

SHADOWGATE

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PHOTON BOOKS

SHADOWGATE

Dark, brooding clouds hovered above the remote, European mountain range like a predator waiting to devour its prey.

Twenty-eight year old American scientist Elliot Foster gazed out at the ominous sky crowning the jagged, icy landscape from the elevated view of the helicopter as it traveled. He could almost feel the bone-chilling, frigid temperatures through the polycarbonite window next to him.

Uncertain exactly where he was being flown to and wondering how much longer it would take to get there, Elliot resisted the urge of asking the pilot and sounding like an impatient child.

Instead, he opted to quietly wait.

As the chopper continued over the mountains, Elliot wondered if he had made the right decision in accepting the offer to assist the international scientific group.

Regardless of everything he had been told about the research project, many questions remained. Questions that multiple phone

conversations had not been able to clearly answer.

Subatomic particles. Dark matter.
Quantum physics. Antimatter.

These were a few of the words used to capture Elliot's interest upon his initial conversation with the Russian scientist who had contacted him.

'Would you like to come and help us unlock the secrets of the universe?' The man had asked Elliot before making an offer he found difficult to turn down.

Despite having all expenses paid as well as a large monetary payment exceeding Elliot's yearly salary, the travel distance still made him hesitant to accept.

Even now, enroute to the project location, he remained doubtful.

The last thing Elliot wanted was to be away from his wife and their Baltimore home for a month despite the fact they had agreed upon it together and she had given him her full support.

The young couple weren't hurting for money, but it still seemed foolish to turn down such a lucrative offer.

Packed for the four week venture, Elliot's suitcase lay behind his seat; filled to maximum capacity. He had also been encouraged to bring his scientific research. As

such, Elliot's expensive, new laptop computer also sat nearby.

He was prepared to guard it with his life, if necessary.

More uncertainty plagued the young scientist as he traveled to the apparent outskirts of human civilization on another continent. That, along with the confidentiality agreement he had been required to sign.

Elliot didn't have a problem keeping secrets – scientific or otherwise. A devout freemason and a member of a prominent secret society in college, his allegiance to such brotherhoods had opened a number of professional doors for him.

The Russian scientist claimed it was his theoretical article on particle physics published in a popular science magazine that served as the reason for the offer. But Elliot couldn't help but wonder if it could also have been due to the fact he had graduated high school at fourteen and college at seventeen; obtaining degrees in both biochemistry and physics.

Then again, it could've been because he was the son of a CEO for a prominent US pharmaceutical company.

Or maybe all of these factors combined.

Elliot scratched his clean-shaven face. After awakening at 5:30 AM that morning, he had barely enough time to shower, get dressed

and grab a quick breakfast at the hotel before being picked up and taken to the departure site.

Elliot thought of his wife, glancing down and touching the gold wedding band on his right hand.

“You're married,” Dr. Aleksander Nowak, a Polish scientist said with a heavy accent, sitting a few feet away. “Me, too. Do you have any children?”

“No,” Elliot replied, speaking over the sound of the rotating blades. “You?”

Aleksander, appearing to be at least ten years his senior, nodded. “Yes, two. Boys. Seven and twelve.”

Elliot retrieved his wallet from one back pocket and unfolded it to show the man a photograph of a beautiful woman with long blond hair and piercing blue eyes. “This is my wife McKenna. We've only been married for a year. But we plan to have kids one day.”

“I'm certain you will. You're both young. You have plenty of time.”

Elliot nodded.

Aleksander leaned in as if to tell him a secret. “So how much did they offer you?”

“What?”

“Money.”

Elliot scratched his head. “I don't think it's a good idea to you know, talk about it.”

“I'm only joking,” the scientist replied,

nudging him in the ribs with one elbow and erupting into a hearty laugh.

Elliot forced a smile in response.

“What's your field?” Aleksander asked.

“Quantum physics. I work for the Department of Energy in Maryland. But I'm also in the process of getting my doctorate. You?”

“I'm a researcher for a laboratory in Poland.”

“Sounds exciting.”

Aleksander shrugged. “It's alright. I'm wanting to know if this is any different than the internship I did at CERN several years ago.”

“CERN?” Elliot repeated, making certain he had heard correctly. “No kidding?”

“It is the truth. I would not lie to you. The experience was life-changing.”

“I'm sure. If this goes well, maybe you can put in a good word for me.”

“Of course,” Aleksander replied.

Before Elliot could say anything else, he felt the helicopter descend.

He looked out the window as the aircraft set down on a paved clearing in the midst of surrounding mountains. Elliot saw a gate and a road leading off from the location. The helmeted pilot turned and looked at the scientists.

“We've arrived,” he announced. “Be careful getting out, and be sure to take all of your belongings.”

