Maggie and Max

A Highland Adventure



Stewart McKie

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STEWART MCKIE

MAGGIE AND MAX
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DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER
MARGARET MCKIE
Speed bonny boat like a bird on the wing,
over the sea to Skye.

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CHAPTER 1

Scotland? Really?

Will I have to wear a kilt?

Sunlight streamed through the kitchen window as Max loaded the dishwasher. He moved with the mechanical efficiency of someone who'd rather be anywhere else—which was exactly how he felt.

"Do we really have to go to Scotland for our summer holiday?" he asked, not bothering to look up at his mother.

His mother, who stood at the sink rinsing plates, tried to sound cheerful. "Why not? It'll be an adventure."

"All my friends are going to cool places," Max complained. "Australia. The Seychelles. Namibia."

"Well, we're going to Scotland," his mother said firmly.

Max slammed a plate into the dishwasher harder than necessary. "Will I have to wear a kilt?"

His mother smiled slightly. "Scottish people only wear those on special occasions. You're safe."

"What about porridge? Do I have to eat it for every

meal?"

"No one will force you to eat porridge, Max."

"Scotland sucks," Max muttered.

His mother's hand froze on the tap. She turned it off slowly, dried her hands, and placed them gently on Max's shoulders.

"Max," she said quietly, "you know it's been difficult since your father died. I need this. Some peace. Some quiet. A chance to just… breathe. Do you understand?"

Max hugged his mum. For a moment, he was just a kid who missed his dad.

"I guess so," he said softly. "But Dad would never have taken us to Scotland."

He let go his mum and shoved his earbuds in before she could respond, cutting her out. His mother watched him, hurt flickering across her face, before she turned back to the sink.

* * *

The evening rain pattered on the station platform as Max and his mother dragged their wheelies toward the waiting sleeper train to Scotland. Its windows glowed warmly against the darkness. Other families boarded around them, their excited chatter filling the air.

Max walked several paces behind his mother, earbuds firmly in place, music shutting out the world.

* * *

Golden morning light filtered through the train window when Max woke. His mother sat on her lower bunk, watching the Scottish lowlands roll by—endless moorland, ancient stone walls, sheep scattered like white dots across the hills.

Her face was peaceful for the first time in months.

Max leaned over the edge of his upper bunk, still groggy with sleep. "Where are we?"

"Scotland," his mother said simply.

Max squinted at the barren landscape. "Looks like the moon."

He disappeared back into his bunk. His mother's smile faded slightly.

* * *

Wind whipped across the harbour as they struggled with their bags towards the ramp of a car ferry. Seagulls wheeled and cried overhead. The salt air was thick and bracing.

Max's hair whipped into his face. What a desolate place. How could anyone live here?

As the ferry sailed away from the harbour, they leant on the stern rail, watching the mainland recede into mist. The wake churned white and furious behind them. Seagulls swooped and dove, their cries piercing the hum of the ferry’s engine.

The wind caught his mother's hair. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, looking more relaxed than Max had

seen her in a long time.

Max watched her relax, then looked back at the disappearing land.

Something shifted in his expression—maybe the first hint that this place was different from what he'd expected.

CHAPTER 2

The Island

No' much happens here

The ferry horn blared as they approached a tiny port—just a wooden pier, a single building, and one battered taxi waiting like a loyal dog.

Everything was smaller, quieter, more remote than Max had imagined possible.

The taxi driver, Mr. McLeod, was a weather-beaten man in his forties with eyes that twinkled with secrets. He spoke with a musical lilt that made ordinary words sound like poetry.

"So you'll be taking the croft for the full month?" he asked as they climbed into the back of his taxi.

"Yes," Max's mother replied.

"You know there's no' much to do here except walk and fish?"

"Yeah. We know," Max said, rolling his eyes.

"I just want some peace and quiet," his mother said earnestly.

"Well, that you'll get," McLeod said. "No' much happens here. And there's no one around for miles. Just the way some folk like it."

