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The Rumor of the Ruined City
by Jeff Hecht
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Science Fiction

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We met the mad Russian at the Pratt Museum at Amherst College. Its mounted skeletons and glass-cased models were there long before interactive displays came into fashion. Anna had smilingly promised me a serious museum when I picked her up at the Boston airport. I could have spent hours exploring it, but she insisted I follow her and the curator to the basement.

Downstairs, they opened a heavy door that led into a musty stone room full of fossils. Some were on benches as massive as the room itself; others were in cabinets or in drawers built below the work tables. Some stood on their own low stands. The stone framing of the basement and the cabinets dated from the mid-nineteenth century.

The Russian was leaning over a rock slab, peering through the sort of hand lens geologists always carry. He had been expecting us. He looked up and smiled at Anna, a gold tooth gleaming. "I am pleased to meet you, Professor Bouton." Barely over five feet, with thick white hair swept back from his forehead, and a suit shiny from wear, he looked small beside sturdy Anna.

Smiling in return, Anna shook his hand. "And I am pleased to meet you, too, Professor Khokhlov. This is Vern Jackson, who found the site with me."

The Russian reached out to me, "I am Nikolai Khokhlov. I am pleased to meet you." Anna had told me about him on the long-distance line from her lonely Raleigh apartment. She called him "the mad Russian," for his obsession with strange old fossils that he described in rambling e-mail messages and photographed in black and white with delicate shadings. She wanted to show him what we had found in the hills of upstate New York, and it was a good excuse to get together again. He seemed sane enough as we shook hands. His English was accented, but clear for a man who had never visited America before.

The curator introduced us to the jewels of his basement, the fossil footprints that Professor Edward Hitchcock had collected in the nineteenth century. In 1802, a farm boy named Pliny Moody had found the first footprints on a slab of rock in a nearby town. The local wise men had said Noah's Raven made the prints, and Hitchcock himself had suspected a giant bird. "Jurassic dinosaurs, nearly two hundred million years ago," explained our tall and dignified guide. He told us so much that my mind was growing numb when he showed us a gray slab the size of a desktop crossed by tire tracks. "Here's a fossilized Cambrian tidal flat," he said with a deadpan smile.

I had learned enough geology from Anna to know the Cambrian period ended over half a billion years ago. I looked at the rock, and I looked at the curator, then I looked at Anna and the mad Russian. They seemed to be in on the game, so I hid my ignorance in a joke. "So who took the motorbike half a

billion years back in the time machine?"

"Climactichnites," he chuckled. He said the fossil tracks had been a mystery for over a century. The first were found in 1860, before inflated rubber tires were invented. More were found later, but only recently did two paleontologists claim an explanation for the prints. They said a flat animal about the size of a human foot had inched its way across a tidal flat, one side pushing the other, each step raising a ridge that looked like the print of one groove in a tire. "They found one track with an impression of the animal at its end," he concluded.

The Russian looked at him with an enigmatic smile. "I am not certain. We say Problematica have as many interpretations as there are eyes."

* * * *

By six o'clock, the professors had relaxed to become Anna and Nikolai, and we were on the turnpike, heading west through the Berkshires as the sun slipped down in the sky. Anna and I had talked about going back to the site alone, but taking Nikolai made it easier to justify. As I drove, she told how continental collisions, rifting, erosion, and glaciers had shaped the mountains. Geologists thought they understood that story well. Anna had not expected to stumble on a geologic enigma while repairing hiking trails on the southern fringe of the Adirondacks.

"What were you hunting?" Nikolai asked.

"Nothing in particular," Anna replied. "I always watch for fossils. Vern was looking for old settlements; his family came from near there. We both belong to a nature club that runs service trips that are partly vacations; we met up here."

"The luxury of vacations we did not have when I was young, after the war," sighed Nikolai. "We had to have a purpose. It was a field camp I had for students, when I had become a professor. Our maps showed good Cambrian and Ordovician sites. Two students came to me the second night in the field, when everyone else was sitting around the fire drinking, and said they had found some fossilized ruins. They were young, and knew little geology, but I was glad they wanted to learn, not just get drunk. I thought they had found an old mining camp or hunter's cabin, but I wanted to encourage them. I went with them early the next morning, before anyone else woke up. When they showed me, I knew they were right."

