

The Alex Cave Series Book 4

GRAVITY

Chapter 1

BUFORD GLACIER, ICELAND:

A distant noise caused Baltistan Nilsson to look up from his equipment on the northern edge of the glacier. He was taking readings on the rate of calving, using a small quad copter with a built-in video camera. He stared in the direction of the sound, but all he could see on the other side of an ice ridge, was a large vertical white cloud, against the sky blue background.

What in God's name was that, he thought. He climbed to the top of the ridge separating him from the steam plumes. An ominous glow reflected sporadically from his sunglasses while he peered over the ridge. His eyes widened and his jaw sagged in disbelief, and he realized no one would believe this without a video recording. He quickly turned the copter in the direction of the steam cloud.

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MONTANA STATE COLLEGE, BOZEMAN:

Alex Cave sat on the edge of his old wooden desk, gazing out over his second year geophysics students. Each year the faces changed, yet the material remained much the same, with repetitive lectures, repetitive tests, and repetitive performance. He grimaced, wondering silently about his chosen profession at the College. He loved the subject, and teaching paid the bills, but even with the occasional field trips to interesting formations, the work was becoming all too boring. He felt like a caged animal performing the same trick repeatedly. He would do the occasional odd job for the Director of National Security, but *occasional* was the optimal word.

He looked up at the clock, and felt a sense of relief. In a few more minutes, his classes would end for the summer. When he heard a knock on the door, he turned to look. A man in a US Postal Service uniform was standing on the other side, and he walked over to find out what he wanted. "Yes?"

The man held out an envelope. "Sorry to bother you, Professor Cave, but I need your signature."

Alex signed for the letter and read the return address. It was from Reykjavík, Iceland, with *Urgent* written in red letters. "Thanks."

The bell rang, and Alex looked at his students. "Have a great summer, everyone."

He stepped aside while they left his classroom, and then sat at his desk to grab a letter opener. Inside the envelope were a round trip airline ticket from New York to Iceland, and a single page note.

"Hello, Alex. I'm Jeffery Sliven, the Director of the Nordic Volcanological Center, and I need your help with an unusual geologic discovery. I must maintain secrecy, so only a few scientists are invited. Here is the time and date. I know this is short notice, but your expertise would be greatly appreciated. Sincerely, Jeffery."

Alex felt a small adrenalin rush, thinking about the potential for a new challenge in a place that he had never been. He called the airport and managed to get a connecting flight to New

York, but it would leave in two hour. He tucked the envelope into his briefcase, and headed for the door.

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Alex drove into the driveway on his small ranch, and parked next to his girlfriend's SUV. When he climbed out, he heard a familiar giggle, and smiled. Halona, Fala's eight-year-old daughter, was playing tug of war with his dog, Barney. When Alex knelt down, Barney let go of the thick rope, causing Halona to fall on her butt. She laughed and jumped up, running after his huge dog. They both stopped in front of him, and Alex ran his hand through Barney's thick mane. "How ya doing, big fella?"

Halona smiled and held the rope out for her friend to see. "I won, Alex."

Alex grinned, swept her up onto his arm, and stood. "I saw that. You're getting stronger every day. Heavier, too. Has your mom been giving you some kind of magic Indian growing medicine?"

Halona laughed. "No, silly. I'm just growing tall, like her."

"You sure are, so it's time you do your own walking." He set her on the grass. "See if you can beat Barney again, while I go talk to your mom."

Halona looked up at her friend and frowned. "You're leaving again, aren't you?"

Alex knelt down in front of her. "I'm afraid so."

"Will you be back for my birthday party on Sunday?"

Alex loved Halona as much as he loved her mother, who had planned the party several weeks ago, and he dare not miss it. "I promise I'll do my best to be here."

Her lower lip rose into a pout. "All right."

Alex stood and climbed the three steps onto the back porch, and then went into the house. He set his briefcase near the hallway, and found his girlfriend sitting in a chair in the living room.

Because of her raven black hair, her parents had named her Fala, a Native American word, meaning 'crow'.

Fala turned when she heard the door open, and smiled. "You look more excited than usual."

"I've been asked to attend an urgent meeting in Iceland."

Fala stopped grinning and set her laptop on the coffee table. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as I pack. My flight leaves in less than an hour."

"Are you going to be back in time for Halona's birthday party? She'll be so disappointed if you're not here."

"I promise I'll try."