As they drove along the coastal road, they passed a fenced-off military base. Concrete buildings bristled with antennae and satellite dishes. At the centre sat a massive white dome that seemed to pulse with secret purpose.

Max's eyes widened. He sat up straighter. "What's that place?"

"Och, that's just the airbase," McLeod said casually.

"What do they do there?" Max's mother asked.

"Well now, I don't rightly know. They keep it all very hush-hush. Something to do with monitoring air traffic and suchlike."

"A secret base," Max said, genuinely interested. "That's actually kind of cool."

His mother shot him a warning look, but Max barely noticed. He was already imagining what secrets might be hidden behind those fences.

* * *

The taxi pulled up to an isolated stone cottage, an old croft, perched above a dark loch that mirrored the grey sky. The landscape was stark, beautiful, and utterly empty.

"Here we are," McLeod announced.

They climbed out. The silence was profound—no traffic, no neighbours, just wind through heather.

McLeod unloaded their bags and handed Max's mother a key and business card. "You'll find all the supplies you ordered on the kitchen table. That's the house key and my card. Just ring if you need me to take you anywhere."

"There's mobile signal here?" his mother asked hopefully.

"Aye. One of the benefits of having the military nearby."

"And there's broadband in the cottage, right?" Max asked.

“There’s no internet here.”

Max's face fell. “What about a mall? Internet café? Anything?"

"Just a wee supermarket near the base."

Max turned to his mother with a look of betrayal. "What am I supposed to do for an entire month?"

"You could go on some fine rambles in the heather," McLeod suggested kindly. "There's lots of wildlife about. And you can fish and row on the loch."

Max's mother brightened. "That's perfect! You can learn to row. Then you can try out for the school rowing team next term."

"Right," Max said skeptically. "And who exactly is going to teach me to row?"

"Well now. There's my daughter, Maggie," McLeod said.

"She's a champion rower." He pointed toward the loch. "That's her boat there, on the shore."

Max could see a small wooden rowing boat lying upside down on the stony beach.

McLeod climbed back into his taxi and drove off. The engine sound faded quickly into the vast silence.

"This is perfect," Max said sarcastically. "No malls, no internet, and I have to hang out with some random girl."

He grabbed his bag and trudged toward the cottage, already counting the days until they could leave.

CHAPTER 3

Boredom and Beyond

There's something in the loch.

The first week dragged by like a prison sentence.

Max rambled through purple heather, hands in pockets, earbuds in. He

stood on hilltops, wind whipping his jacket, looking down at the tiny

cottage and dark loch.

The landscape was epic, but he felt very small.

He spent hours sitting on the upturned boat by the loch, methodically

skipping stones across the water. He'd gotten quite good at it. One stone

skipped seven times before sinking.

But despite the beautiful scenery and fresh air, Max was thoroughly,

completely, mind-numbingly bored.

* * *

One afternoon, he sat at the rough wooden kitchen table with his mother.

She looked relaxed and healthy, actually smiling as she ate. Max just looked

miserable.

"We've been here a week and I'm dying of boredom," Max said. "Can we

please go home?"

"Max, don't be selfish," his mother replied. "This is really helping me. I've

even started painting again." She gestured to several canvases leaning

against the wall. "And look at you—colour in your cheeks, getting lots of

exercise, sleeping through the night..."

"Yeah," Max said sarcastically. "Fresh air, exercise and sleep. I’m living the

dream. Hashtag ‘aawbless’."

His mother laughed despite herself. "You know, it's a shame we never saw

McLeod's daughter. What was her name again?"

"Maggie. So much for learning to row."

"Maybe she's away on holiday herself?"

"Or maybe she's avoiding the weird English kid who got dumped in

Scotland against his will."

* * *

That night, Max lay in bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Moonlight

streamed through the window. The silence was keeping him awake.

He threw off the covers with a frustrated sigh, pulled on jeans and a

hoodie, and slipped out of the cottage.

The night air was cold and fresh. Max walked down to the water's edge, his

breath making little clouds in the moonlight. The loch was a sheet of black

glass under the full moon.