It had been that way with us. I, the one who knew almost nothing about rocks or fossils, had stumbled upon the site as we painted red blazes on a trail. I had stopped to look out over the reservoir my mother always called "the Sacandaga," which filled the valley where my grandmother had grown up. Instead, I found a rock face with a pile of rocks embedded in it.

"It took me a day to admit that I couldn't explain what Vern had found," Anna said. "We went back after the rest of the group finished the trail work. I must have studied it for hours..."

Nikolai waited until he was sure Anna had finished. "My wife tells me I am crazy to chase the rumor of the ruined city. She has never travelled far; to her, crossing the ocean is like flying to another planet. She says at our age we should be thinking of retiring and playing with our grandchildren. She will not go to see it, so it can not seize her like it did me. When I saw it I knew it was my destiny."

"I understand," said Anna. "Sometimes I worry about that, too."

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We stopped for a quick roadside meal when we got off the Thruway in New York. Anna and I quietly paid for Nikolai, knowing Russian scientists have no money. He had pulled strings to get speaking invitations to Yale and Amherst, which had paid for his trip to the States. It was after dusk when we set up my big old tent in the Northville campground, just inside Adirondack State Park. As Anna and I worked, Nikolai opened his bag and unwrapped two small thin slabs of dark fine shale that he had packed with tissue in a book-sized box. We set up the lantern and looked at the fossils, glossy black films on the gray rock.

Anna studied them, turning the slabs to catch the surface in different light, peering at spots through her hand lens. To me they were overgrown insects with too many legs, claws, and body parts. "What do you think they are?" she asked.

"Enigmatica," he replied. "I have studied papers on the Burgess Shale and other lagerstaetten, but even those lucky events that preserved so many other strange things captured nothing like them." He took them and packed them carefully away. "There are bigger ones, but I could not bring them."

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In the morning, we drove to the trail head and slipped on our day packs. When Anna and I had discovered the site, the whole trail crew had backpacked in, but we didn't want to make Nikolai carry a heavy overnight pack.

We walked about two miles along the trail still marked by our red blazes, then turned at the old stone wall which I had spotted last summer. We followed the wall to the cellar hole that was our landmark. The remains of the old building intrigued Nikolai. "How long has it been abandoned?"

"The trees are at least 50 years old," Anna replied. We'd puzzled over this ourselves, when we first saw it and wondered what life had been like deep in the woods long ago. "The loose fieldstone looks like early nineteenth century work. I'd guess the people moved out between 1900 and 1940."

"We never found any signs of plumbing," I added, though I was not sure what that would mean to him.

Nikolai sat on a big rock at one corner, sipping from his water bottle and looking down into the hole. Leaves were slowly filling it in. "Could this be what you found?"

I shook my head. "No, it's several hundred feet away."

"That isn't what he meant, Vern. He's asking if it could be the basement of an old house." Anna shrugged. "We're not sure. We only discovered this last year, and haven't studied it long enough. Although we've talked about it forever on the phone." She smiled, then added. "But the rocks aren't terrestrial sediments. They're marine shales."

"Mine is shallow marine to mud flat," said Nikolai. "We found one surface that looked like the Climactichnites layer, but without animal imprints or tire tracks. I wish we had something like that. We need more pieces of the puzzle." He pushed himself up, and it was time to move on.

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Our enigma is in a rock face that looks south toward the lake. Anna says glaciers exposed it when they pushed south tens of thousands of years ago. The thick ice sheets thrust over the mountains, breaking off big chunks, and leaving steep rocky slopes on the southern sides. I saw the same thing in Maine when I was camping with my family.

Nikolai saw it as soon as we came through the trees. He exclaimed something in Russian, then strode to the rock face. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and studied the rock through the little hand lens that hung on a cord tied around his neck. Then he shifted his gaze to the lighter rocks embedded in the dark gray shale. Three roughly squared stones sat on top of each other, the top one just above his eye level. He examined the lighter rock, then peered intently through the hand lens at the edge touching the dark rock. We watched as he ran his finger along the joint, then pulled a little jackknife from his pocket and poked at it.

"Incredible. They are held as firmly in the matrix as glacial dropstones are in marine sediment. If they were not square stones set on top of each other, I would think they sank to the bottom from a melting iceberg."