When she nodded, Alex walked down the hallway, stepping into his office for a moment to grab a suitcase from the closet, and his passport from the desk drawer. He continued to the master bedroom, and after packing for a short trip, returned to the living room. "I'm all set."

Fala stood. "We can take my car, if you like. Just give me a minute to get ready."

"Actually, I don't think I'll be gone more than one or two nights, but I'm not sure when I'll get back. I'll take my truck so you don't have to leave your veterinary clinic to pick me up."

"All right. Just give me a call when you get back."

"I will." He turned and headed for the back door."

Fala followed him out to his car, and waited while he said goodbye to Halona. When he was through, she smiled bravely, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Just be careful, Alex. I know how much you love a good adventure, but I worry about you."

"I will."

"Okay. I love you."

“I love you, too. I’ll call when I’m headed back.”

When Alex drove away, Fala climbed the steps up to the deck, and sat in a chair. She knew about Alex’s past, working for the CIA. He had promised never to work for them again, but for the last eight months, she had a suspicion that on some of his supposed field trips, he was really doing some kind of secret mission for the Director of National Security, Martin Donner. On one occasion, he came back with stitches holding a stab wound closed, and abrasions on his knuckles. Whatever he was doing on those occasions, it sure as hell wasn’t studying rock formations. She wanted a comfortable family life, with traveling together across the country in the summer. Perhaps this trip to Iceland will be some type of secret mission as well, and he’ll get hurt this time, or God forbid, killed.

Fala looked away from the pasture when she felt a small hand on her shoulder, and turned to see her daughter’s troubled expression. “What’s on your mind?”

“You looked sad, Mom, so I came over to cheer you up.”

Fala smiled. “Well, you did, now let’s fix something to eat.”

“Is Alex going to get hurt again?”

Fala’s smile slipped away. “We’ll ask the Spirits to watch over him after we eat, okay?”

“All right.”

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Chapter 2

ICELAND:

NordVulk, the Nordic Volcanological Center in Reykjavík, was located on the campus of the College of Iceland, on the Southern Peninsula of the island. When Alex entered the small auditorium, he recognized several of the most prominent figures in the geophysics community, and realized whatever was going on must be of great significance for all of them to arrive on such short notice. He nodded to the familiar faces, and sat down in the front row.

A small man with wavy-white hair stepped up to the podium and adjusted the microphone. “Thank you for coming. For those of you who may not know me, my name is Jeffery Sliven, the Director of this facility. I’ll get right to the point. One month ago, one of the students discovered a strange event on the north side of the Buford glacier. If he had not been there, it’s doubtful anyone would have noticed this strange event. Rather than my trying to explain it to you, here is the video from his remotely operated aircraft.” Sliven looked at the projectionist, the lights dimmed, and an image appeared on the screen.

The motion picture showed the aircraft approaching a billowing cloud of steam rising above a glacier. When it pierced through the haze, the image caused everyone to gasp. Massive globules of glowing molten rock appeared to be floating up out of a glacier. Suddenly they all slammed down onto the ice, sending plumes of steam hissing into the air. An instant later, the camera lens shattered.

The picture on the screen vanished, the lights in the auditorium blinked on, and Sliven stepped up to the podium. “Even stranger is the complete lack of any seismic activity that would account for lava movement. Now, this next video was taken by the same student four days ago.” Sliven nodded to the projectionist.

Once again, the picture was from an ROV flying over a glacier. The camera focused on the smooth walls of a black tunnel, and the picture showed that it wasn’t straight down, but more like a corkscrew. The drone dropped down inside, showing darkness for few moments, and then the picture blinked off.

The lights came on, and Sliven went back up to the podium. “That, ladies and gentlemen, is the exact spot where the magma floated up out of the glacier. My colleagues and I are at a loss to explain either of these events.” Sliven held his palms up. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Muffled conversations quickly filled the room, and Alex sat quietly listening to the ideas offered to the Director, but none of them appeared confident in their theories. He knew about Sliven’s reputation as the world’s leading volcanologist, but he had never met him in person. If *he* didn’t know the cause of the strange volcanic tunnel, he doubted the other volcanologists would know, either. The only way to get definitive answers would be to get inside and take a good look around, so he raised his hand.

Sliven noticed. “Yes, Mister Cave?”

“Have you sent a team down into the tunnel?”

Sliven smiled. “No, but the student who went inside to retrieve his drone said it continued down much farther than he wanted to go without a proper expedition. I was hoping you would like to lead the first team.”

Alex grinned. “Yes, thank you. Can you give me a couple of days to get organized? I have an idea, and it will let us know what we might be up against.”