He picked up a smooth stone and sent it skipping across the surface.

One skip. Two. Three. Four—

Max turned from the loch and sat on the upturned boat.

The heather scrunched behind him.

Max froze. The hair on his neck stood up.

He turned slowly.

A girl stood about ten feet away, watching him.

She had wild red hair in pigtails, freckles like tiny constellations on her

cheeks, and round gold-rimmed glasses that caught the gleam of the

moonlight.

"Jesus!" Max said, startled. "Who are you?"

"Maggie," the girl said matter-of-factly. "Maggie McLeod."

"What are you doing out here? It's the middle of the night."

"I'm often here. I like the night." She studied him carefully. "That's my boat

you're sitting on, by the way."

She walked forward confidently and sat beside him on the upturned hull.

Max shifted uncomfortably.

"But why come to the loch at night?"

"I'm investigating something," Maggie said firmly.

"Investigating what?"

"There's something in the loch."

Max laughed. "What, like the Loch Ness Monster?"

Maggie's expression remained deadly serious. "No. Not a monster. Not a

whale. Nothing natural."

"Then what?"

"Something from the base. Maybe a secret weapon.

Hidden underwater."

"That's crazy."

Maggie stood abruptly and started walking away. She stopped and turned

back.

"Crazy or not, I'll be here tomorrow night. Same time. To investigate

further." She gave him a challenging look. "You're welcome to come. If

you're not too scared that is."

She ran off into the darkness, disappearing into the night.

Max stared after her, heart pounding. For the first time in a week, he felt

something other than bored.

CHAPTER 4

Questions and Mysteries

Max pushed scrambled eggs around his plate at breakfast, distracted. His

mother watched him over her coffee.

"You're very quiet this morning."

"Just thinking."

“Oh, oh," she teased.

"Mum... what do you reckon they actually do at that secret base?"

His mother set down her mug. "Like Mr. McLeod said, it's probably just a

listening station. They monitor radio signals, watch for potential threats."

"What kind of threats? Like terrorists?"

"That sort of thing, yes."

"But they wouldn't develop secret weapons there, would they?"

"Secret weapons?" His mother looked concerned. "Max, where did you get

that idea?"

Max shrugged. "Just wondering."

But his mind was racing with possibilities. What if Maggie was right? What

if there really was something hidden in the loch?

* * *

That night, Max slipped out of the cottage again, moving with more

purpose this time. He glanced back once at the dark windows of the croft,

then headed down to the loch.

Maggie was already there, sitting on the boat staring at the dark waters of

the loch.

"So you're here," she said with satisfaction.

"Yeah. So what?"

"Then let's investigate." Maggie stood up. "Help me with the boat."

They flipped the boat over together—it was heavier than Max expected.

They fitted the oars into the locks and dragged it to the water's edge. The

hull scraped against stones.

Maggie climbed in and positioned the oars with expert ease. Max shoved

off and scrambled aboard, nearly tipping them.

"Ever been in a boat before?" Maggie asked dryly.

"Of course," Max said defensively.

"At a theme park, I bet." Maggie laughed.

Maggie rowed with smooth, powerful strokes. The oarlocks creaked

rhythmically. They glided across the still water toward the centre of the

loch.

The water was calm and deep and dark.

Maggie stopped rowing and shipped the oars. The sudden silence was eerie.

"So now what?" Max whispered.

"Listen."

Max strained to hear. At first—nothing. Then, very faint, a low humming

sound, like a giant refrigerator deep underwater.

"What is that?" Max whispered.

"I don't know. But it's getting louder."

They both leaned over opposite sides of the boat, peering into the black

water.

"I can't see anything. It's too dark."

The humming intensified, vibrating through the hull beneath them.

Maggie reached for the oars, suddenly urgent. "We should go back—"

The water's surface began to vibrate.

They grabbed the sides of the boat as the humming became a roar.

"What's happening?!" Max shouted.

The water churned, bubbles rising from below.

Then—something massive began to emerge.