"North America was on the Cambrian equator, Nikolai. I don't know of any Cambrian ice age," said Anna. I had heard it before, as Anna and I had debated how the rocks had come to be there. She had scoffed when I suggested someone piled them together, but she could find no other explanation. Trying to solve the mystery of the rocks was the first excuse for our calls; we found others as the weeks passed.

"You could make the rocks go away, if you want. Just ignore them. Mikornin did that. I told him where to look, and I know he went there, but he could not see them. He is a fool, Mikornin."

Anna nodded. She had told me about Alexei Mikornin, late one night when she felt down and we were reaching out to each other on the phone. He was a bright young geologist with a solid reputation, pulling contacts to get a job in Anna's department and get out of Russia. Mikornin was no fool; he would not waste his time on discoveries no one would believe. Anna worried someone like him would get tenure instead of her.

She traced her fingers over the border of the embedded rock, as I had done when I found it.

"Do you have anything else?" Nikolai asked.

"No fossils like yours," Anna said. "We found three other squared rocks near here, but they are separate."

"Like the wall fell down before it was buried?"

"Yes."

"Have you tried digging any of them out?"

"Would you believe us if we had?"

Nikolai laughed. "Would anyone believe any of us?" He turned from the rock face, looking back and forth between us. "If you did not see this, and I only told you, would you believe this? Science says this cannot happen. Science says nothing that lived on Earth 500 million years ago could have built walls or cities. Who carved the rocks? Trilobites with their many little legs? Hallucogenia or Anomalocaris from the Burgess Shale? All just overgrown insects or crabs. It is impossible."

Anna looked at him, puzzled. "Do you believe that?"

Nikolai grinned, light glinting from his gold tooth. "Of course not! I believe my eyes. I believe ground truth. I know what I see here. I know what I saw in Siberia. Something cut rocks and set them on top of each other. These are not tire tracks that somebody can invent an animal like Climactichnites to explain." It was not exactly madness that glinted in his eyes, but the manic energy that had pushed him up the hill. "How long have you worked here?"

"Only three days," Anna sighed. "After we found it, we camped nearby and stayed for two extra days. We searched for other exposures, but this is the best. We didn't disturb it. We didn't have park permits, and besides, as you say, no one would believe us."

"No one will believe us, anyway. They are not ready to believe." He turned to me, asking "Am I not correct, Vern? You engineers know scientists."

I nodded. I had learned a lot about Anna after the discovery, as we talked for hours under the stars near her cramped little tent. She is not the most cautious of paleontologists. She knows some who still doubt that an asteroid impact killed the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, despite the hole as big as Connecticut it made in Mexico. We had much less evidence, and saying something smart enough to pile rocks on top of each other lived half a billion years ago required a new scientific revolution. Sometimes Anna wanted to forget it.

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"Dig," said Nikolai, setting down his pack. He took from the back pocket his geologist's hammer, pointed at one end, square at the other. He must have read the uneasiness on Anna's face, because he quickly added, "carefully, of course." He put on worn plastic goggles, then whacked the rock. Chips flew.

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We chipped at the rock face for hours, with little reward. Anna and Nikolai peered at the fragments through their hand lenses. They found only bits of trilobite, and a few tiny brachiopod shells. I chipped away shale, and found the edge of the pale rock was as smooth as it had looked on the surface.

"Whoever stacked these rocks spent more time working them than the people who left the cellar hole," I told Anna as we hiked back. "Those were just undressed fieldstone. This looks carved."

She looked distressed, a 36-year-old assistant professor fascinated by something that wouldn't yield the publications she needed for tenure.

Nikolai didn't notice her expression. "It probably was," he said. "But I wonder how soft-bodied animals could have done it."

Anna fired up the gasoline stove while I chopped vegetables for a stew. Nikolai sat by the lantern, comparing rock fragments with photographs from his bag. When everything was in the pot and simmering, we sat with him.

"Half a billion years, it has been there. It is incredible, is it not?"

I nodded, but I would have done so before we found the ruined city. I think my family is old because some ancestor fought in the Battle of Saratoga, 220 years ago. That was as far back as I had expected to look when Anna and I set down our buckets of red paint to walk along the old stone wall.

He pulled a small box from his bag and opened it. "I brought some index fossils from my deposits." I had to look carefully to see the trilobite outlined in one rock. Anna examined each sample with the metal-cased hand lens that she wore between her breasts on a leather thong.

"I can't place any of these, Nikolai, but I haven't found anything good for dating here." Anna paused. "Maybe tomorrow."

