

DEUS EX MACHINA:
THE GOD MACHINE

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2009

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ABSTRACT

God is our salvation from eternal death. That's what Professor Nicholas Updown grew up believing. But what if there is no God? What then? These questions lead Nicholas down an unprecedented path of scientific exploration that unlocks the secrets to traveling through time. The wake of this discovery sweeps up a cast of odd and ambitious characters, including Updown's sultry wife, a no holds barred Presidential candidate, a mysterious hooded killer, a curious journalist, a crusading cop, the founder of Forever Life, and a whole slew of uniformed Time Travelers. Along the way, Nicholas Updown learns a thing or two about the secrets of the universe and those in his own life.

DEDICATION

To Rachel, who was worth waiting for.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the efforts of all those I've met at the University of Alabama, this thesis would not have been possible. I'm grateful to Wendy Rawlings, in whose workshop I wrote the original short story this work is based on. To Phil Beidler, as well, who helped me find the literary depth for the work's expansion. To Michael Martone who helped me look at the big picture and Gary Mankey who helped me find the scientific sounding lie. To Kate Bernheimer for being on my committee and always being a kind face. I would like to thank my friends and family, especially my parents and sister, who make so much in my life possible.

I am also indebted to Melville, Irving, the Bible, Ryan Kazmirzack, and Einstein for always making me think.

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DEUS ex MACHINA

A Posthumous Writing
Of Nicholas Updown

*When Man went to seek God
Man walked round and round
When God searched for Man
It all began again, again*

(F. Nietzsche - 1900)

FOREWORD
REASONS FOR BEING

Dear brave reader,

The tome you hold before you is produced not without trouble. Nor without trepidation. Not without crisis, nor tremor. I was laying awake in bed one night, trying to make out the texture of my stuffy studio apartment ceiling in the darkness, when I felt those sweaty prickles of fear take hold of my shoulders and neck. My best friend had, just a few hours before, told me he no longer believed in God. He would always be a Catholic, he said, but more from a sense of cultural belonging than from any pull of faith. This shook me, quite a bit, and there I was, eyes rubbing my scratchy pillowcase in the dark, thinking of how a good number of respectable scientists, associates of mine, and now even many close friends found religion to be a bunch of overblown, superstitious hogwash, with no reliable basis. All these important people in my life were quite convinced that God did not exist. In the grand scheme of things, for my lonely person, the consequences of this line of thinking were that, within the mere span of forty, fifty, sixty years, I would most certainly also not exist. Or maybe I had only a few hours left.

For me, for the throbbing chambers of my heart, for the grasping, the choking of these chambers, these ideas were worse than Hell. Humans have two primary instincts, my mind insisted, as I slowed my breath to even ins and outs. Two primary instincts at the very core of us that, in one way or another, inform everything we do in this life.

One is the drive for survival. We eat, we sleep, we drink, we duck and flee from danger or stand and fight. We find outlets for our emotions, distractions from our insanities, better living conditions for our families, better medicines for our bodies, longer lives. All of this

we do because, at our truest, we cannot stand the idea that one day we will be rotting in the ground.

Our second drive is, of course, for sexual reproduction. The chase. The flirtation. The seduction. Tarzan swinging after Jane in the jungle. Coffeehouse dates and Internet chat rooms. We fear settling down with a single mate and producing our brood only because we wonder what purpose will be left but to grow old and die? This is why men squirm at the thought of vasectomies. Why women weep at barren wombs. Are we supposed to be content in making way for the next generation like one second passes to allow room for the next? Is it enough to convince ourselves, to lie to ourselves, that we will have immortality through our children and their children's children? Most of us have met our grandparents, sure, maybe have even heard stories of our great grandparents, but before that, beyond that in the great span of history? These people, no matter how many descendants they may have, are now no more than dust. And we're supposed to smile in our nursing homes, our children having forgotten us even now, while we still breathe, and put up with this nonsense? What about that little voice, deep down, insisting, *my life, my romance*, it mattered. I was here first.

And yet, we don't want to be here alone. We do want those future generations. We love them. Everything in our beings strain to make them. Our constant pursuit of each other's flesh shows how our greatest instincts push past any fears or reluctance. Just as we are hardwired to wish for our own survival, so too are we built to promote the well-being of our entire species, if not as individuals (what with our petty squabbles, our violent homicides) then certainly as a whole.

So the thought of nonexistence, complete obliteration - of mine, my family's, my friends' and neighbors', all those scientists', the televangelists', the politicians', the strangers' on the street, the actresses' smiling in toothpaste ads, even my children's and grandchildren's in the future - was inexcusable to me. Something simply had to be done. The pleading prayers I offered to the ceiling of my bedroom provided only fleeting comfort to me in those moments. The seeds of doubt planted in my brain had too firmly rooted. So I needed to find comfort somewhere else.

It was then that I first thought it.

Perhaps if God cannot save us, if there is no God to save us, we can save ourselves.

But how could I aspire to have such power? The power of an immortal, an eternal, an omnipotent being? Did all of human history contain enough knowledge for such a pursuit? I wasn't sure, as I lay there in that room, but I knew I needed to find out.

So I got out of bed and scoured the Internet. For hours and hours, seeking answers for questions humankind had forever been asking - whether we knew it or not. But the sun rose, and set again, and there were no answers there for me. Over the next several years, I would also traverse the country, far and wide, from university to university, library to library. I would study high energy, philosophy, aeronautics, psychology, physics, alchemy, genetics, Voodoo, mystics, magic, new age thinking, the cosmos, alternative medicine, even time travel. I would see the barren plains of Russia's frozen tundra. I would hike the wide plateaus of Tibet, beside those seeking Shangri-La. I would float down the Amazon in a rubber raft, contemplating the Universe and the stars, with strange natives perhaps hiding in dense foliage on all sides. In the outback I would stare at Uluru, the monolith Australian red rock, called Ayer's by the first European settlers there, but rightfully called a more ancient name by its true guardians.

These journeys took their toll on me, the toll of years, and my grey hairs grew many as my time grew short. My face birthed wrinkles, even as I failed to birth any children of my own. My legacy was set, then - many spent their lives seeking a spiritual route, a path straight to God. I would, instead, seek an escape route. A path around. A circumnavigation.

It was in Arizona I finally found my prophet. My words of hope. Not far from Death Valley, from cruel desert and unrelenting sun, at a small, out of the way college library, I found the first of the texts rejected by the major institutions. It was called *Deus ex Machina*, and numbered fewer than one hundred pages long. The back cover was torn off and a few pages ripped to shreds. Someone had tried hiding it, on a back bookshelf, far from similar

subject matter, in a corner of the building covered in dust. I had long since learned to peer past the obvious sectors, though, and now, at last, I had the first part of my treasure map.

I had no idea what it was I sought. This book, now a finished, polished project, was just scraps and torn pages then. I had to gather it piece by piece, and it came with no small trouble. This tale of Nicholas Updown, while a beacon to me and an answer to my questions of how man could finally reach beyond his previously humble destiny into eternity, seemed a plague to the world of academia. A mere mention of his name brought lips, trembling, shut. I met resistance at every turn, but enough money, enough persistence, and I managed to add piecemeal to my findings.

That day when I pushed the last piece into its binding, I felt a tremor through my entire being. A chill, like cold rain water poured down my chest. I knew I must spread this work, this truth, to the world. This thing I had here, it was scattered, it was difficult to read. I fear not all the authors were always in their right minds. And yet, I could not think of a simpler, more straightforward way to relate this testament of humanity. The muddiness, the chaos, the sheer terror, are all part of what it was, what it is, what it will be, to exist in the long and dangerous days of Nicholas Updown's God Machine.

After this textual assembly, I began my travels once more, going far and wide to verify the accuracy of the testimonials gathered in this manuscript. I have gone to Michigan, to Arizona, to the White House in Washington D.C.; even to the future itself. In some instances, the words here were confirmed and defended with absolute veracity. In others, the significant parties spoke of the same events in harsh or hushed tones and denied all knowledge. But what else can be expected in the ever shifting realities brought on by time machines? In still other instances, the key witnesses were deceased or impossible to find. Perhaps they were no longer even born to begin with - worse than my worst nightmares - zapped from existence by some alteration to reality itself.

So it becomes then, much like other books of its sort. A work of faith alone. My words are words you will have to trust, I can offer no other evidence. These words are

words I trust more than any I have ever read. They speak to me, with their yearnings, their helplessness, their confusion and pain. They tear the beatings of my heart out and lay them bloody on the page. I hope that in looking them over you can see their undeniable power - even where this humble editor has failed to produce them.

Nicholas J. Pincumbe

Tuscaloosa, AL March 13, 2008

ENTRYWAYS

FIRST DOOR

LILLIAN LAZARUS

Lillian Lazarus was shocked to find herself asphyxiating. She stumbled forward, billowing clouds of smoke stinging at her eyes and masking her surroundings. Her kneecap banged on some hard surface. She winced at the pain, pinching her lip between her teeth and teetered off balance. The space where she hoped to find the steady edge of her desk provided only air for her waving hand and, as she fell, she could not help but feel upset that she'd just had the offices equipped with brand new Berber carpeting. Now, not only would that need replacing, there was also a very real chance she might die.

It had started out a normal enough day. She'd gotten up, had decaf coffee and a bowl of bran flakes, walked her golden retriever, aptly named Goldie, and headed into work at the clinic. She'd worn that new dark red cable knit sweater she'd been so happy to find half priced at the mall. It was surely blackened beyond recognition now, dulled by the smoke like her sharp hazel eyes.