“Of course.” He looked at the other hands being raised, and pointed to a woman. “Yes, Ms. Stafford?”

“I’d like to go on the expedition with Mister Cave.”

Sliven looked at Alex. “Mister Cave?”

Alex already knew this development was unusually odd, and he had dealt with strange situations before. In the past, some of the people he allowed to accompany him would usually end up dead. He wouldn’t jeopardize anyone else’s life again before he understood the situation. “All right, but my partner and I will check it out first. If my preliminary findings show that it’s safe, I’ll organize a larger expedition.”

Sliven turned to the audience. “Are there any more questions? All right. Those of you who wish to be included in the second expedition, please talk to Mister Cave. Thank you all for coming.”

Sliven walked down to talk to Alex face to face. “I’m glad you came, Alex. You were on the top of my list of people who needed to be in on this discovery.”

“Well, thanks for allowing me to do this. I’ll head back to the States, and let you know when I’m ready.”

“All right. It is your expedition. Just let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“I will. Thank you.”

When Sliven walked over to join a small group of people, Alex noticed the young woman who wanted to go with him talking on her phone, and decided to walk over to talk to her. When she noticed he was moving in her direction, she quickly hung up, and hurried out of the auditorium. He followed her out to the parking lot, wondering if she wanted to talk outside, but she climbed into a car and drove away. He didn’t see the need to pursue her, and went back inside. After spending time talking shop with his fellow geologists, he hailed a taxi to take him to the airport.

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Stacy Stafford drove off campus to a small internet café, and hurried inside to a vacant table. She brought out her smartphone, took a quick look around, and pressed one of the contacts. “Hey, Janice, you’re not going to believe this. I’m sending you a recording showing you why I was called to this meeting. I think your legend might be true after all.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m not sure. Sliven put some geologist named Alex Cave in charge of forming an expedition, but this professor insists on doing the preliminary up close assessment himself. If he finds what you’re after before anyone else, you’ll never get your hands on it.”

“When is he starting?”

“He didn’t say, but he’s headed back to the States right away. He’ll call Sliven when he’s ready, so use your contacts to tap into the Director’s phone service.”

“I will.”

“I think he wanted to talk to me. If you want me to, I could try to make contact with him at the airport before he leaves and see if I can learn more about his expedition.”

Sloan thought about it for a moment. “No, I don’t want him to get suspicious. I’ll find out more about him through my contacts.”

“Okay, I’ll call if I learn anything new.”

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When Alex boarded the airplane back to the States, he felt the familiar adrenalin rush of being on the hunt again. Thankfully, Fala understood his disappearing for weeks at a time. Most of the work was field trips with his students, but he still did the occasional odd job for his friend, the Director of National Security, Martin Donner. That would be his first stop on the route home, since this was definitely *odd*, and Donner would want to know about it.

He sat down next to the window, and thought about the best way to survey the tunnel before he entered. What he couldn't figure out was the smooth surface. It reminded him of black volcanic glass, called obsidian, but that would be impossible. The material needed to make the glass was silicate sand, and it wasn't native to Iceland.

He smiled at the thought that he would be there for Halona's birthday party tomorrow. Fala had something special planned, and his best friend would be there as well. It would be the perfect opportunity to tell him about what happened in Iceland, and ask for his help.

He leaned his seat back, closed his eyes, and tried to sleep, but couldn't stop thinking about the tunnel. The flight seemed to take forever before the pilot finally announced they were on final approach to Dulles International Airport.

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WASHINGTON DC:

When Alex walked into his office, Director Donner stood from behind his desk, and held out his hand. "Welcome back. Have a seat and tell me more about this unusual lava tube."

Alex sat down and told him what he saw in the movie. "I'm not positive it was created by lava, but for the moment, I don't have an alternate theory. I think I know how to check the interior before I go down, but I'm going to need your help procuring these items." He slid a sheet of paper across the desk. "Here's what I need to make this work."

Donner's eyes went wide when he learned what Alex had in mind, and then he smiled. "Good grief, Alex. I've never heard of one being used for that purpose, but I'm sure it can be arranged. Where are you going to build it?"

"The Naval test facility in Keyport, Washington, but I need to return home first. It's Halona's birthday tomorrow."

"Of course. One of these days, I'd like to meet your new family."

Alex smiled. "I'd like that, too. I never thought I'd fall in love again, after Sevi was murdered."

"Well, it's good to see you've gotten past that part of your life. Fala sounds like a wonderful woman."

