

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA: AN ANDREW VALQUIST ADVENTURE

by Keith Massey

Chapter One

Monday, March 14, 2005

The day had finally arrived! I stood in a line of people at the National Security Agency's Friendship Annex (which they depersonalize and call the FANX). I had been told to bring a copy of my birth certificate and two picture IDs. The line of new employees stretched outside. I could see my breath on that chilly spring morning.

"I can't wait to come in from the cold," I joked to a man behind me in line.

He didn't respond, apparently unaware of the spy craft jargon where "come in from the cold" means to return from an undercover assignment. (And, in that instant, I had no idea just how soon I would go abroad undercover.)

As I stood outside the door, waiting my turn for procedures I did not completely understand, I looked the FANX facilities over. Tall and presumably electrified barbed wire embraced several tan buildings. I had been inside this area twice before. This was the complex several miles north of the main NSA facilities at Fort Meade, Maryland. The FANX is used to process applicants for the various tests they need to take before being hired at the NSA. Not far from where I waited, I could see the two-story office building where I had taken my Arabic tests several months earlier.

They had flown me from Chicago, where I was staying with my twin brother Stefan and his family after I finished my tour in Iraq with the Army. The NSA put me up in a nearby hotel and gave me vouchers to eat in the restaurant there. For two days I took language tests, both reading skills and listening exercises in Arabic. Now, my Arabic was pretty good since it was part of my Ph.D. and I had spent a year speaking it regularly in Iraq. I passed those tests and I seemed to be on a fast track to get into the NSA.

That's when I hit a huge roadblock. My Top Secret (TS) security clearance was not so easy to get. Basically, for a TS, you have to be a United States citizen (check, I was born in Wisconsin). You also can't have any immediate family who aren't citizens (check, all I have is a twin brother, also born in Wisconsin). The other thing is, I had a Secret clearance when I was in the Army. And that's supposed to make getting TS all the more easy since they don't have to reinvestigate times you've already accounted for.

For a TS clearance, you need to describe where you were and with whom you were for the previous ten years. You see, they're always trying to disprove the unlikely hypothesis that you are secretly an agent of a foreign government's intelligence service. If such a person ever got a Top Secret clearance, you can imagine the security disaster that would be for us. So, if someone can't explain adequately where they were for an entire month two years ago, who knows? Maybe that was the month they spent in Russia being briefed by Russian Intelligence for a mission to be a deep mole.

But, why would this be difficult in my case, you wonder? Well, here's the problem. The day after getting back from Iraq, my twin brother and I went to Romania for a month, during which time we actually ended up working with the Romanian Secret Intelligence Agency SRI (*Serviciul Român de Informații*). It's a long and complicated story. It's a good story, but not something to be explained away in a single sentence on my security forms. (And it's a story told in the novel *A Place of Brightness*.)

After I sent in all the paperwork for my clearance, page after page, about forty in all, documenting my whereabouts for the previous ten years, I got a call for an interview with the Department of Defense investigator who would be researching me for a possible clearance. She had me meet her at the local post office. Apparently a DOD investigator can just call the local post office and say, "Hey, I need office space. Make it so."

She began asking a few follow-up questions based on the things I put in my forms. And then came the big one.

"Um, can you tell me more about this month in Romania earlier this year?"

I decided to tell the entire truth. The second I mentioned SRI she starts shaking her head.

"This may not be fixable, do you realize that?" she said.

And so began the longest six months of my life. I needed this job. I had no other decent prospects at the time. There simply aren't any jobs in higher education. Sure, I had a Ph.D., but so do a thousand other people. As

it is, I ended up becoming a finalist for a position at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. I had a Ph.D. completed, I had teaching experience, and I had academic publications in peer-reviewed journals. But I didn't get the job. I found out later that someone with just a Master's Degree, no teaching experience, and no publications got the position. Oh, and she was also the godchild of the college president. After that humiliation, I had no will left to send a resume to colleges, knowing that someone else out there already knew they had the job and the so-called search process was just a legal formality. Now, I had taught Latin in a high school before joining the Army. And I suppose I could have gone searching for a similar job elsewhere in the United States. But if I had to start all over again, I wanted it to be in something very fresh. And so, I had decided that, for the time being, this NSA thing was my best prospect.