The usual lines of protestors had been outside this morning, but no extra zeal was in their hard gazes to indicate they were plotting anything like this. Nothing to show they were ready to take a quantum leap past tossing eggs and waving signs about baby's blood and hurling the usually empty threats.

She could hear the flames eating apart the building, as she shoved her lab coat over her nose and gasped, trying to strain clean oxygen through the tainted air. Somewhere, nearby, ceiling tiles crashed, scattering the smoke for brief, terrible moments.

Her mother would probably be the first to notice she was missing. Mom always called on Tuesdays around lunchtime. Lillian had enjoyed bonding with her ever since her mom's retirement from teaching kindergarten. In return, her mom was proud of the work Lillian was doing, providing young women with the ability to choose to be sexually active and yet retain control over their own bodies. *Your body's not your enemy*, she'd always told the wide-eyed teenagers in the exam room as they text messaged their friends and bit their nails.

As her throat constricted, Lillian was determined to fight through her own body's shortcomings. Calling up her physical memory, she stumbled toward her best recollection of an exit, leaning heavily on her one strong knee.

Lillian had read once that flames could reach thousands of degrees, more than enough to lick away every shred of her flesh and blacken her bones. Funny the things you remember. She'd also read, and knew, that it was the smoke twisting in her lungs she should fear the most.

"Those Goddamn Jesus-freak terrorist bastards," she mumbled to herself between coughs. It's not like she hadn't seen things like this on the news before. She knew the risks. But when it's not even safe to send your kids to school anymore without the concern of them being shot or blown to bits, everything had its risks.

It wasn't supposed to happen, not here, she thought, feeling cliché as anything with the smoke tearing her eyes to blindness. She collapsed to the ground, no breath left in her lungs, wondering if her mom would feel it in her heart, some supernatural mother sense, the moment her daughter died.

"I'm not a baby killer," she whispered as the flames, the smoke, the imminent death swirled around her. And then a ceiling tile above her succumbed to the hungry fires. It fell and splintered over her forehead, leaving a gash and engulfing her in flames.

And, strangely, this sensation was not her last.

For Lillian awoke, what felt like seconds later. She coughed smoke from her lungs and batted eyelids open. A strange skyline loomed above, with giant buildings crowded closer than books on a shelf, as far as she could see. And then a man, blocking her view, in a strange, vibrating suit, removing a mask and smiling at her with tired eyes.

"Congratulations," the man said.

"Welcome to the future," the man said.

"You get a second chance."

SECOND DOOR

DR. CHARLES OSTRANDER

“When I’m dying of cancer, as my grandparents do, the Time Travelers come –”

“Don’t you mean as your grandparents did?”

Dr. Charles Ostrander stares at his haphazard patient. The man is pushing fifty. His once firm biceps have given over to drooping flab. Crow’s feet are grooved as knife marks on a wooden cutting board beneath his eyes. His hair has gone copper and thin. He is one of the stranger cases Ostrander has had in recent years, but still a garden variety paranoid delusional after all.

“I’m no expert in grammar here, Nicholas, but when someone’s died of cancer, we should use past tense,” Ostrander smiles his healthy, young-looking smile (dental caps, \$2,500, and that was a bargain). “It happens once, only once, and then it is behind us.”

The patient shakes his head, seeming frustrated. Ostrander hears the slight whipping sound of the back of his head against the leather couch cushion, like a well thrown Frisbee or an overactive zipper.

“It’s not cancer, not cancer that’s my point. It’s only cancer sometimes. It could just as well be meningitis, or food poisoning, or a plane crash. Or a bullet in the lung.”

Ostrander leans forward in his wooden chair, places a hand on the patient’s knee with good intention, but the man flails up, away from the doctor and curls into a protective ball, rocking gently in place.

“Those Time Travelers, they’re not reliable, though. Unreliable. Wouldn’t set my watch to them. Seems contrary, I know, I know, not like how one envisions Time Travelers. Masters of Chronos, slipping among the ether, one would assume their skill set to be profound, their timing – impeccable. Worse yet, they only come sometimes.”

The doctor’s pencil lead snaps mid stroke and he sighs. What does he think he’s accomplishing putting this all on paper anyhow?

“Why don’t we talk about what’s really bothering you? Do you want to talk about your wife?”

The patient is crying, but his face is blank and his eyes look distant. Only the tell-tale tears sliding down unshaven cheeks give him away. Ostrander doubts he's been taking the prescribed anti-psychotic meds. He feels angry when patients don't follow instructions, especially repeat patients like this one. How can he be expected to find the cause of their fucking issues when they won't be cooperative?

The patient is rocking again, faster now, and his lips curve up in a smile, even as the tears continue to well. Ostrander hoped that dimmer lights would help his patient relax, but they just make expressions like this all the creepier.

"They come to save me from the flatline," he says, as much to himself as anyone. "Always, always, they freeze-frame reality just before my heart stops. Freeze my frame, preserving my body. They say they're here to save me, but I'm not sure. Am I crazy? Everyone I tell thinks I'm crazy."

Dr. Ostrander gnaws on the nub end of the pencil and sets his notepad down.

"You know, if you want to wrap this week's session up—"

"The suits they wear, they're astronaut suits, and they're fuzzy green like tennis balls. Their moon boots are made by Nike, of course. And they've got deep sea diver masks, because they're very sensitive to the quality of our air. They won't say if the air here is too poor or too good – won't hint whether the future is going to be Hell or Heaven—"

Patients are supposed to get better under his care, not worse. He was taught to believe that in school, asserted it as a professional time and again. A degree from Cornell hung over his desk, for Christ's sake. And yet cases like this, a patient he's been seeing for over 20 years now seeming on the brink of total mental collapse, it was enough to make Ostrander question his entire calling.

"Hell or Heaven," the patient repeats.

Ostrander rubs his broad hands, knuckles grown thick with age.

"Which do *you* think it's going to be?"

The patient's eyes seem to come into sudden focus, and they stare up at Ostrander sharply, sending a tremble down the doctor's spine.

"Oh Hell, definitely Hell."

THIRD DOOR

EDGAR UNUM

Edgar Unum was an interesting fellow. Every morning he'd sink an oversized brown fedora on to his beaker-thin head, push beakish glasses up his French hen nose, and head to the newsroom of the Arizona Sun-Chronicle-Gazette. When the paper was consolidated at the turn of the century, the ninety-story glass and metal monstrosity was the tallest Arizona had ever known. Now, less than a decade later, it looked squat and dim compared with the seven or eight taller buildings within a few blocks.

In 2109, an era where newborns were given laser eye treatment as regularly as circumcisions, Unum wore a pair of aluminum browline frames of the type that had not been sported for a good 150 years, and even then, as far as he had gathered, only by revolutionary types like some fellow named Malcolm X. He'd bought them at an antique costume shop on a whim, perhaps trying to create a "persona" for himself that might draw friends and admirers. On his way through the front lobby, he passed the tuxedo clad receptionist who'd yet to learn his name and started the journey up the rumbling elevator to floor eighty-nine. The main offices of the Arizona Sun-Chronicle-Gazette were on floor ten, and several other portions of the media conglomerate took up entire stories, such as the sport's section on floor twelve, the international news offices on floor fifteen, or the arts and entertainment section on floors twenty-one and twenty-two. Human resources took floors nine and eleven, as if they were some strange vertical bodyguards for the editor-in-chief's tenth floor abode.

Unum had been on the tenth floor all of twice in his fifteen years with the publication; once when he went to hand in his resume and was informed that it had to be submitted electronically, and once, after hours, when Gregor, a janitor he'd befriended with a pint of scotch took him on a quick tour. The editor-in-chief, the famous Carlita Bronson, had an office spanning half the floor. When Unum asked what it was like inside, the janitor only shrugged. He didn't have access.

Edgar Unum dreamed of being a *Kraft Presents Pulitzer* prize-winning investigator, but despite all this journalistic ambition, Unum was relegated to the obituaries. It seems he possessed the newshound's equivalent of stage fright. He could jot down the most startling exploratory questions in the world in his memo device, but as soon as he faced the holo image of an interviewee, he sunk like a cinder block on margarine pillars.

The elevator dinged his destination and Unum skulked out. On the eighty-ninth floor, lights were kept at half wattage, to save on the Sun-Chronicle-Gazette's overhead. The SCG owned most of the floors but actually rented the building from a former state governor and billionaire. As he passed the one window on the floor, Unum treasured this final glimpse of sunlight for the day. Rebecca Gretzbaum, the chubby receptionist with a poorly hidden crush on him and perpetual broccoli between her teeth moved to block the view.

"Haven't seen you a lot lately, Edgar," she said.

He moved past the window, closer to his back cubicle, which was crammed somewhere between the surplus phonebook storage and an oversized generator from a century ago.

"You know how it is; people die, I stay pretty busy," he said. This was a lie, actually, he realized once the words left his mouth. For some reason, things had actually been a little slow lately.

Edgar's typical day involved verbally comforting the bereaved, and trying to create original taglines for yet more deceased retirees. How many ways can you say "He Lived a Good Life" he often wondered. Unum once actually typed up "For He Was a Jolly Good Fellow" in a newsfeed for the death notice of the former head of a major diet pill conglomerate. Luckily, he got a hold of himself before clicking send.

As the only writer for the SCG's obituary ticker, which covered the entire state, as well as some cities in neighboring states, Unum's days were usually stacked neck high with death notices. His only interactions with other human beings were usually Gretzbaum's walk-by flirtings and his editor, Jack Jackson's threats when Unum was unable to keep up with the impossible load of eulogies and funeral announcements.