"Yes, she is." He stood. "I'd better get going, or I'll miss my flight."

Donner stood and walked him to the door. "I'll set everything up for when you're ready. Just let me know if there is anything else I can do to help."

"Thanks, Martin."

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FALLON, NEVADA:

Janice Sloan stepped through the open doorway of a small private airplane and stared out across the desert. On the other side of the runway was a pyramid shaped building, with three glass spires. The structure was surrounded by a green lawn and flowers, and ESSEX SPACE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION was carved into polished green granite blocks near the entrance. She could see several aircraft hangers located on other parts of the compound, and the one alongside the runway had an odd-looking railing protruding from one side.

When she climbed down the steps, Sloan was greeted by a short man with thinning hair. “Hello, Essex. I’m glad you accepted my offer.”

John Essex smiled. “I just hope it’s worth the trouble. Are you certain about this? Because if you’re correct, it would solve my problems for inexpensive space travel.”

“I’m certain. We’ll need to have a jet ready to take us to Iceland on a moment’s notice.”

“I have the right connections to get us anywhere, at any time.”

“Good. Now take me to your living quarters. I need a drink.”

Essex indicated the car parked a short distance from the plane. He knew a little about Sloan’s illegal operation. He also knew she was a ruthless woman, and had some deep-seated psychological need to be in charge of her situations. He would just have to trust her about this opportunity, if he wanted a viable means for launching his space vehicles.

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Chapter 3

MONTANA:

Halona was waiting on the porch, when a brown SUV came up the driveway and parked. She smiled and jumped out of her chair when she recognized the tall man with black hair and thick dark eyebrows. "Alex!"

Alex smiled and swept her up into his arms. "Hello, birthday girl. Did you miss me?"

"Yes, but Barney kept me company."

When Fala stepped out onto the porch, Alex set Halona down, wrapped his arms around the tall woman, and gave her a kiss. "Any word from your cousin?"

Fala smiled. "He's on his way here as we speak."

When Alex felt Halona pulling on his shirtsleeve, he looked down. "You're in a big hurry."

"Mom said I had to wait until you got here, before I get my surprise present, so tell me, already."

Alex smiled. "Not until your Uncle Okana gets here."

Seeing Halona and Alex getting along so well made Fala smile. Halona's real father was a mean bastard, who considered women to be sub-servient, hitting them occasionally to show his dominance. Alex was the complete opposite, treating women as if they were precious gems to be protected at any cost.

They sat down in green plastic deck chairs, and Alex reached into the ice chest to grab them each a beer. He opened one before handing it to Fala, and explained what happened during the urgent meeting in Iceland. "I have to fly into Seattle tomorrow morning to make the arrangements for surveying the tunnel."

"It sounds dangerous, Alex. Who's going with you?"

"Your cousin, if he agrees." He noticed Fala's concerned expression. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, I just hope Okana agrees to go with you. I would be worried the entire time you're away, if you went alone."

Alex grinned. "I don't think he would miss out on such a discovery."

Halona suddenly ran up the steps, smiling. "Uncle Okana is here."

Alex and Fala stood and turned to look at the white pickup coming up the driveway. When Okana stopped and climbed out, they all walked over to greet the tall man with shaggy blond hair.

Okana smiled and picked Halona up. "You're getting big, and you're as pretty as your mom."

"Thanks, Uncle Okana. What's my surprise?"

Okana gave Fala a questioning look. When she gave him a nod, he opened the passenger door and grabbed something inside, and then knelt down to give her a puppy. "Happy birthday."

Halona smiled and cradled the puppy in her arms, giggling when it licked her nose. She kissed her uncle on the cheek. "Thank you, Uncle Okana. What's his name?"

"It's a she, and that's up to you."

Fala smiled at Alex. "So what do you think?"

Alex wrapped his arm around her waist. "Very nice. Is the pup from your veterinarian clinic?"

“Yes, the mother was hit by a car and I couldn’t save her. This one is the runt of the litter, and the only puppy nobody wanted. The poor little thing is very loving, and I couldn’t put her down.”

Alex watched another car park in the driveway, and suddenly several of Halona’s little friends climbed out and ran up to see the puppy. Fala went down the steps to talk to the two mothers of the children.

When Okana walked up the steps, Alex reached into the chest and held out a beer. “Have a seat, and tell me about your work in Alaska.”

Okana accepted the beer and sat down. “We’ve located the cylinder, and tomorrow I’ll fly back to help Mike with the recovery.”