But for six months I was told that the DOD was still looking into my possible connections to a foreign intelligence service and my clearance was in limbo. With each passing day I was more stressed out, thinking that my clearance might not happen at all. I remember that, in that timeframe, I got an email from someone claiming to be a Nigerian general with a business proposition and I was so paranoid that I called the FBI to report it, just in case this was a secret NSA test to see how I would react to such things.

While all that was still in process, the NSA scheduled me to do my polygraph test. Again they flew me to Washington and put me up at that same hotel. They told me to be ready to get on a bus the following morning to be taken to the FANX complex where the polygraph would take place.

Now, something unusual happened that night. I was in bed, in my hotel room, trying to relax in preparation for what I assumed would be a stressful next day. Then I heard a noise at the door. It's someone trying the knob. And then, the door opens!

Into my room walks a tall woman, early thirties, long blonde hair, quite—fit. She is apparently a flight attendant, judging from the smart blue dress-uniform and matching hat. And Baltimore-Washington International Airport was not far from this hotel.

She does not see me and puts her bag down on the dresser. I'm speechless, unable to imagine how she has gotten in here.

She turns and, upon seeing a man in the bed, shouts, "What are you doing here?!"

"This is my room!" I explain.

She sighs heavily. “This happens sometimes. They accidentally double book a room and reissue a key for it.”

I’m still quite flustered. “I guess that’s what happened.”

Then she smiles at me and says, “You know, we could just share this place.”

And it hits me. Of course this isn’t happening! This is a test from the NSA! I mean, I’m here to complete security tests, including a lie detector. So they’re setting up this scenario to determine how I would react to it. This is the stuff of fantasy. So this can’t possibly be real.

“No, miss,” I say loudly. “That is not going to happen. You need to leave-right now.”

She looks at me dumbfounded and grabs her bag from the dresser. Then she turns in a huff, goes out the door, and slams it behind her.

Now, you know already that I will eventually go to work at the NSA. And after I had been there several weeks I went to the security office and asked about this incident. And I learned that the NSA does not do such tests.

That’s right. It was real. It wasn’t a test. I kicked a beautiful flight attendant out of my hotel room that night. Oh well, I guess I’m sure it was for the best. (Though I admit I revisit the incident in my mind from time to time.)

The next morning, I arrived at the FANX for my polygraph. Obviously I’m nervous. I mean, I’ve never had a lie-detector test before. A bunch of us are sitting there waiting our turn. We’re in the same large room where I had hung out some months before while waiting between language tests. It’s like an airport lobby, short gray carpet, dozens of benches facing each other. Televisions in every corner of the room displayed the latest news, as if implying that the NSA already knew everything projected there last Tuesday. They also have a nice coffee service. As I drink several cups, I can feel my stress level rising. In retrospect, you probably shouldn’t drink too much coffee before a polygraph test, but who tells you these things?

I see official looking people entering the waiting room and calling out names. Judging from the agency badges worn by most of the people waiting, there were more current employees being re-polygraphed than first timers seeking employment. I would later learn that you have to be retested every five years.

“Jenn Roher?” a man asks.

A woman near me stands and approaches him. I see them shake hands and he leads her down a foreboding hallway.

It feels like an eternity. I drink more coffee.

“Andrew Valquist?” I hear.

Standing from my chair, I approach a tall blue-suited and gray-haired man.

“I’m Stan. I’ll be your polygrapher today.”

I shake his hand and off we go.

We enter a small room with a massive mirror I assumed to be a one-way window. Bright florescent lights shone from the ceiling against the other walls, all sporting cream-colored panels. Things seem just very polite until he starts putting “The Equipment” on me. A blood pressure cuff goes on my right arm. On the other hand he puts a little metal cup over my index finger (to measure perspiration). And then he puts yards of what look like curled old-style telephone cords around my chest (to measure my breathing).

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes,” I lie. And it occurs to me that my lie detector test is officially off to a poor start.