Settling into his desk, barely able to make out the photo of an overfed tabby cat magnetized to his mini fridge (the cat, incidentally, was

his grandma's, sent to him in one of her more lucid moments at the home), Unum began to think. Last week was the first time he could remember finishing his work load – the first time in fifteen years at this dead (ha) end job that Unum hadn't left pages of corpse leads, as he called them, in his e-mail inbox. At the time, he thought it was just the result of putting in a really full day of effort. But, two days later, he did a completely half-assed job and had the same result. And then, yesterday, he didn't receive a single notice after noon. It had been a little strange, actually, but Unum had been engrossed in watching a new skin flick on the net, and hadn't paid much mind.

But he was thinking about it now and came to the frank conclusion that despite what he said to Gretzbaum, he hadn't been staying pretty busy. He hadn't been busy at all, and it was striking him now as just plain odd. All the clichés about death and taxes were true, after all. Everyone gets it eventually, which meant job security. Unum didn't retain much sentimentality about such things after so many years at the wheel.

A slight man given slight notice by an ever-expanding world, one thing Unum didn't appreciate was the feeling that he was getting edged out. He glanced at his ring watch (Unum wore eight rings, all for various practical purposes), and realized that despite it being an hour before lunch, his inbox was still bare.

Give it time, he thought, though, so he did. He stuck a pencil on his thin, protruding nose – a typical time killer – he whiled away the minutes. When the pencil, a relic as outdated as his glasses (for who could not simply record every detail digitally these days?), finally fell upon his cubicle floor, Unum still hadn't managed to shake his concerns. Another glance to verify the unchanged state of his inbox was enough. He turned to the webs — time to rediscover that journalistic verve.

Why would the inbox possibly be empty, Unum asked himself? It wasn't possible that everyone just spontaneously stopped dying. He hadn't noticed any signs of the apocalypse during his two-hour commute before dawn. Unum clicked on the PDA snug in the platinum ring on another finger. No video mail, no messages of consequence. Just the usual tripe, including office forwards about urgent cases of child starvation and how best to identify specific types of flatulence (the latter complete with silly pseudoscientific names) and spam, of course, always

spam. Ever since the Spammer League became a major political lobby the amount of porn and prescription ads streaming to various inboxes only expanded exponentially. Those penis pills didn't work. Unum still got plenty of ads for them, though. But no messages heralding the dead. No announcements of funeral arrangements. Nothing.

Unum keyword searched recent publications of the SCG and there were plenty of mentions of car accidents and murders and all of the usual front page fare. But nothing to supply his Obit ticker with new data.

Reluctant as he was to face his cantankerous boss, Unum held another ring up to his retina to activate it and zipped a quick vid of himself to the Jack Jackson's console.

"Sorry to bother you, Sir," Unum meekly squeaked, "But have I been zapped?"

While he waited for the head honcho to bother with his pitiful correspondence, he considered the matter further. Maybe everyone was taking their business elsewhere? He searched the websites for the twelve largest publications he knew of with obituary sections. Zilch. He tried a general search for obituaries and the current date. Notta.

This was starting to look bigger than his little cubicle. A lot bigger.

His ring beeped. A vid-response from Jackson. He was vibeflossing into a miniature mirror, while glancing sidelong at the vid-camera.

"Zapped? No, not yet. Should you be?"

No good could come from responding to that. Unum snapped the pencil in half. What the hell was going on here?

People had died, yes, but for some reason, no one was announcing funerals. He pulled up the number of the closest funeral operator.

"Edgar Unum, here, Sun-Chronicle-Gazette. Do you have a minute?"

The hologram of a handle bar mustached man guffawed.

Apparently, according to Cindy Styles, the fashion editor, mustaches were back. Unum wasn't buying it.

"A minute? I've got all day. I've never seen things so slow."

Unum twirled the eraser end of the pencil on his desk.

"So you say things have been pretty slow there, huh?"

The man pulled a hand through his hair – from the looks of it, he'd been doing a lot of that lately.

“Slower than slow,” he said. “And what’s even worse, people are canceling services they’ve previously booked. Why would someone buy a coffin and book a service and two days later change their mind?”

The conversation was only leading to more questions for Unum. He thanked the funeral operator for his candor and turned back to the web. A few targeted searches revealed some startling data. The funeral and burial business, usually a solid financial performer, had taken a significant hit over the past year or so. Unum found an article on this issue filled with quotes of funeral parlor and cemetery owners bemoaning a high number of last minute cancellations. It seemed like more than enough for corroboration.

The disparity, then, was between death rates and funeral rates. He called the secretary of state’s office, hoping to inquire about the most recent numbers on recorded fatalities. The secretary, apparently, an automated voice soon informed him, did not speak with the press.

Gregor, in the meantime, had walked into the hall in search of the cleaning supply overflow. Unum flagged him down.

“Gregor, buddy, old pal.”

Gregor gave him an uncomfortable look. Apparently the purchase of friendship had been temporary at best. A recent immigrant from a rural area of Russia, Gregor’s English was spotty and he kept his words to a minimum, as far as Edgar could tell.

“Gregor, tell me this, why would someone put a few hundred dollars down to book a funeral service for their dead nana, only to cancel a few days later?”

Gregor shrugged.

“Better prices?”

Unum thought about this then shook his head.

“No, things are too competitively priced. Besides, it’d have to be a hell of a sale to be this widespread, and I haven’t heard of anything like that ...”

Gregor snorted.

“No know. Maybe nana come back?”

Unum pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Come back? What do you mean?”

But Gregor had already wandered off to locate some blue wonder spray.

It reminded Edgar of something Grandma had written to him lately. He'd figured it for another moment of impending dementia, but maybe there was more to the story. She'd said that she'd seen a friend of hers, Grace Northrup, pass away during a card game. The orderlies had come; there was an ambulance and everything. And then about an hour later when the nursing home staff had called Edgar's grandma in to see if she could help fill in the gaps in the paperwork Grace Northrup came walking in the door, looking as vibrant as an eighty-year-old ever does.

And the corpse? Grandma said she'd heard whispers around the home that when they'd taken the corpse down to the mortician, it'd just up and disappeared.

Maybe this was the lead he'd been looking for, he thought. Apparently people had suddenly stopped staying dead.

To Edgar Unum, it sounded like the scoop of a century.

Still, an eighty-year-old in a nursing home wasn't much of a witness. Better to see if there were more cases like this before jumping to any conclusions.

Back to the webs, then. The very first link was to a foundation of some sort. It was called, aptly, *Forever Life*. On the main page, there was a reprint of a news story about the founder. It was a woman who claimed to have died in 1995 in a fire at a Planned Parenthood facility, only to be deposited on the streets of New York City last year by a mysterious man in a fuzzy green jumpsuit. Though the news piece expressed some skepticism about the woman's story, it did note she had impressive recollection of trivia from late 20th century. The story came with a picture of its subject. With bright eyes and tight curls of grey-blond hair, this woman, this Lillian Lazarus, looked surprisingly spry for a lady who, by Unum's calculations, was claiming to be more than a century and a half old.

At the bottom of the page, there was a number. He called it.

WINDOWS PREFACE

If you are reading this, I, Nicholas Updown, am dead. In fact, even if you aren't, I am dead. I am sure of this, you see, because I have spent my life dying. I've been stabbed, cancered, poisoned, plane crashed, train trampled, stroked, cardiac arrested, shot in the lung, and ushered toward my end in just about any manner you can imagine. By no small miracle, in fact by quite a large one I know very much about, I am still able to put this account into words.

It was late 20th-and early 21st-century "master of suspense" Stephen King, I believe, who first suggested to me that writing is time travel. What better way to bridge the span of years between reader and writer? To pull one back from her comfortable present to be immersed in ages gone by? Or to yank reader and writer both into the unexplored territory of the far future?

And that, after all, is what this story, what my life is about. Time travel. And that is why I've had no luck entering through any of the traditional doorways.

The biggest problem with a time travel account, you see, is knowing where to begin. In more conventional narratives, it's a simple matter of identifying the standard world of the story, discovering an event that shakes that world to its core, and proceeding from that point. Take, for instance, the classic tale of *Hansel and Gretel*. These two precocious European youths lived happily with their parents at the onset of our tale. But then their mother died suddenly and their father remarried, thus shaking their world to the core and resulting in abandonment in a spooky forest, an encounter with a withered old practitioner of the black arts residing in a diabetic's dream (or nightmare) home, and a "happily ever after." The death of the mother and remarriage of the father certainly isn't the most fascinating or iconic event at play in the tale, but without these earthshaking moments in time, none of the rest would have been possible, or for that matter, made any sense.

In a world with time travel, though, every event is stacked haphazardly on the next and even the smallest trek outside of the pre-formed timestream qualifies as not just an earthshaking moment, but a reality altering one. It's like stacking a pile of dominoes and trying to pull

one from the middle instead of the top. So the question in a time traveling world such as the one we now (or later will, depending when you read this) live in is not so much what events shook the world to its core, but why they happened, and what they mean, and, of course, where, oh where, to begin?

In a conventional narrative, there are two doors – one that lets the reader in and locks behind him, and one that lets the reader out, never to return the same. In my story, there are no doors. There are only dozens of windows, which must be broken into one by one.

WINDOW ONE
THE TRINITY

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEANING OF LIFE

I call Myself Abraham. It is as sensical as any moniker when your children number as many as the stars.

I stretch back My thumb and extend My forefinger, an imaginary pistol.

Bang.

And there is life. There is everything. Flashing before Me on a computer monitor, the big bang expanding from a pinpoint of light into the swirling star clusters of the cosmos.

But this was always there and always is, for Me.

It's easy to forget who I am. What this all means. What's past and what is yet to come.