“Thank you,” Aleksander responded.

The pair grabbed their suitcases and stepped out onto the pavement. Two men ran to meet them outside the chopper; both wearing thick, hooded jackets and gloves. While the larger of the two took the luggage from the scientists, the other waved to the pilot, who reciprocated through the window.

Keeping their heads low, the men moved away from the chopper. Moments later, the mechanical bird ascended and flew off over the mountains.

“Doctors Foster and Nowak!” The man appearing to be in his mid-fifties with a thick, graying mustache greeted them in a heavy Russian accent and shook their hands. “It's fantastic both of you are here. I'm Dimitri Kozlov - the scientist leading the project.”

“Nice to meet you in person,” Elliot responded.

“You, as well. Thank you for deciding to come all this way to assist us.”

“I'm honored you asked me, although I'm still unsure why, considering all the other scientists out there you could've asked.”

“None of the other scientists wrote the thought-provoking article on particle physics,” Dr. Kozlov responded.

“How many work at this location?” Aleksander asked.

“That depends on the time of year,” Dr. Kozlov replied as they approached a large, gated entrance on the side of the mountain. “My team has eight people, two positions of which have been revolving. That's why both of you are here.”

A hydraulic noise was heard as the heavily-reinforced door opened.

“This way, please,” Dr. Kozlov said.

Elliot and Aleksander followed him into a dark, expansive tunnel, large enough to drive a truck through. The man carrying their suitcases quietly followed behind them.

A pair of armed guards stood to either side of the entrance as the thick, steel doors closed with a loud noise that echoed through the tunnel.

“The elevator is just up ahead,” Dr. Kozlov told them.

“How big is this place?” Elliot asked.

“The laboratory's located several levels beneath us. There are also living facilities where you'll be staying. They're complete with kitchens, saunas, exercise and entertainment areas. It gives the Hilton a run for its money,” Dr Kozlov said with chuckle. “Eh?”

“It certainly sounds like it,” Elliot commented.

“This facility must have taken years to built,” Aleksander suggested.

“Yes. But it was originally a large cavern,” Dr Kozlov explained. “We merely expanded it.”

Elliot looked up at the ceiling. “Why did they decide on a facility at this location, out here in the mountains?”

“For a number of reasons. It's believed this place is unique in nature, if you know anything about earth energies and chakras. Are you familiar with these things?”

“Sure,” Elliot replied, hoping to sound convincing.

“Here we are,” Dr. Kozlov said, motioning to the left. Leading the men over, he pressed a button and a door slid open. “After you.”

Elliot and Aleksander stepped into the elevator, followed by Dr. Kozlov and his assistant. Once inside, the head scientist pressed a button and the elevator began to lower.

As it slowly transported the men underground, Elliot was reminded of his distaste for elevators. He watched the light move on the console, feeling as though he were descending into the bowels of the earth.

Elliot hoped it wouldn't be an entire month until he saw daylight again. Lost in thought, he missed something Aleksander uttered to Dr. Kozlov before the elevator jolted to an abrupt stop. Elliot was nearly thrown off

balance, but remained on his feet as the door slid open.

He followed Aleksander and Dr. Kozlov into an immaculately clean and sterile corridor that wouldn't have been out of place in a hospital or military establishment.

“Your belongings will be taken to your rooms, which I'll show you later,” Dr. Kozlov said.

“If it's alright, I'd like to keep my computer with me,” Elliot said, motioning to the small brief case carried by the assistant. “It has all my research on it.”

“Of course,” Dr. Kozlov responded, then told the assistant something in Russian.

The man returned the case to Elliot with a cordial expression. Elliot nodded as he took it. “Thank you.”

“If either of you are hungry, need to use the bathroom, change clothes or anything else, you're welcome to do so.”

“No. I'm good,” Elliot responded.

“I'm good also,” Aleksander added.

“Then let us continue,” Dr. Kozlov told them, leading the men further down the expansive passage.

They passed several doors marked with numbers before Dr. Kozlov accessed a closet. Inside, he took out a pair of white labcoats and handed one of each to the scientists. “Please, put

these on.”

“Certainly,” Elliot said, placing his case on the floor briefly and sliding into the perfectly-sized piece.

Aleksander did the same.

Continuing through the passage, they arrived at the entrance to the laboratory guarded by an armed soldier.

The young men quietly stepped out of the way, allowing the group access. Dr. Kozlow exchanged brief words with the soldier in his native language before leading the way into a vast chamber.

Elliot gazed up at the enormous, warehouse-sized lab, hardly able to believe the size.

