You willing to talk about it?” Joe asked.

“Well, it’s already getting to be a long story,” Rodrigo said.

The women carried their drinks outside.

“I’d like to hear the long story,” Hanna said.

After a swig, Rodrigo set down his beer. He looked at his wife. “Jada, can we start with your version?”

She gave him that ‘I have to keep smiling’ look, then said, “Sure, why not?”

Jada described the accident a year earlier, and the emotional tumult she recovered from. This was a preface to the seizure Rodrigo suffered a few weeks earlier. “Then, this bugger tells me both incidents were triggered by telepathy with some mysterious alien,” she said. He got that Pan Am smile again.

“Okay, my queue,” Rodrigo said.

“I really like this beer, Joe,” he said. A serious look then settled in. “It’s been hard on both of us. At first, the alien’s intrusion into my head was accompanied by pain. Lots of pain. The torment got in the way of even thinking about what was going on behind so much agony.

“The alien figured this out, I believe, and the pain became less and less with each new contact. Truth is, it was the alien, not me, that figured out how to communicate. I just absorbed what came my way and followed its lead. What’s important though is I am certain that these incidents were thought transference.”

“Okay, Rodrigo. I have a lot of time for you. I mean, you probably saved my wife’s life. Still, what in God’s name is this telepathy like, and how does the alien get into your head from somewhere else,” Joe said. “I’m having a hard time. It doesn’t make sense. How can any of this happen.”

Jada was nodding.

“I understand, Joe. Especially since I’ve got your partner involved and into a big problem,” Rodrigo said. “Maybe some more detail will help.”

He noticed Joe looking at his wife. Joe’s ebullient expression had disappeared.

“I think Jada has used words like insanity and impossible,” Rodrigo said.

“The aliens somehow directly communicate using thought. I’m sure the alien is able to tag its thought messages to human electric infrastructure to get them to me.”

“Not possible,” was Joe’s stark comment.

“Okay, but they’ve told me this much. I know you’re and engineer. Maybe we could talk, and get creative, about how this could happen.”

They exchanged a few ideas before Joe said, “I can tell you what Hanna doesn’t get.”

“Joe, I’ve talked about my concerns with Rodrigo.”

“In addition to that,” Jada chimed in. “As far as we know, Rodrigo is the only human on the planet getting these messages. What’s with that.”

“Hold on a minute,” Hanna said. “I’ll finish what I started to say. Rodrigo and I talked this telepathy thing out. He knows I’m having a hard time with this idea of getting messages from some mysterious alien that somehow just appear in his brain. But I know and trust my friend and officemate. You’re a good man and wouldn’t lie about this,” she said looking at him.

“Okay, okay,” Joe said. “You trust Rodrigo. I’d like to hear the rest of it.”

Rodrigo went on to talk about his training at El Paso and gave a few examples of successes he attributed to thought transference.

“That’s a nice story. What’s missing for me is the connection between all those years ago and being contacted by aliens now,” Joe said.

“That still bugs me too,” Hanna said.

“Boy, you guys are tough,” Rodrigo said with a big grin. He then finished his beer. He held up the empty. “I might need another.” The grin faded, before he said in his soft voice, “I think the link is that I was really good at it. I’ve asked myself the same question many times. My only answer is that the alien found me.”

“There is an incident, that happened years after Jada and I were married that might help you understand. It’s the only incidence of thought transfer since I left UTEP.”

He smiled again. “It happened when Jada and I flew to El Paso. My tenth UTEP reunion was the excuse.

“I remember. I’d guess there were only a couple of hundred people there,” Jada said. “But it was an excuse for us to go home and see family.”

“So, I don’t get it…” Hanna said. “What’s the connection to telepathy?”

"At UTEP, I joined that group I mentioned led by my math instructor – training in telepathy. We learned many of the techniques that were pioneered in the military in the late twentieth-century. The military called it the stargate project.

"Professor Paul Clemens, my linear algebra instructor, had a keen interest in telepathy. He taught me how to focus my mind by visualizing things far away as a first step."

"He asked you to see things somewhere else to start?"

"No. Not at all. At first, imagine is a better word. That training was about concentration."

"Well, I can attest to you being good at that," Hanna said. "I've never seen anyone dig into something that doesn't look right like you."

"You're right. It took quite a while before we got to the fun part," Rodrigo picked up. "He'd plant something you wouldn't expect to find at places like a theater or gas station in El Paso. It was hard. Lots of wrong answers. Many people got frustrated and left the group. Most who stayed just enjoyed the game. Soon though, I got one right, a paper bag of beans tied to a fence post at the edge of town. It was incredible. It amazed everyone. As excited as I was, I remember an uncomfortable sensation; like going into some trance just before I figured it out. It was so strangely uncomfortable. Like I was mentally flying many miles. Then I saw the bag hanging there! Almost immediately I was thinking how to find the location. That first time it was so very, very weird."

Rodrigo got so excited, he had to stop and take big breaths to calm down.

"A trance? Were you hypnotized?" Joe said after some seconds.

"It's incredibly hard to explain. I later learned it's about clues. Evidence and suspicions that point in the right direction were mostly not stated in our exercises. Most of it was reasoning. When it comes together, it's like magic.

"Other factors were keeping my mind open. To this day, I remember knowing that some of the necessary evidence came from somewhere else. The daze was my own making – call it excitement – while concentrating and trying to sort through hints to find the strongest. But something truly inexplicable was going on in my brain."

Hanna nodded, as if understanding. "Okay… But what does ESP have to do with an alien contacting you?

He looked at her for a second. "Maybe I should finish my story."

"It sounds like you were both interested and good. Why did you quit?" Hanna asked.

"Let me come to that, too."

Hanna's challenge made his brow furl. "Dr. Clemens, Paul, played a trick on me at the reunion."

"Paul was a very distinguished man," Jada said with an impish smile.

"I think he wanted to add some spice," Rodrigo added with a noticeable glare. "He'd hid a coin, an English pound, under a place setting on a table somewhere in the room. There were a couple hundred '79 UTEP alumni at the reception. Then, he held up a second one-pound coin and asked Sonja Novak and me to try to locate the hidden one. She was the only other mind-reader – what he called the group – there.

"The challenge took me back ten years. I felt a change immediately began to come over me. My brain started to prepare.

He handed the coin to Sonja. Then she gave it to me. I can remember the feeling of it. It felt warm, but more importantly, heavy. After a couple of seconds, I picked up my fork. My mind did that thing. The rest of the world went into an interlude." He saw Jada nod. "Everything else

disappeared but finding the coin. I surveyed the room for anything different – looked at every table and its occupants."

"You're trying to make this sound like some suspenseful detective story?" Joe said.

"Well, that's kind of what it is."

Paul gave Sonja the first shot at finding that coin," Rodrigo said. "She stood and walked around, then aimlessly wandered back. He was positive, as always."

While she wandered around, I watched Paul and got some help. He seemed to avoid looking toward one part of the room. Thinking about how to approach the problem took a while. That sense of the coin, heavy, and a focus on the area Paul steered clear of got my mind moving. The heavy coin was a polar opposite from the stainless dinnerware. I remember the trance-like state, because it hadn't happened for a long time. I felt conscious – almost like I'd moved – as my eyes drifted from my service, table by table, before I was staring at another table about halfway across the room. It was there! I knew it. Under the coffee saucer next to a large man."

"You sound like you were certain," Joe said.

"Yeah! I was sure I was right."

"Paul must have seen me staring and asked what was going on. I'll admit his game made my heart beat faster, I was breathing hard, as he walked slowly across the room. He stopped at tables along the way and looked back. Then he stopped at a close table. When he looked back and pointed, I shook my head, no. I motioned him to the right. He pointed, acknowledged my nod, and said something to the people sitting there. When he pointed at the right cup, I shook my head, yes. Paul turned over a saucer. There it was! He held it up, then took a minute to speak with the people at table with a big smile. They applauded."

“Wow, Rodrigo! You found it in that big room?” Hanna said. “It sounds impossible, like some kind of a trick.”

Rodrigo was disappointed. “You know better than that.”

“I do, but I didn’t know this Professor Clemens,” she said.

“That’s a great story,” Joe said with a little laugh. “Can I pour you ladies more wine.”

“Yes, please they replied in unison.”

Walking away, Joe said, “I still don’t get how this is connected to aliens.”

“I don’t either, other than I feel I might be one of a very small group of humans that they hoped to train to receive their messages. I’m certain that what I’ve got so far was real.”

Joe walked back from the kitchen with a fresh bottle of wine. “What did the aliens say?”

“The only thing I’m certain of so far is a request for help.”

“Help?” Hanna asked.

“Yes,” Rodrigo said. “And it’s complicated.”

“That’s what they say in the movies,” Joe chimed in with a polite smile.

“Okay, but here’s the kicker,” Rodrigo said. “I believe these aliens think very differently from us. Their minds might somehow be connected.” He paused for effect. “Anyway, there’s some kind of direct neurological connection, as impossible as that sounds. So, the last few times the alien has contacted me, I’ve been able to see much more than what it was trying to let me know. It was as if I was seeing their world through dozens of individual eyes. I was able to get an idea of what their planet looks like, what’s important to them, along with an implication of group think.”

“But what about this help thing?” Hanna said.

"I think I've pieced an something together. We learned at FDR park that the military moved the alien vessel to a secure location. I haven't figured out where that is yet. But the alien gave me the impression it's not far from Wyoming. The alien seems to want to get back to the spot in Wyoming where it landed to be able to leave earth."

"Really," Hanna said. "I remember that CSETI guy, Bashar, said there was no evidence of a landing."

"That's what I heard too," Rodrigo said.

"And I'm getting confused and hungry," Joe said. "Hanna has made a family favorite in the Krol household, Kotlet Schabowy. She asked me to find a special bottle of Italian wine."

"I think that's a great idea," Jada said. "Enough aliens for the night."

As she was putting food on the table, Hanna said, "Rodrigo, I see what you mean about stringing hints together to see a way forward. I'm impressed."

Next Day

"Hi, Rodrigo," Mani Subramanian said. "Dr. Giles is on the phone, I don't think he'll be long, if you want to wait."

"Thanks, Mani. Do you know why Morgan wanted to see me?"

"I don't, sorry… He just said, "Get Rodrigo over here. You know him.""

"Well, at least he didn't tell you to get the scum ball," Rodrigo said. Mani chuckled.

Rodrigo sat and picked up the Enquirer. The front-page headline grabbed him. 'Legislators Budget $2.6 billion for Highway Improvement.' He'd started to read wondering if they'd ever get to the 152.

"Hey, Mani, how's work on that master's going?"

“I don’t know, man. Sita is having a real tough pregnancy. I’ve been taking care of Veer when I get home and doing most of the cooking.”

“Isn’t it soon?”

“Yes, Shokor Allah,” Mani said.

Morgan’s head popped out the door on Mani’s right. “Did you get hold of him?” Mani looked Rodrigo’s way.

“Hey! Good morning, Amigo.”

‘This will be okay,’ Rodrigo thought.

Rodrigo walked in to as much of a smile as was possible for Morgan Giles. His bosses good mood and their thirty-plus-year fellowship heartened the outlook. Morgan gave Rodrigo his hand as he closed the door. Morgan to stood, his back to Rodrigo, and looked at the adjacent wall. This thinking habit took Rodrigo back, way back to when they were kids sharing an office in Chemistry. Even then, Morgan wore feeling sleeves.

“What’s going on Morgan? Walking over I realized I haven’t been in your office for donkey’s years.”

“Well, I got a bit of a surprise this morning.” Morgan said after a moment. His mouth had distorted into a growl. Gray hairs in foreboding black eyebrows stood out against dark skin. The bosses face looked like he was about to throw a book at him. “Then I remembered we haven’t talked for a while.”

No Biggy, Rodrigo thought again. Colleagues often sought Rodrigo out after talking to Dr. Giles. He had a reputation for being the best at interpretating the bosses’ weird mannerisms.

“There was a phone message when I got here,” Morgan said. “It was Dan Block.”

Why would Morgan want to tell him the head of patents had called? Rodrigo hadn't filed anything for consideration for years.

"You always liked working with Jessica Hanson on legal matters," Morgan went on. "Dan said she warned him she might be filing some Freedom of Information Act requests for you. He told me she agreed to take this on with personal time but wanted to be sure it was okay to use Seleron's name."

"Yeah, I pulled out a few things I'd like to get from UATPF that I hoped might not be confidential. I paid the fees. Jessica agreed to put these together on her own time. She's never used the Freedom of Information Act and wanted to learn a little about it."

The boss was quiet.

"I've always marveled, Morgan, how you can see every building on campus, and all the way to Lincoln from your windows. All I can see down the hall is the bricks on the east side of building seven…. But does Dan have a problem with what she's doing?"

"No, but he called to make sure I was okay with it," Morgan replied. "What's UATPF?"

"The military's Unidentified Ariel Phenomenon Task Force."

"Dan's message did get my alarms going… I got this strange call the Pentagon a week, maybe two ago. A Colonel Lang. I made a note," he said while paging back through his calendar. "The Colonel mentioned a congressional assistant by the name of Josh Howard. I didn't write down the congressman's name. Apparently, either Howard or the congressman called the Pentagon. From what the Colonel said, it sounded like your latest project must have something to do with alien activity. That struck me as funny, but I blew it off. Another of those hairbrained schemes you get yourself involved in."

"Josh Howard?" Rodrigo queried… "Yeah, that's the guy Niki brought to the picnic, Hanna and Joe invited Jada and me to a family picnic a while ago. Niki is Hanna's sister. Howard and I talked for quite a while that afternoon over a beer. Nice day. But it was some time ago.

Rodrigo realized Niki must have talked to Josh about the project after she got it from Hanna.

"You know me boss. It all started with that Wyoming incident the summer before this one. You probably remember…" Rodrigo gave Morgan an abbreviated story about how he had got interested in the episode. "Amigo, how many of these things have you taken on over the years I've known you?" Morgan asked.

"Geez! Dozens, I'm sure. But I lose interest in most after a week or two. You know, Morgan, the more Hanna and I look, the more we're finding on this one. I haven't been this excited about something in ages. She's hooked too."

Rodrigo knew he shouldn't but went ahead and said it anyway. "I'll mention something again. The job in Regulatory Compliance doesn't exactly take the intellectual I.Q. as what we used to get in Chemistry. I think that's part of the attraction of this project."

Morgan's face told him that was enough. Rodrigo knew his boss had to work hard to find him a job in the new Seleron during the reorganization five years ago.

"Hanna's your most recent new office mate in regulatory compliance if I remember right."

"Not exactly new. She's been here more than two years now."

There was a brief pause. "Okay, what do I do with this?" Morgan questioned. There was a pensive look. "I'm good with you and Jessica putting in the Freedom on Information request, I guess. Dan liked the idea of Jessica getting familiar with the act. I'm not wild though about you using Seleron's name. But I'm going to let it go forward that way, even though it might come

back to bite me. Besides, this project of yours might die soon. Better yet, you could find something way out there that is useful to Seleron." He smiled.

"Okay, on your way dude. I think we're good for now. I'll call Dan. Let him know."

At the door Rodrigo turned to see Morgan rummaging through a thick pile of reports. He heard, "Good to see you, man."

Later that Day

"I could tell Maggie was pleased she got your report before lunch," Rodrigo said. "Bet she's glad you're back at work. If left up to me, it would have taken a while."

He opened the building 2 door, and they walked into the sunlight. "The meeting room is in building 6."

"Did you look at this morning's Enquirer," he asked her.

"Nah, just glanced at emails on my phone while I ate my cereal," Hanna said.

"Not a mention of aliens," he stated.

"It's still plastered all over Facebook – but nothing of substance, just that troll stuff. I didn't pay attention," she said. "I think all that fuss after the CESTI turmoil is going away."

Rodrigo wondered what Facebook gave Hanna that she couldn't get from the paper when he saw Lisa Smith and waved.

"You seem to know everyone," Hanna said.

"Lisa and I go way back. Started at Walter Labs about the same time. Don't see much of her these days now that biology is in building 6."

"Never been in six. I guess that's why we're going."

"That was Maggie's intention. And to introduce new staff in both departments," Rodrigo said.

"Okay … Results are on their server, you know," Hanna said, making a face. "I don't need to talk to anyone to get what I need."

"Right! But then, by the time you've been here thirty years, you'll hardly know anybody. This doesn't sound like a formula for success to me."

"Computers have changed the world, Roomie. I just want to be efficient," she said with a sneer or smile – he couldn't tell.

They followed the path around the Walter Memorial Fountain.

"Walter Labs? Wow," came out of Hanna's mouth after a few seconds. "I knew some long-gone dude named Walter started Seleron but never heard the story."

"I know Jim well. Jim Walter's grandfather started the company, and he ran the business before it went public. Still comes around for an event every once in a while. His grandfather's operation started by refining limestone ballast from English ships arriving in Philadelphia in the 19th-Century. Everything started with those carbonate-based chemicals. The company diversified in the 20th-Century. Walter Labs was among the first to begin to search for new monomers that could be used to build specialty plastics," Rodrigo said.

"So, that chemistry base, kicked-off the company's contract business?" Hanna asked.

"Yes, knowhow ... and, that's important. Seleron's grown a lot in the twenty-five years since Walter Labs went public," Rodrigo added. "Growth obvious to old-timers." He looked around. "I remember small wooden buildings and lots of pavement covering most of this space," He pointed through a 180° turn."

"Well, bloody-el… Where would I park without that parking-structure, huh?" Hanna said pointing with a teasing grin.

"Yeah, yeah. It's much more than just the size of the campus and numbers of employees… the nature of the work we did back then wasn't run of the same ole stuff over and again that we do now. You've heard me gripe. These days, it's the same procedures again and again. We spend our day doing paperwork to be compliant. My chemistry job was creative… more thought-provoking."

Hanna made a face. She didn't much care to hear her friend knocking what she did for work. She'd worked hard to get a job at Seleron, a company known for great starting salaries and fairness for women. But he had a lot of expeience. She should listen.

"I get it that times have changed," Rodrigo added after a second. "Yes, most of Seleron's work is now contracted with the government and other companies. That report you finished this morning for the Navy is a perfect example. There's only a handful of people left doing anything that might get patented. There once was a group of almost a hundred of us in Chemistry. Top people trying to use new ideas to make something that would make the world a better place."

He looked away. His eyes a little teary. "There's a few left, like Ray Gallager, with such diverse talents who have been kept on and kind of allowed to roam because Morgan knows they will always be finding important stuff."

Rodrigo's face was long. His head hung momentarily. "Somehow, the bond back then – with other employees and the work – was undeniable," he said. "Comradery, teamwork and spirits were high when we were trying to discover and develop new products for the company. Excitement filled this place. It's gone now."

Hanna's expression changed. She didn't say anything, then turned toward him, "Better morale… really? Have I heard of any of those proprietary products?"

“Moldstop,” Rodrigo said. “A paint additive I invented. It’s still widely used in those latex paints that go on most houses.”

Hanna stopped, wide-eyed, and looked around. “So, then you saw most of this go up.”

Rodrigo watched his friend step back to look up at the top of building 4. “Greenhouses and labs up there once tested my synthetic samples,” he said.

“What’s up there now?”

“They ripped all that exploratory stuff out. It’s now mostly servers that allow all the computers on site talk to one another. It also houses the record department where everything that’s ever been done here is stored and accessible with sufficient clearance.”

“So, the contracts that we work on are all up there?”

“You bet.”

Then her face brightened. “Moldstop. My God, Rodrigo. You invented the product that is still one of the top money-makers for Seleron. That huge plaque on the wall in the lobby! How long ago was that?”

“I synthesized the first sample more than twenty-five years ago. Then it took five more years, I’ll bet, to turn it into a product. So many people played a part. Lisa Smith who waved at me on the way over here. She first saw the antifungal activity. Then she did a ton of work to uncover the commercial potential. So many more were involved in everything needed to get a collection of carbon atoms with some sulfur, oxygen and chlorine to a product.”

Hanna noticed his subtle emphasis of ‘a collection of carbon atoms’. “I’d like to learn more. Can you help?”

“When we get back to the office, I give you a few things I have to read.

Rodrigo started toward the west entrance into building 6, but stopped, again, and turned to wait for Hanna. She was soaking up a slow 360º-look around the campus. He answered a few of her questions about when buildings went up. The most distant building's style seemed to hold her attention for seconds. That's the first molecular biology structure. "To be honest, that was all new science I've never quite caught up with."

"I got a pretty good handle on the basics in school," Hanna said.

"Maybe, someday, you can apply for a job there. Keep up your good work."

"Can I help you two find something?" a young woman about Hanna's age asked.

"Oh. no, thank you," Hanna said smiling. "Rodrigo and I are just talking about times past." The woman gave her a droll look then walked away.

"But enough of this, lady. We best get on the elevator before the meeting starts without us."

Going up, Hanna said, "You know, I had a thought."

"What's that," Rodrigo asked as the elevator door opened.

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"That was worthwhile," Hanna said, on their way back to their office. "The biology staff get a little broader exposure to Seleron's business than we see in Regulatory Compliance. That gal Wang was sharp."

"So is the new young woman out of Georgia Tech, Sanderson."

"But, you know, Rodrigo, the thought I started on before the meeting blossomed in there. Can we talk about it…. My bet is I could track down that rancher who got the video of the alien ship. Wouldn't he be interesting to talk to?"

Rodrigo turned and gave her a wide-eyed look. "How in the hell yah gonna do that?"

"I haven't got that far yet. But I'm pretty good with this thing," she said holding out her laptop. And mynsister can fill in most gaps I have.

Rodrigo considered this for a while full of slow steps before saying, "I guess I'd start with looking at the relevant websites.

"I read that CETSI got the video from a reporter at a TV station in Salt Lake. That might be a place to start."

"Joe was raised in Durango. It's a ways but not so far from there. I'll talk to him.

"You know, Joe and I drove across most of Utah, to get to Durango when we missed a commuter flight. So, it might be further than I thought.

"But the part that makes this seem like it could work is that you are good with people. If I can find out how to contact the dude, I'll bet you can persuade him to let us visit his ranch."

"You're assuming it's a guy," he said. This got a smile. "You want to visit his ranch, Huh?"

Hanna just grinned broadly. "I guess I could get pumped about going there. Seeing the site. Who knows, we might find something."

"I did quite a bit of research about ten years ago after a sighting in New Mexico near Silver City," he said. "As I got more into the history of the site, I found several earlier reports of sightings.

"I guess what I'm thinking is that before a call, we should be sure we have as much available information as possible."

It pleased Hanna that Rodrigo liked her idea. Made her feel part of a team. "I think I can do some surfing tonight."

"I'll follow up a couple of things, too."

The Next Weekend

A black SUV parked in front of Rodrigo's house. Hanna got up and walked to look out the front windows. "He's here, Rodrigo, a tall fit-looking Naval officer." she said. What a hunk! The man's good looks didn't dissipate her tension.

"Thank you, Commander Wahl, for taking the time from your Saturday to meet at my home," Rodrigo said. "This is my friend and associate Hanna Krol."

"No worry, Mr. Avila. My Saturdays are far from sacred."

"Hello, Ms. Krol, Commander Jackson Wahl with the Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon Task Force at the Pentagon." He offered his hand then a card.

"Good to meet you, Commander," she said. After some awkward seconds she said, "Rodrigo and I have been trying to guess why you asked for this meeting."

"Dr. Giles identified you two as the Seleron employees responsible for a Freedom of Information Act request that landed on my desk a week ago. I am following up."

"Yes, sir, we are the guilty parties." Rodrigo didn't lose the uneasy smile, despite jest. "We requested information on the incident in southwestern Wyoming that occurred a year ago," Rodrigo said carefully choosing his words. "The CSETI report weeks ago made quite a splash after their successful Freedom of Information Act request. There were many unanswered questions. Getting answers to the ones in the request is the kind of quest we enjoy."

"Yes, I remember the CSETI news conference well. And the incident here in Philadelphia," Wahl said. "The 1500 pages CSETI received were heavily redacted for National Security purposes. Also, that video CSETI furnished to the news media was not part of what was supplied. I've heard a rancher in Wyoming was responsible."

“Colton Wrest,” Rodrigo said. “I had a conversation with him this week. He said CSETI received the video via a media outlet in Utah.”

Wahl looked startled. “It appears you have made progress. I have yet to speak with Mr. Wrest. Regardless,” he gagged out, surprise becoming annoyance, “this likely will be a short conversation. The Navy’s position is that all information related to that incident is top secret.”

“Because of the nature of our work, both Hanna and I have top secret clearances. Seleron does a great deal of government work. Much of that for the military,” Rodrigo said.

“Thank you. I learned quite a bit about Seleron and you before this visit. As I told Dr. Giles, while I might be able to supply some information that’s been declassified, Colonel Lang and I have found no reason to give you anything classified. This program is not related to what Seleron does. Colonel Lang, the head of UAPTF and I will look at your request closely again. We can only supply nonconfidential information.”

“Then, Commander, it sounds like you will not supply anything that CSETI did not receive,” Hanna said.

“Probably not, Ms. Krol. This level of secrecy has been challenged in court many times. In all cases, courts have ruled possible extraterrestrial activity was in the direct interest of national security, making analogy to nuclear secrets. Courts then ruled not to allow document publication or information release. For that reason, I don’t think you will get what you’ve asked for.

“Dr. Giles gave me a little information on your effort. Can I ask why you two have dedicated so much energy to finding out what happened in Wyoming?” Commander Wahl asked.

Rodrigo stared for a few seconds and gave Hanna a look.

“Well, Commander,” he said, “I will speak for myself. Over the years, I’ve read a lot about UFOs. My interest started with my grandfather’s stories when I was a boy. Over the years several UFO detections with unexpected features beyond sightings seized my attention.”

“Okay... and you, Ms. Krol.”

“This is all new to me. It’s just been exciting teasing out bits and pieces as we’ve gone along. I’ve always been a puzzle solver,” she said. Sudoku and the like when I was a kid and now. “This has been fun.”

They stared at the Commander for a reaction. “I rely on Hanna when it comes to technology. My skills are basic,” Rodrigo added.

“Interesting answers. I’ve learned the majority of individuals making these requests are fighting the system or trying to get notoriety for a group. The reason I ask this question is there are possible downsides to what you’re doing. Particularly, if you uncover and hide information that would have national security implications.”

Several moments were uncomfortably quiet. Rodrigo grimaced.

“Commander Wahl, you have been polite. But I’m going to need more than that,” she said.

“Alright,” the Commander said after a second. His eyes locked her glare. “The UTPAF’s main directive is to learn whether another nation, especially an adversary, is using breakout aviation technology that could threaten the United States. Reports of interest are usually unidentified aircraft over American military bases. When pilots report activity that suggests a technological gap – functionality advantages over our aircraft – it is in the government’s interest to find out who or what might be responsible. Given our discussion, I don’t think new technology is what you are interested in. Regardless, the rules apply to everyone.”

“Commander Wahl,” Rodrigo started loudly. “I suspect at least part of the effort has been devoted to reports of extraterrestrial activity that might give us a technological advantage over adversaries.”

There was no answer.

“I’ve read accounts of objects that have crashed on earth and materials retrieved for further study,” Hanna said.

Again, they got nothing from Commander Wahl.

“Reports of intelligence from commercial pilots have often been followed by interviews recently. Very experienced individuals have suggested flying objects show speed and maneuvers that would be impossible given known technology,” Rodrigo added. “There are also stories of materials with properties that could not possibly be of earth origin.”

Hanna could tell Rodrigo was getting impatient with the lack of candor.

“I know some of this is misinformation. Nonetheless, much may also be factual. One being the incident in Wyoming,” Rodrigo said. “I’m hoping we will get help with at least some of what we asked for.”

Yet again, the Commander did not comment.

“You implied there might be penalties of some kind associated with our activity,” Hanna finally said after a break.

“All I can say is that it’s possible to make your lives difficult. We would prefer civilians leave this matter to us.”

Hanna wondered what ‘difficult’ meant but chose not to ask. She could see from his expression that Rodrigo was having considerable trouble with this barrier being thrown out there.

There was another break before Wahl said, “I feel our conversation has gone far enough. I will notify Dr. Giles that we met.”

They all stood, and the Commander said, “Thank you for your time.”

Wahl gone, Rodrigo said, “That was about the funkiest conversation I’ve had in a while. I think he was sent out just to discourage us. I’m inclined to ignore him.”

“I don’t know,” she said. He let us know we could get in serious trouble. Do you think any of what we’ve done so far could be a problem?”

“I’m certainly more concerned than I was before talking to Commander Wahl.”

“Yeah,” Hanna said. “I think he was legit, though. And that worries me.”

The Next Week

“Wow! How cool is this,” Hanna said, her mouth wide open… her eyes fixed on snow-capped monoliths in the distance welcoming her to a new world. She eagerly lapped up several big lungfuls of cool dry air at the bottom of the stairs. “Nothing else in the universe could possibly be so grand.”

She lagged, behind Rodrigo as he walked across the tarmac toward the terminal building at Jackson Hole. Her gaze returned to the glory over and again.

She reached for her phone as Rodrigo turned to wait. She put it back. “I know, a picture will never do this justice.”

He smiled and said, “Send Joe a postcard. I’m glad we came too. Beauty alone makes the trip worthwhile… and we talked everything else out on the plane. Right now, I can’t think about much but aliens. Can’t wait to meet Colton Wrest tomorrow, and I still don’t understand how you magically dug up a phone number.”

“But wait, Roomie, it was you who talked this cowboy into meeting with us. This visit is just about all I’ve been thinking about for three days too. I don’t care if we find nothing. It’s a gas just to be doing this. As complicated and hard to understand what we know is, my world will never look quite the same.”

Rodrigo stopped for a second and smiled. “I feel kinda numb. Jada wasn’t happy with me going. She accepts the opportunity but wasn’t easy, anyway. How did Joe do with you coming?”

“I invited him. He went on about some big project for work. I acted disappointed. Truth told, I worried he’d just be in the way. I love the man, but he’s a civil engineer. A totally different mindset from what we are doing.

“Oh, that’s not fair. One thing he and I both love is being outdoors.”

Hanna put her hand behind her neck and looked at the ground, away from Rodrigo. “How many staff signed onto Dr. Giles idea of working on their own time to check samples we take back?”

“I filled all the spots we thought might be needed with good people I’ve known for a long time except for molecular biology.

“But looks like the cars are this way,” Rodrigo said, his voice suddenly rigid. “Why don’t you find the bags while I get a car?”

Hanna had a big dose of respect for her partner. She regularly wished Rodrigo could lighten up. So what, she reflected. This is going to be a blast. No need to dig into everything. When she talked to Niki, she’d wanted to come. But there was work to be done. She looked up and headed to baggage claim.

Half an hour later they were on the road for a 90-mile drive. Hanna stopped twice for spectacular overlooks. They reached Big Piney two hours later and turned left toward Marbleton.

Fter a short drive their bags on the sidewalk in front of Mableton Inn. She looked around. “Sure ain’t Philly! Look at this. We’re parked right in front of the place.”

Hanna chose a room upstairs. Rodrigo’s was near the lobby. “Give me half an hour and we can meet here for a drink,” he said.

“A brew or two would be great,” she said.

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“My room’s view is incredible. Just some forest, but, wow, open space as far as can see,” Hanna said. “No cars, people, just birds and clean air. I sat on the bed to check calls and emails but spent most of the time staring out the window. I could live here…

“Didn’t bring much but jeans and tops, except for one dress that I hung up, just in case.”

Rodrigo nodded. “I was talking to the friendly lady at the desk. The drift thing Colton told me about started a few weeks ago. It’s an annual event and been going on for more than a hundred years.” Rodrigo said.

“She gave me directions to his ranch. Wasn’t sure about some details. But she knew his cattle are already on their way to BLM land. Said she sees him around town once in a while. Everyone knows Colton. Small town, I guess.”

“BLM?” Hanna said.

“Bureau of Land Management – government land.”

Rodrigo stared at notes he made. “Turn on a dirt road just past a creek.” This doesn’t make sense.

It’s this time thing he does. Always thinking about fitting what needs to be done in the hours in the day. Maybe he’ll relax later. Hanna said, “Don’t worry, the GPS will get us there.”

"She has a nice smile, too," Hanna said. "Friendly people here. At the airport, everywhere. They all seem relaxed.

"When did Wrest agree to see to us tomorrow?" She pulled up the video of the alien craft for a millionth time. She spotted Rodrigo watch the video flash on her face. She knew the video captivated her and hoped he was as excited as she was.

"Ten," he said. "It sounded like we have permission to visit the landing site, if it's not raining. That did make it sound a little tentative. But we should be there most of the day."

She was amazed with what he'd accomplished in the background. Some combination of personality and style allowed him to make others comfortable and willing to work with him. Still, when he got into something, he liked to work by himself. So, his idea they go to Wyoming together last week made her feel special. A few lunchtime meetings also made a difference – good thinking came out of talking with each other about something other than work.

'Why am I suddenly so rivetted with his habits and attention? This thought had lingered. One idea was his conduct and responsiveness to the needs of others made his invention become such a big product?'

Then she wondered if Rodrigo had been in contact with the alien recently. She wished he would talk more about it but understood why he kept most of that to himself. Maybe these aliens took such factors – openness, attentiveness, and the like – into account in settling on him as their partner. She looked at him study notes.

Not a tall man, Rodrigo had that square body type. Still muscular and fit-looking at 60, his full head of hair was dark with a little gray at the temples. Always clean shaven, he wore similar dark slacks and a plain, modest colored shirt open at the neck. Hanna had never seen a tie and wondered if there was a pair of jeans for tomorrow.

“I noticed a small bar around the corner,” she said, “The first is my treat.”

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Out for a run the next morning, the intensity of the last days was front and center. As Hanna’s strides got longer and stronger, the project receded into the beauty surrounding her.

She walked the last mile back to the Inn. Memory of the alien’s disappearing flashed again. What in God’s universe could make that happen? she judged as intensity ramped up.

Research and occasional lunches with Rodrigo unearthed a constant stream of bits and pieces – things without obvious answers that sustained excitement. The list had become quite long. Shared insight egged her on. Studious growth slowly nurtured a weighty fellowship, the likes of which Hanna couldn’t recall with man. Certainly not with Joe or Dad, she thought. She looked forward to occasional lunches and weekend phone calls immersed in the details or some new theory that brought her that vital state of mind. It’s not that my conversations with Joe are superficial, she considered. They’re just not cerebral, she finally decided.

Now, even with her body refreshed from a run, a thrill filled her for the day to come.

Openness, maturity and experience permeated conversations. Rodrigo was steady with more energy than many people at work in spite of nearing retirement. He’d kept up with technology but never got too deep. Didn’t let sexy new thinking suck him in. The constancy of new software and changed capability seemed to put him off. She already determined that he valued her up-to-date skills.

Then again, he, still, always gave his best. Hanna knew he wasn’t happy in his job. Still Rodrigo never talked about retirement. Just before they left, Maggie called them a dynamic duo. Rodrigo taking Hanna’s raw ideas, like how to tackle the quarry project a month ago, and molding them, to add substance.

She came to a billboard. It advertised the Drift Museum, a comparatively meek building behind it. But reading bits from a billboard convinced her to give it a visit before leaving.

Minutes later Rodrigo was sitting in a small dining area when Hanna walked into the Mableton Inn. “Mind if I join you? I can get a shower before we leave.”

He looked up. “Good morning. You look like you just tumbled out of a boxcar,” Rodrigo said with a chuckle.

She confidently sat opposite her clean shaven and well-dressed friend. “I was thinking about a couple of things,” she said then jumped up to get a cup of coffee.

When she settled again, Rodrigo asked, “Like what?”

“I was thinking about that guy up in Lethbridge… Goff,” She started. “Should we try to contact him again?”

“He never returned my calls,” Rodrigo said.

“Maybe he’d pick up a call from a phone in Wyoming.”

“That’s an idea!” Hanna could see his wheels turning. “I know this trip cost us a few bucks already, but it might prove worth going up there.”

On the flight, Hanna read several papers Rodrigo recently found. Got through most of a manila envelope full of them. Her friend was a bulldog when locating and consuming relevant information, particularly what was available from the government.

“Rodrigo, have you heard from Jessica Hansen about those freedom of information claims she filed for us? Commander Wahl said we might get some nonconfidential stuff. It’s been a week.”

Rodrigo shook his head, no. Hanna said, “That conversation with Wahl still bugs me. What if we really find something?

“Find something? Like what?” Rodrigo asked.

“Something that we don’t know about so far… What if this Wrest dude tells us something the military probably doesn’t know?”

“Let’s cross that bridge if we get there,” Rodrigo answered.

“I don’t know, Roomie. I’m just worried that we could be in for some serious trouble if we withhold information that might be useful to them.”

“Got it. You sound more than a little concerned. But back to Goff. That first paper we saw by the Professor came out of Jessica’s searches to file that first freedom of information request,” he said. “CSETI’s request took most of a year before the government complied. Something from Goff might turn up. But a year is a long time.”

Hanna popped up and grabbed a package of granola and yogurt.

“You know, Colton Wrest used a lot of names in connection with this drift thing when he and I first talked about today’s visit,” he said once she was back. “I think one was Goff. I’d kind of forgot about the guy. I still wonder why his publications went quiet, and he never returned calls.”

“I’ve read so much. Hard to keep track,” Hanna said. “Wasn’t he looking at… didn’t he study a number of unusual biological occurrences in trees found in the western U.S. and Canada. But no papers were found since the one Jessica turned up, after a regular string before.”

“Yes, and Goff has some connection to the government that Jessica couldn’t figure out.”

“You know Rodrigo,” she started after gulping down a big glass of water. “Since we arrived, I haven’t heard a peep from any of these people here about the incident. I would bet it was big news.”

“Indeed. The news died quickly, didn’t it. Too quickly? Maybe visitors from another world don’t interest most people,” Rodrigo said.

“Too much on their minds,” Hanna said and pulled out her phone.

“Are you looking for recent news out of CSETI?” Rodrigo asked.

“No. I’m thought I’d see if I can get tickets to a Phillies game after we get back. Joe is a little miffed about me going off and leaving him all alone.” A grin brightened her face.

Rodrigo chuckled. Let’s hope this turns out to be a big deal that causes us to worry about Feds.

“I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait for ten,” she said. “Maybe we can be early.” She ran up to grab a shower.

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Colton Wrest’s ranch wasn’t easy to find for city-folk. The gravely dirt road meandered through lodgepole and white bark pines. The rental wasn’t prepared for occasional waterboards that made for a dusty and bumpy ride. After one false start, they found the paved county road. Saddlebag, the hand painted sign said. It wasn’t much better.

“It all looks the same,” Rodrigo grumbled. Hanna just grinned.

Pavement soon history, Rodrigo grumbled while trying to follow a paper map and his notes. Hanna concentrated on the road and the GPS. After another mile, they pulled up to Colton’s ranch house. “Magic! Thank you, GPS,” she announced with a big grin.

They parked in a large dirt area dotted with Wrest’s house and what looked to be outbuildings nestled in trees facing a barn. A corral separated the two. “This place looks great. We’ve gone back in time to the old west.”

“Yeah, I wonder how many generations have lived here,” Rodrigo said.

Colton Wrest stepped out onto the porch in riding clothes. “Right on time, folks,” said the fit-looking man about Rodrigo’s age. “Great morning. Painter needed a workout. We rode to the site

just to check things." He turned his head toward the fine-looking dark red and white paint in the stable. She looked their way, and Hanna wondered if the horse knew he was talking about her.

As they shook hands, Hanna noted Colton was Rodrigo's height, maybe an inch taller, and ten-pounds lighter. "Why don't we sit on the porch – it's a might warm today. I've coffee or water go 'in inside," he said, smoothing sandy hair. She saw a little gray above his ears.

"A glass of water would be nice," Rodrigo replied.

"Coffee for me, please," Hanna said, taking Colton's firm handshake. He walked away leaving them both wanting more from this understated man.

Settled a minute later, Wrest began, "I know you'd like to see the site. Mr. Avila said you'd bring some technical gear. Best if we can take my Bronco."

"A few questions first, if you don't mind," Rodrigo asked.

"What's on your mind?"

Rodrigo pulled a slip of paper from his shirt pocket. "Have you interacted with the authorities?" Rodrigo asked.

"I crossed paths with them," Colton answered.

"Crossed paths?"

"Well, there's two sorts. The local forest crews are fine. Get here regular this time of year. We can talk about the Drift, if you'd like. That's what they're interested in. But after I gave that interview and video to that TV reporter out of Salt Lake, the Feds lost it. All over my place like cattle dogs on drugs. I couldn't believe how many choppers landed where your car's parked.

"How about you two? Why the qyestion? I didn't think to ask, but you're not with them, are yah? I'd the notion you were on your own."

A hairy mut walked out of the house and settled next to Colton's chair. He reached down and stroked the dog's head. "This is Prince. The name came from his devotion."

"We've nothing to do with the authorities," Hanna said. "We're just friends interested in what's happened. For one thing, why the aliens looked to have disappeared."

"That's good… I've got not 'in but grief out of our brothers from Washington. And that part of the video you mentioned still gives me crazy dreams."

"How did you come by the video," Rodrigo asked.

"I rode painter and followed the lights to the top of a hill. No more than a quarter mile away from that round thing. You've probably seen those pictures. It was a wild ride. And a battle to get there."

Hanna wanted to hear more about the battle but didn't interrupt.

"You know," Colton said, "I've seen a lot of strange stuff in the forest. But when I saw those things that came out of whatever that glittering ball is – wow, folks, they just vanished. Still gives me the willies. Had me wondering if I'd lost it for a while. Why didn't that blazing thing they came in disappear too?"

Awestruck, Hanna might have never heard anything that felt more trustworthy from someone she didn't know.

"You've never seen anything like this before, then? It was just luck …. good or bad, that you saw them," Rodrigo said.

"There's stories – old stories pa used to tell. But I'd never seen nut 'in, anything like that. And I'm up in that spot pretty regular that time of year," Wrest said. "I can see a good part of the ranch from that hill… usually catch sight of a lot of my cattle. I like to keep an eye on my herd. They'd all be off on the Drift now."

He'd stopped for a few seconds. His eyes bulged. "That day, it was suddenly winter in summer. The whole sky lit up north of here. When I got there, I figured pa's yarns must be true. But none of those government boys listened. Could see it in their eyes. Thought I was some crazy ol' coot. Specially when I told them I couldn't catch my breath."

"Not enough air, Mr. Wrest? I don't think I've ever heard that before," Hanna reacted.

"When the air got cold, it also got thin. Yah know, even more than climbing one a those tall mountains."

Her mouth hanging open, Hanna asked, "Did the federal people give you any other trouble?"

"I don't know how long it was, maybe a couple of hours after the video's broadcast in Salt Lake. I'd already seen it on the news. The first helicopter landed right there," Wrest said pointing at the open space where their rental was parked.

"Never saw It again. Must have been half dozen troopers that jumped out right there." He pointed. "No nonsense. Gave me A handful of paper, then pushed me aside and had their way with my house, then the site. Soon more choppers were out at the spot for days. They hauled away that thing them aliens left the first night. Even built a fence around the site. But the cattle took care of that."

Hanna glanced to her friend. He was glued on Colton's every word. What a start, she thought and wondered why some ambitious reporter hadn't had a conversation like this. They certainly would have seen it. "Have you talked to reporters?"

"A couple 've called. A New York dude pushed hard, but no one wanted to make the trip. I refused to be interviewed over the phone. You know, folks can fool with recordins'. Anyway, the military guy in charge told me not to give interviews. He said my comments might be changed, and I wouldn't like it. But I think they just don't want what I saw to get out there."

“Like I told yah on the phone, the landing site is pretty picked over,” Colton said looking at Rodrigo. “Maybe the hardest part was when this FBI dude wanted me to sign some nondisclosure promise, then threatened to haul me off to court when I said I wouldn’t. Next, said they could take away my right to use Federal land for the Drift.

“My nephew Warren, he’s a really smart kid, an attorney in Casper, told me to stand my ground,” he finished.

The after a couple of seconds. “I really don’ know what happened to the video and why it came back after so much time.”

“Sounds like you had an bad couple of days,” Rodrigo said.

After a second Colton started to get up and Rodrigo said, “One more question. Has anything else unusual happened recently?”

“Unusual?” Colton asked. He took off his hat and scratched his bald head. “Well, a couple head went missing some time before I saw that thing. Later I found part of one while the snow melted. Don’t usually lose head to the cold.”

“Part of one!” Rodrigo asked.

“You know partner, it was the nastiest thing. The carcass was still frozen. Hard as a rock. But the head was gone. When I found that yearling like that, my stomach turned over. Still does. What kind of person would do something like that?

“Maybe it was those damn creatures.”

Shocked, Hanna looked at Rodrigo.

After a minute, Hanna drained her cup. Everyone got up and headed for Colton’s Bronco.

Hanna grabbed their case from the rental and tossed it into the Bronco.

“It’s only a few miles but you’d best use them belts.” Colton warned.

From the backseat, Rodrigo asked, “Have you seen Professor Goff recently?”

“Henry! Hell yes. He keeps us busy around these parts with some long-winded project about a miserable beetle that’s killed off some lodgepoles. He doesn’t listen. Trees come and trees go…

“Whoa, did you see that!” Colton boomed, pointing excitedly to a large bird taking off from the ground with something in its talons.

“I did,” Hanna said. “I’ve never seen a bird catch prey. What kind of a hawk?”

“A prairie falcon. Got himself a rabbit. You folks just got a special treat.”

That was incredible, Rodrigo thought, wondering what other special treats the day might hold when the feeling overtook him in the backseat. He grabbed and held the handle above the door. ***Tree***, he heard as alien electricity started in the back of his head and coursed his body. Then, again, ***tree***. Just as quickly the surge of sensation was gone. He leaned back into the seat. His head on the headrest, he took a breath. Tree? Why would a tree be important?

“How well do you know Mr. Goff,” he heard Hanna ask Colton.

“Fair to middle ‘in,” Wrest said. “Saw him a few weeks back… Hold on here, I need to go through this stream bed.”

Rodrigo grabbed the hand rest. Jostling made him wonder again why a tree was important. There will be another clue, he was sure.

“Has he talked to you about the aliens or their craft?” she asked, her words breaking up as she bounced around.

“For sure. He’s been keep ‘in track of funny things across the forest on ranches all the way up to the National Park. Checks in on all the ranchers and rangers. He talks to everyone pretty regular. He told me he was hired by the government because of the stuff he’s seen.”

“Good to know. He hasn’t been returning my calls,” Rodrigo said, feeling less worried about another shock.

He knew Hanna was thinking about their conversation at breakfast. Goff’s publications stopping, but an earlier publication raised the possibility of alien activity in this area. “Weird material, possibly genetic, in a tree,” Goff had said. Another clue, Rodrigo thought.

Hanna had known Goff had seen something unusual. Something she didn’t understand. Rodrigo remembered it was changes in physiology and chemistry. And Goff suggested the changes were only possible if the trees were engineered. This must be connected to alines. Technology unknown to us. Keep an eye on trees.

Minutes later, Wrest stopped at the top of a hill. Out of the Bronco, he pointed down at a spot hundreds of yards away. “This is where I took the video,” Wrest said. Rodrigo spotted the remnants of a fence below.

“Can we drive down there,” he asked.

“Hold on a minute,” Hanna said.

Hanna walked around taking in the panoramic view. “I see what you mean. Those way-off mountains are beautiful.”

Wrest pointed at a large rock ten feet away. “That’s where I braced my phone.”

She walked over.

“Did the view change,” Rodrigo asked.

“Not that I notice. But I think I can see where the ball was.”