A man should not have so many children as I. One child is lonely, and passes through childhood selfish and shy. Two children are bonded, and balanced, but sheltered still. Three children are socialized, but too much to keep parents attentive to the needs of each. Four children, and they begin to look after one another instead of remaining mere wards of fathers and mothers. Five children and the wishes of the parents are upheld, but fathers become more like executives than elders. Six children and fathers must be lieutenants, barking orders and admonishing the smallest of offenses to ensure their safety when his back is turned. Seven children, and fathers are an afterthought, nearly eradicated in relevance except for the youngest, feeblest of children. Eight children, and the father is the chief of a tribe, known and heard of, admired, but only turned to in some moments for advice. Nine children, and the father is a liability, a minority voice threatening to slow the Hedonism of their desires with mantras of responsibility, both moral and fiscal. Ten children, and the father's name is forgotten so that they may recall one another's.

Once the children number as the stars, as the uncountable masses, past the quantifiable millions and billions, they are but

anonymous blurs, one after another. And the father donates little more to their experience than twenty-three chromosomes.

And where is the mother in this sloppy equation? My wife was both Persephone and Jezebel. Persephone, because I snatched her free from the sun, and forced her into the cruelty of My arms, where she became a corpse bride. She repaid Me with her pale, clammy skin at night, and her obsidian hair, devoid of pigment like oblivion in day, and her cold, cavern eyes watching always, always. Persephone because her home now is beneath the earth, and because she never seemed comfortable here for more than a season. She was not My wife for longer, and then, like Spring, she passed to darker times.

Jezebel, she was, for different reasons altogether. These reasons I shall detail in time, when they best fit in the course of My wide and spacious narrative. I was a science fiction writer, once, an author of many pseudonyms, prolific and mediocre enough to churn out hack novel after hack novel and eek out a meager existence. My wife loved Me at this time and I felt a certain satisfaction knowing what was fictional and what was true. In the space of time that followed, I lost such a sense of simple clarity. But this experience taught Me, at least, how to spin a tale, if not how to keep the love of My wife.

But My wife, My wife, why do I go on about her? For she has been gone so long now. And she did not mother My children. No, rather they were mothered by necessity, and this necessity was far too abstract to rear them as well. One might just the same leave an infant in the care of the westward wind.

All of which leaves Me with children numbering too many for any father to bear. They haunt Me with their presence, the knowledge of My spawn keeps Me awake day and night. I would be as on to Isaac with any of them were I asked by God.

But the question of God is another that necessitates address.

I have not met God face to face, though a priest once wished the pleasure upon me. Not exactly, anyway, though maybe this wish had a bit of prophecy in it.

I wrote science fiction in search of God. As a child, I experienced the dread shudder that is Church, devote parents reinforcing ideals of rightness and wrongness with their sternness and their stares. On occasion, when My behavior warranted, they reinforced with the buckles of their belts. My brother gravitated toward this juvenile dichotomy, satisfied to perform a deed and then wade in the smugness of his holy virtue. My mind never allowed such uncomplicated translation of life, and I railed against the message of the priests and the pulpit, spurned My catechism, made faces at the nuns.

Instead, I turned to books and blasphemy. I read Nietzsche and Marx and moved beyond the ease of good and evil. I began to see life in patterns and equations, easy to quantify. But, through it all, *one disturbing trend emerged*. No matter what variables went into a computation, all things numbered the same. I could add, subtract, multiply, and divide exponentially. All results were the same. Always, always the same. Everything ended in death.

My wife ended in death. My parents and brother ended in death. By the time you read this, I am certain I will have ended in death. Millions of children as My legacy, but not one of them have saved Me from this curse. And I will not save one of them. So what use are we to each other?

And this is the way I have met God face to face, perhaps. In the tasks He's performed. For He giveth life and taketh life away. He lets Me have joy and tranquility in the still waters of time, then looks away when boulders dash the surface of My consciousness and all things good in My world drain out, one after another, after another, until naught is left but Me and My descent into madness and the seconds and minutes and hours and days tick away until I too will lose all that is Me to the dirt.

I have lost so much already. My obsession with losing no more, with saving My life, has led to a loss of its worth. I take no joy in My movements, find no taste in My food, no sex in My bed now. My face has grown aged and wrinkled, My eyesight dimmed, though My other senses have remained sharp, perhaps honing themselves to compensate for other's lack, as a blind man's do. My

walk has become a slow and stumbling trod, as one foot has been twisted into uselessness, undulated like a root, anchoring one leg to the ground unless I use the other to drag it about. So much this obsession has cost Me, yet I have always kept seeking answers.

As a younger man, with no meaning to be found in science, which can calculate, but whose calculations all have the same result; with no meaning to be found in faith, whose simplicity rewards one with a pauper's funeral; I turned to words and imagination. I began to dream of another world, another time, where Death was not the God of all it surveyed. In this world, I was God, and I mastered Death. I disappeared it like a magician and fathered children as plentiful as the stars, to live with and share joy with forever. I breathed life back into My wife and she was forever thankful, forever submissive to My heart, centered on My happiness, and I on hers, as it should be. In this world, calendars lost meaning, because they are but markers to keep track of the approach of that Satan, Death. In this world, a century was a day, and each of us sighed in contentment at every golden red setting of the sun. Fully assured we would live to see it rise again.

As I wrote, I let My dreams and imagination carry Me into realms of ridiculous fantasy. I told Myself that I wanted to obliterate death. Not conquer it. Not overcome it. Not delay it, or fight it off, or slow it down. I wanted to destroy death. Some people feel themselves daring enough to go a round or two with it in the ring, maybe smack it about a bit, but I wanted to grind death's bones to dust. I wanted My vengeance for all I had seen it destroy, and all I knew it planned yet to claim. I wanted to seek it out, terrorist that it was, in whatever foxhole or bunker it hid in, and turn its remains to smoke. This rage, this obsession fueled My writing. And My writing quickly became too esoteric for the brain candy craving public. My wildness, My dreaming, led to My literary demise. And this demise led, until now, to the end of My storytelling.

I hide My face beneath a hood because I cannot bear what it has become. And still. Still My work is not done.

I was a young man when I wrote those other things, before I lost My sense of time. I am not sure just how long has passed since then, but I know so much has happened. The pages placed here, the narrative that will unfold, tells not so much the story of Me, as how the story of My imagination flirted with reality. This is not My story, or the story of My wife. This is not the story of life and death, and God and Satan. This is not the story of dead ancestors and countless descendants awaiting their own demise. This is not the story of trinities and timelessness and science and faith and war and famine and pestilence and love and hate and betrayal and murder and madness and despair and hope and meaning and anything else the world reads as dopamine to numb it to the spinning of its axis. This is the story of a man I know better than anyone, and a man who knows, better than anyone, of all of these things.

I tell this story because something must be done. Something must be done about the God Machine. Or is it already too late?

Even as these words circle through My mind and find their way on to these pages, even as I contemplate the meaning of life and find this breathless story the only way to relate it, even as I call Myself Abraham and declare the import of this narrative, I wait in this story's Garden of Eden, where life and sin and death all find their creation. Even as I relate these events, I am standing in a mad scientist's laboratory.

I am studying his scientific artifacts, skeletons, plastic models of DNA like tiny spiral stairways, fossils of every type of life, microscopes, telescopes, maps of the stars, chemicals that cause reactions to aid investigation, chemicals that cause reactions to aid digestion, chemicals that cause reactions to aid progress, chemicals that speed humankind's demise.

State of the art data processors line a semicircle stretching half the compound. My articulate nose identifies the sour burn of sulfur, the bitterness of brimstone, the pungent pickle sting of formaldehyde. Sounds fill the room, varying from the squawks of birds, to the scurrying of white rats, to the child cries of monkeys,

all frightened in their cages, unaware of earmarked uses for their cornucopia of digestive tracts.

Before Me is a giant telescope, impressive enough for NASA work. I peer into it, into the looking glass, and the cosmos dance before Me. Constellations patterning the sky. Dying stars emitting their last, desperate rays of life. Why is it all so maudlin in My eyes? I feel as meaningless as an amoeba. More than dwarfed by its vastness – swallowed, obliterated. Some days when I find Myself meditating on the state of the Earth, its smallness compared to the grandness of the Universe, a nightmare flashes through My mind's eye, an image of this blue and green orb falling suddenly from its orbit, plunging from its place like a rock, like a plane losing its engines and wings all at once from some bizarre curse, like an elevator with cords suddenly cut. I imagine the Earth falling away into the coldness and darkness of space, the life giving sun shrinking to a pin hole, then smaller, until the whole world is black and dead.

Stars are the original time travelers. No star we see in the sky is to us as it is in that moment. They are but twinkling records of the past. Even the sun we see is the sun of yesterday. When a star goes supernova and lights up our sky in an event, if some sentient beings once lived there, they are eons gone, and this is their funeral scream. The past can come to us in echoes, in visions, but science knows of no way to collect it, to gather it up on some jar, to have and to hold for all of time. Even when we try to grasp it, it crumbles like a sandcastle in our child hands.

I gaze upon the universe of stars and I do My best to number them, figures amassing in My brain, as I wait for that all important man to return to his home.

I am in the laboratory of the man this is all about and, for once, time is an issue. Where is he, when I need him? Will he have the answers to save us all?

I find a patch of shadows. And I wait for Nicholas Updown.

CHAPTER TWO

STOP THE SINGING

You are Richard Donner, though you call yourself Rip, a name you fabricated in high school and dispersed amongst the populations of jocks and cheerleaders like an apocalyptic plague in an aerosol, in hopes that it would permeate the popular masses and win you their affection with its message that you were edgier than a Richard, less arrogant than a Rich, more mature than a Richie, and much savvier than any Dick. It worked, as all such acts of clever aggression do. It does not take tanks and biceps and dollar bills to rule the world. You just need the confidence to stare humankind in its face and take whatever you want. So far, this mantra has never failed you.

