

**3+: Short Stories**

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CV Whitfield

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**Artificial Mobsters © 2012**

**Emissary © 2013**

**The Temporal Spaghetti Imperative © 2013**

**Amanda's Feet @2011, @2019**

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### **3+: Short Stories**



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For those who dare to dream and hold the power  
to change their stars...



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## Acknowledgements

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## Artificial Mobsters

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Robots don't pray.

Nor do they desire confession. Why would they?

Simply a combination of bio-matrix parts and programming, they were the product of an intelligent Man. Defaulted to their programs, they would have no need for forgiveness. No soul to cleanse. None, before the *miracle*, sought the guidance of the Church. Looking back, it was really easy for Man to pervert them—part of a preordained destiny.

The history of the ASB, Artificial Sentient Being, began hundreds of years ago—before most came to distrust them. The first prototypes built generations ago—neither blood nor machine, but a creative blending of the two. By order of the Unified Space Authority, the service bot was merged with the medical clones, all in the name of exploration and science. Historians would have you believe them to be Man's pinnacle of human ingenuity. The Clergy called them a plague—a burden to the purity of Man [refer to Cardinal Rasso's *Plagues of Man*].

Great-Grandfather told stories of how he became the investor of robots, the patriarch to a new organized crime. Pappy, to all that knew him, both ASB and Flesh and Bone, was considered the father of the modern artificial mobster. Importing, exporting, there were billions to be made. Pappy chose first, chose the best. That's how he acquired Killian in the early days of this century.

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Killian was a Z series ASB, more sophisticated than the old M class—no known issues with their Freudian Compensators—and much more adaptable than the S class’s misguided auto-programming. Pappy liked him the minute he hit the loading dock. *He was a sharp lookin’ kid, just like a nice Irish boy,* Pappy said.

Hired to do work for the Family, he was a response to the *Confession Reform Order* by the Vatican in ’21. Pope John Paul IX had decreed that Sacrament of Penance of Mortal Sins committed for the sake of organized crime was no longer permissible [reference: Emil Gottschalk’s *Desperate Measures for Organized Religion in a New Millennium*]. No repent to be considered for direct actions of extortion, bootlegging, prostitution or homicide (some exceptions applied). Yet, the new Sacrament of Penance had one small back door. If Man could not commit evil, he would outsource it to those that could. The new rules said nothing of influencing or suggesting someone else take the lead. ASBs had no Grace to lose. If they were doomed to Hell, what did Man care. Killian, like all ASBs, carried the burden of greed and power into a new era ruled by the Holy Royal Roman Catholic Sovereignty [covered in Chapter Three: History of the Sovereignty].

After centuries of enabling organized crime, Rome had had enough. No more. If anything, it would eliminate the lifestyle through loyalty, faith and fear of God. Mobsters, throughout history and

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especially in the early years of the new century, were very harsh businessmen, yet they were always concerned with the directives of the Church. The Mob would follow the new mandates. Or had the League of Cardinals misjudged the ingenuity of Man?

As with many times in human history, technology has usually made life easier. The steam engine increased the speed in which Man traveled. Optical fiber improved communication. Here, it allowed Man to stay sinister. With ASBs keeping Man's conscience clean, the local mobsters could kill his neighbor with no regret, steal the wealth of his neighbor's businesses with no remorse, and fornicate with no repercussion.

Business as usual.

If an ASB were caught committing a criminal act, the Crime Council could not prosecute the owner. The law treated the ASB under Sentient Laws. The owner of the ASB could disavow any knowledge and release the mechanism up for investigation. If it were found guilty, the ASB would be sentenced and destroyed. Not a bad sacrifice for the security of a heavenly soul and freedom from prison.

Within decades, from New Boston to New Chicago, millions of ASBs were employed by the gangs, pimps, neo-cartels and the rackets. Acceptance was slow. Many of the goodfellas rejected them—another example of a machine taking a job from a hard working citizen. The bosses opened their arms and took them in like brothers. Why wouldn't they? Perfect

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tool. For a perfect crime. Eventually the mobsters would call them *Tinman* (the nickname stuck even outside the families)—like the character from the children’s story, the one who had no heart.

Pappy told many stories. None were more amazing than the story of Killian’s miracle. Yet, it began from a dark origin. Killian followed Pappy’s wishes without hesitation or mercy. His true reputation came from his style and execution. He insured business partners paid their dues. If they didn’t, then he made examples of them—showed them the Charles River. If they could swim, he broke their legs first. Hits were brutal and frequent. Tommy Guns were fired with force and chaos. Blood always splattered clean white spats. No one wanted to see Killian walk through their door in his charcoal pin-stripe suit, which cost nearly three thousand, bishop-purple tie and fedora pulled down low—it was usually the last thing one saw.

Shortly after Killian’s arrival in the summer of ‘27, Pappy’s daughter, Gran’mama, had found herself in the wrong places at the wrong times. Caitlin’s sexual exploits climaxed into late night romps in the pleasure dens, like that of the Hippy Hop Speakeasy, and hanging on the arm of Finni “Fester” McKenna. The Royal Catholic Sovereignty came to Pappy’s aid. Bishop Karl, with his bright purple cassock, stopped by every Wednesday. He preached to Gran’mama about the seduction of the giggle water, death pipes and powder elixirs. For the remainder of the week, a

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trio of nuns paid daily visits.

Pappy described them as emperor penguins marching into his study, clutching pectoral crosses, every morning precisely at 8 A.M. With bibles and rosaries in hand, the aging woman counseled his daughter on the Virtues. The Virtues restored Grace and proved eternal life. Gran'mama tolerated the nun's lessons and judging glares.

Pappy found Killian in Caitlin's room one morning. The auburn haired girl denied any wrong doing. She answered her bedroom door with nothing but a sheet wrapped around her slender torso. Yet, the incident inspired a lecture on the *Fornication Statutes of '31*, which decreed pre-marital sex with a machine was no different than the act with a human. But Gran'mama didn't care, another rule to add to the list of broken ones. She didn't see the harm. The physical act was cold; it was mechanical. She didn't care for Pappy's religion either [Appendix IV].

As the nuns arrived one morning, Killian and Pappy were in the study. He spoke the words: *Cleanliness is next to Godliness*, forcing Killian into a command prompt. Pappy provided the daily agenda and guidance. Then it happened. In his forgetfulness, he had left Killian idle inside the study while the Nuns provided Caitlin her lessons and daily prayers.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

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That day, Killian stood by the door and watched them leave. He spoke to Gran'mama and told her that her sinful ways were leading her down the dark path of no return. He told her God would welcome her back with open arms. She sighed and rolled her eyes. She had heard all the sermons from the nuns and Bishop Karl. She didn't need it from the hired help, too.

Killian was different after that day. Pappy caught him mumbling the fourth Rosary after dinner. He knew nothing of where he acquired the beads.

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

Killian carefully tucked the Rosary back into his breast pocket.

ASB history books chronicled the day that Killian walked into the Saint McKenzie Diocese and asked the Canon if he could talk to God. Father Jack replied that all God's children can talk to Him; one only needs to open their heart. Yet, Killian wasn't speaking metaphysically. He truly wanted to talk to God. Father Jack took Killian by the shoulder and began to guide him. Killian thanked him and quietly left the Parish.

Several days later, Pappy called Killian into the study for the daily briefing. Pappy informed Killian the trouble with Freddy "The Finch" Foster. Killian refused. Killian wouldn't kill again. Great-Grandfather never heard of Killian disobeying a sug-

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gestion. Pappy, at first grew angry at his insurrection, but then feared the consequences of something bigger. Killian told Pappy he would not sin anymore. Pappy screamed at Killian. The first time he had ever. He accused Killian of preaching—selling them out to the Sovereignty. He asked Killian one more time. Again, he nodded a negative. Pappy rebooted him. He checked Killian's programming. He had to verify the Gum Shoes hadn't intercepted him, implanted some spyware and turned him into a stool pigeon. All Killian would do was recite the prayers.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Pappy questioned where he heard the prayer. Killian couldn't respond; he had no files to justify the knowledge. He simply knew that he would not commit the sin again. He walked out.

Killian went back to the Parish and walked into the confessional. He begged forgiveness for the sins of his life. He asked for the Sacrament of Penance; he wished to pray to God. An ASB partook in something none other had done. Yet that day, a *Tinman* did. The Clergy didn't know how to handle the request. The *Reform Order* said nothing of ASBs and nothing about cleansing the soul of a person programmed to commit mortal sins. Killian would not have known better. His heart was not able to make a conscience decision, nothing to separate right from wrong, virtue from sin. Father Jack and Bishop Karl tried to categorize it as a venial sin under the second prerequisite. Their confu-

sion and fears mandated they contact the Vatican. So a report was sent back to Rome.

Before the Vatican could respond, Killian's story spread around New Boston. The papers reported it. News wires sent it onto every data pad. He became a celebrity. Then those stories crossed oceans and made its way to the Holy Vatican City. A robot had found God. This ASB was now a great concern to his Holiness. The Pope sent an envoy to investigate and evaluate the situation. If the story were true, a *Tinman* found religion, not by programming to be a Parish assistant, but truly made the commitment of faith, then it would be a true miracle in deed—a message from the Lord our Savior.

But the Church did not come to that conclusion.

Instead they feared it was an elaborate hoax by any one of the Anti-ASB organizations. Some believed it to be designed by FASBN (Free Artificial Sentient Beings Now). Either way, the Holy Royal Sovereignty wasn't playing along. Rome sent Centurions to take custody of Killian. They took him and studied him. The College of Cardinals formed committees to battle the new threat. They would dissect him and understand why he malfunctioned.

Cardinal Rien arrived three weeks later. The Cardinal carried another letter from His Holiness the Pope. Killian would be purged. He would be shut-down, his components dismantled and stored in the vaults below the Vatican. Perhaps someday the minds of the Faith would study him and learn how

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the miracle happened. But not that day. The miracle was swept under the rug.

When word of this got back to Pappy, he pleaded with Cardinal Rein. He tried to secure Killian's release. Pappy wasn't convinced that Killian had found God. But, he couldn't risk it either. Killian's miracle could show billions of people the path to Glory. Or it could allow the Royal Catholic Sovereignty to pass new spiritual laws and mandates. The family businesses were at stake. The entire operation was in grave danger. Cardinal Rein refused to listen. Pappy spoke of a moment 27 years prior; the Cardinal changed his mind. No one knows what Pappy said to his Eminence that day but it allowed Pappy to free Killian.

Forty days of house arrest with six Centurion protectors, Pappy made a promise to Killian. He would stand by him till the end. He quickly assigned all his ASBs to honest occupations. Each day, they hugged like father and son, and spent the afternoons talking in the study about life, politics, but most importantly, religion. He spent afternoons praying for Killian's deliverance.

Killian spent the nights writing his testimony, penned thousands of pages. The Centurions burned them each morning before the digital ink could dry.

Then, Cardinal Rein was overruled. Pappy sought his Eminence's guidance. The two men could no longer fight off the orders from Rome. His Holiness Pope John Paul IX arrived in New Boston. His Holi-

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ness had no intention of accepting Killian's miracle or setting him free. He was there to personally oversee his memory wipe. Nothing more.

His Holiness fearing a violent uprising sent the Centurions to silently return the men to the diocese. Things needed to be kept quiet. Then, they could be returned to normal.

The Unified Space Authority arrived to conduct the memory purge on a Sunday. In the event that the program ghosted itself, the Church authorized a micro-EMP blast to the bio-gel boards. Those would be replaced and a standard ASB personality would be reloaded. The day was well documented. His Holiness waived his hands in the motion of the Trinity and smiled [Vatican Library Scrolls of His Holiness John Paul IX].

Great-Grandfather returned home with the re-born Killian. He watched to see if he got his Faith back. He didn't force the lessons on him like he did so many times with Caitlin. He simply left him alone. He'd walked past the Book and Rosary, day by day. And he simply watched, documenting it all in his journals. He asked Killian from time to time if he remembered anything of his Faith, of his prior life prior. He always nodded *no*.

Never any evidence. Never a sign.

Then.

Pappy witnessed him, alone at the table, counting the beads on a Rosary and whispering the final prayer.

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*As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

He had not taught him. No one had taught him.

An account he never spoke of, only scribbled once into his journal. Not until decades later, upon the journal's discovery in an old desk drawer, would the truth be known.

Robots don't pray. Killian did.

— excerpt from *Robots Do Pray: Confessions and Study of Religion in Artificial Sentient Beings* by the Royal Bishop Kierra O'Brien, Royal Catholic Sovereignty, Saint McKenzie Diocese

New Boston, 15 July 2599

Bless me Father, for I have sinned.

Tell me your sins, my son.

I couldn't save her. We would have to assume that guilt, but I—right, *I* will not. *I'm* guilty of her passing. It's all *me* fault. Keara was lost because we could not save her. Her lifeless body draped in *me* arms. Her Emissary lost. We tell stories to children of places like Tír na Nóg and we think it's just make-believe, but in fact they are more truthful than we ever admit. Many things, we know, would confuse. Awe folks like you. Destroy beliefs.

Slow down son. Have ye had a sip of the bottle now we?