I must have looked puzzled to the Russian. "Do you understand what we do, Vern? If our index fossils match, it means your ruined city was built at the same time as mine."

"The same geological time, Nikolai," Anna added.

"Ah, yes. Within a million years or two." He grinned, showing his gold tooth in the lantern light. I walked back to check the stew, wondering if Homo Erectus had tamed fire a million years ago.

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On the third day, we moved to the other rock face which showed squared stones embedded in the shale. We had little luck until Anna spotted a big rock that had fallen from the rock face, with its top layer separating like veneer from ruined plywood. A thin sheet four feet long and almost three feet wide came loose easily when I jammed a branch underneath and pried. Nikolai helped Anna slide the top piece to the ground, exposing the fresh surface.

Shiny black ridges caught my eye at once. Anna gasped in surprise. Nikolai muttered something in Russian.

"What is it?" I asked.

Neither said a word as they stared at the fossil. To me, it was just part of another unknown animal, perhaps as big as a bear or crocodile when it lived, but with many legs and a body divided into many segments like a lobster's tail. I could not read much from the rock, but I could read the mixture of excitement and distress on their faces. "It isn't supposed to be here, is it?"

Anna looked at Nikolai, eyes wide. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Not this size." His voice was hollow. "Could it be an anomalocarid or proto-eurypterid?" He shook his head, answering his own question.

I could see claws and legs where Anna and Nikolai pointed to them. One had four toes spread out at the end; another showed three toes. Each leg was a couple of inches wide, and I could see half a dozen legs clearly on one side where the legs were intact. The legs might have kept on going, but the rock had broken in the middle of the fossil.

"Look at the eyes," Nikolai half-whispered. Four of them, big and multi-faceted, looked toward each point of the compass from the top of a head the size of a dinner plate.

"It's incredible. Where could it fit, Nikolai?"

They muttered uncertain words back and forth, looking at the thing from different angles. It seemed obvious to me. "It came from the ruined city. It probably built it."

Anna's face turned to me, framed by unkempt brown hair. "Yes, but what is it? What did it evolve from? Where does it fit on the evolutionary tree of life? This thing lived no more than 30 million years after the start of the

Cambrian explosion. That was the first group of large complex animals. How could something like this have evolved so fast? Where did it come from?" She turned back to Nikolai, and I realized I was out of my depth. "What can we do?" she asked him.

I looked at the mad Russian, and saw a tired, puzzled old man, unsure of himself in a strange place. The late afternoon sun wrote shadow-lines across his face. "I wish I knew," he said, slumping to sit beside the split rock.

"Could it fit with your site?"

The Russian shrugged. "The rocks would fit. But everyone back in Russia laughed at the rocks. We have some strange little fossils; I showed you two. I have a photo in my bag that looks like the four fingers on the hand, but smaller and all by itself. The bigger ones are not well-preserved. I gave up showing them everything." His eyes closed, sighing deeply. "We had only the rumor of the ruined city. Just a rumor. You have the skeleton of an inhabitant."

Anna looked overwhelmed, like she had last year after we had talked most of the night, talking about our discovery and sharing our lives. "They won't believe it, Nikolai. They'll laugh at me, and leave me to wither into a lonely old woman."

I didn't want to think of her as lonely. They would have stared at the fossil all evening, if I had not warned them of the time. The slab was too heavy for us to carry. Anna and I worried about Nikolai, he worried about Anna, and I couldn't lift the big rock alone. We'd have to come back with help or equipment to carry it out.

* * * *

We sat around the weathered wooden picnic table talking late into the night. While I brewed coffee on the camp stove, Nikolai explained what he had found in Russia. I sat beside her as he sketched the layering of his rock formations on the pages of a notebook. The features he saw were subtle. I asked a few questions; Anna asked many more. Nikolai's answers sounded as if he had heard most of our questions before.

It was all magic to me. As an engineer, I build optical instruments; it takes a geologist to read the rocks' stories. Nikolai thought his ruins had been a wall, built of stones neatly cut and laid on the mud flat so they fit closely together. "It may have been more a town than a city, but it was in the water. I think they lived in the sea."