Since an early age, you've enacted a similar war of aggression on your own body, seeking out weaknesses and bulldozing over them with welcome improvements. The nose correction as a teenager. You told friends and would be critics that you had a deviated septum. Really, you just felt the tip pushed out a bit too much and the nostrils flared a mite too wide. Around the same time, a hired personal trainer came and the daily trips to the gymnasium on the mansion grounds began. You assaulted your arms and shoulders and back and abs and pecs until you were the envy of every jock, the darling of every young belle's heart, and a regular Geek Adonis in an Armani suit.

Richard Donner was the name given to you by your adoptive parents, conservative, Floridian, old-money elites. Rip is the name given to you by adolescence, by developing musculature and an emerging knowledge that you are an alpha wolf. Sometimes at night, standing in one of your handful of forty-room mansions, before one of your Hispanic immigrant polished full length mirrors, you let your tailor-made, designer silk robe flutter open, your two inches longer than average erection bounding free in the cool air, your orthodontist-perfected grin resting between your lips with the ease of a ported sailor unhooking a strange blonde's bra and exposing expertly augmented tits, your contact-colored steel-blue eyes exposing the limits of Earthly beauty, and let loose a howl

to the bright, unblemished surface of the moon that should intimidate any member of the family *Canidae* with the fierceness of its virility.

Though you credit attitude and not monetary worth for your success, you certainly don't discount the convenience afforded by the latter. Raised in a home where the word *want* held no more meaning than *tickle*, a passing discomfort of a laughable nature, you learned not only that man could have all he desires, and should not be afraid to demand it, but also, the best ways in which to demand. Sometimes those ways required a little back scratching, the wheels squealed for a little grease. With the Donner money at your back and a diverse financial portfolio before you, having adequate leafage to garnish your chosen lifestyle was never a problem.

Social and financial elitism are far from the extent of your ambition, however. What leader of men would be satisfied to merely cast a large shadow, to merely have a fat wallet and a household name? No, a man like you surely needs to do much greater things. Like any wise entrepreneur, you were conscious of your resources and eager to make them work for you. So, using your broad social connections and your enviable wealth, you turned your sights to public office.

You were a shoe-in for state representative in your twenties, deputy governor thanks to a big enough party contribution shortly thereafter. Once you'd tackled the governorship of Florida by thirty, you knew there'd be no end to your success. You were the guy they'd name awards after. The one who'd make them rewrite all the history books. And that's why, as soon as the age eligibility kicked in at thirty-five, you began your campaign for the presidency of the United States of America.

Which is how you got here, at one of those party fundraisers you've developed a sadistic pleasure for. Iowa, or some other heartland state. After a while on the trail, they all blend together. One hillbilly with a dead end job after another who honestly believes one fucking ballot makes all the difference. The "salt of the Earth," your campaign manager, Ted, calls them. They remind you more of salt in other places. But, still, you like to put on a good show. And you will.

In minutes you'll be immersed in river waves of these people, seeking shoulder squeezes, finger brushes, or just the opportunity to see you with their own eyes, to know a man such as you is real.

But for now, you're backstage, finger picking spinach dip from your teeth, and studying your features while someone applies your makeup. The campaign trail has not been kind to you – creases on your palms from shaking too many hands, laugh lines and crow's feet from chuckling at the same tired jokes and winking at the same glass-jawed promises, even a lightning bolt of gray beneath your top coat of dark brunette.

The makeup hack manages to powder most of this away, and the rest of you remains young and vigorous. Your eyes are as sharp and, thanks to your most recent prescription, steel blue clear as ever. Your mouth is set and determined – ready to depart the pithy wisdom of the next generation. You are not just any man. You are Rip Donner, fucking future President of the United States of America, God dammit.

Such are your thoughts as you adjust the American flag pin saluting your lapel, smooth your hand woven silk tie, and step from behind the curtains to the cheers of thousands. You have to hand it to Ted, the man can be a stodgy old bastard, but he sure knows how to drum up a crowd.

The bright lights feel ready to melt the flesh of your forehead as you stare out into the great lake of people before you. Whites, blacks, even some damn Mexicans, you think. Not bad for a Republican. You smile and wave as you approach the stadium and the “Donner” signs bob amid the hoots and hollers. You are a king to these people. The electricity makes your heart soar. You grab the mike.

“Now is this a crowd, or is this a crowd?” you shout. Your audience goes twice as nuts as before, if such a thing is possible. You flex a bicep.

“Are you ready to make a difference?” you ask, “Are you ready to make America strong again?”

The crowd applauds its approval. Just got here, and you're already on a roll.

You barely notice the ripple in the crowd at first. It's just in the corner of your eye as you launch into a speech about irresponsible bureaucrats wasting tax payer money on senatorial pet projects and special interest groups. You rail against the flabby state of modern American government.

“What I want to do,” you declare, “is give the power back to the people! This is your country, America, time to reclaim what's yours!”

You're shouting this, your voice strong, loud, and clear, when the wave in the crowd reaches its crescendo and spits out a man. He looks old and worn down, hair thinning and discolored, dark brows locked on you.

He jumps up on stage, lurching at you, causing you to spin back and fall down on the wooden platform in surprise.

A shot from somewhere rings out.

A woman screams.

Was it one of yours, you wonder, as the interloper stumbles, bends in half, and collapses on top of you, a hot lump of flesh and blood.

Not far, boots thunder like storm troopers.

His hoarse voice implores you, as the air gushes from his body.

"Stop the singing," he says to you. And then he's dead, and your security pours in, blocking out even the sun.

You roll the man off of you and kneel to examine his face. You want to know who he is, what he was trying to tell you, but strong hands restrain you, pulling you back to some enclosed room.

"We need to keep you safe, Sir."

You demand answers. This is your job, as a member of the executive branch. You find answers and enforce the proper judgments. Yet, this fact seems missed by your handlers. Minutes pass in chunks while you seethe in a chair behind a locked door. Someone has the good sense to bring you coffee. Moron added too much sugar, though.

You just keep asking what the fuck is going on until someone has the better sense to clue you in. It's Ted, finally.

Ted Armstrong, your campaign manager, a wizened political crony of your parents who knows the ways of Washington enough to steer you in the right direction. Ted used to be a bit of a candidate himself, but glaucoma caused the loss of a few too many retinal ganglion cells, there was an operation, and, suffice to say, no one gets elected wearing a damned eye patch.

Still Ted, pirate pupil, bone white hair and all, made an excellent advisor and he finally decides to tell you what the hell was going on.

"He was shot, Rip."

"No shit, Ted," you say. "I thought all this commotion was for someone's car backing up. Question is, who did the shooting?"

Ted laughs that indulgent laugh of his. You're on to how fake he is, but you don't tell him, because you do appreciate the efforts of a good kiss ass.

"It wasn't one of ours."

Someone else, then. Maybe an assassin. You feel like RFK for a moment, and don't know whether or not to be flattered. You opt for not, and push on.

"Was it just one guy, Ted? Do we know?"

Ted motions to one of the security personnel.

"Not sure, Sir," he barks. "Still confirming visuals, Sir."

Then they escaped. You wish you hadn't collapsed like that. Maybe you could've gotten a glimpse at the gunner yourself, the cocky bastard. You turn back to Ted.

"They *were* after me, right? Who's the asshole who took the bullet?"

A diplomatic pause.

Ted glances behind you and you turn.

A police officer fills the doorway, all blond goatee and rosy cheeked bravado. He flashes the proper credentials and introduces himself as Detective Chet Bradley. He offers a hand to shake. You take it. Hell, you lay a hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze. Cops are voters too.

"The deceased has been identified as one Nicholas Updown," Bradley says. He opens up a file folder and shows you several photos of the victim during his more lively past, when his thick, dark head of hair, crooked teeth, and hazel eyes still had some vitality. He looked a lot younger in the photo too, like he'd been doing some hard living since it'd been taken.

"Do you know this man, Mr. Donner?"

There was something familiar about Updown's face, that was for damn sure. And you felt like you'd heard his name before, too.

"No," Ted answers for you, "We've never heard of this Updown guy."

The detective flashes a more recent picture, this one a Polaroid of the corpse, a bullet hole neatly dotting the forehead. He asks if this jars anything loose. All you feel is disgust, though. You'd never had the

displeasure of seeing anyone dead in person before, and you're not cherishing this paradigm shift.

Bradley asks you a few more run of the mill what did you hear, where were you, what happened bullshit questions and looks about ready to pack it in. But you're got questions of your own.

"So, Detective Bradley, just who is this Nicholas Updown?"

"It's Professor Updown," Bradley says.

He gathers up the file folder and packs away his badge, every bit of his body language suggesting he's ready to hand you off to a lower ranking official. If you're anything, though, you're persistent.

"Who's *Professor* Updown?"

Asshole.

Bradley looks at you closely, and you can't tell for sure if the look he gives you is one of a man trying to figure out how much he can trust what you're telling him, or the look of a man trying to figure out how much he can safely say. Either way, the uncertainty seems to shrivel his tongue.

"Updown's Updown," he says.

And he walks off, leaving you wondering if there's anything to be made of that.

CHAPTER THREE

SCIENTIFIC BASIS

At that very same moment, Nicholas Updown is on his way to work. He has taken to walking there. Traffic causes headaches and headaches are no one's friend, after all. Still, punctuality matters, and Updown is not one to be late, even since he became self-employed. Thus, he burns the tissue in his calves with great abandon, doing his best to isolate the quickest path between his modern split level home and the downtown compound he and Elizabeth referred to as "the Office."