“Do you think Mike can spare you for a few days?”

“I can ask. What have you got in mind?”

Alex explained what happened in Iceland. “I’ll do the first exploratory survey, and I’d like you to join me.”

Okana grinned. “Sounds like fun. I’m sure Mike won’t mind. In fact, I think he’d love to join us.”

“I’d prefer that it just be you and me for the moment.”

“All right. When are you planning to go down the tunnel?”

“I’ll need some time in Keyport to get organized, so let’s meet in Iceland in four days.”

“Okana took a sip of beer. “We’ve been through a lot of tough situations together, so of course I’m in.”

“I appreciate it.” He briefly thought back to the time Okana saved his life and got him out of Europe before the Russian Mafia could kill him. Thankfully, that problem was resolved during the Red Energy operation.

Okana stuck around until Halona cut her birthday cake, and had one piece before heading for his truck. As he walked over to say goodbye, he noticed Alex’s serene expression and a warm feeling coursed through his body. “It’s nice to see you happy again, my friend.”

Alex smiled. “I’ve never been happier. I’ll see you in Iceland.”

When Okana drove away, Alex walked up onto the porch, grabbed his beer, and sat down in a chair. He had a family he loved, and an adventure to go on with his best friend. Things just couldn’t get any better.

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Chapter 4

KEYPORT, WASHINGTON:

Navy Commander Emerson stared across his desk at Alex, and smiled as he shook his head. “One of our obsolete models should work for what you have in mind. I’ll have one delivered to the fabrication shop, and you can work on it there. What about the rest of the parts? We don’t have any of that equipment.”

“Now that I have your approval, I’ll have everything else delivered by overnight courier.”

“All right. I’ll set you up with a room at the Officer’s barracks for the duration of your stay with us.”

Alex stood and reached across the desk to shake Emerson’s hand. “Thanks, Commander.”

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Two days later, Alex attached the end of an optical cable to a laptop computer, turned it on, and smiled at the civilian woman standing in front of the lights, camera, and atmosphere sensing equipment mounted to the front of his creation. “Ready when you are.”

“All right. We’ll start with methane gas.” She opened a valve on a small cylinder, allowing the gas to escape in front of the small plastic tube. “It’s on.”

Alex studied the readout on the small monitor. “I have a positive reading for methane, at three-thousand parts per million. Ready for the next gas.”

Thirty minutes later, Alex turned the computer off, and smiled. “All systems functioning as promised. Thanks for your help, Tina.”

Tina smiled. “You’re welcome. Mind if I ask where you plan on using this thing?”

“A tunnel in Iceland. It’s quite deep, and this will let us know if we need special equipment before we begin our descent.”

“Well, you’ll have to donate this to the Smithsonian when you’re through. It’s definitely one of a kind.”

“I’m afraid it will be a one way trip.”

“That’s too bad. I doubt there will ever be another one like this. How are you planning on getting it to Iceland?”

“I have a rental van waiting outside. I’ll take it to the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station, and load it into a military transport plane. We should arrive in Iceland tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good luck, Alex.”

“Thank you.”

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Chapter 5

ICELAND:

Alex stared out through the window of the air terminal in Reykjavík, as a private jet rolled to a stop. When the side door opened, Alex recognized the tall blond man walking down the steps, with an attractive brunette woman clinging to his arm. Alex grinned and shook his head. That was just like Okana. He had a way with women.

Alex noticed another couple exiting the airplane, and the tall woman made the man beside her look very small. He turned when Okana and his companion walked through the doorway.

Okana turned to the woman beside him. "Alex, this is Brenda Tillman, a photographer I met at the airport. She offered me a ride on this private plane, so I couldn't refuse."

Alex reached out and took her hand. "My pleasure."

Okana kissed the woman on the cheek. "Thanks for the ride."

Alex stared past Okana at the two people he had seen getting out of the airplane. He was about to look away, when the slender woman glanced in his direction. The look in her eyes was one of recognition, not a casual glance, but he could not remember meeting her.

Okana noticed Alex's wary expression, and turned to see what had his attention. He didn't notice anything unusual, and turned back. "I've seen that look on you before. What's on your mind?"

"Did you talk with those two on the flight here?"

"No, they sat alone in the back corner." Okana smirked at Alex. "I was too preoccupied to pay them much attention."

Alex grinned at his friend. "Let's get your gear loaded into the helicopter. Everything else is already on board."

"Any idea how deep this tunnel is?"