Anna nodded as he said his site had been just south of the equator half a billion years ago; so had New York. But I could see her grow uneasy as he sketched a town built in the waters of a tropical sea. Years of graduate school had taught Anna not to speculate wildly beyond the evidence. More than once she had warned me not to take crazy ideas too seriously. Yet there we sat, watching the mad Russian build a few odd stones into a city built by some long-vanished creatures alien to all the science we knew. "How can you read something so fantastic into the rocks?" she asked when he paused for breath.

"It is 40 years I have been a geologist. I know patterns of the Earth like you know Cambrian index fossils. Come see them and you will understand. When I stand before the rocks, I can see the ruined city as clearly as I can see that you are lovers."

I don't know if Anna or I were more startled. We had tried to keep it all proper and under control, not even holding hands. How could he see the hours on the phone, and the thoughts lurking in the back of our minds? How could he have heard us planning the trip to leave time "just to ourselves"? I felt myself blush. "What?" we both said.

Nikolai's mouth formed a conspiratorial grin. "You say it in the way you look at each other. You can not hide that."

Anna recovered first. "No, Nikolai. He is married and has children." Even in the lantern light, I could see her blushing.

"There are no secrets among those who can read rocks," Nikolai laughed. "I can read you both. He is in love with you and you are in love with him." He

paused. "I will not tell your wife, Vern."

"You don't understand," I sputtered, grasping for excuses. "We are just friends."

I couldn't read Nikolai well; it was dark, and my eyes were cloudy. He did not want to hear our protests. Perhaps he had grown used to lies in the old Soviet Union. He stood and shrugged, and said, "I will go sleep in the car, so you can sleep together."

We did not stop him from carrying his sleeping bag from the tent. As he walked to the car, we looked at each other across the picnic table in the lantern light, neither moving. The night before I had dreamed of holding Anna, of exploring her and exploring with her. Now I was a kid caught playing with fire and doused with cold water to put out the flames.

Anna touched my hand, and I held hers. We heard Nikolai close the car door behind himself, and listened to night sounds of the forest. The few others in the campground seemed to be asleep. The stars moved. "Maybe you were right," I whispered across the table. "Maybe he is crazy."

Anna smiled, "He is not the only one."

I savored the time as the stars crept further across the sky. "I can't," I whispered at last.

"Nor I," she replied, letting go my hand. We went quietly into the tent, to crawl into our separate sleeping bags and dream our separate dreams of the ruined city.

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Clouds partly covered the sky when we rose for an early breakfast; the radio forecast steady rain for the afternoon and evening. We would have liked better weather, but we had done well that far, and Nikolai had to leave the next day.

We hiked to the site, but in the sober light of that cloudy morning, it was clear the slab was too big to carry. Anna wouldn't risk cutting it with the equipment we had. We collected other samples, fragmentary fossils that might be distantly related to the big one, but didn't examine them closely. We photographed the fossil on the slab, and protected it as best we could from the elements. We could come back for it later with a bigger crew, the right equipment, and a permit from the park authority.

The rains came soon after lunchtime, and we slogged through the wet forest in plastic rain gear, looking in vain for more signs of the ruined city. We stayed too long, and the walk back did not go well in the heavy rain. Nikolai had pushed himself too hard. He complained little, but we could tell his knees and back hurt.

At camp, we spread a tarp to keep the rain off the stove. While I cooked, they compared rocks, tilting them to catch the lantern light.

Over the meal, I asked what stories the new rocks told.

"Nothing more. That animal might as well have come from another planet," Anna said.

"Why couldn't it?" One visit in half a billion years made sense to me.

Anna gave me a disappointed teacher face, but Nikolai disagreed. "Do not dismiss that idea too fast, Anna. Look at all the planets the astronomers have found around other stars. Mars may have had life once, and that would have been a short trip."

"No, Nikolai, that's much worse," she said. "A few paleontologists might believe an animal that evolved from the anomalocarids. That's vaguely within their concept of reality. But they would laugh at extraterrestrials. You can't tell them too many things they don't want to believe."

The Russian sighed. "Why is it worse? We do not have to change all of evolution if our creature came from another planet. It is early yet. We have many questions to ask and much to learn. From where did it come? How did it build?"

"I don't know," Anna said, studying the scarred table. "I don't know. I wanted something easier."

"Nothing big is easy." Nikolai sipped water from his cup; rain dripped

from the tarp. "They did not want to believe in asteroid impacts or plate tectonics, either."