Walkways lined each side on multiple levels, extending up nearly a hundred feet to the industrial ceiling. A handful of scientists sat working on quantum computer at different stations spread out around the center of the floor; facing a giant, circular structure to one side of the chamber.

Power cables ran from the ceiling to the ring-like object standing nearly sixty feet in height.

It was an impressive setup, to be certain; dwarfing every laboratory Elliot had ever seen.

“This is where the magic happens,” Dr. Kozlov proudly announced. “As they say.”

“It's incredible,” Elliot commented, taking in the hi-tech surroundings.

“Very impressive,” Aleksander added.

“I'm pleased you think so,” Dr. Kozlov responded. “Come, meet my team.”

The scientist gave the new arrivals a tour of the laboratory before introducing them to the European men.

“It seems as if I'm the only American,” Elliot commented. “I hope I don't let you down or misrepresent my country.”

The other men chuckled.

“Nonsense,” Dr. Kozlov responded. “You're not the first American scientist to come here. Just as there will be others after you.”

“That's good to know,” Elliot said.

“For your sake, I'm thankful everyone here speaks English.”

“So am I.”

Dr. Kozlov led Elliot to an empty work area. “This will be your station. The quantum computers are state of the art. And if you need anything else, I'll get it for you.”

“Thank you,” Elliot replied as Aleksander was shown to his work station a short distance away. Elliot placed his laptop beside the desk and began familiarizing himself with the area until he heard footsteps on an upper platform.

Elliot looked up to see a man in a

trenchcoat in his late thirties or early forties. The imposing individual stepped up to the railing and looked down on the scientists, who in turned looked up to give him their undivided attention.

“Who's that?” Elliot quietly asked the scientist nearest him.

“The one funding the project,” the German replied. “He's the reason we're all here.”

“Welcome to our two new arrivals,” the man said in a Transatlantic accent. “My name is Dorian, and I'm overseeing the research here at this facility. The work we're doing here is vital, not just to science, but to the future of humanity.”

The scientists listened, giving the man their undivided attention.

“An invisible barrier exists outside the realm of human sight,” Dorian explained. “Behind this barrier and contained within it is the sum of all wisdom; past and future. For the sake of our world, we must open a door to this realm.”

Elliot glanced around briefly as the other scientists appeared transfixed on the charismatic man.

“We stand now on a precipice,” Dorian continued. “On the verge of a breakthrough. If we remain steadfast, we'll change the world

forever. Even more so, the universe will be transformed. The work each of you are doing is some of the most important in history. So we must not allow anything to interfere. Let's forge a path for others to follow in the years ahead.”

Following Dorian's motivational words, the scientists returned their focus to the work before them. Taking a seat at his station, Elliot logged into the quantum computer and studied a collection of complex data. As he began to test the accuracy of various equations, Dr. Kozlov activated a series of controls at another station.

The sound of internal engines revved up and the giant, circular structure powered on. A series of colored lights danced along the metallic, outer perimeter. Within the circular chamber, behind a transparent, glass-like barrier, more lights pulsed.

“Doctors Foster and Nowak - the construct before you is called the Vortex,” Dr. Kozlov announced. “Its design might look odd or even primitive, but it's the only one of it's kind in the entire world and cost millions of American dollars.”

“It's the isolated project testing zone?” Aleksander asked.

“That's correct, Dr. Nowak. The Vortex is our key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. Both of you have come at the perfect time. After years of experimentation, we've

come closer than ever to opening a window into another dimension.”

“Fascinating,” Elliot whispered.

Dr. Kozlov turned to the team. “Activate the chamber, and release the particle emission beams.”

“Yes sir,” one of the other scientists replied with a German accent, making the adjustments on the instrument panel before him.

The team worked in sync, monitoring the progress as high frequency, translucent blasts were emitted from large, cannon-like apertures stationed around the center of the Vortex interior.

Moments later, a strange, yellowish mist formed; manifesting behind the transparent barrier accompanied by flashes of ethereal illumination.

Elliot felt a vibration beneath his feet as the strange display unfolded. A swirling mist appeared within the tunnel, accompanied by an eerie, low-pitched sound. Within moments, the temperature throughout the laboratory gradually increased until it became sweltering.

“What's happening?” Elliot asked, observing from his station as multiple cameras set up around the lab recorded.

“The particle emissions are causing a small tear in the fabric of time and space,” Dr. Kozlov explained. “It's just enough to peel back

a thin layer of the cosmos, but nothing else. Like Dorian said, we must go further.”

Feeling sweat form on his skin, Elliot removed his labcoat. Almost immediately after, the unusual display within the tunnel ceased and the temperature returned to its previous level.

Elliot glanced up to see Dorian still on the elevated platform, leaning on the railing as he silently observed.

“It's amazing!” Aleksander responded with a look of excitement. “But why did you stop it?”