As he winds his way off road, through patches of dry winter grass clinging to their last bastions of life, over dusty curbsides, and around highlighter orange traffic cones, Updown begins noticing a striking phenomenon. An eerie phenomenon. The corners of his eyes caught ghosts – or were they reflections? – of himself taking the paths he didn't. Would it be faster to cross the street now, pausing to check for cars ripping past, or to plow up the sidewalk further until passage became easier?

Updown stops, deciding to cross now, yet it seems, in the corner of his eyes at least, that some phantom photocopy of himself goes on ahead, choosing the latter destination. It was quite unnerving. Was the bizarre supernatural element of the situation even the worst of it, though? No, really, the worst part was not knowing whether he or the ghost had chosen the most direct path.

As he tries squeezing these thoughts from his mind, Updown notices the rhythmic groan of the plastic joints on his backpack. These slow and quicken with his pace, sounding not unlike some distant duck.

Inside his bag, he has two incredibly important items. The first is a jump drive containing all the information he has on the "God Machine" project to this point. The second is a metal lunchbox decorated with comic book characters and containing grilled chicken on wheat, an almond and berry compote, and a bottle of water, all packed by his wife.

His wife. Elizabeth. Gorgeous raven black hair, soulful eyes, a shy smile that only flashed behind closed doors, but melted hearts when it did. His heart.

When he was growing up, Updown often thought about his father and wondered why the man never spoke of other girls he'd dated in high school or college before he'd met Nicholas' mother. It seemed a natural enough topic to Updown as, even in elementary school, he began exploring his own romantic interests with varying (usually low) degrees of success.

But when he met Elizabeth, he understood. A girl who is special enough to marry is a girl who demolishes every other girl from your memory. For his father, that was his mother. For Updown, it is his Elizabeth. It was someone who he felt comfortable being his whole self with. Someone who rewarded his strengths and flaws equally, and usually with yummy sandwiches like grilled chicken on wheat. Twelve years of yummy sandwiches, loving support, and fabulous sex later, his only regret is not having better genetic material, and thus beautiful children amalgamated from their collective DNA pools. One thing Elizabeth has always wanted is to be a mother.

Updown kicks now at that dry winter grass, growing nearer to his office. It isn't even natural grass, isn't supposed to be growing in this climate. Some suburb manufacturer has seen to bringing it there along with trees and parks and daycare centers and all that friendly suburban shlock as part of the marketing plan for Sunrise Acres, their friendly Arizona manufactured home neighborhood.

He wonders how many of his daydream phantom photocopies have taken different routes entirely, not just from manufactured house to office, but from childhood home in Michigan to California, or New England, or Germany, or some Pacific Island instead. What has he missed out on by choosing the path he chose? It is the difficulty of living a finite life with a finite number of opportunities. One wrong choice and that might be it, never a chance to do it again. Not like a video game, where if you turned the wrong way, you could reboot and try again. In real life, if you turn right in the labyrinth and are swallowed alive by a Minotaur, you don't get another life to start over and see where the left path would have taken you.

This isn't the first time Updown has seen ghosts on the way to work. Quite the contrary, actually, because he began seeing them almost as soon as he started this Heaven-forsaken God Machine project.

Sometimes Updown feels like his phantom photocopies are laughing at him, like they are the ones always getting things right, and he is alone, stumbling through the wasteland.

Still, Elizabeth likes the area, and the proximity to the light pollution free desert affords Updown needed star gazing opportunities and ample space and privacy to properly fuel his research. And it isn't as if Updown hasn't previously questioned his place in life. It becomes a natural pastime after so much rejection. Growing up, Updown was one of those smart, quiet, awkward-looking types. He stuck his nose in books and stuck his neck out for no one. As he grew, an attraction to the fairer sex begged for a bit more bravado, and his taste for rejection began to grow. Not that he enjoyed it, but he expected it after a while. Call it negative reinforcement.

The same happened in the academy, when physics professors laughed at his lofty theories and his fantastic dreams. He remembers sitting in the dusty lecture halls, hand shooting up to question accepted theories about the beginning and the end of the universe. His professors grated their teeth as he scoffed at the Big Bang and the Big Crunch. He tried poking holes in Einstein's Theory of Relativity and other bases of contemporary scientific thought, even if the math didn't always support his gut feelings. His audacity held back his genius, tempering what should have been impressive grades and often leaving him teetering on the edge of academic probation. Updown persevered, but it was more a matter of survival than the outstanding achievement that should have been his. High performance on standardized tests, where bubble sheets left little room for analytical boldness, allowed Updown to pursue his Master's degree and Doctorate, and, despite the arguments of not a few senior faculty members, begin teaching the younger generation.

Even this moderate level of success did not satiate Updown's desires for greatness, though. Who was he trying to impress? By the time he attached the Doctor prefix, his parents and grandparents were all long dead. His only real relative, his brother, cast such a smug, impressive shadow that it dwarfed every bit of Nicholas' life, professional, personal, and especially moral. It made his every action, every line on his resume taste of failure.

All Nicholas Updown has ever wanted is a place to belong, or a thing he's done exceptionally well.

And then he met Elizabeth. A precocious, smart-mouthed young undergraduate who'd toyed with his mind and teased with her legs. Meeting her was the only time sticking his neck out came without a guillotine. There were professional risks, of course, and some of them came to head. But she was worth it, every bit of her.

And she encouraged him to advance his ideas, even if he is still searching for the scientific basis. Nicholas Updown has spent years looking for his place, his role in life, for somewhere to belong. When he settled in this Arizona suburb, it was to find this, to make his God Machine and finally have a reason for pride beyond a wife three times too hot for him. To finally have a chance to be great.

Convincing investors was something else.

For some, he spoke of power. He told them his research could lead to a well of renewable energy that never ran dry. A perpetual motion machine that could churn out tennis shoes or *Happy Meals* or whatever nonsense it was their corporation sold. They would never need minimum wage armies again. How the stock prices will soar, Updown proclaimed.

For others, he spoke of knowledge. An artificial intelligence based super processor with satellite links capable of viewing the entire world under a microscopic lens, of combining all the written and verbal knowledge in the world at one central place and analyzing it to the nth degree. All the secrets of the universe could be unlocked with such brainpower. The beginning and end of the reality would just be the start.

Still others required a softer approach. A reminder of their mortality, the ticking away of their golden years. Updown would tell them about his grandfather. About the first time he watched death through an unfiltered lens. This was not movie death or even six o'clock evening news death. He was eight and this was real. Later, he would recall that last fleeting sigh, rising like a kite from Grandfather's lips. Later, he would wonder about souls. But, in that moment, he just watched Grandfather's chest rise and fall in the light blue hospital gown, and squeezed the old man's spike knuckled fist until it went limp. Even in that moment, Nicholas Updown knew he would be haunted by death.

And, after hearing the account, more than one investor was haunted enough to throw down some serious financial weight.

Still, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, perpetual motion machines, supercomputers, the secrets to eternal life – Nicholas Updown had come no further with these ideas than any other researcher and not as far as a few at the Harvards and M.I.T.s of the world, no doubt.

Staring at the road ahead, just fifty yards or so left to go, and through the shabby part of town, where houses and shade both grow thin and trash lines the street, Updown imagines how nice life could be if he could just skip through the rest of the walk and appear directly at the office door. How wonderful life would be if he could just skip all this mind numbing research and arrive upon his God Machine, quieting the increasingly urgent demands of his investors, the increasingly guilt-filled pangs in his heart. It'd give him more time to spend with Elizabeth. He knew he was neglecting her during this quest, spending sun up until the quiet hours of the night in his lab. But it was for the good of man and the good of science. And it was to make her proud. When he finally got this breakthrough, Updown knew she would love him all the more. He knew he would have reason to be at her side, would finally deserve his place there. Whether she knew it or not, he was doing this all for her.

He questions this notion though, he does. And not for the first time, as he finally reaches the entrance to his office. Self-doubts were never held down for long in his particular cranium. And they wrestle their way back to the surface now. What was he doing? Expecting to accomplish the impossible? To invent so many things humankind had until this point only dreamed of dreaming of inventing? And *then* he would enjoy his still nubile young wife? *Then* he would stop to smell the roses and enjoy the feeling of her snuggling against his side? She would be just as proud of him if he learned how to perform miracles, to raise the dead, and he had just as much a chance of doing it. He was attempting the impossible. He was trying to force science into the realms of fantasy. Trying to cram nonsense into a rational box. No scientific basis. That's what the professors and journals said about his theories. No scientific basis, just dreams and thoughts and madness.

All those presentations to investors with models of how the speed of light can be slowed down and three dimensional representations of the

relationship between space and time – all of that was bullshit, scientific mumbo jumbo, designed to shock and awe dreamy-eyed business men afraid of growing old into investing. All of this came from a feeling, from a vision, from a deathbed conversation with his grandfather. What was Updown doing? He wanted to honor Grandfather's passing, to make Elizabeth admire him, to find his place in life, but now he's wasting people's time and money when he doesn't have a rational leg to stand on. He wants to do good, but he is a fraud and if he loses their nest egg on this, he could stand to lose his wife as well.

Updown sighs, and takes a key to the padlock cordoning off his cozy personal life from his dark obsession. Hauling back the heavy metal door, he peers inside at all the show pieces set up to wow visitors. The plastic DNA stairways, the fossils, the microscopes and telescopes, chemicals and computers.

He whiffs the familiar odors of sulfur, bitter brimstone, pickle-sour formaldehyde. He passes cage after cage of unwitting captive test animals. Some of this he uses, sure, but most was as fabricated as the presentations he gave.