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It was a bit of a drive over rough, steep terrain. Down the hill the way they came up and around a rocky area. Minutes later, they were at the site where the alien ship landed.

“It’s pretty torn up,” Rodrigo said as he started to walk around looking at trees. “Can you see where the ship was from here?”

“Not exactly,” Colton said. “So much go ‘in on, I couldn’t say.”

“It was easier to pinpoint the landing site from up there.” Hanna had slid the suitcase to the back of the Bronco, opened it and was pulling gear out. “I’ve looked at the video so many times,” she said. “I can probably get close.”

Hanna turned then stared into the forest for seconds. “I think it would have been about forty feet from where you’re standing, Rodrigo, on the left side of that large tree.”

Tree, reverberated in his head. She tossed him a sterile sample kit. Rodrigo backed up to where she pointed. He put on latex gloves, then set in taking samples. But he quickly stood. **Tree**, he remembered again and looked at the large tree to his left. A glaring chill enveloped him.

Stunned, he asked, “Did the temperature just change.”

“I didn’t feel it change,” Colton said.

Hanna nodded her head. “I didn’t notice it drop.”

Rodrigo walked over the tree. He spent some time walking around the snarled old trunk. The Ponderosa Pine’s age showed. “I still feel cold.”

“Alright, Hanna said, looking at her phone. She walked over to his sample kit and checked the air temperature. She then put the phone back in his pocket and walked back toward the gear. “My temp. app. says there’s no difference. I couldn’t feel anything there.”

“Well, for me it felt cold by the tree.” Rodrigo said and went back to taking samples.

Colton watched them work. Hanna methodically used standard sampling procedure with each sample collected. She logged the time and spot as accurately as possible. She took a lot of photos with her phone and used flags to keep track of those, as well.

Rodrigo suggested she take samples at several spots, things that interested him. He concentrated his search around the large tree. It took about an hour to fill two 24-sample trays.

After a while Rodrigo heard Colton say, “What do you plan to do with all that stuff,” pointing to a sample try in the Bronco.

“The plan is to take samples back to our lab for genetic and chemical analyses,” Rodrigo said. He then gave an unadorned explanation of his arrangement with the boss at Seleron.

Hanna looked over later to see a quiet Colton, patiently sitting under a tree sipping occasionally from a thermos and nibbling on nuts from a plastic bag. “Would it be too much to ask you take us to where you found the cow without a head?” she asked.

Colton took off his hat and looked over his shoulder. “It’s maybe a half mile walk,” he said, then stood, pointed and put the bag in a pocket. “Right down that hill there.”

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Hanna grabbed a fresh sample kit. Rodrigo picked up the hand spades and gloves.

Seeing no evidence of a path through the brush, Rodrigo asked, “Did you talk to the Feds about the headless cow.”

“They didn’t ask,” Colton said as they weaved their way downhill through trees and scrub.

Several hundred yards later, Colton said, “Good, the stench is gone.”

“Something still stinks,” Hanna said.

“Okay, almost gone.”

They’d come onto a pile of sun-bleached bones and debris. Both Rodrigo and Hanna pulled a fresh pair of latex gloves out of the box and started to root around.

“You two are really into this,” Colton said, standing about twenty feet away. He found a tree to lean on while he sat quietly.

“Hanna, come look at this,” Rodrigo called out after some time. He’d cleared away some bones and brush with his shovel to find a multitude of big, black flies burrowing around in what looked to be fleshy material.

“Yuck! Hanna blared, holding open a large plastic bag. Rodrigo began to gently remove small shovels full and put them into the bag. “Do you mind?” he said looking Wrest’s way.

“No pal, just some dirty debris.”

As Rodrigo dug away, Hanna changed bags several times. Suddenly, a metallic sound rang out. Rodrigo stopped.

“Whoa, what was that?” Colton cried out and walked over.

Rodrigo wrapped a plastic bag around his arm and reached in the hole up to his elbow. He pulled out a big rock and set it next to the hole.

“Is that it,” was Hanna’s disappointed comment.

“I don’t think so.”

Rodrigo’s shoulder rested on the ground as he leaned in and felt around dirt and debris about as far as he could reach before pulling something out.

“Well, looky here … you need to see this,” he said.

“What the heck did you find,” Colton asked.

Rodrigo stood and yanked the bag off his arm after setting something round on the ground. He pulled a towel out of his back pocket to wipe it off. It was a disk about three inches in diameter that twinkled in the sun. He polished it with a little water, before its reflected light separated into colors.

“I’ll be damned if that thing don’t glisten like the inside of an abalone shell. There’s a couple up at the house the wife and I brought back from California,” Colton said, after a good look.

“It looks perfectly round and very thin,” Rodrigo added. Awestruck, he stared at his partner. “We might have got lucky, really lucky.” He gave Hanna the disk.

“Careful.”

“It doesn’t weigh a thing, and the edge feel sharp,” Hanna said, bouncing it in her gloved hand. “Almost like there’s no weight at all. There’s an indentation in the middle… To make it easy to hold?”

A huge smile covered her partner’s face. Tears or sweat ran down his cheeks. Lucky, indeed!

He picked up a paper towel roll and tore off a sheet. He threw it on the ground and tore off another. Rodrigo took the object and pushed the sharp edge against the towels. There was no tearing. Just perfect cut edges. He handed it to Colton who gave it back right away. Rodrigo was breathing hard and took off one glove.

“Do you think that’s a good idea? It may have come from the aliens,” Hanna said. The thought brought back a last-minute comment from Jada. “Don’t let him do anything dangerous.”

Risky or not, Hanna took a lot of pictures as Rodrigo held out the object. “We found an object that might have been accidently left by aliens. It rang like metal when a shovel hit it, but it’s like no metal I’ve ever seen. Has the feel of a piece of lightweight glass. You know that perfectly smooth feel. It’s almost weightless with sharp edges. Maybe a tool,” she said.

After logging in the object, they spent another hour digging more searching before Colton said, “I’m getting mighty hungry folks. I should have told you I’m diabetic. Do you mind if we go back to the house, and I’ll rustle up some food?”

“Of course not,” Rodrigo said, now a little tired. “Food and talk would be nice, thank you. I wouldn’t mind hearing more about this drift thing.”

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After something to eat, Rodrigo looked at his phone, “Almost three,” he said. “Thank you so much Colton for everything. Today went far beyond expectations. The object we found near the cow’s remains is incredible.”

“And a big mystery,” Hanna added. “I think we’ll call it a day and get an early start tomorrow?”

Rodrigo asked. “You don’t mind if we come back tomorrow, do you? Is there a hardware store in town?”

“No worries about tomorrow. I promised to help a neighbor with a problem calf. You folks needn’t worry about tools, there’s a barn full. Also, feel free to use the Bronco. It’ll be parked there, keys in it.”

As Hanna and Rodrigo got into the rental, Colton turned toward his house but stopped. He reached into his pocket. “Hold on,” he said, then uncertainly walked over to the driver’s door and handed Hanna a small flat object about the same size around as a wristwatch.”

“What is this,” she said. “It looks a little like the tool we found by the dead cow today.”

“I don’t know,” Colton said. I found it by that large tree at the site a couple of weeks ago.”

“Really,” she said tinkering with it. She handed it to Rodrigo.

“I’ve been playing with it at my dinner table. It doesn’t seem to do anything. Maybe it’s a coin? Some kind of token? Your folks might figure out what it is,” he said.

“Thanks,” Rodrigo said. “Found it under that big tree at the site, huh?”

As they drove away, Colton was waving. The car was dead quiet for a minute or two.

“What a day,” Rodrigo started.

“What a man,” she replied.

Rodrigo sat quietly for a while examining the little, uniform object. “This seems a little unexciting compared to the bigger disk, but you never know.” He put it in his pocket.

A mile later, Hanna said. “You know, Roomie, those TSA people might confiscate something that unusual at the airport. Why don’t I take it to the post office this afternoon and mail it to our Seleron office. I’ll put your name on it.”

“Good idea. We might just want to have the guys look at it. It weigh’s nothing. Feels like a postage stamp.”

Rodrigo handed her the small disk. She put it in a pocket. “I’ve been a little afraid, Hanna, to test your temperature on my contact with the alien.”

Hanna looked his way.

“Jada and I went through an exercise two weeks back. I was able to contact the alien with her watching. It was pretty dramatic for me. She still doesn’t like the idea of thought transference but knows I wouldn’t lie to her about it.”

“Yeah, she talked to me about it the afternoon before we left. It’s hard for me too,” Hanna said. “But I feel pretty much the same way. I don’t think you would make up some story about this. For one thing, there’s no angle. So, I’ve accepted everything you’ve told me about these contacts with an alien.”

“I know it’s tough for anyone without direct experience to understand.”

“Maybe we just got some evidence?”

“The reason I asked now is that I’d like to go back to the site and that big tree tomorrow. Two reasons: first is that when I stood at the spot you pointed out where their ship was, I got a chill, I mean a freezing shock, like walking outdoors naked during the winter. It felt like the temperature fell fifty degrees. I checked with my phone’s temp. app too. It hadn’t changed at all.

"On the ride to the hill in the Bronco, I got a telepathic message from an alien. A single word – Tree. It was very clear. I've been thinking about it since. I believe the alien wants me to get their ship back to the spot I was standing in. There may be more that brings in the tree."

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What's the other reason?"

You know how brilliantly light was reflected from the disk we found by the dead cow."

"Yes, what about it?"

"It's the dust. The dust around the landing site where they disappeared reflected light just like the disk. I noticed it when I turned over shovels full of dirt."

"You're saying the dust twinkling has something to do with the aliens disappearing."

"It's guesswork. But if I'm right, it would be a big deal. I just wonder if Professor Goff has found this connection."

"Something I thought about earlier today," she said. "Goff's paper – the one that suggests changes in plant chemistry – we need to figure this out. We've got to get this guy Goff to talk to us."

Later that Day

"Hey, Babe, how did it go today?" Joe asked.

The line was silent. Then, Hanna softly sobbed. "It was over the moon, Joey, over Mars and Jupiter, too," she said while stumbling with words. You won't believe everything." There was a couple of breaths.

"Are you okay, Babe?"

Another big breath. “This thing I let Rodrigo drag me into is incredibly legit, Joey. I wasn’t convinced until I got here. This rancher, Colton, is wonderful. The real deal. He confirmed virtually everything Rodrigo and I thought might have happened.”

“I’m shaking, honey, now that I’m trying to get this all out.” There was silence on the other end.

After a while, Joe said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you this excited. Even when you jump up and down for a Phillies homer. Tell me everything, babe … every second of the whole day.”

“Let me start with something you won’t believe. After we got to the headless cow.”

“Hold on, Babe, a cow with no head? You better slow down.”

“Sorry, Joey, everything seemed more amazing than reality on Colton’s beautiful ranch. It was like some fantasy.”

“I can’t help but start with the disk we found by the headless cow. There’s no way it’s from earth. My guess is it was used to cut the cow’s head off. Don’t ask me why aliens would do that. We never saw a head.”

Joe was speechless again for a while. “Why can’t it be from earth?”

“It was hard, round and sharp. Here, there’s pictures on my phone. Just sent some. Won’t do it justice. Reflected sunlight separates into colors. The thing couldn’t weigh a tenth of an ounce. The surface feels like glass.”

“Wow! Just got the pictures. Strange stuff. The picture does show color on your arm holding the disk. Did you find anything else.”

Hanna went through the whole day, step by step. With each new story her voice went into a crescendo before it was broken up by giggles and laughter. Joe couldn’t help but laugh too. “I

can't wait for you to get back, Babe. This doesn't sound so far-fetched anymore. Now, I want to be convinced."

The Next Day

An early start the next morning made sure there'd be plenty of time.

Rodrigo had called Professor Goff the prior afternoon. "It cost a few bucks to use the hotel phone," he said, "but you were right about location. Goff actually picked up. He admitted he used a program that filtered incoming calls. It'd never seen the hotel phone. He picked up. Must have recognized the area code. When I told him what we were interested in, he was polite but said he couldn't talk because he's bound by a secrecy agreement with the Canadian NATO administration. He told Colton he'd been retained by the Pentagon. Conflicting stories are suspicious."

"This guy's full of stuff," Hanna said and figured Goff was history.

As they drove on the gloriously clear morning – the daytime high was expected to be about five degrees cooler than yesterday – Hanna rolled down her window to enjoy the air.

Rodrigo looked hypnotized sitting in the passenger seat. His view was straight ahead without a peek at her or the countryside. After a while she asked, "What's going on Rodrigo, you seem troubled."

It took seconds before he turned and looked vacantly. "I can't get two and two to add up. Each time it comes to three or something more ridiculous. I've considered dozens of possible explanations. Matter doesn't just disappear."

"I suppose they might have crossed over into some parallel universe," she said with a grin.

Her partner's face let her know the witty comment missed the mark. "Come on, Hanna. I'm serious about this," Rodrigo replied without flourish, or even a look. But his words were forceful. "It's troubling. Something is missing. My bet is the Feds missed it too."

'Whoa! Haven't seen this before,' she thought.

"I thought about the alien craft last night. Being locked up in some vault by the military," he started. "I have the strangest feeling. I'm sure those things that came out of it are gone. It's possible… Do you think it's possible the ship is alive?"

"Wow, Roomie, that's pretty far out there."

"The thought made me sad, quite sad," he said. "If it is alive, the thing's been locked up and probably drilled, hammered and sampled by a bunch of human aliens." He leaned back on the headrest, his eyes closed.

In less than a minute he started again; a miserable expression replaced with a sunny one. "This disc we found." He bounced it in his hand. "I know this crazy thing is the key. There's a door we must go through. Something we must discover before we find out what happened to those aliens. This is the only thing we have that we can attribute to them with confidence."

"Okay, this is get 'in way too far out there for me. It might just be a tool," she said.

"What if something was recorded on it. How would we find out?" he asked.

"What suddenly has made you so cheery?" she said, so distracted she was struggling to remember the longwinded route to Colton's.

"I'm sure you've figured me out. Nothing gets me going like a challenge. There's a story here we need to uncover. That's exciting. This is by far the most stimulating project I've ever got into, I mean, ever. And I have someone who I respect helping."

Hanna stashed the compliment away. It was something planned. “Can you be sure we’re the only ones who have one of these?” she questioned, with a glance at the disk, now very earnest.

“I’m not particularly intuitive, but I can feel it. We’re the only ones,” Rodrigo said, in that assured tone of his. “Let’s start at the original site. I want to have a look around with fresh eyes. Everything yesterday was so new. And maybe we’ll find more of that dust I saw reflect light. Maybe even another one of these.”

Last night he dreamed about the offramp – the one he didn’t make when he crashed Gabriella. The dream dredged up an awful memory – the offramp transforming into a disk rolling away from him. His dream was an amplified distortion of that awful event when the alien first contacted him. He’d been stewing on the accident since he woke. How could he explain any of it to Hanna?

After a brief stop at Colton’s barn to pick up the tools and Bronco, they were making their way toward the site. Hanna noticed Rodrigo staring out the passenger window. “What’s going on now?”

“Do you remember how this started for me?”

“Yeah. You said there was an accident the first time the alien contacted you. So, what’s up?”

“Here we have poles running across Colton’s property in the middle of nowhere – power poles. I was just wondering if there could be a connection between power poles and the aliens.”

Hanna looked north of the road to see a long line of power poles running off into the distance until they disappeared. “I guess that’s another thing we need to add to our list,” she said.

At the landing site, Hanna grabbed a shovel and began to walk around turning over rocks, while looking for anything they might have missed. She soon noticed Rodrigo sitting on the Bronco’s bumper watching her. “Tired already, Roomie?”

“You’re stirring up a lot of dust.”

“Sorry, I’ll be more careful,” she said with a probing look.

“No, no, it’s not bothering me. It’s the sparkle again. The dust reflects sun. A sparkle that looks like the reflection from the disk we found.”

“So, you think that’s caused by particles of alien material scattered around here?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Can we look at the video on your phone again?”

Hanna pulled up the video, and they huddled around the small display under a tree. “There it is, where they disappeared. It was right there,” she said pointing toward the large pine.

“It’s hard to tell, but the trunk looks to be about forty feet from where the craft was,” Rodrigo added.

They walked over to the tree. “Look at this. Nothing but dirt. I didn’t notice yesterday. Why is life notably missing under the tree? No brush or seedlings, nothing within a circle with a radius of maybe a hundred feet from the tree. Just dirt,” Hanna said.

“Very unusual, given the density of growth in other parts of the forest.” Rodrigo turned around a couple of times. “I guess the military could have done something.

Hanna again began to move from place to place with her shovel and turn over soil.

Rodrigo walked around the tree once more. “Yesterday, I had that strange feeling. It was hot. But I got that chill here, right here. Next to this big rock,” he said firmly planting his feet in a spot about halfway out toward the tree’s dripline. “After I got that message saying, “tree”.

I feel the cold again. If I stood here for a while, I’d need a couple more layers.”

“How get a chill,” she added strange. I didn’t feel anything, yesterday,” Hanna said walking over. “It still doesn’t feel cool. She pulled out his phone. “It’s sixty-six where I’m standing.” She walked out in the sun. “Sixty-seven. The technology says it not cold here.”

Rodrigo walked over again. “Yeah, I did that yesterday. Sorry, feels cold to me.”

Hanna went back to shoveling soil around the tree.

“Hold on,” Rodrigo said. “Let me get a better angle.” He jogged over to a spot where the sun was directly behind him. “Can you turn over some dirt.”

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “The intensity of the sparkle looks much more concentrated than it was at other spots.

“Let’s switch places. You should see this for yourself.”

They switched places. “I see what you mean. It’s like the soil is chock full of the sparkling stuff. But it’s more than that. What I’m seeing reminds me of looking at the sky on a dark, dark night and watching the stars twinkle. Let’s get samples.”

They filled four two-quart plastic bags with the soil from four spots. They choose locations as randomly as they could make them in the limited area and carefully labeled the bags with the exact location of the sample from GPS on Hanna’s phone. She tried to get pictures of the sparkle with her phone before she carried the bags back to the Bronco.

She stopped about halfway and turned to look at her partner. “Hey, partner, what if this disk is some magic material these aliens have developed for space travel,” she said. She set the bags on the ground halfway to the Bronco and pulled the disk out of her pocket and held it up. “Some material that’s the basis of everything they make … their ship, their tools, even something akin to a space suit. Those things we saw come out of the ship didn’t really look much like a life form.”

“Whoa!” Rodrigo said. “These aliens may not look like us or anything earthly.”

“Yeah, I get that. Whatever made the sparkle must have been a covering to allow the aliens to be outside in our atmosphere. Or, maybe to hide them.”

“My God, Hanna. Where did that come from?” They stared at one another uneasily for a second. “That’s plausible, you know, particularly given what we understand. Now I can’t wait to find out what this sparkly stuff is.”

“I don’t know. If there’s any reality in this idea, I can tell you how to make two and two come up to four.”

“Okay,” Rodrigo said looking at his friend expectantly.

“Maybe, the aliens didn’t disappear. Maybe they are here, and all this dusty stuff we’re seeing is the residue from them and their suits. Maybe something went wrong, and they didn’t disappear, they disintegrated. What could happen if oxygen was toxic for them.”

“Now, that’s sounding plausible,” Rodrigo said. “But we’re dealing with something here no human has ever seen. I think the wise route is to collect as much evidence as we can before drawing conclusions.”

They collected more samples before preparing to move on. Hanna opened the Bronco rear door.

“Hang on,” Rodrigo said. “I wouldn’t mind grabbing samples from that tree where the aliens disappeared. I’ll be right back.”

Rodrigo used a knife he found in the Bronco’s glove box. Bark, sub-bark, needles, and sap were collected following good hygiene protocols. “Sharp knife. But probably not sterile,” he said, while cleaning it with his towel and some water from a bottle Colton kept in the Bronco.

Hanna made notes. The samples were carefully logged and put in one of their sample kits. They took off cross country for the half mile to the headless cow remains.

They then spent an hour with shovels and trowels seeing if they could find anything else of significance. “I don’t think my back will take much more of this,” Rodrigo finally said.

“Okay, I’ve got a little more energy, and we haven’t looked over there yet,” Hanna answered while pointing at a low ridge with her shovel.

Rodrigo leaned on his shovel and watched her dig. He looked at his watch, thinking, ‘Still five hours till our flight.’ A flash caught his eye. “Hold on Hanna,” he called out and walked over. He began to go through a pile of dirt next to his partner. After a few seconds he held up something that looked like a small but shiny tattered flag.

“What’s this?” he said, sounding breathless.

He handed it to her. “Looks to be torn cloth, but it’s got that same sparkle I saw back by the tree you sampled. It’s very thin,” she said tugging on it with two hands. “And strong.”

“I didn’t see it till it caught the sun,” he said. After cursory study, they logged it into their sample kit.

She dug more with increased energy, Rodrigo now helping. They tried several spots without finding anything more.

“You know, we’ve got a ton of samples and have a flight to catch,” Rodrigo said. “What we’ve accumulated to this point might test our colleague’s patience. If they find something interesting, there’s always the possibility we can come back.”

“If we get going now, we should have time to take care of sending the big stuff from the post office in Jackson Hole.”

“Sounds good,” Rodrigo said. He immediately started to walk away.

‘He kind of forgot to pick up his things,’ she thought. Then heard, “I’m also sure we are going to have to engage a material scientist. I think this stuff we’ve found might wear out the Seleron guys.” He was already fifty yards up the hill.

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Back on the highway, Hanna had been thinking. “You know, I really didn’t expect we’d find anything. But what we did find is amazing…. exciting is an inadequate word. I suspect the military may well not have come across any of this. So, my psyche has gone back to our conversation with that Navy guy, Commander Wahl. What if the Seleron guys begin to turn up something interesting? What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Rodrigo said. “Let’s not cross that bridge until we have to.”

“Your expression tells me there’s something more on your mind, Roomie.”

Rodrigo looked at her. “I may not be particularly intuitive, but you are. Now that you’ve thought about it, anymore thought on the alien ship being alive?”

“I can’t see how the round metal ball in the video could be a lifeform. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“What does it take in your mind for something to be alive?” he asked, his voice had transitioned to that slow, forceful tone.

“Well … it needs to be able to move. It should breathe and have blood to get the oxygen to its cells. I guess it needs to take in nutrients to generate energy. And most animals have a brain and think to some extent.”

“What about plants and bacteria?”

“Okay, then how would you recognize something from another world was alive?” he said.

Hanna said nothing for half-a-minute. “Guess, I’m not up to your game.”

“All I’m suggesting is that we need to keep our minds open. The more I think about the alien ship, The more convinced I become it must be alive. Think about some of what we’ve found. Materials that are not from earth. Something that’s had the effect of an herbicide under a single tree. And communication over distance seeking help.

“We are almost sure the occupants of their ship are gone, what does that leave?”

“The ship,” she answered.

“Yes, even if the alien ship is an android, it has proved itself alive in a fashion that convinces me.

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Flights were good. With an on-time arrival in Denver, they had time for some food at the Boulder Tap House. Hanna was quiet. In the air to Philadelphia, Rodrigo was work, work, and more work. Hanna chose to read. He thought she was feeling a tapped out – had enough of their adventure.

Rodrigo tidied up hand-written notes. He also entered sample logs. Other impressions he remembered from their undertaking were almost complete when his battery quit. He’d hoped to pull everything together for a report for Morgan Giles.

When he and Hanna parted at baggage claim, she turned with a warm look and gave him a hug. “Thank you. I’ve never had an experience that competes with the last few days. It needs to settle in. Right now, I know how all those seafaring adventurers who explored the new world must have felt.”

His first thought was she just added something extra to their success. But as he walked away, he realized this wasn’t Hanna-like. Something was wrong.

Any light was long gone when he spotted Gabriella parked by herself. Hanna had finally stopped giving him stuff about his relationship with his car. She had a new one loaded with all the bells and whistles. It was one of the few things they might never see eye-to-eye on. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. This feeling that something might not be quite right with Hanna was bugging him.

He always parked under a light. His favorite lot was almost empty, commute traffic long cleared, so he took his time.

“Hey girl, how yah been?” he said as he walked around her, unlocked doors and put the bags in the trunk. His regular security markers and camera hadn’t been activated. She was almost as clean as when he parked her three days ago. He cleaned some bird stuff off the windshield with the rag and spray-bottle he kept in the trunk. Then, he took the time to tell Jada he was on his way… he turned the key to hear that purr.

The drive was great. Nothing close to a delay. He let her out a little on a safe stretch of the highway and pulled into his garage at 10:24 pm. He patted Gabriella’s dash, got the bags and went inside to find Jada’s smile, “Thanks for calling. I’ve got some nice food.”

“Great! Seven hours since I had a burger in Denver.”

She gave him a kiss, and Rodrigo dropped everything. He pulled her close. “It’s really good to see you, dear,” he whispered, “after a few days I will never forget.”

“I got that from your calls. You usually just check-in when you travel. You couldn’t stop talking. What you found sounds to have washed away all that fretting over the cost. Come have some food and tell me everything.”

He gazed while she walked back to the kitchen, this woman he’d lived with for so long. There were moments when they seemed to know each other too well. But on the flight, he’d happily thought about his tolerant wife and his personality quirks. Now he couldn’t help but get lost in her beauty as she walked away.

“I got a lot done on the plane,” he said. “I can unpack later. He thought to move the sample bag to the garage but left it by the door. “Putting my notes in the computer helped me remember

more. It's a story… a story without an ending. With some finishing touches, I think I'm done until we start getting results from the samples. But I can get to all that tomorrow."

"Sounds good! I'd like to have you back for a while." She said and handed him his Jack. But her expression told him she knew he wouldn't be able to give up the project, even for a few hours. Jada turned to get a light supper on the table. It was good to be home.

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The rhythmic vibrato woke Rodrigo. Harshness gone, it now moved with patience and emphasis between notes, no matter how discordant they were. Eyes open, he was startled then worried.

The aliens swaying in the distance from his views of their home planet filled his mind. He couldn't make out individual figures, but it still unnerved him. He had to drag his thoughts to the gently swaying palm trees outside their condo on Saint Lucia last summer. It worked the last time and now again. He relaxed.

He was close to piecing together the thought behind the rhythm but still didn't have it. The alien was learning to talk to him.

Now that he was wide-awake, all the questions from Wyoming overflowed. Why did the alien single him out? He knew nothing about these beings. Was it some android on the other end? What did they want? Somehow these questions seemed more crucial after what he and Hanna foun… and comical.

He got out of bed and walked over to sit in the chair by their dresser. He looked over at Jada sleeping and immediately considered talking to her. Maybe she might have an idea what was going on with Hanna. Just as quickly he knew it was a bad idea. He'd wait and let things play out.

His mind went to a collection of short science fiction stories he'd almost finished reading. The hope was it would give him ideas on how to deal with alien. Instead, most stunk. One regular problem was aliens inevitably had two arms, two legs and a head. They also spoke English. The issue of communication was never acknowledged.

Very few humans, maybe none, could appreciate the experience Rodrigo had with the alien. Trying to read meaning into what initially seemed gibberish. Never knowing when it would open the door and make contact. Dozens of hours sitting alone on the patio reliving each experience.

Rodrigo wondered for the thousandth time what the real aliens looked like while working to secure his psyche. He wasn't easily panicked. It took a long time sitting in the chair until his wife's reassuring soft breathing purged the feelings. He started to doze off and might never figure out what the alien wanted anyway.

In bed the rhythmic chant came back, then the image of swaying palms. He relaxed for a long, long time and let the swaying cacophony saturate him. It seemed to make sense. Another minute and he might see it. With no idea how much time had passed, he felt a complimentary pulse fill him. His heartrate changed. His mind was working nonstop. Dozens of thoughts and ideas flashed in and out.

Then, everything stopped.

Through a sensation of complete relaxation, he felt awareness flow into him. It filled his being and became part of him. The brilliant barrage of color from the video jarred him but just as quickly diminished. The image was colorless. A lifeless ball. It looked dead.

The alien had just learned how to send him an image. Accompanying the image was the message. The only message that mattered. He was immediately asleep.

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About to walk down the hall for a first cup on Monday, Rodrigo wondered if any work had started on the samples he distributed Thursday. Hanna wasn't there yet.

His mind went to their weekend conversation. She said, "no worries," when he asked about the parting at the airport. "I got really tired. It happens sometimes. I don't want to talk or do anything. Sometimes, I barely feel like breathing," she said.

He began to consider if he'd buy this explanation when Ray Gallagher burst through his office door. "Rodrigo… hey man!" he said, gulping air. "Those samples … I got to some … this weekend. Results! Man, they were funky to the max," Ray unconsciously flattened his messy kinky hair – always a little like Einstein's. "Sorry, man, I ran across the mall and up the back stairs of your building." Next, he tucked in his shirt. "That sparkly, dusty stuff is super weird. Never seen anything like it."

Ray was standing right next to his chair and bent over to get close. Hot words made Rodrigo stand up. One of Ray's shoelaces was untied. He violently scratched his neck behind an ear.

Rodrigo hoped he'd get to whatever got him going. Always a mess, he was a good man for those who took time to get to know him. More important he was an instinctive scientist. Rodrigo didn't mind the other stuff. "Weird? You must have been eager to get going on them this Sunday."

"Guess I was. I came in to check on some incubators and that sparkly sample called to me," Gallagher said.

Rodrigo knew Ray had a home life. He'd met his sweet wife.

Rodrigo chuckled and said, "You mean, it said – Ray, come look at me?"

Gallagher gave him a funny look. "Whatever … There isn't much of the glittery stuff in those soil samples. But it was easy enough to separate from the dirt, debris and bits of OM.

"OM?" Rodrigo asked.

"Yeah, man, organic matter… I just shook up a sample with some water, put it into a benchtop centrifuge and spun it at slow speed. The sparkly flakes stayed in the water and everything else went to the bottom of the tubes. That glitter floated! I did it again and let one tube stand overnight. Some of it stayed suspended until after I left but settled by morning. So, this morning, I did a large sample and collected about a milligram of that sparkly stuff."

"When did you get here this morning to get all that done?" Rodrigo asked, finally getting that Ray was thrilled with what he'd found.

"Early… I wanted to see what happened overnight."

"You just got up and left?"

"Judy's used to me disappearing. Anyway, it turns out the glittery stuff's density is a small fraction of water and much smaller yet compared to things like aluminum or steel. It's so light the flakes float in air for a while when you shake it in a tube. I'll do all the math and put good numbers in a report."

"Doesn't surprise me. Just holding the disk Hanna and I found, you can tell there's not a lot of mass," Rodrigo said. "We think they could be related – the disk and the sparkly material.

"Anything else?"

"I haven't seen this disk you found. Do you have it here?"

Rodrigo opened a desk drawer and handed Ray the disk. He played with it for a minute.

"Pretty strange stuff," Ray said fascination covering him handing it back. "A spectral scan of the shiny flakes I collected let me id common metals, mostly aluminum. Some silicon-based material that must hold everything together in a way that's not obvious. It's unusual enough that I might ask Professor Samuels at Temple to have a look at it."

"For free?"

"I think so. I've sent some money his way in the past for grad student help with government contracts at Seleron. He'd probably give us a freebee on a little look."

"Great, Ray. I really appreciate you taking time out of your weekend. We didn't know what to expect. I think I'll try to let Hanna know."

As Gallagher started to leave, he turned and said, "Oh, one more thing Rodrigo. There's some radioactivity. It's the first thing I checked."

"Oh shit, man, Hanna and I took a bath in that stuff."

"No … no need to worry. It's only maybe twice background. No sweat.

"Good. When do you think you can get to some of the other samples?" Rodrigo asked.

"I don't have anything next weekend, at least right now, so I'll plan to put in a few hours, probably Saturday after Jason's basketball game. You never know. I might get to some of the samples evenings."

"Much appreciated, Amigo," Rodrigo said as Gallagher walked out the door. "I'm delighted. Looking forward to more results."

Ray smiled.

Rodrigo checked his watch. He'd call Hanna now. At least leave a message.

**

Rodrigo gave the door a knock. Shuffling preceded it opening. "Roomie… I wasn't expecting anyone! I was sleeping."

Muffled by surprise, he couldn't help stare. Why she hadn't returned his calls was clear. Hanna looked like crap. Blankets and pillows were heaped on the couch behind her. "Sorry," was all he could muster.

Rodrigo took a hard look for his concealed officemate. The person he thought he knew well. In a bathrobe and slippers, with a hairbrush in her hand, this Hanna was a frail outline of the well-dressed and adept friend he set eyes on each morning. Most startling was a pallid face under a knotted tangle of her normally beautifully groomed long golden-brown hair.

In search of something to say, he was looking down on her. They normally were eye to eye.

The stooped Hanna pulled a Kleenex out of a robe pocket, covered her mouth, and coughed several times. The deep, hoarse coughs sounded painful. “I’m not going to ask you in. I’m disgusting,” she wheezed out.

“Is it COVID?” Rodrigo asked. He took a couple of steps backwards.

“Naw. I’ve tested negative three times now.”

“Then, this has been going on since we got back?”

“I guess. That’s right. I didn’t feel very good the night we landed,” her voice was a whisper as she turned her head to cough again. “Joe’s in New York. A problem with an assembly line for a drive motor his company makes for water softeners.”

“Seems they’d give him a break. Let him stay with you,” Rodrigo said.

“It’s a big deal. Their plant makes about fifteen thousand of the damn things a day,” she said. Anger flashed before her eyes drooped. She staggered a little and put her hand up on the door jam. “The plant is dead in the water. He’s the only development engineer still with the company.”

“There must be a lot of water softeners out there,” Rodrigo noted. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“I have an appointment tomorrow.”

**

Results poured in over the next week. Rodrigo had begun to keep the office door closed. Intense excitement flooded the limited employees in the know. They wanted to hear more about the samples, but every one of them also asked about his missing officemate. With each question about Hanna, he was beside himself for quite a while.

After they got back from Wyoming, Hanna had come back to work for two days before she vanished, and he visited her at home.

Another gap without communication followed his visit to his sick friend's house. Joe later explained Hanna's doctor sent her to the ER. She was immediately hospitalized.

The hospital staff started a cascade of tests. Results led to more confusion, not a cause, as her illness increased in severity. Rodrigo finally tracked her down to find an exhausted and fragile-looking Hanna surrounded by equipment. In a maze of tubes and other gear, it hard to believe it was her.

Joe was back and sitting quietly by her bed, looking unhappy. Rodrigo began to stop by the hospital evenings to keep her up to date on progress with the samples they'd collected. He really wanted to check in on her. She seemed to appreciate the visits – even weakly smiled once in a while – but she had stopped calling him roomie. She seemed to take little interest in her surroundings or what he had to say. He wasn't sure if it was too much or she couldn't keep up.

Yesterday, they'd moved and quarantined her. He asked but got no info. Finally, he was able to get Joe, who didn't want to talk. "Thanks, Rodrigo. She's really sick," he spit out impatiently, before hanging up. He sounded beside himself.

That dreadful image of Hanna in the hospital bed with tubes and medical kit everywhere was stuck in Rodrigo's head. "She doesn't look like the person I know. She's lost so much weight. More like some kind of zombie," he told Jada at supper.

She gave him a strange look. “You’re worried she picked up something from that stuff you two brought back from Wyoming, aren’t you? The stuff you think aliens left.”

Rodrigo stared for seconds before his words came out slowly, “That would be the truth. My mind wouldn’t let me go there.” He worried colleagues at work had been exposed to some strange bug.

“I called her and talked after you came back so downhearted from visiting her at home,” Jada said. “We talked for a long time. She struggled. Said she feels a lot like she did that first day – when you took her to the ER after FDR Park.”

“Really!” he shouted. “Why didn’t I consider…. that day she might have had meningitis. All that reading and I shoulda made the connection. Right after FDR, Dr. Midfield said that her ear exam and her neck rigidity justified a spinal tap. But I never heard that outcome and forgot about it because she felt better.

“Then we went to Wyoming! And handled all that alien stuff.”

Immediately after dinner as he picked up his computer. He knew it had to be right. A little reading confirmed that damaged meninges, the brains protective tissue, could lead to viral infection. Suggested symptoms matched Hanna’s ordeal well.

She collected a lot of samples in Wyoming. Samples potentially contaminated with microbes from another world. But she was careful and wore gloves. He wanted to know more.

“Hey, Joe, it’s Rodrigo again.”

“What is it, Rodrigo? I’ve had enough, already.”

“Really sorry Joe. It’s a tough time. I wouldn’t bother you again without a good reason.

“I’m worried Hanna could be having a reaction to something she picked up in Wyoming.”

He heard Joe suck air. In a calmer voice, he said, “Do you mean something from the aliens?”

"Yes."

"Such as… and why?"

Then, before he could answer, Rodrigo heard, "Rodrigo, you're scaring the shit out of me. Who knows what could happen from some bug that didn't evolve on earth?"

"That's part of the problem, buddy. I think Hanna had meningitis after the CSETI rally. I bet you can confirm that. If that's the case, she is likely more susceptible to things like viruses. Maybe an alien equivalent."

"Oh, shit, Rodrigo. You need to call Dr. Midfield at Mercy. I have her number in my phone."

**

"Yes, Dr. Midfield. Thank you for getting back so soon. Joe Radcliffe gave me your number."

"Hanna Krol's husband? How can I help you?"

"Are Hanna's symptoms consistent with meningitis or encephalitis?"

"Yes… and a lot of other things. We've found all the usual evidence of swelling in the brain. But her symptoms don't respond to the usual therapy for a viral infection. I'm interested in anything that might help us treat her more effectively. She has so many symptoms, it's hard to determine what is significant."

Rodrigo hesitated. "Dr. Midfield, you may have trouble with what I'm going to tell you.

"Hanna and I have been following up on a theory that aliens landed a craft in Wyoming a year ago. With the assistance of the Wyoming rancher, we visited the suspected landing site over a week ago."

"Does this have anything to do with these internet contagion hoaxes I've seen?"

"Yes, Dr. Midfield."

“Then, I think I’ve heard enough.”

“Please hear me out, Doctor,” he spit out loudly. “Hanna and I found artifacts at the alien site that were clearly not of earth origin. Regardless of whether or not you believe me, these are now being evaluated by our employer, Seleron, and Temple University.”

“Seleron. Okay…”

“We both handled these items and, possibly, came in contact with microorganisms from another world. Microbes or whatever, I am worried that for some reason Hanna got sick and I didn’t.”

“I am having considerable difficulty with this line of reasoning Mr. Avila, but Mrs. Krol is quite ill. Can you keep it to what you know?”

“Yes, Doctor. Our lab results are preliminary. But you might find one result important. Our team believe tell me they have found a substance, in many ways analogous to our DNA, which has a very different chemical structure.”

“Now you have my interest, Mr. Avila. We have found that Mrs. Krol is producing an unusual antibody profile, as if her body is searching. Something I’ve never seen. Would you be available to give some blood today?”

Several days later,

“Hey, Roomie,” Hanna said with a grand smile. Next to her bed, Joe smiled too.

“Wow, do you ever look better,” Rodrigo said.

“Dr. Midfield is giving you a lot of credit for nudging her in the right direction,” Joe said.

“But she really doesn’t believe the alien story,” Hanna giggled.

“You really are feeling better,” Rodrigo added. “I don’t understand why the Doctor is giving me credit. All I did was give some blood.”

Joe got up from his chair and walked over. He pulled him a hug. “That blood sample showed minor amounts of a similar unusual mix of antibodies to what they were seeing in Hanna. But you’re not sick.

“The doctor said, that in healthy individuals, like you, immune tolerance prevents our protective systems from attacking the body's own cells. If this process fails, the immune system can produce antibodies against its own tissues, leading to an autoimmune response.

“The Doctor said she started thinking why, if this was an autoimmune problem, did Hanna have it and not you, no matter whether the cause was environmental or genetic. Hanna is a young woman. Young women are known to be more suspectable to lupus. Then Dr. Midfield tried a single treatment of a new lupus drug and immediately began to see an improvement.”

“Will Hanna have to keep taking it?” Rodrigo asked.

“I don’t know. Also, it’s only been a couple of days. And questions remain, like why Hanna’s response to the drug was so intense. She hasn’t even been diagnosed with lupus. We just have to hope it continues to work,” Joe said.

“Dr. Midfield says autoimmune diseases are notoriously unpredictable,” Hanna added. “But I don’t feel like I’m going to die anymore.”

**

Rodrigo and Ray from analytical met weekly to review progress with the Wyoming samples. Ray’s innate technical enthusiasm had put him in the center of the work. Rodrigo counted on him to keep track of all the threads of study.

Samuel's Temple University group quickly dropped everything else to study the amazing disk material and fabric that could be rock hard or flexible while lighter than anything known. They determined the 3-inch disk had a metal composition similar to the dust's glitter but, with changes in an adhering substance. The fabric-like sample was different again but the majority of what held the component metals together was the same material as the dust. The cloth-like substance couldn't be cut with scissors. And, as far as the Seleron acoustic lab could tell, there was nothing digitally or otherwise inscribed on the disk.

"You know Rodrigo, don't tell the boss, but I can't keep up with my regular work," Ray said on a Wednesday. "Team members constantly want access to the materials. I get calls all day long. I'm running samples back and forth between labs. Then people want to talk.

You know, man, it's going to get out despite the secrecy agreements.

This was the second time Rodrigo heard Ray complain. "Sorry, Ray. I talked to Dr. Giles about the amount of work the project is generating. He wasn't worried the last time we talked. It's still only a few weeks. It'll hopefully all settle down soon."

"Just getting people to read and sign the secrecy agreement took time. Did he say anything about a little help?" Ray added. He hesitated. "The people in Samuels' group asked permission yesterday to get chemists outside the group involved. They want help studying the dust."

Ray looked at Rodrigo for a second. "I also learned that I can get a small sample from the fabric-like material to dissolve in perchloric acid. The dust also dissolves. This will help other studies."

"Just as important, both the dust and fabric are impervious to the radiation sources I've tried. They're not influenced by X-rays, at least on short exposures. Microwaves did not make these substances hot. Nothing I tried had an effect."

"Great stuff, Ray! Thanks for the results," Rodrigo said, worrying about Ray's comment about things getting out. He needed to talk to Morgan.

Ray closed the door, and Rodrigo tidied up his desk. He picked up the envelope with the small disk that Hanna mailed back to the office from Wyoming. He'd opened it maybe two weeks ago. It got buried under paper.

He shook the disk out of the envelope and began to bounce it around in his hand. He noticed that one side had a small indentation he'd forgotten about when the phone rang. He slid the disk back in the envelope.

The Next Week

Monday morning, Maggie, came in early to let Rodrigo know the boss wanted him in his office at 9 a.m. "What's going on," he asked.

"Don't know. I'll come back in a while and walk with you," she said. "See if he wants me too. I'd like to hear what's going on."

Half an hour later, Giles' secretary Mani wasn't at his desk. Morgan Giles waved them in from the other side of the open office door. "Close the door, please, Maggie," he said, with his expression typically humorless.

"What's up boss," Maggie asked.

Giles didn't even look her way. "Well, my friend, your pet project has caused quite a stir," he said, glaring at Rodrigo. "I was hoping Hanna was better – to be here. When is she going to get past this?"

"I don't know Morgan. She was better, now she's not," Rodrigo said, unable to stifle a tragic look. He turned his back to both of them and took a few breaths.

Morgan cringed but didn't say anything and waited.

“Maggie, I know you’ve been kept out of this. Now you need to know.” Morgan’s unhappy look intensified. Rodrigo wondered if this might go south.

But Morgan took a breath and softened engrained fury. With a calm voice he said, “Maggie, you may well be able to help sort a thorny problem.” Still Morgan’s typical peeved look dominated the space between them. Rodrigo sucked air.

The lab Director gulped. He started slowly. “This morning I got a call from a senior FBI agent I once worked with. My stomach flipped when he asked me, “what the hell’s going on over there,” Morgan’s voice remained soft, but paced words gained momentum. The span between them got smaller.

“The agent was told you are messing with things with important national security implications.”

“What the hell,” Rodrigo said. “How did that get out?”

“He wouldn’t say. Hanna and you were named specifically,” Morgan said nodding Rodrigo’s way. “The agent’s source further said what you were doing should be handled by Defense.”

Morgan’s harsh style, the intended message kind or argumentative, was personal. Rodrigo had years of training. Back in Chemistry days, a group of the 2nd floor chemists bet about who Morgan would tag Monday morning over after work beers on Friday. Rodrigo remembered the unlucky winner bought a round the next Friday. He’d wondered if a well Hanna’s character would hold up under Morgan’s unconscious assault. He wished she was here to find out.

He blinked and ditched the distraction, to stay in the present. “Morgan, Hanna has kept you informed with what we’ve done and found with regular written reports. I’m happy to bring you up to date with results since her last report.”

Four eyes engaged, a short, tense silence was broken by, “Morgan, we did nothing wrong. Defense already had their way with Wrest’s property. We didn’t set foot on the site until months after they had given the place up. The fence they had built around the landing site was on the ground. The place was a mess.”

Rodrigo glanced Maggie’s way. She’d seen it before.

Giles harsh look intensified. “I take your point, man, but I don’t like getting calls from the FBI. Our company is a business that should get top priority from all its employees. Having said that, I was happy enough with the bargain you and I struck because of the chance that we might find or learn something of value to Seleron. But we can’t interfere in the governments business.”

“Morgan, none of this is a big deal yet. All we have is a little data, not clear results,” Rodrigo said.

“You saw the table in Hanna’s first report that I edited. It summarized what was found to date on the samples we collected in Wyoming. The report suggested results are interesting enough to get some of the folks Ray recommended at Temple involved because they went beyond Seleron’s technical capabilities.”

Gilles grimaced. “Yes, the reports have been helpful and well written. But I wasn’t particularly happy to learn that samples went outside our lab.”

“Dr. Giles, sounds like there are a lot of moving parts here,” Maggie said, interrupting the two staring men. “My take is neither Rodrigo nor Hanna can be expected to come to you with every little decision. Some of what they’d found went way beyond the capability of staff. The guys have been doing a great job using their own time evenings and weekends.”

Not sure why she knew all this, Rodrigo said, “They haven’t got to the majority of the samples yet”

"It's pretty current, but Hanna never finished a report she started when we got back!" he said with force. He shook a handful of papers over his head.

Giles took this in for a second, his expression unchanged. "Let me be clear, I'm not concerned about you and Hanna. Yes, you've been forthcoming. The problem seems to be that what you've found could easily become of interest to Defense. If I were them, I'd be embarrassed about missing so much."

"Morgan, I don't think they have a clue what they've missed," Rodrigo said.

"Okay, okay, but my read is that if what you found is convincing evidence of extraterrestrial activity and new superior materials," their boss started, "Defense needs to know this and may well want to keep most of it under wraps. But you've already started cooperating with outside people! Since Defense represents a big part of our business, they could make this uncomfortable for Seleron," he concluded. "That would fall on my shoulders."

Morgan stared at him while his expression slowly softened. "Dude, you know that I value people who are honest and don't hide their feelings in difficult situations. What comes through in Hanna's reports is integrity. Please let her know I said that."

Rodrigo smiled.

Maggie picked up, "Thank you for letting me be a fly on the wall, Morgan. I've learned a lot. Seems to me that sending the samples out was sloppy judgement. Everything else I'm aware of has been handled superbly. But Hanna and Rodrigo get paid to solve technical problems, not to worry about broader consequences of their actions. We probably can't turn off the Temple faucet, but Defense can if they want to," Maggie was now leaning on his desk inches from Morgan. "My suggestion is you call the agent back and try to set up a meeting with defense

people. Let's put everything Seleron employees have learned on the table. If Defense wants to keep this secret, I'm sure they can work a deal with the folks at Temple to avoid publication."