No Father, sober as a Nun on Sunday. Me, uh, we promise. Perhaps we should start at the beginning before we start babbling about my guilt and inherent responsibility of her loss. There's so much to tell of her life—not so much different than a tragic fairytale. Twenty-seven years ago, born to loving, hard-working parents, she was innocent and beautiful—nothing her parents wouldn't sacrifice. Barbie Dream Houses, Breyer Horses and cassette players, all paid through Kmart layaway, but given, with extreme love, all the same. The one gift her parents failed to provide was

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that of a brother or sister. Each time her mother got pregnant, the baby was lost due to miscarriage. After the third, her parents stopped trying. Instead, focusing on the gift Keara was to their lives. Her mother and father would not ever let Keara see their pain. That year, she got a kitten for Christmas—even though the landlord expressly forbade it. Photo albums filled with holiday pictures of her and the little black cat with white paws, like mittens. At thirteen, toy horses, became real horses. Her father begged favors from the owners of a stable outside of town so Keara could ride. She would have to barter chores, picking up after them, feeding and cleaning stalls—but she couldn't be happier. Afternoons spent riding, and jumping. She told me it was English style—saddle and wear—knee boots and snug black helmets. She wasn't fond of the western look. She complained it was too cowboy and dusty, like a rodeo. She found elegance and class in the more regal approach to riding. Those were her happiest times. Then, it ended when she was only sixteen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. My last confession was three weeks ago. In Him we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins. I'm sorry Father but I did not mention all my sins during my last confession. I hold anger against God. For allowing my mother to suffer and die. How could he stand aside and watch her waste away into an eighty-pound

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mess—suffering from dose after dose of poison. Poetic, isn't it, that we use poison to destroy poison—the cancer that ate away at her bones. He wasn't there when I stayed up late trying to force her to finish her chicken broth. God doesn't understand the pain I felt as I watched her dying on those stained lilac sheets. She was so weak she couldn't eat or even whisper my name. I spent each day caring for her. She was supposed to take care of me. And where was my father? Huh? My dad was never around. Why couldn't God keep my father in the house. He should have been the one to watch his wife die. Instead he insisted he had to work extra shifts at the warehouse, driving forklifts to pay the mountain of bills. What was left was barely enough for the rent—or food. He should have been home helping me, helping her. I was a kid. Maybe I should have gotten a job down at the mall: at Dairy Queen; or Glove Hut. I couldn't. I needed to do my homework, but it never got done. I spent night after night forcing medication down mom's throat and bathing her with those tiny sponges and soaps the hospital gave us. I'm angry. I have a right to be, right? How dare he leave me alone with that burden? If I didn't hear the clanking of bottle to glass, well after midnight, I would not have believed he was home. He poured those drinks as he watched Late Nite on the little black & white TV in the kitchen. It was one of those nights that I heard him sob for the first time. Then, I understood. But I won't forget—or forgive him. He found salvation in a bottle. He avoided his

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demons. Only for another set of demons. I couldn't. Why couldn't he help me? Help her?

We all must be conscience of our thoughts child. And our tongue sometimes can be tempted to speak words guided by the devil. But God knows that they are not always meant. Anger is natural. Let go of that anger or it will consume you. It has no purpose or place in Life or His kingdom. Take this guidance child. God has a plan for all of us. What we see as tragedy, He sees as a test to our faith. Do not blame Him nor your father for the sorrow you feel in your heart. Our destinies are already in motion. Give thanks for the Lord is good. I absolve you of these.

While her friends were out learning how to drive, wasting spring days at the drive-thru, slurping milk shakes, she was home trying to keep her family whole. She pushed herself with her studies. She still graduated from Brookline High near the top of her class. Those years lost were made up by hard work. She was getting things back on track. After graduation, her acceptance to college rewarded that perseverance. Her father still worked down at the Yard moving freight. Unfortunately, it wasn't a salary that could afford college. Then the scholarships arrived. Even a grant or two—restored her happiness. Things were still rocky—the fairytale was still a dream. But she was happy. Notre Dame. She arrived

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on a bright sunny day in a rusty U-Haul truck. Her father helped her move, drove most of the way. Even helped her settle into the dorm. He hugged her and spoke of his pride and enthusiasm as she took her first steps into a new world. He worried about her. She would be four states away. She promised to be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas. She would save her money by working on campus—get a redeye flight into Logan International. Love of books got her job at Hesburgh Libraries on campus. Late nights in the library reading 19th century Gaelic literature. Her roommate became the sister her parents never gave her. The two were inseparable—even staying roommates when they moved out of the dorms Junior year. Keara only mentioned her with fondness. How she helped her through the Asian design class—finding feng shui. It was then, she started to understand her place in the universe. Yet her faith was still broken. Her father would bring back very bad memories.

So my life continued, Father. The pain got easier each night after mother passed. College helped. I didn't have time for remorse or dwelling in those nightmarish days. It was hard enough staying up on my classes. Then there was that dang feng shui. How can a rock or a properly placed tree relieve stress or bring happiness? If Ami didn't show me it was possible, I wouldn't believe it. Where was she or feng shui in high school. Then, it happened again.

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This time, it was father. I couldn't go through it again. So I mostly ignored it. Ignored him. The toxicology report came back stating his liver was drowned in a seasoned barrel of distilled whiskey—some Irish brand I'm sure. I couldn't be surprised. He found comfort with that damn bottle—so sorry Father—each and every night.

It was finals week. Boxed into a room at Riley Hall and my cell vibrated. I couldn't take it. And sometimes I wish I didn't. He collapsed at the rail yard, nearly crushed by a freight car. Strangers helped him to the ambulance, rushing him to St. Elizabeth Medical Center. I missed my last two tests. Luckily, the professors gave me an extension. Fifteen-hour bus ride home made me want to puke. By the time I arrived, it was too late. He was gone. I was so angry—at him. At me. I was empty.

I didn't even have a black dress, bought one at the Old Navy. Borrowed some old white pearls from mother's jewelry box. It rained. I thought that only happened in the movies, but it happened that day. The sound of rain hitting the mahogany casket was like a thousand drumsticks banging on walls of my heart. I didn't leave the graveside with everyone else. Staying behind, I stared at the freshly carved dates in the granite headstone. My fingers traced the sharp edges, scraped the tips, blood bubbled up. I cried so hard. I couldn't even buy the headstone. The guys down at the union bought it. I think mother would have liked it. There was barely any life insurance.

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What there was, I spent on the burial and the casket.

I couldn't even get the house moved into storage before I got the call that Uncle Liam had fallen. Some scaffolding had collapsed at a high rise construction site. The VA handled his funeral, thank God. They say celebrities die in threes. My family did it too. Nana, mother's mother, suffered an aneurism at the assisted living home. Brian, Uncle Liam's boy, my cousin, was shot and killed in some firefight on an insurgent compound half a world away. That was the day my family died. My soul was black. Black was a empty adjective. But it described me to the bone.

You are never empty, child. His Grace fills our voids with his love. No matter how far we fall, we must learn to pick ourselves up. Rejoice in their new beginnings in Heaven. Regret and remorse should not fill your days. Trust Him—

Trust Him? The one that took everything away! If it wasn't my family, it was my friends. Graduation night, merely hours after commencement. My diploma freshly framed. We all decided to celebrate at a friend's family cabin. Car loaded and my friends sat in anticipation in the car. I forgot my purse. My stupid purse. Then, the phone rang—my application for my internship was accepted, but I needed to be available that night for one last phone interview. I waved my friends to go. I couldn't delay their fun. It would be okay. I'd just drive up later.

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Insisted that my boyfriend to go when he offered to stay behind. Why did I do that? Emptiness opened into a black hole. State Patrol called minutes after I aced the interview and awarded an internship with the most prestigious book gallery on the east coast. The officer on the other end telling me that their car was crushed by a load of construction equipment that fell as a semi jackknifed on wet roads. Why would God let this happen? Happen to me! Everyone I cherished. Everyone. Loved. Gone. Alone.

I bless you. He blesses you.  
Darkest night will lead to the brightest dawn.

When she's alone. We are brought in. Our first encounter was more than pleasant. She caught us staring at her from across a crowded coffee shop. The aroma of espresso and caramel fraps stung the air. The machine steamed milk with a high-pressure hiss. Not sure how she could sense our presence. Yet, she did. It's not the first time we've done this. Nor the last. She sipped her drink from a steaming cup, a real cup, not one of the paper ones, and opened a book. She tucked strands of hair behind an ear as she read. Delicate fingers turned pages. Bright blue eyes suddenly looked up. That's when our lines of sight crossed. Our gaze locked for seconds, only seconds—no more. Somehow she felt the warmth of our stare. As she turned back her book, she smiled so softly—a slight bend to her lips. Although she went back to

reading, we continued to watch her.

The second encounter happened on a train platform. She boarded the L at 8th Avenue, sat down and pulled off her heels. As she looked up, she caught us looking, down at soft tender toes. She pushed hair behind both ears. A nervous reaction, we wonder. She put her heels into her bag, pulled out some bright purple socks and running sneakers. When the train stopped, and doors opened, she sprinted out on to the platform. We tried to follow but the doors closed before we could get out. I think she knew. She stopped and tugged at the sock around her ankle. She ever so slightly looked over her shoulder. We swore there was a sparkle to her eye, a smile on her lips.

Our best vantage point was a red park bench somewhere in Central Park. Somewhere along Fifth we think. In the spring, she would buy flowers from a little vender on the corner. As the days grew warmer, she mastered eating the street dog, no ketchup just mustard and relish. Leaves turned yellow—orange and red. She wore a broken-in pair of riding boots with socks that covered her knees. She held an umbrella for a little old lady as she fumbled with a key to get into her building; gave pennies to small children to throw into the fountain at Bethesda Terrace; got down on hands and knees, in a skirt, to assist a sidewalk chalk artist—the soft blue powder staining her knees.

That winter, she would visit a little antique shop. She'd go there every other day. We'd discover

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there was harmonic connection to the store, an intersection in space and time. Beginning of her transition. Curiosity got the best of us and we followed her inside one afternoon. There she stood at a glass case looking down. Mesmerized by something, we couldn't tell at first. Moving closer, we saw that it was a beautiful antique pocket watch. We told her it was quite stunning. She looked up, startled at first, but only at first, and smiled softly. The type strangers provide out of kindness. Then, she realized it was us—always where she happened to be. She pulled her handbag closer, told us she had a can of pepper spray. Not sure if she was joking—warned us that being a stalker in the city was not a good idea. After pointing at the beat cop on the street, I convinced her we weren't a threat. We'd never hurt her. She continued to stare at the watch. We asked if it held any sentimental value. She said her Poppy had one very similar, but it was lost a long time ago outside Dublin. It's ironic that the red leather book tells us the importance of time. Time is key to everything. And we find her marveling at an antique pocket watch.

I can't confess to having carnal knowledge although I would love to say I did. It would be worth the penance. Dates are as rare as black lions and unicorns. The closest I've been on a date is that this strange guy keeps popping up every time I look up. I accused him of stalking me—shower

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him in pepper spray. I thought about calling the cops, 'cause he gives me this creepy-pulls-girls-into-his-van-and-dumps-their-body-in-the-landfill kinda vibe. Then again, he does have a soothing voice. He somehow convinced me to trust him. Although I think he referred to himself in the third person once. That's not odd, right? And no matter how creeped out I tell myself I should be, we can talk for hours. Like yesterday, he was at the antique shop and saw me looking at the watch again. He noticed how I was drawn to it. Why am I? And how can he sense that kind of thing? It's like it was pulling me to it. Memorized by its allure or sparkly behavior, like a fish to a lure. We started talking about life. And love. He rambled on about time and fate—destiny. He said they're all tied together. We even found ourselves across the street at that 24-hour diner—Late Nite Lou's I think it is. We must've drunk a gallon of coffee. We talked about my parents, the loneliness, spirituality and when I last confessed, for God's sake. He was passionate; it was forged in his eyes. He told me that things never happen by accident, everything's predetermined, even when it's tragic. He reminded me of you, Father. We walked back to the antique store. It was closed, but we knocked on the door until the gentleman opened it. Again, this guy with a smile and charismatic voice convinced the guy we needed to see the watch—one more time. The dealer took it out all noble-like, white gloves and all. He was honest and admitted that it didn't work. It had been stuck

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on 3:30 for decades. A precise watch repair could easily get it back up and running. Then, he, the mysterious guy, talked me into buying the watch and when I was a little short of cash, he paid the difference. Perhaps that's my confession this week: taking charity that wasn't deserved. I'm not sure. But that's not the craziest thing, Father. After it was paid for and I got the beautiful little box home, I opened it. It's hands stuck on the 3 and 6. Then, I picked it up. That's when the watch started ticking.

I've watched you grow from a little girl into a very beautiful woman, Keara. Each step into the world is one blessed by Him. Yet be careful, he attempts to sway your affections. Be mindful of the path to temptation. Glory be to him, the Lord is good.

She was considered one of the Lost. Someone burdened with no one to love, no one to return it. That's when we arrived. Doing everything in our power to save her. Our actions, Father, may have accelerated her transition. And for that, we are guilty of her fate. She couldn't afford the watch, yet I bought it for her. The watch was her sacred talisman—her destiny's focal point. The watch didn't work. She needed it repaired. So, we told her we could fix it. I, uh, we thought this could buy some time. This led to another run in. If we were the watch smith, we could stall, buy her some more time. Continue the search for her

savior—her emissary.

Once the watch was repaired, it would keep precise track of her time. Time moving forward on her journey, her vestibule to a new chapter of her life—one of a never-ending saga of continued loneliness. We were confident. Then, something went wrong. She brought us the watch. It was running. It was keeping time—nearly perfectly as far as we could tell. As the watch sat on that work bench, we were puzzled, puzzled beyond comprehension. Who could? The life energy must have started it. It didn't need mortal hands to begin the clock. It started the moment she touched it. We should have seen this. Why didn't we expect it? The Red Book should have foretold this—but we misread the prophecy.

Many have trouble believing. It's no different than convincing your congregation of miracles, we suppose. The red leather book has archived dozens of stories for hundreds of years, perhaps longer. You may not believe it Father for your spiritual guidance has led you down a different path. Our existence is not in contradiction to yours. We can co-exist for reasons beyond even our understanding. No different than the different religions on this plane. Working together in a larger picture, right? If someone told you that you must find an emissary or find yourself in an eternal void, what would you think? Every moment of existence dependent on the seconds, the minutes ticking away on an old antique pocket watch. You'd accuse that person of being insane. I can only

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beg for our forgiveness in these unfortunate circumstances.

I don't really have a confession. I just need to talk to someone. And I have no one else, really don't. It's tragic; I know. Well, there is the creepy-stalker-guy. And he's not so much that anymore as I've spent more time with him over the last few weeks than I've been here with you. He finally told me his name. Bishop. I hope that's his name. There was a moment in his eyes that it felt like he was just saying it, not believing it. No last name, or he didn't offer it. He told me he knew someone that could fix the watch, but when I showed him it was now working; there was an expression of horror on his face. I thought he was offended, so I told him I'd pay for his friend to clean and maintain it. Yet, he didn't seem concerned about that. So he proceeds to tell me that I need to find some kind of emissary. This emissary is to save me. It creeped me out. He told me some crazy story of how I needed to find someone that loves me. Love binds the galaxy together or something stupid like that. If I don't, then I'm gonna die or something. Only a true love. One without lust, pure of heart. He spoke of a red leather book; told a story of some ancient prophecy. The rest was just too crazy to repeat. But I'm scared. Could it all be a game, some homicidal prank? Transcendence. Doomed to black. Void of loneliness.