Updown sits at a computer consol, opening his lunch box for a taste of his grilled chicken sandwich. He bites in, wondering if he should abandon all this foolishness. Wondering if he should end the God Machine project once and for all as he lets the flavor overwhelm his taste buds. He wipes his mouth and feels a hand on his shoulder.

Behind him, there is a man with his face shrouded in a dark hood.

Nicholas Updown's chest feels ready to explode.

"I know your secret," the old man says.

And I did. Each and every one.

WINDOW TWO
THE QUEST

CHAPTER FOUR

MINOR PROPHECY

“Tell me why you broke into my fucking lab!” Updown demanded, waving the thirty-five caliber, six shot revolver. Stupid. Quicker than I remembered. I shouldn’t be taking these kinds of risks.

“I’m not a fan of intruders in my laboratory.”

I sighed. Quick and antsy both. You would think that a man who had stared down death so many times would be able to handle a stranger in his office without trepidation. Or had he yet? I often forgot my timetables. One of the side effects of this, I’m afraid.

Showing my palms and backing away, a sign of peace, I hoped to quell him a bit.

“I’m not just any intruder though, of course.”

Updown’s glare did not accept this answer as adequate, but I was in no mood for offering long, drawn out explanations. Nor would one exactly work to My purposes, so, instead, I turned to the massive computer consol at our left. This behemoth, unlike most of the trappings in this overgrown garage, was more than bells and whistles. It stretched from desktop to ceiling with all the towering might of a Greek God. Updown had labeled the monitors *Zeus* and *Poseidon*. Though their girth was entirely unnecessary, they were backed by impressive processors. I waved his mouse to dissolve the screen saver.

Impatient, Updown cocked the revolver’s hammer.

“Hey! Don’t touch that!”

My hand snaked into the open backpack beside his chair and fished out Updown’s prized jump drive. I held it between My thumb and forefinger. It was no larger than a tube of chapstick.

“Shoot Me,” I rasped, “And all I have to do is squeeze.”

*

The strange man with the vibrating suit was gone. Lillian Lazarus looked around. She was alone. What had he meant *welcome to the future?* Where was she? The skyline looked a tiny bit like New York’s, if

fifty million buildings the size of the Empire State Building had sprung up over night. She was in a back alley somewhere and she stood to stretch her legs, trying to block out the fish foul smell of dozens of dumpsters.

Out on the sidewalks, pedestrians were packed like jam in a jar. Shoulder to shoulder were hundreds of people wearing odd outfits – tights, pastels, animal masks, pants that looked like they were made of aluminum, tuxedos like they were everyday wear. Feeling claustrophobic, she scanned the street. Compact cars were as clustered as pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the smog in the air gave Lillian an uncomfortable reminder of her recent experience at the clinic.

On the corner, she spotted a store called *Munchy Market* and wiggled her way to the door, hoping find a little space. Inside, the florescent lights shined blue and the walls were lined with three basic types of product. There were bright blue and orange cans reading things like *Zap* and *Awake*. There were silvery pouches of an indiscriminate nature. And there were mystery bars wrapped in plastic. She picked one up, which read *Yum-yum Energy Bar*. Lillian hadn't realized how hungry she'd been. As unappetizing as the bar looked, she walked it up to the counter, and, since she hadn't seen a price, pulled a \$20 bill out and waited.

The clerk, a teenage girl with a pineapple shaped tower of bright green hair horizontally adjoining either side of her head and what appeared to be at least five metal studs implanted into her lips and chin in goatee formation, shot Lillian a strange look.

“Whazzat, some kinda play dough?”

Lillian blinked.

“It's money. Do you not take money any more?”

“Girl, I dunno whatcher about, but you betta scan some creds, or I'm poppin over the coppas.”

Welcome to the future? Hand shaking, Lillian reached into her wallet and pulled out a *VISA* card. The clerk screeched, stuck a hand in Lillian's curls, and yanked down, slamming Lillian's forehead down on the counter.

“Drop it muthafuck, drop it!”

When the police, the “coppas” came, flashing guns and badges, the clerk wagged her finger at the credit card, proclaiming it to be some sort

of doomsday device, the coppas loosed something that looked like plastic wrap and held tight around Lillian's wrists, and she got to take a ride downtown.

Apparently, she was charged with the crime of "menacing a service employee" and the punishment involved having her fingertips and face scanned by bizarre, humming plastic wands, and being held in a coat closet sized room with one low stool and barely enough room to sit on it, until a police official was ready to speak with her.

The lieutenant she spoke with seemed unimpressed by her story, but gave it to her straight.

"Listen, I dunno who y'are. Yar scans didn't come up with any known identity and ya obviously seem disoriented. We 'zaminated that device ya had in the store, and apparently it's just some harmless antique or what not. Since, far as I can see, ya're no threat to anybodies but yarself, and we dun have room to hold ya anyhow, I'm orderin' ya to go down to City Hall and register yar citizenship. You can go now."

Lillian protested; she had a million things to ask. She didn't even know what year it was.

But the lieutenant had others to process and wasn't interested in conversing. On the wall, Lillian spotted a digital display listing the time and month and day and year. The year. 2108.

*

My free hand tapped at the keyboard, a quick sequence of numbers and letters like a miniature drum machine. Updown's password.

Now I had his attention for certain.

"Just who the hell *are* you?"

If Updown could have seen past the shadowy layers of my hood, he would've caught the slightest flash of a smile. The secret was to give him just enough to keep him going – a trail of bread crumbs – without giving away the destination.

"You already know the answer," I told him. "I'm from the future."

A moment of silence passed between us. A tense, awkward moment. And then Updown's lip and tongue exploded into a raspberry and he began to laugh uproariously.

“That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard!”

I inserted the jump drive, fingers on one hand still in smashing position, and scrolled his mouse about the screen, clicking one hidden folder after another.

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” he said, anger and panic bouncing off of each other in his skull.

“I’m afraid it’s quite the opposite,” I quipped.

His pistol grip was growing lax as his energy was now focused on eyeballing My hunched form.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I found the folder I had been wanting. It was titled *Deus ex Machina*.

“For someone so intent on changing the world, changing the very nature of time and space with his invention, you seem shocked to behold the fruits of your labor.”

I double clicked on the folder. My pointer turned into an hourglass icon as the mainframe shifted under the weight of the files, slowly prying open the folder’s contents.

Updown slapped my hand from the mouse.

“Don’t open that! How dare you … how dare you come in here and pretend that you …”

But he could not finish the sentence. My eyes were glowing out at him through the hood. I straightened to My full height. My mannerisms. My hobbled gait. Something about me would not release him.

“How could you be from the future? How is that possible?”

I backed away from the consol and he dove for the keyboard, rushing to cover up his precious work.

“So says the man who invented the time machine.”

Files re-hidden, he shot up, revolver steady in hand, held with a purpose.

“Impossible. This work is nothing but a fraud. If you know anything about me, you know that,” Updown said.

He looked down, shocked by his confession.

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes you did,” I said, “But that doesn’t mean you’re right.”

He fired.

*

“Hello.”

“Greetings. Thank you for calling Forever Life, where we say ‘no’ to mortality. How may I direct your call?”

“I need to speak to Lillian Lazarus.”

A pause, as the auto receptionist processes the request.

“Are you interested in becoming a member of Forever Life?”

“No. I need to speak to Lillian Lazarus.”

Another pause. Sometimes Unum hated technology.

“Would you like to make a financial contribution to Forever Life?”

“Lillian Lazarus!”

“Lillian Lazarus is the founder and leader of the vibrant community of Forever Life. In order to better serve our growing population, Ms. Lazarus delegates most of her public interactions to a group of highly qualified minor prophets. Perhaps –”

“Fine then. *I* am a minor prophet. I need to speak with Lillian Lazarus. It’s very urgent.”

“What is your name and life number?”

“Excuse me?”

“The name and life number you have given are invalid. Please say your name and life number again.”

“Hell.”

“The name and life number you have given are invalid …”

*

A wild shot, it zinged off a metal wall and smashed a beaker full of mystery liquid.

I was standing ten feet away. Men with shooting ranges in their laboratories have better aim than that. He missed on purpose. And now he was pacing, unnerved that he could not mow down his trespasser.

“I suppose you’re some sort of corporate spy, sent by one of my investors to intimidate me. I suppose you’re soliciting an offer, you want

some sort of hush money or you're going to expose this whole project and make it tank."

I let him stomp his anxiety out. His shoes were wearing a pretty deep groove in the carpet with their rapid back and forth.

"Well?" Updown said, "How much is this going to cost me? What do you want?"

I shook my head.

"You're mistaken, Professor Updown."

"What's that mean? What do you want from me?"

"I'm not here to destroy you. I'm here to make you. I'm here to help you create your God Machine."

He fired again.

This time the bullet whizzed past My right shoulder and into the wall beside a monkey cage. He was still just warning Me.

"Bullshit! That's bullshit."

I waited for him to have it out. Better to let him overcome it all at once.

"You're a crazy man and you seem to have a death wish. I suppose you're going to keep standing there, feeding me stupid lines, until I actually hit you? Is that what you 'future people' do when you meet someone from the past? I suppose I'm causing all sorts of crazy paradoxes with my work and you've been sent back to terminate me? Is that it? Well you listen here, you stupid son of a bitch, I want you to get the hell out of my lab before I call the police! So help me, if I have to blow you to Hell right here I -"

I placed a hand on his shoulder. I'd had enough.