“Just relax and answer everything I ask as truthfully as you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

I was immediately put at ease by the fact that the questions were no-brainers.

“Are you Andrew Valquist?”

“Yes,” I said truthfully.

Now, in retrospect, it’s not irrelevant to ask a man with an identical twin if he really is the person he claims to be.

But then the questions got harder.

“Have you ever taken illegal drugs?”

I started to explain the circumstances behind a single ill-advised puff on a joint at a party in high school where there was this really fantastic red-head I was trying to...

“Yes or no!” he snapped.

His tone took me by surprise.

“Yes,” I said.

“Have you ever *sold* illegal drugs?”

“No,” I said, truthfully.

Soon came the questions I was dreading the most.

“Are you now or have you ever been a member of an organization which intends the overthrow of the United States government?”

“No.”

“Are you now or have you ever been employed by a foreign government?”

I decided in that instant that he obviously was not willing to hear the complicated explanation of why I had worked *with*—but not *for*— the SRI several months earlier. And the real purpose of this question was to find out if I was an undercover plant secretly working for a foreign intelligence agency, which I was not.

“No,” I said, feeling my blood pressure spike at the ambiguity of my situation.

He fell silent, and began writing several notes on his clipboard. After what seemed an eternity, he pulled his chair directly in front of mine. He leaned into me so close that I could smell every seeping and stinking cavity in his teeth.

“You’re lying to me,” he said loudly.

I was in shock. “No, I’m not,” I finally offered.

“Yes, you are,” he returned. “When you said you’ve never sold illegal drugs, I can tell you’re lying. And you are not going to leave this room until you admit the truth.”

Wow, I thought. That’s one point on which I am quite sure. I really never have sold illegal drugs. I’ve never sold *legal* drugs. I’ve actually never sold *anything*. Now, I knew my answer to the question about foreign governments was a matter of interpretation. And my DOD investigator knew the whole story and was out there trying to sort all that out. Even so, I was surprised that the machine saw me as evasive on this particular question.

“It’s one o’clock right now,” he said. “I’ve got nowhere to go. You will not leave this room until you admit that you have sold illegal drugs.”

And so, the showdown began. An eternity of silence went by. I don’t know exactly how long. It felt like hours but I think in the end it was something on the order of fifteen minutes.

“You really aren’t leaving here until you admit it,” he said.

“I’ve never sold illegal drugs,” I repeated.

He shook his head. Getting up from his chair, he began to remove “The Equipment.”

“Get out of here,” he said in disgust.

I walked out the door, my heart falling and believing that this opportunity was now lost.

A man in a black suit stopped me as I entered the waiting room. “Dr. Valquist?” he said. “Go back to your hotel room and relax. We’re rescheduling you for another polygraph tomorrow.”

“What?” I said bewildered. “I thought I failed it!”

“A lot of people fail it the first time. Just relax and we’ll try this again tomorrow.”

Back at my hotel room, I tried to make sense of the day. I concluded that, for whatever reason, I must have unconsciously projected anxiety from one question into another where it simply didn’t belong. And I also learned later that they don’t intentionally mess with people in a polygraph just to see how they will respond.

The following morning, I breezed through my second polygraph. I had a different examiner, which is their policy. And the man told me as he unhooked “The Equipment” that he would have repeated questions a second time if there were a problem. That was as close as he could come to telling me I passed.

Five months later I got an email informing me that I had my TS clearance. And I learned that my EOD (Entry On Duty) date was March 14, which was still a ways off.

I’m not going to go into depth on the bittersweet time that followed with my brother and his family. We had drifted apart when I went to grad school and he went to seminary. (He’s an Eastern Orthodox priest today.) And then I was in the Army and went to Iraq. But now we had just finished several months together, which included an adventure in Romania we could never have anticipated. Anyway, I said I wasn’t going to go into depth on it, so it’ll suffice to say that tears were shed and plenty of wine was drunk.

I moved everything I owned, which all fit in my car, to a one-bedroom apartment just west of Fort Meade, Maryland, the Army base which houses the main campus of the National Security Agency.