"But we've only scratched the surface!" Rodrigo barked with a long, unhappy face.

"I feel like Hanna and I have put the better part of our ourselves into this for months. These lightweight materials are incredible," Rodrigo said. "Yes, we might have found some things that Defense missed, and we still don't know what we have. Maybe we got lucky. We just practiced good science.

"Morgan, I don't want to get cut out of this. Defense has a big scalpel."

Morgan leaned back in his chair. His scowl was gone as if he was looking to the heavens. It was quiet and still for a while.

"Boss, you have a fine line to negotiate here," Rodrigo started. "It looks clear to me that these unknown materials have properties that would make them patentable. Uses for substances with these properties go far beyond Defense needs. I think a lot gets lost when you mix politics with agency policy. You'll remember how hard it was to get Moldstop registered. I'll be very unhappy if Hanna and I get pushed out of the way."

Giles' expression softened with these comments, and he sat for a minute more, thinking. "I know you two have put a lot into this. I get it… excitement and energy are what makes new products happen. And I agree, Rodrigo, all this might just get shredded in the Defense machinery." After a short pause, Giles continued. "The first thing I need to do is bring Evan up to speed."

"CEO Manfeld?" was Maggie's surprised question.

Rodrigo could see Morgan's mind working. "Yes," he said in almost a whisper… "Rodrigo, why don't you continue with what you've started while I try to unhurriedly arrange a meeting with Defense. Besides, you're right, something patentable might come out of those materials you've found that could put Seleron in a very favorable position. I need to kick this up to the next level."

After another second, he added, "Maggie, will you get in touch with this professor…

"Professor Samuels," Rodrigo said.

"Thanks," Morgan said. "Maggie, get familiar with where things stand at Temple, so I can understand how this will play out."

Everyone sat for a minute before Morgan said, "This discussion was helpful."

**

Rodrigo and Maggie walked slowly back to his office.

"I wonder if someone called Defense," she said, stopping to look for a reaction.

"Maybe. Could have been anyone," he replied, irritation showing. "There's so much talk. Yesterday, Ray told me a couple of stories he heard. Way out stuff about two-foot tall aliens and blood-sucking creatures stealing Hanna's vitality."

"Come on, Rodrigo …"

"Okay … Anyway, it's good that Morgan's supporting us. But this glitch leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I'm worried..."

"Dr. Giles will have your backs."

Rodrigo just shook his head affirmatively, "There's no one I trust more."

"You go way back. Well before I started here. Want to tell me about it?"

"The story is really about him."

"I was Morgan's first lab and office mate at Walter Labs. Neither of us much older than you were when you joined Seleron. He was smart, brusque and impatient. We connected immediately. We shared the unsaid glory in being the first people of color at Walter Labs. Our stories were amazingly similar … good and bad. I liked his knack for transforming bad events into a joke. It helped the pain go away.

"Everyone knew we were good to get those jobs," she said. "But, unlike you, Morgan excelled at writing and public speaking. Jim Walter saw it immediately. It was only a few years before he was appointed manager of the new regulatory compliance team."

Maggie stood for a few seconds. "Thanks," she said, with a curious look coming over her face. "But I've this feeling you might have just a few more weeks to see what turns up."

"We'll see," he responded.

**

Back in the office, there was a message on Rodrigo's phone. "Hey, Rodrigo. It's Lisa. Give me a call."

He looked out the window over his desk to catch a glimpse the corner of the biology building in the distance and called. "Hi girl, what's up?"

"Yesterday I got to those samples you took from that pine in Wyoming. Five of them were typical of what I expected from the literature for Ponderosa Pine." She stopped and giggled. "But the sixth… Jesus, halleluiah! To say it was unusual would be a gross understatement.

"Hold on, dude, I have the results right here."

"Which one of the samples was unusual?" he asked.

“One of the two samples from the wood under the bark… Here they are! I I don’t think anyone has ever seen anything like this before. I spent a good part of the evening reviewing the literature. I’m looking at the microscope’s pictures I took. There’s a bunch of large, I mean really big, galls randomly placed in the tissue. Usually, you see lesions like this when the tree is diseased, often bacteria overwintering, but not this many. They wouldn’t be all over the place like this, either.

“I put a micro syringe into one of them to sample the contents. The gall wall was really hard. It took forever and a special needle to get the sample.”

“What did you find?”

“It certainly isn’t bacterial. The gall’s full of a single substance – some high molecular weight molecule. You know, long chains like cellulose or DNA. The structural data I got for the polymer wasn’t anything known using tests I have available available.”

“But it’s just chemical,” he asked.

“Yes, as expected, it was carbon-based. My instruments did identify some components. Large amounts of repetitive alkaloids held together by phosphorus and sulfur units. I think the components were linked through space, not with hydrogen bonding, but in some electrostatic way that almost seems unnatural. Unexpectedly, one alkaloid was nicotine. It’s rare see much of that in biological samples. I could tell the structure is regular, a polymer, of repetitive composition in very long chains. The closest analogy I can make is DNA, I guess, but it certainly isn’t DNA.”

“How can you be certain?”

“For one thing, DNA doesn’t contain most of the components I was able to identify. But this could be a coding molecule, like our DNA. That’s purely guesswork.”

“Is there something we can do to figure out what we have?” Rodrigo asked.

“I’ve done about as much as I can here. I could send it over to molecular biology. They have equipment better suited to this kind of analysis. Do you have any contacts over there you might be able to talk into helping?”

“Well, I didn’t think we’d need them, but I know Zach Adames well. I’ll call him. Anyway, thanks, Lisa. I appreciate your time and work. Incredible, as usual,” Rodrigo said to sign off, while realizing their mystery had grown in yet another direction.

**

By late-afternoon Rodrigo was trying to finish his last project of the day when his phone rang. “Damn, what now.”

“Hello, Mr. Avila, this is Henry Gott from Lethbridge University. I’ve been thinking about our conversation when you were in Wyoming and wondered if you have made progress.”

‘Why the hell was Gott calling after being so cool when first contacted.’ Rodrigo took a breath. “Yes, Dr. Gott, we have found some interesting things with one of the samples we collected.” ‘Maybe he might be able to help with the biology, but best to keep other discoveries quiet.’

“Interesting?” Gott questioned after waiting for a while.

“We took some samples from the tree on Colton Wrest’s ranch where the aliens looked to have disappeared.”

“Uh-huh,” Gott whispered.

“Well, we turned up large lesions in the woody part of the tree that we’re currently looking at. My biologist calls them unusual.”

The line went quiet again. “Mr. Avila, I’m glad I called. I’ve been studying trees in that area for years now, and I’ve run across big lesions as well. Probably the same ones you’ve found. My concern is that these lesions are a new plant bacterial disease that might cross over to humans.”

Gott went on to talk for ten minutes, emphasizing big lesions, but his first few sentences convinced Rodrigo it was a scam. He was no biologist but knew that DNA has the same chemical composition in all plants and animals on earth. Also, Lisa had said the lesions weren’t bacterial. They were something much stranger than that. He’d seen no indication of a dangerous new disease in Gott’s publications…

After Rodrigo finished his work for the day. As he got into Gabriella all he could think about was why Gott was BS’ing him?

Once through the Seleron gate, he turned left toward Mercy and thoughts went to Hanna.

The next Sunday

“Hey Rodrigo, you found it,” Joe said. “It’s really good to see you … despite circumstances.” Joe took Rodrigo’s hand with both his. It took a while before Joe let go.

“Yeah, somehow an eternity went by since we talked Friday,” Rodrigo said. “Yesterday was awful. Like waiting in the hospital when your wife was so sick,” Rodrigo said.

Rodrigo shook his head and turned away. After they found a place to sit, he said, “I’ve walked past this Revolution Coffee dozens of times, but never been in before. Looks like a hole in the wall from the street… But you sound better than yesterday. Much better.”

“Yup… I was bummed to the max,” Joe said. “Never got past the shock. I was really worried about Hanna when we talked. Good thing both you and Hanna’s mom still have land lines. I feel lost without my cell.

Joe sucked a long breath. “It might have killed her if Hanna had to watch FBI agents going through her stuff.”

After a minute, Rodrigo asked, “Does she know.”

“No, I’ll have to find a better time and way to talk to her about it. Just thinking about it got me shaking. This whole FBI thing just seems way over the top.

Rodrigo sat down at a table. “After talking to you a second time about the research you did, Dr. Midfield tried some new things, but Hanna is still very sick,” Joe said.

He stumbled and grabbed the back of a chair and sat down opposite Rodrigo. “You feeling okay, buddy?” Rodrigo asked.

After seconds, Joe said softly, “I worry constantly she will die.” His hands looked to be keeping his head from hitting the table. I can’t imagine being without her.

“What happened with that lupus drug?” Rodrigo asked.

“It was like she or whatever made her so unwell has developed a tolerance after a couple of doses,” Joe answered.

Rodrigo shook his head and, after a few seconds, got up to grab coffees.

“What got me,” Joe said when Rodrigo sat again, “first thing, they took my phone. Everything’s on it. I’m worried they might see something having to do with work that was sensitive. My first reaction was anger. I’ll have to brief my boss on Monday about what happened. But I’m more worried about keeping this from Hanna until she can handle it.”

“Yeah. Once I got past the shock, it started to seem surreal. I still feel a little out of it,” Rodrigo said.

“Jada was too upset to talk about it for a while. She called it the FBI’s invasion.” He stared at the table for a second. “Then, she got angry with me for this stupid project I spend all my time

on. Yelled for a minute, then stormed into the bedroom, closed the door, and turned on the TV real loud."

"Oh shit, how did you deal with that?"

"Didn't have to. I sat there thinking she might never forgive me when she walked out and apologized for reacting so badly. Said she wanted to get up to speed with this alien thing.

"We went out for a walk. After a while, we stopped for some nice food. Once she sat down, she wanted me to go over absolutely everything from the last couple of months. In the end she said Hanna and I had to be onto something important for someone to get the FBI involved. We must have sat in the restaurant for a couple more hours talking nonstop."

There was a break. Both sipped coffee.

"So, are you holding up okay?" Rodrigo asked.

"In the end all they took were our phones, computers and a folder Hanna kept in her dresser – the summaries she'd written for Dr. Giles. They didn't put us in the slammer."

"Certainly, can't be the same for you, Joe, but I feel a deep-down distress. All that work! The creative energy, and we have nothing. Hanna and I put our best in over these last months. The military guys just get the FBI to walk in and take everything. How can they do that with no questions, no notice? She and I are not criminals. Nor are our families.

Joe flattened his thin lips together until they lost all color, then asked. "So, you can't take time back. What can you do? Start over? Certainly, Hanna's not up to that."

Rodrigo stared at Joe for several seconds, then smiled. "Old buildings like this are one of the things that make Philadelphia special," he said. "Did you check out the plaque by the door? It dates to 1749, before the Revolution."

"Yup, noticed it last time I was here and did some reading. So much history. Ben Franklin once hung out here with his discussion group," Joe added.

"You know, Jada's job is to help the city make sure buildings like this don't decay or get misused…. Ben Franklin, huh. Before the revolution," Rodrigo said. "I see why I had to duck to clear that door."

Joe drained his cup. "Let's hope it holds up for a few more hours."

They both chuckled.

"Thanks," Rodrigo said. "A little laugh helped me.

"I'm going to grab a refill … You?"

When Rodrigo got back to the table, he said, "What I'm thinking is this special partnership your wife and I have is important." Rodrigo looked at him with a forced smile. "I don't want to see what we've done together get wasted. Jada agrees. We talked it out last night."

"But Rodrigo, you have nothing. All the data, all her notes, and all the samples are gone. You'll never see any of it again," Joe said with a long face.

"You've never said how you felt about the raid," he added after a few seconds.

"Numb," Rodrigo said. After a short break he put in, "That FBI raid … made me take a reality timeout. As you lamented, we'd put a ton of work into this project, and those guys at UAPTF want us to walk away. That message is clear. But Jada said she hasn't seen me this excited about anything, ever. I know Hanna feels the same." His smile had matured into a stubborn face.

After a few moments, searing eyes shortened the distance between them. "You sound like you're not giving up, buddy," Joe said. "So, what can you do?"

“Fight,” Rodrigo answered taking short breaths. “And I have an idea. Haven’t thought this out. Maybe talking will help. ”

Joe was seriously engaged.

“Several weeks ago, Hanna and I talked about Seleron’s servers at the top floor of building four. Thinking, I realized results, paperwork, sample records – everything our team generated so far are up there… somewhere. Dr. Giles approved our work because of the potential for proprietary value in the materials we collected and Seleron tested. I believe we can make a convincing case for Giles to use. The military had no right to just take everything without Seleron’s permission.”

“You believe you can sell something like that to your boss,” Joe asked.

Rodrigo’s determined look persevered. “Yes, I think Morgan will come along if I pitch this right. The second part of the equation is to get permission for some time with the recordkeepers to recreate the data we had before the raid. We need to generate a detailed outline of what we’re looking for.”

Joe looked at him uncertainly. His mouth wide-open he said, “Taking on the military is quite an idea. No doubt it will be tough. And Hanna won’t be much help.”

Nothing was said for a minute as they sipped coffee. “Who’s the bad guy that wants to shut you down?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think Commander Wald is the culprit,” Rodrigo said.

That got a funny look from Joe. “I remember that he scared Hanna.”

“Yeah, but he was very professional. I feel we would have been given a warning, a second chance, if he knew. I also question he has the authority to get the FBI to make the raid.”

“Okay, but who then?”

"My guess is it was his boss, Colonel Lang, for some reason we may never learn. It's that intuition thing I seem to be getting. I'm pretty sure I will come across Lang before long."

"Hanna called him a buzzard," Joe said. "So, the head of the military's UFO organization wants to keep this quiet and in-house… or, he doesn't like you. I'd no idea he's that important."

"If I'm right, Joe, there isn't a clue what he knows and is after. I've thought a lot about these aliens, their ship, the dust we found, and everything else we've learned… What we know all adds up to nada about the beings. We have no idea how they got here, where it came from, who they are or, what they look like; much less why they are here. The one thing we know for sure is that something caused the ones that left the ship to disappear. We've collected more data, a lot more. But just bits and pieces that only adds complexity to what we don't understand. We don't have anything that approaches a theory."

"Maybe then, you shouldn't be so put off that everything is gone?" Joe said with a smile.

"Nobody thought this was going to be easy," Rodrigo summed up. Then, after a thoughtful second, "For me solving the mysteries one at a time is what makes this challenging and rewarding. The lack of clarity keeps me riveted. Still, I'll be happy if we begin to pull together an idea."

"It was good to have someone to talk with," Joe said. "Thanks for that, because I came in here overwhelmed.

The Next Day

Rodrigo sat at his desk for a minute thinking about how quickly the project had developed – the chronology of the discoveries. His mind contrasted that to Morgan's admonition and the immediate FBI invasion. He tried to concentrate and started down the road of a post-invasion

plan when the envelope from Wyoming caught his eye tucked into a corner of his desk. He shook the envelope and the small object that Colton had given them tumbled out.

'I completely forgot about it. I've had this damn thing for more than a month. Could it be another clue? It doesn't look like much, but there is an indentation on one side.'

He was holding it between two fingers staring at the indentaton when Maggie walked in. He still needed to tell her about the results from Lisa.

"You know, I've thought more about Morgan's advice," she had started, when the rooms lights flickered then went out. Computers and other equipment shut down.

Standing facing him, Maggie looked as if she'd seen a ghost. "Holy shit, Rodrigo. Turn around and check this out!"

He held out the round object, the size of a quarter, in his open hand.

"What the fuck just happened," she asked. "Where did you get that?"

"From the aliens," he said rolling his chair around. "I mean Colton found it at the alien site and gave it to me."

Rodrigo jumped up and looked out the window over his desk. The windows in the next building were dark.

Maggie looked down the hall. "Rodrigo, there's no lights. Next door, Sally's in the hall too."

Rodrigo's eyes were glued on the disturbance in the middle of the room. "Would you look at this! A three-dimensional box, a rectangle, has formed. It's flashing on and off in the room's middle."

Back inside, "Ho…ly shit, what is it?" Maggie blurted out. "The damn thing's taking up most of the space between your desks and the printers on the table at the room's end."

The disturbance – flashing with subtle red light around it's edges – united into a big rectangle suspended midway between the ceiling and floor. "A three-dimensional picture of something?" he questioned.

An image was coming together from a bright fog that filled the box.

"It looks to be a solar system with four planets circulating a big yellow star," Maggie said.

Both stood, momentarily spellbound, by the unfolding spectacle. Maggie pulled out her phone and began to film the image.

Rodrigo slowly stepped closer. He reached out. His hand slowly approached the rectangle. A foot away, an arc from the box knocked him to the floor. "Woah!" he yelled and scrambled to his feet determined not to miss a second. The alien camera zoomed in on the second planet. It grew to be the only thing visible. There were moons.

"You okay," she asked.

"That shock felt more like a shove," he said.

The rotating planet looked nothing like earth. No blue oceans. Most of the surface was hidden by dense clouds. Small visible parts of the land shined tan splashed with red, a vibrant red.

"That's not a red I've seen," Maggie said.

"I have," he countered.

Nothing was visible in the darkness on the backside of the turning globe. Then the darkness was broken by a single spot of intense light.

"That red on the light side," Rodrigo choked out, now holding his throat. "It's the bright red of the algae-like plants, or whatever on the rocks in that dream I had weeks ago. I talked about it with Hanna."

After a minute, one corner of the box blurred. Small geometric shapes popped up one at a time. “Those are characters,” Maggie said and moved a little closer. She filmed the evolving symbols.

“Think it’s writing?” Rodrigo asked.

“Ask the aliens,” she said. “I got it all. Amazing stuff.

“Can you hear that?” She asked.

“No.”

“A faint high-pitched hum has started,” she said. “I can barely hear it. I’m sure the phone got it.”

Rodrigo shook his head and answered, “Can’t hear a thing. Even if I missed it. This is the most amazing thing I’ve seen… ever!”

After a few seconds, he asked, “Is the sound rhythmic? Have a beat?”

Maggie listened for a few seconds. “Yeah, there’s a beat. A repetitive dissonate pulse. It may be that weird alien music you’ve talked about.”

Rodrigo just nodded. “I hope your phone got it. Anyway, this thing sure looks like a hologram. The aliens have got to be trying to communicate. Why else would we get this?”

“And what the hell are we going to do with it?” she asked while continuing filming.

“Well, I guess we’ve come to that decision point Hanna, and I worried about so many times,” he said. “But let’s see what else this mysterious apparition has to show us.”

Maggie looked at him for a second, nodded, and walked away. She attentively circled the image with her phone. She moved, kneeled and stood on a chair, for almost a minute before the image abruptly collapsed.

In the dark room, Rodrigo realized he was shaking. He took several breaths then noticed a funny itch. Lights flickered back on, and he checked his hand closely. There was tingling and redness, but other than that, the skin didn't look damaged.

Maggie was still standing on the chair with her phone at her side and her mouth wide open. The only sound was computers booting. "What did we just see?" she asked. "My hearts trying to pound its way out of my chest…" She stepped down and sat in the chair breathing hard. "It's one of those moments in life I'll be talking about to grandchildren."

"Maybe, on the news tonight?" Rodrigo said. "I was afraid and excited at the same time. Probably like being in combat. It was so …. unusual, I'm still shaking, not sure it's excitement or fear. I wish I would have been able to hear the sound."

"It was strange. A melody, I guess. It made me edgy."

Rodrigo shook his head knowingly. "You've just heard an alien talking."

They continued to stand dumbfounded before Maggie said, "That edgy reaction to music happened before, in high school. My teacher tried to explain some of Aaron Copland's later works. He composed a lot of nontonal pieces that initially seemed brutally harsh. Only with time and study did I come to understand how to listen to and enjoy his work. I'm crazy, Ben says, when he hears my music."

After a few seconds, Rodrigo added, "That high pitched hum, I think that's what you called it, comes with the mental messages I receive from the aliens. Not really knowing what nontonal means, that's the way I would describe the sounds I get from them."

Maggie stared blankly across the room. "You were always the brainy one, buddy. It doesn't surprise me that aliens chose you to contact, even though I never believed this whole deal until today. Now you're telling me they have spoken with you. I suddenly feel like this is NSA stuff,"

she said raising her voice. “Those symbols in the hologram’s corner probably were words. Is anyone on staff a linguist?”

“You’re right. What I’ve got from the aliens has always been way over my head too. We should give the device to the Feds.” Maggie shook her head in agreement.

“Maybe we should talk to Morgan first,” Rodrigo concluded.

“I think what I’d like to do is call Commander Wald. He’s a good man… very professional in a military way. I’d rather deal with someone who will listen rather than his boss. Wald said his boss didn’t want any outsiders involved, full stop.” He could see Maggie wasn’t convinced.

“And send me what you recorded so I can show it to Steve Hoogerbrugge. I don’t know him well, but he got burnt out at the UN before coming Seleron. He speaks a bunch of languages.”

The Next Day

“Good morning, Commander Wald,” Rodrigo started the phone call. Tense, he hoped his feelings about the Commander’s military professionalism were correct.

“Yes, Mr. Avila. Dr. Giles told me to expect your call. How can I help.”

Rodrigo wondered why Wald had talked with Morgan. He started tentatively. “My colleagues and I at Seleron have turned up something… something that we believe could better be handled by the government. You have access to resources we do not. Can I meet with you,,, and, anyone else you feel appropriate, to disclose what we have found.”

Wald was quiet for a several second seconds. “Thank you, Mr. Avila. I may have to think how to best do this.

“Dr. Giles informed me that your colleague, Ms. Krol, is quite ill. Will she be able to be part any discussion? And, can you give me an idea of what it is you want to discuss.”

"No and yes, Commander. Hanna is hospitalized. They are having difficulty diagnosing the problem. I was given an artifact by Mr. Wrest. It produces a hologram we believe is akin to a moving picture of the alien world. It also contained something that looks like it could be writing. Our staff feel ill-equipped to decipher any of this."

After another soundless period, Wald said, "I'm sorry to hear about Ms. Krol… You say this device produces a hologram. That seems an unusual way to communicate."

"Yes, Commander. I would agree. The hologram is unlike anything I've ever seen. It seems to materialize out of nowhere."

"Can you tell me a little more about this hologram?"

Rodrigo described the device, the depression that activated the hologram and what they saw."

"To be honest, that sounds … beyond incredible," Wald said. "I'd like to see this. Is there anything more."

"Yes, sir. We have documents that details what we discovered during a visit to Colton Wrest's Wyoming ranch. While there, Hanna and I collected samples of several things. We've only begun to get data from cooperators in Seleron's labs. We don't have much of a story yet, not even a theory, but what we've learned looks to be of interest. The results may be of interest to your technical people.

"I see," Wald said. "You will excuse me Mr. Avila for saying that all this sounds far-fetched. Interesting enough though, I would like to arrange a meeting to go into the detail of these claims."

There's a second issues, Commander. Last weekend teams of FBI agents came to Hanna and my homes, unannounced and took away our computers, written summaries of the work, and phones. All the data is now gone and will have to be reconstructed. Months of work and thinking

has disappeared. We were not told who sent them, and I guess it could have been someone from Seleron. If it wasn't you, it also could have been someone from the UAPTF.

After a hiatus, Rodrigo heard, 'I see. Let me look into that too."

"That would be appreciated, Commander. I would like to invite Dr. Giles who has supported our work to this point. He is current with what we've done and will be able to speak to Seleron policy."

"Give me a few days to arrange a meeting with my colleagues," Wald concluded.

The Next Week

"Hey, buddy, I've done some research on holograms." Maggie said sticking her head in Rodrigo's office door. "I believe what we saw would be called a dynamic hologram. It's an active area of current research…"

There was no reply. Rodrigo's head in his arms on his desk. "Yoh, dude, is everything okay?"

Still no response. She walked across the office and put her hand on his shoulder, with no response. He slowly raised his right hand. When she lifted hers, his hand went back onto the desk.

Maggie wasn't sure what to do. Was he ill? She left him alone. He looked fine. Could it be this unescapable alien thing? That bothered her. Rodrigo seemed to live with it, even thrive. Still, this was a little scary. She sat down at Hanna's desk and watched.

A couple of minutes turned into ten. She pulled her chair over next to his. His head came up. He looked over at her with a happy smile. "That was the most amazing contact yet – almost no pain. It was in my head, trying to talk to me with some glimpses of the setting."

"You talk like this has happened a lot," she said. "Did you learn anything new?"

“Probably the most important things I’ve picked up so far.”

Rodrigo took a break to pick up his cold, half-full cup of coffee.

“Come on, Bud. That’s been sitting there for a long time. Let me get you a fresh cup.”

“That would be nice, but I think my mental state would benefit from moving around a little.” Rodrigo got up with his cup and walked down the hall.

The wait got uncomfortably long, and Maggie set out to make sure he was okay. Thirty seconds later she saw Rodrigo at the bar making a fresh pot.

He looked around. “Sorry. I kept you waiting … you got a little worried about me. But I feel okay. A drained after that thing gets into my head. It’s a battle to keep up with it.”

“So, what did it tell you?”

Rodrigo looked in both directions again. “Let’s go back to the office.”

He closed the door and took several sips of coffee. Happy that Maggie was so interested, he said, “I think the thing that surprised me most is that these aliens are ancient.”

“How can you know that?”

“They move around quite a significant chunk of the Milky Way in their ships, but my impression is they might not have a wiz-bang way to go faster than the speed of light. It didn’t say, and I probably wouldn’t understand. The closest star systems to earth are four or five light years away. That means each time they travel somewhere, it takes a long, long time.”

A probing expression came over him. “I’m going to read some things into what I learned… Guesswork. In addition to having been around for a long time, I wonder if they haven’t explored a large chunk of this part of the galaxy. That would definitely make them ancient.”

“That sounds like a stretch,” she said. “And, if they can’t go faster than light, it would take a very long time.”

"Maybe, it's just an impression. I'm thinking millions and millions of our years. This alien's thoughts about space travel are so matter of fact," Rodrigo said.

"It sounds like you're saying they aren't in a hurry to get around."

"That's the impression I have.

"I did learn that they have a fleet of these vehicles, and the vehicles are rarely on the ground. So, I think we may be dealing with smart machines, really smart machines that operate them. I just don't see living and smart animals tolerating all that dead time."

"But you seem to believe the alien you have contact with is alive. How can that be if they spend their lives on a spaceship?" she asked.

"So many questions. One thing I'm certain of. The one I'm engaged with believes that the spaceships, and the machines that operate them, maybe even themselves, were created by an earlier civilization that probably no longer exists."

"What!" she frowned. "That's a long way from where we started today. I wasn't ready for that leap."

"Sorry, Maggie, but we really need to keep our minds open. My understanding is this is why they came here. They believe we may have many of the qualities of these ancient aliens. Their plan was to study us."

"I'm not sure I believe that. There's got to be more to it," she said.

"And it told you all this, But? You told me to keep my mind open. I'm not sure there's enough room in it. Why us?"

"I hope we find out. Then this will get riveting."

After a second, she said, "You said you saw its surroundings. The spaceship's A.I. I mean."

"Yes, it was a large concrete room with a high ceiling. Nothing else. The view was very depressing – think a prison."

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Maggie and Rodrigo drove onto the sprawling Philadelphia Navy Shipyard. The gate guard checked identification and directed them to building 19A, a five-minute drive at 10 miles/hr.

Rodrigo was triing to follow the Navy map when Maggie said, "Hey, I know you've already settled this in your head, but I'm still not wild about what we're doing. Morgan says the military thinks we should stay out of this business. Is there any point in exposing more of what you and Hanna found? They're just going to take what we have and tell us to move on – maybe not nicely."

"You were there when I talked to Morgan," he said. "I don't see we have an option. This will make his relationship with the board a lot easier. A couple of troublemaking directors are using this as a pinball issue. Morgan hasn't said more.

I don't want to give up what Hanna and I are doing up. I'm ready to fight.

"I'll add that it's good you are going to this meeting instead of Morgan. You were there when the hologram first came up. I also feel you made a big effort to get up to speed with what Hanna and I did. The extra effort is appreciated."

"Yeah, yeah, Bud. I still don't think you, me or Seleron make any difference to the military guys. I've seen it now. They absolutely consider this their venue and are used to getting their way," Maggie said, irritation showing.

"Okay, Boss, let's try to start this calm. I have a problem you don't. They're going to see the same things we've talked about. Why am I the only one who can bring up the hologram? Why

did they give us the package? If I have to admit to the connection I've been having with the alien, they're going to think I'm a crackpot or worse."

Maggie looked at him sympathetically. "Well, you're not crazy. Be patient with me about this. I'll do everything I can to avoid getting you into a bind. Have you talked to Hanna about what's happening?"

"No, her husband has asked me not to. She doesn't even know about the FBI raid yet."

"Okay, if they go after you, make you angry, I'll support you 100 %. Let them know we are not weak," she said. "Morgan has bought your argument that they had no business confiscating material that might have proprietary value."

"What did you think of Commander Wald, then," Rodrigo asked.

"I guess my view improved with the way he's handled this so far. I think we can work with him, but he's not in charge."

Then, pulling up to a parking area next to a berthed ship, Maggie said, "A sign back there said building 19A."

"Sorry, I missed it."

Out of the car they both looked up the fifty-or-so feet to the deck of the ship. "Kind of makes me feel like David taking on Goliath," Maggie said.

"Yeah, but David won," he said opening the door. She chuckled.

Inside, a uniformed receptionist made a call. Rodrigo recognized Commander Wald's gait in the distance – tall, fit and comfortable – as he approached. "There's lots of stuff on his uniform that wasn't there at yesterday's meeting," she said.

Wald's comfortable style and casual conversation helped Rodrigo shed nervousness. They followed him slowly down the hall to a conference room. Inside, four people were seated at a

table, two in uniform and a man and woman in business suits. The square of four small tables pulled together allowed everyone to easily see the other participants. Wald introduced Maggie and Rodrigo while the three took all but one remaining seat.

Everyone seated, the Commander began, “Welcome Mr. Avila and Ms. Jensen. I’m Jackson Wald from the White House.”

Rodrigo saw a look of disbelief come over Maggie’s face. Wald sat next to a gaunt officer with a particularly haggard face. Then he introduced the remaining four.

“Next to me is Colonel Lang, the head of UAPTF. Across from me are Drs. Madsen and Thompson, civilian contractors for UAPTF. Commander Green is between us and will serve as recording secretary.

Your claims of an alien message caused a stir,” Wald noted with a friendly smile. “This probably wouldn’t have got much attention if it weren’t for the interesting materials the FBI found on your computers and phones and at Seleron’s laboratories. Commander Green has reviewed what the FBI had collected and called me yesterday. I’ve also had a chance to look at some of it. But all that has been transcended in my mind by this new claim of a message.”

Wald had the appearance and comfortable language Rodrigo expected from someone from the White House. But his short dark hair and a clean-shaven face didn’t distinguish him from the other men in uniform. This was a military proceeding.

“I expected Seleron’s Dr. Giles to be here today,” Wald said pointing at the empty chair.

“My apologies,” Rodrigo said. “He couldn’t join us today.” Morgan had told Rodrigo he wanted to sit this out and see how the wind was blowing before getting involved. “He’s asked my supervisor, Maggie Jessen to sit in for him.”

“And it’s my understanding that Ms. Krol is ill and unable to attend,” Wald said.

“That’s correct,” Maggie said. “I have taken the time review the materials she gave to Director Giles.”

“Well, then,” Commander Wald started. “Can we see what is in this alien message.”

Maggie whispered to Rodrigo, “We’ll see how this goes.” Then she spoke up. “You will see what’s actually an extraordinary hologram. Everything’s on my phone,” she said and pulled her phone and a cable out of her coat pocket. “May I use this projector?” she asked, pointing to a table in front of a screen.

Lights dimmed, she began to show the video she’d taken of the hologram. This was followed by a long silence before Commander Wald asked her to show everything again. Rodrigo watched the civilians pointing and talking softly. Colonel Lang sat in stone silence.

With the lights back on, Rodrigo looked around the room to see mostly dazed looks. He didn’t hear a word. Colonel Lang continued to sit stone-faced.

Rodrigo broke the silence after a while, “I asked a linguist-colleague at Seleron, previously an interpreter with the UN, if he could make out anything from the symbols that appear near the end of the video. He said the only thing he was certain of was that none of it came from this planet. That’s a principal reason Hanna and I are here. You have resources we don’t.”

“And we appreciate you coming forward,” Commander Wald said.

Rodrigo felt the device in his jacket pocket and was prepared to bring up the actual hologram if that became necessary. He hoped it would work a second time.

The room went quiet again before a young woman seated across from Wald introduced herself. “I’m Megan Thompson a civilian contractor in Dr. Madsen’s technical team at UAPTF. Thank you for sharing the hologram. It was incredible. The large yellow star with four close planets could be be HD-69234, a system roughly 600 light years closer to the Milky Way’s

center than earth. That star was discovered to have planets, four planets about four years ago. At the time it was noteworthy because the second and third planets fulfilled many of our possible life criteria."

"Well now, 600 light years is not a walk in the park," Colonel Lang exclaimed, breaking his silence. "You wouldn't be joshing us, would you?"

"Sir, I don't believe the technology exists on earth to fabricate a hologram like you just saw," Rodrigo said. "Those three-dimensional images were 100 % light."

Thompson ignored the Colonel's outburst. "I'd really like to compare what Ms. Jessen has shown us with some databases. I've access to the NYG database, the Encyclopedia of Suns and the 3D Universe. HD-69234 is a very large and bright star. I could probably confirm the identity with some computer time."

"There will be millions of stars within the range we are talking about," Dr. Madsen started.

"Let's be careful here. The technology does exist to fabricate a video," Colonel Lang interrupted again in a dominating tone. The sneer on his face was spiteful.

"Okay folks let's please keep this civil," Wald interrupted. "But Colonel Lang has a point, he said looking Maggie's way."

"I might have the capability to bring up the original hologram," Rodrigo said, noting Wald's deference to Colonel Lang, the head of UAPTF. "I haven't tried to do this a second time." He pulled the device out of his pocket.

"What the hell is that?" Colonel Lang asked with a hint of excitement. "It almost looks like a quarter."

Rodrigo handed him the alien appliance. "It's the device the aliens left at the landing site on Mr. Wrest's ranch."

Colonel Lang carefully inspected it before handing it back. “What does this do?”

“It created the hologram that Maggie filmed. I seem to be the one gifted for some unknown reason with the ability to make it work,” Rodrigo said. “One warning, this device seems to draw large amounts of ambient power to create the hologram.”

“What’s the status of this building,” Wald asked Commander Green.

“It has an independent power supply,” Green answered. “That’s one reason we hold meetings here.”

“Let’s give it a try then.”

Rodrigo pushed his thumb into the indentation. Nothing happened immediately, and everyone looked around, then at him. Suddenly, there was an eerie squealy sound, and the lights dimmed. It was black for a second, before the hologram began to appear above the tables.

“Can you stop it,” Colonel Lang asked after a minute.

“I don’t think so,” Rodrigo answered. “And don’t get close. I got quite a shock.”

When the hologram had run its course, there was seconds of darkness before the lights went back on. “That was incredible,” Wald said. “I now understand why Maggie said you two were spellbound. No criticism meant, but the video pales by comparison.”

“Well, the video is the best my iPhone can produce,” she said.

There was another break before Wald added, “I suspect there are more reactions.”

The man’s commanding presence impressed Rodrigo.

Dr. Madsen asked to see the object that brought up the hologram. Rodrigo walked over and handed it to him. “Very light,” he said. “I’m tempted to put my thumb in the depression, but I don’t want to go through that process again.”

"I think it's okay, Dr. Madsen. Many colleagues have tried to activate the hologram unsuccessfully," Rodrigo said.

"So, why are you blessed with this special ability?" Colonel Lang asked with a surlily grin.

"I can't be sure, Colonel." Rodrigo answered.

"This sounds like BS," Colonel Lang interjected.

Rodrigo didn't react to his scolding. Everyone sat quietly.

"This whole thing has been concocted to get you access to more information about the Wyoming Incident than what we gave you legally."

Rodrigo stared for a few seconds. "Colonel Lang, Maggie and I have been polite. You haven't… So let me ask you why UAPTF found it necessary to have the FBI raid our homes and key Seleron labs last Saturday and take everything we have done – computers, phones, files, data, and samples? We are good citizens! The raid scared the shit out of our families. Do you have an excuse?"

Commander Wald was also staring at the Colonel with a displeased expression.

"Mr. Avila, I don't have to explain myself. And I believe this meeting is done."

"Order, please," Wald said. "The meeting will be done when I say so. Everyone must have the opportunity to understand what's happened here." The Colonel scowled but didn't look at him.

"Colonel Lang raised a significant issue, Mr. Avila," Wald said. "Do you have any idea why you have this unique ability?"

There was a break. Rodrigo turned and whispered in Hanna's ear. "This could get very messy."

He continued to stare at Colonel Lang. “I have not made this up. This is real. This device is from the aliens that landed in Wyoming more than a year ago. Colonel, if you team had done a better job at Colton Wrest’s ranch, they probably would have found it long before Hanna and I ever set foot in Wyoming. I take offense at you suggesting we are trying to con everyone. I’m the one who called Commander Wald to tell him what we found.”

The Colonel sat and stared at Rodrigo. The room was quiet. “Mr. Avila, the government of the United States has given me the responsibility to decide when aliens are real or not. Given the mission of UAPTF, what you just showed us makes little difference. We are interested in technology.”

Rodrigo noticed that all eyes, including Wald’s, were glued to the two of them. “Well then, Colonel Lang, I believe we found some things you overlooked at the Wrest site, including this device.”

“What else?” the Colonel asked as interest broke through his tough guy demeanor.

Rodrigo looked at Maggie and nodded. She pulled her case from under the table and opened it. “Here are the reports Hanna prepared on Seleron’s work to this point. These were for Dr. Giles, our department head and a member of Seleron’s board of directors. These are actually Dr. Giles’ copies because the FBI took Rodrigo and Hanna’s. We have Dr. Giles permission to give them to you. All this has been documented with our patent department and any patentable discoveries will be cleared with you. Our CEO and the Board have been briefed and expect your cooperation,” Maggie finished.

Then she took several items out of the case, the disk, two vials of dust, a scrap of the fabric Rodrigo found and an album of photographs.

“What are these other items,” Wald asked.

"Some of what they found," Maggie said.

Dr. Madsen got up followed by Megan Thompson. "Can I touch this," she asked Maggie.

"Yes, please do. That's why we brought it."

"Jim, this disk is extraordinary. Look how light. It might be made of the same material as the spacecraft," she said and handed it to Dr. Madsen.

Rodrigo saw the Colonel grimace.

"What's this," Madsen said while picking up one of the vials.

"We can't be sure," Rodrigo said. "This dust has similar properties to the disk and the fabric we also found. Maggie held up the fabric. We have learned that each have slightly different properties, and in each case the metal-binding material is different. They may all have a variety of uses, both in civilian and military applications.

"We have developed a theory that the dust, which was widespread over the landing site while hidden by the soil, is the remnants of disintegrated aliens or their robots."

Colonel Lang stood and walked over to the items on the table. He picked up the disk. "It has a sharp edge," he said and put it down. He put his arm around Madsen's shoulders and walked him into a corner of the room.

Rapid-fire questions and discussion of the materials and where they were found followed. Some questions teased out other materials they had found, but the subject of alien substances from the tree on Wrest's ranch never came up.

Commander Green had ordered in coffee. Dr. Thompson, Dr. Madsen and Commander Wald continued with questions. After a while Maggie pulled out her phone to check a call that had come in. Colonel Lang walked over and held out his hand. "You will have to leave that phone with us. Well need that thing the aliens sent you, as well," he said looking at Rodrigo.

Conversation came to a halt.

Maggie's polite smile disappeared. She looked him in the eye. "Colonel, Rodrigo and I came to you freely with this information. You've already sent the FBI to his and Hanna's homes. Homes of good citizens who first saw the hologram this week. They aren't going anywhere. Hanna is very ill. They invested time, many months' worth of energy, and personal funds in getting this undertaking to this point. And, you already have their iPhones. I'm not giving you mine.

"You can also bet we know a whole lot more about these visitors from that big yellow star than you and the rest of the military do," Rodrigo said. "We were expecting you'd want to work with us."

Wald interrupted a short silence that followed, "Well then, I thought it might take a while longer to get here. We've come to a natural decision … I think we can come to an arrangement that you and Seleron will be happy with. Have either of you had a security check."

"Of course," Rodrigo said. "Security checks are required every five years in our team at Seleron because of our work with the military, among other thing." My last one was about three years ago."

"Great!" Wald said. "Here's what I'd like to do…"

**

Back in the office Rodrigo was still thinking about the morning's meeting. There was a text from Commander Wald.

Hello Rodrigo,

I wanted to apologize for the Colonel's behavior this morning and tell you how I got involved in this project. I think it could make a difference. It might be best if you called on my cell: 571-494-8862.

He showed it to Maggie. She smiled and said, “That’s different.”

They had talked nonstop on the way back from the morning’s meeting. She said she was feeling too full of the military and aliens for a while. She disappeared to do some research on something about a government mining contractor’s operation in South Dakota. Her comments had an impact, and he decided to put off calling Wald until later.

**

“Hello, Commander Wald.”

“Thanks for calling, Mr. Avila … Let me start by saying how impressed I was with the report you and Ms. Jessen made yesterday. How did you find all that stuff the Colonel’s team missed?”

“Looking for what’s not obvious is what Hanna and I do for Seleron.”

“Indeed, it would seem. As much as I apologize for Colonel Lang, it won’t make any difference. He won’t change.”

“So, I’m confused,” Rodrigo said. “How did you come to lead this project?

“I would prefer, Jackson, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” he said now starting to feel quite comfortable.

“This is the military. Colonel Lang is the head of UAPTF. I can’t ignore an order, but I don’t report to him. I work for Admiral Northman who is very senior to both the Colonel and me. Lang must be cautious not to stray too far from what Northman wants.”

“Is the Admiral still the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?”

“You keep up Rodrigo. And, yes, another job is I’m his liaison with the White House staff.”

Rodrigo didn't say anything for seconds. "Okay, I've read that your boss is working on reshaping the public image of the military. You're no doubt busy in your day job. Why would he ask the head of his White House operations to lead a project about alien activity."

"You're insightful too. The Admiral works closely with V.P. Johnson. Nick Glaser, her chief of staff, and I have West-wing offices across the hall. The Admiral knows me and Colonel Lang well. I have his trust. He would tell you that I'm more qualified than just about anyone in the Navy for this role."

"What are those qualifications?"

"An Ohio State Ph.D. in physics."

Rodrigo wondered what had attracted the Commander to the Navy. But he logged it for the right time. "So, Jackson, what do you have in mind for the debrief at Davenport?"

"I'd like to get you and Hanna there for at least a couple of days to meet with Dr. Madsen's staff and probably a few other individuals. I talked to Madsen. He's embarrassed they missed so much. He's kind of under the Colonel's thumb but said their program would benefit from the sampling techniques you described."

"How does this woman Megan Thompson from the meeting fit into the picture? Her comments made me think."

"This is something I was able to talk the Colonel and Dr. Madsen into. Megan is a recent MIT Ph.D. in astronomy. She was recommended to me by Professor Buchi who I postdoc'd for. She was doing a postdoc in physics, also with him, at the time."

"Buchi … wasn't he awarded a Nobel Prize a few years back?"

"You really do keep up, Rodrigo. Wolf called me about a year ago saying he had this terrific student who wanted to use her skills to help the country. He asked if I could find an appropriate

place for her. I talked her into getting a TS clearance and a Navy fellowship to work with Madsen. I figured that even if she couldn't stand all the secrecy, after a year she could move somewhere else."

'The more they talked, the more assured Rodrigo became. "You think a couple of days will be sufficient?"

"I do. Of course, the Navy would pick up any cost of transportation, rooms and meals. There's a comfortable hotel within walking distance of the facility."

"I don't see Hanna making it," Rodrigo said.

"Is she that sick?" Jackson said.

Rodrigo didn't answer.

After a prolonged pause, Rodrigo asked, "What about the alien ship?"

"What do you mean?" Jackson asked.

"I'd like to see it."

After a few seconds, Jackson said, "You sound certain it's there."

"I am." Rodrigo said and considered spilling the beans on his developing relationship with the alien ship.

"The best I can do is take your request under advisement," was all that Jackson said. "The Colonel controls the Davenport facility."

Rodrigo took this as a yes.

"There's one other thing, Jackson. To be brutally honest, Colonel Lang worries me. I've never been in or worked with the service. My impression is you are an upright man who follows Navy rules. Both Maggie and I walked away from the meeting worried that Colonel Lang might

not be as reliable – maybe devious or worse. What guarantees do we have about our safety at a facility he oversees?"

The line was quiet.

"Here's the problem, in my mind," Rodrigo said. He stopped for a second. "I think there's a chance we will learn a lot about an alien civilization. I already have knowledge of a lot that we didn't disclose at the meeting. On top of that, we have found what will likely prove to be materials that have great value beyond building the next generation of fighter jets. But Colonel Lang will want to keep all of this under wraps. From what I've seen, if he has his way, nothing will ever come out. So, I'll ask you, how does the Colonel keep what Hanna, Seleron, and I know quiet?"

Jackson didn't answer the question. "What do you know that you didn't divulge?" he asked.

"I would prefer to save that for another time," Rodrigo said. He recognized that their discussion had become a negotiation.

"Jackson, let me talk to Hanna, Maggie and Dr. Giles."

"That sounds good from my perspective, as well. I'm meeting with the Admiral tomorrow."

**

Rodrigo walked past Mani's desk toward Morgan's door. "Hey Bud," he heard.

"How are things, Morgan?"

"I'm doing well… great really. Trudy's started a job she likes now that Kim is off to school in New York. So, there's a new routine at home."

Stacks of reports covered one side of Morgan's desk. Sitting, Rodrigo could barely see over them. Three computer screens obscured the other half. A report was open in front of him. The

red marks he saw before sitting down reminded Rodrigo how detail-oriented Morgan was. But now he had his attention. His mouth was twisted into an agreeable snarl.

"So, what's going on. I've talked to you twice in the same week."

Rodrigo smiled. Then Morgan raised a hand suggesting he had something to say.

"After I told Mani to tell you to get your butt over here, my mind went to that conference we attended when I was still green. I'd only been here a couple of years. I can't get it outa my haed my head." Morgan said.

Rodrigo liked that Morgan still used the casual language of their youth around friends. He looked at his amigo. His dispassionate look was kind. "You remember that big event center on the Jersey shore. I'd never been to a big conference like that. Being able to pick speakers at any time was cool. I met people from other companies. So much chit-chat in the halls outside the talks. I got into it."

It was before Morgan met Trudy. Rodrigo's thoughts went to one evening. "I remember that night you and I were invited to some company's hospitality suite. I don't recall which company."

"It was Seaborn Pharma. They were looking for a pharmaceutical registration. We got samples to test for metabolites. The active ingredient was of Indian origin. Then Chemistry made some metabolite standards to send to toxicology. I don't remember if you were involved. I was.

At the conference, I suspected they hoped I might be of help… some leading questions. You know, maybe not mention flaws. I don't remember what they were, but in chemistry we had to make authentic samples following procedures they supplied.

"But man! That night got crazy," Morgan said."The booze and girls were flowin."

"I remember the place was jammed," Rodrigo added.

“That was the first time I noticed you stopped after one drink,” Morgan said. “It was later I asked. Learned your rule. It is one of the many good things you’ve taught me.”