"No, but we have enough food and water for seven days. If we don't reach the bottom after three, we'll have to come back to the surface."

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THE BUFORD GLACIER:

Their helicopter approached from the Arctic Ocean, and Alex stared down at the cracked white face of the massive glacier below. Directly ahead, the large ice field stretched off like a wrinkled white sheet toward the top of the volcano. Ten minutes later, they arrived at the black hole into the planet, and their pilot, Ron Crowder, set down a short distance away. Alex and Okana climbed out, and walked over to the edge of the tunnel to assess the situation.

The ice had melted back nearly twenty-feet from the dark opening, forming a smooth, but slippery surface. They carefully followed the gentle slope down to the flat basaltic rock surrounding the rim of the twelve-foot diameter tunnel.

Alex knelt close to the entrance to satisfy his curiosity. Just as he thought. The surface was smooth, as if covered in glass, with no loose gravel or dirt. As far as he could see, the inside diameter of the tunnel remained the same size as the opening as shown in the movie, and curved around and down like a corkscrew. He stood and gave Okana a puzzled expression. "It looks like a fifteen-percent down grade. A little on the steep side, but walkable. The odd part is the surface

appears to be melted silicate sand, like obsidian.” Alex smiled. “It wasn’t molten rock rising out of the tunnel, it was molten glass. Now the question is where did it come from? It’s not native to this area.”

Okana grinned. “Only one way to find out. Let’s get your contraption unpacked, and we’ll see what we’re up against.”

They returned to the helicopter, and Alex walked up to Ron. “It looks promising, so go ahead and shut down.”

Ron flipped a few switches, the jet engines stopped whining, and he climbed out to lend a hand.

Okana opened the door on the cargo compartment, and stared at Alex. “How did you come up with this crazy invention? The rear end of a torpedo as a drone?”

Alex grinned, and spun one of the four small tires mounted to a metal frame. “A friend of mine in Washington gave me the idea. Torpedoes already have trailing wires, so whoever launched it can maintain control. I’m using the wires to send us data and digital video from the equipment on the nose.”

Okana shook his head, slid the two ramps out of the compartment, and set them in place. “I’m the engineer, and I would never have thought up something like this.”

Alex looked at Ron. “Could you operate the hoist?”

Ron grabbed the push button control pad on the end of a small electrical cord. “Ready when you are.”

“Go ahead.”

When the winch whined under the strain, Alex grabbed the front end of the eighteen-inch-diameter torpedo, careful not to let the camera and sensor equipment bump into the side of the helicopter, while he swung it most of the way out of the compartment. When Okana grabbed the back end, they walked beside it on either side of the ramps until it was down onto the hard packed glacier.

Alex grabbed the small wires trailing from the back of the torpedo, secured them to the helicopter, and then plugged the end into a computer. A few moments later, the camera image and sensor information appeared on the screen. “We’re all set here, so let’s roll it to the opening.”

Ron continued releasing the steel cable, while keeping a close eye on their progress. On several occasions, he thought both men would fall, but somehow they managed to keep their balance, and continued down to the tunnel. When Alex gave him a thumbs up, he released the button and waited. He noticed the wires jiggle, and then Alex and Okana were hurrying as carefully as possible in his direction.

When Alex reached the helicopter, he jumped inside and held the monitor so everyone could watch the progress. The data from the sensors appeared as varying shades of color down the left side of the screen, and they were all in the green area.

The light from the headlamp on the drone glistened off the smooth surface, and staring at the screen was like being in the front row of a roller coaster ride. The altimeter indicated the torpedo had just passed the five-thousand-foot mark, when the screen went dark.

Alex reversed the recording back the last few moments, and played it forward one frame at a time, but the glare from the headlamp made it impossible to see anything unusual. “The last sensor reading showed the atmosphere is fine, so let’s find out what caused this.”

Ron found their eagerness a little odd. “Aren’t you going to wait for the rest of your team?”

Okana grinned. “We *are* the team.”

Alex noticed Ron's perplexed expression. "We'll be fine, but thanks for asking." He held out his hand. "And thanks for the ride. I'll call when we're ready to be picked up."

"That works for me. I just got a call about another customer. It's nice to know I'm needed. Be careful, Alex."

With one last wave at Ron, Alex turned on his headlamp and began his journey into the planet. The thin wire from the torpedo was wrapped around the inner wall, held taught by the weight of the rest of the wire further down the tunnel.

Okana glanced over at Alex. "How did Fala feel about you leaving again?"