And that brings me back finally to the long row of people on a crisp spring morning at the FANX. My turn arrived, I presented my papers, they confirmed my name on their lists, and I sat for my ID picture. The group of us, about fifty in all, were taken from room to room that morning for what seemed like endless human resource information sessions.

After a lunch in the FANX cafeteria (where I had eaten for free when I came for the language tests and polygraph, but this time had to pay), we were all put on a bus for the main NSA complex at Fort Meade. There was just one order of business left for the day. Just off the main hallway which

connects Operations Buildings 1 and 2, we entered the main security briefing room. (I have heard this is the longest hallway in the country, if not the world.) As I stepped through the door, I was handed a manila envelope with my name printed on a white label. I took a seat in the front row and looked inside. There I found a plastic ID card, about the size of a driver's license. The picture they took of me earlier was printed on it. I now had an official agency badge.

Included with the agency badge was a chain to hang it on because we were required now to wear this thing around our necks to prove our right to be in a classified area. The only other thing in the folder was a single piece of paper. It was a pretty straightforward document. It explained that I, with a place to sign my assent to the terms, accepted a lifetime obligation to never divulge anything I learned that is classified and also to submit anything I write for pre-publication review, even if I leave the agency. Since leaving the NSA to become headmaster at the Fairfax Classical Academy, I've published academic articles with no Arabic content at all. It doesn't matter. I have to send them off to the NSA for review, just in case I even inadvertently mention something classified. (Adventures connected to my job at the Fairfax Classical Academy are described in the novel *In Saecula Saeculorum*.)

The briefing room was like a college lecture hall. Dark blue walls framed twenty rows of seats all facing a stage with a black podium sporting the NSA Seal, a Bald Eagle holding keys in its feet, ringed with the name of the Agency.

"Would everyone please rise," a woman at the front of the room said.

We all complied and a man in a black suit entered.

She introduced the man and described his rank and position within the NSA in a way that certainly sounded very high up the chain of command but which was utterly lost on me at the moment.

"I'm happy to have the opportunity to conduct your official swearing-in ceremony this morning," he said. "Please raise your right hand and repeat after me."

Now, that was not the first time I had raised my right hand and sworn to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. But I am proud to add that the gentleman who swore me into the NSA that day would go on a few years later to attain the highest civilian office of the organization. He would eventually rise to the rank of Deputy Director, a position always held by a civilian. The

Director himself is always a military officer at the four star general rank. I would go on to meet the Director in circumstances that I'll describe a bit later, though the details will have to be well-sanitized of certain classified points. Let's just say that embassies were closed, I was responsible, and, in retrospect, I was wrong.

That night, as I relaxed in my little apartment on the futon that also served as my bed, I sipped a glass of wine and looked at my badge. Greater adventures lay ahead of me than I could have imagined at that moment. And I certainly could not have imagined that those adventures would start the following morning.

Chapter Two

Tuesday, March 15

My alarm jolted me from a fitful sleep at 6:00 AM. Before going to sleep, I'd spoken with my twin, Fr. Stefan Valquist, for a few hours on the phone, while we both refilled our wine glasses multiple times. As I lingered in bed for a few moments, I realized that I didn't even deserve to feel as good as I did.

Following my normal morning ritual, I drank coffee and read the news on the Internet. After a quick shower, I headed toward the FANX where orientation would continue for a second day.

One of the other new employees, Gregory, also an Arabic linguist, had been frustrated the previous day about how long the in-processing was taking. I had assured him that all these human resource briefings were legally necessary, and that we should cherish this down-time while we still could. I knew from my experience in the Army that the day would soon enough come when we would feel taxed mentally and physically in this line of work. We deserved to remember with fondness the simple salad days of orientation.

I suppose that's easy for me to say. I mean, here Gregory's just all excited to "get in the fight." I had already been in the fight. I'd been to Iraq and I had helped bring down a neo-communist terror group in Romania right after that. So, I did understand where he was coming from. And the fact is, six months later Gregory had experienced more than his share of adventures.

So, I parked my car in the large lot across the street from the FANX and walked toward the orientation center for what I believed would be a boring day of briefings. I even craved it. I was actually looking forward to learning details about the matching funds in the government-sponsored retirement program.