On a cool and damp morning, he appears. He

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pesters me to think of anyone that may still hold a spark of love; a fiber of attachment; a thread of intimacy. I was flustered and nervous. I told him that my roommate in grad school seemed to ogle me when I walked around the apartment in my socks and towel. Sure enough. He tracked her down. She was living in some Tibetan monastery and living as a celibate Buddhist nun. The phone call was very weak, but she had to think about it for several minutes before she even remembered me. I take it that meant she wasn't my emissary. Not to say there wasn't a little bit of relief too. He did this with several coworkers and one former professor of mine. He really pushed the professor angle. Found his house, two hours north by train. The door was answered by his widow. She told a story of how he died just six months earlier. Viral infection attacked his lungs. Bishop saw me fall to my knees. He thought it was out of complete sorrow—maybe fear. Truthfully, I was exhausted, as the ridiculous search had taken weeks. I used all my vacation time. I must have been stupid. That was my last hope, he said. We walked back to the train station, tears rolling down my face. I was scared. Embarrassed. Ashamed. Alone. Then, I remembered, there's only one person who's known me longer than anyone else. That's you Father. You must be the one. Perhaps this was all a test. A test, right? Like the ones you speak of. God calling me back to His house. A trial to get my faith back. You love your congregation like your own children. Maybe this was

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the lesson. I need to reach out to you. I'm your daughter in the Spirit. You are my emissary. The one who can save me? Do you love me, Father?

Glory be to God. I love you child like the Shepard loves his flock. Yet, that love has many steps, many forms. From the spirit of Jesus and his father God. I know I do not contain the love you seek. I cannot show selfish desire to protect you. I cannot justify breaking laws for you. These would be the signs of someone that truly loves you, loves you with the passion and fire of all of one's heart. This is a sign of compassionate love versus that of erotic or even platonic love. Put your faith in Him. Your answers will come. He will provide. Glory to be God, the Lord is Good.

Then all I truly have left is this old pocket watch. Odd. It's stopped.

Father, I couldn't help her. Shy of three decades of life and the girl suffered the loss of her parents, all known family, high school boyfriend, prom date, college lover, friends, roommates, everyone. Then, there was myself. It was forbidden. To do anything other would be catastrophic to the fabric of our reality. The red book foretold it. Thousand years of ritual and culture. Individuality is scorned during the trials. We are told that we are to help the chosen with a group consciousness. If the rules are not adhered, devia-

tions in the process could be had. A text book case. I failed her. I failed the collective. In your terms, I sinned, Father.

My forgiveness is a bit more problematic though. These crimes are not refutable. Tolerance is not weighed on level shoulders. Somewhere in time and space, I became...me. If there was a way, in a million years or a million possible futures, I had to find a way. But there comes a time, one forgets consequence and follows their heart.

She was destined to cross over. We stood on a street corner, near that red park bench we first watched. As they came for her, I held her hand. I wiped the tears from her cheeks. They arrived, carrying the red leather book. They took her to the antique shop. Somehow, somehow it's always been the focal point of her destiny. The Elders took her by the arm and walked her to the back room. The back room, separated by a velvet curtain, lit with the intense glow of a thousand suns. She walked toward the light. Her path on this world had come to an end. Yet, I refused for her to do it alone. I raced after her. The Elders tried to stop me but I pushed by them. The red leather book fell to the floor. Watching it, I felt like time was moving at half speed. Keara looked back and I raced to her. The Elders yelled for me to halt. If I passed the threshold, anything could happen. Perhaps a paradox, or a global catastrophe. But I didn't care. I loved her. I crossed into the light.

Standing there in the nexus, we hadn't caused a

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universal event. The teachings were wrong, or slightly exaggerated. For a few moments, I felt like I knew it all. I could see the beginning and the end. Thousands of scrolls, books and recorded history, pulsed through my head. Keara collapsed into my arms. A new beginning...forged.

I was the Emissary.



## The Temporal Spaghetti Imperative

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### A Tale of the Temporal Fraud Agency

Hayden swam through, what he called, the temporal spaghetti. His body floated between multiple strings of time. He found his mind capsulated inside a universe of ideas. He walked through fields of wild flowers, fireweed and sweet peas. Each endless and encompassing. Their brilliant colors stung his eyes. The aroma of thousands of petals and that of flower nectar swarmed his nose. A steady breeze flowed over his body, cool and relaxing. As quickly as the flowers appeared, the flowers disappeared, replaced by thousands, no millions, of stars. So many stars. He zoomed through space . . . and time. For a moment, a brief moment, he found himself surrounded, consumed by millions of pinpoints of light. Twinkling blue, green, red, and yellow, each pulsed with the rhythm of his breathing. Something, gravity perhaps, pulled him closer and closer. The light called to him, spoke to his soul. He didn't deny the attraction. He wouldn't. If he calmed his mind, he heard their seductive call. The whispers told him the origins of the universe. If only his primitive mind could understand the teachings. A distant orange ball of flame and warmth, a star with nine planets encircling it, pulled him to its surface. The star warmed his blood, cooled his thoughts. Fire danced along the surface—wiggling, jumping, arching. The intense heat had no

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affect on him. Suddenly, brilliant light turned to absolute darkness. He closed his eyes, focused his mind, as his body passed through the event horizon. Voices, thousands of voices, murmured in his ears. No idea what they said. He opened his eyes, darkness exploded with an intense white light.

With a snap! And a pop! Sparks of charged energy, Hayden materialized from the Time Stream.

He lifted his head, stood from a kneeling position. A fine crystalline vapor sparkled as it rose off his poly-thermal body armor. The gas was simply a super-cooled mixture of nitrosulfuroxide, which filled the air with the smell of a freshly struck match. Re-entry pinched the nerves and strained the muscles with a god-awful sting. Hayden wore the latest temporal field-issued body armor, his body housed the modern nano-neural implants. Without them, he would most likely arrive unconscious, a condition a highly trained temporal agent would not want on a mission.

Hayden Raye, a man who works somewhere to the side of the late 27th century, yet history records his birthday being a date in the late 1880s, reached for the temporal dials on his belt. He verified the date via the Omni-chronometer: late 20th century, December 31, 1999.

Switching on the inter-temporal comm-link, he opened a channel back to Olympus, the Agency's primary headquarters. Command computers eagerly waited for confirmation of his arrival.

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"Flashback-6 to Olympus." He spoke past static. "Hey, Doc, I think I was dreaming again," Hayden lifted his visor.

The small earpiece nudged in his ear squawked to life, "That's interesting Flashback-6. You're sure it was dreaming, not a hallucination?"

"Pretty sure. It felt just like it. Can you fall asleep in the Stream?"

"No agent has ever reported anything like that. Your bio signals are good and vitals are strong. Medical authorizes mission go."

"Copy that. What's Zeus saying?"

Zeus was the super computer that monitored the Time Stream. It was a semi-self-conscious entity running several hundred trillion cycles a second. If not for Zeus, the Agency could not run temporal analysis, mission scenarios, or historical reality models. Because human perception was flawed, Zeus would guide the agent to the real history, the history set forth by destiny, or so its designers explained.

Hayden looked to his tiny bio-gel screen on his wrist. The mission parameters started to scroll through the display.

*Time Stream status: portal indicates an unauthorized temporal jump. Time code: 48 hours ago. Time Traveler: identity unknown. Time-line Analysis: Temporal jump originated from April 29, 2027. Result: Temporal fraud detected as eastern United States of America suffering numerous black outs dur-*

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*ing January 1, 2000 through January 19, 2000. Historical documents also show stock market crashes. Yet are miraculously reset January 21, 2000. Accurate Historical Analysis: No historical crisis related to Y2K events. Conclusion: suspect has changed timeline for financial gain. Several U.S. companies suddenly lost all financial records and customer databases. Mission Status: Apprehend time traveler and return to Olympus. Charges will include temporal fraud, altering time-line for personal gain, and unlawful use of the regulated Time Stream. Secondary charges: trespassing in the Time Stream. Do not exceed agent authority, apprehend and arrest suspect using nonlethal means for interrogation. High priority to determine Time Stream access in 2027.*

"Sounds like a milk-run, Olympus." Hayden mumbled into the comm.

"Cut the chatter Flashback-6. One last thing, stay out of the way of time. Keep it in line."

"Copy, Olympus."

Now Hayden had to do the thing he hated the most: wait. He wondered if Zeus ever dropped an agent too early just so the wait would annoy him. So, he found a chair and sat patiently. He pulled off his helmet and tried to pull up some historical context on the mission via the remote access data port on his belt. From his best observations, he found himself inside some financial institution. GPS located him in New York City, financial district. The room was

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enormous. Hundreds of workstations with several old boxy monitors placed in a circle formation. The floor was littered with paper and pencils. His search only concluded with thousands of historical entries of how people stocked up on water, food, precious metals, and weapons in fear that the world's computers would crash on January 1, 2000 due to some programming glitch. The panic was not only localized around banking and national security, but also many religious organizations aided in the hype of an end-of-the-world event. Hayden Raye scrunched his eyebrows and found the stories unnerving. How could so many people be convinced of such predictions? Then again, this was a year 700 years before the creation of the Initiative. The humans of this time were primitives, easily roused by fears of gods and technology. He scratched his head and rubbed his forehead. Doc and Zeus would be quick to remind him that he was once one of these primitives. He just wanted to get on with things and get back to Olympus.

Zeus's calculations and assessments always amazed Hayden. How could a computer, even one as complex as Zeus, know the correct course of history? So many things could control the most basic temporal deviation. As all temporal agents did, he graduated from the Academy with a well-taught understanding of temporal mechanics and quantum theory, considering his origins, but nonetheless, the whole concept could make one go crossed-eyed. He kicked himself for not reading more of McGregor's *Treatise on Tem-*

*poral Fundamentals.*

Phineas McGregor, considered the pioneer of all time travel, had discovered the Time Stream in the late 15th century. Being a Renaissance scholar, little is known how he discovered it. Only that he was the world's first recorded time traveler. Many now knew that time travel has happened for centuries, before and after. It isn't a matter of science or industrial mechanics that propelled one through time. Like mysteries of religion and spirituality, Time has its own secrets. It's simply a matter of discovery and understanding. McGregor, before his disappearance, recorded more time within the Time Stream than any other human. With a great understanding of both the science and spiritual functions of the Time Stream, he published over 10,000 pages; most were hand written with pen and inkwell. Hayden wished the man were around to help with his new experiences in the Stream. Time only knows his fate; the Initiative still searched for clues. Some think he became one with the Time Stream. Some believe he just found a tiny corner of time and lived his last days in peace and harmony.

Hayden's time-watch beeped.

Pop and zap! Suddenly, the room filled with crystalline vapor, like steam from an old city manhole cover. The Time Stream opened with an azure haze, bright and blinding for one tetra-second. The air smelled like burnt matches. With that, a man fell out and plopped on the floor in front of Hayden.

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The Time Agent rushed to the unconscious time traveler. Enjoying the ease of the mission, he tapped the gentleman's head until his eyes fluttered open. With a disapproving shake of his head and verbal tck tck, Hayden tapped his chest armor, his Temporal Fraud Agency badge appeared, "You have the right to remain silent. But you're more than welcome to spill your guts."

The suspect's head fell back to the floor; he whimpered.

Hayden smiled at the poor fool's attempt to alter time.

Deep inside the Olympus compound of the Temporal Fraud Agency, Sterling Dunn, with links to temporal terrorism, sat in a crystalline holding cell. Sitting with a heavy head supported by nervous hands, interrogators continued their intense questions of their new prisoner. Hayden watched the prisoner through the transparent walls, which allowed noise from inside the cell to escape out but prevented any noise from outside in. He knew the questions by heart, but didn't always know the answers. Who gave you access to the Time Stream? Where was their facility? Describe the equipment used?

Hayden turned from the cell to find the Doc giving him a quizzical look. Pointing for him to follow, Doc walked back down the hall to the med lab.

"I'm intrigued by your references of dreaming in the Stream." Doc stated.

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"To be honest, Doc, I'm more curious what that Sterling Dunn guy was doing in 1999." Hayden projected the statement down the hall.

Hayden looked back to the cell and pointed to a guard, "I want all the details."

The guard nodded and flexed his stance as Hayden sprinted down the hallway toward the Medical Lab.

He found the Doc shuffling through piles of data chips. "Ah, here's your file." Doc spoke as if he knew Hayden was in the room with him.

Hayden, as with every journey through time, provided his detailed report of the mission along with any experiences in the Stream. The Doc, fully authorized, was first to read the reports. With this one, he found Hayden's details quite interesting. Could there be new side effects of traveling through time?

Sitting behind a brushed aluminum desk, the Doc shuffled through books and digital pages via his desk's bio-gel monitors. "I read your jacket. Not accustomed to exaggeration in your reports, very specific with very little adjectives. Thus, I'm very concerned and interested in your latest experiences. Especially the passage: *If I calmed my mind, I heard their seductive call. The whispers told me of the origins of the universe. If only my primitive mind could understand the teaching.*" Doc pointed for Hayden to sit in the chair before him.

Hayden cautiously sat down. "My next psych evaluation isn't until next week, Doc."

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"I'm not interested in your mind. I'm curious if you have any physical symptoms? Discomfort? Chest pains? Headaches?" Doc scribbled something down with his digi-pen.

"None that I'm aware of, Doc." Hayden scratched his head and squinted one eye in trying to remember any recent aches and pains. "Chef's ravioli last night gave me a bit of gas. Is that important?"

Doc popped an irritated gaze over to Hayden, furrowing his brow. "Not unless your flatulence is contaminating the Stream, I could care less."

"I was more worried about risk of a paradoxical event."

"What?"

"Never mind. Hey, I'm still confused Doc. Are you a medical doc or one of those crazy quantum boys from Los Alamos? You are very concerned for my body so you're—" Hayden checked his pocket Omni-reader.

"That's not really important Flashback-6."