The boat lifted as an enormous disc-shaped craft rose beneath them like a

whale surfacing. It was the size of a small roundabout, covered in seamless

silver-blue metal that seemed to shimmer and shift.

"Oh my God—" Max gasped.

The craft continued rising, lifting their tiny boat higher and higher above

the loch. Water cascaded off its surface in waterfalls. The humming

stopped.

Max and Maggie gripped the sides of the boat, frozen with terror.

The craft hovered silently about twenty feet above the

loch, their boat

perfectly balanced on top of its curved surface.

A hatch slid open with a hiss.

A spherical robot floated out—all smooth curves and glowing blue lights.

It hovered above them and emitted a pale beam of blue light at the

rowboat.

Both children slumped unconscious into the boat.

The robot extended another beam that levitated the children from the boat,

floating them gently toward the open hatch and into the spacecraft.

With another beam, the robot raised their empty boat rose vertically off

the craft, hovered it sideways, then dropped it back onto the loch with a

splash.

The robot followed the children inside. The hatch sealed with a whisper.

The craft shot into the sky and vanished in a blink.

The loch returned to perfect stillness, as if nothing had happened, the

empty rowboat floating aimlessly in the water.

CHAPTER 5

Missing

Morning light streamed through the cottage windows. Max's mother set

breakfast plates on the table.

"Max! Max! Breakfast!"

Silence.

She walked to his bedroom door and knocked. "Max? Time to get up!"

She opened the door. The bed was empty, covers thrown back.

"Max?" Concern crept into her voice.

She ran through the cottage, checking every room. Kitchen. Bathroom.

Living room. All empty.

"Max! Max! This isn't funny! Where are you?"

Panic rising, she ran outside. "Max!"

Nothing but wind and emptiness.

She ran back inside, found McLeod's card with her shaking hands, and

dialled the number on her mobile.

"Mr. McLeod? It's Max's mum. He's—he's disappeared. I can't find him

anywhere. Can you come? Please? Thank you. Hurry."

She stood at the window, hugging herself, staring at the empty landscape,

tears starting to form in her eyes.

* * *

McLeod's taxi arrived and screeched to a halt. He jumped out before it

fully stopped, his face looking grave.

"I've something to tell you—"

"About Max?"

"No. About my Maggie. She's missing too."

Max's mother's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh God. Both of them?"

"Let's check the loch. Now."

They ran down to the rocky beach, breathing hard.

Maggie's boat floated in the middle of the loch, oars trailing in the water.

"That's Maggie's boat," McLeod said, pointing.

"Do you think Max was with her?"

"Possible."

"What were they doing out there at night?"

"Maggie likes to row at night. Always has. Under the stars."

"And you let her?"

McLeod bristled. "She's no' a child. And she has a mind of her own."

"They could have drowned!"

"Maggie's an excellent swimmer," McLeod said calmly. "Can Max swim?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then drowning seems unlikely. Even if they fell out, it's no' far to shore."

"We need to call the police. Now."

"The only police on the island are the military police at the base."

"Then let's go. Please."

* * *

Wing Commander Harris sat behind his desk, crisp in his RAF uniform.

His bearing was military but his eyes showed genuine concern as Max's

mother and Mr. McLeod sat across from him.

"I'm very sorry to hear your children are missing," Harris said. "Did they

know each other?"

"As far as I know, they'd never met," Max's mother replied.

"Perhaps they met by chance and ran off together? Children do play

pranks."

"Maggie's no' the running-off type," McLeod said firmly.

"And where would they go?" Max's mother added. "This is an island!"

Harris nodded. "Fair point. All right. I'll brief my military police

immediately. We'll organise a search party. Try not to worry. If they're on

the island, we'll find them."

But the look in his eyes suggested even he didn't quite believe it.

CHAPTER 6

The (Space)Ship

Max and Maggie woke to find themselves strapped into high-backed seats

facing an enormous curved screen. Stars streaked past at impossible speed.

Behind them, the spherical robot hovered silently.

The screen flickered, then displayed a woman in a sleek uniform. She

looked human but somehow different—ageless and serene, with eyes that

seemed to see everything.