“We didn't,” the scientist replied. “We've only been able to create this opening for a very short period of time. Fifteen, twenty seconds at most. The duration must be extended. And in order to do this, we need the right particle equation.”

“We've attempted hundreds,” another scientist added. “Thousands.”

Elliot returned his focus to the computer. Over the next few days, he and the team worked to create new scientific equations. The results were then programmed into the Vortex computer. Converted to energy, they were tested by the large machine, which exhibited additional atmospheric displays as it absorbed powerful blasts of particle energy.

Days passed as the experiments continued around the clock. Elliot's uneasiness

grew as the research continued, questioning the moral implications of the project as he began to experience nightmares related to the work. Despite this, Elliot kept his reservations to himself and forged ahead.

Late one night after leaving the lab, he made an international call to his wife McKenna on the landline telephone in his room.

“It's great to hear your voice,” she said. “How's it going there?”

“It's good. I can't talk about the specifics of the project, but I'm off to a solid start”

“Are you enjoying it?”

“Sure,” Elliot replied. “It's a lot of work, but I figured it would be. But enough about me. How's everything at home?”

“It's going well. The dogs miss you.”

Elliot smiled. “I miss them, too.”

“I went to church on Sunday with my sister,” the wife added. “You know, she's been begging me to go for months.”

“I remember. How was it?”

“I enjoyed it. I was thinking that we could go together once you got back home,” McKenna suggested.

“Maybe so,” Elliot responded, rapidly growing more tired as he rested his eyes.

“Are you alright?” McKenna asked following several moments of silence.

“I'm fine. Why?”

“I don't know. You don't sound like your normal self.”

“I'm just spent,” Elliot explained. “I've been working a lot of hours and it's late here.”

“Yeah, you're seven hours ahead. You should go get some sleep. We can talk again in a couple nights, if you're able.”

“Yeah.”

“Get some sleep,” his wife added. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Elliot responded. He returned the phone to the receiver next to his bed, turned off the light and closed his eyes. Unable to shut his brain off, Elliot found it difficult to get to sleep as fragmented thoughts flew through his mind like pieces of a puzzle he couldn't fit together.

Almost compulsively, Elliot retrieved his laptop sitting nearby, powered it up and ran through a collection of scientific data. Comparing it to the experiments from the laboratory, he wondered if one of his proposed particle equations could be the missing piece.

The following day, Elliot shared the data with Dr. Kozlov, who carefully looked over the long equation a section at a time.

“It could work,” Kozlov suggested, studying the information. Minutes later, he directed the scientists to power up the Vortex.

The energy harnesses inside the giant

tunnel were powered on and high intensity particles were fired. Moments after the sequence was engaged, one of the alarms sounded and a red light flickered on the computer screens.

“One of the transmitters has malfunctioned,” the German scientist announced.

“Disengage,” Dr. Kozlov instructed. “Shut it down.”

“Yes sir.” The scientist controller replied before the Vortex was powered down.

Going over a collection of data, Elliot looked over to see Dorian and Dr. Kozlov discussing something on the other side of the lab. Afterwards, two of the scientists were instructed to make the needed repairs.

“I want the Vortex operational as soon as possible,” Dorian ordered.

“It will be,” Dr. Kozlov affirmed as the men worked feverishly.

Dorian exited the laboratory as the painstaking repairs were made. Hours later, the work commenced.

The internal cannons blasted high frequency particle transmissions into the heart of the tunnel, creating an ethereal, yellowish haze before a tangible change occurred in the lab.

Feeling the temperature rise once again, Elliot grew uneasy, sensing an unpleasant

tangible change in the atmosphere of the lab.

During a break from testing, Elliot scanned his latest equation on the quantum computer. While double-checking the numbers, he saw a tall shape behind him in his peripheral vision. Elliot turned to see Dorian observing the scientists.

“Hello,” Elliot cordially said.

Dorian responded with a nod, combined with a look difficult to decypher, then quietly walked across the lab.

Returning to his work, Elliot continued to check the complex scientific equation on the computer screen.

Following the conclusion of their daily work in the lab, Elliot spotted Aleksander in the corridor before him on his way back to his room.

“Aleksander,” Elliot called out, catching up to him.

The scientist turned. “Yes.”

“What do you think of everything so far?”

Aleksander shrugged. “It's good. We're making great progress.”

“Progress. Right,” Elliot affirmed before looking around to make sure nobody else was around.

“What's wrong?”

Elliot quieted his voice to a near

whisper. "Have you felt something 'off' during the experiments?"

"Off?" Aleksander asked with a confused look.

"Yeah. You know, like something's not right."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That machine," Elliot added. "The Vortex. Whenever it's fully engaged, the lab doesn't feel right. You know?"