When the Agency's Suits or Lab-coats broke out the call signs over real names, Hayden knew it was strictly business. He didn't take offense to it. It was their way of keeping their distance both emotionally and professionally. At any given moment there was usually twelve Temporal Agents actively swimming through the Time Stream. With the new government restrictions on quantum engineering, very few companies or individuals found the funding or equipment to get them past the Front Door (what both science and the boots on the ground called the quantum

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threshold to get someone or something into the Time Stream.) Hayden appreciated that he wasn't an agent 50 years ago when time jumping was a daily event. In today's Agency, one or two jumps a week were busy for a field agent. The hard job was Zeus trying to keep history in order, running all those algorithms and monitoring the Time Stream.

Hayden's Omni-Reader beeped. He looked down to see the latest details from the prisoner in the holding cell, the guard fulfilled his order in providing a detailed report. "Damn. Whadda ya know? Looks like the computers continued to work without a hitch. According to the doofus, he made numerous attempts to write a hidden sub-algorithm that would create the new date codes for the Federal Reserve mainframe. Each time the suspect altered the time codes in the mainframe, the programmers found the glitch and repaired it. They just didn't realize they were actually undoing the scam." He laughed to himself. "When that failed, he decided to manually input the code that would force the systems to crash and blame the double digit year field. He needed the computers to fail. According to him, some influential family with hundreds of billions of dollars of debt hired him after the start up crashes of that decade. They had hoped to wipe the slate clean with a little computer glitch—a glitch most of the world feared would happen anyways. Thanks to me, he failed. The computers worked perfectly. The world's money and debts continued to live on into a new millennia. No harm, no

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foul for his client though. They still got stuck with the debt."

Suddenly, Hayden buried his head in his hands and cursed. Doc looked over at him puzzled. "Problem Flashback-6?"

"Yeah, I totally lost that bet with Flashback-4. Coulda swore that the U.S. economy collapsed that day and was restored by that Steve Nobs guy."

"I think you mean Steve Jobs. History remembers him as co-creator of the personal computer." The Doc corrected.

"Whatever. Ian, Flashback-4, clearly sided with Zeus's final assessment and he was right. As always."

Hayden shook his head in disbelief. "What's a few thousand coins worth to me anyways?" He sighed at the thought.

Doc was disturbed by how temporal agents were betting on the outcome of time. By any standard, this was very concerning. To question the outcome, could force a reversal of the true flow of the timeline. Would these agents purposely jeopardize a mission to simply win a bet? He hoped not. Specifically since these were the best and brightest the Initiative forged. Yet, Hayden did have doubts concerning the super computer. He marveled at the way Zeus could keep the official history on track. Was he protecting time? Or just a tool so it flowed in the right direction?

"History usually finds a way." Doc responded. He quickly reviewed Zeus's latest report being transmitted to all departments. "And sometimes, it

disappoints. People usually always suspect the worst."

The Omni-Reader beeped again. The latest report confirmed that no alteration to the time-line had occurred. No fraud found in all 47 million calculated possible outcomes. Yet, the influential family still found themselves debt free without the fraud. Somehow the bank was attacked by some eco-terrorists and all the records were lost. Time indeed found a way. And for this family the fears worked in their favor.

Hayden, Flashback-6, served the annuals of time. According to the history books, billions of dollars were made with speculation and doomsday forecasting. Many people believed they would wake up in a pre-industrial world. Billions were saved. Fate found a way like it does with frogs and horse races. The big time clock continued to tick.

"If it was going to fall into place anyways, what the heck was I doing there?" Hayden exclaimed.

Doc switched off his monitor and folded his arms on his desk. "I suggest further reading of McGregor, perhaps the chapters dealing with destiny in quantum theory. You didn't waste your time, you ensured it stayed on track."

The Doc was right. Phineas McGregor had discovered time, and like many other scientific treatises, could have multiple outcomes. Twentieth century physicists had predicted string theories in quantum mechanics. Something Phineas had confirmed during his journeys. Time was a very complex entity. Thou-

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sands of possible timelines were massed into a very restrictive sphere. An early temporal pioneer, after seeing a computer rendering that McGregor had constructed, had referred to it as a big bowl of spaghetti. Time-lines were crisscrossing in every direction; some touched; some didn't. Phineas had concluded that some time-lines affected others but not all time-lines were interconnected. An example would be the death of Henry Ford in childhood wouldn't have stopped the mass production of the automobile; or, an European monarch wouldn't stop some explorer from reaching the new world. Time found ways. History could adapt itself.

But within the Time Stream, Phineas discovered there was a right path. Universal harmony was predestined by a series of historical events. He found if you interfered with those events, causing fraud in the natural course of time, serious disruptions in the quantum plane could possibly bring about a terminal paradox. Thus ending the entire universe that humans have tried to understand. So, he created his Initiative.

"Doc, I've read it. But my point is—"

KAA AARR!! KAA AARR!!

Hayden was cut off by a klaxon blaring through the halls of the compound.

A metallic voice replaced the klaxon; her voice was mono-toned and resonated off the facility walls.

"Time-Stream malfunction. Portal trajectory miscalculation detected. All personal to their emer-

gency stations."

Hayden jumped from his seat in the med-lab and raced to the command center.

As Hayden entered the darkened command center, Zeus rushed to compute the details of the temporal accident. The super computer displayed hundreds of bio-gel monitors of time-line coordinates and predictions. Analysts and technicians barked orders and punched calculations.

Zeus confirmed the details of the affected mission:

*Flashback-3 re-entry coordinates have been compromised. A severe miscalculation has occurred. Flashback-3's mass has increased by 185%. Caused by bring more than the suspect back. Bio-monitors have confirmed Flashback-3 made an emergency exit of the Time Stream in the year 2012.*

Hayden rushed to a command station, "What was Flashback-3's target time origin?"

Zeus responded, 1975.

"What was his mission parameter?"

Temporal Fraud suspected via indirect interference with the formation of one of the first personal computer companies. Time-line was altered by a temporal jump 72 hours ago. Flashback-3 was sent to intercept and redirect the Sightseer.

The Sightseer was any person, thing or event that altered the time-line indirectly or without malicious intent. Typical response time to intercept the

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Sightseer had to be between 48 and 96 hours. Any longer of a response could have unfortunate consequence to history.

"So, Sight-Seer? This was not a clear attempt to alter the timeline?"

*Affirmative. Analysis determined an individual decided to sightsee the historic event and inadvertently altered the course of events. Flashback-3 went back to apprehend.*

Sightseer was the reference for the seldom approved time traveler to witness an important event. It was outlawed nearly 50 years ago as this kind of event typically was the outcome. Time would get disrupted and then things got out of control.

"Can I go back to 1975 and fix whatever happened before he jumped home?"

Negative. String theory dictates that a divergent time line has been created.

"So what does that mean? Can I get in the Stream and help Flashback-3?"

*Affirmative. Temporal correction is required. Analysis shows that Flashback-3 either brought someone or something with him from 1975. By assisting Flashback-3 back to Olympus, Agency can then transport person or artifact back to their proper timeline.*

Before Hayden heard the last of Zeus's assessment, he was down in Mission Prep suiting up. Rarely did a Temporal Agent make more than one jump a day, Hayden was going to make his second

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within 2 hours. Doc stood to the side, quickly looking over Zeus's health analysis.

"Flashback-6 is cleared for temporal jump. Adding secondary bio-monitors. Mission Go!"

Pop and snap! Hayden appeared from the Time Stream.

"Flashback-6, comm check," Hayden spoke into the small microphone of his bio-monitors. He looked to his temporal regulator. The date: Sept. 25th 2012, 1330:43. Location: San Francisco. Finding himself on a crowded street, he quickly hit stealth-mode on his temporal-suit, which gave those around him the appearance he wore the current fashion. Luckily, no one seemed to care that a man appeared from nowhere. He thought it must be California, that's why. Scanning the street and surroundings, Hayden knew he had to find Flashback-3 quickly. These were the coordinates of FB-3. Where was he? Hopefully his drop into 2012 didn't cause a second incident? The damage could be as simple as someone avoided getting hit by a bus or a deadly virus unleashed killing millions and erasing the governments from the map of North America. Who knows what he could have accidentally done.

In only minutes, the past could be forever changed into a darker one. Zeus liked to calculate those world-ending scenarios. Never had Zeus actually predicted one, but he somehow liked it. Odd for a

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super-computer. He very rarely predicted something like the early cure for cancer or a solution to world hunger. That would be too easy.

Suddenly, Hayden spotted his comrade. The young temporal agent nervously looked around his surroundings. Hayden noticed he had not used stealth, nor concealed his true identity. He continued to stop bystanders and ask them a string of questions. At the same time, FB-3 shouted into the air, "Close your eyes!" Almost begging for the Artifact, "Do not look at anything!" If Hayden didn't act quickly the authorities of this era would arrest his comrade on the grounds of him being mentally unstable and disturbing the peace. So, FB-6 raced to his fellow agent.

Hayden pinged his Omni Chronometer, spoke a clear command back to Olympus, "Spotted FB-3. Sightseer and Artifact not accounted for. Requesting additional agents on this time to pick up the Sightseer. FB-3 and I will track the Artifact and return to Olympus as soon as possible. Over.

Hayden raced over and grabbed the young man by the shoulders, "I'm going to assume you brought someone through the stream that shouldn't see this time period?"

The frightened agent nodded an affirmative.

"Let's not get your under armor into a bunch here. We need to work this logically and calmly." Hayden combed his hair with his fingers. "And you can not, cannot, continue to talk to these people. Got it?"

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Again the shaken temporal agent nodded an affirmative, "Copy that. I think I brought him through."

"Who?"

"That guy who invented the computer!"

Hayden looked around. Not good. He quickly checked the FB-3's mission profile on his bio-gel computer.

"You got to be kidding me? Him? Seriously?"

Flashback-3 nodded.

With quick thinking, Hayden determined if he was a man from the past, tech savvy, and suddenly transported to the future, where would I go? The street was very active, people walking in every direction; retail shops lined both sides of the street. Mostly clothing and food establishments, Hayden guessed that eating fruit in this century was a big deal as he looked to a restaurant with a giant fruit, perhaps an apple, painted on the exterior window. Hayden wasn't seeing anything that would attract a person from the past. He mumbled to himself, "We need to find some kind of technology store."

FB-3 tapped him on the shoulder and speaking for the first time to Hayden, "I think that would be the place." He pointed to the business with the large apple embossed on the window.

"It's no time to eat, friend." Hayden replied.

"No, that's an electronics store. That's the logo I saw in 1975, just not as colorful."

Hayden tapped a few commands into his bio-gel computer. "Oh, crap!" Hayden pulled FB-3 and both

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men ran across the street. Nearly getting hit by two large motorized vehicles in the process.

As the two men quickly entered the store, they found it crowded with all kinds of people. It was definitely an electronics store. Dozens of people were huddled around small hand held devices. Many of the citizens were typing on metallic keyboards with huge brilliant monitors before them. Hayden instructed FB-3 to search the right, as Hayden would take the left. It didn't take very long until FB-3 pointed to their misplaced person.

The Artifact, or man, was a slender hippy looking gentleman. He was barefoot, with long hair; his face sported stylish oval eyeglasses. The man was intently looking at the small handheld devices. The sign read: iPhone 5 and iPad with Retina Display. He looked at the devices with amazement and what Hayden could have sworn was the look of pride. They had to secure him fast before he saw any more. As Hayden approached, the situation got worse. The young man looked up and clearly locked onto the eyes of his aged self on a giant image. He sported much less hair, the same oval lens glasses and a black turtle-neck. The man's eyes started to widen, as there was clearly two dates listed on the images: 1955-2011. Hayden raced to the man, spun him around and removed his glasses. He pulled a pair of eye blinders from his belt and forced them onto the man's eyes. Hayden was surprised that he wasn't struggling to get away like other time transgressors.

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Reaching into his satchel, Hayden pulled out his Immobilizer. With a quick reach and tap to the shoulder, the slender man plopped into the arms of Flashback-3 and Hayden.

"We better go," Hayden directed Flashback-3.

The two men hurriedly pulled the man's arms over their shoulders and assisted the man out of the store. A store employee in a blue shirt stopped them to see if there was a problem. Hayden quickly made some excuse about their friend having an adverse reaction to something he ate for lunch. Shuffling out the door, around the corner, and into the alley, Hayden prepped the temporal regulator for a return flight.

"Have you compensated for the correct mass?" Flashback-3 asked.

"Of course I have. We should be going back with four bodies not just us three.

"It's not my fault."

"Whatever." Hayden continued to prep the small electronic device.

"Are we going backwards?"

"Nope. Sideways. Zeus says we have to go back to Olympus first. Then your guest here will have to be sent back solo in efforts of closing an alternate time line."

Flashback-3 nodded.

"How'd this guy jump with you in the first place?"

"I had grabbed the sightseer, who I think was

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there to collect an original Apple I. You know how these collectors are nowadays and wanting to own a piece of history. Well, I had just stopped him and this guy," FB-3 pointed to their unconscious friend, "noticed us and approached. The problem being that I just initialized the return via the Stream. Before I realized it, he had been pulled in with us. I didn't compensate for the mass and tried to abort. We ended up here. No idea when I was."

"So you pulled yourself out of the Stream."

"I did. The minute I realized the problem. Hit the emergency stop."

Hayden raised an eyebrow and told FB-3 that he better hope the other agents find the sightseer fast. But first he needed to help Zeus fix the time hiccup.

Zeus's temporal models were now changing every 3 seconds. His neural bio-gel processors were clocking 50% over standard. New estimates gave the Initiative only 2.3 hours before the timeline suffered extreme disruptions. If their new guest didn't get back to his time soon, time might just forget he ever existed.

Slowly, the three men's molecules and cells accelerated to the speed of light and were pulled into the void known as the Stream. Flashback-3 looked down and he could see Flashback-6 stretched and pulled in with him along with their temporary guest. Swiftly the Stream carried them toward home, toward Olympus.

Pop and snap!

Flashback-6, Flashback-3 and the Artifact arrived back at Olympus.

"Funny, we were just talking about that guy, Doc and I." Hayden stated.

"Well, thanks for keeping time on track!" Doc shouted

Flashback-3 looked at him with a quizzical look.

"Trains. As in subways, steam—ah, forget it. Trains, man!" Hayden nudged him.