Rodrigo smiled at the man with damp eyes across from him.

“The main thing I remember though was you rescuing me. I don’t know how much I’d drank. I never even wondered why those beautiful girls were hitting on us. I also don’t remember how you got me to leave, only that I was over the top angry on the cab ride back to our hotel,” Morgan said with a little swallow.

“So, a while ago, I was sitting here thinking about how you’ve watched me rise through the ranks. First, five years or so as your direct supervisor. Then, the department head and, now director. Never a word, even though none of this would have happened for me if it weren’t for you.”

Rodrigo thought he knew this man well but had never heard this admission. The two sat for a few seconds before Rodrigo started to say something but, instead got up and held out his hand. Morgan clasped it in both of his.

When they both were settled again, Morgan said, “The board delivered a message to me first-thing this morning.” Then, after he cleared his throat. “I’d wondered why CFO Horton wanted to talk to me.

“He said some of the board members were getting antsy about the UFO project after that whistleblower report. That it might adversely impact Seleron. Nothing specific, but I’ve heard messages come down from the board through Horton before.”

“So, what are you getting at, Morgan. You told me everything was fine.”

“Rodrigo, that’s not why you’re here. To be honest, I’ve considered both courses then made a decision. I’m not sure how this will play out, but I decided I’m going to leave the project to your

judgement. I'm only one vote on the board but this is the last you'll hear from me on the subject."

Rodrigo felt a glow as their last conversation flashed through his head before saying, "I know you're a man of your word, boss. Let me bring you up to date. Maggie and I met with the defense officials on Tuesday."

Rodrigo talked through the meeting at the shipyard and his phone call with Commander Wald that stalled. "There are two problems, Morgan. The first is I don't want to get into my communication with the alien, if I can avoid it, with Wald, even though I think he's a straight shooter. The second is that this Colonel Lang has a screw loose about getting his way. Like I said, he was very hard to deal with at the meeting. Wald seems to know how to slow him down, but Lang's senior. I'm concerned about safety at Davenport. He might even lock me up. I mean he might do anything to get what he wants, including the materials we found."

"Does he know I've talked to Evan about those materials?"

"Not directly, but Maggie mentioned the board have been briefed and that everything so far has been documented with the patent department."

"It would be a little crazy and very messy for this Colonel to go after civilians to keep things quiet."

"I don't know, Morgan. You'd have had to be there. This guy tried to take control from Wald several times. He even said that aliens, real or not, didn't matter. It was the technology he wanted. Nothing else was important, certainly not Maggie or me."

Director Giles sat quietly for a minute with a normal unhappy face. Rodrigo was unsure what might be going on. Finally, his eyes bored in on Rodrigo. "Here's what I think you should consider. Hanna's can't go and will be your ace in the hole. If this guy, Lang, tries anything

troublesome, you are just a call away. It sounds like you and Commander Wald are on the verge of a good relationship. I wouldn't hesitate to spill the beans on alien communication if it will get you somewhere. From what you've said, he's a reasonable man.

Rodrigo then saw an incredibly rare smile. He knew that Morgan was his real ace in the whole.

"That's the best I can do, my friend. At least you can count on it being interesting, whatever happens."

Goodbyes said, Rodrigo walked slowly down the hall back toward the office. Morgan's a \Chdvice was good. But Morgan knew the old Chinese curse as well as he did, "May you live in interesting times."

Change ending to have Morgan, Not Hanna show up the second itme. She told Morgan about Rodrigo's problem. Can bring in the other (Happy) ending. Need to deal with Lisa Smith. Go back and clean up LISA.

The Next Week

As their car approached, the Learjet 40 looked larger than Rodrigo expected. A group waiting to board looked like dwarfs near the stairway. Jada gave him a smile and said, "I know that eager expression. It's the one when you're excited.".

He took his wife's hand. "I love you. You've been wonderful. The crap you've had to put up with as this project keeps getting bigger and bigger."

"But now you get to see that thing, whatever it really is," she replied. "No matter what else happens, I know you'll be happy."

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “With all those trips on company business, I’ve never paid attention to this part of the airport. There must be more than a half dozen private jets parked behind this one.”

Jada pulled up next to the boarding ramp. “Bless you dear for letting me know you can still count.” A forced smile unveiled the clash he knew was going on in her head. “This flight must put you up there with the rulers that arrived in those planes with Arabic markings?”

There was another less than radiant smile. He smiled too at her cynicism.

There was quiet for seconds before she asked, “Those people waiting to get on the plane. Do you know them?”

“No one except Jackson.”

Jackson walked over in uniform and offered Jada his hand. “A pleasure to meet you Mrs. Avila.” He introduced them to three technical people from the Davenport UAPTF Reporting Center staff. Then explained they’d been working in Philadelphia and arranged to fly home by filling empty seats on the government plane. “Nice to meet you,” Jada said with a wave and turned toward Rodrigo. “Time for me to turn into a pumpkin. Have a wonderful time, Bear.”

After a peck, Jada drove away, he saw an uncontrolled tear dribble down her cheek then watched her drive off slowly until she rounded a turn out of sight. She always obeyed posted speed limits. He took a deep breath conscious his wife was very worried for his safety and turned to look toward Jackson climbing the stairs.

The Learjet 40’s limited seating was no more spacious than economy on commercial jets. Jackson asked Rodrigo to sit up front so they could talk. Then he disappeared into the cockpit.

Rodrigo leaned back into the seat with a sigh of relief. This was finally going to happen, he thought, after days of back and forth. He again saw the tear trickling down his wife’s cheek.

Something about this Wyoming incident had fortified their bond. This girl he'd met, then married so long ago... He looked out the window as if to catch another glimpse of her driving away.

After five minutes Jackson returned. "We're about ready to get going. Sorry to leave you sitting. I've always liked talking to pilots. Don't often get the chance. I think I subconsciously wanted to be one."

Both sat and buckled in. "It's disappointing that Hanna decided not to come. She's a sparkplug. Even more, I'll admit being taken with her composure under difficult conditions. Rodrigo didn't repeat that she just wasn't well. After a few seconds, Jackson pulled a book out of his carryon.

In the air, both ended up with a bottle of water. Jackson had taken him through a few numbers on Davenport staff and organization. Rodrigo hadn't expected the small talk but was surprised how much they did at the facility.

They didn't know each other well. He was trying hard to be friendly,

Rodrigo had pushed him hard to see the alien craft and ended up making the trip contingent on it. He knew this caused Jackson problems. "Hanna did send me a flash drive with those reports she prepared. A good read," Jackson said. "You two had a surprisingly good handle on what happened in Wyoming. Our team missed too much at the site. More disappointing, little thought went into possibilities that weren't obvious… more thought will go into how useful those materials you found might be.

"We should have thought more about how little that big alien ball weighed. But…." He stopped before saying something he shouldn't about the Colonel, Rodrigo assumed.

"Just diligence," Rodrigo said. "Much of what we learned was the result of the team at Seleron."

"Anything new?" Jackson asked.

Rodrigo turned his head briefly to look out the window. "There's one thing Hanna and I held back. The Seleron staff were still working on the samples when we first talked to you at the shipyard," Rodrigo said. He went on to describe the samples from the tree where the aliens disappeared.

"The conclusion from Dr. Abrams is that the material in the nodules Lisa Smith found must be a code akin to our DNA," Rodrigo said. "It has a completely different chemical structure. He thinks it could be decoded. It would be a rather massive project."

Wald stared. A knowledgeable glare as if he already guessed where this was headed.

"There's so much more we need to understand," Rodrigo said. "Dr. Abrams said what he'd found was both exciting and scary. "Alien cell structure is worlds apart from cells found in animals and plants on earth. Using different molecules and linking structures, the cell wall materials are incredibly robust – one might even say hard. It is obvious evolution took a different path on their world. Maybe their method was never in the mix billions of years ago life began on earth."

"Humm," Wald said, a muffled harrumph that reached across the walkway and took Rodrigo's notice. His face virtually expressionless. "Looks to me you folks believe there's little doubt about other life in the universe." Jackson rubbed his face and head hard as if trying to unscramble too many possibilities. "And you found this material in a tree. If all this is true, it's strange they would deposit their genetic code in a tree, don't you think…"

Rodrigo didn't answer.

"Anything else?" Rodrigo said nothing.

"Well, beyond showing any extraterrestrials on that craft could be from another world, I don't think this moves us forward."

Rodrigo wondered if Jackson considered the value of being able to go after the alien code if things became grisly in the long run. Then he remembered his communication with the alien ship would come to a head over the next few days.

Jackson's face asked for more.

"Do you remember the colors on the planet in the alien hologram."

"Yes, big blotches of that unusual red," Jackson said.

"Hanna and I talked it through. What if the color was life on the planet. The greens of earth are obvious looking at the globe from space."

"Like chlorophyll but red?" Jackson said, now looking interested. "Have you identified it?"

"Old chemistry and biology fail me, but the Seleron molecular biologist put as much as they've figured out so far in a report. Zach gave it to me last night so I could bring it along. Hanna hasn't read it." Rodrigo rummaged through his carryon and handed Wald the three-pages.

Jackson read it a second time, then looked up with a profoundly serious expression. "We need to get on top of this. Your team looks to be right. Everything points to aliens planting their version of DNA in trees on Wrest's property. Why?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if that dark-red color – call it maroon – isn't associated with the equivalent of photosynthetic plants. Or maybe something like plants," Rodrigo added.

"For sure. My guess is the color has to do with the spectral properties of the agent that absorbs light during some equivalent of photosynthesis. Chlorophyll's green color is because of

reflected light left over after the plant leaves absorb the wavelengths needed to do the job," Jackson said. "But we'll figure this out."

Rodrigo considered opening up about what he knew from his interactions with the alien ship. "Jackson, you were obviously a talented kid. How did you end up in the military?"

Jackson gave him a forced smile, "Did you ever serve?"

"No, it never crossed my mind."

"You know, the military is not purgatory…" Jackson stare turned intense. "I can tell you were a good student. So was I," Jackson said. "I grew up in Ohio. My folks farmed. School was easy. Like most of kids I knew, I never concentrated."

Jackson paused, turned his head and, then looked at Rodrigo again. The glare was gone.

"When I was fifteen, my brother was killed in Afghanistan. The night we heard my house was a hell hole. I cried, screamed and broke things. Then I ran off into the woods. Coulda froze to death. The next day I signed up for ROTC and the world changed."

"So, the military gave purpose to life?" Rodrigo asked.

"I guess that's as good a way to sum up the thinking of a fifteen-year-old as any."

They looked at each other in silence before Jackson asked, "Why did you say the military never crossed you mind?"

Both men with solemn expressions, Rodrigo knew Jackson was sizing him up. He decided to be straight and see what happened. "I was a bookish boy. The rest of life and the world went on in the background. Learning was the only thing that was important."

"Did you have friends?"

"A few, but no one was ever close, except Kele. Kele died."

Jackson's expression changed. The wheels were turning. Rodrigo wished he'd say something.

“I think two things made me take on this project with such vigor.”

He had Jackson’s attention. “The first was my grandfather,” Rodrigo said. “For a few years in my early teens, the family visited him and my grandma in South Dakota every year.

“One night grandpa took me to a bonfire. I remember the long drive. I got bored … asked to go home. Tata just smiled. His father was Arapaho. Once we got there, the night instantly became magical. I still sometimes find myself humming the Ghost Song.”

“What’s that?”

“A melody from the Arapaho Ghost Dance. It originated in the 19th-Century when white-man diseases were killing everyone off.”

“What made the night magical?”

“Tata sat close to me. His arm over my shoulder. He explained everything that was said. But he didn’t have to. Most of it was evident.

“Anyway, that’s when I first became interested in aliens from campfire stories that summer. Tata knew a lot and had great books. He choked out, grandpa died shortly after that.” After some silence he said, “Grandma gave me all his books,” he said sadly.

“Grandpa’s influence and absorbing a lot about aliens brought me out of my shell. This was the first time I was immersed in something that a teacher didn’t say I had to do.”

“What’s number two,” Jackson asked.

“That’s more difficult. I’m going to take a chance with you,” Rodrigo paused. Eye contact was palpable. “The only people that have heard this story are my wife and Hanna. An interested expression came over Jackson.

“More than a year ago, I was contacted by an alien.”

Jackson reacted, as if he was suddenly looking at a lunatic. “Come on man. What’s this bilge?”

“My wife’s reaction was worse, much worse. Let me explain.”

Jackson’s head shook slowly in acknowledgement.

“In my junior year at UTEP, my linear algebra instructor invited me to join a program he was overseeing. It was training in telepathy. I loved it from the start.”

Rodrigo took ten minutes to explain his telepathy training, that he was very good at it, the first connection and the accident, then the contacts since the CSETI story broke on the news, and why he believed that he was talking with the alien ship.

“So, Rodrigo… you believe that inert-looking ball you’re going to see has communicated with you?” Jackson said, disbelief pasted on his face.

“I also believe it’s not an inert ball. It’s alive.”’

“You sound certain, and I think you’re an honest person. But this story you’ve painted is hard, very hard to accept.” After a few seconds, Jackson said, “I like to think I’m open-minded, so let’s talk this out. And I’d like to understand what you think this alien craft has told you.”

“Thank you. Maybe later we can talk about why the alien picked me.” Rodrigo swallowed. “I’ve learned a lot about them. Some of this I’ve been told, some I’ve read into what I’ve heard or seen.

Rodrigo watched Jackson as he spoke. A skeptical look regularly surfaced. Nonetheless, he listened.

“The alien transmits bluntly. There’s no adjectives or adverbs.” Rodrigo saw Jackson react. “I say transmits, because I don’t get words, just thoughts. I have a theory how that happens. I often can see what the alien has seen when it tells me something, like its mind is an open book. It took

many communications before the alien learned to attenuate his signals so that they were not painful before I could understand. The alien gets all the credit for making this link work.

"I've learned the aliens communicate directly with each other, brain to brain. I don't know how that happens. Several times I've got messages that suggests group thinking. Therefore, it's possible their minds are linked and open all the time. I also believe the alien uses our electrical infrastructure to get thoughts to me."

Rodrigo knew Jackson was skeptical at best. Maybe polite to keep listening. So, I decided to forego his theory on why they ship was here in the first place. A later time, maybe, if he became sure Jackson believed him.

"My questions are accumulating," Jackson said. "Go ahead."

"They have a fleet of ships like the one that's here. My guess is that there are about forty or fifty of them. These vehicles are ancient. Literally, millions of years old. For that reason and other details, I've convinced myself that they probably don't have spme warp-drive. I'm pretty sure that they travel the universe at a speed less than lightspeed. I also think the alien I've talked with is an A.I. that is also millions of years old."

"That's a bunch of stuff that would be very interesting. But you're going to have to convince me about this communication issue to start with."

"I understand. There's one other thing you'll find important.

"They were here on a mission. Their home is very far away. They may believe that a previous race on their planet died off as the climate changed and the planet warmed. Some of that is a guess. This previous race most likely is responsible for the spacecraft and A.I.'s."

"So, let's say that Megan Thompson is right," Jackson said. "And these aliens are from HD-whatever-it-is, and it's six hundred light years away. Then it would take them a whole bunch of

years to get here," Jackson said with a wince, then repeated, "A whole bunch!" He leaned Rodrigo's way fuming.

"You bet," was Rodrigo's comment. "Now your reaction has matched Jada's. I understand. This is a lot of stuff that's hard to believe. It took me a long time to convince her. Hanna too. In the end both accepted this unsavory, counterintuitive jumble because they knew I wouldn't lie to them. I'll need to convince you.

"This is a big deal for me. I imagine aliens in no rush to find what's out there. For reasons only they know, they accept what the physics and universe offer and do what they can.

"There's a lot of guesswork in what I've said. But I've spent a lot of time thinking about this. Everything I just said suggests to me time, and everything you and I associate with time, may be very different for these aliens."

Jackson didn't say anything for a while. "Thank you. That's a bucket full. Of what, I'm not sure. Heedless of how wild much of this sounds, we have about four hours. No way I can can take this to anyone in the UAPTF, much less Admiral Northman. You need to rein in a lot of it. Let's start with this previous race you think built the alien spaceships and died out millions of years ago. Did you learn anything more about them?"

That Evening

Megan Thompson pulled up the pictures Maggie had sent her one more time. She watched the planets circle the star and read the numbers pasted in a corner of the monitor.

The Davenport supercomputer had collected HD-69234 data from telescopes worldwide and transformed earth-based data into a visual model displayed on an adjacent screen. Sufficient data was only available to allow comparison of the first two of the four planets. But these two looked

to be an exact duplicate of what she was seeing in Hanna's video from the hologram. The odds against planet sizes, distances and orbits coincidentally matching so closely were huge. The fit is just too good to ignore, she said to herself. But 617 light years away?

She leaned back in her chair and went through a long mental list of caveats.

The Colonel can stuff it, she thought, recalling Colonel Lang's obnoxious interruption during the meeting. He could care less what she had to say… no, he doesn't have a clue, nor does he give a shit. His Navy is locked in battleships and aircraft carriers' whose days are long past.

I need to find something that will jolt a pilot out of the past… drop kick his old butt through the uprights. She hadn't been this angry for a while and got up to walk over to grab a soda and cookie she always kept to fend off frustration.

The cookie deliciously melting in her mouth got her mind going. A comprehensive survey of what was known about wormholes and black holes in the part of the Milky Way would be a start. They had to get here somehow. She crafted a search limited to the local quadrant in the Milky Way surrounding a few million-star systems in an area surrounding both the earth and HD 69234. It would keep computer time reasonable.

She grinned and pressed the execute button then looked out the window behind the monitors. A little laugh escaped. Her big mistake that first week at Davenport. The query was easy to write. She wanted to find stars in the Milky Way that were ready to collapse into a black hole. As that job ran, the computer seemed a little slow before the call came in. "What the hell are you doing down there?" Ken Renshaw asked. "Your job has brought everything on site to a screeching halt." Only 300 billion or so stars in the Milky Way, she thought, a lesson learned, as another laugh escaped.

Still getting her legs under her at Davenport, she watched as the new supercomputer seamlessly juggled bits and pieces of data from relevant servers around the world. Easy to program and use, it was incredibly fast. Scraps of results had already started to appear on her monitor, so she'd got it right. Single-minded as she looked over the first answers, Megan felt driven to call Bull Sprang, her Ph.D. adviser at MIT. He'd introduce her to the premier worldwide wormhole expert.

As more results came in, she was not able see how aliens could use irregularities to shorten such a long journey, unless, of course, they'd learned how to navigate wormholes. Using them was the only feasible way to shorten such a journey, given what we know. We have so much to learn, she thought. She'd need a crash course. Right now, becoming a whizz was the only thing that would make her happy. Suddenly insatiable, she couldn't work fast enough.

Maybe changing variables would turn up something unexpected. She was without doubt an intellectual infant compared to aliens that could travel so far and make the hologram she'd seen happen. She'd play with this for a while and prepared for a long uphill battle.

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Twelve hours after arriving, Jackson Wald was in his Davenport office still thinking about the hours of discussion the day before. So much bigger than the reality of his day-to-day life, the story Rodrigo told seemed like a grand fairy tale. Yet, he was convincing.

Rodrigo was a good man. He wanted to believe him. The long conversation on the flight was jam-packed with possibilities and thoughtful interpretations. Yes, there were gaps, but he was now convinced Rodrigo believed he was telling the truth. So, two possibilities remained. Either the man had a personality disorder or these contacts and what he'd learned were as he said.

Still, this idea of linking with the alien was far out – fantastical. Anyway, what could he do with it. No one would believe him. So what! The Colonel wouldn't listen anyway. In the end, though, he'd have to convince Northman.

He picked up his vibrating phone and heard, "Good morning."

"Hey, Megan. What's up?" It was nice to hear her low melodic voice. Far better than the expected call from the Colonel.

"I've got some really interesting stuff I'd like to talk about."

"Well, right now, my foremost desire is to walk down the hall for my first cup of coffee. Yesterday was long… but I'm all ears."

"Well then, take your phone and go get that coffee."

Jackson really liked her. She'd told him she was a wild child until she discovered the library and then got a computer as a teenager. Her mega-personality was all science these days. He'd had nothing but good reports back. Everyone praised her as a problem solver and hard worker. Tenacious was the word that came to mind. So far, the Navy had been unable to find a challenge that slowed her down.

"My day with Rodrigo, yesterday, was also fascinating – but you first."

"Was Colonel Lang there?" she asked.

"No, why do you ask?"

"We'll get to that. But wormholes kept me lit all night. Everything I found switched on some new goofball way the aliens might get here faster. I couldn't stop.

"Until the Colonel's total incompetence," she yelled, "His inability to even consider the possibility they came from HD 69234… Just remembering his mindless challenge deflated my balloon. Nothing would make him go away. It was like he was standing there over me, staring."

He wondered what the Colonel would think of what he and Rodrigo had talked about.

"I had to do something and walked outside," she started again. "It was chilly. No, it was cold. I had my usual tee shirt on and looked up when I turned to head back inside. There it was above me, the Milky Way, bright and spectacular. It was a great night. From one vista to the other. I couldn't stop staring.

"My brain began to go again. My mind's eye saw eastern Washington State, then the earth and sun, then it went to local stars – I've studied them all. It took a few minutes before I was finally able to study the location of HD 69234. Even on a clear night it was difficult because the brightness of the Milky Way was in the background. But HD 69234 is a very bright star. I was pretty sure I was right.

"Wow," Jackson said. "How can you possibly pick it out of millions of visible stars?"

"I knew the direction was correct. The intensity of the light falls off with the square of the distance. You know me. I did the math in my head. Early this morning I checked parallax calculations online to make sure I was right."

Jackson was lost but didn't interrupt.

"Anyway, I stood there after I started to shake from the cold before it hit me. After reading and thinking all night about wormholes and other possible shortcuts, I realized an advanced race could just send out ships manned by A.I.'s. They'd learn to hop, star to star, and use gravity offered by rogue planets to play pinball with the universe, to get near light speed. They'd sent back signals for future generations who would benefit from what was learned."

Jackson was very quiet.

"Hey, Jackson. You there?"

"Yah, and I'm glad I have some strong coffee.

"I need to get you and Rodrigo together."

"Yeah, I'd love to talk to him… but let me finish.

"Back inside, I worked for more hours – until I called – other than a bite to eat. There have been some really good studies of this possibility. Many calculations using rogue planets to move spacecraft between star systems. We don't know where many are, we just know there's a bunch of them.

"The more I read, the more convinced I became. This would work for some alien race that was a whole lot more patient than we humans are."

"What's a rogue planet?"

"A planet that was ejected from a star system during formation. Several experts suggest they are probably more numerous than planets orbiting stars."

There was quiet again before she asked, "So, why do you want me to talk to Rodrigo?"

Now back in his office, Jackson sat and sipped coffee. 'Should he open up?'

"Because the two of you somehow pulled the same deduction out of the heavens coming from very different perspectives."

"You mean, he thinks an A.I.'s piloted your ship?"

"Well, that too. But neither of you are worried about the cost of exploring the universe in time. And now I think I get it. Einstein showed time is relative. I just uncovered a facet of relativity they don't teach in school."

"Wow!", he heard. "Where's Rodrigo at now?" she asked.

"He's in a meeting with the biology group this morning trying to decide where to go with some samples that might be alien DNA. After lunch, he and I are going to visit the spacecraft."

"Alien DNA?" he heard her whisper. He knew she'd talk to him.

**

“Sorry to interrupt, Lieutenant, could I have a quick word with Mr. Avila?” Megan asked.

“Certainly, Ms. Thompson. Join us for lunch?”

“Thanks. That won’t work,” she said. “I need to get some sleep.”

Lieutenant Edgar gave her a funny look.

“Just give me a second.” Megan grabbed Rodrigo’s hand and walked him over to an empty table.

“I hope that wasn’t too pushy,” she said.

“No worry,” Rodrigo said. “I’d really hoped we’d get a chance to talk. Have you had a chance to follow up on that star system you mentioned at the shipyard meeting?”

“HD 69234. Let’s talk about that too. But Jackson told me we’ve somehow pulled the same conclusion out of all the uncertainty of the heavens. Comparing views is important to me.”

“View of what?”

“How the alien ship got here. Research has convinced me that some cleaver method to exceed the speed of light limit is unlikely.

“I’d really like an hour or so but know you’re going to see the alien craft this afternoon.” Megan pulled out her phone. “What’s your number. I’ll send you a text and you can call me if you have time this afternoon.”

“I’ll try… You could talk to Maggie.”

**

Jackson put his hat under his arm and knocked on Colonel Lang’s office door.

“Come in Commander,” Lang said. “You well?”

“Yes, thank you… you wanted to see me.”

“I have your request to visit the alien craft with Mr. Avila, this afternoon.” Lang held up a busy form.

Jackson reached for it. “I haven’t signed it.”

A frown came over Jackson’s face. “I thought we’d talked this out.”

“I’m still not happy with having him here – and, above all, with the civilian seeing the ship.”

Jackson wondered why they had to do this again after the Colonel’s rant the week before. “Well, Colonel, it’s my view that your staff should learn how Rodrigo and Hanna found all the things they missed, and the methods that allowed them to do that.”

He considered reminding the Colonel about Hanna’s conclusion at the shipyard meeting… He wouldn’t get it.

“I understand,” Lang said. “But my policy is to keep knowledge we have of this ship limited to as few people as possible. Keep it a secret.”

“Secret? My God, from whom? It’s been spread all over every newspaper and TV newscast in the nation. The Russians and Chinese aren’t stupid. They know we have it. You get that don’t you?”

“Commander Wald,” he said, his tone controlled while forceful. “The vast majority of Americans do not know that we possess an alien spacecraft. Most don’t care. The few that think we do don’t have the ability to figure out it’s here. I want to keep it that way.”

“But, Colonel, the last time we argued about this you agreed to let Rodrigo see the ship. I promised him. It was a condition to get him here.”

“Well, he’s here. I think it’s too risky.”

Jackson did not feel it necessary to repeat that Admiral Northman was aware of and approved this request.

"And who's going to handle the crowds of protestors at our gate when it gets spread all over social media?"

"That's not going to happen. I have his word."

The Colonel's face was a brilliant shade of red. "Well, you may trust this man, but I wouldn't let him clean my toilet."

There was a protracted break with both men staring. "Colonel, I will have Rodrigo at the enclosure at fourteen hundred this afternoon." Jackson got up and closed the door behind him.

**

"Hi, Maggie, it's Megan Thompson. Rodrigo gave me your number."

"Yeah, Megan, what's go 'in on?"

"I guess … we don't really know each other. Just that brief talk at the shipyard meeting. Anyway, I'd like your take on a few things. That is, if you have time."

Maggie wondered why she was so tentative.

"Fine… Is everything okay there?"

There was a pregnant pause while Maggie waited to hear what she had to say.

"The truth is I had a hard time calling you after Rodrigo suggested it."

"Why? Did I put you off?"

"No, not at all. I feel a little intimidated."

"My God, girl! You've earned a Ph.D. in astrophysics, and you feel intimidated?"

Another tongue-tied break took several seconds.

"I was really impressed by how confident you were when you rebuffed Colonel Lang at the meeting. I haven't encountered many women our age who have their act together like that."

Maggie laughed loudly. “The truth is I was scared shitless. Rodrigo told me not to take any guff.”

“Well, it sure didn’t show. You were amazing. He’d gone out of his way to be an asshole.”

Maggie instantly liked this lady. A great feeling sank in as she remembered feeling the same way just months ago.

“The video and reports you sent me were great, too. Thank you. So, let me start at the beginning. Since we met each other that day, I’ve been able to convince myself that HD 69234 is the star system these aliens are from. Coordinates I was able to collect from around the world matched your video of the hologram perfectly.”

“Great. Until now, everything we’ve learned only seemed to open more possibilities.”

Megan was again quiet for a second. “I could tell from Rodrigo you’d had a lot to catch up on. The most worrying thing is believing that Rodrigo has been in contact with aliens. If all he says is true, some of the mystery in the universe, at least as I see it, could disappear.”

Maggie didn’t reply right away.

“The only thing I can tell you is that I believe him. Any you should really talk to Hanna. He’s an amazing guy. Honest to a fault. I’ve never known him to stretch the truth.

“But I’ve known him a long time. He bores into all the questions and uncertainty like a bloodhound. It’s the mystery that turns him on.

“If you want to go further, you should really talk to Hanna. She’s so much more up to speed.”

“So, the other thing you might help with is the more than 600 light years between the earth and HD 69234. I’ve been trying to find short cuts that would allow the aliens to get here in a reasonable time … in human time.”

“Okay, you, Rodrigo, and the rest at the meeting talked about light years and immediately lost me? I get it that it’s a long way to travel.”

“It’s about 1.6 trillion miles.”

“In my world it takes about a minute to go a mile. So, traveling 600 light years sounds unimaginable.”

“The universe is a big place.”

“Yeah, Rodrigo has tried to tell me about the galaxy and universe. It kind of rattles around in my brain. Just too big to imagine.”

“The closest star to our sun is about four light years away. That’s why 600 light years seems impossible to humans, even at the speed that light travels. So, I’ve come up with the idea that the aliens might didn’t have to or want to travel faster. If they were more patient than humans, they could travel at a speed near lightspeed … kins of take their time. Then what they learn would be available for future generations.

“That snuggles up to Rodrigo’s idea that an advanced civilization would build artificial intelligence to pilot their ships. An A.I. would not be constrained by all the problems that would face living beings, if their only job was to keep the ship on course.

“But how would they even get up to light speed?” Hanna asked.

“I probably know a lot more about the universe than most plain Janes,” Megan started. “It’s kinda common knowledge among astrophysicists that a properly guided ship could hitch together gravity boosts from stars and planets to get close to light speed.

“The theory of relativity cautions us that an object’s mass will become a problem for any object if it gets too close to light speed.”

“What do you mean by a problem?”

Megan was quiet for a second. “You haven’t studied physics. Seemingly strange and contradictory things happen as fundamental functions of matter and energy approach limiting values. Einstein’s famous equation, $E=mc^2$, relates energy, mass and the speed of light. In special relativity, a ships mass is thought to grow toward infinity as it approaches light speed, the sacrosanct constant.

“Matter, light and energy are strange things because what you and I see are made up of more atoms and molecules that it’s possible to imagine.”

“Yeah?” slipped out of Hanna’s mouth and faded away.

“Rodrigo said something about a big sip of water contained ten to the 23rd-power water molecules. Unbelievable.”

“And the universe contains just as many stars and other big bodies, like planets and stars, as atoms in the sip of water. The distances between all these things are vast because the big bang that started everything was billions of years ago. That’s what makes all this so hard.”

That soaked in for a few seconds. Hanna decided enough with the questions. “Okay, I’m feeling pretty insignificant.”

“Me too. I told Jackson about this idea of patient aliens,” Megan said, “and learned that Rodrigo had said the same thing but that he got there a completely different way. Rodrigo is so busy, he suggested I talk with you.”

“He has talked to me! A lot when he was thinking this out. It was hard.

“He spends his free time in his back yard thinking. I’ve been with him a couple of those evenings. He often talks to his wife or me the next day when he’s figuring things out. He works and works – scribbles on a piece of paper – until he has something he’s happy with. Then he puts the sheet down and comes back to it a day or two later.

"Anyway, we've talked about what he's learned from the alien. It's complicated. He still thinks he's been dealing with an A.I., not the creatures that come from that planet. But you've probably heard all that… the idea that their ships are conscious. I think we still only have part of the story."

"Okay, tell me what you know about why he thinks the aliens don't exceed the speed of light to get here."

That Afternoon

Rodrigo was having trouble waiting for what was coming. Every little detail he knew about the aliens and their ship was churning around in his head. Overload!

Jackson gave him a choice of riding or walking. With this fixation on seeing the ship, a walk sounded like it would give him a chance to settle down. But he could only think of one thing – his eyes glued on the horizon.

"The Davenport facility has over three hundred technical staff with expertise in all the relevant functions," he caught Jackson saying. "Whatever," he thought. His usual moral attempt to concentrate was displaced as more questions about the alien craft queued.

They'd walked a mile, maybe two, from the office building, around infrastructure and across runways. Jackson's pace had him breathing hard. But the physical activity felt good. It fed his eagerness.

Another 100 ft. and Rodrigo saw something. Through trees. All by itself at the north end of the site. A lone derelict building surrounded by a chain-link fence. Intentionally separated from other development. The falling down structure lay behind trees at a hill's bottom.

With the old warehouse in full view out of the trees, details of the building sharpened. The sheet metal siding was rusty and dented. A piece of roof must have flapped and bent in a strong wind. There was no parking area or cars.

Well clear of the runways, he made out two uniformed marines with a pickup on the enclosure's east side. They looked to be repairing the chain-link fencing. Jackson's site lecture continued unabated. The marines stood at attention and saluted, before opening a gate. Jackson returned the salute, and Rodrigo noticed weapons leaning on the pickup. Jackson led him around the dark east side of the building where all he could see was an old-fashioned storm grate near the back. No doors or windows.

Jackson bent down to push a button Rodrigo hadn't seen. The grate's shift startled him and uncovered steep stairs. "Hold onto the handrail," Jackson said.

Rodrigo hadn't said five words since they left the office. "This is a little spooky."

The stairs led to a steel door with no handle. Rodrigo's heart pounded as Jackson used his ID for access. The door slowly swung open to reveal a marine at a desk in a small room with an elevator behind him and an automatic weapon within easy reach. "Good afternoon, sir," he said. "A nice walk?" he asked as Jackson signed the registration book.

"Good to see you, Al? It is nice out there.".

"Rodrigo, would you sign in, please," Jackson asked.

After signing, he printed his name, the date and time. Then the elevator door opened. Inside, he caught a glimpse of the marine's monitor through the closing door. It was split into four scenes – one was a long hallway with gray walls and no people. Maybe a dozen white doors could be seen in the distance. It looked sterile and somehow intimidating.

Eagerness peaked as the elevator started its descent. No panel or buttons. With time, excitement turned to suspense, then distorted to stress. He usually didn't have a problem with elevators. This was a long ride.

"Rodrigo, I can see this process has made you uncomfortable." Jackson's words felt measured, not reassuring. Rodrigo watched him. A resigned expression didn't help.

The doors finally opened onto that long hallway. Rodrigo stood there feeling handled. He stared down the unsettling hall. Like some volatile gas, remaining excitement evaporated. He felt empty and deflated.

"This is a difficult place," Jackson added. "My first time was unnerving. We have a process to go through with no natural light. There's nothing to be concerned about and you'll get used to it."

"Thank you," was all Rodrigo could manage, still looking down the long corridor. There were no windows in most doors. Not a person in sight. The place looked like a prison.

Jackson walked down the hall, but Rodrigo stopped at the first door to look inside. Something was taped over a small window. He didn't like this place at all. His lungs felt tight. The air was cold and heavy. His head started to spin.

That first, tense conversation he and Hanna had with Jackson. Did he know too much? He turned and looked back up the hall at the blank steel of closed elevator doors without controls.

This was a prison!

He'd be locked away to keep him quiet! The Colonel wanted absolute control. Rodrigo told too much of what he learned from the aliens. Jackson talked to Lang. This nasty place was some gulag in a sparsely populated part of eastern Washington state. There were prisoners behind those locked doors.

The whole thing… This trip! A special jet. All the nice things Jackson said… just a military scheme to isolate him and keep him quiet.

Jada would disappear too. He'd never see his wife again. She'd scream and scream! Then die of fright. Then, they'd grab Hanna. Some contrived accident. All of them put away to never be heard from again. Before long, people would forget. Get on with their lives.

Rodrigo looked at the ceiling and filled his lungs with air. It took several seconds before the fantasy began to crumble.

'Come on man! Calm down. You're making this up.' The creepy, fear didn't go away.

Jackson had stopped and waited four doors down the hall. Rodrigo had collected enough composure to slowly walk to catch up, then asked, "How far underground are we?"

He didn't get an answer. Jackson opened a door on the left and motioned Rodrigo into a large room. Half a dozen people worked at benches and desks, heads down. After scanning the room, Rodrigo's eyes fixed on an armed marine standing at the door at the room's opposite end. The others all wore the same grey coveralls. He shivered. Damn, they are inmates! Heads down, they were oblivious to his presence.

He remembered the absence of cars outside and gritted his teeth. Sweat ran down his back. Confusion was penetrating. He looked behind him. The door was closed. Nowhere to run.

Jackson motioned a man Rodrigo's age over and introduced him. "Dr. Fischer, this is the man I told you about, Rodrigo Avila."

"Dr. Fischer is Dr. Madsen's laboratory manager," Jackson said.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Avila." A no-nonsense look came over Fischer's face. He held out a hand. "You and your colleague, Ms. Krol, did some fine work. I'm afraid it was embarrassing to learn how much we missed at the Wyoming site."

Rodrigo stood dumbfounded for a second before air rushed out – as if a balloon burst. He stood for a second more before saying, “Thank you, Dr. Fischer. My apologies for being a little by what I’m seeing.” After another few seconds, “Hanna is tenacious in her pursuit of samples and documentation.”

“Well, only now are we beginning to consider how much the systematic sampling procedures you follow at Seleron might improve our program,” Fischer picked up.

Rodrigo took a breath and wondered if Jackson even noticed his fit of paranoia. His mindset was catching up. Did Fischer just say that they regularly dealt with alien vehicles? Yet another twist pumped life back into him.

“I will make sure we have some time to talk more,” Fischer concluded.

Rodrigo managed a smile, and thanked him, before he followed Jackson through the room, past the guard and down a short hall. There were more closed doors before the hall’s end. Another uniformed marine sat at a desk with a weapon. He stood.

Jackson said, “As you were, Sergeant Wilson.”

“Well guarded,” Rodrigo said.

“The alien ship is on the other side of this door,” Jackson said, with affect, pointing behind the sergeant. “First though we go through the doors on the right to change into protective gear.”

Rodrigo was puzzled.

“We must go through a safety procedure to prevent contamination outside of the containment room. After we finish, we will both take special showers before we get back into street clothes.”

The fact that Jackson was going through this with him helped drain remaining worry. He looked at the door. The alien craft was literally feet away. An eager surge pulsed through him, His worry about some plot finally fled like a defeated enemy.

Rodrigo walked into the changing room with his heart racing. Now he could smell it. That kid again, when he stood by the car for an hour before mom drove him to take his driver's test. A man on the greatest adventure of his life.

"It was the only reason you agreed to come," he said out loud, smiling at the mirror when almost ready. He zipped up the stiff coveralls and glanced at the exit doors. This was it. Unsteady, he stood leaning on the wall before he was able to put on the head gear. "Come on old man, it's your duty to help the military," he reminded himself self-mockingly while looking at the mirror again with another smile. "This is your bonus."

Witnessing the spacecraft up close and personal might just be the high spot of a most satisfactory life. "Beyond lucky," he whispered, remembering Hanna, he wished she was here.

Jackson was waiting when he came through the changing room exit. He jiggled Rodrigo's respirator and tightened the straps. Jackson then pushed the left button on his microphone, "Can you hear me?" Rodrigo pushed his button, "Yes, I heard you." Jackson motioned him to double doors behind him. The brutish gear had turned Jackson into something nonhuman. Another small battle to deal with.

Then, with each step anticipation grew. Discomfort with the safety gear, his fit of apprehension, and the struggles to get here had disappeared. An uncontrolled snicker escaped. Jackson stopped inches from the door.

Jackson entered a code on a keypad. Nothing happened. With more time Rodrigo felt movement on his protective suit from a rush of air. The double doors opened onto a tiny room with more doors. Frustrated he started to add up the number of doors they had to go through. Tale-tales above indicated the vent above was blowing a lot of air unnoticeable through the gear.

Doors behind him closed automatically before a second, floor to ceiling, closed. Anticipation of was momentarily lost to the ruckus. Tale-tales went limp.

The entrance opened to blackness. This was it. Euphoria surged. A figure, something round, began to appear. Bright lights flashed. His eyes adjusted quickly to focus on a perfect sphere on a platform in the middle of a huge room. Dizzy, he sucked in air, his heart pounding.

Vision tightened on the ball about five feet in diameter looking small in the setting. Dully metallic, no color flashed. It looked dead. The flashing color of the video, he remembered, was uplifting, even joyful. He stood in the doorway, waiting, for a minute. He studied detail and tried to calm down.

Without warning, he was on the platform, looking out. This was the spacecraft's view. Nothing but four grey walls, unbroken evenness. Somehow this outlook felt too intimate as he distantly scanned the room. Then the almost tickle at the back of his head alerted him. After more than a year, he felt the ship's A.I.'s frustration that he'd only imagined. His stomach sank. He looked around the room again, gripped by a horrifying chill as if the blood had left his body.

He noticed Jackson had walked over to the platform, leaving him at the entry.

Rodrigo took his time to walk slowly up to a railing around the spacecraft. The ceiling towered above barren walls. Everything appropriate for a much larger object. After climbing stairs, he stood behind a second lighter-weight railing five feet from the spacecraft. He could probably touch it. Everything else disappeared. Days of anticipation condensed into the instant.

Consciousness narrowed onto the ship's surface … the same dull, glassy look of the disk they found on Colton's ranch. He could not find anything, a scratch or dent, only sameness. Would it reflect sunlight like the disk? He wanted to take off the suit and touch it.

Rodrigo stood motionless and stared at the unknowable pod. Dull, the surface without a blemish was the color of the ice on the winter pond Jada and he visited every winter in the Alleghany mountains. How did something travel through space and, then get hauled five hundred miles on a truck's bed without a scratch.

Jackson's voice cut through concentration as he flipped a switch on a control panel. "We haven't figured out much so far."

The sphere shook slightly then gradually opened – split in half. Not even a crease had been apparent where it divided. The tingle in the back of his head distracted Rodrigo's attention. Now painful like a bee sting. He shook his head and reached back to find only the stiff protective suit. Was there something in the suit? He tried to ignore the sensation.

"But you've had it for over a year. All you can do is open it?" Rodrigo said, despite swelling pain.

Pain was suddenly replaced by a cold, empty feeling. Now it felt like an ice cube against his skin. He shook his head again. Something was going on.

God damn it! Not now.

Jackson had noticed his discomfort. "You know Jackson, I've looked forward to seeing this spaceship since you suggested the trip," he started. "I've been like a kid going to a special candy shop. But now, I know something's missing. It's more than the glitter. There's an aura, almost a yearning coming over me. I think it's the craft. It's like the A.I. is dying and trying to make me aware."

"I've heard something like this before Rodrigo – in other words and second hand. One of the technicians when the craft first arrived talked about empty feelings. He drove the other engineers crazy."

“I’d like to talk to him.”

“That won’t be possible.”

Rodrigo was speechless for a second before he asked, “But why?”

“He’s in a hospital … for the mentally ill. He couldn’t shake it, then totally lost it.”

“What do you mean by lost it.”

“I’m told his brain shut down. He’s unresponsive.”

Stunned, Rodrigo stood quietly for a while. He stared at the ship. The gnawing feeling in his head got colder. This was his one chance to see the ship. He concentrated.

“How did you learn to open the ship?” Rodrigo asked.

“The switch I activated sent a specific frequency to something in the sphere. We’re not sure what receives it.”

“You don’t know?”

“You’ll see. We’re not sure why that wavelength activates the sphere’s opening. An exhaustive search found where the signal is received. But its technology is unlike anything we’ve ever seen.

“Let me show you why this was difficult.”

Rodrigo forced himself to concentrate despite constant annoyance. The interior of the sphere was rough but looked unchanging – no control panels, switches, seats or monitors. “There’s nothing to see except that black and lumpy interior wall,” Rodrigo said.

“Nothing to speak of… One would think the sphere was directly connected to the alien minds.”

Jackson's comment sank in – another piece of evidence – before Rodrigo heard, "Our guys went over the interior with a virtual fine-tooth comb. It's consistent. Certainly nothing to sit or lie on."

"Maybe they don't need to sit."

Jackson turned toward him. Rodrigo couldn't really make out any expression through the equipment. "The breakthrough came when they used a directed beam of radio waves. Our men spent weeks going over the interior and varying wavelength and intensity. They eventually found the proper frequency and place."

"Directed beam?" Rodrigo asked.

"Yes – kind of a low energy laser. They painstakingly scanned the interior. When they got to the right spot in combination with the correct frequency and energy, a panel opened." Jackson flicked a second switch on his control board. A thin, wide sheet near the bottom inside of the orb opened slowly. Underneath was a maze of small irregularly shaped fibrous-looking cords.

"Really packed in there, aren't they," Rodrigo said. "Are they wires? Something bundled with an irregular cloth – maybe plant material. Nothing looks manufactured. More like growth." Here and there he saw chunks of a black material.

"What the hell is that?" Rodrigo asked, pointing.

"A ton more work after they found the panel led nowhere. There doesn't look to be another panel anywhere in the vehicle. We've taken small samples of the wires. Not enough to damage anything, hopefully. It looks like the fibers occupy a three-inch gap between the outer and inner shells. Unbelievably, the fibers are carbon-based, organic, and probably plant roots."

"So, when you took samples, did these plant roots heal themselves?"

"Yes. And those black chunks look to be a polymer. Some weird insulation the engineers think. Maybe, a nutrient medium?"

There was not a sound for a minute before Rodrigo said, "My God, what strange animal could possibly have created this? Fibers that are roots in a spaceship?"

"My sentiments exactly," Jackson answered. "But our team has found these roots are filled with gated pathways. They vaguely resemble animal nervous systems on earth."

Again, Rodrigo was quiet. The lonely feeling that disappeared in the excitement of examining the ship returned. He'd read about animal nervous systems enough to understand the basics. This was an important clue.

"Did you find anything inside when you first opened the craft?" Rodrigo asked, his eyes still fixed on the spectacle before him. "The interior looks to be the opposite of flawless exterior. Dark, rough and scratchy."

"Maybe more important, the capsule's shell is incredible. To the best of our knowledge, it's one hundred percent insulating. No heat escapes the capsule or vice versa."

"Or, maybe, those fibers were alive, they might generate heat?" Rodrigo suggested.

Jackson turned toward him. "And, yes, the inside was a mess, but nothing I expected. The interior contained soil, fiber and even small rocks. Aside from some crystalline solids in rocks not known on earth, everything could have been from here. The only things that seemed like someone had made them were some partially filled bags. My guess is the bags are made from that same cloth-like material you and Hanna found near the headless cow. The guys are checking that right now."

"What was in the bags?"

“Refined materials you can find on earth, like urea, potassium sulfate and ammonium phosphate.”

“N-P-K… Sounds like fertilizer,” Rodrigo said.

“That’s what the guys here are telling me too. They wonder if the aliens had some strange need to grow food during their journey.”

“Any water? If the fibers might be plant material.”

“No water in jugs or anything like that. Of course, the fibers had a natural water content. Though not synthetic, the fibers are not plant material you’d find on earth.”

Feeling a less inhibited by the cold at the back of his head, Rodrigo moved on, “The sphere isn’t glowing like in the video,” a non-question begging a response.

“All I know is this is the way our guys found it. No one has seen a difference since it arrived.”

Rodrigo walked slowly around the craft. Not an inch evaded a glance. The empty interior might be deceiving.

Uniformly without evidence of switches, controls or knobs, clues could be hidden in its rough, darkness. Slight peaks and valleys could be texturizing applied specifically to hide something, anything. He walked around again. The perfectly smooth exterior continued to distract him, inviting his touch.

A pesky question – on Rodrigo’s mind since he first entered the facility – finally came out. “I don’t see anything that could produce thrust or otherwise get this thing moving. Maybe they launched it with a big slingshot?”

