

A hand holding a glowing spear in a jungle setting. The hand is in the foreground, holding a dark wooden handle. The spearhead is large, dark, and has a bright, golden-yellow glow emanating from its tip. The background is a dark, misty jungle with green foliage. The overall mood is mysterious and adventurous.

# BRIDGERS

1: THE LURE OF INFINITY

STAN C. SMITH

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*To those who see wonder in places  
untrodden by human feet.*

# THE LURE OF INFINITY

By their nature, intelligent species cannot resist the lure of infinite worlds.

INFINITY FOWLER

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INCOMING

*July 16*

THIRTY-SIX HOURS CAN FEEL like a long time—even longer if you’re being hunted. Infinity Fowler pressed her naked body into the dirt and dead leaves of the forest floor. Small insects began biting her skin, but she was too exhausted to care. She thrust out her right hand, palmed the bare scalp of the tourist beside her, and forced his head down until his cheek was in the dirt.

“Stay down!” She hissed.

The tourist nodded. His eyes were wide, but he had a slight grin on his face, as if he were pleased to be getting his money’s worth.

Just beyond the tourist lay Infinity’s bridger partner, Hornet. He was staring out through the low vegetation, his black body blending in with the shadows of the forest floor. Infinity cursed silently, regretting that she hadn’t taken the time to smear mud on her and the tourist’s pale skin.

Hornet’s muscles went rigid. He had heard something. Infinity

turned slowly and gazed through the sparse saplings they had chosen for cover. She heard something faintly disturbing the leaves, perhaps a hundred feet out. At first she thought it was a squirrel or a bird. But a large body—even a cautious, deliberate one—created a subtly distinct sound. The creatures were coming.

She applied more pressure to the tourist's scalp, a signal to stay still. The guy had been willing to work hard and even fight. But he was an idiot, and he was already bruised and bleeding from half a dozen wounds. Infinity and Hornet would be docked for every one of them. If they made it back alive.

The sound of crunching leaves was getting closer. If the creatures were moving through the forest randomly, there was a chance they'd pass by without incident. But more likely the creatures were tracking them, following the disturbed leaf litter. Infinity and Hornet had already underestimated the creatures' skill and perseverance more than once.

Fight or flight? This was the fundamental dilemma every bridger was trained to face. And Infinity was a good bridger. The sun was low on the horizon, so their thirty-six hours had to be almost up. But how many minutes were left? She had no way to know for sure. If they ran now, they might gain a few more minutes. Or maybe not. If she and Hornet fought and won, they might gain another hour or more. If they fought and lost, the tourist might have a better chance to get away, as long as he started running now before the creatures were within sight. She knew what she had to do.

She released the tourist's head. "Run," she whispered. "Go as far as you can. Don't stop. Hiding won't help. Go now."

He frowned. "No."

She grabbed his head again and tried digging her fingernails into his scalp, but the dead tissue of her nails had been stripped away while bridging to this world. She snarled. "Run!"

"I'm not going to miss this."

She stared at him, seething.

“Incoming,” Hornet whispered.

Infinity looked through the brush. It was too late—the creatures were close. She saw two of them creeping among the trees. They were no more than five feet tall, and their faces were butt-ugly, with ape brows and low, sloping foreheads. Neanderthals, most likely, or whatever Neanderthals had become in the last 100,000 years. Weird tattooed or painted patterns made their faces look menacing. They wore tight pants made of woven fabric that looked stretchable. Their upper bodies were wrapped tightly with dozens of colored cords, some stretched over each shoulder and some wrapped around the abdomen. Their long, blond hair was drawn into ponytails behind their heads, and a melon-sized pouch clung to the side of each man’s waist.

They may have been short, but their bodies were thick. They had already proven to be powerful, and they could run like goddamn cheetahs, at least for a few seconds. Each of them held a weapon in his hand, an atlatl-type thing with a fifteen-inch wooden handle that allowed them to throw heavy, foot-long darts carved from stone. These creatures were formidable, and Infinity wouldn’t underestimate the bastards again.

One of the creatures pointed at the ground, probably at blood drops or some other sign the humans had left behind. The creature spoke—the first time Infinity had heard them talk. His voice was higher and more feminine than she had expected, and the language included a lot of pops and clicks. Both of them erupted with what could only have been laughter. The bastards were having fun.