We were too tired to argue. Nikolai, exhausted, went back to the car soon after dinner, saying nothing more about rocks or love. As we lay in the tent listening to the rain Anna worried again that we should have kept our discovery to ourselves. "I'm not ready for this, Vern. I want to do the right thing, but I don't know what's right. I know it's wrong to suppress evidence, but it's wrong to make wild claims without any support. It would have been simpler if just you and I had come here and worked on this at our own speed."

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know what I had really wanted. "I try to do the right thing, but it isn't easy to tell what that is."

"Isn't it easier to be an engineer, where the numbers give you clear and clean answers?"

I started to tell her about the judgement calls you have to make in cost-performance tradeoffs, but we both drifted to sleep before I could explain that engineering is as uncertain as life.

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Anna and Nikolai discussed what they should do over breakfast, as drizzle fell around the tarp. Nikolai already had drafted a paper on his ruined city; he wanted to add our find to his and make Anna a coauthor. "You can be first," he offered with a broad sweep of his right hand. "I will not say they were extraterrestrials. But it is time to publish. I am an old man, and I have already waited too long. I want answers in my lifetime. Visit my site; my rocks will convert you to the truth."

"We don't have an answer yet," Anna warned. "We may never have an answer," she whispered to me later, not wanting to wound the old Russian. Cautious Anna wanted to wait and do more research. She had to organize students to haul the big slab out of the woods and look for other fossils. She wanted our fossil examined by experts on anomalocarids and eurypterids, the many-legged animals she thought might be related to it. She had to juggle her time to make the Russian trip before her fall classes started. And she wanted time to think, to decide if she could face the inevitable battles with other scientists who would not believe the rocks.

I went inside the tent and packed our gear. After a long debate, they compromised on a three-month wait.

"What do you think it is?" Nikolai asked me as we loaded our gear into the car.

"I have no more idea than Pliny Moody did when he found those old footprints," I answered, wondering what the boy would have thought of dinosaurs.

Nikolai laughed and unzipped a side pocket of his pack. "This is for you," he said, handing me a cardboard-backed envelope with Russian writing on the outside. "It is a picture of another thing from my ruined city. Do not show it to Anna; she will not believe until she sees it."

* * * *

We talked of the future and the past on the way back to Boston. Nikolai was planning for retirement, unsure how he would fare in changing Russia. Anna had a grant application pending, as well as her worries about tenure. I had a big new microscope project coming up. And we all wondered what could have happened half a billion years ago.

Nikolai's flight was first, so we dropped him off at the international terminal. He hugged us both and kissed Anna on the cheek before gathering his luggage to walk through the glass doors.

I drove back around the airport loop to drop off Anna. "I wonder what he saw?" she mused as we got out of the car in front of her terminal.

"The sort of thing you see in the rocks that I don't understand."

"There are many things I don't understand myself," she said, looking deep into my eyes. She reached out her arms and we hugged tightly. "You did the right thing."

"I try," I said. "You're doing the right thing, too."

"It isn't easy. Sometimes I'd just like to run away from it all. But we can't really do that."

I agreed, and we let each other go. We kissed each other chastely on the cheeks. She gathered her things, and waved a broad farewell before she went inside.

Suzanne was waiting for me at home. "I knew you'd be getting home now," she greeted me, as glad to see me as I was to see her. There was nothing chaste about our kisses. As we brought my gear inside, I remembered Nikolai's envelope. I told Suzanne that the mad Russian had given me something mysterious, and handed it to her unopened. She pulled out a black and white photo, and examined it carefully. "Footprints," she said, returning it to me. "Somebody rode a all-terrain vehicle in the mud, got off, and walked around before riding away."

I looked at the photo. A pair of tread marks crossed the picture, spaced evenly like the wheels on a Jeep or ATV. No pair of Climactichnites could have marched along so uniformly. At the top, the path curved and the tracks doubled, showing all four wheels. Each tread was deeper in two spots, as if the vehicle had stopped. There, on opposite sides of the tracks, were prints from small, odd-shaped waffle-soled hiking boots, the sort that the animal we found might have worn. Someone had gotten out and walked across the wet mud. They had bent over to write curled, Arabic-looking letters with a sharp finger before climbing back into the vehicle and riding away. I had seen a kid on an ATV do the same thing on a beach. But this mud had dried long, long ago, before Nikolai had found it and neatly painted letters on the rock with a fine brush. Most of the words were Russian, but the last two were in English: "Latest Cambrian."

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