Aleksander looked at Elliot for several long moments, staring at him as if he had a third eye in the center of his forehead. "No."

Elliot chuckled, then scratched the side of his face. "Sorry, I just thought you might have noticed something. I'm probably just imagining things."

"I wouldn't worry about it. We're making great strides."

"Right. Sorry to bother you."

"I'll see you in the morning," Aleksander said before going into his room and closing the door behind him.

Mentally exhausted from the days work, Elliot continued on to his room and locked the door behind him. Still plagued by concerns regarding the project, Elliot collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Maybe I just need a good night sleep, he

told himself, hoping to be feel better in the morning.

Just as he began drifting off to sleep, there was a knock at the door. Elliot snapped awake, quickly sat up, then went to the door. He opened it to see Dr. Kozlov.

“Dorian has requested to speak with you,” the scientist said.

“Dorian?”

“Yes,” Dr. Kozlov responded.

“Right now?” Elliot asked.

“It shouldn't take long. Come with me. I'll take you to him.”

Elliot nodded, trying to hide his trepidation. “Yeah. Sure.”

Leaving the guest room, Elliot followed Dr. Kozlov down the corridor. Taking steps to another level, Elliot was led into a room with a large window overlooking the laboratory. Dorian stood before the window, gazing down at the Vortex.

Dr. Kozlov quietly closed the door behind Elliot, leaving him alone with the leader.

“You wanted to talk to me, Sir,” Elliot said.

Dorian turned. Seeing his quest, he smiled. “Mr. Foster. Thank you for coming.”

“I didn't think I had a choice,” Elliot replied.

“Nonsense. I like to meet with all the

scientists one on one. In case they'd like to share any any reservations or personal concerns.”

“I see.”

Dorian placed a hand on Elliott's shoulder, walking him over to the window. “Tell me, Mr. Foster. What are your feelings regarding the project?”

“Feelings, sir?”

“Yes. Your thoughts.”

Elliott's mind raced as he attempted to convert his thoughts into words. “I think we're making great progress towards expanding the opening.”

Dorian looked into his eyes as though he could see into Elliott's soul. “Are you certain?”

“I'm positive. Though I can't help but to wonder if there's an element of risk to what we're doing.”

“There's always an element of risk involved in new scientific discoveries.”

“Yes, but what if opening up this portal poses some kind of threat to life on earth,” Elliott suggested.

Dorian chuckled. “Threat? That's highly unlikely.”

Elliott suddenly felt ridiculous for mentioning it at all. He scratched his head. “Just a thought.”

“The work we're doing here is transcendent. I need everyone to be fully

committed and not afraid to do that which has never been done.”

“Of course,” Elliot replied. “My commitment is one hundred percent. I only wish I would've been given more information about the project before I came here.”

“Don't let it bother you. Nobody's allowed to know anything about the project until they're here,” Dorian explained. “In the same way that information can't be shared by anyone once they depart. That's why everyone's required to sign the agreement.”

“I understand,” Elliot affirmed. “So no worries.”

“None of the sort. I have the utmost faith in you. If I didn't, I wouldn't have brought you here.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Dorian looked out at the laboratory once more before moving away from the observation window.

Elliot slid a hand into one pocket. “Dr. Kozlov told me it was my article on particle physics that brought me to his attention.”

“*My* attention,” Dorian said, correcting him.

“Oh. So you recruited all of the scientists here?”

“I selected them. Yes.”

Elliot nodded to himself.

Several moments of silents passed before Dorian turned towards him. “Do you believe in God, Mr. Foster?”

“What?” Elliot asked, surprised by the random personal question. “God?”

“Yes. God,” Dorian responded, studying Elliot's reaction with unbroken gaze. “You know, the man upstairs.”

Elliot nervously scratched his face. “I uh, believe there's an order to the universe, and therefore, there must be a source for that order. An author or a divine architect.”

“And what are your beliefs about this architect?”

“I'm not altogether certain, to be honest. I've never been religious.”

“But your mother was,” Dorian interjected. “Still is, apparently.”

Startled by the comment, Elliot was uncertain how to respond.

“I make it a point to know as much as possible about those I invite here,” Dorian added.

“I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't understand how my beliefs or those of my parents relate to the project.”

“Such things are vital to the work we're doing. Religion, mythology and fairytales have no place here. We must reject such things and divorce ourselves from them in order to

embrace a new approach to what many refer to as the divine.”

“I don't understand,” Elliot said.

“Understanding isn't necessary. I can assure you, you *will* encounter God down here,” Dorian told him with a look of enthusiasm.