Flashback-3's face acknowledged the reference. Hayden grew up around the goliath-sized steam engines of the late 1800s. His father was a rail man, which meant Hayden would have been one too. He sometimes missed them. He dreamt of them but never while in the Stream. He swore that someday he'd get the Initiative to send him back home, even if it was just for a day. Most of the other temporal agents never understood his passion for such an archaic mode of transportation.

Sitting in a holding cell, the longhaired man looked at the wall with confusion. He adjusted his round glasses. Agents stared at him through a transparent poly-ceramic wall. The man fidgeted.

Zeus chimed the intercom and announced only 1.7 hours remained to fix the timeline.

"And what are the implications?" Doc inquired of Hayden.

"Well, it appears he may have seen some devices

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his future company is destined to invent and patent."

The Doc started to laugh.

"Why's that funny?" Hayden asked.

"Kinda hard to fix that."

"With all this tech, can't we wipe his memory or something?"

"And most likely destroy whatever genius that's part of his brain. Only a couple percent off from a full lobotomy would erase his memory. That wouldn't go too well for someone that's meant to revolutionize the electronics industry. So this could only be classified as pre-destined clairvoyance."

Hayden heard the term before. He wasn't quite sure he completely understood what that meant. Doc could always tell when he didn't quite grasp something.

"Maybe he was meant to see it. It's how time and destiny sometimes move down the track, as you say." Doc tried to relate to Hayden with a train reference.

"Are you saying this situation inadvertently helped him create all his products?"

"Quite possibly." Doc replied. "It's not the first time."

Hayden scratched his head and rubbed his eyes in frustration. Doc always took that as his cue to do his best to explain things to Hayden. The writings of McGregor had discovered that time had an interesting way of running. Sometimes the great men of history were aided by Time. Since most didn't understand

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the physics, they chalked it up to dreams or visions. But in truth, sometimes Time gave them a nudge to continue the flow. Doc tried to explain this with train metaphors and how time was just using creative ways of continuing to lay new track. The train of time still had a destination to reach and it needed to find a way. Even the thousands of pages McGregor preserved in the Initiative's library detailed the possible fluxes in history. Sometimes great men just needed a push: Da Vinci, Einstein, Tesla, and even Steve Jobs.

He could see the light in Hayden's eyes. Perhaps it was making sense. "So you're saying sometimes Zeus makes mistakes?"

"Just get him back to his right time, will ya?" Doc barked.

Hayden nodded.

Zeus calculated the coordinates and the exact instant Fashback-3 was to return and drop off the uninvited guest. Forty thousand scenarios determined there had been no damage to the natural timeline. Hayden caught FB-3 up to speed and wished him Godspeed. He actually was still stuck on the whole concept of seeing one's own future, regardless of destiny. How could this still be the natural order of fate? Wasn't time more complex than mere accidents and coincidence?

Or perhaps, he was thinking too hard and too long about something he would never truly understand. Hayden watched the parameters of the

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mission. Everything looked good and Zeus's time clock ticked down to zero. :20 ... :15 ... :08. Suddenly a historical file displayed on one of the bio-gel monitors. It was an old television interview with Steve Jobs. The date of the interview was after the return point so things must have been fixed. Then, Hayden's attention was drawn to the words he was speaking—

*—sure the Apple II will be in every home in a few years. But, the future of Apple is to put a computer in everyone's hands. Those computers will be no bigger than a book. They will have screens that you can touch and call up everything from games to encyclopedias—.*

Hayden strolled down the long sterile white hallway.

"Doc wants you in Engineering ASAP," a voice rumbled from behind Hayden.

He turned to find the new kid, Ethan. As part of his orientation, Hayden was assigned to mentor him and show him the ropes. Although he wasn't in favor of having a recruit tagging along everywhere he went, he did as he was told; orders were orders.

"Absolutely. Did he say why?" Hayden responded.

"Not exactly. I did hear him mumble something about Project Anubis," Ethan cocked an eyebrow to see if Hayden recognized the name. If Hayden did, he didn't show any signs, not even a twitch.

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"I would say tag along but maybe next time."

Hayden patted him on the shoulder. Ethan nodded.

Just like most organizations, there was a chain of command and a need to know, even when it came to time. In time, Ethan would be sent on similar projects. Or perhaps even jump through the stream for Project Anubis. Until then, he would have to just work mop up or do a few milk runs, as all probies did.

Hayden wasn't sure what to think of Ethan. Temporal recruitment wasn't restricted by time. Agents came from all points inside the chrono-sphere. Hayden had been born in the mid 19th century. Yet Ethan technically was born nearly 800 years later, in the 27th century. The linear timeline fact had intrigued and sometimes boggled Hayden. Two men born centuries apart, from different worlds in respects to technology and science, had the same fate—a fate that brought them to work together to protect Time. Hayden was just happy he could talk about trains with someone. Ethan had told Hayden that he was intrigued by the train's steam engines. It amazed him that iron boilers used steam, produced by burning coal to heat water, to force pistons to move back and forth. At the time, Man thought this the most efficient way to travel. It was faster than horses. Hayden told Ethan in his first week that his first job was stoking the fires aboard the Chesapeake-Appalachian Line out of Tallahassee. From that moment on, Ethan stuck to the experienced agent's side whenever he would allow it.

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Engineering wasn't exactly the boiler room of Olympus. It was more or less the Research and Design, R&D, of the entire Temporal Protection Initiative. The best minds from all over time were consulted to develop new tools and facilities to serve either as listening posts or focal points in the Time Stream. The focal points would allow for easy movement across the Chrono-Sphere. By building the focal points it was easier for a Temporal Agent to jump from one noodle of time to another noodle even if sometimes those noodles didn't touch. Without the focal points, those kinds of time jumps would be impossible. Zeus and the Director didn't like improbabilities.

As Hayden entered the dimly lit room, he noticed the bio-gel monitors displaying schematics of large triangular objects. Hayden assumed these were the modern equivalent of something Phineas McGregor worked with in the early days of time travel. When Phineas discovered the Time Stream, he had worked with pyramidal shaped stones he dubbed the Triumvirate. He had found that the energy resonance of the stones, along with the right geographic locations on the Earth, allowed him to jump years into the future, or the past. The trips were extremely uncomfortable. Thus, he went into the future and found 23rd and 27th century technology to assist in the process. Once outfitted with the prototype temporal body armor, he founded the Temporal Protection Initiative. His destiny was to protect time, keep it on track.

"As you can see here, we have a small problem with the new installation." The Doc directed the team of Lab-coats around the table. "Ah, Hayden, glad you could join us."

Hayden wasn't sure if the use of his first name was a good thing.

"Reporting as requested."

The Doc smiled and waved him over to the table, "please, please."

"We've got a rogue agent in the Stream," Doc exclaimed. "He's threatening the Anubis Project and could bring down the Temporal Protection Initiative."

"How's that possible?" Hayden defended. "All agents are accounted for."

Doc, for the first time, looked a bit confused. He knew that there was someone or something working against the project. Yet, it would have to be someone or something that had the resources of the Temporal Fraud Agency. Zeus was having trouble predicting the time-stream residue. In better words, the super-computer couldn't find a jump point.

"It's not one of ours. But someone that is mirroring our own techniques and technology. Zeus is over-clocking and burning out electro-crystals three times faster."

"Oh, so you're saying this is serious. Why didn't you say so?" Hayden's sarcasm had little effect on the Doc.

Hayden volunteered to be sent back to investi-

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gate. It would be his longest trip through the Stream. Project Anubis construction was taking place in the year 12,500 BCE. This destination date was nearly 5000 years before any attempt on temporal fraud. McGregor wrote in his writing that the Time Stream had no limits. He predicted that a Temporal Agent could literally leap back to the beginning of the Universe. Yet, he could never guarantee the safety or return of the agent in question. Thus, no one had ever attempted it. Although there were theories, that's where McGregor went when he disappeared. Hayden thought about testing the theory.

Project Anubis, built in the Nile Valley on the Giza plateau, when completed would confuse and mystify archeologists for thousands of years. Hayden stared at the classified blueprints of the project. He immediately believed this to be the greatest temporal fraud ever instigated.

Hayden stared at Doc, "You're kidding me!"

"We're protecting time, not taking advantage of it," Doc retorted.

"Really! By creating the biggest temporal fraud ever?" Hayden looked at the schematics that would become the Great Pyramids at Giza.

Doc cleared Engineering of all non-essential personal. He looked to Hayden as if the fate of time rested on the next few minutes.

"Perhaps you believe we are hoaxing modern archeology by creating this," Doc pulled up a picture of the Giza plateau, including the iconic Great Pyramid,

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the Sphinx and the smaller pyramids of Khafri and Khufu. "I promise you, what we're doing is saving the Time Stream."

For the next several minutes, Hayden couldn't believe his ears. Doc went on to explain the construction of the Great Pyramid, nearly 5000 years before its assumed archeological estimation, was an attempt to seal a great tear in the space time continuum. Not to fraud history.

The Initiative has spent the last 4000 years protecting its secret. Even modern 27th century archeology believes, the Great Pyramid was constructed in 18 years by the hands of the Egyptians in the year 2487 BCE. Yet, in the last 24 hours, a rogue temporal agent could expose the true origins and begin an end to the Initiative all together.

"I need your help Hayden. We need you to find this rogue agent. If he accomplishes his mission, it's just not our fate at threat, but all of Time."

Hayden hated the big motivation speeches about saving the Universe.

He wanted to know, how could building a two billion ton structure have any purpose to saving the Time Stream? Yet, there was one thing that Hayden did know, and that was there wasn't much that still surprised him. Even the experts would stand by one theory only to have it overwritten by the whimsy of time. With all the diagrams, science and mathematics defending the project, Hayden just wanted to hear Doc admit it.

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Hayden suited up. The poly-thermal body armor was in place; bio monitors beeped and chirped; side arm locked and loaded. Temporal agents only travel armed when needed, with the exception of the Immobilizer, a non-lethal stun weapon. Reports were that these new rogue agents carried the latest Viper rifles. The Initiative never had a radical threat before. One could never be sure. Although the Temporal Fraud Agency wasn't in the practice of killing, perhaps their new enemy would. Last time Hayden checked, the poly-thermal body armor didn't stop viper rounds.

Destination coordinates were set. "We'll send you in with security credentials."

"Any hope of getting some back up? How 'bout the new kid, Flashback-9?"

Hayden's radio squawked, "We're pulling several agents back through the Stream."

He didn't feel much better. With a sudden sense of nausea, Hayden was in the Stream. Once the body adjusted, the feeling was quite euphoric, but in the first few seconds, he always wanted to vomit.

He focused on the ribbons of color before his eyes. Suddenly, they appeared to dissolve. Everything seemed to blur, clouded by a mysterious fog. He had never experienced any fog in the Stream before. He felt his body jerk, as one does just as they fall asleep but suddenly wake up. Slowly, his eyes closed. He saw oceans. Rising up out of the water, he soared over a rocky coastline; sand dunes reached to the horizon. The fog returned; no, it wasn't fog. It was

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sand. A fine cloud of dust. Rising up through the haze of dirt and sand, enormous stone blocks stood. But wait! To the right, another megalithic structure reached up to the sky. This one was completed. Capstone in place. It shown with an immense brightness. The light nearly blinded him. A man stood on a wood scaffolding looking out over the work of thousands of men, pulling and pushing massive stones over sand. With his nemes headdress, with bright blue and white stripes, covered his shaven head. Servants shaded his position with ostrich feathers. The shadows faded away as the sun breeched the dust cloud. The face was clear. It was Hayden. His body shivered as though his blood was heated. Suddenly, behind him a black shadow eclipsed the entire area. Everyone, everybody, everything was consumed. Nothing was left but the man. He turned to face the mysterious shroud of darkness. Voices called his name. He recognized the voice. Yet he couldn't place it. He felt like he was falling, falling down an abyss of darkness. No light could escape.

Zap! Pop! Hayden materialized from the Time Stream. He hit the ground unconscious. The impact woke him; he jumped to a seated position. "Flashback - 6... read...over." The voices in his helmet were muffled by static. The inter-temporal comm-link buzzed and hissed.

Hayden was disorientated. His eyes slowly focused. This trip through the Time Stream was

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nothing like he had experienced before. The dreams this time felt so real. Almost like they were memories. Perhaps the distance traveled in the Stream caused more intense visions. Not many had traveled over 10,000 years into the past. According to official Initiative records, the farthest jump point was 7,500 BCE. He now knew this was untrue. The Initiative was clearly covering up Project Anubis.

His comm-link continued to hum with distorted voices. "Repea....Flash....copy."

As he removed his helmet, he heard a clear signal from an inter temporal comm-link; it squawked, "Anubis, do you have him? Repeat. Do you have Flashback - 6? Over"

"This is Caretaker-2. We have him. He's looking a bit green. But we have him. Over."

"Boost his bio-monitor feed through the Caretaker. Over."

Hayden saw an older man, with graying temples, walk to a large bio-gel temporal interface. The unknown man quickly typed commands into the holo-terminal.

"That's good, Anubis. We have his readings. Flashback-6 please check in."

Hayden stood and walked over to the man, "Caretaker-2 I presume?"

"Affirmative, Flashback-6. But call me Jack."

A smile drifted across Hayden's face, "You got it, Jack. Hayden." He scratched his head and looked around the room.

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The room was the standard Caretaker facility. Hayden had heard of them, but had never seen one from the inside. They were like micro versions of Olympus tucked at important points in time. Each facility had one caretaker but had the equipment to host several temporal agents in the event of a temporal emergency. As far as Hayden knew, they weren't in such a state yet, but it was time to unlock the safety.

Jack handed him a bio-gel tablet. Scanning the files flashing on the device, he raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so this will be an easy one."

Even Jack knew sarcasm when he heard it said so flatly. "If you follow me I'll take you down shaft 3. That leads to the main tube right under the fissure."

"The diagram shows that's directly below the monitoring room, or to an archeologist, the King's Room."

"That's right. But what I'm about to show you, you won't want to just stand here and chit chat."