The creatures stopped. They sniffed the air. Infinity gripped the primitive spear lying beside her. Within seconds she’d be fighting for her life.

She turned to the tourist and whispered, “Hornet and I will try to kill them. Bridge-back is close. Only minutes. If they kill *us*, run.”



The tourist just grinned and nodded. He should have been pissing himself.

The creatures were looking straight at them. They had heard her talking. Infinity glanced at Hornet, and their eyes met. No point in trying to be silent now.

“We go to them,” she said. This would give the tourist the best chance to run.

Hornet nodded.

They jumped to their feet and charged. Naked. Weaponless except for crude spears made from saplings sharpened by rubbing the tips against a rock.

The creatures looked at each other and smiled, and then both of them let out high-pitched screams. They raised their atlatls to launch their stone darts.

Infinity kept running, but she dodged to the side to put a tree between herself and the creatures. She intentionally carried her spear in both hands to make them think she planned to wield it as a close-quarters weapon. But when the creatures were within ten yards, she darted from behind the tree and launched the weapon, surprising them. From the corner of her eye, she saw Hornet carry out the same maneuver from behind another tree.

But the creatures launched their darts at the same moment the humans left their cover. Infinity dove for the ground and a stone dart whistled over her.

“Jesus!” Hornet mumbled. He was sitting on the ground clutching his shoulder. A dart was protruding from his back, having almost passed through his dense body.

There was no time to check on him. Infinity got to her feet and closed in on the creatures. One of them had staggered back, a spear through his thigh. The other dropped his atlatl and pulled two weapons from the pouch at his side—a curved stone knife for his left hand and a heavy axe for his right. Ignoring his injured companion, he smiled at Infinity and gyrated the two weapons in a

complex, almost artistic pattern, weaving them back and forth expertly. Probably a strategy to intimidate his assailants or throw them off guard.

Infinity scrambled to grab a fallen log the size of her leg. It was too heavy to be wielded as a nimble weapon, but that was why she'd chosen it. She approached the creature as if she were stupid enough to try to fight him with it.

"What the hell's on this thing?" She heard Hornet say behind her. He was still on the ground—not a good sign. The stone dart must have been poisoned.

The injured creature was pulling the spear from his leg, but he was still on his feet, and soon he'd be able to fight. Things weren't looking good.

"Tourist, this is where you run," she shouted, keeping her eye on the creature and his gyrating hand weapons. She blocked with the log in case he was skilled at throwing either of them. Suddenly, she heard the tourist running, but he wasn't running away. He barreled past her to attack the injured creature with his spear.

The creature facing Infinity saw what was happening, and with an almost-casual flip of his forearm, he threw his stone axe, striking the tourist's head. The tourist collapsed, his body skidding several inches in the dead leaves before coming to a stop. Infinity cursed. There was no time to check on him.

On the bright side, now the creature before her was nothing more than a guy with a knife, which Infinity could handle. As the creature's arm was recovering from throwing the axe, she launched the log, hitting him in the chest. She then kicked him in the nuts and simultaneously double-blocked his knife arm, a combo disarming move she'd practiced a thousand times and had used in more real fights than she cared to remember.

In nine out of ten fights, this move should have flipped the knife harmlessly out of an attacker's hand. But this time it didn't work. The creature was shockingly quick, and he managed to ignore the

hit to his groin and counter-block with his free hand, resulting in insufficient leverage on his wrist. He didn't release the knife. In fact, as she disengaged, Infinity felt the stone blade slice her forearm.

Time to switch tactics. The Neanderthal was too skilled with his knife to risk further elaborate moves. She needed to take this fight to the ground, and she needed control of that knife before it killed her. While he was still off-balance from her failed disarming move, she resorted to an animal-like attack on his knife arm. She grabbed his wrist, spun around with her back to him, and tore into his arm with her teeth. This move was another feint, intended to make him think she was desperate and unskilled. Before he could throw his free arm around and transfer the knife to his other hand, she executed her specialty power move, Uchi Mata. She threw her left leg back and up, forcing the man's left leg off the ground. Using his mass against him, she pulled on his arm, hefted him over her shoulders, and slammed him headfirst onto the ground in front of her.

Astoundingly, the creature still hadn't dropped the knife. So instead of trying to break it from his steely grip, she grabbed his knife hand before he could react, bent his arm at the elbow so the knife was above him, and slammed her entire weight onto it. Immediately his muscles began to spasm, indicating he was hurt. She rolled to the side, jumped to her feet, and stepped back to a safe distance.