Elliot wondered if the man had somehow overheard his phone conversations with his wife, and Aleksander in the corridor a short time earlier.

“Many wonderful things lie ahead. We're making history,” Dorian added.

Elliot forced a smile. “I'm excited.”

“As am I.”

Departing the room moments later, Elliot discreetly scanned the corridors for hidden cameras or listening devices. By the time he arrived back at his quarters, full paranoia had set in.

Elliot locked the door, then searched the room from top to bottom for more devices. Coming up empty, he wondered if the days without sunlight were beginning to effect his state of mind.

Before long, Elliot was struck by a sudden wave of mental and physical exhaustion. He laid down on the bed and closed his eyes.

As he drifted in and out of consciousness, Elliot was plagued by a barrage of strange and disturbing dreams relating to the

project. Despite the lack of sound sleep, he arose early the next morning.

After showering and shaving, Elliot got dressed, ate a small breakfast along with several cups of coffee before reporting to the lab.

The next two and a half weeks consisted of intense periods of experimentation as the scientists tested a seemingly endless series of particle emissions converted from newly-devised equations.

None, however, served to advance the project beyond its current status.

Determined to contribute something of value to the project, Elliot spent nearly every waking moment theorizing. He regularly worked late into the night on his laptop, tirelessly pouring over large amounts of data as he devised complex, new particle equations.

In the days that followed, Dorian took a more active role. He observed Dr. Kozlov and the team more closely as they worked.

“Begin recording,” Dr. Kozlov told the controller as they worked into the night, extending beyond their usual quitting time. “Program Dr. Foster's equation into the Vortex and bring it to full power.”

The German scientist nodded, activating controls on the computer panel in front of him. The sound of internal engines roared as the Vortex came to life once again. Lights

brightened along the metallic, circular perimeter as others lit the tunnel chamber within the transparent barrier.

“It's at maximum capacity,” the controller confirmed.

“Excellent,” Dorian responded. “Fire the emissions.”

“Yes Sir.”

The scientists observed a series of high frequency translucent blasts shot from the sides of the tunnel and joining together in the core.

Seconds later, the chamber was filled with a colored haze. Flashes of ethereal light pulsed within the Vortex like lightning through storm clouds.

The men silently followed along with with the synchronized timer on the quantum computers, awaiting for the rift to close as usual.

Strong vibrations were felt throughout the lab as the emissions fired. A swirling mist manifested within the tunnel, accompanied by an eerie, low-pitched sound.

Elliot waited for the temperature to rise.

This time, however, it seemed to do the opposite. Instead of growing warmer, the lab became cold. Elliot buttoned his coat and rubbed his hands together for warmth.

“Sir. The rift is holding steady,” the operator announced, studying data on the screen in front of him. “According to the numbers, it's

strengthening.”

The other scientists exhibited looks of excitement. Dr. Kozlov did the same, checking the figures on the computer. The seconds passed before the team broke out in a round of cheering.

“I can't believe it!” He proclaimed, turning to Dorian. “It's happened. We've done it!”

“Yes,” Dorian calmly replied, refusing to tear his eyes away from the Vortex as the strange energy within it took on a blue, spiral formation.

“There's something wrong,” the controller announced seconds later as he entered a rapid sequence into the computer. “The energy's growing stronger, but it's losing coherence.”

Dr. Kozlov quickly checked; the excitement fading from his face. “I don't understand.”

“The rift is unstable,” Aleksander announced, also checking the data.

“Shut it off,” Dr. Kozlov ordered.

“No!” Dorian yelled.

The other scientists turned to look at Dorian as he stepped closer to the Vortex.

“Keep it powered on,” he ordered.

“Don't close the portal. Continue recording.”

“Yes Sir.”

“What's the strength of the energy field?”

“Seventy-eight hundred, Sir,” the controller responded. “And increasing.”

The swirling energy emanating from the heart of the Vortex grew stronger, accompanied by bursts of electrical static like a solar storm.

“Eighty-three hundred,” the controller announced.

Dorian moved closer to the Vortex as a dark shape appeared within the center of the rotating formation.

A deep rumbling shook the laboratory, accompanied by a roaring sound which echoed through the chamber like thunder.

“It's here,” Dorian announced, inching towards the giant machine as the form increased in size, taking on humanoid shape as it became more solid in appearance.

The hair on the back of Elliot's neck stood on end. His mind raced; struggling to believe what he was witnessing with his own eyes.

The humanoid shape continued to alter, growing more defined. Its alien-like features became increasing distinct as it seemed to hover outside the physical realm, defying the laws of nature.

Grayish skin covered the creature as it moved closer with long sinewy limbs, three

claw-like fingers on both hands and a bulbous head with large, black, oval-shaped eyes.