"She says she understands, but I know she worries about me. Being on an adventure again may satisfy my desire for *some* kind of excitement in my mundane life. I love Fala and Halona, but I'm tired of being stuck in a classroom. I envy you, Okana, off discovering hidden mysteries, and a nice change of scenery."

"Yeah, I like it. We had some great times together solving the world's problems, even if you didn't tell me everything that happened in one of them."

Alex knew that Okana was talking about the Red Energy operation, but he was sworn to secrecy, and couldn't even talk about some facets of it with his best friend. "I really wish I could, and you don't know how much it bothers me not being able to tell you."

"Okay, okay. I won't ask again. When we get through here, I'm going back to Mike's research ship, the Mystic, and help to retrieve the last you-know-what in the Bering Sea. We should have it up from the seafloor in one day, and we'll give all of them to our friend, the Director of National Security."

"I'm going directly to his office when we're done here."

"Tell him I said hi."

"I will."

They continue down the steep incline in comfortable silence, with the illumination from their headlamps guiding the way. It was just as Alex suspected. The tunnel kept curving down and around to the right, like a corkscrew. He suddenly stopped when he heard a sharp tapping sound echoing off the walls from somewhere behind them. "It seems we have company."

Alex slid out of his backpack, as did Okana. "I was the only one authorized to lead an expedition into this tunnel. We had better find out who it is."

Okana reached into his front pocket and brought out a .38 caliber pistol. "Just in case they're not the friendly type."

They began the long uphill climb toward the entrance. The tapping sound slowly grew louder, and around the curve up ahead, a beam of light moved across the shiny walls of the tunnel.

When Alex turned the corner, he recognized the two people from the airport. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing down here?"

The woman turned to put her hand down on the man's shoulder, and he stopped hammering a metal spike into the wall of the tunnel. "I'm Doctor Janice Sloan, this is John Essex, and you're Alex Cave."

"That's correct. My expedition into this tunnel is the only one authorized by NordVulk, so back to my question. What are you doing here?"

Sloan smiled and extended her hand as she stepped forward. "I hope you'll excuse the intrusion. I'm an archaeologist, and I am not here to interfere with your expedition. I'm following a lead from a reliable source. It's a legend from Norse mythology about a place called Edda's Chimney."

Alex's eyebrow rose. "Perhaps you're not aware, but this tunnel is recent. I doubt it's the source of your Nordic myth."

"I wouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusions, Mister Cave. This may not be the original tunnel from the legend, but I'm hoping this one will be similar. I won't get in your way."

Okana tilted his head away, and Alex followed him over to one side of the tunnel. "Since we can't make them leave, and we can't just shoot them, I'd just as soon have them come with us. I'm getting a funny vibe from those two, Alex, and I don't like looking over my shoulder all the time."

Alex grinned at Okana's reference to shooting them. "I agree, to a point. All right."

Alex turned back to Sloan. "Why don't you join us?"

Sloan looked at Essex, who nodded his agreement. "We accept your offer, but I insist we continue setting our anchors along the way."

"All right. What are they for, Doctor?"

Sloan smiled. "If we're going to be traveling together, just call me Janice. Just a precaution, Mister Cave. Can I call you Alex?"

"Of course."

"A precaution for what?" asked Okana.

"None of us know how deep this tunnel will be, and we may need places to tie off our ropes."

This is getting stranger all the time, Okana thought. Another question occurred to him. "How did you learn about this tunnel?"

"A friend of mine was going to a secret meeting at NordVulk, and called to let me know about it. She told me about the strange tunnel."

Alex had the feeling she wasn't telling him everything. No archeologist would be interested in something so recent. They waited for Essex to re-pack his hammer, and then they began the trek back down the tunnel.

Even though Okana thought Sloan was several years older than he was, and nearly as tall, he found her quite attractive, and moved up to walk beside her. "Since you didn't ask, my name is Okana." He held out his hand, but she didn't take it.

"I saw you on the plane, Mister Okana, and I know your type."

"Oh, that? No, she was just giving me a free ride. I'm totally single."

Sloan stopped and stared evenly at Okana. "And I'm totally gay, so drop the charm."

When Sloan turned and continued down the tunnel, Alex grinned at Okana, who looked over at him and shrugged, before giving him a determined smile and hurried to catch up to Sloan. Alex just shook his head. *That's my friend*, he thought. *He never gives up*.