"Good morning."

"Where are we?!" Max shouted, panicked.

"On the bridge of a spaceship."

Maggie, surprisingly calm, asked, "And who are you?"

"I am the Commander of this vessel."

"Are you an alien?" Maggie asked.

“You could call me that.” the woman replied with a small smile.

"But you look just like us! Where are you from?"

"I am from the future. Your future."

"How far in the future?" Max demanded.

“Let’s just say some way into the future."

“You speak English. Do they still speak English in the future?” Maggie

asked.

"I actually speak a very different language. But our technology can translate

instantly into any language of the past. Would you like to hear my real

speech?"

"Yeah, sure," Max said.

The Commander's mouth moved, emitting rapid beeps and blips, like an

old modem on fast-forward. It lasted only a few seconds.

“Awesome! What did you just say?" Max asked.

"I recited your Bible. The entire text."

"The entire Bible? In like three seconds?!"

"Our language is extraordinarily efficient. To help you remember it, I’ve

also sent you a message on your mobile device."

"I left my phone at the cottage.” Max replied.

"I've located it and delivered the message. Please listen to it when you

return. It's very special. I'll explain why later."

"Your language must sound bizarre when you talk to each other," Maggie

said.

"Actually, we don’t talk to each other often. We primarily communicate via

thought-waves. Telepathy as you would call it. Our brains evolved that

capability over many centuries. This also means we have no secrets—we

always know what others are thinking."

Max looked uncomfortable. "So you know what I'm thinking right now?"

"No," the Commander said, amused. "Your brain is still quite primitive

compared to ours so we are unable to establish a connection."

"That's a relief!"

"But where exactly are you?" Maggie asked. "Are you somewhere on this

ship?"

"I'm very far from you. We rarely travel with our

vessels."

"Wait—there's no pilot?” Max was confused.

"Correct. We control our ships remotely and use robotic assistants to man

them."

The robot zoomed into view, wiggled in front of the children, and then

disappeared behind them.

“But why was your ship in our loch?" Maggie asked.

“The ship experienced an unexpected malfunction requiring immediate

repair otherwise it might have crashed. So we hid the ship in your loch

during the process to avoid detection."

"What are you going to do with us?" Max asked, scared now.

"You won't be harmed. Our entire civilisation is founded on the principle

of 'Do no harm.’ It has also taken us - you - many, many centuries to get to

this point."

"Then why did you take us?"

"It was accidental," the Commander said apologetically.

"You were directly above the ship when surfaced. The choice was to

submerge again and risk throwing you in the lake or take you with us. We

chose to take you with us.

You'll stay aboard while we return to our repair station, then we'll bring you

home exactly where and when we found you."

“But how can you take us to ‘when’ you found us. Surely that will be in the

past?” Maggie asked.

The Commander smiled. “We have conquered time travel and can move

back and forward as we wish.”

“Wicked!” Max said, “But how long will it take to get us home?"

"Our ships travel faster than you can imagine. You'll be home soon. But

now we must put you to sleep for your journey to a distant planet. You

won't feel anything. Follow the robot."

Max stood up. "Will we see you again?"

“At the repair station.” The Commander reassured them.

CHAPTER 7

Where Are They?

A small room held two transparent life support pods against the walls. Max

and Maggie lay down in them. The lids sealed with a soft hiss. Displays

activated, showing their vital signs.

The robot emitted a blue ray. The children's eyes closed.

The lights dimmed and the robot glided away.

* * *

Back at the cottage, Max's mother and McLeod sat at the kitchen table with

untouched mugs of tea.

Mother held Max's phone, staring at it like it might offer answers.

"He left his phone behind. He can't even call..."

The phone buzzed. A text.

"Maybe that's him!" she said hopefully.

She tapped to play the text on speaker. A burst of rapid beeps and blips

filled the room.

They stared at each other, baffled.

"I've never heard anything like that," McLeod said.

"Neither have I."

"We need to check this with Wing Commander Harris. Now."