Dorian took a few more steps towards the being until he stood several feet from it. He reached an arm up towards the humanoid, which towered over him at least three times his height.

The creature extended a long arm towards Dorian, which somehow managed to pass through the transparent barrier as if it were non-existent.

The being's long fingers inched closer to Dorian's. In the instant they touched – in the blink of an eye – Dorian was bathed in a bright flash of light before appearing to vanish completely.

Just then, the lights, the computers, the camera, and everything else functioning on electrical energy ceased altogether. The lab was plunged into a black silence.

The power returned moments later and the computer began to reboot. The men looked up to see the Vortex empty, dark and quiet as if nothing had occurred.

Dorian stood at the bottom of the large machine, facing away from the scientists without moving a muscle. The men exchanged expressions of confusion before Dr. Kozlov slowly approached his employer.

“Dorian?” He asked.

Dorian remained silent; still like a statue.

“Dorian,” Dr. Kozlov repeated, moving closer.

“I've seen the other side,” Dorian declared. “I know the mysteries and understand the purpose behind all things.”

“Are you sure you're all right, Sir? You're not making sense.”

As if he were possessed, Dorian reached out with one arm, grabbed Dr. Kozlov by the collar and raised him up off the floor.

“I'm making perfect sense!” Dorian stated. “Things have never been more clear. Do you not believe me?”

“Yes. Please,” Dr. Kozlov uttered, struggling to breath as he attempted to loosen Dorian's tight grip as his feet dangled freely.

Shocked by the display of superhuman strength, the other scientists traded looks of uncertainty. They remained at their stations; none daring to interfere.

Dr. Kozlov's eyes bulged as he fought to get a breath, unable to free himself. Moments later, Dorian finally released his grip and the scientist fell to the floor and began coughing.

Instead of helping Dr. Kozlov, Dorian turned towards the others with an intensity in his eyes as if another force had taken control of him. Elliot trembled at the sight.

“You saw it, didn't you?” Dorian asked. “Each of you witnessed one of the greatest

moments in human history. An achievement like no other.”

“Was it an alien?” The German scientist asked. “An extra-terrestrial?”

“It was much more than that. Your simple mind could never fully conceive what they are!”

The scientists stood by, remaining silent as Dorian suddenly exited the laboratory. Once he was gone, Elliot ran to help Dr. Kozlov, still on the floor.

“I’m alright,” Dr. Kozlov uttered as he struggled to stand.

Elliot assisted him to the nearest chair, where the head scientist took a seat.

“What do you want us to do now?” Aleksander asked.

“Should we reactivate the Vortex?” The German scientist inquired.

“No,” Dr. Kozlov quickly replied. “No. I want it left alone for now. That’s all the work for today. Please leave the laboratory now.”

“Shouldn’t we examine the recording and do more testing?”

“Het!” Dr. Kozlov responded in Russian. “Leave the laboratory at once and return to your rooms!”

Elliot quickly collected his personal laptop and followed the other scientists out of the lab. The men mumbled to one another as

they walked through the corridor.

“What happened back there?” One asked the others. “What's wrong with Dorian?”

“What was that thing?” Another asked.

“Shhh!” Another scientist replied. “We shouldn't talk about it.”

Returning to his room, Elliot locked the door behind him. Too wired to sleep, his brain replayed the events from the lab as he struggled to make sense of it all. Less than half an hour later, Elliot received a visual communication from Dr. Kozlov affirming to the scientists that the project was a success.

Elliot then learned he would be leaving the facility the following morning and returning home to the States. He breathed a sigh of relief and began to pack. Before he could finish, there was a pounding at the door.

Elliot raced over. He unlocked it to see Dorian with an intense look in his eyes and froze.

“Congratulations on the breakthrough, Mr. Foster,” Dorian said. “The success belongs to you most of all.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Elliot replied. “But I can't take credit. It was a team effort.”

“Don't be modest. You're the one who created the particle equation. I knew one of you would prove to be superior.”

Elliot scratched his head as Dorian

looked into the room. “You're preparing to leave, I see.”

Elliot turned and saw the nearly packed suitcase sitting on his bed. “Yeah. I need to get home. I miss my wife.”

“Of course. Your precious McKenna.”

“That's right. But I don't recall telling you her name.”

Dorian smiled. “You listed it in the paperwork you submitted, along with the confidentiality agreement. Remember?”

“Oh. I guess I forgot. Well, I appreciate the opportunity, and for allowing me to be a part of the research. As well as the discovery.”

“It was much more than just a simple discovery, Mr. Foster,” Dorian said. “This is only the beginning. There's so much more to come. Aren't you curious to understand what happened?”

“I saw the entire thing,” Elliot responded.

“And what did you see, exactly?”