On the way, listening to Okana and Sloan's mostly one-sided conversation, Alex learned that Sloan was from New York, but not much else. Essex remained quiet, so he moved up beside him. "What's your stake in this exploration?"

Essex smiled. "I'll be the first person to accomplish viable transportation between here and the moon. The entire planet will know my name for generations to come."

Alex grinned at the man's ego. "What is it you do for a living?"

"I'm an engineer, and I design living accommodations for surviving in space. I plan to mine the moon, once I have a viable and inexpensive launch vehicle. My name will be a part of history, and I'll be immortal. "

Now Alex's curiosity was piqued, as was Okana's, who moved closer to listen. "And you expect to find the answer down here?" Alex asked.

Essex smiled. "Yes, I do."

Alex stopped and looked over at Sloan. “Why don’t we take a break, and you tell us about Edda’s Chimney.”

Sloan followed Alex’s lead and shrugged off her backpack. “All right. The legend tells of three Viking warriors who set out to find the center of the earth, down a tunnel such as this one, with smooth sides, bare of fractures. After three days, one warrior returned, claiming the God, Edda, the destructor of worlds, crushed the others under his invisible foot, before casting him out of Valhalla and back to the surface.”

“You were thinking it could have been a change in gravity that crushed the others.”

Sloan knew about Alex’s history dealing with unusual situations, and wasn’t surprised when she learned he and his friend were coming down here. She also knew about his time in the CIA, so she had to be careful about what she told him, including the fact that she was a smuggler of stolen high-tech and experimental equipment. She stared evenly at Alex. “The video of the floating magma is proof that something in this tunnel is affecting gravity, and I want it.”

Alex stared back. He had seen that same expression on another woman not too long ago, during the Red Energy operation, and it was very disconcerting. If there really were a device capable of controlling gravity, in the wrong hands, it would be extremely destructive.

Okana suddenly stopped walking. “I feel a lot lighter.” He smiled and bounced on his toes, but then he didn’t come down. “Oh, shit! Alex? What’s going on?”

Everyone suddenly felt light as a feather, and began floating up the tunnel, desperately trying to find something to grab. Even their gear began floating upward without being touched.

Alex felt like his zero gravity training in a falling aircraft. Each time he bumped against the sides, his fingers slid across the smooth surface, and he kept moving up the dark void. The only illumination was the light from their headlamps, sweeping around the interior in all directions as they tumbled in the air. Just as quickly as it started, everyone suddenly slammed down onto the floor.

Alex landed face down and began sliding headfirst deeper into the tunnel. The thin wire from the torpedo zipped past above his head, and he could only hope no one was hurt.

He felt as if something was dragging him across the smooth surface, like on a sled sliding down the ice without any breaks. The pressure building in his ears became painful, and just when it felt like his head would explode, the force dragging him down the tunnel suddenly ceased and he slid to a stop.

He rolled over and stood up, sighing with relief when his ears popped. He looked around at the others, still on the ground. “Is everyone all right?”

Okana, Sloan, and Essex, sat up, each pinching their nose to relieve the pressure.

Okana smiled with relief when his ears popped. “That was an interesting ride. How deep are we?”

Alex checked the altimeter strapped to his wrist. “Damn! I must have smashed it during the ride. Grab your gear and let’s get moving. We have a long walk back to the surface.” He bent down and slung his backpack onto his shoulders.

Okana stood up and grabbed his pack. “You’re damn right, Alex. Let’s get out of here.”

Sloan stood and stared at Alex. “Leave if you wish, but John and I are continuing down.”

Alex shook his head. “That would be foolish, and you know it. It’s as you said earlier, we have no idea how deep this tunnel goes. We have a long hike ahead of us, and it’s all uphill.”

Sloan bent down and grabbed her gear. “No, Alex. Whatever is manipulating gravity will be worth a fortune, and I won’t leave without it.”

Alex stared at Sloan for a moment. “Is it really worth your life?”

“You bet it is.”

Alex knew greed had that effect on some people, and it would be impossible to reason with her. When he and Okana began walking up the tunnel, Alex stopped and turned around, feeling guilty about leaving them behind.

Okana noticed and moved close to Alex’s ear. “It’s not our problem anymore, my friend. Let’s go.” He turned and began walking up the steep grade.

Alex reached into his pocket, brought out a portable radio, and held it out to Sloan. “I’m not sure about the range in this tunnel, but holler if you have any problems.”

With a nod from Sloan, Alex turned and continued up toward the surface. A few moments later, he heard sharp tapping sounds echoing up the tunnel.

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