His unseen smile squandered, Rodrigo heard, “Well, no device or method we know of, anyway. But with every new day, that limitation could become history. I’m not worried … we’ll get there.”

With his fixation on the ship, Rodrigo nearly missed Jackson's deadpan contradiction. What made him reply that way?

There was no way to read Jackson's expression through protective gear. Had they found something Jackson was unwilling to talk about? A process they didn't understand or were unsure of.

"But the craft did get here somehow," Rodrigo said. "It has mass. I can see it. It must obey the laws of physics … You must have weighed it?"

He didn't get an answer.

It was quiet while Rodrigo walked around the spacecraft once more. He passed the panel again and noticed two switches beside the two Jackson had used.

"You know, Jackson... Hanna and I had a problem with Colton Wrest's video when we started. Things just don't disappear. Those things that came out of this ship, then disappeared, were a thorn in my side until we discovered the sparkling dust at the landing site and came up with a supporting theory… And it's also true, they don't just appear. This ship also got here somehow."

Rodrigo wished he could see the unresponsive Jackson's face. From the size of the craft, he estimated that the protective suits, or whatever they were, that emerged in the video were no more than a foot tall. Then, aliens inside would have been small by earth standards.

"You know, Jackson … when the aliens disappeared in that video, it bothered me. All the hocus-pocus I've heard never added up.

"Anyway, this craft poses another puzzle. Hanna has a real problem with this vehicle, how it just seems to have appeared, without even an idea of how it might get here. I get too caught up in following the mystery to let that worry me. Hanna doesn't let me forget."

He didn't get a view again. What was it that Jackson didn't want to talk about? Trying to get more from him about how the spacecraft got here probably wasn't going to happen.

"Is there anything else you can say about the craft we haven't talked about," Rodrigo asked.

"There is one more thing we don't understand. The craft is surrounded by a weak electric field. It's the first thing we discovered. The field is always there, it never changes, and we don't have a clue as to its purpose."

'An electric field?' Rodrigo thought. He'd read that fish species use electric fields to navigate ocean depths. Changes in the field allows 'sight' of nearby objects. He mentally logged the need to get on top of this. Another thing to think about on the way home.

He thought briefly about his beautiful wife. He was already looking forward to seeing her.

There were more loops around the craft. The strange, but now familiar sensation started to get more intense at the back of his head. It was trying to contact him. It must be the ship's A.I. right next to him.

Rodrigo waited a minute, then gave the spaceship one last look. He turned to go.

Light exploded around the ship. So intense, he felt heat through the back of the protective suit. The light pushed him. He lost his balance and slammed into the handrail. He managed to grab it just as his senses were blasted by a jolt of thought transference. He fell to one knee but pulled himself up hanging onto the guardrail.

A raucous crowd was screaming at him. Signals so extreme, his head hurt for the first time in months. He doubled over the rail and tried to open his eyes. Impossible. Light paintballs splattered across walls. They were too bright to tolerate.

As he hung onto the rail, the A.I.'s familiar rhythm emerged from the noise. Others raced past it. Not the same cacophony of sound from when the ship's A.I. first connected with him. This

time he was standing right next to it. He was positive that familiar voice was part of the uproar. Dizzy, he almost fell again and wrapped his arms around the rail.

There are more aliens nearby … This is a conversation! he thought.

In what seemed an instant the bursting intensity of telepathy stopped to be replaced by an image of the gleaming spacecraft in his head. He turned and opened his eyes. The ship was dull, cold and gray again.

In the distance he heard, "Rodrigo… Rodrigo, everything okay?" He found himself slumped over the railing as perspective came around. Jackson was getting up from the floor below the spacecraft's platform. "I was stunned when it lit up and fell down the stairs. I'm okay," Jackson said. "You?"

Rodrigo straightened up still holding the rail and said, "When its lights went on, something happened. I got a message from the spacecraft. You and I need to talk."

"Talk about what?" Jackson asked. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure you'll believe me," Rodrigo said.

"After what just happened, why don't you try me."

Rodrigo let go of the handrail. Wobbly, he grabbed it again with one hand. "Okay, I just overheard a conversation between aliens – a bunch of them. The contact was very different from the ones I've had to now. I'm sure there's other aliens nearby. Living aliens, rather than the ship's A.I."

"Okay … What makes you think that?"

"When the ship lit up, the thought transference wailed like a crowd screaming at a football game. So loud it hurt. With concentration, I was able to isolate the voice of the A.I. The rhythm and beat I'm used to hearing. The message I've heard before. But now it's demanding to be

released from the confinement. No longer a plea, its message was clear. Frustration and fear were intense. I'm also thinking it had to use a good chunk of its meager energy supply to light up and send the message."

"Fear? How could you possibly know that?"

Rodrigo didn't need to see Jackson's face to get skepticism. "I'm not reading too much into the signal. I think the A.I. is declining."

"You know Rodrigo, why don't we get out of these suits, go back to my office, and grab some coffee. I'll admit finding what you just said is hard to believe. For some reason though you're being here lit up the ball. Let's talk it out."

Rodrigo turned at the door and stopped for one last look at the ship. Those new alien voices, so clearly different from the A.I., somehow felt less cultured and logical. The sensation in the back of his head was gone. It'd been superseded by a feeling that he would soon learn more about these aliens. The experience left him satisfied. Lingering discontent from being singled out by the aliens now of little importance. This adventure would go on for a long, long time. He felt fulfilled in the smelly showers and put on his street clothes.

As they left the rooms into the long hallway, Rodrigo was surprised when Jackson turned left rather than head right back to the elevator. At the end of the hall, there was a door that again required Jackson's id. On the other side of the door, a small open car with six seats waited on tracks. A lighted tunnel stretched into the distance. "This will get us back to the office sooner," Jackson said.

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Rodrigo left Jackson's office disappointed. Even though the Commander was friendly enough, and listened, he couldn't tell where Jackson stood on what he had learned from the alien

ship's A.I. It was important to have him onboard. Anyway, he owed Megan a call, and there were two texts on his phone he wanted to look at. He settled in an unoccupied bench outside, zipped up his jacket and called Hanna first after reading her text.

"Hi, Roomie, have you seen the ship yet?"

"Finished about an hour ago – it was beyond spectacular. I don't even know where to start."

"Give me a call after you've thought it through then… I feel great today. Joe's taking me to dinner," she said with a giggle.

"I'll call again, later tonight, maybe. Right now, I need to catch up with Colton. It sounds like something weird happened on his ranch. Sorry, there's so much I need to tell you about this place and the ship."

"Understand. It's already past six here. Try me at the office tomorrow."

Rodrigo shut down the call and looked skyward. Anger boiled. She should have been here. This health thing was so fucked up. But that would do no good. After a minute, he dialed Colton.

"Colton, how are you, it's Rodrigo."

"Hey man. Thanks for getting back. How's that lovely lady, Hanna?"

"Hanna's okay… Your text sounded worried, very worried."

"I guess I am. Something strange is go in' on here."

Soft words were packed with emotion, and pulled Rodrigo's thoughts back from Hanna.

"I've got some weird weeds growing – really big and strange weeds."

"Near your house?"

"No, no, around that large ponderosa at the alien site. The tree where you kept get in' a chill."

"What do these weeds look like?"

“Like nothing you’ve ever seen, man. I got a picture of a smaller one on my phone. Let me send it to you.”

“Okay, this is a good time.”

He got up and remembered the alien conversation he’d heard earlier in the afternoon. Could these things Colton saw growing like plants be the aliens? The picture arrived.

His eyes had a hard time making much of such a strange image. “What the hell is this thing! Tall and black with puffy red leaves at the top. Doesn’t look like anything from earth, does it?” It looked far away. A little out of focus. Hard to see much. Nothing to compare the thing to. Colton said it was tall. Then, he spotted a bunch of tendrils, or something long and thin piled on the ground near it. The distant figures that made him so uncomfortable in one of those earlier communications with the alien kind of looked like this. Staring for a while didn’t help. He called Colton back. “Hi Rodrigo. What do you think?”

“Not much of a picture.”

“Have you ever seen anything like this?”

“Maybe,” Rodrigo answered

“Did you get more pictures?”

“No, I was scared shitless.

“Those things are everywhere around that big pine. The bigger ones started sending those rope-like things out toward me. I hopped on Painter and skedaddled. After a mile or so, I stopped and called you. When you didn’t pick up, I left the text.”

“I guess you don’t want to go out there again.”

“Not by myself.”

It was clear Colton’s already had enough of these things.

It did seem like a crowd was in the background when the ship was reaching out a couple of hours ago. Maybe these weird plants are associated with aliens – how? If they are plants, he thought.

"I'm not too far away in eastern Washington state. I'm committed tomorrow until early afternoon. I think I'll change my flight home to Jackson Hole Airport, get a car and be at your place Thursday morning."

"What are you thinking, partner."

"I've got to see this for myself," Rodrigo said, thinking Colton just might have seen aliens or they were close by.

"Thank you," Colton said. "I don't remember be in' this terrified before. See if I sleep tonight."

**

"I'm not sure how I let you talk me into this," Jackson said. He flashed a quick smile Rodrigo's way. "But I am looking forward to seeing Wrest's place and the landing site, whatever it is that might be growing there." While battling the steering wheel, his voice got snippy. "Damn, this washboard and the potholes are like being back in Ohio. I could be on the way to the folk's place."

"Sorry, this is the only way I know to get to Colton's ranch." Rodrigo looked at him with a weak smile. They had turned right off State Hwy. 26 onto a rocky dirt road. "That's where you grew up?"

"Yeah, mom and dad farmed corn and beans not far from Columbus."

Rodrigo started to wonder how he ended up at MIT, rather than Ohio State, and then the military, but couldn't resist any longer. He had to come out with it before they got to Colton's

ranch. “You are friendly, Commander, and open to my ideas…. But you have left me with the impression that you don’t really believe I’ve been communicating with an alien. That gets in the way of us working together.

“The few who know, friends and family, also had trouble accepting the idea – particularly the telepathy part. But, except for you, the only people I’ve confided in know me well and believe me always truthful. That’s as important to me as anything in life. Yes, they have argued about details, but, in the end, they have accepted what I have said.

Jackson glanced his way. His eyes returned to the road, and he said, “Okay, I admit to being a hard sell. I would like to believe you. Some of my reluctance is because I am fighting military colleagues who do not welcome evidence that would acknowledge the existence of these aliens. I would be, politically, beaten into submission if I support much of what you have said.”

“You’re talking about Colonel Lang, aren’t you.”

“Yes, and some officers who work with him.”

“You said that was part of it.”

“This telepathy thing is hard for me to accept. After we talked on the way to Davenport, I spent an evening reading. There isn’t much support out there in the scientific community.”

“What would it take for you to change your position?”

“Unquestionable evidence of aliens today.”

Rodrigo had his answer and sat back in his seat. Jackson’s agreeing to go along to Colton’s ranch happily sealed a good chunk of the deal for Rodrigo. He was sure the often-silent man wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery. He needed to clear the air but wished he was more sure what they were going to find. It worried him that he might have oversold what he knew when he went back to Jackson’s office the previous night after talking with Colton.

When they pulled up to Colton's house, Rodrigo jumped out of the rental. Jackson stayed put and seemed to be taking in the scene. But he soon got out of the vehicle when Colton walked onto the porch with a smile was as wide as the Columbia River.

Colton grabbed Rodrigo's hand energetically with both of his. "Great to see you, my friend. Last night I worried you'd cancel coming this morning. You've really put yourself out. It's appreciated."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Wrest. I'm Commander Jackson Wald. I lead this project for the Navy. Apologies for the short notice on my coming."

"A better start than your military colleagues last year," Colton said while taking his hand. "I have some coffee inside but suspect you boys want to get go 'in. We should take the Bronco."

They piled in, Rodrigo in the back seat.

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The drive proved torturously long. Colton and Jackson got to know each other in the front seat. Rodrigo thought through the recent week and started to question why he'd agreed to make this trip. Of course, with a chance to find aliens, there was never really any uncertainty. And Jada wasn't very happy when he told her he'd be another day. His lungs filled with his head full of meaning. He knew the pressure had added up and was wearing on him.

His mental review of the things that were weighing him down was interrupted by a big bump as they crossed a creek. The jolt banged him into the door. The blue funk disappeared but something weird started.

A horribly exposed feeling set in, like a desperate bird in a cage. Something was after him … wanted him. With every bend in the road, the sensation grew.

Maybe this side trip wasn't a good idea. With the turmoil in his recent life and, now, adding this side trip had got to him. Reading for several hours last night was the only reason he finally got some sleep.

He woke late and, uncharacteristically didn't shave. Scratching the stubble, he hated the feel. And started to watch the roadside. Pines swayed in a strong breeze, bumping one another. Nothing felt right. His eyes closed; he knew the trees motion mimicked those distant aliens in that early glimpse of their planet. His mind was playing games.

Rodrigo shook his head and focused. It stopped.

After another mile of bumps and bends, the unrelenting thought transference rhythm started to pound his head. The strange beat was different from the ship's A.I., what he was used to. But as months ago, when this all started, the beat repeated over and over. He concentrated. The rhythm was very different from the ship's A.I. There was no way to pull together a message.

He thought about grandpa's Indian songs – and their words he didn't understand – that stuck in his head when he was a kid. They wouldn't stop. Now, he hummed them once in a while, they were part of him.

Rodrigo shivered. That temperature hallucination, months ago, near the tree where they were now headed. It all added up. Maybe I'm overhearing the aliens, he thought. With Jackson and Colton chatting away, he tried to calm down.

Head on the restraint, and eyes closed, he hoped it would stop. Awareness filled with something tall and swaying. Something weird – totally unlike local trees – shadowy images.

He heard Colton say, "Almost there, just around this bend. Prepare yourselves."

Then, Jackson cried out, "I'll be damned!" Rodrigo's eyes jerked open. Colton buried the brakes. The Bronco skidded to a stop a hundred yards short of the tree.

Rodrigo stared in disbelief at that place the ship's aliens disappeared so long ago. His eyes lurched around the impossible sight before him. His heart was trying to beat its way out of his head.

The ponderosa was surrounded with growth dense and tall. Only the old tree's upper branches were visible. No one moved or spoke.

Rodrigo noticed his head had miraculously cleared.

"Good Lord, save us! There's more than two days ago." The words had trembled out of Colton's mouth. Hands on the wheel shook. He started scratching. Jackson sat quietly a look of shock filling his usually self-assured face.

After a minute of stares at the odious sight before them, Jackson encouraged a reluctant Colton to inch the Bronco closer and closer without strong reaction from the beings. They slowly swayed back and forth, seemingly not seeing or hearing. His face was now without a hint of fear. Alarm conquered; Rodrigo could see Jackson's wheels were turning.

"As crazy and quiet as these things appear," Jackson said, his voice a thoughtful drone. "They are either unconcerned or unaware that we are here." After a second, he added, "Even in Afghanistan, my guts were never twisted this tight."

"What are you thinking, man," Colton asked.

"Ambush."

Colton had stopped, his face long. No one got out of the vehicle. "Rodrigo, can you hand me my ballistic helmet," Jackson asked. Rodrigo had wondered why he'd brought a helmet. Despite prepared calm, he thought, Jackson was frightened but serious.

Jackson opened his door to methodically stepped closer, snapping away with his phone's camera. He bent low for one shot, and Rodrigo saw him reach back to touch a bulge in the middle of his back at his beltline. He was carrying.

Colton followed, after grabbing a machete out of the back. His actions compulsive. They were all frightened. Before long, Rodrigo joined them. The three stood twenty yards short of the nearest swaying growth, a smaller one, maybe eight feet tall. He and Colton stared uncertainly, Jackson busy with his phone's camera.

Dozens of tall sturdy stalks filled the space around the Ponderosa. Five huge bulbous red leaves that looked like long, fat balloons topped each stalk.

"The leaves are expanding and contracting – breathing, almost," Jackson said.

Opaque black stems could be mistaken for thick plastic poles hammered into the ground. The size of telephone poles on the biggest aliens. The morbid look unsettled him.

The dead-looking stalks might be some ploy to contrast puffy, bright red foliage, he thought. Leaves on each of the monsters slowly wilted once full of air, then quickly puffed up again. Leaves constricted around regular veins with the same darkness as the stalks but adorned with red bumps. A gaping hole could be seen between each vein. If not so frightening it might be comical, was he puzzled.

Rodrigo remembered his conversation with Hanna a couple of months earlier, questioning why no native plants grew here. Not even a blade of grass. These growths were, incredibly, the opposite of what Rodrigo and Hanna saw then. It seemed even more whacky that new growths were waist high in some adjacent areas. The taller aliens rose 20, even 30 feet above the ground.

Any humor vanished with his inquiring gaze fixed on the bottom of each tall trunk. Every alien was surrounded by a half-dozen, or so, thin pointy and long black rope-like limbs. The

trunk's bottom, the arms base was a lumpy tumor. He could find no other word for the growth's base while watching the flourishing tentacle-like growths moving like snakes.

The long limbs pulsated and moved with no apparent purpose. Almost as if following weird music. "The largest of these tentacles was maybe an inch in diameter and fifty feet long. Their movement might be somehow connected to the strange rhythm I get from the aliens," shouted at Jackson.

Next to him, Colton for some reason picked up a rock and tossed it in the direction of the close one. The rock bounced short of its mark. The alien moved fast, so quickly, Rodrigo wasn't sure he hadn't blinked. "Is that a good idea," he said.

"Maybe not," Colton replied. "I needed to do it."

"While most tentacles have circled back to wrap around the stalks, some are touching other aliens. It looks like their touching is deliberate?" Jackson said.

Rodrigo's foot tapped unintentionally while he watched the throbbing tentacles. He wasn't sure but their beat seemed to match the rhythm that bugged him while in the Bronco.

The tallest aliens showed evidence of intelligence as they touched, almost thoughtfully, he imagined. There was grace in the way a tangle of tentacles covered the stems. As many as fifty creatures of different sizes, looked content and ignored them, swaying without a breeze.

It surprised Rodrigo that discomfort had totally disappeared. He could never have imagined the creatures he was looking at. He'd expected that inhabitants of another planet would look nothing like what was found in books and movies. These creatures went beyond that expectation. Revulsion for these creatures was distressing, but he wasn't frightened. Instead, he felt liberated. He had no doubt explanations would be found in the revelation before him.

“They may look hideous,” Rodrigo said. “I wonder what they will think of us after they learn whose here with them?”

Colton nodded. “There wasn’t a damn thing when I came out a few weeks ago. Well, maybe it was longer than that. But these things grow fast and look supernatural … I’d be for taking off if they didn’t look awfully tightly anchored to the ground.”

“I’m with you,” Jackson said from fifteen yards away. He was taking a wide semicircle around the closest alien, snapping away, but avoiding getting near a bigger one.

Gazing at the spectacle, “I think we have found the aliens,” Rodrigo said calmly.

Jackson said something to Colton that Rodrigo was too invested in the setting to get.

Rodrigo’s eyes were stuck on a small, round bundle of hundreds of short, black shoots. One bundle on each stalk, mostly hidden under the massive leaves near the top. They were much easier to see near the top of the taller close creatures. Looking hard, he also found them on the smaller ones.

Bigger bundles looked about twice the size of a human head with irregular small black globes at the end of each shoot. “It looks a lot like a sunflower,” Rodrigo said out loud, pointing. “Stubby dull leaves around each bundle of shoots makes them look like a big sunflower.” Colton and Jackson must not have picked them out of the visual bounty.

Different colored leaves were on each sunflower. Most were tints of red. On the tallest, the leaves looked brown.

After moving nearer, Jackson’s mouth was wide-open. His hands covered his ears. “That doesn’t bother you,” he said loudly.

“Something’s hurting your ears?” Rodrigo asked.

Jackson's impatient expression for a second disappeared before he said, "A chorus of a high-pitched sounds has started. I think each of these things has a different tone. It's not overpowering, but the pitch is high enough to bother me."

"Out of my range, I guess," Rodrigo said. "Maybe they noticed us. Was there a beat or rhythm?"

"Yes, but it's not something I recognize."

Rodrigo thought about the hearing aids in his suitcase before concentrating again on the swaying aliens. They all rocked back and forth comfortable and unphased – not a care in the world.

After a few seconds, Jackson said, "The rhythm makes me think of something Aaron Copeland might write. It's repetitive and unusual."

"Isn't it strange," Colton started, "how they're established in places far enough from the tree to get direct sun. I think they are suckering off the pine's roots."

"Maybe that explains why aliens planted genetic material in those nodules you found in the tree," Jackson said to Rodrigo.

. Discomfort with this situation had completely left him. He remembered his life beyond aliens, if even for only a split-second. Thought about Hanna, Lisa and Maggie.

Just then, a lone cloud blocked the sun and the alien's puffy leaves instantly deflated, collapsed and hung limply from stalks. "What a unique visual experience this is," he said. Jackson was right, anyway, about the tree's nodules. He'd call Zach in Seleron's biosciences.

Both Colton's and Jackson's faces were tense. Happy that more now made sense, some of the journey to get here flashed before him – all those guesses about science, the battle to communicate, the empty feeling from the spacecraft. Everything had prepared him for today.

“On the short ones, I can see a dense black growth visible at the center of the leaf mass. It looks like bubbles, black bubbles,” Jackson said, busy and only fifteen feet away. “Maybe new growth?”

“Could it be a brain.” Rodrigo said.

Jackson gave him a swayed look and nodded.

Rodrigo remembered Jackson’s concern over a trap. What was the next step?

The three stood and stared. A moment to marvel? Rodrigo looked at the other men as shock and fear had merged into a new normal.

Nothing was normal about these creatures though. He glanced at the sun and pictured the opposite, a stary night sky. HD 69234 would be among the host of stars in his limited view of the cosmos – some of them thousands of light years away. Yet here the aliens were! He looked at them and took a deep breath wondering how this could be.

Rodrigo began to think about how many light years it would take for the germplasm or whatever produced these things to get here, before glancing at Jackson, then Colton and the Bronco. He walked back to look for a pair of gloves. He wasn’t sure why. At the Bronco he fumbled around before finding a box he and Hanna must have left months ago crumpled up under Colton’s gear.

Colton watched him put on the gloves and stick a second pair in a pocket. “What yah doing, bud?” Colton called out.

“I’m not sure,” Rodrigo started. “Maybe we ought to try to make contact. There may not be another opportunity like this for millions of years. I can’t give away this chance.”

“We know nothing about these things,” Jackson said as Rodrigo walked back.

“They don’t seem aggressive. I’ll be as careful.”

Colton stared for seconds before saying, “I’d just as soon not have you get killed on my place, buddy. Maybe I should do it?” His voice wavered. “When I was here a couple of days ago, I planned to change out the flash drives on some camera’s I put out. I still need to do that. You should let me go,” Colton said.

“Besides, I’d really like to see what those cameras got.”

“So would I,” Jackson added. “But I wouldn’t want either of you get caught in the middle of those aliens before we test their reaction.”

Rodrigo stood for a minute taking in Jackson’s admonishment. “These things could be horrible predators. Sounds like you are still worried about an ambush. That doesn’t seem likely to me,” he said.

Just then the thought transference he’d thought might come struck. A confusing blast. It was impossible to make sense of a massive blow of thoughts. Was it even directed at him? It was more like he’d been included in a conversation.

He felt something swishing through his brain. Then the back of his head tingled. These aliens were checking him out.

‘Should I be afraid of these monsters? Why are they here? Will one of those tentacles grab me to be devoured.’

The scene before him suddenly became far more vivid – he felt like he was taking in features of each alien with a spotting scope. Every little detail around him was magnified. They knew he could hear them. The spot at the back of his head was throbbing.

With these living beings, the contact was like night versus day compared to the patient and methodical thoughts from the A.I. Not understanding, he got that there was a social quality as

opposed to the pure logic of the A.I. Were these things emotional? Did they love, get angry? He needed to patiently make contact and see what happened.

Jackson was right. Close contact was risky. But this kind of opportunity might be afforded to one individual in a generation. A chance to turn a page in the cosmic book of mankind. Rodrigo had to use the opportunity – somehow. Risks weren't going to disappear. Jada would say don't do it. Still, he felt compelled to test the alien's reaction… at any cost.

"You are right, Jackson. But I already put these gloves on. I'm going in." Determined, he tried to ignore a pounding heart and set off towards the closest large life form. There was no debate. No one tried to stop him.

Alien swaying ended close to him. Some bent toward him. He walked directly toward the biggest one. Tentacles parted to let him pass. He looked up to see its sunflower pivoted to face him. Flexibility astonished him as the massive brute turned and bowed toward him. He stopped twenty feet short to look up. The powerful, stench was suffocating. Something acrid filled his eyes with tears. Apprehension soared.

He glanced at nearby aliens. Tentacles surrounded them. Far too many to worry about. They wiggled and moved around. The menace above didn't move. Vulnerability was palpable.

There was a sprout directly in front of him – no more than a foot tall. He moved several feet away from it. He knew it couldn't see, but the sunflower was watching him, paying attention. More tentacles arrived. Sensory overload coursed his body. He hope they couldn't tell he was shaking.

He stared up again at this lifeform four, even five times his height. His legs unsteady he felt air moved from snaky ropes vibrating and shifting. One moved its scaly, greasy, and glistening

length closer, between him and the giant growth, and curled up five feet in front of him with its pointy end several feet off the ground. Maybe they bite or sting…

Rodrigo hoped the sunflower didn't see his fear. Panic started. His whole body shook… but he took this job. Without considering the terror that came with it. He took a big breath of the acrid air.

He raised his head and took more breaths. With another step, tentacles left adjacent stalks and straightened out. More moved toward him, not fast, but the things looked synchronized and threatening. He stopped, teeth clenched. Tentacles stopped too. More joined the tentacle with its head up in a defensive lineup for some unknown sport.

"Listen," Jackson hollered. "Those things are talking to you."

He turned and looked back. "What do you mean?"

"You can't hear it? It's that rhythmic high-pitched sound again. They've cranked up the volume. Higher, then lower, like a siren. It's a distress signal. Got it on my phone."

"Woah, coming through here loud and clear," Colton said. "You don't have to understand alien speech to get that. You should get out of Dodge – now, man!"

Rodrigo looked around. Surrounded by tentacles, he didn't see a way out. Another look up at the giant alien again, then he took another step toward the growth, his eyes on the sunflower. Tentacles moved closer. He took one more step. He could touch them. An awful smell – like the juice he hosed out of the bottom of his trash cans – filled him.

Colton shouted something and walked closer holding his machete above his head.

Rodrigo reached out to touch a long growth. The thing pulled away. On his left was the tiny alien. He reached down to give it a touch. It arched away. He reached further then rubbed his

fingers together wondering if he was just as disagreeable to them as they were to him. The gloves were covered with oil and a pungent decayed odor.

"Look out!" he heard. Limbs moved toward him from everywhere. He stood tall, hoping they'd stop.

Consciousness and time disappeared. Ambiance swirled somewhere into the upper reaches of the stratosphere – no gap to breathe or scream. A fierce barrage of unrestrained transaction assailed his mind. Countless thoughts. Hints of meteoric feelings, beliefs and ideas. No way to catch up. Mysterious feelings amid the powerful putrid smell without comprehension. Awareness overwhelmed.

Mindfulness suddenly caught up. He sensed some of it might stick. He looked at the tiny alien next to him then around. Something hurt. The small alien got a double take. In the midst of surging pain, he looked at it, then his feet. How could it be the alien was now on his right?

Awareness swelled … his face was buried in the sunflower of shoots. He fought pain to hold up his arm. A piece of bone was sticking through his shirt. Only the putrid stink and pain registered. Everything else hidden in dense brain fog.

"I didn't see you move," Colton yelled. "You disappeared but, then were there again …. in a different spot." Rodrigo barely heard him and could no longer see past the fog. Just motionless tentacles inches away. He reached to touch the piece of bone. Ribs ached. His body throbbed. These aliens picked me up, he thought and used his right sleeve to wipe oily stuff from his face before the lights went out.

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Grandpa turned and looked at Rodrigo with his kind and knowing smile. The sun was setting behind him. Light from the low sun filtered through his white hair to encircle his face in a radiant glow. The moment was magic.

Now, Grandpa was sitting with Rodrigo under the apple tree he'd planted years before. He jumped up and picked two and handed Rodrigo one. After a bite he asked, "How is it?"

"It's great, Grandpa." Rodrigo looked up into the tall tree's canopy and thought about the hours they'd spent in the knee-high summertime grass under this tree. "Why did you plant this tree?"

"I broke a leg."

"Really! How did you do that?" Rodrigo said, his voice sounding young. But he was more interested in what a broken leg had to do with planting a tree. He saw Neinoo walk out the back door. She smiled at him. Grandma smiled a lot. The moment felt like heaven. He took another bite of the sweet apple and wiped his mouth on a sleeve.

"My friends and I were fool 'in around when they were building the Niwat house," Grandpa said. "You know that two-story, red-painted place with white trim about a mile down the road. My friend, Raphael, was their boy. We were jumping off the house's roof into a big pile of sand. On the third jump, I missed the sand."

"Oh, what was Raphael's Arapaho name?" Rodrigo asked. He could listen to grandpa's legends for hours – particularly when he talked about the traditions of Native American names that went with names. Grandpa'd lived some of those traditions and studied to fill in the gaps. Somehow it was much richer than what they taught at school.

"I called him Hosa," Grandpa said. He was quiet for seconds. "Chief Hosa lived many years ago and was known as little Raven. My books have more."

Rodrigo was entranced. He could listen all night. Neinoo walked up and sat with them.

"This tree is here because my father told me trees you plant represent life and growth. He said my leg would heal and grow strong with the tree. I planted it as soon as I could get around. I was proud of this tree growing up. I went to the library to research apple trees that grew in South Dakota. Then I bought it with money I earned and nurtured it."

Rodrigo was having such a good time. Having Grandpa and Neinoo sitting with him was the best… Wait! Something was very wrong. Grandpa and Neinoo suddenly were statues. Like a video stopped. It was a dream! They died when Rodrigo was a teenager. How could everything be so magically real?

Rodrigo's eyes opened. His view clouded with eyelids stuck shut. He started to lift his arm to rub them. A hellish throbbing sent shock waves through him. It felt like someone was whacking him with a baseball bat.

Arm down, he jockeyed around trying to get relief. The shroud that hid the planks of the ceiling slowly faded. They found aliens at Colton's place! Something happened – it was painful, then he passed out. His neck cocked, even that hurt, he could see a red sleeve covering a cast on his lower left arm. It was broken! Only then did he summon up that bone sticking out through his shirt sleeve.

The dream – the aliens somehow augmented it! Made it bigger, more intimate, and more real. They had seen the beauty of our world – the magnificence of hills covered with great trees, branches spreading unthinkably beyond trunks, oceans stretching beyond sight into the imagination of every living thing, and flat lands of tall grass waving in a gentle breeze. The dream was their gift. More took place than just the broken arm. Did this gift contain a message? Were similar dreams in his future?

He looked around. Jackson was sitting six feet away with a magazine. They were in a small room. Jackson gazed up. “Hey, Rodrigo … those aliens did a job on you. Welcome back!” Jackson got up and walked over.

Rodrigo coughed trying to say something. Another cough hurt. “Where am I?” finally came out.

“In Colton’s doctor’s clinic in Mableton.”

Rodrigo’s head was clearing. Some of the alien episode was coming back. After alien tentacles grabbed him, he moved fast, too fast to get what was going on. Like the view from a rollercoaster, but even faster.

He shook his head. Tried to shake blurriness away. The nasty ache got worse. Then he heard Jackson again. “The doctor got help with your arm from a retired surgeon. They put on a cast, just your lower arm. The surgeon told Colton the hole in your arm is worse than the clean break. X-rays showed nothing else was broken. They said you’ll get past the bruises soon.”

The dream – the day was so bright. Grandpa’s words were hugely meaningful. Everything seemed real. He’d been certain he was there. A memory brought up with more clarity than he could possibly remember … before aliens.

More was coming back. Everything happened in seconds. One moment he was on one side of the small alien. The next he was on the other side. Alien power twisted and compressed the events of a minute – crammed them into microseconds. A huge matrix of information and concepts was planted in his brain. Now alien thoughts overflowed – too messy to understand. One idea quickly overtaken by another with scrutiny impossible. He knew he would get it.

The smells! The pungent, acrid odor of the alien had changed from instant to instant. Was there a glaring message hidden in those vile whiffs? He needed all his faculties in place to unearth what was in the bundle the alien delivered. He had to get back on course.

"Where's Colton?" Rodrigo asked. "How did I get here?"

"Colton's out talking with the doctor. They're buddies. The doctor did something for Colton's wife that he's grateful for. Anyway, we made up a story on the drive here about an accident you had on Colton's ranch. You slipped and tumbled down a hill to land hard on a big rock."

While listening to Jackson, Rodrigo reached back to a tickle behind his right ear and pulled out something short and black. One good look and he knew it was a shoot from the sunflower. It was stuck between his ear and head when the tentacles shoved his head into the sunflower. He held it close to his face to examine its feathery tip. It almost looked like a small black flower. Now there was no doubt the aliens picked him up – too fast for human sight. He figured those tentacles operated on a timescale much faster than the milliseconds needed for conscious human thought. His subconscious no doubt caught it all. He'd try to dredge somethings up.

Jackson was saying something. "Is your head clear?" Rodrigo thought.

"Yeah, it's starting to get there. I'm still having trouble concentrating."

"Good. Your arm was a mess. The broken bone ripped the skin and exposed the flesh near your elbow. Colton had some antiseptic he uses on cattle in the Bronco's back. I used that and a clean towel on your arm with some water, then wrapped the towel tight on the way here."

Rodrigo just nodded.

"I've been thinking about that invented story I asked Colton to tell the doc to avoid letting news of the aliens out of the bag. When the alien ship first arrived at Davenport, Colonel Lang was concerned about biological contamination. They found no evidence of life that was

recognizable. And, after a year no disease has shown up. But these aliens present me with a new ballgame."

Rodrigo cut him off. "Yeah, thinking about that, I was in the middle of them. I was covered with all their nasty stuff. Who knows what's in there."

Rodrigo held up the sunflower sprout he found behind his ear.

"What's that?" Jackson asked.

"Things are coming back. Because of this sprout I'm sure my head was imbedded in the alien's sunflower. All I remembered after I woke was that there was a fast-moving ruckus until I found this behind my ear."

He handed it to Jackson. "What is it?"

"One of the sunflower's shoots. Your lab guys should have a look."

Jackson immediately walked over to a small table and sink in the room. He put the sprout into a plastic bag and that into his pocket. He washed his hands. "Do you think you can stand up?"

"I'm not wild about the idea. What's going on?"

"I'm a little worried. There's a risk we've been contaminated with something dangerous."

"You mean bacteria or something else harmful from the aliens?" Rodrigo asked.

"Yes. Since you can't move very well, here," Jackson picked up a box of sterilizing wipes and pulled a couple out. "I know you don't want to move that arm." Jackson helped him wipe down his right hand and cleaned around his ear.

"Thanks," Rodrigo said. "What are you going to do about the contamination issue?"

"Good question. I think we've got to make some assumptions here," an anxious-looking Jackson said, "Colton is okay several days after being exposed to the aliens. That suggests any toxic biological problem is not airborne." He took a break, then, "I'm going take this sample of

alien tissue to the lab guys in D.C. tomorrow. I can alert them it's on the way about possible contamination. Captain Russell's team know what to do with things like this. My guess is that they can probably rule out any possibility of concern. It's likely that the alien biology is so different from ours that any likelihood of disease will be ruled out."

"A lot of assumptions," Rodrigo said. "Certainly, there must be protocols to deal with this situation."

"You're right, but we've already passed the point of no return. I can't reverse that Colton and I brought you here. Any contamination has happened. Not getting you proper treatment never crossed my mind."

"But what about going home tomorrow?"

"This is a tough situation. I feel obligated to get you on a plane tomorrow. The chance that we will spread some unknown alien bug seems negligible. But we can wear masks."

"I'm not particularly comfortable with taking a chance of hurting other people just to get home."

"Okay, Rodrigo, I'll have to tell you what I know from confidential records. And what I tell you will remain confidential, please. When the ship arrived at Davenport, they did find living microorganisms in the contents. These were analyzed. I'm not sufficiently versed in biology to understand everything I read in the report. But the takeaway was that they weren't a danger. The biology was very different from what's found on earth."

There was a minute of silence before Rodrigo picked up, "That's reassuring. I remember standing there. In the middle of those giant aliens. I really hurt then passed out. A piece of broken bone was sticking out of my arm. I was in shock and confused. Now I'm sure they picked me up. There was intimate contact with an alien's thinking organism and those tentacles. There's

no doubt that I took a bath in everything on their bodies. I remember that dreadful smell they had." Rodrigo also remembered the subtle changes in what he smelled over time.

"You really stunk the car up on the way here. The first thing the doctor did was clean you up," Jackson said. "So, we've all been exposed. I suppose we could be concerned about chronic effects even though no immediate ones were apparent. Their bugs will probably remain on the earth."

Rodrigo took this in looking at Jackson, "There's a cast on my arm."

"Your radius is broken. Colton's doc's friend mended a nasty tear in your arm. I'm told they're used to doing surprising stuff like that around here. He said it will be fine and heal nicely, but recommends you visit a specialist when you get back to Philadelphia. He'll talk to you but wants you to spend the night here. He can change the dressing tomorrow and have a look at it before you fly home."

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The doctor proved to be a man of his word. He'd fitted Rodrigo with a sling and got him standing. They walked around for a couple of minutes as the doc adjusted the sling to make his arm more comfortable. Jackson and Colton left to get some sleep at Colton's ranch. Jackson said he'd drive the rental back and pick him up in the morning.

They moved Rodrigo to another room with a real bed. He was resting better and feeling stronger by the minute. Ghostly light flooded in a window from the concealed moon. Shadows played against reflected light and made him think of productive evenings on his patio at home. Relaxed, he worked on the bundle the aliens gave him with the objective of slowing down alien thoughts. After an hour, maybe more, some things in the alien bundle were making sense. He

figured out how to catch up – with some problems – to their thoughts. Nothing looked like a breakthrough though.

He liked the clinic's talkative overnight nurse. Young and bouncy, she poked her head into the small room regularly. Finding him awake, she cracked a couple of jokes – he'd only heard one already – before asking him how he broke his arm. Rodrigo just smiled. "I saw the Xray. That's the cleanest break I've ever seen," she said closing the door. He knew she wasn't done. Vagueness hadn't satisfied her.

Rodrigo thought he should try to sleep and abandoned the alien history lesson for a while. His mind went back to the beginning of this amazing journey – that day he heard CSETI had got the goods from their Freedom of Information suit. His excitement had been over-the-top. Next, he saw the all-important video Colton made with its unreal barrage of moving colors. A military spokesman saying the video was concocted. That still put him off. He'd looked at it again and again. There were weeds, broken trees, and other signs – vibration – that signaled reality. Even more important, he thought, was Hanna's enthusiastic support that turned into a partnership. That was the key to the success they had. He'd never forget her important role in uncovering the things they discovered during his first visit to Colton's ranch.

He wondered how she was doing and knew she was feeling left out. He decided to call tomorrow but also knew Jada had kept her up to date. Satisfied, he decided to try to get some sleep and rolled to his side. It was hard on his arm, but it didn't take long to find a more comfortable position.

Almost immediately, rhythmic tones filled his head absent the negotiation of thoughts in the planted bundle. Instead, this was a single voice. They must have realized he was confused and planned this.

He learned that atmospheric pollution had decreased the pH of rainfall on HD 69234. That much came from the bundle the alien embedded in his head. After all the hours, he'd been a little frustrated there wasn't more. But he knew this conclusion fit well with what was known about earth. Rodrigo wondered what more he would learn from this single source and didn't have to wait long.

Exactly how rainfall became acidic was beyond the records he could reassemble. He guessed that alien memory, like human memory, became more iffy the further back their attempted recall.

This alien's rhythms were almost as consistent as the A.I.'s. It wasn't long before Rodrigo understood what the vibrations in his brain were telling him. Acid rain freed up CO_2 chemically bound in former oceans and the soil. This dramatically increased the CO_2 strength in the atmosphere and the amount of reflected heat that was returned to HD 69234. The net effect over a period of time, what sounded to be many thousands of alien lifetimes, was that CO_2 reached an equilibrium concentration that elevated the ambient surface temperature by about 30° centigrade over that found on earth.

This very hot temperature made their planet's surface unlivable for the vast majority of species of once abundant life. The few that did survive changed. He had yet to uncover the nature of the offending pollutants. Nevertheless, most surface water eventually ended up in the atmosphere. This added to the greenhouse effect since water is a potent greenhouse gas. Remaining life became dependent on extracting moisture from the atmosphere or dominating a few subsurface sources. This was the niche these aliens filled.

Satisfied with extracting a sound story, Rodrigo felt sleep come over him.

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Sometime later he was roused with a start. Rodrigo was hammered by the alien rhythm again. He decided to try to catch this live and tilted the bed up and turned on the phone. A nightmare started to come back at once. It'd opened in a city on HD 69234 – a city that looked unlike anything found on earth. Yet much was analogous. "Strange animals live in towering buildings – round ones – practically on top of one another. Some have collapsed. Others only look worse for wear. The building materials are smooth, as if they were poured into place or fabricated and then placed there.

"I see a few remaining animals. They have six limbs dangling off an oblong flat and almost rectangular body. More detail is not obvious from a distance. A small one looks like something I might step on and squish. Arms, legs, whatever they are, spent most of the time on the ground. Unless they need to use them for something more than walking about. At such times the body tilts up to allow three to come into play.

"The city swarm with teacup-like devices that must have transported these creatures from structure to structure at high rates of speed. Only two teacups are occupied amongst the thousands I can see whirling about. They seem to float through the air. I can see something that looks like fibers that contains the cup. When released, another fiber takes over and the vehicle changes direction. I wonder what made them go.

Rodrigo interrupted, "It's 3:13 a.m. on Wednesday, October 12, 2027. An alien is taking me on a tour of a city on HD 69234. What I'm seeing is so clear. Almost like a recorded video. I don't need to interpret anything. My guess is that the city is still there but in terrible repair. It's probably made of something similar to the incredible material Hanna and I found on Colton's ranch. Very few of the city's structures look in sufficient repair to be habitable. There are cracks in most and some were missing chunks, or an upper part of the structure has collapsed. But I can

see alien animals and a still moving transportation system. From the ground, a smooth reddish material is nearly everywhere, like paving with many irregular but thin cracks. The buildings have single, almost round holes to the outside at irregular intervals. Presumably a way out. The structures would be considered tall and skinny for buildings by earth standards. The alien animals look to be smaller than humans. Maybe two feet in length. I can see nothing on these creatures that looked like clothing or decoration. Nor are there heads or other exterior features beyond the six legs. The buildings' holes look like they have never been filled with glass or an equivalent material. A large congregation of swaying aliens, the ones I've seen on earth, fill a space across a wide boulevard. I see another group in the distance. The space with the closer group was once probably open space. The paving material didn't extend into the alien area. Looking up I spot an alien animal standing and staring out of a hole at something on the ground from partway up one of their structures.

"A small multilegged animal, maybe the size of a rat, ran along the pavement between the buildings near my perspective to an undulating pile not far from the aliens. It was what I think the alien animal in the building was watching.

"The alien's view I was following moved toward the pile. I saw one of the predators break away. Others must be feeding on something. Then I saw an alien tentacle purposefully moving toward the writhing pile of predators from across the pavement. Another one of the predatory creatures began to move away from the pile and immediately disappeared, as did the tentacle. I caught a glimpse of the tentacle retreating into the group of aliens yards away.

"The alien's tentacle's action caused the remaining predators to flee leaving what I think was a chewed and deflated carcass of an alien six-legged animal. It was as if the rodential animals

had sucked everything out of it. The alien animal in the building had disappeared. Then I saw one emerge from a hole at the building's bottom to drag the carcass back into the structure.

"The alien's communication ended there. I think it was intended as something for me to digest."

In awe, Rodrigo set his phone on the bed. It took a minute before the scare began to wear off. How could he possibly ever have imagined – so like earth while so different. His skeptical voice began to tell him the alien's might have made this up. Kind of like bait at the end of a fishing line.

Then the alien's picture of their world after the spaceship creator's demise started to sink in. A world still struggling after what might have been millions of HD 69234 years. There was so much he didn't know. Now the challenge had only got an order-of-magnitude bigger.

He remembered his anger at being the human the aliens chose to communicate with and chuckled. The chuckle turned into a laugh, then a roar.

Anna came running in. "Everything okay, Mr. Avila?"

"Yeah, I just had a really wonderful thought."

"Do you want to talk about it."

"You know, I'd really like that. You'll be the first person I call when I can talk about it."

Anna gave him a funny look and walked back to her station.

Rodrigo thought about it for a second. He'd seen beings from another planet. He knew more about them than anyone on the entire planet but couldn't talk about it. His thoughts turned to the bundle the aliens had given him. He needed to unlock it. Get rid of the noise. The problem was that, incredibly, their memory involved a negotiation. This negotiation became a particularly difficult problem when the aliens had to go back long ago, such as when the creators died.

Creators was the alien's term for the animal aliens that developed their spacecraft and computer systems still in use. It was interesting, he thought, how alien thoughts had begun to not require translation in his mind. Should he worry about this.

Anyway, he thought, their negotiation resulted from separate but connected brains. It involved reconciling scraps from a larger whole into something that made sense. Connected alien intellects, each with limited capacity.

It seemed crazy to him that such a system could be responsible for an intelligent species where thousands of individuals lived together in peaceful colonies. Yes, their habits were simple, and they didn't live in cities or go to work each day. Still, something's missing here.

Rodrigo decided to let the way they think sit for a while and open another can of worms. He made some more notes on his phone before he forgot some of this.

The Next Day

'Well, here I am,' Rodrigo thought when the flight touched down in Philadelphia. It was a long day. His arm ached. But it felt good to be home. Another pain pill would make finding Jada happier.

As the plane taxied, he was presented with another of the day's many problems. Pills were in his carryon on the floor by his feet. Reaching with his right arm didn't make it and hurt like hell. "Here, I'll get that," Jackson said and reached over from the window seat.

Bag in his lap and the book he never opened stashed, Rodrigo said, "Thanks." He swallowed the pill thinking he would have never made it without Jackson's help.

With a grateful goodbye at the landing gate, he watched Jackson head down the Terminal's D-concourse for his connecting flight to D.C. He adjusted his sling – the constant ache was better on his feet and out of that airplane seat. Jada would be waiting for him at baggage claim.

With a first step thoughts turned to his wife. She wouldn't understand how he was driven to contact the aliens in the face of such risks. Yet, he'd reconciled it for himself. It was just right – there would be no second chance. Jackson and he had talked nonstop about aliens the whole flight home. It took his mind off the injury. Speaking softly, they figured out a lot. Jackson made notes.

Logical arguments wouldn't matter with his wife. Forget calculus and physics., Jada would use arithmetic.

A slow, unhurried walk gave her perspective time to float to where he could prepare for it. She'd see through anything but pristine truth. It was stupid, crazy, even worse. She didn't often swear, but, if angry enough, he'd bet that was in store too. She'd boil the whole thing down to basics. It was a dumb stunt, and he got hurt. Really irresponsible you old man!

Taking his time, the whole event played out. A once in a lifetime opportunity. Ambition became compulsion. Dangers disappeared. He had to do it. None of that would matter.