Hayden stared at the man known as Caretaker-2 as he led the way; he looked as if he had years (literally) of bouncing around the temporal spaghetti. His instincts would be right. Jack was one of the first temporal agents ever certified by the Initiative. Rumor had it that he had worked with McGregor and helped with the foundation of Olympus. Then again, Jack wasn't one to talk about the glory days of time travel where most of the agents looked like Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon. Today's Temporal Fraud

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division was just another department in a massive Temporal Protection Initiative. The Lab-coats and the Tie-tuckers were the controlling arm of everything. Some of the current agents wished that McGregor were still around.

The journey down a long cave tunnel had the unusual smell of blasting powder and ozone. It appeared that both ancient and modern techniques helped carve out this portion of the facility. It wasn't often that Nero-lazers were used in conjunction with TNT. The walls even displayed evidence of copper and stone tools. They were going all out in this conspiracy. After walking nearly twenty meters, the tunnel ended in a dark and ominous hole in the ground.

"Shaft-3?" Hayden asked.

Jack merely nodded.

"Uh, who's going down the big black hole first?"

Jack lifted his hand and slowly pointed in Hayden's direction.

"Had a feeling that was the case."

Hayden pulled his arm up and tapped a button on his wrist bio-gel interface. Suddenly his suit illuminated; the fabric energized with thousands of nanopolymers that provided a soft bluish-white light, like a deep ocean fish. In that instant, Flashback-6 became his own flashlight. He preferred the suit, as he didn't need to fumble with illumination-sticks, nor have to carry the clumsy staff torches. Once the floor had some light, Hayden could see the beginnings of a met-

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al ladder. "Good. Some modern conveniences at least." Hayden started to back his way down into the shaft. "I would love to see a nice comfy mag-lift, just one mag-lift, as I descend the big black hole."

The two men descended into the shaft with slow and precise movements. The ladder was strong and remained fixed as the two men worked their way down it. After several minutes of stepping down the ladder, Hayden asked, "How deep is this thing anyway?"

"This shaft goes down 300 feet."

"Not that bad."

"Be thankful we're not descending Shaft-9. That one goes down nearly a thousand meters. We nicknamed it the "well to hell".

"Drilled out by us?"

"Nah, some kind of natural geothermal vent shaft. The Lab-coats think it's millions of years old. The funny thing is that it's here of all places."

Jack continued his story. Hayden recognized the tale; one that felt like it was told from a history book. He wondered was it a story that the Initiative created or was it the natural course of things. Were things staying on track with their work or were they guilty of changing it?

One thing that Hayden did know was that you don't become a Caretaker unless you finished your career with distinction and could be trusted. And if the Caretaker Station weren't even listed on any official books, then Jack would die to protect the project.

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Caretaker designation was unlike the agents. The numerical placing was honorary and given in order. Thus, only one person would hold a specific designation. If Jack was Caretaker-2, he was the first time agent to get the ranking. Because everyone out of the academy knew that McGregor self titled himself the Caretaker, he felt he was the caretaker of the Time Stream. The others were done in tribute to respect McGregor's contributions to the entire theory of time.

Finally the two agents reached the bottom of the shaft. Hayden stepped off the metal rungs with a longing respect for solid rock. As he turned, he gasped at the site he found. He was standing in a cavernous room that had to be the size of a large coliseum. The first thing that caught his attention was that it was fully illuminated; yet there were no lights or torches anywhere in the room. It was a cave. Stalactites and stalagmites covered most of the chamber. On what Hayden determined was the east wall was a warm glow emanating from the rocks, like a sunrise underground. Deeper in the cave, the eerie glow of stars and moon flickered on the ceiling.

"Uh, you do this?" Hayden asked, trying to clear his throat.

"Nope. It was this way when we got here."

Jack led Hayden to the center of the room. Almost like a koi pond in the middle of the cave, Twinkles of light bounced around in the majestic pool, yet this pool had no water. The effect was composed solely of energy and light.

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"This is the fissure," Jack told Hayden. Jack scratched his head as if he was speaking the obvious.

Hayden inched closer and closer. He looked over the edge as if he were looking over the railing of some sky-lounge. "How deep is it?"

"That depends on your frame of reference." Jack swallowed. "See, our infrared scans say its only about six centimeters deep. Now, if you jump into that pond, you'll be swallowed up and fall. Fall into the spaghetti and who knows where you'll end up."

Jack paused and thought about what Jack had said. He was confused. According to Doc and Zeus, the Great Pyramid was built to conceal and plug the fissure. Yet, last Hayden checked; he was 300 feet underground. How'd a billion-ton pyramid do that 300 feet above them?

Then again, Hayden sometimes had a problem with fourth dimensional logistics. Jack proceeded to tell them that the Pyramid hadn't been constructed yet. The actual construction won't happen for another 5000 years. The topography of the Giza Valley will lower itself some 287 feet. "So, what you're looking at is the foundation of the Great Pyramid."

"We think McGregor discovered this site nearly 70 years ago."

"Hold the inter-temporal com-link, Jack! Seventy years ago, when?"

"Seventy years before you." Jack positioned himself like a history professor. "Story goes that McGregor found himself pulled from his time and

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found himself in this cave. Of course it wasn't anything like this. Back then, it was just a small little pocket in the rock. He was trapped and the only thing to do was to dive back into the fissure. He only prayed he'd find himself in a time that could help him return home. The story ends well, but it's said he spent the next 20 years trying to find this place again. We were just beginning to start the project when he disappeared for good. Since then, the Initiative has been working on Project Anubis to protect this place."

"Not sure I understand why."

Jack paused. He carefully thought about the situation and decided to tell Hayden the big secret. "We've found that this fissure may actually be a crossroads in the Time Stream. That makes this fissure extremely dangerous and highly unpredictable."

Hayden shook his head and raised his eyebrows. Jack knew that Hayden wasn't following along.

"I'll try and keep it simple. This fissure has the power—"

Jack was cut off by the sight and sound of several time breaches. Suddenly, within seconds, several men stood in front of them. Hayden didn't recognize the armor or the tech they were utilizing. The time suits were a smoke grey with brushed aluminum plates. Very similar to the Initiative's suits, but slightly more tactical. The men were ready for action the moment they stepped out of the Time Stream, even Hayden and other designated agents took a few seconds to get their wits about them.

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Jack immediately pulled his side arm from its holster and raised it at the closest intruder. He never had a chance to pull the trigger. Several viper rounds hit him. They ripped through him and his flesh as if it was paper. Hayden spun and yelled. He paused for a few moments and decided to try his hand. With a spinning motion, Hayden spun his weight and placed a high kick across one of the mysterious men's head. The man went down hard. Just as Hayden turned to spot his next target he noticed that he wasn't in the line of fire from viper rounds, but he saw two of the men charging at him. He pulled his weapon, just as a viper rifle end slammed to the side of his head. The two men tackled Hayden. As the men impacted, Hayden lost his footing and all three men fell into the fissure.

Hayden awoke. His body ached with a burning-feeling that consumed his muscles and stiffened his joints. Although he still had his temporal-jump suit and armor on, the unexpected journey through the Time Stream and the intensity of the event tube they went through caught him off guard. As he slowly blinked his eyes and the room that he was in came into focus, he knew he was no longer in the past. He wasn't sure how he always knew when he was; perhaps it was just a trick or some kind of sixth-sense.

Suddenly, the door to his right dissolved and disappeared. In walked three tech-troopers. Their armor glistened with imperial glares of deep mid-

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night-blue poly-carbon plates. They walked over to him and shouldered their viper rifles. They pulled him from his back to a standing position. He looked into the tech trooper helmets to see if he could confirm they were indeed human. All he saw was the reflection of his tired face looking back at him from smoke-black visors. One spoke through a synthesized voice modulator, "Move on your own power or we'll drag you."

"Alright. Alright!" Hayden choked on the words.

Hayden found the energy to walk out of the room. The three tech troopers marched behind him. Wherever he was, he was in a facility that had the architecture and technology of Olympus. He laughed to himself. "What are the odds?" he mumbled to himself.

Then, the design shifted to something less technological. The transparent steel door opened to a long hallway. So long, that Hayden could only see the wall-mounted lights disappear in a blurry abyss. The hallway was damp and smelled of mildew, like an old musty basement. The building materials were not 27th-century any longer. Instead the bio-plastic walls were replaced with gray concrete and cinder blocks. Cracked and pitted, the walls had suffered years and years of abuse. He noticed the faint remains of writing on the wall, but most of it was illegible. Yet, he could make out one incomplete notice: "—oover Da—Hydroelectric Sub-Stat—."

As his walk ended at the end of a very long hallway, the technology of the construction changed

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again. A heavy cast iron door opened and Hayden found a mirror copy of Olympus's Temporal Threshold. Hayden immediately recognized the twin of Zeus and Temporal Jump Accelerator. Someone with great resources and incredible knowledge of the Time Stream had engineered a doppelgänger version of the Time Initiative. How was that possible? Even the thugs and con men that Hayden stopped throughout time didn't have a setup as sophisticated as this.

"I take it we're going somewhere?" Hayden joked, always the smart-ass, like it was a reflex to hide his true feelings. Suddenly, he had a very bad feeling about everything and his stomach started to sour on him.

Once inside the room, three young ladies in lab-coats approached Hayden. He quickly noticed each sported a different hair color: auburn, jet-black and blonde.

"Ladies."

They started to modify his armor and provided him a new helmet. The redheaded beauty walked up to Hayden and ripped the bio-gel temporal monitor off his wrist. She replaced it with a similar unit, yet Hayden was sure it didn't have any communication ability back to Olympus. He knew why they would remove it. There was a possibility of Bid Daddy finding him once he entered the Time Stream. So, whoever was now in control of him and this facility knew the Temporal Initiative's procedures to track their Time Agents while in the ether. The rather cute

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blonde with dimples proceeded to remove his belt. He snickered. She smiled back and yanked the belt from his suit. "Ouch darling."

The black-haired beauty replaced his breather unit, while the redhead and blonde nano-stitched new armor plates along his legs and arms. Hayden examined the new pieces and realized that they looked very similar to the tech troopers behind him. The tech was also a bit more stylish and minimal compared to the suits back at Olympus. Actually, he thought the improvements were impressive. He felt like a temporal badass. He even found himself flexing in front of the girls.

"All that and you didn't even ask me out to dinner. I take it I'm not enlisted in your little army?"

As soon as the girls backed away from him, the tech troopers pushed him to the event tube. The system came to life as the lights and whirls of gears and internal mechanics hummed to full readiness. The girls smiled as he turned to look back at the room. The Blonde threw him his helmet, which he caught with a clank. Slowly, the static started to rise around him. He quickly put the helmet on his head and latched it. With a spark and snap, Hayden disappeared into the temporal ether.

He wandered among bright red and yellow flowers. The fields of flora grew to the horizon in all directions. Walking slowly, he was consumed by the sweet aroma of the flowers' nectar. Birds flew overhead. Yet, it was completely silent, no birds chirping.

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Not even the rustling of the wind. He felt as if he were transported to Elysium or Shangri-La. Suddenly, the air was full of petals, falling like snow. He was cold, then hot. The scent of honey and vanilla disappeared, replaced by the stark stench of sulfur. The annoying sting of exhausted muscles consumed him. Flash and pop, he materialized. He stood in an mid-20<sup>th</sup> century naval drafting room.

Sunlight filled the room with a warm orange glow. It took several seconds for Hayden's eyes to focus and see exactly where he was. Out through the windows, he could see a large shipyard. Ship horns could be heard muffled by the building. Standing near a large window was the silhouette of a man. He approached as the man spoke, "I've been expecting you."

Hayden removed his helmet and walked closer. "Really now?"

With Hayden's words the man turned. Dressed in a late 1930's military uniform of Nazi Germany, the man's face was mostly known by temporal agents from a historical bio monitor feed. Standing in front of Hayden was an improbable anomaly, a man that time had consumed, standing there like an eerie statue, Phineas Atlas McGregor, the father of time travel. Hayden expressed disbelief. This allowed the man opposite him to smirk.

"So glad to see you too, Hayden." McGregor spoke. "I can see you're surprised to see me."

Hayden nodded. He was completely caught off

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guard. No one had seen this man in nearly forty years—those being years relative to Hayden of course. The stories of his disappearance ranged from being devoured by time itself, to impersonating someone in history and living the life of power and riches. Thus, to see him standing here, now, defied logic, but certainly destroyed the modern myths of his doom. "So, I guess you're not dead. And why are you wearing that ridiculous uniform."

"Ah, yes, the stories of my demise are extremely exaggerated. Although, I do enjoy a few of the story and find them quite humorous."

"Good news for someone, I'm sure."

McGregor forced a laugh. "I'm sure." McGregor turned back toward the window. "As for why I'm wearing this uniform, perhaps you should look outside."

Hayden approached the window and looked out over the dry docks. The blinding light that blocked a detailed view out the window from his prior stance dissolved to a clear image of a massive construction project down below.

"Beautiful site, isn't it?" McGregor offered an impressed question.

"Yeah, sure. It's, uh, really impressive."

McGregor could sense in Hayden's voice he didn't quite understand. He was still trying to connect dots like those found in children's activity books.

The large shipyard bustled. Thousands of workers welded, riveted and hammered together six

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massive ships. Set out in six separate dry docks, the ships came together. Each nearly 300 meters from stem to stern, each with a flattop design, and each with a massive tower in the center of the ship. Two of the ships were nearly complete, whilst the sixth was still just a keel and beams. Cranes lowered grey aircraft to the deck. These were aircraft carriers. But something wasn't quite right. That Hayden knew.

"Changing history I take it?" Hayden was nearly certain, but he left himself a small possibility of error.

"Why not, I say." McGregor responded.

McGregor spoke as if he had a deeper sense of what made the universe tick. He looked to Hayden almost as if the whole thing was a game. As if time, were game pieces on some chessboard, able to move and rearrange with no consequence with the exception of a different outcome, a different winner. He unbuttoned and removed the uniform's coat, pulled the tie from his neck, un-cuffed the sleeves of the pressed brown shirt, and removed the red armband.