* * *

At the base, they crowded into a room crammed with sophisticated

monitoring equipment. Screens displayed radar plots, satellite imagery,

radio frequencies.

A young technician named Smith played the message again. The strange

beeps filled the room.

"It's compressed data," Smith said thoughtfully. "Like special forces use for

encrypted communications."

"Is it one of ours?" Harris asked.

"Could be Russian. Chinese. Hard to say without more analysis."

"Get on it immediately. This might be connected to our missing children."

"I'll work through the night if I have to," Smith promised.

Harris turned to Max's mother and McLeod. "Come back tomorrow. I'll

have more then."

* * *

The children slept peacefully in their pods, as the ship zoomed through

space.

Back on Earth Smith worked late into the night, headphones on, adjusting

dials, running code on his screen.

Max's mother lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling.

McLeod stood at his window, looking out at the dark loch.

* * *

When they returned to Harris's office, his face said it all.

"I'm sorry. My men have searched every inch of this island. There's no sign

of your children."

"But they can't have left the island!" Max's mother said desperately.

"I don't see how they could have left without someone knowing."

"I checked with the ferry company," McLeod added. "No children

matching their descriptions. And the local fishermen saw nothing unusual."

"Are you hiding something from us?" Max's mother asked accusingly.

"Excuse me?" Harris looked offended.

"Maybe the children saw something they shouldn't have—something secret

—and you caught them?"

"You think we kidnapped your children to protect military secrets?"

"Well, we don't really know what you do here," McLeod said.

"This is a listening station. We monitor communications. We don't develop

weapons and we certainly don't kidnap children!" Harris softened. "Look, I

understand your suspicions. But they're not on this base. They must be

hiding somewhere on the island."

Max's mother gave a bitter laugh. "It's almost like they've been abducted by

aliens."

Harris managed an ironic smile. "If there were aliens, our equipment would

have detected them. Trust me."

CHAPTER 8

The Repair Station

The screen on the spaceship bridge showed a barren, dusty planet surface.

Suddenly, a massive hangar door opened in the ground like a giant mouth.

Another spaceship emerged slowly and vanished in a brilliant flash.

Their ship descended into the hangar. The door closed above it.

* * *

The Commander herself stood in the pod room as the robot opened the

pods and woke the children with a blue ray.

They sat up, groggy and confused.

"Where are we?" Max asked, looking around.

"Welcome to our repair station. Once the ship is fixed, we'll return you to

Earth. By the way, what are your names? I should have

asked earlier."

"I'm Maggie."

"Max."

"Maggie and Max. Let's go to the bridge so you can see where we are."

* * *

The screen showed an enormous underground hangar filled with dozens

of spaceships of various sizes. Robots zipped between them like metallic

fireflies.

"Our ships come here for repairs constantly. See that one with the dents?"

One ship's hull was badly pock-marked.

"How did that happen?" Max asked.

"Asteroid shower. It happens in space. You can't always avoid them."

"But how do your ships even fly?" Maggie asked. “They have no propellers

or jets."

"Excellent question. The secret is magnetism. Powerful electromagnets

built into every ship exploit the power of magnetism. They run on solar

power and use the magnetic fields in space to hover,

move, and—"

"And what?" Max prompted.

"And jump. Watch."

The screen showed a simulation—a ship hovering, spinning on its axis,

moving up and down, then suddenly getting smaller as it traversed

distances almost instantly.

"That's insane!" Max said. "How fast do they go?"

"Fast enough to cross your solar system in minutes. Your galaxy in hours.

It’s the main reason we mostly don’t travel with the ships - our bodies

could not stand it.”

“But we’ve been fine”. Maggie observed.

“Yes.” The Commander confirmed, “because you have been travelling at a

speed carefully calibrated to avoid doing you any harm. Anyway, are you

hungry?"

"Starving," Maggie admitted.

"What would you like?"

"Porridge and tea, please."

"Bacon, eggs, and a vanilla latte," Max said.

"The robot will prepare it. Please sit."

They sat in the command chairs. Trays hovered onto their laps with two

bowls and spoons.