Memory blanks remained, but he'd filled in most of what happened. He even knew how his position next to the small alien had changed after his head was smashed into the sunflower. Most importantly, he now had the story of why the aliens were so interested in the earth and what the future might hold. So many answers didn't excuse behavior that she would see as foolish. But maybe, just maybe, a compelling story would win Jada over in the long run. She was always clear-eyed and his greatest critic. Their openness – and arguments – from the beginning, however difficult, was a big part of the reason he loved her so much. Sometimes they didn't end up on the same page. But they always knew where the other half stood.

The concourse opened onto the baggage area. Rodrigo didn't spot Jada's long, straight black hair anywhere in the distance. He looked at the big board. His luggage would be on baggage claim 2. Walking in that direction Hanna caught his eye.

Closer, she looked gutted. The woman he knew so well was a mess – hair everywhere, eyes red, and her forced smile sent a shockwave through him. He hopped painfully the rest of the way, looking for Jada.

Still scanning, he demanded, "Where's Jada!"

Hanna pulled him into a hug. "She went for your car." Her words were almost inaudible. "I drove so she could get both you and the car home. She said you always parked in lot 5 as close to a lamp post as you could get."

'Why are you telling me this?' Frantic now, he was shouting, "You look miserable. Something's gone wrong!"

She freed her grip on him, took his free hand in both of hers and stared. "I'm a mess. Sorry." Hanna choked out, "I should have been there. Yes, I wanted to see them … the aliens. But I could have stopped you from getting hurt. Jada and I talked most of the night. She's really upset … me too."

Rodrigo stood staring. His sight fell to the floor. His legs wobbled. He knew this was coming and sat down on the carousel. After some seconds, he said dryly, "Thank you for telling me." He didn't look at Hanna.

Out of numbness, the truth began to unfold. This was the third time he'd been hurt. Jada had been holding the pain inside. Now he'd seen a glimmer of what was in store through Hanna.

Still in the same place minutes later, he felt a chilly hand on his shoulder and looked up to see his wife. He bolted to his feet and pulled her into a fierce embrace. In her arms his body sagged, and he wept. It wouldn't stop. She didn't resist.

Half an hour later both were sitting quietly on the edge of the baggage carousel. Hanna had left. Jada stood and, hovering over him said, "You know I love you." A long time had passed since she called him the stupidest piece of shit in that universe that consumed all his time. After another quiet minute, he heard. "On these occasions," she said with a teasing smile, "I wonder why I love you so much."

He stared at her dark eyes before she leaned down to kiss him lovingly. His wife's black hair fell silklike covering his head and shoulders. Just the two of them inside its shelter, he held on. Worry took an unexpected path to back recesses, supplanted by love of this special woman.

She picked up his bag and started for the exit. Her slender figure called to him. After the doors opened, she stopped to say, "I am sorry you were hurt."

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Gabriella was parked at the curb outside the baggage exit. Rodrigo saw a ticket on the window and was glad she hadn't been towed. Jada put his bag in the trunk, stuffed the ticket in hers, and started the engine. He struggled getting his broken body into the sporty car.

Five calm minutes later Jada said, "Okay, the air has cleared some. Tell me … how-the-hell did you get yourself into this mess?"

Rodrigo pulled his phone out of the sling and fooled around one-handed. "If you'll pull off the road for a minute, I can show you."

Jada did as he asked. He handed her the phone. Mouth and eyes wide open, she pushed it back toward him, and said, “Holy shit!” She covered her mouth. “How big are those foul-looking things?”

“These are pictures Jackson took of the aliens before I got hurt. Page through them. You’ll see me standing next to a big one.”

A minute later she said, “If you didn’t have that broken arm, I’m not sure I could believe this. Good God, Bear, what are these monstrous things.”

“Finding that out is most of what Jackson and I talked about on the way back to town. He didn’t even want to give me these pictures. He wants to try to keep this out of the media until his boss decides how to take it forward. I had to promise that you and Hanna were the only two that would see them.”

Jada tranquilly paged through the pictures a second time before handing back his phone. “Didn’t you say Jackson’s boss is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.”

Rodrigo nodded.

After a break, he heard, “I guess at this point I don’t have choices. I’m stuck in the middle of this.”

Rodrigo heard her take a deep breath and say, “Jackson and I talked about that too. No matter what happens, he will do what he can to keep Hanna and my involvement secret. He said there are ways to do that.”

After more hushed miles he heard, “Tell me more about these monstrous creatures.”

The dim night light blinked as oncoming cars rushed by. He completely forgot about his arm. “Well, I know quite a bit more than when they broke my arm. Since I’m the only human that the aliens are in contact with, I think the data transfer I got was their way of getting what I’m going

to tell you to the proper authorities. I was injured when aliens picked me up and smashed my head into one alien's sunflower. That's when the data burst happened. They didn't know how breakable I was."

Jada's eyes rolled.

"Be patient, and I'll catch up on the rest. What I'm calling the sunflower is their thinking apparatus, I think. When we get home, look for it under the large leaves near their top in the photos."

"I really want to know what you learned from that alien data you received."

"Tons! And I've only speculation for some of my ideas. But I've developed a theory, of sorts, and am going to put it out there anyway.

"One important part was that the aliens believe their planet was once much like earth with life everywhere. After a prolonged period of heating due to a changed climate, most species, including an animal species that built their spaceships, were unable to cope with the changes and ambient heat. The creatures in those photos survived. They are ancient. They had seen their climate change before.

"The alien's planet was once more temperate, they say, much like earth. The information I've got came from their collective memory. There were many diverse lifeforms. Maybe for the kinds of reasons were hearing from politicians now, a race of animals the aliens call the creators, accepted too late that their activity was irreversibly changing the planet's environment. HD 69234 also was home to this ancient, sentient plant species. I'll emphasize the term ancient. I'm sure they were around long before the animals. As it turned out, these plants were one of a few species that survived the climate disaster."

"Really?" Jada said. "Smart plants? They don't look smart."

"They are. I'll get to that, too. Aliens in the pictures are descendants of the ancients, they say. We can't know how much they've changed. Communities of these smart plants share a single interconnected nervous system through their roots. They use these to communicate and share thoughts. There are only a few communities left because of the availability of suitable habitat on HD 69234. The A.I.'s that control the fleet of alien craft are dependent in some way on these aliens. I don't understand why the aliens need the spacecraft but have a guess there too.

"The aliens' roots contain gated pathways, like those found in animal nervous systems. We know that because of samples taken from the spacecraft's computer. It is quite possible that the alien craft carry a supply of germplasm in the hope of finding a more suitable place for the aliens."

"You're going to have to explain a lot of this, Bear. I'm feeling overwhelmed."

"Maybe we should call it a night," he said.

"One more question," Jada said as they pulled into the garage. She winked, then stared at him. "Have you learned why the alien's picked you for this job?"

"Yes. I was selected by the spacecraft's artificial intelligence that is in Davenport out of maybe a dozen humans, it says. All these people open to accepting its telepathic messages. That's all I got."

"Okay," she said, smiling and opened her door.

**

"Hi, Roomie, thought I would check in," Hanna said. "How are you feeling?"

"Things are fine. First thing this morning, Jada called work to say she'd be late. Then, she made us a lovely breakfast. Jada's been great. She's stayed with me last night and talked me through it. I finally asked to go to bed. She just left for work."

“Sorry I was so emotional. I don’t think I handled the messenger role very well,” Hanna said in a quiet voice. “I’m glad to hear you sounding better than last night. Is the break improving?”

“Thanks. I’m feeling better this morning. I’m to see a local doctor tomorrow. Some specialist named Brighton. Maybe I'll be back at work on Monday.

“It’s a nice day. I thought I sit outside. Maybe try to do some work.”

“Seeing you Monday would be great. I’m feeling hopelessly behind…”

Rodrigo heard a strange sound. Almost a gasp.

“But my second reason for calling is to catch up on…” Her voice became grating. “…on what the hell happened during those two extra days without hearing from you. I see you at the airport with a broken arm? Not a word!”

It had all come out. Rodrigo was catching the charged disquiet that he suspected Hanna had harbored behind the tears. Being paid back by not being more intimate with the events of Davenport and Wyoming. He knew this was coming.

“There’s a great deal to go over,” he said. The line was very quiet.

“Hanna, did you look at your personal email this morning?”

“No, but I can get it up on my phone.”

“Why don’t you do that. I sent you one titled, From Wyoming, yesterday.”

There was a break of a minute.

“Did you look at the photos?”

“They were shocking. I couldn’t have imagined, Hanna said, her voice still a brittle.

But enthusiasm crept in, “But I savored every second. The pictures sent happy shockwaves up and down me just knowing they are real and here.”

"Jackson has asked that we keep this to ourselves. He gave me permission to share with you and Jada… well, I insisted. But I'm trying to keep hands off. Jackson has a lot of pressure right now. He's trying to come up with a way forward.

Rodrigo couldn't help but chuckle. "There's much more. My arm was broken when the aliens' picked me up and smashed my head into a sunflower, their thinking apparatus. I got a big package that I'd like to go over with you. I'll spend more time today trying to remember some of it that is still fuzzy."

"They do look a little like sunflowers," Hanna said.

"You shouldn't even share any of this with Joe."

"That's going to be tough. He's been after me about being extraordinarily unhappy recently. Can you give me something now, over the phone?"

"Okay, my thinking has moved on so much since that day at Colton's place.

"Their planet's animals developed the spacecraft, and the artificial intelligence that pilots them. The aliens name for the animal beings on HD 69234 translates to sapiens in my brain. Sometimes they use creators. A process must have led to the aliens deciding to explore the Milky Way. They confirmed my suspicion. There's no special way to jet around the universe. Everything is limited by the speed of light. Regardless, they chose to build a fleet of ships and artificial intelligence to wander around this part of the Milky Way at sub-light speeds. Given the speed of light, information from these explorations probably only arrived on HD 69234 after their lifetimes. It wouldn't surprise me if their ships always carried alien germplasm. Maybe to test suitability on planets they found – like the aliens growing at Colton's ranch."

"You have learned a lot," Hanna said. "You're being redundant, maybe enough for now. The Milky way is a big place. I didn't appreciate how big until a recent conversation with Megan.

She told me if you put a sphere with a radius of one hundred light years around our Sun, it would contain about 15,000 stars. HD 69234 is more than 600 light years from the Sun. I assume the number of stars would scale with volume."

Rodrigo wondered where she was going with this.

"It seems to me, then, that it would take a long, long time to do a systematic search of so many stars. Why in God's name did these evil-looking things end up here?"

Not a word was uttered for quite a while. Finally, Rodrigo said, "Well, now you've added another variable to this miserable theory I've put together. Without some incredible technology we've never even imagined, how did these aliens find us?"

Rodrigo didn't hear anything for several seconds, then, "So, it's possible these aliens think earth might be their new home," Hanna said.

"Yes, that's possible. What they've said is that they would only leave once we've returned their ship."

Washington D.C.

His first morning back from the earth-shattering events in Wyoming, Jackson parked in space CR-12 and headed toward the Pentagon's River Entrance. He turned to look at the sign marking his new personal parking space: Commander Wald. He stood … aliens, Rodrigo's broken arm, and the incredible events of the last two days. Only three men had seen what he saw. With the vastness of the military establishment, indeed the world, he alone was the one who had to sort this. That responsibility came with the new parking space. He shook his head and resumed a deliberate pace.

He made it back to D.C. in time for the Nationwide Shield meeting. It was a great diversion after a day in airplanes that was exhausting. Top young officers had gelled into a spectacular

team. He hoped his leadership was essential. But now there was a whole new ballgame. He soon couldn't keep his mind off of Wyoming.

Dull light filled the Pentagon's halls. Thoughts went to the trickier part of his responsibility – talking with Colonel Lang after finding aliens in Wyoming. He'd thought through how to move the news of the aliens on Wrest's ranch through the chain of command. His duty was to talk to the colonel, UAPTF's head, first. Lang was already unhappy with his assignment to lead of the project.

He didn't report to Lang. That was intentional. When they discussed the assignment, Admiral Northman had asked Jackson to manage Lang with kid-gloves to the extent he was able. But he also warned him about the Colonel's reputation as single-minded and a hothead. His character followed him from his flying days to leadership of UAPTF. Having an Air Force colonel heading a unit under Navy administration created problems.

More than 900 steps with two flights of stairs later, he opened his office door. It was 7:40 a.m.

**

Rodrigo walked out of Dr. Brighton's office with a big grin. "He said everything looks good, Babe. Probably no adjustments will be needed, but he wants to see me again in a week." He struggled to get into the car with only one arm.

As she pulled into traffic, Jada said, "That black sling looks better with the red cast." Then in traffic on the M, she added, "Give me more about these ugly aliens. You said that ship of theirs is important to them."

"Yeah, it's complicated, but I know they want it back. I'm not sure I understand everything."

“I guess I’d just like to get as much as I can about those creepy things,” she said. “I got really confused when you talked about roots.”

“The alien creators – the animals that built the spacecrafts – learned to use alien root systems to build the processers that control them. Somehow, they keep the electronics alive, and they repair themselves. The systems are not nano quick. They are alive in a different sense. These alien plants have nervous systems that evolved over many millions of years. Maybe billions and they are nothing like plants here. I believe the spacecraft were built ages ago – again maybe millions. How many, I don’t know.

“This really tests what I can know. This technology is amazing and very different from anything humans have done. There’s no doubt though, that it took thousands of millions of years for the plant intelligence to evolve. My guess is sentient animals came along way after the plant aliens.”

Jada gave him a mystified look. “Thousands of millions of years is a very long time.”

“Like I said, it’s complicated. You and I have talked about evolution, and the history of life on earth. Today, only a few dozen colonies of these aliens remain on the planet in specific places where liquid water is available. Another important thing I learned, the aliens in those pictures are unique from animal species in that their brains are connected – all memory is shared and cumulative. This process is not perfect. There are bits and chucks of old stuff here and there that were inherited genetically from ancestors.”

He looked at his wife’s face. Her eyes were trying to concentrate on driving, but he could tell she was getting some of it.

“Their society is open. Thoughts are shared. I’ve seen it – it’s intense, be like a crowd at a football game yelling, everyone at the same time. Somehow it works for them.

“I have no indication that these alien plants ever developed technology like writing for record keeping. This may not be surprising, since they only communicate by direct nervous system connections. But they are now the last remaining complex life form, with one exception.”

“An exception?”

“Yeah, but it’s another story.”

“I really need to get back to work. I’m going to drop you off at the house but want the rest of the story tonight.”

Rodrigo looked at her questioningly. “I thought we might talk more over lunch.”

“I am really interested,” she said. “Let’s leave it for tonight.”

**

Jackson pushed the chair back from his desk and thumbed through a pile of hard copies of the photos he’d taken. He pulled together half a dozen to show to Colonel Lang. There was no doubt he would be a hard case. These had to be convincing.

Early on, he told mum about this guy he was working with. Her eyes got big, and she called the Colonel, the gadgie – a Scottish term he didn’t know. The meaning his phone gave him seemed accurate: A poorly educated person who engages in hooliganism – petty criminality or loutish behavior.

Anyway, there was no point in avoiding going to Lang’s office any longer.

**

“Come in Commander,” Colonel Lang said, closing a report and standing. Jackson noticed a bad sign; the ever-present meeting-assistant was absent. Both sat. “Good that you came right away, Commander Wald. Your message’s story was hard to believe. Let’s talk this out.” A steely grin covered the Colonel’s face.

Jackson peeked at his watch – 10:15. He'd left a message half-an-hour ago. "There's no story, Colonel. These aliens are real. Here's photos."

Lang paged through the pictures quickly. "Ugly, aren't they? Who else has seen these?"

"Only you," Jackson said.

"Burn them!" Lang said. His face seemed to narrow as he stared. "This can't get out!"

"Come on, Colonel. I got back from Wyoming yesterday. I thought I should discuss this with you before doing anything."

"You have my thoughts."

A discussion? was Jackson's thought. He hadn't felt up to the argument he now saw coming. Used to getting his way, the Colonel wasn't going to be reasonable. "Rodrigo Avila, his wife, his coworker, Hanna Krol, and the rancher, Wrest, all know we came across aliens and have seen pictures. Should I burn them too?"

The Colonel ignored this, and ignored Jackson's scowl. "Then, the Admiral hasn't seen them?" He asked setting the photos on his desk. Jackson shook his head, no. "That woman, Krol, is a talker."

"I asked Rodrigo to keep a lid on it. He knows this is sensitive. He will not let it get out," Jackson said. "I also asked Wrest to keep what he'd seen to himself. He lives alone in the country and seemed agreeable.

"Rodrigo was injured by the aliens and insisted on talking with his wife and Hanna. Colton and I made up a story for the doctor who treated Rodrigo."

"Already a big group of possible leaks," Colonel Lang said with a grimace. "Have you taken any action in Wyoming?"

“I thought we should talk first… those things were firmly stuck in the ground,” Jackson said. It was hard not to smile – but this was serious.

“Regardless of whether aliens exist or not,” Lang started, looking miserable. “Some people believe anything they hear.” There was an audible harrumph. “UAPTF has always kept alien reports under wraps. I see no reason to change.” His eyes narrowed above the scowl. He stared for a minute, Jackson silent, before his hand banged on the table. “Damnit, Wahl, I’ve made myself clear! In my armed service, we don’t question superior officers.”

“Come on, Colonel, I’m not advocating releasing information on aliens. The Admiral asked me to lead this project after the CSETI news release early last summer.”

“I remember the incident well, young man!” the Colonel shouted. His voice had gone up a few decibels, the nasty scowl now harder. “Goddamn attorneys gave CSETI enough to be tempting.”

Jackson ignored the inherent slight. “Okay, Colonel. I get it that you’re not happy with the arrangement. Maybe you should discuss my assignment with the Admiral. Today, I came to you to because you lead the UAPTF. The project has taken on a life of its own since Avila and Krol appeared. Saying that, if it weren’t for Rodrigo, I would have never seen the aliens. He’s been very open. I’m trying to get my arms around a much bigger deal than I started with.

The Colonel’s teeth were clenched, his eyes floated to the left. Jackson’s urgings now surely lost somewhere in the void between them.

Maybe might coach the Colonel into another approach, he wondered. “You’re probably also not happy that Admiral Northman has begun to nudge his administration more and more toward increased public release of managed intelligence. Like it or not that includes UAPTF. I know he’s talked to you about that.”

There was not even a sign of acknowledgement across from him.

"During House Armed Services Committee meetings that I've sat in on, the pressure from the congressional members to open up was crushing. The Admiral is trying to balance military needs against the political wishes of those members interested in votes."

Jackson waited for feedback that didn't come. "It won't make you feel better, Colonel, but I'm in the middle here, between you and the Admiral's agenda. Now – I never expected to find aliens. There are far too many unknowns like safety issues to consider opening a public window. What we have would only cause panic."

He again looked to Lang for a reaction. "Having said that, few in the military have the experience you do with phenomena that are not easily explained. So, I'd appreciate some help."

Jackson leaned back in his chair to wait. At last, Colonel Lang said, "Jackson, I figured the rough go you had in Afghanistan would have taken some starch out of that uniform. I respect what you did over there.

"Nevertheless, to get this job done I want men who take orders on my team."

Take orders from you, was what Jackson heard. He imagined Lang might not waste time being polite and get here quickly. "Colonel, are you asking me to ignore the Admiral's orders to take your guidance?"

"My view, Commander, is the Admiral has little understanding of what UAPTF does and no business interfering," Colonel Lang added. "I was more than a little put off, then, to have an outsider assigned to handle this project."

"So, Colonel, can you give me an example of what the Admiral or I don't understand?"

"Hundreds of unreported military sightings over sensitive facilities that almost certainly don't involve extraterrestrials, damn it," was his fierce start. "Aliens? There's a monstrosity of a

database of unidentified phenomena … each case unique. Every one needs to be carefully monitored without outside interference. Any word of what you've seen would be catastrophic.

"Let me be clear," Colonel Lang went on. "Aliens or not, what happened in Wyoming is a matter of national security. I don't give a damn where the brass wants to steer this Military. So, my advice remains, you burn those pictures and forget aliens. As far as I'm concerned, they don't exist."

A long silence followed as the two sat there and stared. Battling irritation, Jackson thought about those towering things sitting there in Wyoming and what might possibly take place. He said, "Thank you, Colonel Lang. I think we're done here." He got up to leave.

"Guess I pissed you off," Lang said immediately. "I've never been called subtle."

"Look, Colonel. This hasn't been much of a discussion … I believe there are important reasons we should try to work with these aliens. Oh, I didn't mention that the damn things are sentient. I will do my best to maintain strict security.

"There's relatively few in a small area. If we can see them, maybe we might find out how they got here … especially since someone now can communicate with them."

"Communicate? What kind of bullshit is that?"

"Come on Colonel, maybe you can give me a chance… My understanding is that the aliens have been cultivating a contact for months. I only learned about it a week ago. It's developed to the point that they've now conveyed much more than simple thoughts. The interaction has begun to bring in useful information."

"Who is this contact, Commander?"

"In exchange for the information, I've given my word not to say."

Colonel Lang shook his head. It then tilted down so Jackson could only see pupils at the tops of his eyes. The lines in his gray crewcut deepened – with them the confrontation. “It’s no doubt one of those Seleron nut jobs, no difference… I know you’re a smart man but all that caught in between stuff makes you a whiner. I’ve been dealing with the UAPTF incidents for too many years to change procedure. Aliens or not, my experience tells me we keep our facilities safe and concentrate on technology that might be a superior threat to ours. Once you let politicians or the public in, things go sideways. All that crap only causes distraction and confusion. You have yet to give me a reason to change policy.”

“Just maybe, Colonel, if we worked with these aliens, we might learn more about that amazing spacecraft you have at Davenport. As far as I can tell, your men have found very little. When Avila and I saw it, it was sitting there.” Jackson chose not to relate what happened as they left.

Lang scanned the tall, fit man before him. “Have these aliens told your contact what they want?”

“They want their spacecraft back.”

The Colonel paused. “Dr. Madsen and his crew have worked damned hard on that thing. Yes, it’s clear there’s no zing-bam propulsion system. At least one their team can crack…. It’s also made of stuff they don’t get. But you know all that. My plan is to keep it where it is until we start to figure out how it got here. At least, the Russians or Chinese don’t have it. Nor do they know we have it.”

The message about hostile militaries clear, Jackson growled, “Colonel! Once more – I haven’t suggested making anything public. But if we can talk with these aliens, we might learn how that fucking craft got here. New information out of NSA suggests the symbols in that hologram

you've seen are coordinates. It looks as if Megan Thompson is right. These aliens have traveled 600 light years to get here. I would sure like to understand how they did that."

"Okay, Commander, I know you think that Thompson is a smart queen bee," Lang said slowly. "But you will acknowledge traveling faster than light is impossible. And I find unofficial alien messages of little interest."

Then, in a firm voice, Lang added, "It would have been appropriate to talk to me about this earlier. Regardless, in my Military, we take our time … make sure we get to the right ending."

"So, Colonel, I think I'm hearing you say, 'it's my way or the highway,'" Jackson said. Unforgiving words were an octave lower.

"Look Commander, I was hopeful when you showed up. Still am. We don't see many young officers with spunk and the kind of record you have. But there's a team here. You need to be part of it. Admiral Northman and his buddies may rule the Pentagon, but a new administration will come in before you know it. Northman's stuff – all that wide of the mark policy that he and his chums are trying to make happen – will disappear. Our alliance of officers will see to that. We'll get back to the right way of running this man's Military… You should be careful before you make trouble for yourself."

"Thank you, Colonel. Your admonition is clear and full of conviction, Jackson said with intentional emphasis. "I plan to continue to lead the Wyoming project and expect cooperation."

Lang stared as Jackson rose and walked through the door. He left knowing conversation made clear his relationship with the Colonel would be adversarial. In the hall, he turned toward the stairs and Admiral Northman's office.

**

Colonel Lang noticed Lieutenant Salvador Berry standing in his doorway.

"Good Lord, Chava, you must have sprinted to get here this soon," Lang said.

Berry chuckled. "What's going on boss."

"Close the door."

"I need your help with another sensitive matter," The Colonel said. "There's a know-it-all civilian working with Commander Wahl. It's making my life miserable."

"You want me to keep eyes on him?"

"I don't know. Commander Wahl has become annoying. It's like Avila has brought the brute out in him."

"I could lean on this guy Avila. Where does he live?

The Colonel handed him a file. "It's all there. Look it over, and we can talk."

"I can come up with a plan tonight. Something that will frighten him?"

"Maybe a little more."

"Do I need to check in?"

"Use your judgement. If he isn't discouraged easily, call me. We'll talk about other measures."

Two Days Later

The gate to Rodrigo's backyard swang open. "Hello …. Who's there?"

Heavy footsteps became louder as someone moved around the side of the house.

"Hello."

A tall lanky young man approached next to the deck. The staring man was clean shaven with a baseball cap on backwards over short black hair. He was dressed in a long sleeve shirt and jeans. "No se levante, Senor Avila." He said loudly.

"Don't get up! Who are you?

”I have a message,” he said in Spanish.

“A message?”

The man walked close and looked at Rodrigo’s arm. “You’ve been injured.”

“Yes, it hurts. What do you want?”

“If you care about your family, stay away from Senor Wahl. Don’t talk to him.”

“What…. Don’t talk to Commander Wahl? What is this shit! Leave my family alone. Get your ass out of here. I’m calling the pólice.” Rodrigo pulled out his phone, dialed 911, and started to get up as the man’s boots clomped noisily on the deck.

“Don’t get up!” the man screamed loudly. He marched back and gave Rodrigo a good whack on his broken arm, then quickly left him bent over in pain. Doubled up, Rodrigo heard a car drive off.

“Hello, 911, what is your emergency?”

He managed to muster hidden strength as agony slowly waned to answer the 911 operator’s questions. He immediately called Jackson. The police arrived as he finished with Jackson and took a report.

Feeling beyond exhaustion from the ordeal, he called Jada at work.

Phone off and having gone as far as he possibly could sleep came on in his lounge chair, his useful hand supporting his arm.

**

Jada’s car pulling into the garage woke Rodrigo. That noisy muffler he still needed to have replaced. Pain was mostly gone.

She burst through the patio door. “Bear, where are you?”

He struggled to push himself up from a slouch with his good arm. She rushed over, took his head in both hands and kissed him. She asked, “You feel okay now?”

The softness of her skin brightened him. “Much better. I slept a little. The guy whacked me pretty hard. The sapo missed though. His punch landed above my elbow – much higher up than the break. But pain was unbelievable for a while.”

“Sorry… Do you have any idea who he was?”

“No, but I have a pretty good guess who sent him.”

Jada gave him a funny look. “I called Dr. Brighton’s office on the way home. He wants to see you as soon as we can get there.”

“Let’s go.”

**

Pulling out of the driveway, Jada asked. “So, who sent this man?”.

“It was Colonel Lang. Jackson talked to him on Monday. The two had some kind of confrontation over the aliens. I imagine that the Colonel thinks I’m the one responsible for the trouble.”

“You’ve never had much good to say about this Colonel. Sounds like this Navy UFO team would be better off without him … But I’d like to hear more of what you learned from these aliens about where our planet might be headed.”

Still in pain, Rodrigo’s eyes were focused on oncoming traffic. “I’ve already said the hot climate wiped out most plants and animals. These aliens wonder if they were genetically modified by the alien creators to tolerate high temperatures.”

“Wouldn’t they know that?” Jada asked.

“A good question I can’t see how they would have survived otherwise.

"Most life forms remaining on their planet are simple organisms resembling bacteria or unicellular algae. A lot of what these aliens know about the spaceship builders came second-hand from the spaceships' A.I.'s."

"So, if most types of plants and animals were wiped out," Jada said. "Why weren't these aliens?"

"I can't really say. Most interesting to me was, those animals, the creators, chose to use living tissue cloned from these alien plants in their A.I.'s that pilot their spacecraft and the ships, themselves. That choice alone – to use much slower but more durable electronics –suggests they were quite advanced and knew something about the universe we don't. It wouldn't surprise me if they did something to keep the aliens going.

"Remind me why the alien material would be slower."

"It's a guess. Animal nervous systems on earth use gated pathways to conduct signals. Signal transmission takes time to get to the brain. So, I figured any lifeform would probably use something comparable."

"Okay, do you know how hot it is there?"

"Hot enough that there might only be liquid water in a few geographically favorable places. But 30° C is guesswork, too. I am unsure about so much. Like if there are lifeforms living underground to avoid the high surface temperatures. Regardless, the aliens obviously retain the ability to do okay on earth."

Jada looked his way and nodded in understanding.

"That is the bare bones of what I've come to, based on the aliens' bundle. One reason these creatures are here is that they think we might share characteristics – not physical, because I've seen them – with the animals that were on their planet. The second reason is they want their ship

back. Those alien creators built the spaceships and computers that fly them millions of years ago. They relied heavily on these sentient plants that they probably studied for millennia."

"I know you, Bear… you wouldn't tell me anything you weren't reasonably sure was right. You said that at least a few of the HD 69234 intelligent animals still exist," Jada said. "What's going on."

"In this package the alien planted in my brain was something like a video that played back the night before I flew home.

"I saw a devastated city on their planet and a lot more," Rodrigo said. "But the important thing was I watched the creators in tall high rises. Somehow, they were surviving. I think the aliens' aimed for me to think the beings I saw were the remnants of these alien creators. And I kind of believed that. But the damn thing – the *video* – seemed so professional. Thinking on it, I began to wonder if that *video* might be bait. So, I don't know what to think. Why did they give me this? The *video* even contained a scene of one of the creators being eaten by predators."

He looked at Jada for feedback. She was waiting for the light to change.

Thinking came out. "If it was bait, you've answered your question of why they gave it to you," she said. "You sure better keep your options open if you have to deal with them again."

"I find a couple of things incredible. The ships and the A.I.'s that operate them are living organisms," he said. "Probably not conscious, but they are made of living materials."

The creators learned to use the systems from plants that nature perfected over maybe a billion years to make computer systems. These systems can maintain themselves in a healing way and require little in the way of resources.

Another amazing thing is that these ships and A.I.s that operate them look to be independent of the beings that remain on the planet. There's no limit on time. If it takes a thousand years to

get somewhere, it makes no difference. Why would these creatures create systems with no hope of gaining any feedback? Generations far in the future probably would no longer be interested in what was found. I don't understand any part of that."

This got him thinking. "There had to be a reason for all the effort that went into a space program."

"You've painted a grim picture of what happened on the alien planet. But it sounds matter of fact. Is this the way the aliens see it, or your thinking?" she asked.

"Maybe these aliens don't think in shades of gray. Their ship's A.I. is 100% about logic. What I gave you was what my brain made of the input it got. Your question is important. I have to remind myself that the aliens taught me how to think like them. The differences between them and us is as large as the distance between our planets."

"What you said," Jada started. "I think you are right to find the video suspect. What if these alien creators, as you call them, have been spending all these thousands of millennia looking for a new home?"

"You know, I was finding my morning on the patio quite relaxing despite the dull ache. I was reading the paper without a thought of aliens or anything having to do with them. Then this jerk comes along… Oh, well."

Jada pulled into a space close to Dr. Brighton's office. "Sit tight. I'll get your door."

The unanswered question about the video's intention was left in the car.

**

After driving him home, Jada made a light lunch, ate and went back to work. He finished his sandwich and beer on the deck happy that Dr. Brighton saw no damage after the attack. He soon dozed off.

Sometime later he was startled awake by a loud bang on the street. Maybe a backfire. He pushed himself up into a more comfortable position and started to have the strangest recollection from his nap. Anomalous things from when his head was buried in the sunflower were coming back for a first time.

Since the aliens picked him up in Wyoming, his memory of the sunflower incident felt like time stopped. Aware something happened, everything occurred too fast to retain anything. Now his mind had begun to catch up with alien time.

When Rodrigo woke from the nap time was no longer a smooth directional function. He began to have feelings that scared him. He could feel it. Reliving the Wyoming event now, time paused, stretched and even moved side-to side. Thinking about it too long was disturbing and made him feel sick. His stomach was flip-flopping just like that crazy ride at the Harrisburg State Fair a couple of years ago. He was embarrassed when he threw up.

He sat there struggling to clear his mind by staring at the trees beyond his fence. The mindset wouldn't go away but, thankfully, the upset stomach did. Until today he believed human beings moved over the earth, indeed through the universe, in three directions. But time was the one linear variable, without exceptions. There was only one direction, forward. You can't take a break, slow it down, move to the side or backwards. Indeed, the speed of light – c – was the most important constant in the universe. $E = mc^2$. So, time can't change… but he'd seen it change, without doubt.

This transformation led him to think about Einstein. Relativity, his theory of almost everything, showed time is relative – dependent on the other factors. Time was an observable and measurable phenomenon. So, experimental examples that supported this relativity soon emerged. Changes were small but real.

Rodrigo worried his physics were stale. He tried to keep up, but it had been a while. Since time was the subject, he went inside for a book that was written a hundred years ago. He'd studied it in school. It was in his cool bookcase.

Back in his lounge chair he opened Sir Arthur Eddington's 1928 book "The Nature of the Physical World," from the same period as Einstein's early work. After all the years, he remembered what he was looking for.

Eddington coined the term, 'the arrow of time'. The idea was that time flows in only one direction, as opposed to the dimensions of space that have no preferred orientation.
Rodrigo knew the only great dependence of physical properties on time was due to entropy. Any existing state becomes more random unless work is applied, so entropy increases with time. The universe becomes more disordered. Reassembly requires work. He read for the next hour and found nothing more that was useful.

The more he read, the more frustration accumulated. Nothing he could find alluded to effects attributed to changes in time, the 4th variable, in the way the aliens experienced it. He needed to talk this over with someone who really understood physics.

Today, on his patio, he felt like his time was up. He'd had enough of this and wanted to rest again.

**

Jackson was fuming. Rodrigo called him last night. He suggested that the intruder who hurt him had been sent by Colonel Lang. Not just to give Rodrigo a message but to send one to him.

If any of this had the implied associations, he could file an Article 1150 complaint. He'd talked to a JAG, Commander Wilson, who suggested he try to resolve the situation personally with Colonel Lang. Two things stood in the way of an Article 1150 complaint, Wilson said. The

Colonel was not in the same chain of command. Any 1150 complaint would have to go to the appropriate Air Force authority and might get slowed down at best. The request mast also suggested Jackson directly address the matter with the offending party. He worried that might get out of hand.

Commander Wilson strongly thought it best to try to resolve this himself. Jackson admitted he was a little afraid of Colonel Lang's reaction to an accusation. The Colonel was in Davenport and he wasn't going to attempt this on the phone. He was due to return on Thursday, soon enough.

**

"Hello, Hanna, it's Megan Thompson."

"Megan… Wow!... Sorry, my mind was buried in this project I'm working on. What's going on?"

"I've tried to get Rodrigo several times, but he's never answered. I'm anxious to talk to him, so, I thought you can take the information and ask any questions. Sounds like I caught you at work. Sorry."

"Rodrigo does that when he's thinking – turns his phone off. He's at home recovering from a broken arm. Tomorrow will be his first day back at work."

"Broke his arm? How the heck did that happen?" she asked in a snoopy voice.

"You'll have to ask him that."

Hanna couldn't help suddenly sounding cautious. Funny, Megan thought, Jackson was holding something back yesterday when she asked about his trip to Colton Wrest's ranch. He never mentioned Rodrigo's broken arm. She needed to think on this…

Anyway, “I got some more input from that brilliant math guy at NSA. The one who ID’d HD 69234’s coordinates in the Pappis constellation. He used those strange objects that appeared in the hologram’s corner.”

“Like what?”

“The man is incredible! Now he’s been able to zero in on two other star systems.”

“Really?” Hanna opened a new page on her computer and started to type. “Tell me. I’ll get it to Rodrigo.”

“This guy, Jeffery Mason, said the symbols look something like counting lines. He was in a rush. Always is. Said he’d explain later. This time he’s ID’d HD 100546 about 320 light years out in the Muscae constellation and our sun. Both stars are apparently spot on using the coordinate theory he developed.

“There were so few symbols in the hologram. He also wondered if they may be particularly important stops on some kind of alien cosmic expressway. You know, something like our military bases in foreign countries.”

“Really?” Hanna said as this idea began to flood her with possibilities. “I’d like to meet this guy.”

Megan interrupted, “Hanna … intuition tells me there’s something going on with Rodrigo’s broken arm. Yesterday, Jackson wasn’t very forthcoming about the trip he and Rodrigo took to Colton Wrest’s place in Wyoming. Never mentioned the broken arm. That’s not like him.”

The line was quiet. “Megan, you’re a good person. I’d like to talk about what I know about Wyoming but am obligated to not say anything. Rodrigo tells me that Jackson respects you. Your best bet is to talk to him.”

**

Megan stewed on her conversation with Hanna all afternoon. At least her worries about that jerk, Lieutenant Berry, disappeared for a while. It was after six when she got back to her room. This was a nice place, behind a private residence and well off the Davenport UAPTF campus. She was still worried about that guy, but she wanted to call Jackson. It was after nine in D.C. She opened the sliding glass door and walked outside. The fall sun was getting low in the sky. She pulled up Jackson's contact, despite the hour.

"What's happening Megan."

"Sorry to call so late."

"It's okay, just got home after dinner with friends. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay … Well, maybe not. I can't help worrying about that guy Berry."

"Has he touched you again?"

"No, and he hasn't followed me around for days. Maybe he's not in Davenport. Still, it's been six weeks since I filed the complaint with Colonel Lang's office. I would have expected to hear back by now. All I asked is that he be told to leave me alone."

"You're right. It's been too long. And, sorry that I've been so busy that I've forgotten to follow up on it … remind me what your complaint said?"

"Okay, it started innocent enough. He came on like a sweet guy. After a while, though, it got weird that I kept running into him. Finally, I agreed to have coffee, maybe clear the air. We went to that small galley near your office. It's close in there.

"Anyway, he then scooted his chair around to get close to me. I kept feeling his leg touching mine. I moved away. It didn't get uncomfortable again until he started to talk about this old girlfriend. Said he really liked her because she met his every need. When he started in on sexual stuff, I squeezed out the other way and left. He caught me at the door and grabbed my arm so

hard he left a bruise. He's very strong and hung on as I tried to pull away. He let go when someone came to the door … That scared me."

"I remember now, but wasn't there another incident later? Something even more flagrant."

"Weeks later, I was standing in line at the canteen over on the runways when I felt something rubbing my behind. I turn around to see Berry with a shit-eating grin on his face and sprinted out of there. That was all in my complaint."

"Has it got any better?"

"It did right after I filed the complaint, then, more recently, I kept seeing him around campus. Like he's stalking me.

"The last time was in the parking lot. I drove my car all around town to make sure he didn't follow me home. Jackson, at first I thought he was a good-looking man – you know, tall and slim. But I think he has a real problem. He's scary."

"I'm sorry I let this slip, Megan. I know what to do tomorrow."

"Thanks."

The line went silent for a while before Jackson said, "Have a good rest of the night."

"Hold on, Jackson. As long as I have you on the line do you mind one more thing?"

"No. Go ahead."

"I tried to get Rodrigo today to talk to him about that NSA stuff we went through yesterday. Instead, I ended up talking to Hanna."

Jackson didn't say anything.

"You never told me that Rodrigo was hurt in Wyoming."

"Guess, I didn't want to explain."

“That’s what I thought. So, my guess is that you and Rodrigo found something important at Wrest’s ranch and in the process, he got injured.”

“Your logic is, as usual, faultless.”

“But you’re not going to tell me what I want to know.”

Again, Jackson didn’t respond.

“You brought me into Davenport because I had skills you thought would be valuable here. I’ve been patient, recommended equipment changes and trained staff,” Megan said. “Now, finally, I’ve got plugged into a project that’s both fun and makes me go out and learn new stuff. You also had me go through that time-consuming bit of getting a top-secret clearance.

“I think you’ve found something exciting and critical, but you won’t let me join what is no doubt a small group in the know.”

The connection was quiet.

“Come on, Jackson! My guess is that you’ve found aliens… Nothing in my life so far would turn me on more than being able to help sort out all the issues involved in understanding extraterrestrial life.

“You know I can think better than virtually anyone here. I guarantee I will be a big asset and won’t spill the beans.”

Jackson remained quiet for a few more seconds. “This has gone all the way to the vice-president. It could easily become the biggest national security issue the country has ever faced. If it gets out, I would be court-martialed, at best,” Jackson said.

Megan didn’t say a thing for a while. “I get it. Trust me.”

“Okay, I’m going to send you some pictures. I want you delete them after you give them a good look but before you call me tomorrow morning with your ideas.”

Back at Work

The news came like a hammer to the back of his head. He stood and stared. “Maggie, Come on! Why would Morgan resign? If you’re joking, the story isn’t funny.” Rodrigo shouted. His old friend fired? … Anger washed away panic. Rodrigo knocked a pile of unread reports onto the floor, got up and paced.

“Sorry Rodrigo. It’s no joke. The news was in one of those terse emails from above this morning. All it said was he gave notice to the CEO Manfeld. Resigned for personnel reasons. Manfeld is considering it. I knew you’d want to know.”

“Alright. Thank you,” Rodrigo sat and buried his head in his hands for a minute. Then, got up and walked out into the hall. He stopped. The world suddenly senseless, there was not a friend to be found anywhere. How could this be? Morgan was the best of the best.

He walked briskly to the other end of the building. The door to Morgan’s corner office was closed. Mary’s door was closed too. Doors stood there coldly, in that dark corner. They emphasized the astonishing paradigm shift. He banged senselessly on Morgan’s then reeled away aimlessly and dazed. He uselessly wandered empty halls. Everyone was busy working. Eventually Rodrigo found himself back at his desk. He pulled his chair over to the window and stared across the campus. It would never be the same without the man who had given so much and rose so high.

After an indeterminable amount of time staring, Hanna came in. “Sorry, I know you two were close.”

“Indeed.” was all that Rodrigo said. He continued to watch nothing.

**

Work was not possible with the quiet Rodrigo. The first paragraph partially read five times, Hanna closed the project description and walked down the hall to open the door at the top of the stairwell. Door closed; she dialed Marsha Cook, her sorority sister at Swarthmore. Both ended up at Seleron. Marsha didn't pick up.

Hanna's phone rang almost immediately. "Hi Marsha."

"I know why you called, Hanna. I'm sure you get it that I can't talk about personnel matters involving employees."

"Yeah. I just hoped there was something you could say. A tidbit. Rodrigo's a mess. He and Dr. Giles go back to when this company was still owned by the founder's family."

"J.F. Walter?"

"Yeah, Rodrigo and Giles' shared an office when the director first worked for Walter Labs. The two are still very close. It doesn't make sense. Something unusual must have happened for Dr. Giles to resign without talking to Rodrigo. He's beside himself."

"Sorry girl, but I just can't say anything."

**

Ten minutes later, Hanna got off the elevator on the fourth floor of building 6 and walked into Ray Gallagher's lab. The know-it-all would already have made his regular rounds to talk. His office was in the back, past a bunch of strange-looking equipment. Conflicting sounds with tubes whirling, wheels turning, and robotic arms in constant motion must take some getting used to, she thought. "Hi Ray, I'm sure you've heard about Morgan?"

"How's Rodrigo?"

"Torn-up. Wouldn't even talk to me," she said. "I stopped by hoping you've heard something?"

“Director Giles was a hard-ass, but the few times I saw him with Rodrigo, I could see the big soft spot.”

“Rodrigo’s hurting because Giles hasn’t said a word to him. Anything you can share?”

“Rumors.”

“I’ll take anything,” she replied with a dry smile.

“One came from Dan Everts, who heard it from Sammy Williams.”

“I don’t know either of them.”

“Sammy’s been running mail in Admin. for years. He saw Giles come out of the boardroom yesterday afternoon with is jaw clenched and a red face. Sammy thought he might have beat someone up. Then Ray said Susie Weeks, Director Macon’s secretary, told him Giles was fired after an argument with board members. Then, Marty, at reception in your building, saw, Mary, Giles Secretary, crying while she left the building.”

“Whose Macon?”

“He’s the board member who manages government affairs.”

“That’s what I’ve heard that I believe, but my guess is something happened in that board meeting that put Giles in a bad position,” Ray concluded.

**

Jada still not home, Rodrigo poured a second whiskey, but only halfway to his line. He’d been home for half an hour and hadn’t worked up the courage to call Morgan. His phone disturbed those thoughts.

“Hey man.”

Rodrigo took an audible breath. “Morgan! Oh, man, thanks for calling. Holy shit, amigo. You okay? I’ve been beside myself. Trying to get up the courage to call you. I just poured a second whiskey. Oh man, you can’t imagine how glad I am you called. But I said that…”

“A two-fur night, huh!” Giles said with quiet chuckle.

His calm voice filled Rodrigo with an unexpected sense of liberation. Still, he couldn’t help himself. “What the hell happened, man. What made you resign?”

Giles was silent for seconds. “Well … Warren and Macon got their way, is the simple answer. They introduced a topic that wasn’t on the agenda when I started to speak about factors affecting an important government contract, the Norfolk issue. I raised a point of order with Evan because I wasn’t prepared to talk about the subject.”

“Evan?” Rodrigo asked.

“Sorry, CEO Manfeld.”

“They wanted you to talk about the Wyoming Incident, didn’t they?” Rodrigo asked.

Giles continued. “Warren kept hammering away at misuse of company resources and said he had a petition signed by dozens of employees who were forced to work on weekends by supervisors who reported to me.”

“Huh?” Rodrigo uttered.

“Evan asked Warren to produce the document. He said he would give him a copy in a more private setting.”

“I just exploded. He was accusing me of misusing company resources for a pet project but wouldn’t produce the evidence for the board members to see. He went on and on about protecting people from repercussions. But I now know Evan felt he was playing a game.

"They must have been worried, I'd uncovered something strange in the Norfolk project that might be a problem for them. I did uncover some questions I would have mentioned. Now I'm sure it was more than monkey business."

"How can you be certain what Manfeld is thinking?"

"He told me. Manfeld said something is going on, my friend, a bigger issue, which I can't talk about. But during the brawl that ensued, I raised that new government business has come into Seleron because of this work. I was able to give some numbers because I just read Hanna's report yesterday morning. Macon tried to cut me off twice, saying it was B.S. I reminded him he was charging me without evidence. Then, he accused me of making stuff up, and made a motion to terminate me for lying to the board. Warren seconded. Evan let discussion go for a while but never called the question."

"So, how were you fired."

"To wind the ruckus down, Evan asked me to draft a letter of resignation and to leave the meeting. Then, he told the board he'd think on it. I went back and dictated a letter to Mary. Had her in tears. She gave it to Evan's secretary, but, to the best of my knowledge, he's holding it. I don't know how long this bigger issue will take to resolve. And I guess it's possible that things may not go the way Evan hopes. Then, he'll have to accept my resignation. In the interim, I'm *persona non grata.*

"Well, you've had a hell-of-a couple of days, haven't you?"

"You know Rodrigo, I think I'll pour another whiskey too," Morgan said. "I was thinking last night how good it's been seeing you so excited about this Wyoming project. It's infectious. Certainly, got my interest. This young man, Commander Wald, has really got attached to you. He called me just before that board meeting, and we had a great chat. Said he's talked the pentagon

into sending business from the project, even some new stuff, our way. Our staff knows a lot about that ship and the materials you and Hanna found. Apparently, the work you two have done has shown the military a different way to handle these UFO sightings."

"He called you?" Rodrigo said. Jackson never mentioned it.

There was a break before Giles said, "Wouldn't it be a nice way to end your career to come up with something that changes government policy about UFOs and brings a new kind of business into a company like Seleron."

"You're getting way ahead of the game, Morgan. We have big unresolved problems."