“I witnessed the being manifest inside the Vortex, along with you touching it.”

“I promised you would see God, and you did. He revealed to me the past and the future. He showed me the key to all things. The purpose of all life on earth.”

Elliot studied the obsessive glint in Dorian's eyes, wondering what he meant.

“You'll see him again. We both will,” Dorian added with an intense look in his eyes that sent chills up his spine.

“I'm not sure what that means,” Elliot replied.

“The equation you created. They revealed it to you. They gave you the knowledge to open the door.”

“I don't understand.”

“The Ancients. They created us and have a plan for mankind, but they need our help. We must work together.”

“Dr. Kozlov and the other scientists will be able to open the portal again,” Elliot responded. “If that's what you want. They have more than enough knowledge and resources to-”

“The Ancients didn't choose any of the others, Mr. Foster. They chose you and I. Because of that, I extend the offer to work under my employ.”

“Sir?”

“You'll be promoted as my top scientist regarding these experiments, and report directly to me.”

“Thank you,” Elliot replied. “I'm honored, but I like my job.”

Dorian nodded. “The Department of Energy in Baltimore. Yes. I'll double whatever they're paying you, along with other benefits.”

“Thank you. But I really-”

“I have a number of laboratories all around the world. There are even some in the United States, not far from your Baltimore home. You would have your choice.”

“That's very generous, Sir. But I'm not interested,” Elliot countered.

“Of course you are. You haven't heard my full offer yet.”

“I don't need to. It's not about the money.”

Dorian took a step closer. “I know you're in the midst of obtaining your doctorate. I could make certain you have it immediately.”

Elliot chuckled and scratched his head. “How's that possible?”

“It simply is. You and your wife are planning to start a family before long, I presume.”

“We've discussed it. But what does that have to do with this?” Elliot asked.

“From this point forward, everything you do involves what happened here tonight.”

Elliot diverted his focus from Dorian's intense gaze to look elsewhere in the room. “I need to finish getting ready to fly out in the morning.”

Dorian opened the door fully. Elliot stepped out of the way as he entered the room uninvited.

“I always get what I want, eventually,”

Dorian said. "Things and people."

Elliot turned at the unsettling remark.

"It would be most unfortunate if you were to reject my gracious offer," the man added.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're an intelligent man. I'm sure you can figure it out."

"Are you threatening me?" Elliot asked, trembling.

Dorian chuckled. "Come now, Mr. Foster. I speak only in facts and certainties."

"All I want to do is go home. I did what you paid me to do. I accomplished what I was contracted to."

"No. You exceeded it. So I've drawn up a new contract," Dorian told him before holding up a hand in a calm gesture. "You'll have it before you leave in the morning."

Having no sign to sign it, Elliot remained quiet.

"Take your time, and don't worry. We're keeping a close eye on your loved ones even as we speak."

Elliot wondered what Dorian meant as he glanced at the time on his wrist watch.

"Your wife's still at work, teaching children at the elementary school," Dorian explained. "And she's wearing pink today. How pretty."

“H..how do you know that?” Elliot nervously asked.

“I have eyes everywhere. I'll make certain she remains safe until you arrive home to join her.”

Fear suddenly gripped Elliot's heart like a vice. Feeling as though the wind had been knocked out of him, he collapsed into a seat at the small table across from the bed.

Dorian placed a hand firmly on his shoulder. “We have a lot of work to do. Go home, spend time with your wife. I'll check in with you in a few days. So expect my call.”

Elliot opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“I look forward to what our partnership holds in the years ahead,” Dorian added. “And soon, you will, too.”

Elliot remained in a state of shock as Dorian quietly departed the room and closed the door behind him.

A mountain of regret coupled with anxiety and fear gained mass inside Elliot as he racked his brain attempting to devise a solution to his problem; deperate to find a way out.

I've made a grave error by agreeing to come here.

Elliot imagined the possible outcomes. But the odds were clearly stacked against him.

Once I get home, I could go to the

authorities, he considered.

Elliot uttered a silent prayer that he would awaken from what had descended into a nightmare.

He paced around the room until it became evident he would have to do whatever Dorian requested if his wife and family were to remain safe from certain harm.

Elliot debated whether or not he should tell his wife about the situation once he got home. It likely wouldn't be a good idea, certain to cause undue stress.

No. I'll keep it to himself. That's the best option.

Early the following morning, Elliot would depart the remote facility and begin the long journey back home to the United States.

Despite his best efforts to change the situation, there was nothing he could do.

Elliot's fate was sealed.

After he finished packing, he laid down. Elliot forced his eyes closed, attempting desperately to embrace the sleep that refused to come.

The story continues in Advent, coming in early 2024!