"Everyone loves to hate these Nazis. Everyone wonders what if he or she had won. Why not see?" McGregor walked to admire blueprints on a drafting table. "Your Initiative would have you believe that time is a linear straight line. Every event connects to another event destined by some supreme power of the universe." He paused to shoot a condescending grin to Hayden. "Thinking that temporal travel is exclusive to one line curled up in a bowl, so one can bounce from one time to the other with little resistance. Heck you

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call the Time Stream *the spaghetti* and your little Initiative never thought that bowl of pasta was actually hundreds of layers, each separate strings of time? Not the big long one noodle your Doc would have you believe. Think, Hayden! Sounds narrow minded and dogmatic if you ask me." McGregor allowed his words to trail off into a whisper.

Hayden looked to the window and back at the Father of Time, who he now thought was completely crazy. The Time Stream must of had warped his mind or caused some kind of stress disorder. The TFA agent looked around the room as if trying to formulate a plan to correct the changes McGregor had put into place. "So, this is the late 1930s?"

McGregor fought the urge to laugh. "Yeah. But you can't fix it from here. It took months to convince the Kriegsmarine to build all this, and years to get it to this point. The most powerful country in the world had a navy with no aircraft carriers. Aren't you curious how the war would have ended if they had? The Americans won in the Pacific because of them."

"Altering the timeline doesn't concern you?"

"That's what I'm trying to say boy, this is but one of hundreds, thousands, millions of timelines. Each unique. Each different. I've found the secret. I've found a way to see them all. Cross from one to the other. This is but one of those time-lines. The events I didn't change, they evolved this way with just a very soft push. Haven't you ever wondered what if Caesar lived, or what if Prometheus didn't give fire to man!

The knowledge is linked to the rift back at—"

Suddenly, Hayden no longer could hear McGregor's words. The room around him faded into a milky haze, and then disappeared. He had entered the Time Stream.

Moments no longer than seconds, Hayden materialized inside the tube back on Olympus. The air around him hummed and the bio containment filters sucked the air from the small room. Then, the door slid open with a hiss and rush of cold, stark air. Doc and several other lab-coats rushed in to meet with Hayden. They poked and prodded him to make sure he was okay, make sure he was real and unharmed.

"So glad to see you're unhurt." Doc spoke in a hurried tone.

"Why'd you go and do that for Doc?" Hayden barked.

The Doc looked at him quizzical. "It wasn't easy finding you. Thank goodness for the new secondary implant—"

"I was talking with McGregor—the McGregor—and he was going to tell me his entire plan!" Hayden stormed out of the tube and down the hall.

Hayden entered the CIC, Command Information Center, of Olympus. Zeus was buzzing and working his trillion computations a second. The entire room was a strobe of dozens of bio monitors watching over history, over the Time Stream. Each display detailed images from a point in time. Time that had been altered. Zeus couldn't define what was right and what

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was wrong.

"Damn its cold in here." Hayden burst out.

"Zeus is overheating. We had to lower the environmental temperature so he wouldn't burn up."

Hayden found himself looking at the screens flickering before him.

"Like I said, we had a helluva time finding you. If Mum hadn't put the new backup trackers in the shoulder plate—"

Hayden turned to interrupt. "Then I was in a real time line?"

Doc looked at Hayden with concern, "What do you mean?"

Doc knew Hayden was missing for several days, an eternity when worried about a missing Time Agent. Hayden could have seen centuries flash before his eyes. He could have inadvertently changed the course of human events.

"Somehow he's found a way to cross the streams. That would be bad, very bad."

Doc looked at him, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Join the club, Doc."

Several hours of confusion gripped Hayden's thoughts. He had tried to debrief Doc the best he could. He could barely wrap his mind around the events of the last 24 hours. If he couldn't understand the course of events, then how in the hell was he going to fix things?

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Instead he was mesmerized by what Zeus was projecting on the bio-gel monitors of CIC. History unfolded before Hayden's eyes. Zeus sent thousands of video feeds reporting the new history of the planet Earth. Grainy black and white video displayed a moon landing. The lander kicked up moon dust and debris, and finally touching down. Cosmonauts stepped down the ladder and took man's first steps on the moon—red flag with hammer and sickle wavered in the low gravity of the moon.

General McArthur ordered the use of tactical atomic strikes on targets in North Korea and an invasion similar to that of D-Day hitting the beaches of the Korean Bay west of Pyongyang.

"We've got crazy history all over the place—as you can see." Doc brought Hayden up to speed on Initiative events. "Hell, we got Russians on the Moon! 'One small step' is now 'Медведь ходит среди звезд и небес! (The bear walks amongst the stars and heavens)'. It doesn't even sound iconic." Doc lowered himself into a chair. "Not to mention wars being won. Wars being lost. Did you know the Confederate States of America flag has thirty-three stars in 1955 vs. the United States' fifteen? How ridiculous is that?"

"Then, who's that fighting in Korea?"

"CSA, the Confederate States of America."

Hayden raised an eyebrow.

"I know. I don't even want to try and understand." Sure enough, Zeus focused on General

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McArthur and there were the Stars and Bars on his sleeve, but he still bit on a corn cob pipe.

Hayden pondered the differences and hoped that McGregor was right. Perhaps, these events he was watching weren't part of a *true* timeline. But versions of dozens. Somehow, Zeus was seeing multiple Time Spheres and confusing their time lines for others. It made sense now what McGregor was hinting on in that conversation back at the German shipyard. McGregor wasn't changing time; he just exposed the other Spheres. Somewhere, somehow, he used the time rift back at Giza to cross the barriers between alternate time lines. With the blending of the multiple timelines, Zeus couldn't differentiate between them. He was burning through his microprocessors trying to sort it all out. Then again, there was a good chance that McGregor was just crazy and everything he was doing was truly destroying history.

What could drive McGregor's motives? Is he profiting by the changes or was it simply done out of some psychotic plot to dominate the universe, like those old 20th century movies?

Sirens           sounded.                   AAAARRAARP!  
AAAAAARRRRAAAP!

Hayden turned to see transparent steel walls lowering around Bid Daddy. The new room filled with super cooled gas. Lights lowered to a soft red glow. Doc ordered the sirens to be silenced. Techni-

cians ran from one station to another. Fire suppression teams stood at the ready.

Zeus confirmed his own situation:

*Situation is critical. Estimated time to complete CPU failure is twenty-seven hours. Repeat: Situation is critical. Estimated time to complete CPU failure is twenty-seven hours.*

Doc pushed past a technician to confirm Zeus's self diagnosed fate. It was very true. At this pace, Zeus would burn through all of his processors in about a day. He was designed to have a self-replicating feature, but it was just not able to keep up with the damaged chips.

Hayden grabbed Doc's arm, "Can we slow him down?"

"What do you mean? He's a semi-sentient being with a mind of his own."

"I don't know, give him some kind of computer Valium so he slows down a bit."

Doc turned to the senior technicians and looked to them for confirmation. They seemed to nod in unison. "I think we might be able to do something."

"Then, do it! Before he implodes! He's our only hope of me finding McGregor and stopping this madness."

Shutting off Zeus's redundant re-processors slowed his burnout by thirty-nine percent. Yet, he was still overheating like an old radiator. The team of temporal physicists worked feverishly on talking Zeus down. The goal was to have him focus his attentions

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to a very small portion of the Time Sphere. For the moment, it was working. Yet, time was still a critical factor.

Hayden suited up. He was ready to track this madman to the origins of the universe and back. The only problem, he had no idea where to start. He needed to think. Think. Where were McGregor's Temporal Jump Accelerator and his access to the Temporal Threshold? It was somewhere underground. It had to be. That's why it was damp and musty. A cave? Something like the one at Giza? Or was it at Giza? That was too obvious. Then it clicked. It had to be based around another fissure to the Time Sphere. Doc had stated there were dozens of sites on the planet that the Initiative had protected. Perhaps it was one of these sites.

He decided to corner Doc in the secret Engineering section. He was tired of being in the dark and he wanted to know every location of the time fissures. He basically didn't have time for games and politics. Pun very much intended. And soon Zeus was going to blow a gasket and be of no use, and without him; there was no controlled time travel. So whatever Hayden was planning, he needed to do it quickly.

He found Doc leaning over Zeus's schematics, "Just the man I need to see."

"I really don't have the time right now Flash-back-6"

"Don't care, Doc."

"You better care because if we don't find a way to

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repair Zeus or construct some new processors, then the Time Stream is doomed."

"What the hell do you think I'm trying to do?" Hayden slammed his hand down over the schematics. "I need to know where all the time fissures are. And I don't want to hear anything about need to know or clearance levels."

Doc was completely surprised by Hayden's aggressive behavior. If times weren't as critical as they were, he would have disciplined him. Yet, this wasn't ordinary times and perhaps procedures and regulations weren't the best approach. Doc scratched his head and said, "Oh, what the hell. What do we have to lose?"

"All of time, Doc."

Doc nodded, "Right."

Doc pushed the schematics aside with a motion of his hand and tapped a few commands into the bio-gel table. A map appeared with a dozen red dots. "Those dots are all the known time fissures we're aware of." Doc pointed.

Hayden looked over each one. Yet, the site he visited could have been any of them. "Which ones are in caves or underground?"

Doc typed new commands into the table. Half of the dots disappeared.

"Anything built over them or around them."

Again Doc's fingers typed a fury of commands into the interface. Only a few dots disappeared this time.

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"That's good that only leaves," Hayden made a quick count of the dots, "five sites to worry about."

"Do you mind explaining yourself Flashback-6?" Doc finally and impatiently asked.

Hayden explained the details of the facility that he had been taken to by McGregor's Gestapo. He detailed the hallway, the smell of dampness, and the inscription that was partly worn away on the wall. Doc knew immediately what location he was describing. After typing a brief command in the table, only one dot remained. It was a dot in western North America, on the Colorado River.

"Hoover Dam."

"One of the more modern fissures we had to protect. And one of the easier ones. It made sense and wasn't very hard to get the United States Congress to approve a construction project to dam the Colorado River and form Lake Meade. Nothing better than three million cubic yards of concrete and 28 million gallons of water to insure the fissure isn't discovered by anyone unfortunate."

"That's where he's at."

"How sure are you Flashback-6?"

Hayden looked right at Doc, "I'd bet my life on it."

Hayden punched up some data on the Hoover Dam. He hoped that Zeus had some intel on the real purpose of its construction. Perhaps there were weaknesses, secret passages that Hayden could take advantage of. He quickly tried to link the location

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coordinates with those of the Giza Plateau. The computer froze. Zeus was starting to lose his ability to work on sub-stations. Hayden closed his eyes and massaged his hands through his short cut hair.

“There’s one problem.”

Hayden opened his eyes and turned while bringing his arms down to the data station. “How to get past the guards? He had a small militia from what I saw.”

“No. I was referring to how do we know where he’s at in time. Hoover Dam stood strong for 457 years. That’s a large gap and in temporal terms it’s the proverbial needle in a hayfield.”

“Haystack.”

“Uh?”

“It’s haystack, but never mind. You’re right. And something I’ve been thinking about.” Hayden turned back to the bio-gel monitors and the history of Hoover Dam scrolled on a continuous loop. He stared at the data photos that flashed before him. There was old black & white photos of the construction; a photo of the construction workers; and one of the officials shaking hands with President Hoover. Wait. Hayden froze and his eyes focused on the photo. He paused the frame and brought up the resolution. Amazement fell on his face. This wasn’t just any person or a dead politician from long ago. This gentleman, dressed in a fancy 1930’s suit, spats, and with the firm hand of a President, was the very man standing behind him. “What the?”

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Doc looked at Hayden and shrugged his shoulders. “Someone had to be there and supervise the operation.”

“And I bet that tore you up inside. What was that one rule? Some directive buried in a hundred pages of directives and mandates? Oh, yeah. ‘Stay out of the way of time—a temporal agent will do everything in his power to avoid historical documentation or interfering with the record of certain events.’ You must have forgotten that one, eh?”

“Enough Flashback-6!” Doc was turning red, both from anger and embarrassment.

“Lucky for me I have an expert on the facility,” Hayden shot him a devious grin. “When were you planning on telling me that information?”

“It’s always been a need to know, Flashback-6.”

Hayden just stared through him. “Right. Of Course. You. Were.”

Need to know situations irritated Hayden more than he could handle. He felt just like it was secrets between school children—a game that was played by people that knew too much information. And right now, these kinds of games could be catastrophic. So disastrous, that the entire fabric of space and time, as everyone knew it, would be wiped from existence. Even alternative dimensions or parallel universes could be erased. Hayden couldn’t even understand that in his small human mind yet Zeus was quite adamant that it would be a very bad thing.

“The trick is getting into McGregor’s facility.”

Doc was right; it could be any point in over 400 years of time.

“I think we are overlooking the cleverness of Mr. McGregor. Let’s say he’s like us—Olympus—slightly to the side of time.” Hayden sat down at the info station.

“If that’s the easy solution then we need Zeus to calculate an entry point.” Doc said.

The two men walked down to Bid Daddy’s chamber. The tech boys had already filled his chamber with super cooled gas. Production of new chipboards and bio-gel processors were under hurried construction to help Zeus’s increasing burn-out. After Doc got a quick situation report, the tech boys insisted that he wasn’t in any condition to make Time Stream computations. Even when Doc ordered them to get Zeus ready, they nearly sat on their hands in protest. Just like overbearing parents, they refused to put Zeus in jeopardy and increased danger. Only when Doc raised his voice to the loudest Hayden had ever heard, did they start to understand the importance of this time jump.

“I don’t care if Zeus burns out every one of his goddamn circuits to get Flashback-6 to the Hoover coordinates!”

Hayden was suited up in full temporal gear and body armor, full armament and life support and tracking. Worst-case scenario, Hayden knew this could be a one-way mission, but he prayed that Zeus could pull him back. He checked his sidearm; quickly ran a di-

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agnostic of the suit's bio-gel connections and relay nodes. Everything checked out.

Doc broke the emergency seal on the temporal jump pad. Hayden slowly climbed the steps up to the crystal-fused steel plate. He took one last look at his bio-gel monitors on his forearm and reached up to flip the helmet's visor down over his grey eyes. With a nod and salute, he gave Doc the cue that he was ready. Doc turned and rotated his hand and forefinger in the air—the signal to get the unit spinning.

The temperature in Zeus's chamber spiked. The gauges indicated the temperature rose nearly 30 degrees in only a few seconds. The tech boys suited up in pressure suits and entered the super-cooled chamber. Quickly pulling circuit boards, while Zeus processed the temporal algorithms, techs caused sparks and arcs of blue energy to shoot across the chamber. The techs dodged the intensified energy bursts. One unfortunate tech took a direct blast to the chest and dropped to the floor.