Rodrigo told Gilles the whole story about the aliens he'd seen, how his arm was broken, and aliens becoming dreadful weeds. He trusted his friend to keep it mum.

Giles just said, "Well, you need to think on how to get that vehicle returned to them," before Jada walked into the kitchen.

"I'm home, Bear, who you talking to," she said.

"I'm going to sign off Morgan. Jada just got home."

"Understand, my friend… Oh, and Rodrigo, I know I can trust you to keep all this to yourself, too, until this plays out. I've a good feeling about how this will end. Sorry I took so long to call."

Rodrigo realized he should have asked the same of Morgan.

**

Still thinking about his long-time friend's easy confidence, Rodrigo saw a text from Megan. She wanted to further probe his idea that the aliens took their time traveling in space. He bet she wanted more than that while walking to the kitchen to talk to Jada. She'd picked up dinner from a new place, Taco Temple. "My first day back at work was eventful."

A tasty dinner limited conversation. Jada was happy that he'd talked to Morgan. In his easy chair, he put Megan's number into his contacts and called. "So, you would like to make Einstein's Relativity theory crash and burn," was his joke when she picked up.

Megan chuckled. "I guess your arm must be better… Relativity. I wouldn't know where to start. And I'm with you on this idea that aliens probably take their time and explore at speeds something less than that of light. My real dilemma is how long ago did aliens have to decide to put their genetic material in that tree on Wrest's ranch to allow those things I saw in the pictures Jackson showed me? I'd like your thoughts."

"A tough one. Jackson told me you'd figured out what we'd seen and included you in the group that knows. You're already way ahead of me. I've been focused on wondering why the aliens are here.

"Anyway, comments from me should be considered guesswork. It is possible that those ships always carry genetic material with them. Maybe they find occasional possibilities to distribute it on life-inhabited worlds they find. I'll think on it. If I come up with something more, I'll text you."

"It seems a bit of a Catch-22. How could they know they wanted to plant genetic material here thousands of years before it was needed? Anyway, I'm glad you're feeling better. The break Jackson told me about sounded serious."

"Only because the bone punctured a lot of tissue. I think that's what hurt, particularly after a stranger whacked my arm."

"Someone deliberately hit your arm? Why?"

"I don't know but wait a second… Henry Gott!"

"What does this guy, Gott have to do with it?"

"He's a professor at Lethbridge University in Canada. He's been keeping track of forests in Canada and here for many years. Published a lot of papers. Some of them talked about seeing big nodules in trees that contained an unrecognizable polymer – that's exactly what Hanna and I found. I talked to him recently. My impression is that he knows about the aliens putting their genetic material in to trees. I was never able to get him to talk about it. Maybe you could.

"I'll text his details. You'll need to be cautious. He's shy about anyone new. Maybe if you act like a student?"

"What about this guy who hurt you? I remember Jackson saying he told you not to talk to him. That's weird."

"It was very weird. This tall, skinny young guy just showed up in my backyard one afternoon while I was sitting on my porch enjoying the sunshine and reading the paper.

"The look – he may have wanted me to think he was an immigrant. Spoke only Spanish. He was dressed casually with a red baseball cap. But he was clean shaven with a fresh haircut. And his boots. What I told Jackson was that he looked military."

"Tall and skinny, huh," Megan said. She was quiet for a minute. "How old would you guess?"

"Probably less than thirty."

"Thanks, for the input. Let me think on things."

It surprised Rodrigo how suddenly she wanted to get off the phone.

Two Days Later

"Commander Wahl, take a seat," Colonel Lang said, with an impatient motion of his hand. A hard copy of the Federal News Network sat on his desk. His confident look filled Jackson's view. "What now?"

Jackson took a few steps inside. With a hard breath he started, “Sir, I have tried to keep our interactions consistent with military norms. You have continued to be uncompromising in your position that the alien spacecraft cannot be released. Nor are you willing to accept any factual information about the existence of aliens.”

“That adequately describes my position,” the Colonel replied. A harsh sulk now covering his face.

Jackson never wanted to have this conversation. He couldn’t help a clenched fist near one pocket. “Sir, I still haven’t heard a word out of you regarding my concerns that these aliens in Wyoming could become a weed epidemic unless we return the alien ship. The rancher Wrest is very concerned.”

“Why should I accept that those things will spread. Winter’s coming. The snow will take care of them. Incredibly weak logic to use to convince me to give up the spacecraft.”

Anger filled Jackson. He wanted to grab the Colonel, pull him eyeball to eyeball, and shake him until he understood. Instead, he turned his back to walk away for calming seconds, then turned to face Lang again. Slowly and forcefully, he said, “Well, sir, I guess you assume those things you won’t acknowledge will react to temperature the same way as plants on earth do.”

The Colonel’s only answered was a noiseless growl.

Jackson was undeterred. “In addition, Sir, you have chosen to ignore Dr. Thompson’s 1150 filing regarding Lieutenant Berry’s persistent and unpleasant actions toward her.”

The Colonel’s head jerked up. Then he hesitated before saying, “I spoke with the lieutenant. He maintains Ms. Thompson has exaggerated normal courting in that filing. I did not feel action was needed.”

Jackson pushed air toward the ceiling with both hands then walked closer to the Colonel's desk to lean on the back of a chair. "You never spoke to her! I guess you have the authority to avoid action. But doesn't she also have the right to get your position in writing?"

The Colonel sat without comment. Jackson was sure that this last point, at least, had made him uncomfortable. So, he continued, "Sir, you run this operation as a tyrant. Without a semblance of leadership, you just use your position to oppress. That won't work with me.

The Colonel must have had ear plugs. Any openness had long ago taken flight.

"Finally, sir, Mr. Avila was attacked on his patio earlier this week. He told me the man was poorly disguised as an immigrant. His appearance, including what looked to be new military issue boots, was not consistent with the costume."

"Are you accusing me of being part of what happened to Mr. Avila?"

"I have no direct evidence that is the case. I only want you to remind you that any such behavior involving a civilian is unacceptable."

"Okay, Commander. This is the third time I've had to listen to you whine about most of this. You are excused."

Walking out Jackson turned in the direction of his office and saw the Colonel pick up the phone.

**

"Ah-ha!" Megan bellowed at her monitor. She'd spent hours staring at the daily officer itinerary pages on a Pentagon website. Finally, what she needed! She jumped up to wave her hands over her head while doing a little jig. It took forever and required top-secret credentials to get here. Once she negotiated the opaque military code it got easier.

She continued to work away until she zeroed in on Lieutenant Berry's itinerary for previous weeks.

Megan was suspicious Salvador Berry was the person who attacked Rodrigo in his backyard. Rodrigo's description of the person was a spooky-good match. She wanted to firm up the ground around the idea before going to Jackson.

More digging showed Berry had flown to D.C. the day before Rodrigo was attacked. Berry's itinerary said he was to attend radiology meetings at the Pentagon. It was getting dark, but more searching turned up no record of such meetings. She didn't think this was enough.

But an hour later she found a record showing Berry had rented a car at Dulles after landing rather than use a Pentagon shuttle. So, it was quite possible he made the two-and-a-half-hour round trip to Philadelphia and back the morning Rodrigo was attacked. She'd have to ask Jackson – a superior officer – to get the record of the rental's milage.

Now she needed to figure out Berry's connection to Colonel Lang. 'Why would the Colonel be so brazen?'

She called it a night thinking this might just be two-fer and immediately dropped off into sleep smiling like a baby.

**

Rodrigo's next day back at work was most enjoyable – once he dispensed with the huge pile of mail. Lunch out for a burger with Hanna was yummy and felt like old times. Both downloaded what they hadn't got to after he left for Davenport. And the doctor was right. His arm was feeling much better.

On the way home, he tuned in the jazz station instead of the news, then pulled into the garage feeling great. He grabbed his stuff and pushed the button to close the door on the way into the

house. His things in their spot, he picked up the mail on the floor by the front door and headed back to the kitchen. Mail on the kitchen counter, he pulled out the Jack and filled his glass to the usual spot. Jada would be home in an hour.

With a sip he headed toward the living room and his easy chair. But the door to the garage onto the laundry room squealed open behind him. In the distance that tall, lanky man who hurt him two days ago bolted toward him.

Seconds were filled with alarm. 'I ignored his warning. How would he know? Why does this man have it in for me?' There was no weapon. Without thought his broken arm came out of the sling. He stood his ground as the man ran at him. He waited and waited for the last second before taking two steps, one toward the man and one to the side. Rodrigo pushed him hard with both hands. His attacker lost balance and fell away him. He nearly righted himself but crashed haphazardly into the small kitchen table in the corner.

The man seemed dazed laying face-down on the floor for a second. Rodrigo's arm throbbed. The pain was hellish. But seeing the goon sprawled on the floor sent a surge of conviction through him. He grabbed a wine bottle from the counter with his useful hand.

No time passed before he watched this lunatic, amazingly, roll to his back, bend his knees and, in an instant, he leaped to his feet like a gymnast. His forehead was bloody.

'This thug is an athlete and five inches taller than me. I don't stand a chance in a fair fight.'

Backed into the other side of the kitchen, Rodrigo took a defensive posture and hoped to get a good shot in with the bottle. The man charged him again. Rodrigo side-stepped, the other way, and swung the bottle with all his might. Anticipating, the man turned and ducked. The bottle made a glancing blow to his head. The man stopped a few feet away, rubbed his head, and turned

angrily to face him. He grabbed Rodrigo's shirt and pushed him hard into the wall-oven. Rodrigo's head banged the oven handle. A jarring blow, everything went void for a second.

The man's face was inches away. He grabbed Rodrigo's shirt again with both hands and pulled him before pushing him hard against the oven's door. Lights flickered. Shattering glass was the last thing he heard. He slumped to the ground. A vicious kick hammered the side of his head.

Rodrigo's world of pain disappeared.

As he began to come around, Jada again walked toward the airport exit just like the week before. Silky long black hair and that beautiful body – rounded hips enhanced her slim figure. She stopped at the exit, turned and beckoned him with her hand. He wanted to get up and run to her.

But Jada's features blurred and changed. Now he saw grandpa's face with that vivid and comforting smile, one hand calling him. Was it time to join him? Time to die?

Rodrigo came around looking up into a group of faces. A woman was on her knees next to him. Vision floated in and out to focus on her face – attractive with a polite smile.

His view moved around the other people, including a uniformed officer standing over him. Most wore non-police uniforms. He recognized his neighbor Margret. The strong odor of wine made him try to turn to look. It hurt too much.

The kneeling woman asked, "How do you feel, Mr. Avila?"

"Like I was beaten up. The back of my head hurts."

"You have a large contusion on your head. An ambulance is on the way."

Rodrigo wondered why the man didn't kill him. A deep draw of air brought tears to his eyes.

“I’m Sergeant Clawson, Mr. Avila,” the officer said. “Your neighbor here called when she heard things breaking in your house. Do you feel up to answering some questions.”

“I guess so.”

“I was out back, Rodrigo,” he heard Margaret say. “I ran into my house to see a tall man get into your car and drive away. It didn’t look like he took anything.”

Rodrigo looked at the EMT. “Can I sit up?”

“Why don’t you stay put until a stretcher gets here,” the kneeling woman said. “I’ve rolled a clean towel under you head wound.”

“Do you know the person who was here,” the sergeant asked.

“I don’t, but he was here earlier in the week. He delivered a warning in Spanish and whacked my broken arm before running off.

“Was my arm damaged today,” he asked the EMT.

“Nothing obvious, but they’ll check that at the hospital.”

Rodrigo went on to answer questions about the man’s description, the warning, and if he could identify the guy if he saw him again. Rodrigo volunteered that the police should be able to find blood on the kitchen table that sat overturned on the floor twenty feet away. “He had a gash on his left cheek.”

He saw Jada talking to Margaret behind the sergeant. Just as they wheeled a gurney in, she leaned through the crowd to say, “They’re going to let me ride to the hospital with you.”

Rodrigo tried to grin.

**

The ambulance pulled away and headed east. “Are we headed to Mercy again?” Rodrigo asked.

"Yes, sir," the male attendant said while securing an IV.

"The house is a mess," Jada said, after a minute. "It looks like this man wanted you to know he was unhappy that you talked to Jackson again, in spite of his threat."

"Maybe also because I got one good shot in." He smiled but, then grimaced. His hand went to the back of his head.

Jada smiled back. "Can you do something for his pain?"

"It's next on my list," the nurse said as he picked up a syringe. "This should help, Mr. Avila."

"Wow, I can feel the drug taking effect," Rodrigo said within seconds.

"I don't see an obvious problem with your arm."

"Yeah, I hardly notice it with this thing on my head."

"Your computer and car are gone, and he even tipped over my China cabinet – to make his point, I think." A shattered recoil spoke to hidden anguish.

After a minute, he said, "I thought I was going to die."

He felt tears again. The weeping shocked him. Then he sobbed quietly and turned his head. That was very painful. After a minute he said. "I'm scared. I was way overmatched. I don't know why the man didn't hurt me more."

Jada took his hand and kissed him. "I'm glad you didn't die, Bear. You should be upset. How would you ever imagine something like this might happen?"

As they looked at each other, Rodrigo felt the fear going away. His wife managed to transform fright into a warmth. She was incredible. The passion of youth began to emerge out of familiarity, he thought.

"But the guy took Gabriella… I hope they find her. She was the only Alfa C4 Spider in Philadelphia." In the back of his mind, he worried the man might have found his backup flash drive.

"I'm sure the police have an alert out for your car.

"Do you have any idea who sicked this guy on you?" Jada asked.

"Yes, but I doubt I'll be able to prove it."

"You think it was that Colonel, don't you?"

Rodrigo nodded affirmatively. He wiped his eyes with his good hand. The EMT gently helped him put his other arm back in the sling.

"I'll call Hanna and Jackson and let them know what happened. He missed finding your phone. I found it in its usual place between our chairs." She held it up.

"Thank you," he said, his voice soft and his eyes glued to hers.

"My head still hurts a lot. Is there anything more you can do?" Rodrigo said to the nurse.

"I just gave you morphine. It should have the full effect soon. They can give you more in Emergency."

His wife reached down and carefully pulled his hand into her lap with both hers. There wasn't a word, just a giving smile. The morphine took effect. The ambulance rolled along over busy downtown streets as people drove home from work for an evening with their families. First, Rodrigo felt fortunate to be alive. Now he knew how blessed he'd been to have a great life.

As the ambulance neared Mercy, she said, "I know how excited you are about this project, Bear. I'm also want you to be aware that this is the fourth time you will be in a hospital since this business started. I'm not particularly happy about that. I will continue, to support you, but please, please be more careful."

Rodrigo closed his eyes. In the safety and momentary comfort of the ambulance's easy jostling, he called to mind that first news story. The young man on Spanish-speaking TV. He was so excited about the CSETI report. How Hanna was easily caught up by his elation. That first telephone call to Colton Wrest, and those clues they found at the landing site. Wrest story of his unlikely battle to make that key video. The satisfaction Colton felt after that visit he and Hanna made. These last months seemed to put meaning back into his life. Finally, that unexplainable feeling that he must try to contact the aliens a week ago now. He still felt the same. The broken arm, even the beating he just took, was of little consequence compared to the potential payback. He was the one person, the only one, who had the alien's ear, he might be able to unearth some riddles of a rich world that was far from earth and so different.

He opened his eyes to smiled at Jada.

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Rodrigo's concentration, tapping away on Jada's iPad and reading what he could find about concussions, was interrupted by, "You don't look so bad. That turban suits you."

He looked up. Seeing friend's faces, particularly Hanna's massive smile, felt good. "Jackson drove here from D.C. this morning. I decided to tag along to the hospital."

"I felt a phone call would be a poor way to apologize for what happened to you," Jackson said.

Rodrigo wiggled up in bed with his good arm and set the iPad to the side. "Apologize for what?"

"I guessed you might haven't heard the story. It developed very quickly last night and this morning… But first, a question, is this the man who attacked you?" Jackson showed Rodrigo a picture of Lieutenant Berry in uniform.

“That’s him!” Rodrigo was flabbergasted.

“That turban goes better with a smile than that astonished look,” Hanna said. Her grin, as bright as a ray of sunshine, got his smile back.

“Berry is in custody in D.C.,” Jackson added.

“How the hell did you do that?” Rodrigo said, “But first things first, any news on my computer or Gabriella?”

“I called Sergeant Clawson on the way here,” Hanna answered. “Not a word on your computer, but he told me they were fishing Gabriella out of the Delaware River east of the city.”

Rodrigo grimaced. “I loved that car. She was a steal when I found her eight years ago. I’ll never be able to replace her.”

“Sorry,” Hanna said. “But how are you feeling.”

“I’m okay. My head hurts more than a little. The doc said the guy gave me a pretty good concussion but no fracture. They keep giving me pain killers.” His eyes went to the IV in his arm. “Amazingly, I’ve had almost no pain in my left arm today. The physician here said it looked good.”

“Great to see you so alert,” Jackson said. He looked like there was more.

“Jada was in early today on her way to work. She’s been a great sport… that’s not the right word. But she brought me her computer to use. Everything, the broken arm and now this, has been hard on her. That guy … Berry, ruined much of her antique collection of teacups along with a lot of other things that gave her pleasure. There’s something very wrong with him.

“I’ll somehow have to make this up to Jada.”

“No, you won’t,” Hanna said with another smile. “She loves you.”

That took a second to sink in. “The doctor told her that if she comes back after work, they’ll probably release me …. But what are you going to do about this Jackson?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it. Wish it was my call. The Lieutenant wouldn’t have seen the light of day if it weren’t for some super work by Megan. After you talked to her Tuesday night, she thought your description of the assailant was a good match for a creepy officer who’d been giving her trouble at Davenport. She began to suspect a relationship between Berry and Colonel Lang because a formal complaint she’d made about Berry was ignored. Sounds like she spent hours searching military databases to track his movements. It turns out the Lieutenant arrived in D.C. the night before your first encounter with him. Then he disappeared from the radar for a couple of days with no flights recorded. But his mistake was to rent a car at Dulles when he arrived. Most military people use the Pentagon shuttle. She suspected he drove to Philadelphia the morning he first accosted you.

“After hearing Megan’s story, I asked the Pentagon M.P.’s to try to find him. They tracked him down at a hotel in D.C. He’s being held at a military site on suspicion. Hanna mentioned that to Sergeant Clawson who took samples of blood in your kitchen. With your positive identification, I’ll leave it to the authorities to figure out jurisdiction.

“The sergeant said they will work on matching blood to what’s on file for the Lieutenant.”

“But what about Colonel Lang?” Hanna asked.

“There’s little doubt he’s in the middle of this,” Rodrigo growled.

“This might prove tougher,” Jackson said. “I had a hard bout in his office yesterday. Basically, I asked if he was involved with that incident in your backyard. He kicked me out of his office. The big question is why Lieutenant Berry would injure you. The coincidences are huge, too big to overlook. My inclination is to turn this over to the military police. Let them handle it.”

**

Rodrigo had been quiet since they left his room. Asleep when Jada arrived, he began to twitch and shake violently. She jumped out of her chair. She ran to the other side of the bed – away from his broken arm – and held onto him. His eyes popped open as he quickly settled.

"What, what's go 'in on," he said. "Oh damn," he cried when he tried to raise his head.

"Sorry, Bear, but you were twitching all over the place. What's happening?"

He laid still for half a minute, before saying, "I had a dream, a very strange dream."

"About being beaten?" she asked.

"No. Before the attack, I was wondering again why the aliens choose me … why was I the one? Nine billion people, and my name gets pulled out of the hat. It's just too incredible to swallow."

"I thought we'd talked this one out," she said.

"Yeah, we did. Now I have new thinking since the aliens."

She watched him use the bed's control to get up to a sitting position. Then he awkwardly shuffled around a little to get comfortable. "I wish this thing wasn't on my head. Maybe we can ask to have it taken off.

"Anyway, this is the first time I've confirmed the aliens can see deeply into my brain. They have alluded to thoughts, experiences and much more. But their new bundle contains old memories they must have taken from my head.

"I'm not quite as scared by this as I once was. They are no longer some mysterious presences. There's no way of knowing what the aliens can see. Maybe it's everything, or they might follow my day to day thinking closely. Anyway…

"Hold on, Bear. It's hard to believe you can accept that. I don't want to."

"You're right. It's hard, but there doesn't seem to be much I can do about it. In exchange, I guess, I get these bundles of information. That suggests they are controlling. At least that's what we would call it.

"Where we left off a month ago was that the aliens were probably attracted not only by my telepathic abilities, but by my good technical background. Also, the fact that I didn't resist their initial contact, didn't just blow it off."

His wife had a seriously concerned look he tried to ignore.

"So, back to the dream. The alien who does most of the connection with me didn't grasp some of what it learned about me. At least some human emotions seem non-starters to them."

"And, you certainly are human," his wife said, now flashing a flirtatious smile.

"I don't think they understand happiness, fear, disgust and the like," he said. "To the best of my knowledge, their lives are regimented. A continuous movement through time with accidental learning sometimes passed on genetically to offspring, which are clones – or, possibly, copies."

"I find this very interesting, maybe I'm reading too much into what I know. A very different mechanism is responsible for the way they think and retain knowledge. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. They are more like plants than animals and evolved millions of miles away."

"That's a whole bunch of speculation, dear," Jada said. "How are you going to sell this to people like Jackson?"

"It's hard to see how they developed sentience. Maybe that's why it took a thousand, million years. At this point, I think my speculation is all mankind has."

Jada sat back down in the room's only chair and leaned on her hands with elbows on her knees. He knew she was interested.

“I feel other factors were important too. It was important that I understand the basics of the universe and the physics of astronomy.”

“Given what you just said, I would guess some more stuff is important,” Jada interjected.

“Such as?”

“You’re open-minded. By that I mean to include not prejudiced. You tracked the initial clues intensely. I had a really hard time getting your attention most nights. My guess is that they somehow made some of those clues available to you. And, finally, you’re the most intelligent person I’ve ever met … Well, except for the occasional lapses – like letting the aliens pick you up.”

A nurse walked in, “How’s it go ‘in folks,” she asked in a thick Southern accent.

“Thank you. Probably as good as can be expected.” Jada answered. “Rodrigo wants to know if it be possible to get this turban-thing off his head?”

“That’s a pretty nasty gash on the back of your noggin, kiddo. I’ll check with the doc, but I don’t think so.”

After the nurse walked away, Jada said, “I need a break … run to the head and down to the canteen for something to drink. You seem okay.”

He raised his hand and waved. Anomalous things from when his head was buried in the sunflower were really flowing for a first time.

After thinking a while, something gained traction. The aliens picked him up. in Wyoming, His arm was broken. Everything was too fast to retain anything. Now his mind had seemed to be catching up with alien time. He took a deep breath. Disorienting and otherworldly, this scared the hell out of him. He wanted to let what was happening go but continued.

As the alien feeling took over, time was no longer a smooth directional function. It was as much about sensation as accuracy. When the Wyoming event started to replay in his head, time paused, stretched and even moved side-to side. Thinking about that moment was so disturbing it made him sick. His stomach began to flip-flop as the entire event stretched out over some indeterminately long time. Each little movement was now clear. He needed to talk this over with someone who really understood physics – Megan Thompson. He picked up his phone.

Suddenly he felt his time was up for today. He'd had enough of this and wanted to rest again. He put the phone back down.

**

By the next morning, Rodrigo had thought a lot about moving through time. He picked up his phone to listen to the notes he'd slowly verbalized the night before.

Halfway through, he stopped. 'These notes hadn't existed before I recorded them. They haven't changed since. But it's the next day. Time passed. I'm still in this fucking hospital bed. Nothing else, length, width, or height, changed.'

Time's vacuous quality suddenly filled him. It's totally dependent on the instantaneous position, he thought, the being's situation in all four variables. Yet, the aliens learned to use group think. He'd found it chaotic, but most importantly, independent of position. As frightening as it was, he confessed, there was something important. in this ability the aliens had to change time.

**

"Hi, Hanna, you know it's kinda early here." Megan said.

"Sorry, I didn't think. Just got off the phone with Rodrigo."

"Is he still in the hospital," Megan asked.

“Yeah, and he’s bored. His mind was going a hundred-miles-an-hour. He told me about the conversation you two had about aliens taking their time getting here. But, you know, he sounded equivocal. I just want to understand alternatives before accepting this idea that the alien ship came here in slow-mo.

“You are really getting into this, aren’t yah?

“There are hypothetical ways to travel faster than light. In the early twentieth century, the idea was explored mathematically by physicists, including Einstein. He came up with a concept called the Einstein-Rosen bridge, aka a wormhole. It’s a way to shortcut different parts of spacetime that could involve considerable distance as we would straight-line measure it. A less mathematically credible concept – or maybe I should say unexplored – is a portal where two distant points in space and time are temporarily connected. I haven’t looked at this much… Guess I have a hard time believing it.

“So, what’s going on in your mind. Do you not like this idea of slow-mo anymore. Isn’t that what you called it?”

“No, I’m okay with the idea. Even the speed of light seems overwhelmingly fast. And the immensity of the universe is way, way beyond my imagination.

“I’m just thinking about what I heard at the CSETI meeting that Rodrigo and I attended. The CSETI spokesman said that there was no record of a vehicle that couldn’t be accounted for by normal air-traffic at the time the alien craft showed up. Then, Colton said, “It was just there.” He didn’t see the alien vehicle land. Those two pieces of information open the possibility that the alien craft simply appeared.”

Megan was quiet for a while. “I will say,” she started, “our knowledge expands daily. Look at what we’re learning about the universe with this James Webb telescope. But I think if you ask

most astrophysicists, they will tell you they believe that nothing can travel faster than light. Here's the kicker. We are only beginning to appreciate the importance of that funky fourth variable – time. Most humans don't see it as a variable. The clock started ticking with the big bang, and we don't know how it will end. It's just there, continuously counting off the minutes.

"If the heavens were to open, and we're able to give the alien's ship back to them, I'd sure like to be there to see what happens."

"What do you mean?" Hanna asked.

"Will it disappear?"

**

"Hi Hanna, seems like I just talked to you."

"Yeah, like an hour ago."

"In the meantime, Rodrigo called. He wants help with something that sounded crazy, but the more I think about it, it's steadily getting more plausible. He thinks that the aliens might have learned to fool with that 4th variable – time. And that it may have something to do with moving through space faster than light.

"That would require me to take a deep dive. It goes way beyond what we know. But that's not really the reason I called.

"I've managed to pull together a theory connecting Berry to the Colonel. Thought I'd test this on you before taking it to Jackson."

"Okay, shoot."

"To start with, I found Berry had a suspect record in college including at least two disciplinary hearings. But he graduated – New College of Florida. I haven't been able to learn

anything about his academics. There were quiet months with no evidence of work, before he joined the Navy and was sponsored to Officer Candidate School by no other than Colonel Lang."

"Really! When you come out of OCS, doesn't it take some time to make Lieutenant."

"Yes, and usually Ensigns are assigned some kind of testing duty. Berry came straight to Davenport at the request of the Colonel."

"By testing duty, you mean something where the future stars will shine?"

"Exactly. The rest is second hand, but since at Davenport, I've been told several misconduct grievances were removed from his record by the Colonel. One of these, at least, is said to be serious. Something having to do with drugs. So, anyway, the question that has crystalized in my head is, what does the Colonel get in exchange?"

"I'm impressed, Megan. You're good at tracking substance down. I definitely think you should take this to Jackson. This guy Lang is a slime-ball. Let me add another question to yours. Why does Lang want to have this guy hurt Rodrigo. Jada called me last night. She had a hard time talking – breaking up. She's never seen her husband so upset over the senselessness of these attacks. She used the word, intimidated, several times."

A Week Later

Rodrigo put down his first cup of Saturday morning coffee to answer the call. "Good morning, Jackson, I'm surprised to hear from you at 7:30 on a weekend morning."

"Sorry for getting into your weekend, but I have a problem."

"Surprise, surprise?" was Rodrigo's interested statement.

"Yesterday, I sat through an insanely long meeting in Admiral Northman's office – the Admiral, the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff except Commandant of the Marines, and me. Staff was intentionally excluded."

“Because of the subject matter?”

“Correct. As you can imagine, the pictures I took on Colton’s ranch generated a lot of discussion and, then a long line of questions. I had to go through the pictures three times. At the top of a list of particular hard to answer questions: they wanted to know how I knew so much about the aliens, their planet and civilization.”

“Oh,” Rodrigo said, knowing where this was going.

“Yes… we spent over an hour discussing an anonymous associate’s interactions with the aliens. They were impressed with how much factual evidence I was able to produce to support what you told me. Still, skepticism came out of every corner, so many doubts, both spoken and body language. Little doubt because the next step will be to take this to the Vice President. I was grilled.

“Telepathy is hard for people to accept, including my wife,” Rodrigo added.

“And I think the Colonel must have preceded me with some of them. Despite the negative atmosphere, I felt successful in fielding questions. Only one, General Sealy, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, remained unconvinced in the end.”

“I don’t think I will be much help in dispensing with his skepticism. Also, we agreed when I first opened up about the aliens that you’d not let my name get out where the internet trolls and the like could get it.”

“I included our agreement. This will be treated as a military secret. The Admiral was not happy with the idea of going forward without consensus. Regardless, I have an ace-in-the-hole.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s another National Secret. I’ll need two things.”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to come to D.C. and, for sure, keep what I show you secret.”

“I can do both those Jackson, but why all the mystery?”

“You’ll see.”

**

The building on 16th Street was an unimpressive clapboard two-story. He hated to look for places in D.C., that crazy city. Rodrigo used Jackson’s code to get into an easily missed blacktop lot wedged in behind the building and several others. Only one of six spaces was empty.

A uniformed marine checked his ID and asked for a signature. He compared it to one on his phone, then directed Rodrigo to the third door on his left.

“Good, you made it,” Jackson said. “Come in.” With a preoccupied look while Rodrigo walked to his desk, he pointed to a chair and put his phone to his ear. “Mr. Turnbull, I understand you don’t like meeting new people. This is important. You are the only person who can do this.”

Rodrigo watched Jackson listen for several seconds before turning off the call. “Sorry, Rodrigo, the person I asked you to come here to meet is eccentric. He’s in the building but disabled and will take some time to get here.”

“I’m in no hurry, Jackson.”

“I see you’re using both arms. Congratulations.”

“The doc says I’ve made good progress. I’m still taking over-the-counter pain killers. But I have a question…” The door opened to reveal a tall and staggeringly thin man clutching the door jam. A frown dominated his countenance. It struck Rodrigo that he’d never seen anyone that looked quite this pasted together. The parts of his body all sagged like they were about to fall off. He slowly shuffled into the room.

"I'll leave my walker in the hall, Commander," he said. Maybe a head taller than Rodrigo, neatly brushed dark gray hair rested on his shoulders. He turned, still grasping the door jam and his eyes caught Rodrigo's. He stopped and stared for seconds before his bothered look slowly brightened into a fascinated smile. "You must be Mr. Avila," he said. His deep red tunic contrasted pale skin. The initial severe expression behind a neatly trimmed beard had turned warmer.

Rodrigo got up and walked over to him. His offer of a hand was greeted with a limp response. "I'm Jeff," Mr. Turnbull said, the smile was suddenly as timid as his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Jeff."

Rodrigo couldn't help several takes at the man's feet. They were covered by long shoes that looked like canoes. They were secured to braces that extended up his lower legs.

"Can we sit, please?" Turnbull asked. "I have equilibrium trouble when standing for long periods."

Rodrigo offered a hand. "I'd prefer to do this by myself. Thank you." Once comfortable Turnbull laboriously bent over to pull one pant-leg down over the braces and said, "Jackson tells me you are in communication with remote individuals."

"Not a person," Rodrigo clarified. "Life-forms and an A.I. from another world."

Turnbull took seconds. Eye's locked, his glare intensified. Then an arguably pleasant expression came through his abnormal face with little other change. "I sensed the second I saw you that you were different, Mr. Avila."

Spellbound by what he was seeing, Rodrigo was losing Jeff's words. The man's nose looked to have been squashed over to the left side of his face. The eye on the same side was much lower

than the other. It didn't move much, maybe a prosthesis. He found it hard to get his attention back to Jeff's words.

"I'd prefer Rodrigo, Jeff," he finally said. "But you say I'm different. What do you mean by that?"

A tough question didn't change Turnbull's laughing eyes. "You have powerful telepathic skill of a type I didn't know existed."

Jackson broke in. "Let me properly introduce Jeff. I tried to give you the impression that he is important to national security."

"I think what you said is that I'd have to keep my knowledge of him secret."

"Indeed. A better way to describe Jeff is a national treasure. He is the founder of a super-secret government program to remotely investigate world power activities. He was severely injured working in Syria a decade ago and lives in this building…."

"Let me interrupt you, Jackson," Jeff said. "I came here today because the government asked me to. Now that I've met Rodrigo – his eyes turned back to him – I can truthfully say I have never met anyone who has telepathic ability that is similar to what I'm detecting."

"You can see what's going on in my head, can't you?" Rodrigo said.

"Indeed," Turnbull said. "Snippets only, but yours are powerful and most interesting."

"And, given the success Jeff has had in uncovering serious threats to national security, the Admiral and other Joint Chiefs will accept his assessment of your capabilities," Jackson added.

"I guess, I guess I'm feeling more than a little intimidated by being with someone who can see what's going on in my mind," Rodrigo said. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling.

"That goes directly to why I am finding meeting you so interesting, Rodrigo," Turnbull started. "Most apparent, you somehow are able to overhear these aliens from a great distance.

Something having to do with … They are able to tag their mental communications to our power grid. How extraordinary! This could have spectacular value to our government program if we could learn how they do it. Right now, a few colleagues and I must be close to people to be able to intercept what they are thinking."

This caused a pause in the conversation. Rodrigo got up to walk around for a minute. He mumbled to himself. The conversation with that neurologist, Dr. Mason, months ago came back. The alien A.I. had taken advantage of his telekinetic predisposition and changed a region of his brain. That change was probably permanent.

"So here we are. This has come to the point where choice has gone away. You seem reasonable Jeff, and I trust Jackson. Let's go."

After using his handkerchief to mop perspiration, Rodrigo softly said, "I've thought about what you suggest, Jeff. You're thinking of messages that transmit via longer wavelengths like we do with satellite communication. The way I receive the alien messages is because it's the way these aliens think. I'm not sure how you would categorize that. Regardless, they are not radio signals."

"Ah, yes, they don't rely on language. They communicate directly via some kind of direct contact through connections between them … their root systems. My God, I see these beings are not animals. And they are not some kind of strange nonorganic being unlike anything found on earth. You believe they are plants. Plants that can think. Now, that goes beyond fascinating."

Turnbull's face was awash with wonder.

"Have you seen the pictures of the aliens?" Rodrigo asked.

"I have not," Turnbull said.

"They are considered top secret," Jackson added. "I can get permission to share these with Jeff, if this moves forward."

Rodrigo then gave him a brief description of the Wyoming incident, concentrating on what he'd seen and learned.

"I see," Turnbull said when he finished. His remaining good eye looked larger than the prosthetist. "This could be fun, even if it proves not useful." His stare gained intensity. Rodrigo tended to trust people who made eye contact. Turnbull was concentrating on him. "You studied with Paul Clemens. He and I were grad students at Stanford at the same time."

This comment got a grin out of Rodrigo. "I can see you are good at this. Even when I worked with Paul, I never imagined he might be able to read minds. I've always been sure I can't."

"He also can't. But he was one of the best students of thought transference I've ever known. He drops by to visit every once in a while."

This comment made Rodrigo think how Paul had encouraged him to read all those articles on Stargate. He hadn't thought about that time for years.

"Regardless of where this ends up, I'm very attracted by the idea that these beings don't use language. It seems hard to believe that language didn't evolve. Since they seem to be hardwired to one another, I guess they don't need to speak."

This revived a question for Rodrigo that first occurred after he saw the alien video. He wondered if the alien creators also didn't speak.

"I believe these aliens only connect via thoughts," Rodrigo clarified. "I have very limited experience with a group of them and their AI. So limited that I never figured out what they might be thinking about. The only ones I understood was the alien craft's artificial intelligence and to a lesser extent one of the aliens. They had to isolate living alien's thoughts to a single being to get

me something I could understand. The back and forth of thoughts between individuals was chaotic and confusing. I guess these isolated bodies we humans live in have some perceptual advantages."

Rodrigo knew he didn't need to say more.

"I can see communicating was difficult," Turnbull said.

"Yes, until the download from a single alien."

"Download? I can see nothing like that."

"I was picked up and my head physically immersed in an alien structure I refer to as the sunflower and believe it to be like our face. Only in that intimacy was the alien able to download much of what I know about them."

"Fascinating! What else can you tell me about their senses?"

"I don't believe they have sight as we do. A static electric field has been detected around their spacecraft. I suspect we will also find it around individuals. It is possible they have a complex way to use interactions with this electric field as a substitute for sight."

"I have a recording of noises the aliens make – for what purpose would be a guess. It is possible they might hear," Jackson added.

There was a period of quiet before Rodrigo said, "There is one other thing that I believe is important in my interactions with these beings. Most of what I've learned was through exchanges with the spaceship's artificial intelligence. These exchanges started as meaningless noise in my head that was painful. And I did little beyond remain open. It was really the aliens AI. that discovered how to break down the barriers and allow communication."

An interested look came over Turnbull. "I can see you distinguish between this AI and the alien plants."

“Yes. The AI’s thoughts were 100% logical. Much closer to human thought.”

“Close to your way of thinking, Mr. Avila.”

Rodrigo smiled at the compliment. “If I am correct, this AI could be millions of years old and knows how to repair itself because it is constructed out of the same substances that make up the alien’s nervous system. If we can believe what I have learned from the AI, the development of this technology came from a race of creatures that mostly died off ages ago.”

“Mostly,” Turnbull asked.

“Yes. Uncontrollable climate change. Something I received in an alien bundle suggests at least a few of these alien sapiens still exist.”

Turnbull mouth opened and his head went up revealing a long and scared, neck.

There was a pause that suggested something significant would follow.

“One-sided?” Turnbull asked.

“Yes. Aliens seem to contact me only when they choose and, then reveal just what they want me to know.”

Turnbull took a long, hard look at him. A glare so profound that it made Rodrigo wonder what the man had seen in his head. Through Turnbull’s complicated expressions, Rodrigo suddenly pictured a message of sincerity and grit.

“I would be remiss not to mention another thing,” Rodrigo started. “When I’ve been exposed to the aliens’ normal chatter, it’s brutal. I’ve likened it to crowd noise at an exciting football game.”

Again, Turnbull’s countenance changed. His arms on the chair’s supports. His face tranquil. “My life has been hard, Mr. Avila, because of this gift I was given. I sense you have gone through a rough period, as well, probably for similar reasons.”

Rodrigo stared at him more curiously.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Avila, having met you I’m happy to be here. I also feel the work I do leads to some good. The three of us in this room live amongst nine billion humans. I can see that the things you and Commander Wahl have encountered make you believe you have a chance to change the course on earth for the benefit of those billions.”

Rodrigo caught Jackson’s eyes. He nodded affirmatively.

“I will certainly talk to Admiral Northman to confirm what I’ve seen today. I would like to get to know you better and explore this fascinating receptivity. I may know more about human telepathy than anyone. There’s no doubt your contact with creatures from another world is unique. They have evolved exceptional thinking and communication aptitudes when compared to ours. I think there is much to learn.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Turnbull was finished.

“So, Jackson, what now?” Rodrigo asked.

“If you are willing, I will see if I can arrange for you and Jeff to spend more time together. That will require an additional security clearance. You prefer not to travel, Jeff. So, Rodrigo you will likely have to come here.”

“That’s okay. It seems worthwhile make time to continue what started today.”

“Can you excuse us, Jeff. I want to try to plan next steps with Rodrigo,” Jackson said.

“Certainly,” Turnbull said. He was able to push his way into a standing position and slowly amble to the door and his walker. His primary step forward was always with his left foot. The right one more or less dragged behind.

With the door closed, Jackson said, “I’m certain that Admiral Northman will approve dealing with Colonel Lang and, probably, releasing the alien craft. Here’s what I would like to do…”

The door opened. Turnbull pushed his walker inside and sat down. “I have one more question for you Rodrigo.”

A perplexed look covered Rodrigo’s face.

“I sense you are incredibly open-minded. This may in large measure why the aliens chose you.

Eighteen Days Later

Jada was standing next to the vehicle she’d heard so much about, Colton’s Bronco. Her eyes slowly surveyed stately pines, then the distant peaks behind the house. “I can’t believe I’m here,” she said and hugged Hanna first, then her husband. “Your place is lovely, Mr. Wrest.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Avila. Somehow, meeting Rodrigo’s wife for the first time, I’m not surprised.

The compliment drew a smile.

Rodrigo put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “This could be the end of the story,” he said. “The Navy’s press release caused a clamor for more information nationwide. Somehow though, they’ve managed to keep this location secret. An Enquirer reporter has asked Hanna and me for interviews.”

“The Navy didn’t use your names. How did the Enquirer guy find out?” his wife asked.

Rodrigo waved his hands in the air. “It was a woman. Somehow, she figured out that Jessica filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Navy. Jackson says maybe. Let’s get through this day.”

“Well, folks. Thar she blows! On top of a flatbed,” Jackson said. Rodrigo thought was Jackson’s buoyancy was unusual.

Rodrigo turned to watch a cab and trailer negotiating a turn onto Colton's property. It pulled up leaving space with the parked cars. A marine team immediately stripped of a covering to expose the spacecraft.

"It … it's really dull. Like a big iron balloon, just as you said," Joe looked at Hanna, his mouth wide open. "But do you need all these personnel here," he asked Jackson.

"Captain Moreno commands this operation. I believe he is concerned about public interference."

There was a minute or two of anxious quiet as people walked around the vehicle. Hanna happily interrupted: "I can't wait to see it glow."

"My money's on that happening," Jackson added. "That's much of the hope and biggest reason the military let this happen.

"That would make so much worthwhile. You won't believe what we've done at the landing site."

Rodrigo looked at Jackson with a scowl. "Worthwhile? If the ship disappears and the Vice President approves of the follow-up plan, this will be a lot more than worthwhile."

Jackson's unyielding eyes were glued on Rodrigo without a word. The whole group was quiet.

"I did imagine it would be bigger," Jada blurted out, giving her husband a glare. "Like Joe said, it looks kind of ordinary… a big, dull ball." Then her eyes lit up. "But how does the thing get off the ground?"

"That's part of this experiment," Hanna happily joined in.

Colton walked toward the house. "Well folks, it's a little more than an hour and before sunset. I think we can all squeeze into my vehicle and get out to the site. I just need to grab a couple of things. Make sure yah have somethin warm."

“They can’t get the flatbed to the site – too many sharp turns – so a helicopter is going to fly it in from here,” Jackson remarked. “I’ll be along in a while.”

“Hey, Colton, what happened here?” Hanna asked, pointing some distance from the house.

“Well, the military guys brought in equipment. The first thing they did was grate the road. I stopped counting, but maybe a hundred big rigs brought in portable buildings, barriers and equipment. You’ll see. This is a big deal.”

“Do you miss the ruts and potholes?” Hanna asked with a chuckle.

“Okay! Have your fun.” Colton returned her grin. “I still plan to take you to the top of Katie’s Hill. You’ll see. With all those truckloads of stuff, we’ll have to get away from the original site to see much. Anyway, after the first good rain, this fancy new road will be toast.”

**

Underway, along the new road, Jada said, “I can see why that long trailer couldn’t negotiate these turns.”

“It would be tough. Maybe that trailer could make that last one,” Colton answered. “But they aren’t taking chances.”

Five minutes later Colton turned off the new road and headed overland through brush and trees. “Hope those belts are on,” he said. “I’m usually on Painter here, but the Bronco will get through, even with all this brush.

Soon, they stopped on top of Katie’s Hill.

“This is where you took that first video, isn’t it?” Jada said looking around.

“Take a looked down here,” Colton said walking to the edge of the flat area at the hill’s crest.

“Dos Mio! Now I’ve seen one live. And will you look at all the gear they’ve got down there,” she said.

“The pictures didn’t do them justice. Those aliens down there are even bigger and uglier.”

“That large pine,” Colton said pointing. “The one Rodrigo sampled at the start of this amazing journey. The platform next to it is where they’re going to put the ship.”

Trailers and other portable buildings had been shoe-horned in behind a grated earthen wall that looked to be five feet tall. “I’ll bet I see fifty uniforms down there, but it’s hard to see everything close to the site with those aliens.”

“One reason I brought you up here,” Colton said. “I didn’t think we’d see much down there.”

“I’ve got goosebumps. ‘I’m so excited,’” Hanna sang, shaking her arms rhythmically while lampooning the song.

“I still can’t believe this: were going to see it light up.” Jada said, looking around.

Rodrigo raised his hands, palms up with a questioning look.

“Maybe, someday, I’ll write a book about this experience with today as the ending,” Hanna added. “Of all the billions of people on earth, we get to be here and see it. It’s really hard to believe I’m here.”

Then Colton said, “Well I be. There he is! And another young lady with him.”

Jackson emerged through the trees after the hike up the hill with Megan Thompson.

“It’s more of a hike than it looks,” Jackson said, winded. He introduced Megan to the group. “Hanna and Rodrigo know this is the lady whose skill and insight helped make today happen. Without her research and calculations, I doubt the Pentagon would have approved giving up the alien craft.”

“I have no idea how calculations influenced this,” Jada started. “But all I will say is thank you. I feel awesome.” She walked over and hugged Megan.

“So, then, that statistics professor at George Washington must have confirmed your probabilities,” Rodrigo said.

“For sure,” Megan answered. “Professor Samuel even wrote the Vice President. She knows him well. Bottom line: releasing the spacecraft was the best chance we will likely have for decades to determine if wormholes exist,” She added, “assuming the thing actually takes flight. I’ll have to say that finally seeing it, I wasn’t impressed.”

“I didn’t know you decided the aliens used wormholes,” Rodrigo said.

“Sorry, my friend. I think they are the only possibility we know of that might allow this alien ship to travel faster than light speed. I agree with you that the likelihood is slim.”

“This dialogue has already gone way over my head,” Joe said. He turned and whispered to Hanna.

“Hey Jackson, I thought you were staying at Colton’s place until the helicopter arrived to move the vehicle?” Hanna questioned.

“No, I got a better offer and left that with Captain Moreno. We then checked out the new road in Megan’s rental.”

“You can barely see the tiny blue speck near the end of the carpark down there,” she said pointing. “Mercifully, I’m finally getting my breadth back.”

“So, Jackson,” Hanna started. Her tone echoing concern. “Before the sphere arrived in Davenport … what is it now, twenty-three or four months ago? Anyway, it caused a power outage that affected thousands of people in this area. Is all that equipment down there going to be useless?”

“No doubt some of it will be temporarily paralyzed if the same thing happens. But we have manual backup power and have taken as many precautions as possible.”

“I’m particularly interested in the tracking devices in the spacecraft,” Hanna said.

“There will likely be a bigger problem than power,” Megan broke in. “If the craft instantaneously attains superluminal speed relative to our position, communication will be delayed and, possibly, made impossible.”

“Can you give me more,” Hanna asked.

“It’s complicated,” Megan said, “as are all results from the equations underlying Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity. I will remind everyone, that there’s no precedent for what we hope will happen. Except, maybe the light show. Given the vast distance to HD-69234, the place we believe the aliens are from, it would take many lifetimes to make the journey, even if the craft can achieve lightspeed. Even getting the craft to that speed would be an accomplishment still far in the future for mankind.”