The creature choked and spat and pulled out the knife, which had been lodged in his throat. It was bloody to the handle, and the wound was definitely mortal. So Infinity turned to face the other Neanderthal, who was still on his feet trying to pull the spear from his meaty thigh. Infinity picked up the tourist's dropped spear and swung it at the man's head, knocking him onto his back. She flipped the spear around and pushed the point into his mouth. The crea-

ture gripped the spear, gagging, and stared up at her. But its face wasn't really human, which made her next act all the easier.

"Suck on this, you damn dirty ape." Infinity put all her weight on the spear. She smiled to herself as she watched him die, pleased with her witty quip. She pulled the spear out and wheeled around, scanning the area for other potential threats.

The tourist moaned and rolled to his back. Blood was flowing from his forehead. Infinity stepped over and inspected his head wound. It was a nasty bump, but obviously the axe's blade had not hit him on its sharp edge.

"Just perfect," Infinity grumbled. She walked past the tourist and kneeled beside Hornet. "You going to be okay, partner?"

He was sitting up, holding the stone dart in his hand and staring at it. He turned to her.

"Oh shit," she said. "You don't look so good." This was an understatement. Except for the pupils, his eyes were blood red. His lips were swollen and trembled uncontrollably.

He swallowed loudly. "How much longer, do you think?"

She glanced at the sky, but the trees hid the sun. "It has to be soon."

The tourist got to his feet, swaying as though drunk. "Where's my spear? We've got more company."

Infinity followed the tourist's gaze. He was right. Four more Neanderthal men were standing statue-still at fifty yards, taking in the scene. One of them spoke to the others, and they all smiled.

Infinity put her hand on Hornet's shoulder. "Can you fight right now?"

He struggled to compose himself. Even his lips stopped trembling. "I won't let you down." He grunted and tried to get up.

"Never mind," she said. "You're in no condition to fight."

The creatures let out the same high-pitched scream their fallen companions had. They charged, their atlatls held ready.

Abruptly the Neanderthals were gone, along with everything around them.

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INFINITY FELL to her knees on the padded floor and retched. But she had done this enough times to keep from purging the meager contents of her gut.

She got to her feet. "The tourist is hurt!" she exclaimed. "Possible concussion or fractured skull. Hornet is hurt, too. Puncture wound to the upper chest or shoulder from a sharpened stone projectile, probably tipped with poison. He's going into shock." She then noticed Hornet was lying facedown on the floor, not moving. "He needs help, now!"

The airlock hatch to the circular, 30-foot bridging chamber opened. Six techs in white biosuits swarmed into the chamber and gathered around the tourist. He was on his knees vomiting, making it difficult to complete their cursory injury assessment.

The tourist finally caught his breath. He turned over and sat on his butt, wiping his mouth. "Can I have some clothes, please?"

Infinity shook her head in disgust. The idiot had thrown all his training out the window as soon as they had bridged thirty-six hours ago. He had refused to follow orders. He'd almost gotten himself killed more than once. She was immensely satisfied knowing he wouldn't be given any clothes for at least three days—only after his patho-cleansing and chemo-cleansing were complete.

Three of the techs helped him to his feet, sat him in a wheelchair, and pushed him to the airlock. As soon as he was able to answer questions, they'd bring him to the post-bridge interview.

Once the tourist was gone, the three remaining techs turned their attention to Hornet.

"His pulse is weak," one of them shouted. "We need a gurney."

After the tourist had cleared the airlock to the next chamber,

two more techs came through with a wheeled gurney. It took all five techs to lift Hornet's body onto it. Moments later, Infinity stood alone in the bridging chamber. For the first time, she had the chance to look at the knife wound on her forearm. It was deep. She'd need stitches. It was still bleeding, but not much. No big deal.

"Infinity, do you require medical attention?" The voice had come from a speaker in the ceiling. It was Armando Doyle, Supervisor of Bridgers, Bridge Manager, and CEO of SafeTrek Bridging.

"Maybe a few stitches," she replied. "Worried about Hornet."

"Let the med techs worry about it. You know they're the best. Do you think you can do the post-bridge interview?"

Glaring at Armando through the plexiglass window, she used her right hand to wipe some of the blood from her arm and flung it onto the floor in defiance. "Let's get it over with."