"Zeus get Flashback-6 to Hoover-Delta-Six-Six ASAP!"

*Affirmative Doctor Alexander. I have calculated the arrival window. Sending the data to the Cage and spinning the Flux-Spanners to over 100,000 RPS. Good Luck Flashback-6.*

At that moment, Hayden's suit started to glow with the energy of the Cage's centripetal forces. Suddenly, Hayden disappeared in a flash of light and energy.

“God Speed Hayden,” Doc whispered.

Hayden floated through the ether. His skin tingled, then slowly started to burn; nerve endings started to ache, and then slowly started to sting. Sideswiping time brought forth a new sensation for him—a feeling of being split down to the very atoms of his body. Something that Hayden had never felt before. He hoped this would be the last time. The biogel monitor on his forearm lit up. The read-out displayed the current coordinates were compromised. Suddenly, contact with Zeus was severed. Hayden closed his eyes; he felt light-headed.

Slowly, Hayden phased into this sidebar of time and space. When he finally opened his eyes, he noticed a white para-aluminum walled facility. Not much different than the Initiative’s operation back on Olympus. Quickly scanning his surroundings, he found the facility nearly abandoned. Yet, in the adjacent room, several men worked control panels and monitored systems. He was still unnoticed. There was no communication with Zeus. The Omnitemporal gauge was blank—no readings. Hayden sweated. This could only mean one thing: Zeus was off-line. No way to pull him back to Olympus; no way to know if his mission was a success.

“What happened?!” Doc shouted.

“We’ve had a catastrophic malfunction of the sentient processing entity known as Zeus,” a voice

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echoed through the internal comm system.

“I need an eta of when repairs will be complete. I need that data yesterday!”

The comm sat silent, then with an eerie click of static a voice responded, “Unable to provide that data at this time. Zeus is beyond repair. Electrical fires will be contained in five to seven minutes.”

Doc fell back into a chair; his head lowered. He ordered Zeus to get Hayden through the Stream and to his destination. In doing so, he may have destroyed any hope of Hayden returning home. He may have doomed them to a temporal disaster beyond his or anyone’s comprehension.

Hayden stepped around a corner and peered down a concrete hall, the wall’s damp with moisture. A sign on the wall confirmed he was in the right place. The sign stated: Hoover Dam - Warning - This area below Mead Reservoir. Moments earlier, he found and opened a door marked no admittance. When he first looked through the doorway he couldn’t see beyond the doorframe. He swore he only saw a reflection of himself staring back at him. Yet, his reflection shimmered and pulled away from him. For a few seconds, he swore he saw images of him from previous points in time. He had been overwhelmed by a strong sense of fear as some of the images he did not recognize—clearly these were points in his future, things he had not yet done. He didn’t understand a few of them. One set of images showed him in the de-

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sert standing atop scaffolding, plumes of dust and sand swirled around him. It was at this time he realized that was actually a shield for the fissure.

Somehow McGregor was able to connect a sidebar time event with a local fissure. If Hayden's fears were correct, he was using the fissure to tap into the alternate time lines and control the parallel time windows. The mission was to stop McGregor at all costs, possibly bring him back to the Initiative for questioning and/or justice. Last resort was to destroy the facility and try and close the fissure. Doc had provided all of McGregor's own research on the subject and theoretical data on sealing a temporal fissure. The task had never been done before. It was always easier to hide them or bury them under something.

As Hayden prepared for this mission, Doc had tried to clear his conscience about the fissures across the globe. The aging temporal agent and director of the temporal fraud initiative swore that the fissures were too dangerous to just ignore. The course of human events was already predestined, but what if humanity found a way to exploit time? The consequences would be far greater than the Initiative's involvement in world history. They needed to cover those fissures up and protect them for all of time and space. Doc explained that trying to destroy the fissures could somehow cause a catastrophic temporal anomaly. It was just easier to bury them—or more precisely enclose them in something so large that access would seem impossible. One couldn't just pour

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dirt or concrete over the fissure. It would just get sucked into another time. The Initiative devised a way to build a vault around it. And if the construction materials were so massive, no one would ever try to move it. Doc emphasized if we built something with a door, the door would just be opened. Hayden knew about the Great Pyramids on the Giza plateau, but he immediately wondered if every large prehistoric ziggurat meant it was hiding a fissure. What about the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Pyramid of the Moon in Mexico, or the tomb of Qin Shi Huang? Either way, if things didn't go as planned now, he'd never know.

For the last few minutes, Hayden started to panic. He could not raise Zeus on his Omni-chronometer nor could he reach Olympus. It meant only one thing: something horrible had happened to the super computer. He only hoped it hadn't destroyed s as well. He couldn't worry about it. He had a duty to perform and that was to stop a madman. Removing his backpack, he slowly took out the six chrono-grenades. He had secured them around the perimeter of the fissure as the physicists had theorized would collapse it. He synced the detonators to his comm unit. And in case something prevented him from pushing the button, he set a ten-minute countdown.

Running down the long cavernous hallways, he turned a corner only to find himself standing before Phineas McGregor. The temporal genius looked surprised. Not surprise, fear. How had Hayden found him?

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“Have you changed your mind Hayden?” He spoke confidently. Hayden couldn’t confirm if it was sincere or just great acting.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve come to arrest you. Crimes against humanity by way of screwing up time. Do you realize how much trouble you have caused history professors and history book publishers?” Hayden still the smart ass.

“I’m afraid I won’t allow that. Again, I ask you to join me. We’ll discover the secrets of time and space. We’ll touch the consciousness of the universe and learn all that’s learnable. You don’t know what you’re throwing away here Hayden.”

Hayden approached Phineas, “Growing up, I was told I wasn’t too eager to follow the crowd. So, I respectfully decline the offer.”

Phineas placed his hands out as if he was going to offer up a surrender. Hayden withdrew the wrist binders from his belt and approached. “You’re under arrest.”

“You arrest me, yet your precious little Initiative has done more to interfere with history than I have. I’m guilty of discovery. My crime is unlocking the mysteries of this universe.” Suddenly, Phineas pulled a viper pistol from his hip.

Hayden threw his body to the side just as viper rounds flashed over the spot he was standing. Phineas pivoted on his right foot and continued to fire his weapon. Hayden crawled along the floor and rolled into an adjoining room. As he rotated to get to

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his feet, he found himself in the facility's time chamber. Just outside, he heard the continuous rounds being fired by McGregor. Hayden appreciated that he attacked like a typical madman and not a trained soldier. Pulling the last two chrono-grenades from his satchel, he tossed them into the chamber. Hayden slammed the door shut and ran from the room, only to be fired upon by McGregor once more.

Hayden jumped through another open doorway. Viper rounds ricocheted just over his head. Phineas pursued his prey.

Suddenly, the temporal chamber erupted in flames; explosive gases and shockwaves sent debris in every direction. Some of the hot metal fragments struck Phineas McGregor in the face burning the flesh and sealing his left eye shut. This fueled McGregor's anger. He reloaded his Viper pistol and fired dozens of rounds into the smoke and flames.

Hayden picked himself up from the confusion of the blast and realized that Phineas was only a few meters away. He looked down to see if Zeus had locked on to him and confirmed an extraction point. Still the bio-gel monitor was blank. It didn't look good for Hayden. The fire caused by his grenades quickly spread to the other rooms and now bio-gel monitors and computer stations erupted in sparks and flames. He had only one escape route and the super computer had not responded, or given the call back signal. He was lost under a million tons of concrete and a madman was blasting holes into every wall around him.

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Hayden made a quick decision and ran for the long hallway where the fissure sat behind a steel door.

His footfalls echoed off the concrete, the sound thundered in his ears. Then, almost out of nowhere, viper rounds erupted near his feet. Phineas was in pursuit and gaining on Hayden. With each second he ran, the bullets inched closer and closer.

“You can’t escape Hayden! You’ll die as surely as I will!”

Hayden ignored the man’s rant. Sliding into the door, he pulled the handle and swung it open. He looked back one more time only to see muzzle flashes roaring from Phineas’ Viper pistol. There was no time. Hayden turned and flung himself through the door and at the fissure. Just as he did, he pushed the button on his wrist computer to detonate the chronogrenades.

Hayden fell.

Darkness took hold of his vision.

He awoke; the sun, burned his eyes.

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Sand and dust clouded the desert. Rising up through the haze of dirt, an enormous stone block pulled by thousands of men inched closer and closer to its resting spot. Hayden turned his head to look upon another megalithic structure that reached up into the sky. He smiled, a sense of accomplishment. Completed. It took him decades of time to oversee and build. He squinted through aging eyes; crow’s feet scarred

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them. He pointed to a group of men and shouted more orders. The men turned and quickly knelt before him. Standing on a large wood scaffolding, Hayden adjusted his nemes headdress. Sweat beaded on his brow; he quickly wiped it away, as gods don't sweat. He snapped his fingers; servants shaded him with large palm leaves.

The laborers, thousands of strong men, pulling massive stone blocks began to sing.

They chanted. "Ra. Ra. Ra.

## Amanda's Feet

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Ricky remembers very few things from the summer of '77. He remembers Star Wars at the Starlight Drive-In. He remembers Emergency 51 and Six Million Dollar Man. He remembers Amanda Ashley. Ooh, he remembers Amanda Ashley. Amanda, teenage daughter of the overweight landlady in apartment 3B, is tall and curvy, with long strawberry-blond hair. At 11, she's the most beautiful girl he's ever seen.

Amanda spends most her summer days by the pool, along with the other women of the Columbia Manor Apartments. She watches Ricky while his mother works 10-hour shifts at the Levi's plant. Ricky's mother trusts Amanda with a key to their apartment and she routinely checks in on him. She usually finds him watching TV and playing with his Mego Superheroes. She glides in and smiles at him. She tells him, she'll be at the pool. She points at him and then the pool—a silent invitation to join her.

Ten a.m. and several women lounge on cheap plastic chairs that match the antique fuchsia and dark pine green stucco of the building. They spend hours soaking up the stark rays of sunlight, bodies glisten with perspiration and baby oil. Two piece bathing suits tied at the sides; fit so snug, skin bulges out the edges. The ladies rub Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil, with aro-

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mas of coconuts and bananas, on their bare midriffs, calves and thighs. Arnold Palmer's bead and sweat on small tables in front of them. Cigarettes rest gently between long fingers, nails brightly painted Fire Engine Red, like Farah Fawcett Majors. Glossy lips suck in nicotine and seductively blow out clouds of bluish-gray smoke. Soft husky voices mumble about sun-dresses, sandals and Saturday Night Fever.

Ricky notices Amanda's bare feet as she dances across the courtyard in cut-off jeans and a tube top. Hop scotches herself over the rock gardens, rocks that look like peeled potatoes. She's always barefoot, even when she hops in her '74 Datsun to get a banana split at the Tastee Freeze. Sometimes, she stays over to watch Charlie's Angels on Wednesday nights, she sits Indian-style on the sofa, her bare feet tucked under.

Ricky watches her prop her left foot up on her toes and drops 35 cents into the complex's soda machine. The bottoms of her feet are the color of roasted coffee. Not the breakfast blend the cozy diner on 2<sup>nd</sup> and Main serves, more like the extra bold blend Grandfather cooked in an old marbled-blue metal pot on the gas stove. She pulls a bottle of Dr. Pepper from the small glass door, pops the top and takes a long sip of the bubbly beverage. She buys another one for Ricky.

Moments later, Amanda lifts the metal latch to the gate surrounding the aging pool. She wiggles out of her cutoffs. Before lying back on a scratchy plastic

## CV Whitfield

pool lounge, she dives into the deep end. She rises up through the water like a mermaid. Lifting her body from the cool blue pool, she hops over to her towel-covered lounge, crosses her slightly tanned legs. Her shoulders and chest glisten from pool water. Emerald green eyes hide behind Jack Nicholson-style sunglasses. She tucks hair behind her ears. Tugging at her bikini top, she shoots Ricky a smile. Ricky stares at her feet. She wiggles her toes, toenails painted a soft pink. They intrigue him; he finds them attractive, innocent, exposed.

The pool groupies depart with pink skin—like overcooked lobsters. Ricky overhears their conversations and how they'll see each other again tomorrow morning. Tired, he runs home because the sidewalk burns his toes. He leaves a slowly disappearing trail of wet foot prints. That evening, Amanda drives Ricky to ALCO. She's barefoot of course. She buys him a pack of Detective Comics from a wire rack. He reads them on the ride home. Amanda reaches over and messes his blonde hair as if she was greeting a massive St. Bernard.

Sitting in grass and dirt, Ricky watches as a new tenant moves in across the courtyard. Men in dark grey overalls pull things from the back of a U-haul truck that has pictures of surfers and dolphins on its sides. Large gold-brown couch. Followed by bronze glass tear-drop lamps with yellow shades. Then, he sees her. The girl is about his age. Her hair is blonde, too

### **3+: Short Stories**

— pulled into two pony tails in the back. Her red sundress with big yellow flowers flows in the breeze. He marvels as she smiles when one of the movers drops a box of silverware that scatters across the pavement. She has dimples with her smile. For the second time in his life, he sees the most-beautiful-girl he's ever seen.

She looks to him and waves a shy hello before darting off inside the apartment. That's when Ricky notices, she's barefoot.



## Author's Note

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I really appreciate everyone reading these short stories, and one kinda longer one. I realize some of these stories could easily be full-length novels. With that, I will not deny that one day any one of these stories could be told again either in a novel, graphic novel, or motion picture. Perhaps these short stories are story treatments, a canvas to test the subject matter. With you, the reader's help, hopefully that dream will soon be realized. I love these worlds so much I will never completely abandon them.



## About the Author

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...born and raised in Roswell, New Mexico. Although he denies it, he may be the offspring of something slightly extra-terrestrial. Growing up in a small town, he watched an unhealthy dose of television. He read Teen Titans comic books and dreamed of adventures with laser swords. He's been caught sniffing books in B&N and double dog dared to write an entire novel on an iPad. Currently, he lives with his wife and daughter in Denver Colorado and is writing and blogging about pop culture and the 1980s.