Faced with complete silence, she looked around, each face in turn. Megan’s expression was dead serious. “Even with the proven theories of brilliant humans over the years – Einstein, Newton and so many more – we are infants when it comes to the universe we are part of and, what it takes to traverse it.

“If they exist, wormholes could work as bridges between different parts of the universe to massively shorten travel times. It would take hours and a whiteboard for me to explain how that might work. But I will add that many knowledgeable scientists feel it’s unlikely that something like this craft could manage negotiating a wormhole. More than what I just said is impossible to explain to anyone without good training in math and General Relativity. Let me leave it with we don’t even know that wormholes really exist, much less how beings might go about finding useful ones and where you might go using them. It just seems impossible, given what we know.”

Megan looked around the small group again.

“So, back to Hanna’s astute question about communication.” Her eyes now sparkled. “If, no … when this experiment succeeds, the craft will disappear before our eyes. Then, we will get nothing from the equipment for some time, power loss or not. There are a multitude of problems that might affect communication. We have installed devices that will broadcast a simple navigation code once every picosecond until batteries quit. We installed four different kinds of technology. This is the weakest part of the experiment, so we need some luck. From the code we can calculate position. Still, signals may have to penetrate barriers to get to our receivers.”

“I get what you’re saying, Megan,” Hanna said. “But I for one, don’t have much of a background in science. So, I’m not seeing it.”

“Let me give you a simple example of one problem. Signals, radio waves, from our devices travel at the speed of light. We’ve coded signals in several favorable wavelengths to avoid interference. Still, if the craft moves faster than the signals at the speed of light, the first signal broadcast may take hours, days or weeks, and even years to get to our receivers. It depends on the speed of the craft relative to our position. If it passes through a wormhole, its speed might seem hugely faster than light relative to us. Then, the problem could be aggravated by insufficient signal intensity for it to get all the way here, or there may be physical barriers that block a signal’s path. Having said that, we’ve done some cleaver things to allow us to find the signals we are interested in,” Megan said.

“The military has tuned several of their more sensitive receiving devices into more probable places we might expect the spacecraft to pass through on the way,” Jackson added. “But even our little corner of the universe is an enormous place.”

“An understatement.” Rodrigo said. His voice trailed off.

His wife was watching him and walked over. “Bear, you’ve been quiet since we got here. I expected you to be over the moon. What’s going on?”

“I’m fine, dear.”

In the background they heard, “The video that Hanna captured of the hologram was very helpful once Sam and his NSA team once they started to translate their script,” Jackson said. “Anyway, signals the satellites receive won’t be affected by a power outage here.

“So, I think we’ve done as much as possible with the technology available.

“And look, here comes the spacecraft!” Jackson said, pointing. Soon, the helicopter’s growl filled the air as it slowly carried the alien orb toward the platform.

“Looks like they’re being very careful,” Jada said. “Almost impossibly slow and that ball is still swaying all over the place.”

“It’s hanging about fifty feet below the helicopter,” Jackson said. A crew of about a dozen marines moved to steer the sphere into position. They wrestled it onto the platform. Lowering and positioning the alien craft looked to go off without a hitch.

Twenty Minutes Later

“Sun’s get in mighty low,” Colton said. He glanced at his watch.

“Glad you warned me about a heavy jacket,” Megan said to Jackson. “I’m already cold.”

Hanna and Jada walked over to grab their winter coats out of the back of the Bronco.

“I’ve never felt temperature drop like this,” Hanna exclaimed while slipping on a full-length down coat. “What’s with all these tanks in the back.”

“Just in case,” Colton said.

That got some puzzled stares. He added knowledgeably, “Still too much sun. It might get tough to get enough oxygen later.”

“You talk like you know what will happen,” Megan said.

“Well, kind a do…” Colton answered respectfully. “I have some experience… and figure things might play out pretty much like that day when I made the video.”

“I haven’t actually heard thr story,” Joe said. He put his arm around Hanna.

Colton noticed Rodrigo behind the group say something to Jada and walk off into the trees.

“Well, that day it was get ‘in late, a nice summer afternoon. After supper,” Colton’s story started.

“So, why did it get so cold?” Jackson asked when he finished.

“Rodrigo and I talked it over last night. He called it, said, it was something like opening a window to the vacuum of deep space to it mix with the summer’s air. Oxygen was diluted. And the breath ‘in was hard… really hard. What did you call that Rodrigo?” he asked.

“He’s wandered off,” Jada said. She was standing by the trees about twenty feet from the group wrapping her long black hair into a ball and looking worried.

“Are you okay,” Hanna asked. There was no answer.

“Sounds like a portal, a space-time portal.” Megan put forward.

“What exactly is that?” Hanna asked.

“I guess the way I think of it is, it would be a dimensional hole connecting two things that shouldn’t be connected.”

“Goodness,” Hanna said. “You mean like I could step into a portal on earth and end up in outer space?”

“The truth is that the only portals we’ve shown to exist are in the earth’s magnetic field. This is a far cry from connecting a point on earth with the vacuum of outer space.”

“What’s that sound,” Jackson asked. “A low roar.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “It’s getting louder.

“Folks, I’d recommend we all climb into the Bronco. I think it’s going to get real cold, real fast,” was Colton’s admonition.

He started the engine and cranked the heater up to full blast.

Jada looked around franticly for her husband. “Rodrigo’s not here. Rodrigo!” She shrieked. “He should have been back by now.”

The temperature suddenly dropped and tiny chunks of stinging hail began pattering on the Broncos roof. Soon the ground was covered. Joe and Hanna raced into the vehicle.

Jada stood, oblivious to the cold and hail. She screamed again and began to stagger into the trees. “Please, Mrs. Avila, we must all get into the car,” Jackson said, gasping to breathe in cold, thin air. “Your husband is a hardy man,” Jackson said. He walked toward her. She moved away. He grabbed the back of her coat and pulled her toward the Bronco. “Everyone needs to get in the Bronco now.” He pushed her in the back seat and jumped in next to her.

Doors closed, the vehicle started to shake, and the sky lit up.

**

Rodrigo saw light glimmering at the still tightly closed midpoint of the spacecraft. Close to the alien sphere, alien calls had been echoing in his head unrelentingly. Colder and colder with each step down the hill, he zipped his winter coat up to cover his face over the mask. Hard breathing was not getting enough air. Sharp, stabbing pains in his chest and arm worried him. He was dizzy but pressed on.

Thought transference started as soon as the Bronco climbed Katie’s Hill. The high-pitched cries more intense at the hill’s top. The three pitches of the alien’s call dragged out slowly into remarkably clear syllables, “Rodrigo!”

Less than fifty yards short of the alien craft, the view was perfect. The glimmer coming from the orb's midpoint blazed. Over and again, he heard the shriek: "Rodrigo!" Each shrill call's impact a thump that made him cringe then stagger. Only trees filled he hill behind him. No one followed. The military camp, outside the buildings was empty of personnel and just a short sprint away. It looked to be easy to scurry over the wall to safety before all hell broke loose.

Aliens towered around the craft. Another piercing "Rodrigo!" made him fall to one knee. What the hell do they want? filled foggy consciousness as he righted himself. Why do they need me here?

There would never be another shot at this. Nobody else was close. His phone had documented the whole journey. He put it in his coat pocket and snapped the pocket shut.

Aliens had never just called him. What did they want? Was his head making this up?

Behind a tree near the camp, the barrier loomed. No one could be seen. They were safely inside buildings and trailers. He looked up at the ship, about twenty yards away. A large alien towered above him on the left. He took several steps toward the barrier but stopped.

Colder and colder, the air between him and the ship rippled. Like liquids mixing. Breathing fast and hard, he put on a second pair of gloves. Pulled his hat flaps over his ears and snapped them secure, then checked his mask and coat.

The air was so turbid, the ship, only feet away, was cloaked. Big breaths didn't have enough air. He was running out of vigor and time.

Oh shit, he thought. Last night Colton wanted to know about a portal. What might happen. He looked at the ship, barely visible just feet away. If a portal were to open it could easily suck both him and the ship into outer space to emerge maybe light years away. It would be quick anyway, was the thought.

His head had started to clear when a blast of light pushed him hard into a tree. Immediately in blackness he gasped, thinking the light was like wind. Something grabbed him as he fell and jerked him through the cold air. He crashed into something and cringed from pain, but it was warmer.

**

Sometime later, Rodrigo came to, buried under heavy scratchy coverings and surrounded by that wretched alien stench. His ribs ached like when the aliens picked him up that first time. Quickly tolerant of the reek, warm air was easier to breathe even though the mask was missing. He pushed away what felt like sticks and pieces of scratchy cardboard to turn over. Yards away, light flooded through an opening. He crawled and pushed his way through debris into biting cold, then sat still for a minute. Several big breaths no longer satisfied his lungs. His body throbbed.

His stomach churned, and he puked. Then sense slowly returned in the aftermath of the destructive climax. He poked his head out of wreckage. A thirty-foot-tall alien was now a pile of debris surrounding him. Only the black, pole-like stem remained upright. A severed alien tentacle was wrapped around one leg. A look around disclosed more piles of trash – dead aliens. The spacecraft and wooden platform were gone leaving nothing but wreckage. They're all dead! he thought.

Upright in the intense cold, he reached for his phone. One more shot, the remains, then a break for the compound wall. Unsteady legs took him toward the low wall around the military compound. A jog was quickly a slow stumble. Wheezing, it took his last strength to make it to the wall. He'd wanted to stop. That could be fatal.

Almost as tall as him, Rodrigo leaned on the barrier for a second. Catching his breath was not possible. He must go now.

He jumped. There was nothing to grab. His hands followed his body sliding down the embankment. The gloves came off one.

On his knees at the walls bottom, biting, thin air was drowning him. A knot in his left leg hurt like hell. He reached for the nonexistant spike through his calf. He couldn't concentrate.

He stood and ripped off the other gloves. Maybe without them he could grab something. This was it, he thought, life or death. He took two steps back and hurled his body against the wall. His hands grabbed for anything. His feet jerked trying to get traction. His body made it up the wall. His hands could touch the other side.

The air was cold and thin. His lungs burned as he fought and fought to pull his weight up. His fingernails dug into the dirt. Then the lights went out.

**

"Hey Sarge. Think I'm losing it … it looks like some guy trying to get over the wall just outside … Holy shit! The thermometer is bottomed out at minus 90 degrees. He was right there, the private said pointing out the window."

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When the Bronco stopped shaking, Jackson asked, "Am I the only one having trouble breathing?"

"No. It's hard for me too," Joe wheezed. "Like we're at the top of Everest."

"Me too," Hanna added, gasping, before she yelled, giddily, "But, but I got to see it … the thing lite up. The brilliance!

"Now this is just scary."

“Just before the spacecraft disappeared, there was an incredible second or two. Beautiful but blinding. The light had density. Like the air felt thick. My eyes closed, even though I didn’t want them to.

“Then, it was like a switch was turned off. Everything was jet black for maybe thirty seconds. I couldn’t even see Joe next to me.”

There was not a word from anyone else sitting there in awe.

“I strapped a camera on the roof that should have got some of the show,” Colton finally said.

“At least we got to see it,” Joe said. “What now?”

Jada pushed the door open and ran toward the trees. “Rodrigo!” was a low broken howl. She stopped and called out in every direction and began to walk down the hill. Jackson jumped out to grab her and push her back inside. He climbed in next to her and said, “It’s too cold to be out there. Your husband is a strong guy. Don’t worry. He’ll be okay. I’ll find him.”

Only then, did lights come on below and he noticed the space craft’s absence.

“Hey, Joe, think it’s time to break out some of those cylinders of oxygen behind you,” Colton said. “They were under the coats. Hand them out. That military guy, Captain Moreno, took care of us, just in case.”

“Are there breathing masks?” Jackson asked.

“Yup.” Colton said. Joe started pulling out the tubes and masks.

Jackson looked next to him. Jada was crumpled in the center of the back seat with tears streaming down her face. She bitterly pushed an oxygen mask away. “What did Rodrigo say to you when he left. Did he say where he was going?”

“No,” was her muffled roar. Her head came up, “He only told me he’d be back … the fucking liar. This time he may have succeeded.” A small asymmetric grin clashed with the deep sadness of her eyes.

Jackson pushed his head back into the restraint. Eyes wide open he could see wasted remnants of once towering aliens. He rested his head on the dashboard for seconds, hoping for inspiration. Rodrigo was indeed a strong and fit. He must have gone down to the aliens. Chasing a mystery. Could he really have survived?

It looked like the worst was over. He had oxygen that would give him a big advantage in a search for an honorable man that in a short time had gained as much respect as he had to give.

The only thing he was sure to find was cold.

Jackson put on a mask, strapped the cylinder around his waist, and opened his door before saying, “I’ll find Rodrigo. Stay safe in the vehicle.”

Jada said. “Please find him,” then put on a mask.

Jackson walked deliberately down the hill. He concentrated to not miss anything unusual – a stunned hawk, leaving the ground fifty yards to the left and footprints, no doubt Rodrigo’s, remaining in accumulations of hail. Still able to see the Bronco, he considered going back. It was already very cold in his winter uniform, even with a jacket. He’d been cold before. His pace was now a controlled rush. Soon piles of wreckage smoking in the cold appeared. Only black poles stood tall. The alien stench remained. He stumbled through what was left of tenacles before he stopped to survey the scene.

He moved around a pile of alien rubble stirring with a stick. Nothing. Oxygen was helping him fight off the cold. Shivering worried him. He must keep his mind clear. Afghanistan training emphasized the hazards of cold stress. He didn’t want confusion to win out. No mistakes.

The military compound was in sight. He was getting winded. Walking was harder. No trace of Rodrigo. What was left of an alien was not far from where the craft had been. It was only maybe 20 yards out of his way.

His pace slowed, he turned up the oxygen a little, hoping the tank would hold up. It seemed to take forever to reach the pile of wilted leaves. A black rectangular object got his attention. A phone laying on the ground. He picked it up.

A rare feeling, energy sliding away, scared him. Still, he stopped and carefully studied the surroundings. He then made a beeline toward the wall.

Halfway there, breathing got harder. Shit! The tank's empty, he thought The cold was taking him down. He'd waited too long.

He stumbled but made it to the wall. It seemed higher than he thought. Nothing to grab. With everything he had he jumped up onto his belly and was able to turn and roll over the wall, scrambling the whole way. He banged on the door of the closest building. The door cracked open. A hand came out to grab his coat and pull him inside. The door slammed shut.

"Ensign Morris, Sir," a young man said. Jackson noted his mask.

"Thank you, Ensign." Jackson bent over, hands on his knees for a while. "My tank is empty. Do you have more air?"

"Yes, Sir," the ensign said pointing to a table stacked with cylinders. Jackson walked over and plugged his mask into a full cylinder.

"Excuse me, Commander, but why the hell were you out there?"

"I was looking for a friend. A group of us took in the event from the top of the hill behind this compound. He vaguely pointed. The man I'm looking for got separated from the rest of us."

The tall, thin ensign's face deteriorated into a terrible grimace. The room's only other occupant, a chief petty officer said, "I don't think anyone could survive out there for long, Sir. We'd better get a work party together."

Jackson walked over to the Chief sitting next to a radio station. "What's this unit for Chief," he asked.

"It's one of the four posts monitoring the spacecraft, Sir."

"Anything yet."

"No, Sir." The Chief picked up the phone. "Hey, Marty, a Commander showed up here. He told us he was looking for a friend." His voice was full of incredulity.

"Commander Wahl," Jackson said.

"The Commander thinks there may be a casualty outside."

After a few seconds, he turned and said, "An E-9 friend over in operations said they took someone over to sick bay a while ago that was found outside. He was unresponsive."

Standing stilly for a second, Jackson said, "Where's Sick Bay Master Chief?"

"I don't think you want to go out there again, Sir."

"Come on, man, my civilian friend is the reason we're all here today."

The Master Chief got up and looked at a chart on the wall. "Okay, Sir. It's a short hike. Go right out the door. Then immediately right again. You'll come to a graveled road. It's the third building after you turn left."

Jackson grabbed another cylinder and ran out of the building. The Ensign shouted after him, "Take care, Sir," and closed the door.

**

Jackson walked quickly to the building containing the Sick Bay. Its door opened to a small room with an empty desk and two more doors. The first door he tried was locked. After a knock, the door cracked open. He could see was part of a face with eyes staring at him. “Yes, Sir, how can I help?”

“I’m told there’s an injured man here. He might be the person I’m looking for.”

“He’s next door.” The door closed.

As odd as the encounter seemed, Jackson opened the other door to reveal a man and a woman in scrubs that could be seen under buttoned white lab coats standing and talking near a blazing electric heater. Across the room was a gurney in a bay with a partially open curtain.

“Close the door, please,” the man said. “Why are you here?”

“Yes, doctor. Commander Jackson Wahl. I’m one of the organizers of this project.”

“Okay, Commander. But why are you here?” the woman sharply asked.

“I’m looking for a coworker, Rodrigo Avila. He disappeared during what just occurred. I was told you have a casualty here.”

She walked over to a table and picked up a wallet. “Yes, this man’s name is Rodrigo Avila,” she said.

“Is Rodrigo … is he okay.”

“He’s alive,” the doctor said, “but in bad shape.”

A nervous Jackson asked, “Will he make it?”

The man said, “We’re just getting started with him. When you came in, we were discussing how to proceed. He’s unresponsive and damaged with frostbite. So, I can’t say.”

The woman picked up, “Take a seat,” pointing to a folding chair not far from the heater. “We need some time to get fluids started, clean him up, and assess the damage. His body temperature is dangerously low.”

Jackson sat then took out his phone.

**

Jackson spotted Jada standing outside a building where food and drinks were available in her tan down coat. The temperature had warmed to near freezing outdoors. As he approached, she looked like shit and stumbled walking toward him. “It’s a short walk to where Rodrigo is,” he said. “You don’t look well.”

“I can make it.” They walked without a word. Jackson stayed close. At the door, she turned and said, “I’d like to talk to my husband alone. I’ll meet you back at the canteen.”

He walked away.

**

A dozen attempts to scale the wall reran through Rodrigo’s paralysis. Each attempt ended in the same way. His body slid back down the dirt embankment, small rocks and gravel painfully digging in. Hands and fingers bloody, he rested each time until he had enough strength to try again.

He stood for one more attempt. This was it. At the top of the wall was Jada, her long, black hair glistening against a white dress that hugged her shapely body. She extended a hand. He reached to grab it. She helped pull him to the top of the barrier. He hugged her ferociously covering her with dirt, rocks, and blood. Nothing mattered. Safe in her arms. he kissed her single-mindedly until his eyes opened. He started to shut them and return to this obsession but caught a glimpse of Jada sitting in a chair on the other side of a room. She stood.

“Welcome back Mr. Avila.” A woman’s face directly above him said.

This wasn’t Jada. He tried to get a better look. It hurt. Then he tried to lift a hand. It trembled. No sound came out when he wanted to call his wife’s name. He was hot. Bandages interfered with vision. Cold air was rushing into his nose. The woman above him was now busy dressing his right arm and hand.

He hear steps nearby and tried to change position. His eyes stayed frozen on this woman above him. “Let’s take this slow, Mr. Avila,” she said with a compassionate smile. “It’s a good thing a private saw you out there. You’ve suffered a bad bout of hypothermia and major frostbite.”

The nurse was checking his vitals. “Your blood pressure has come up. A good sign.

“Your wife is here,” he heard. He was starting to feel more with it.

The nurse continued to work before, he heard, “I need to make notes,” and she disappeared. He felt loopy, and so much to talk about was sloshing around in his brain. Another package had started to unravel. The aliens … he knew why they were here. Maybe that’s why they called him. They’re all dead, but … Everyone needs to know.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jada. It still hurt to turn his head. After seconds concentrating, some words came out. “Who … who found me?”

“Jackson,” he heard.

“You sound worried … I’ll get pa, past this … before, before you know it.”

He tried to smile without a response.

“I screwed up again,” he slowly came out. Jada said nothing. A sour face was enough of a reply. “Is Jackson here?” He tried to say more but there was no energy.

She turned and took a couple of steps. All he could see now was that splendid backside.

**

Jada quietly stood out of the way for minutes while the nurse cleaned and bandaged him. After she left the room. Jada looked away. Gradually feelings began to flow. “I committed my life to a man I loved and respected,” she started as a whimper. She took a breath. Her voice swelled. “This diabolical witchery that has come over you… Aliens so important – to the point that nothing else matters. After I’ve given you my faith and love for thirty years.

“I’ve asked you to be careful. You haven’t. I’ve helped you get through the effects of your blunders. Each time you’ve taken another irrational chance.”

Those last words shouted, she stood in silence. No more came.

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Seeing only her back, Rodrigo could tell she was angry. Decades of unpleasant conversations told him more was coming. She finally turned to look at him. Her face was blazing. Her eyes, those once beautiful black eyes, he could not recognize. Now unmoving holes as if any trace of humanity was gone, blacker than the darkest of nights, they were sucking the remaining life out of him. Stains of dried tears ran over craggy valleys in her once velvety smooth skin. Her face was like the surface of some yet to be discovered alien planet out of a horror film.

Concentration on a person he’d never seen broke when she began to speak again. “I was so excited today,” her voice was now quiet, even patient. “I thought this matinee in your life was ending and that I’d contributed. Helped you and Hanna make something out of this screw-loose alien mess. That I’d get you back.” Intense sadness had replaced the patience in her voice.

“Then, another dumb stunt – the most wicked of declarations – you tried to get yourself killed, again. What a stupid asshole the reliable man I once knew has become … This time I sat

there, crammed between bodies in that Bronco, certain you had finally managed to do it. I was unable to breathe.

"I was convinced you'd left me behind. A fifty-nine-year-old woman whose done nothing but love you. Left me alone for the rest of my life because you've become enchanted with aliens. I wanted to die too."

She turned to face the door again and took one step. "I don't think I will ever be able to stop loving you. But – God damn you – I've had enough!"

When Jada got to the door, she turned to say, "I hope you enjoy the rest of your adventures," and walked out.

One Week Later

Her knock on the front door brought no response. Hanna hadn't seen or heard from Rodrigo since she and Joe left Wyoming. She walked around the side of his house and spotted him in his favorite deck chair staring beyond the backyard fence. His computer and phone were uncharacteristically absent.

She had searched him out in Wyoming after hearing he'd been hurt. Found a ruined Rodrigo. An unbelievable mess, even though few effects of frostbite were visible. He'd never moved on the gurney. She reached for his hand, "Don't touch him," a stressed-out nurse barked.

Hanna pulled up a chair then talked nonstop about what they'd seen up on Katie's Hill to a lifeless-looking man while the nurse systematically removed bandages to tend to his wounds. I'd been impossible to tell if a word registered. Finally, his head turned, and eyes opened. She had smiled glad he'd come around. The anguish in those eyes terrified her.

Petrified, she stood there until he finally uttered, "Jada's left me," and his eyes closed. That was the last of her Roomie she'd seen.

The more she thought about the power of those moments. The more she worried he might hurt himself the longer she went without any word from him. Noway she could ignore the dreadful state of a person she'd come to love. She tried to talk to Jada who never picked up. It took days to get the nerve up to call Rodrigo. Grateful he answered, she asked to visit. He was short on the phone. Never said yes.

With no response to the doorbell, Hanna tried the knob. It was locked. She felt creepy walking around the side of the house but wasn't going to be ignored. She'd walked up the steps, stopping just feet from his chair. His arms and legs shuffled. He looked like a dreaming dog with eyes wide open. She wasn't sure those eyes detected her presence.

Hanna stared for a while. Took in his whole terrible presence. What was going on made no sense.

With more time she cautiously said, "Hi, there."

"Hanna, oh God, you're here!" Rodrigo exclaimed. He took several hard breaths.

She warily sized up the setting and asked, "And, Jada?"

A flash of anger came over his face. He banged a fist on the chair's arm. "No, damn it, she's not. Never answered calls," his voice got louder. "Texts, emails … she doesn't give a shit about me!"

His head collapsed into his lap. Pressure eased after a minute, he sat up and said, "I'm beyond lost without her. You didn't need that. Sorry I behaved badly. I'm an emotional mess."

Hanna didn't say a word for a while, then, "Well, Roomie, you certainly look like crap."

"Yup … I feel that way too. The anti-clotting medicine on top of the Norco for pain has ruined my guts. I don't eat much because of the symptoms."

Hanna grimaced then stood there awkwardly for a while. He sporadically glanced her way. Never offered her a seat. She walked into the kitchen to take a break and grabbed some water. She was able to sit on a wooden stool. His glance her way caused open palms came up. “Come on, Roomie, you know why I’m here…. Why did you do it, anyway?”

She’d asked to come over and talk about what happened in Wyoming when she called. He gave her some line that the phone might be bugged.

After more time, she caught his eyes. He didn’t look away. “The aliens – they called me!”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she asked. He turned his head away.

She pulled her seat over by his footstool. She could touch him. “You know I love Jada to death..” Anger was blooming in her. He was being a jerk. “You lost your wife because of a thoughtless act. She’s a fine, beautiful person. I’m having a real hard time understanding.”

“Yup, and I also made you to take off work to talk about this! The rash things I do are mount in up … So, have you talked to her?”

Hanna didn’t answer. Just sat there feeling repulsed. Maybe she could get an answer to her question about why he did it later. If there was a later?

After another stubborn minute, she said, “Okay, are you going to recover from all the frostbite? You still look like crap.”

Rodrigo’s face turned away again. Squinting eyes still on her. His lips tightly closed; the frown looked way past angry – unbecomingly gross. She got up and took a step backwards. After some time, he said, “Dr. Lee said I’ll probably lose these two fingers.” He held out his right hand. The two smallest fingers were covered with black blisters. “It hurts like hell even with the opiates. But I’ll recover from the other stuff,” he said pointing at a red, swollen ear. His left hand was wrapped. I had on heavy boots and a mask. My feet did okay. “There will be scars.”

Hanna grimaced again. “What about that alien package you thought was so important?”

Rodrigo’s facial features tightened again. He got up to hobble away and then took a big breath. “Hanna, I’m sorry I’m so ugly. Just can’t seem to help myself much of the time. It’s like something changed. I’m always angry.

“I can’t get any of it. What’s in the damn package, I mean. It’s like I need them to remember it.”

“It’s only a week or so,” she said.

“God damnit!” he shouted. “I’ve felt wounded since alertness came back … and angry since that alien saved me in Wyoming. It’d been better if I died. Something’s different, and I mean really different.”

Hanna stood shocked while she watched him shuffle around like he was trying to get comfortable.

“At first, I thought it was Jada leaving. But it’s more than that… like I’m looking in at myself from outside. And I don’t like what I see.”

Wondering what that meant, she asked, “You feel different – okay. Are you going to do anything about it?”

He gave her a hard look and said, “What can I do?” There was a sneer on his mug. “Maybe it would have been best if the alien didn’t save me.”

“Okay, Roomie, I think I should leave. I’m going to say what I’m thinking… Being here with you was unpleasant, at best.”

He looked surprised then his eyes fell to the floor. “I am sorry I’ve behaved badly … especially with you. Jackson set me up with this military telepathy guy I met a month ago. I have

to drive to D.C. to see him on Sunday. He was a friendly enough guy who's had to face a lot of adversity in his work with thought transference and might be able to help."

Rodrigo looked at her kindly. "I don't think I can change what's going on with me. Much of the time When I wake up, I have to negotiate a dense fog. My brain doesn't work like it used to…

"I'm unable to manage life normally – the way I once did. Yet, I've noticed things have opened up that I'm still working to take advantage of."

She gave him a quizzical look. Then thought of the stench in his kitchen when she walked in. Very unlike Rodrigo.

"Right now it feels like much of the world has been out of focus all my life as I went about living normally." Emphasis of the word normally got her attention. "Maybe that's why I was always looking for challenges like the Wyoming incident. Factors that had played minor roles are becoming important." Rodrigo picked up a book laying on the table by his chair. Here's a recently published bestseller. I had a hard time putting it down, yesterday. Took my mind off all the shit.

"Finished it early this morning. A great story well told. Since I got back, I've spent a good part of each day reading fiction. Before this change, I rarely read anything but technical books and articles."

Hanna liked traces of her roomie in the man that was talking to her now.

"The beauty of the forest beyond that fence," he said pointing. "My mind drills down. I haven't taken full advantage yet. Nature's beauty is like artwork. When you got here, I was thinking what I want most in the world is to sit here for the rest of my life appreciating and understanding nature. In the old days, that kind of thought would cause me to scold myself."

Now he was making her uncomfortable again. “Have you heard about the spacecraft?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“Oh yah, that alien ship.”

She was shocked by his tone’s disinterest. But decided to try to engage him one last time. “Well, another signal came in maybe an hour before Joe and I left for the airport. Jackson said that based on the elapsed time and the coordinates received, the spacecraft had achieved superluminal speed.”

“Jackson said…” Rodrigo repeated with disdain. “Sorry. I know everyone put a lot of themselves into this. There always seemed to me to be only two possibilities. One is that the craft left through a space-time portal and instantly arrived at an altered location from which it took the radio signal traveling at light speed a long time to get here. The second is too complicated to explain.”

“Come on, Roomie, I’d like to hear,” she said concerned she’d never heard such arrogance in his voice.

“Hanna, I don’t want to think that hard right now.”

Disappointed, she got up to leave but turned and walked over to Rodrigo. She gave him a warm hug.

A minute later she closed her car’s door. Rodrigo had warmed up to her being there – a little. Still, much of the conversation left her worried. He did seem different. That relaxed, happy man she loved working with was like hugging a limp rag. She felt like her being there bothered him at times. Taking him away from what he really wanted to do. Maybe there was a window to help get her roomie back. She wasn’t sure she had the fortitude to take it on.

At least he exposed himself. She hoped that Sunday’s visit would help get her friend back.

**

Rodrigo woke. His head was hanging over the bed's edge. The back of one hand was resting on the floor. 'Shit! The swaying dream again. His stomach boiled. Much more bobbing around and my head would have hit the floor.' He had to get up. With the insane alien melody still buzzing, he woozily looked around and climbed out of bed.

The third morning this had happened since the Wyoming trip, he walked around the house aimlessly to work it off. When the melody quieted, he ended up in the bedroom again. Being upright and moving made him feel better. He stared in the dresser mirror wishing he looked better. 'I've got to get mov in' to make D.C. on time. That guy Turnbull was a straight talker.' Rodrigo liked that. Maybe there'd be no B.S.

Pulling on clothes, he remembered how pissed Jackson's attitude made him when they talked about what he'd got from the aliens. Jackson wasn't happy that he couldn't recall what was in the alien package. He also didn't much care for Rodrigo's harsh attitude.

At the time Rodrigo couldn't help saying some offensive things. I had to get it out! he thought. Jackson just gave him unkind glares.

Jackson didn't want to hear that the experience had changed him, the weasel. Rodrigo knew Jackson wasn't buying it. "The arrogance of the young," he shouted. Jackson even defended that narcissist Lang. No, no… Lang was a flaming asshole.

When he suggested that maybe the military could have done a better job keeping the Colonel under control, Jackson took offense. "You know Rodrigo, you wouldn't be here if it weren't for me and the military men who found you." Say this better.

Rodrigo was looking at Jada's hairbrushes neatly lined up on her dresser. All the damage from Wyoming came together. He picked one up, turned, and threw it with as hard as he could against the adjacent wall. Then he stood and stared for the longest time.

Anger with Jada and Jackson and the whole fucking situation he'd got himself into. He walked over and put his finger in what looked like a bullet hole in the wall. He grinned. 'Yup, I'd like to see a hole like this in the Colonel. He was still staring a minute later. All the recent mayhem coursing through his head.

'Even though Lang was an ugly narcissist, he had little to do with your problems old man.' Jada was right. Hanna too. She's not big-headed like Jackson. And the aliens might not be able to regenerate themselves in the spring…. Even if they did come back, so what. It will take them several lifetimes to usurp the earth.

Rodrigo decided it was time to get to the bottom this. Being a little late getting to D.C. would be small price. Maybe it would help.

He brewed a cup of strong coffee and sat in his chair outside.

This mess – because most of what he remembered from the final package he'd already figured out – was all a bunch of bullshit anyway. The problems were: Jackson had lost confidence in him. Jada got tired of his stunts. He behaved badly and might not see Hanna again. Why should he remember much, anyway, after what happened? Yeah, he'd changed. Yes, it was his fault. But no one really wanted to hear about that or the real truth: worrying about emotions – being polite, respectful and patient – all that shit just clouded truth. The aliens had it right. What happened was the way it was. You have to live with it as best you can. His pulse was pounding.

He leaned back and tried to calm down. Maybe he could talk Jada into coming back. But where was she. No one seemed to know or wanted to say. It had been a week… his bet was she

was at Ava's house… fifteen hundred miles away. A first step, then, was to drive to El Paso and see if her car was there. She didn't take much stuff. But that would have to be after D.C.

I don't want to do it anyway, he thought. It'd take too much fucking energy. I like just sitting here.

Damnit! Everything is so screwed. Worst of all, me. Two hours to D.C. If I feel up to that either… I've got to get out of here. Don't need to get more rattled.

He opened the door to the rental and sat, looked around the car and fidgeted with a few things. "This piece of shit is no Gabriella," he bellowed. "I lost the things in that old life that were important to me. Jada was right. I let the aliens run my life into a fuck 'in hole."

His hands gripped the wheel tighter and tighter, and he pushed himself hard back in the seat and screamed again. "I'll never get this alien shit out of my head!"

No wife, work, no friends, or worries. The alien way.

He pushed the door open. "Come on old man," he said looking in the mirror. "You'd have Jada back in a second.

"Yeah, Seleron stuck me in a job that's anything but exciting, he mumbled.

He bolted back in the seat, again. They would have let me go… put the old man out to pasture. Because of my big salary but Morgan twisted arms. They kept me on doing routine work that didn't turn me on… something, I guess. Working with Hanna helped. A good gal. I didn't mind that job so much with her around. I really miss that part of my old life.

He squinted. Saw that stubborn image again – his beautiful wife's body slowly moving so gracefully toward the exit at the airport before everything went downhill. Then, she turned and called to him.

His fist banged the dashboard. It hurt. Everything is so fucking screwed … wacked way out, he thought. Rodrigo's head collapsed onto the wheel. He wept.

**

Rodrigo's head was still spinning with disturbed thoughts of his beautiful wife when he pulled onto I 95. She's always taken her own path. He'd had to temper his needs – keeping his mind full and up to date – to suit her.

To drive safely through alien fog polluting his alertness he tried to concentrate. It took a while to settle down, relax and be more comfortable on the road. He pulled out of the right into the center lane. Soon his mind wander to what Hanna was doing. Sunday, he thought, she and Joe are probably at a Phillies game if the team was in town. All that other shit aside, she seemed to be the only one to remain steadfast. She even kinda accepted what was going on now.

So much to learn – fresh out of school and, then dumped into the mine field of government regulations at Seleron. She was a worthy person. He felt bad he'd treated her poorly. Maybe she and Joe did something else fun in town. "Fun!" he yelled out loud and shook his head.

"Why is she worthy," he deliberated distinctly as he passed the Wilmington exit. Once she started, his job at Seleron was more relaxed. It wasn't so bad after her… only boring.

His thoughts went back five years. The new job, after Invention in Chemistry, was straightforward and routine. Invention was dumped as Seleron changed direction. The board had clearly decided that developing and registering new products was too expensive. Morgan stood up for me. he thought. I would have been on the street like the rest of the chemistry staff if my friend hadn't thrown his weight behind a job for me.

Everyone knew the problem. Shareholders were at the top of the list for the Seleron board's attention. The staff who invented new products and kept things on an even keel were mostly in cost centers that required money but didn't generate income.

Holy shit, he thought for a thousandth time. Seleron would have fired me. The man who invented one of the biggest money-making products they've ever introduced. The antifungal paint additive that was used by all the top brands. Anger grew, again.

They might have given me some fancy severance package. Still, fire the man who gave the 2002 Geneva best new product address! The International Paint Manufacturers Association would have screamed.

Rodrigo punched the dash. Hurt his hand again. He began shaking bad enough to pull off the road.

After a minute or two brooding, a Maryland State Trooper pulled up behind him. Now I have to deal with this bozo! was another thought.

"Good morning, Sir. Everything okay?"

"Yes, Officer… I got angry about something and pulled off to settle down."

"It looks like you've been injured," the Trooper said. "Where are you headed."

"I'm getting better, thanks. I'm on my way to D.C. to meet with a colleague."

"Well, this is not a great place to park. Why don't you be on your way."

Rodrigo did as the officer asked. He did not follow him onto the highway. After a while he stopped watching the rearview mirror.

The aliens probably didn't intend to change me. How could they know what this mysterious machine on the top of my body would do to adapt to their input, was another thought.

He glanced in the rearview mirror. Still no evidence of police.

But I can't keep my mind off aline bullshit, he thought and banged the car's dash, again. They knew exactly what they were doing. They've made you more gullible too. Still upset, he decided to stop again for a minute at a rest stop.

With a hot cup of coffee, he was on the road again. The coffee hit the spot. He began to chill. Window down, cool autum air saturated his lungs. It felt food. Rodrigo felt the fog lifting.

His phone rang! His hand flew to grab the phone. Maybe it was Jada.The coffee went everywhere.

"Oh shit," he yelled. "What a mess."

He corrected as the car nudged into the next lane. "That's what those damn aliens gave me. A good cup of coffee with no cup. A nightmare of all over everything and of everything. This whole thing's bogus and my life is a mess. All they wanted is their fuck 'in roots in earth's dirt. Suck the life out of our planet. I thought I was special, and I played into their hands.

His grip tightened on the wheel. Rodrigo pushed himself back into his seat.

It took more minutes before he saw the D.C. fifteen miles sign. Turnbull seemed to be a good guy whose been through a lot of taxing stuff. He hoped this awful trip had been worthwhile.

**

Rodrigo parked behind the clapboard two story on 16th Street. He was greeted at the rear door by the same marine and procedure. This time the marine asked him to climb stairs to the second floor that ended at a small platform with a door. He knocked and was greeted by Jackson.

They shook hands. Jackson's was cold. His business-like greeting left a bad taste in Rodrigo's mouth. But, behind him, details of the richly furnished apartment pulled his attention away from Jackson.

Jeff Turnbull was sitting in a large and padded wooden chair on the other side of the room. “Jeff wanted to meet here,” Jackson noted. Rodrigo stepped in.

“Welcome, Rodrigo,” was Turnbull’s friendly greeting. “Hope you don’t mind meeting in my home. It will be much more comfortable for me. I sent Maya to do some shopping. We are alone.”

Rodrigo’s perception of the difference between Jackson’s formal reception and the warmth of Turnbull sank in. He looked around without a word again wondering what he did to make Jackson this unhappy. The endless layers of human interactions versus the aliens open thought pool filled his mind. He was going to have to choose where to put the rest of his life.

Details of the colorful surroundings danced before him until Turnbull motioned him toward a nearby chair.

“I’ll excuse myself,” Jackson said. “I’ll be in the office downstairs.”

The formality, as if he had been attending to something unimportant, made Rodrigo know he was ancient history.

“How are you feeling, Rodrigo,” Turnbull asked. His distorted face’s attempt at a smile was another counterpoint to the man closing the door.

“I’ve been better, thank you.”

“Your burns look uncomfortable. Frostbite is no fun. If you need it, there’s a restroom over there,” Turnbull elaborated. raising one arm with difficulty to point at a door near the entrance. “And there’s water on the table. I’d just as soon not get up. Not a great day for me either.”

The drive, Jackson’s cool behavior, and the Marine’s routine had left Rodrigo fed up with the military. He concentrated on this helpful man but shifted again to the alien-way as preferable. I’ll let this visit with Turnbull play out before giving up, he thought.

With all the turmoil on the drive, Rodrigo hadn't stopped thinking that Turnbull could get into his head without him being aware. "Are you checking me out now?"

"Yes. Sorry but you are an open book. A few minutes ago, I backed off a little because all I got was confusion and a profound sense of misery. Maybe you want to tell me what happened in Wyoming. Jackson only said there was some chaos, and you were injured."

Rodrigo couldn't help glare for seconds. "I guess that's as good a way as any to describe it and avoid detail. I will add that something unsettling happened."

"Unsettling?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I'm not the same human being I used to be."

Their eyes locked. Turnbull was searching. "People who know me well seem put off with the way I act … but, you probably know I don't give a shit. I almost said that I don't understand it, but you got the truth. One thing I learned from the aliens is that all this crap we humans do to make others feel better just gets in the way."

He could see he had Turnbull's attention. His good eye was blinking rapidly. "I'm seeing you truly believe what you just said. This is a decided change in your frame of mind from what I remember the last time we talked.

"I also sense you think those aliens are involved.

"Wait! Something has made you angry. It doesn't involve aliens. Yes, this is age-old. You're not happy with your work situation. But there is more, much more.

"Oh, you recently saw a neurologist. The results disturbed you."

Rodrigo could tell Turnbull was probably avoiding his problem with Jada.

“Dr. Mason… He saw changes from normal in my brain after my early contacts with aliens. At my wife’s urging, I saw him again a month ago. He did more tests. But I haven’t heard from him yet.

“That bothered me. But something much more significant was going on. I don’t think you can see it… and I’m not sure I want to know what you think.”

**

Hanna sat parked in front of Rodrigo’s house. She was worried. Hadn’t heard from him since his D.C. visit last Sunday. It must have gone badly. Texts and emails had not produced a response. But that seemed to be the new standard. She called for a second time before driving over without an answer.

She sat there anxious and frustrated. Didn’t really want to find out what was inside the house.

Standing at his door, the bell didn’t get an answer. After a minute she tried the door. Pushed it open. He was sitting in his chair across the room and glanced her way.

“Well, Hanna,” Rodrigo said. He looked down and out. She’d never seen this meticulous man sloppy before these last two visits. His slacks were wrinkled – looked like he’d slept in them. His feet were bare, and he had on a well-worn undershirt. Not the man she thought she knew.

Hanna forced a question. “Did you meet up with that defense telepath?”

It dawned on him that he wasn’t supposed to talk about Turnbull… Oh, well.

“Yeah, but nothing came out of it. He was enjoyable enough to talk to. And did underscore a problem. But I had to drive that miserable tin-can rental out in the driveway to D.C. and back.” His eyes were glued to something in his hands.

Maybe a minute passed without him looking her way before she said, “Have you done anything to find another Gabriella?” she asked.

Without an answer, she asked, “Mind if I grab a glass of water.”

“No worry. I don’t seem to get to anything these days.”

Hanna came back from the kitchen with water. She saw he was holding an old picture of Jada and him. “So, is the package unwrapped?”

He set the picture down. “Well, yeah! But I don’t know what they want … Jackson and the Telepath were expecting some great new revelation, I think. Answers to questions like, how did the universe really begin or, where else we can go to find life. But the only things I could tell them they’d heard before.

“So, what do you want, Hanna?”

With no answer to his contemptuous question, he raised his head with an exceptionally earnest look. “You know, when you and I started this thing, together, neither of us had a clue where it might go. Then, you ended up getting so sick and…. now, I’ve joined them.”

A frightened look spread over her. “Joined them,” she gasped. “What about all the great things we did together.”

He didn’t respond.

Then, “Come on, Roomie, get serious,” came out in an unforgiving voice.

“I am.” Rodrigo’s eyes locked on her. He stood before a fiendish look came over him, and he began to shake. He fell back into the chair. His head bent further backward at an impossible angle. It moved side to side.

He slowly began to spit out something, “Ah, ah, I went to Dr. Mason’s office yesterday. No appointment. Just had to do it. Barged past his secretary. She called the police. But I had five minutes.

“The aliens have rearranged my brain. Mason couldn’t make most of it out, but the whole structure is different from the last time he saw me. The segments are all there, just different sizes and places. Some parts have grown and pushed others around. Anyway, part of the midsection, the part he made a big deal out of what looked to be small changes after the accident a year ago, had swelled a lot.”

Hanna’s felt like she could have been looking at a ghost. “Roomie, you … you’re scaring the hell out of me.”

“No need to worry. My alien-self tells me whatever has happened, happened. There’s no going back unless they can rig me into one of their A.I. run ships and take me back to an earlier time. Jackson didn’t believe me when I suggested that was how they got around. It’s what they do.”

He let out a little chuckle. The chuckle soon was a laugh that got louder and louder. She couldn’t believe what she was happening. He suddenly was a fiend.

She was frightened. Started to push he way out of her chair. Still sitting she said, “That wasn’t very amusing.”

He ignored the comment. “I don’t sleep much anymore. Just kind of sway in bed thinking crazy stuff over and again. Stuff like whether or not the sun will rise. And how many apples were on that tree. The one that old dead man, my grandpa, grew. Once even planned the best way to murder Colonel Lang to give him the most pain and me the most pleasure.”

He got up and stepped toward her. His face ended up close to hers. “Hanna, I think about you a lot. You may be the only person I can tolerate… but I’m still crazy.”

She put her hands up. “Now you are scaring me.”

He turned around and walked away. “I can’t help myself. The alien packages not only contained information. They changed the way I see the world. I’m part alien now.”

“I’m not buying that?” she said. “For some perverse reason, you are trying to scare me, aren’t you?”

He gave her a harsh look. “I once liked Jackson and, maybe, he saved my life. I respected him for not putting you and me into some box. I was wrong. When I look back now, there’s no time for his self-serving military way of fitting everything into a proper place.”

“What about me?” Her eyes narrowed. “You said you can tolerate me.”

“I really don’t like anyone, but you don’t disgust me like most people. You’re listening to me, aren’t you? That old Rodrigo… he was pathetic in so many ways.”

Hanna got up and stomped off out of the house. She started to drive away but screeched to a stop then parked again just down the street. She knew something was very wrong with her friend. This was not the time to leave him alone. He needed help.

She walked back into Rodrigo’s front door and pushed it open. “You are right,” got his attention. He was already back in his chair with his feet up. “We’ve gone through this together, and it’s been quite a ride. You are still a person I care about!”

Rodrigo’s head came up. The anger had disappeared.

“I’ve already said I loved working with my old roommate. I won’t let you trash that image. And it’s much more… all those experiences we’ve had. All those brews we shared. I’m not sure what I feel, but you won’t get rid of me. I can’t walk away from you now without a fight to get my Roomie back.”

There was a prolonged pause before Rodrigo said anything. “Sometimes these alien instincts go away. Then I momentarily feel preposterous. No, I know I’m fucking insane,” he stopped for a second. “When I get going, it’s part of me… or to be accurate, I’m one of them.

“Jada will never come back,” he said. His words tailed off.

Tears unexpectedly ran down his cheeks.

Hanna couldn’t help turning and wiping her eyes. After a minute, she said, “What can I do to help?”

“Stay away. I’m poison. What if this is catching?”

“I’ll take that chance.”

Rodrigo looked surprised.

After a while Hanna said, “An idea … Niki told me early in her new job that Temple University has a good Ph.D. program in psychology. She knows what we’ve been through. I could see if she could get a recommendation. Someone you can talk to. Just talk with. Maybe someone who could help with this.”

“Ha, ha. Your sister is loony anyway,” he said as his face changed again.

“Niki just likes to laugh and have a good time,” Hanna said, grimacing again.

“Anyway, they’d have to put me in a strait jacket and beat me to get me to talk to anyone other than you about this.”

“Rodrigo, it might be possible that the right person could help!” she roared.

“I don’t care!” he yelled back. “I just want to be left alone. This shit will eventually go away like windblown dust.”

They stared for a while, before an ugly smile came over him, and Rodrigo said, “Until the aliens grow back from their roots next spring.” Hanna felt life’s joy leave her. **The End**