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INFINITY and the tourist entered the sealed interview chamber, both of them still naked except for the gel packs that had been quickly taped over their wounds. Everything else could wait. They both could have been infected by parasites that would soon kill them, but as long as they were capable of speaking, the post-bridge interview always came first. This rule was written into SafeTrek's contract with the consortium of universities that had helped fund the facility. They wanted access to information while it was fresh in the minds of bridgers and tourists.

Four men sat on the other side of thick plexiglass, including Armando Doyle. He sat there with his goofy bowtie and gazed at Infinity, like an annoying fatherly figure. She had never seen the others before. The guests were different every time, usually from one university or another. The room used to be full after every excursion, but these days the crowds were sparse. The world was losing interest in bridging. Except for tourists.

Before sitting down, Infinity faced the men. “Go ahead, take a look. After that, focus on me, not my tits.”

Armando shook his head at her, but she stood still for several seconds and then sat down behind the barrier designed to conceal only the area below the waist. Like everything else in SafeTrek, the chamber was configured for males.

“You can take a look at me, too,” the tourist said, displaying his usual overconfident smile, like everything was a game. Actually, with his wealth everything probably *was* a game. He slowly turned in a circle before sitting down.

The three academics looked a little perturbed, but Armando simply frowned and got straight to business. “We’re recording, Infinity. Do you want to start with world specs?”

She nodded. “Forest, plants, and weather pretty much like ours. Surprising, considering a 100,000-year divergence.” She was referring to the fact that the tourist had requested a world that had diverged from Earth 100,000 years ago.

Armando turned to the academics. “The client was interested in seeing an alternate path human evolution has taken since their first contact with other hominid species. Although I believe his interest was recreational rather than academic.”

The men nodded with furrowed brows, as if they considered a recreational excursion to be a waste of time.

“I’m sitting right here,” the tourist said. “I can speak for myself. It turns out 100,000 years was a good choice on my part. I saw exactly what I was hoping for. In that timeline, Neanderthals probably wiped out humans—Neanderthals were all we saw.”

“We saw at least six,” Infinity said. “All were nonhuman. Maybe Neanderthal. Maybe some other species. We only covered a few miles, so we don’t know if humans also existed on the same world.” She knew at least one of the academics would want a full description of the creatures, so she described them in detail.

“These things were badass,” the tourist said before she could

finish her recounting. “I think they were out hunting for pleasure, like when we go big game hunting. Only these guys used handheld weapons, like it was a matter of pride to them. The minute they spotted us, they started hunting us.” He smiled and shook his head. “They were badass.”

Infinity rolled her eyes. This guy never quit. The academics would want details on the Neanderthals’ weapons, so she described them.

“Can you describe any of the plants you saw?” one of the men asked. “Particularly any that were unusual?”

“I don’t know much about plants,” Infinity replied. “To me they looked like the plants outside this building.” Then she sighed. “Maybe you should bridge somewhere yourself.”

Armando frowned at her. “A little respect, Infinity.”

She shrugged and nodded. She was the best bridger at Safe-Trek, so Armando usually cut her some slack. Still, she would be nothing if he hadn’t hired her. If he wanted her to behave, she would at least try.

“I saw some birds,” she offered. “I’d never seen birds with feather markings like these had, but their basic shapes weren’t much different. Saw some squirrels. At least three wild cats smaller than bobcats. No deer or anything like that. Perhaps Neanderthal hunters killed all those.”

This was followed by a stream of questions about details, like the smell of the air, the color of the sky, the weight of the Neanderthals, their language, their clothing, and any signs of disease or malformations. She answered the questions the best she could. Lucky for her, the tourist had finally shut up. Probably bored.

The academics listened attentively to every word. And they frantically scribbled notes, even though they knew they’d get a copy of the interview video.

The questions were finally beginning to slow down when Armando held a finger up so he could listen to someone talking to



him in his earpiece. He frowned and shook his head. "Thank you, Celia," he said. He looked through the glass at Infinity. "I'm sorry to tell you this. Hornet didn't make it. The techs think you may have been correct. Poison on the stone dart."

Infinity stared down at her hands in her lap. The tourist next to her was talking. Something about Hornet being a badass, too. She shot up from her chair and glared at him. For just a moment she considered pummeling the idiot. But bridgers didn't harm tourists. Ever. Instead, she slammed her fist into the plexiglass. She hit it again, hard enough that the gel pack on her forearm flew off and her blood splattered the clear barrier.