The bowls were full of a strange green glop.

"Where's the bacon?" Max asked, disgusted.

"This isn't porridge!" Maggie protested.

"Just try it. Trust me.” The Commander said.

They picked up their spoons and tasted the glop.

"Whoa!" Max said, amazed. "That's exactly bacon, eggs, and latte! All in

one spoonful!"

"And this tastes like perfect porridge!" Maggie said. "How?"

"Our food is intelligent. It tells your brain how to imagine the taste. So

everything is always delicious and nothing is ever wasted.”

“It tastes a lot better than my mum’s cooking!” Max confirmed.

CHAPTER 9

Time Travel

"We need to test your ship after the repairs," the Commander said once

they'd finished eating. "Would you like to take a short trip to another

planet?"

"Absolutely!" Max said.

"Will it be a dead planet like this one?" Maggie asked.

"Wait and see. But first we must secure you."

The robot emitted a ray. Massive restraints descended over their chairs like

roller coaster bars.

The screen showed stars streaking past, then a planet approached—blue

and beautiful —like Earth but somehow slightly different.

The ship dived through the cloudy atmosphere.

They zoomed through incredible landscapes—dense

steaming jungles, wide

savannahs with massive herds of strange beasts, active volcanoes spewing

lava, waterfalls the size of mountains.

The ship stopped and hovered over different scenes, sometimes flipping

upside down for different perspectives.

Dinosaurs—creatures of immense size and variety—roamed below. Some

even flew past the ship. A massive pteranodon banked around them, its

beady eye visible through the window.

Max and Maggie gasped in wonder, as all this flashed by on the screen.

The ship plunged into an ocean, revealing shoals of strange fish and

enormous aquatic reptiles.

Then the ship shot back into space as quickly as it arrived.

* * *

Back at the repair base, the restraints automatically released.

"Did you enjoy your trip?" the Commander asked.

"That was better than any video game!" Max said breathlessly.

"What planet was that?" Maggie asked. "It looked familiar but..."

"It was Earth. Your Earth. Approximately 75 million years ago."

"We just traveled through time?" Maggie said, amazed.

"Yes."

"Can you take pictures of the past?" Max asked.

"Unfortunately, no. Images of the past or future appear blank in the

present. A limitation of how time works."

"So they wouldn't work on my Instagram channel?" Max sighed.

The robot hovered over in front of the children.

"Now it's time to take you home. Follow the robot to your pods."

CHAPTER 10

Going Home

Stars streaked past the screen as the ship returned to Earth. When they

were nearly home, the robot opened the their pods and led them to the

bridge where they sat in the command chairs.

The Commander appeared on the screen.

"How are you feeling?" The Commander asked.

"Tired," Max said.

"Ready to go home," Maggie added.

"I woke you early so you could see something."

The screen showed the Moon, then Earth growing larger—that iconic blue

marble with swirling white clouds.

They passed slowly by the International Space Station.

"That's the ISS!" Maggie said, pointing.

"Correct."

"Can they see us?" Max asked.

"No. We're traveling slightly before their time, so we don't exist in their

present moment yet."

"Like The Time Machine!" Max said. "The H.G. Wells book!"

"We're familiar with that book. His machine was crude but the concept was

sound."

"So you can go backward and forward in time whenever you want?"

Maggie asked.

"Yes, though we rarely operate in the present—too much risk of

discovery."

"But you were in the present when you picked us up," Maggie observed.

"True. It was a risky necessity."

The screen showed Scotland becoming clearer—mountains, lochs, tiny

settlements and isolated crofts. Their loch came into view, Maggie's boat

still floating in the middle.

"There's my boat!" Maggie exclaimed.

"Yes. We're returning you to the exact moment and place

we took you

from.

Your entire journey has occurred in what you would call the future. So

you're going back not only to where you were, but also to precisely when

you were there."

"Like we were never gone?" Max asked.

"Exactly."

The ship hovered over Maggie's boat.

"Will we ever see you again?" Max asked.