But I would not get my wish.

And I was particularly looking forward to lunch in the FANX cafeteria that day. From my previous times there, testing for language and the polygraph debacle, I had learned that if it's Tuesday, it's Taco Salad Day!

And what a Taco Salad. A crunchy flaky bowl, ample meat, fresh and crispy lettuce. This was indeed going to be a great day.

I saw Gregory already seated in the orientation hall and took a place next to him. It was like a little theater, with two aisles running up the sides. I lowered the desk attached to the seat in front of me and started looking through papers in my orientation folder.

“Day Two!” I said. “I’m thinking of signing up for the medium risk retirement portfolio. How about you?”

“Good Lord!” he said, putting his head in his hands. “This is all so boring. I just want to get to my first assignment so I can start catching terrorists!”

“Your day will come, Gregory,” I said. “But try to enjoy this time for what it is. You know about the Taco Salad, right?”

A phone at the front of the room screamed for attention. The woman conducting our orientation had been looking over some notes for the first briefing and went to answer it.

I saw her nodding and then looking into the crowd of new employees. When she spotted me, she suddenly smiled and hung up the phone.

“Dr. Valquist?” she said, walking quickly up the aisle. “A car is waiting outside the perimeter to pick you up.”

“What’s this about?” Gregory asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t either,” she said. “But get going. They were very insistent.”

I stood and left the room, suspecting that my Taco Salad was in serious jeopardy.

A black limousine was idling just outside the security perimeter as I walked back out the checkpoint.

“Short day for you, huh?” the guard asked.

I smiled. “Apparently I’m being summoned.”

His face fell. “Good luck, sir.”

I looked at him curiously as I stepped toward the vehicle. The door opened.

“Dr. Valquist?” a voice shouted. “Get in!”

I hopped into the car and was thrown against the back seat by the sudden acceleration.

“Wait!” I protested. “Can I get my seat belt on, please?”

Only then I spotted a man in a black suit seated across from me.

“The name’s Hollings,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m your new boss.”

As I shook his hand, I studied his face. He was balding with brown hair, heavy set, with red blotchy skin.

“This is a summary of what we’re about to discuss,” he said, handing me a manila folder. “You can read it more on the plane.”

We sped south down the Baltimore-Washington Parkway at well above the speed limit, compliments of a Maryland State Police escort blaring its sirens all around us.

“Apparently I’m flying somewhere?” I asked. “Can you tell me a little more?”

“We’re on our way to Andrews Air Force Base, where you’re getting on a flight to Constanța.”

“Constanța? As in Constanța, Romania?”

“Yes. You’ve been there?”

“No, only Bucharest and Brașov. What’s in Constanța?”

“A US Air Force base. Your ride can only land there.”

I sat back in my seat and tried to process all I had heard. “There must be a mistake,” I said. “I’m an Arabic linguist. And I didn’t think that the NSA did clandestine missions. Isn’t that more of a CIA thing?”

He chuckled. “Most NSA employees don’t even know about the division you’re now working for.”

“And I get to find out my second day on the job?” I asked. “I assume you need someone who can speak Romanian? That’s why I’m being selected.”

“That’s helpful,” he said. “But it’s primarily your knowledge of Latin that brought you to our attention.”

“How could Latin matter to the NSA in the 21st century?”

“You’re only going to learn this mission one step at a time,” Hollings said. “After you land at our base, you’ll be driven in a diplomatic car to Bucharest.”

“Good. Now that’s a city I know well. I was there about a year ago.”

“We know all about that. You’ll check into the Intercontinental and wait for further instructions.”

I surveyed notes that said little more than what he had already told me. We entered Andrews AFB and sped into the runway area.

“One more question,” I said. “Just how urgent is this mission?”

Hollings said nothing and I had my answer as we pulled up alongside a plane.

My mouth fell open as I looked out the window at an SR-71 Blackbird, a sleek spy plane I knew was capable of flying over Mach 3. There would be no reason to fly me to Romania in this thing unless they needed to move me at hypersonic speed.

“Pretty urgent, I guess.”

“Quite,” he said.

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