The academics drew back, eyes wide.

Armando stood up. "Gentlemen, we'll end the interview here if you don't mind." He then motioned them to the door.

The tourist said, "Can I go now, too? I have a splitting headache."

Armando nodded, and a tech came through the hatch and escorted the tourist out.

Armando turned to Infinity once they were alone. "Are you finished, kiddo?"

"Don't call me that. Not right now."

"I'm sorry." He sat silently for a moment, tugging on his bowtie with two fingers. "And I'm sorry about Hornet. He was a good bridger. Maybe the best."

She studied his face. When she saw the slight grin, she relaxed a little. "Good, but not the best," she muttered. He was only trying to cheer her up.

His smile broadened. It was genuine, not forced. "His salary will go to his beneficiary for five years. That's the deal."

She just shook her head. Like her, Hornet had no family to speak of. He had never told her who he'd chosen as his beneficiary. He'd been a drifter before signing up at SafeTrek, so probably some kid somewhere who didn't even know he had a father.

“Well, after your cleansings, take three days bereavement. Or whatever it is you like to do when you lose a partner. Then I need you back here. We have a rather unusual excursion coming up. I want my best bridgers involved.”

Infinity eyed him warily. “Coming up when?”

“Could be as soon as August third.”

“That’s three weeks. How in the hell am I supposed to—”

He held up a hand. “You’ll be paid double for the upcoming excursion. Plus, you won’t be docked for bringing your tourist back tonight with eight qualifying wounds to his body and possibly a concussion.”

Now she looked at him with outright suspicion. “What are you getting me into?”

“Like I said, it’s a rather unusual excursion. The clients will arrive August first. You’ll train them on the second. If our first bio-probe is successful, the bridge could take place August third. But they’ve blocked out the entire month in case it requires multiple bio-probes.”

Infinity slapped her palm on the plexiglass, smearing her own blood. “Two things about what you just said are screwed up. What do you mean, *clients*? I’m not taking two tourists again.” It was always difficult babysitting one tourist. She had taken two before. It was too risky, too damn chaotic.

“No, you’re not,” he said. “You’re taking three.”

She pressed harder against the plexiglass and the seams began to creak under the pressure. “You’re not serious.”

Armando glanced at the seams but refused to show concern. He nodded. “They’ve got the money. In fact, they’ve pre-paid. They’re going, Infinity, and you’re taking them. You and the bridger you choose for your new partner. Next question.”

She closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing. She was almost afraid to ask her next question. Tourists got to choose how far back the point of divergence would be. If the destination world

had diverged from ours five minutes ago, it would be virtually identical. If it had diverged a year ago, there might be noticeable differences. A lot can happen in a year. With a divergence 1,000 years ago, civilization could look quite different. At 100,000 years, humans may not even exist, as with this latest fiasco. Neanderthals or some other species could have gotten the upper hand at some point. Infinity hated bridging to worlds that had diverged much beyond 1,000 years ago. Things got too unpredictable. She could fight any human alive, because she understood how humans fought. But as she had been reminded today, it was hard to know how a nonhuman would fight.

She opened her eyes slowly. “And why do you think the first bio-probe won’t be successful? How far back do they want the divergence?” The bio-probe was how SafeTrek found an inhabitable world, one that didn’t have toxic air, lethal temperatures, or some other instant-death deal-breaker. Worlds with divergence in the distant past were much more likely to be uninhabitable due to all the possible environmental changes that could have occurred during that time.

Armando forced a smile. “You might want to sit down first, kiddo.”

She pushed even harder on the clear barrier. “Just spit it out.”

“The clients were very specific in their request, and they were willing to pay all additional fees.” He hesitated. “You’ll be escorting them to a world that diverged from ours eighty million years ago.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stan Smith has lived most of his life in the Midwest United States and currently resides in Warrensburg, Missouri. He writes adventure novels and short stories that have a generous sprinkling of science fiction. His novels and stories are about regular people who find themselves caught up in highly unusual situations. They are designed to stimulate your sense of wonder, get your heart pounding, and keep you reading late into the night, with minimal risk of exposure to spelling and punctuation errors. His books are for anyone who loves adventure, discovery, and mind-bending surprises.

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