"Remember the message I sent to your phone? Reply to it with any

message, and we'll receive it in our present—your future. If we choose to

respond, we can only return to this exact location, at the same time of day."

"But I'm leaving soon to go home to England!" Max said, disappointed.

"I'll still be here." Maggie said cheerfully.

"Max, we can only return to the precise spacetime coordinates where your

timeline first intersected with ours. This spot. At the same time we picked

you up."

"So if we reply to you in our future, you can only come back to this point

in our past?" Maggie asked.

"Exactly."

"That's completely insane!” Max exclaimed.

"Perhaps. But that's how time works." The Commander's voice became

warm. "It's time to say goodbye now, Maggie and Max. Maybe we'll meet

again. Maybe not. That choice is yours."

The screen went dark.

* * *

Maggie rowed them back to shore with smooth, practiced strokes. Neither

child spoke.

They reached the rocky beach and dragged the boat up. They flipped it

over to cover the oars.

For a moment, they just stood there, not knowing what to say.

Then they hugged—a firm, happy hug between two kids who'd shared

something truly wild and exciting.

Maggie broke away first and ran into the darkness toward her home.

Max watched her go, then turned toward the cottage.

CHAPTER 11

Home Again

Morning light streamed through the cottage windows. Max's mother set the

table for breakfast, moving mechanically, like she hadn't slept.

A dishevelled, yawning Max appeared in the doorway.

His mother froze, plate in hand, staring at him like he was a ghost.

"Morning," Max said casually.

"Max!" She rushed to him, checking him over.

"What? I was just in bed..."

"You look exhausted."

"Yeah. Didn't sleep great." Max sat at the table.

His mother sat across from him, studying his face intently. "I had the most

terrible nightmare. I dreamed you'd disappeared. You and Mr. McLeod's

daughter Maggie. And we couldn't find you anywhere."

"Actually... I didn't really sleep well myself.” Max admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"I went for a walk last night. Down to the loch. And I met Maggie—you

know, McLeod's daughter. Then we went rowing."

"Wait. You and Maggie were out on the loch in the middle of the night?!"

"She was investigating something. She asked me to come along."

"Max! You could have drowned! Anything could have happened!"

"But it didn't," Max said calmly.

His mother tried to compose herself. "So... did you find anything?"

Max shrugged. "No. Nothing. That loch is dead as a doornail."

"No secret weapons?"

Max smiled slightly. "Not even a Loch Ness monster."

They started eating. His mother watched him carefully, noticing something

different about him but unable to put her finger on it.

"So what's Maggie like?"

"She's... actually really cool," Max said thoughtfully.

"Well, that's good! Now maybe you will learn to row after all. At least you'll

have something to do for the rest of the holiday."

"Yeah. Meeting Maggie was pretty exciting."

“Really? Is she pretty?”

“I guess so,” Max admitted.

They ate in comfortable silence for a moment.

"Mum?"

"Yes?"

"Can we come back here at Christmas?"

His mother looked surprised. "But I thought you hated Scotland?"

Max looked out the window at the loch. "I changed my mind. This place

is… different from what I thought."

His mother studied him, seeing something new in his expression—a kind

of maturity that wasn't there before.

"We'll see. So maybe Scotland wasn’t such a bad idea after all?” she said

softly.

Max smiled slightly and took a bite of toast, his eyes looking out towards

the loch.

Through the window, the dark waters lay calm and still.

For now.

But maybe not forever…

After all, Max has that message on his phone. And Maggie is still on the

island. And the loch is still there, dark and deep and a great hiding place.

So what happens next? Well, nothing right now.

Unless, of course, someone decides to send a message to the future…

Glossary of Terms

Croft - a small cottage that used to be occupied by a crofter and his family

Loch - a lake in Scotland

ISS - the International Space Station

About the Author

Stewart McKie PhD is a children's book author based in the UK and Norway.

Maggie and Max: A Highland Adventure was his first children's adventure story.

His second adventure story is called *Cloud Island*.

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You can find out more about the Hytte Troll books at https://hyttetroll.com.

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