"Tomorrow, in Royal Oak, Michigan, a meteorite will touch down. That's not a terribly unusual occurrence, as there are tens of thousands of documented meteorite finds. Nor is it terribly unusual that the meteorite will crash in an urban area, nor even that it will not harm a hair on the head of a single man, woman, or child. It will not put potholes in streets or dent cars. This meteorite will be about the size of a small car itself. And it will make a crater plenty wide. But this crater will destroy only one thing in its creation, one single building, and destroy it so completely, yet incompletely, that you will be forced to wonder if it was an act of God. The building is a small Catholic Church. I believe you've been there, that

you know the pastor, don't you? Father Thomas? He is, after all, your brother—”

Updown fired again, a hair lower, and this time the bullet sliced My shoulder, unleashing a splatter of blood with it.

*

Then, on the street, that young punk reporter had come. She'd been scanning the police beat for interesting stories, and *Convenience Store Menace Claims to be from the Future* sounded just like the type of puff piece her editor loved to run.

She asked Lillian what her favorite bands were, and snorted when she listed *Weezer* and the *White Stripes*.

“Whoever,” she said, “Don't you jam the *Argonauts* or the *Moist Towelettes*?”

Lillian shook her head and the reporter chuckled.

“Listen,” Lillian said, “I was at work in the year 2005 and there was a fire and the next thing I know, I woke up in the middle of an alley and it was today. I don't know what happened, some strange man, some angel, saved me from the jaws of death.”

The reporter snickered.

“You should really sponge the *Moist Towelettes*, I think you'd doze them.”

Lillian ended the interview curtly and walked to City Hall, determined to orient herself. She didn't think a bit more about the quirky young reporter until a week and a half later, after she'd gotten her identity registered, and a cred chip implanted in the back of her hand, and sold her *VISA* card and clothing to an antique dealer in exchange for enough creds to buy a whole new wardrobe and prepay rent at a downtown loft for the next five years. It was then, with her newly purchased holocomputer, that Lillian received her very first v-mail. It was from a nervous looking, bald headed man. He spoke softly and earnestly.

“You're that lady from the past, right? Listen, my name's Toby. I was born in 1982. I died in 2022. Then, three days ago, I was born again. I think we ought to talk.”

*

“If you think I’m going to stand here and let you threaten Tommy –”
Wincing, grasping My shoulder, I backed toward the entrance, speaking faster.

“Father Thomas will not die, only his Church will be destroyed. This news item will be found on page three, of the local news–”

“I want to know who the hell you are and what the hell you think you’re doing –”

“This news will change your life forever. Because once you read it you will know I’m telling the truth. That I am from the fu–”

“That you’re insane. I’ll know that you’re totally in–”

“You’ll know that the work you’re doing on the God Machine is legitimate, that you *are* the father of Time Travel, that you are headed for a breakthrough. I’ve come back here not to threaten you, Nicholas Updown, but to thank you, for the work you are about to do.”

He fell silent.

I slid away from him, drifting closer to the door. This caught his attention.

“Oh no, I’m not done with you. Don’t you dare walk away –”

“You’re out of bullets,” I said, and as his gun clicked, he knew I was right. The chamber held six, but he’d only loaded three. I left him wondering at My knowledge and ducked out the door into the light.

A fistful of ammo jamming into his gun, he pursued, but the brightness of the sun blinded him long enough for Me to disappear from his sight.

I left no business card, no name, no way to contact me. I had done what I had come to do, and when I needed Nicholas Updown next, I would know where to find him.

CHAPTER FIVE

INVESTMENTS

You are back at campaign headquarters, where you've recently been subjected to an endless stream of debriefings by campaign staff and high-ranking party officials. After a while of doing this type of drivel, it's just painful. Almost like you've just gotten out of the showers at a state penitentiary.

Once you fight your way through the open aisles of desks, known as "the bullpen," full of enthusiastic young idealists wanting to shake your hand and "feel history in the making," you seek refuge in your back office for a moment, resting against the smooth surface of your polished cherry wood desk. Made from stuff no less stern than George Washington himself cut down, you like to tell people. Your walls here are decorated with your diploma from University of Miami, photos snapped with celebrities as varying as Paris Hilton and John McCain, and a collection of American nautical flags from different eras, each mounted on an individual plaque.

You've had ten seconds to breathe and an eleventh to start bouncing the Pat Robertson bobblehead on your desk, when Ted bursts through the doors in his characteristic uninvited style. He's flanked by half a dozen aides and, between them, they're firing questions at you ten miles a second. They want your opinion on the latest poll numbers – you're doing well with Ecumenicals in Iowa and poorly with women in New Hampshire, you're down 3.5 percent overall from yesterday. They want answers to questions about advertising blitzes. Veterans reacted strongly to your latest attack ads against the Republican frontrunner, George Taylor, questioning his military record, but they're catching some flack in the press, do you want them pulled or should they go ahead? CNN correspondents want to know why you haven't taken a strong stance on immigration yet. The league of Cuban voters also wants to know how you feel on the issue. Your campaign supporters want to know how you're going to counteract Taylor's grassroots movement in the Midwest. Party loyalists want reassurances that their endorsements will equal influence in your future regime. Campaign budget makers want to know how you plan

to increase donations. Everyone wants an interview. Everyone wants an answer. Everyone wants an appearance or a sound byte or a pound of flesh.

When Ted finally dismisses the harried aides, he hands you a cup of coffee, black.

“Sit down, Rip,” he says, “I know it’s been a rough one.”

You sip the rich dark liquid.

“Said by a man who went to Nam.”

Ted perches on the corner of your desk and adjusts his eye patch carelessly.

“Never fun seeing a man shot. How are you holding up?”

You set the cup down and pace near the window. Outside your compound, anti-war and abortion rights protesters are waving hand printed signs and making general jackasses of their selves.

“I’m not going to have a sudden bout of depression, if that’s what you mean. Still, it seems a little odd, this whole deal with this Updown guy.”

“Was that his name?” You’re surprised Ted would forget a detail like that. Doesn’t seem like him. Maybe it’s his way of telling you that Nicholas Updown shouldn’t be your focus here, to stay the course, keep your eyes on the prize, all that cliché bullshit. Still, the image of the back of his head popping like a bubble of spit flits around restlessly in your mind and you find it impossible to suppress. You shake it free from your thoughts and talk strategy with Ted.

Later, when things seem to have lulled for a moment, and most of the senior officers have gone out to lunch, when it’s just ambitious first timers hitting the phone banks trying to rustle up one more endorsement or one more pledge of financial support, you wander over to the cube of one particularly bright-eyed intern. You selected him for the task this morning due to these bright-eyes and your trust in his discretion. It didn’t hurt that he’s one of the sharper kids on the campaign, and you’d earlier taken notice of him. Not that you remember his name or anything, but you have people to do such things for you. The kid wears a *Captain America* t-shirt, which you find a bit odd, but at least he’s a patriot, right?

You’re not here to socialize, though, even if you make a joke about the *Philadelphia Eagles* cheerleader calendar tacked on his wall or pick up the boomerang on his desk that he tells you he got when he studied abroad in

Australia not two years hence. You're sure he could ramble on about the office fantasy football league (which you're currently dominating, thanks to the former NFL analyst you have managing your roster) or the latest C++ manual he's read, but you're here because you've asked him to do a very special research project for you. One that no one else is to be clued in on. You've emphasized this last point to the rookie, and from his hushed tones in the off white little cubicle, you can tell your charm has once again had its influence.

"So is this something to do with your investment portfolio, Mr. Donner, because I've read some good tips about some ambitious tech stocks that you might consider."

You eye the intern. Not the direction you'd expected him to take on this.

"What in God's name do my investments have to do with this?"

He hands you a file folder.

"Ninety-percent of your current investments are tied up in a publicly traded company known as *Deus ex Machina*. DeM. It's priced low and seems to have potential, though it hasn't performed particularly well in the last quarter. But you know all of that, of course, right?"

You flip open the file folder.

"How do you say this? Day-ox ..."

"Day-OOS ex MOCK-een-ah. It's Latin, Sir."

Latin? You thought that was a dead language. Reason you took Spanish in high school – have to keep with the current state of the country.

"Latin, huh? Is it some sort of religious thing?"

The intern nodded, reluctant to correct you, but green enough to not absolutely fear it yet.

"It means 'God out of a machine,' Sir. Basically, it's a term from Greek tragedy referring to the moment at the end of the story where a god figure would be lowered down by a crane on to the stage and solve whatever unsolvable problems the characters had found themselves in. Kind of a lame plot device, really."

You rolled the file folder up in your hand and heard that satisfying crunch of paper. Jesus Christ.

“So, you’re telling me that ninety-percent of my stock portfolio involves some sort of fucking theatre company? And a bad one, at that?”

You were suddenly pleased at the foresight you showed in placing your financial advisor on your speed dial. Number 3, one below your campaign manager, and one above your token red state conservative Christian fiancée, Helen.

“No, Sir, actually it appears to be a scientific research company.”

You flipped the phone shut. Your advisor was safe, if only for a moment.

“What sort of research?”

For the first time, whiz kid looked lost.

“Well, that’s the thing. I must’ve Googled this company in a million different ways, but I kept coming up with the same thing. Scientific research and development. No details, just R&D. Only actual factoid I could grab was that the CEO, and, as far as I can tell, the company’s only employee, is the Nicholas Updown guy you asked me about.”

You shake the intern’s hand, praising his hard work and letting him know how invaluable he is to the campaign and how much you appreciate his discretion. As you back away from the dusty cubicle and the intern unpauses the garage band punk rock on his iPod, you diagnose your situation.

So now you know that it’s not so much that you’ve got most of your capital invested in a bunch of fruity thespians, it’s actually quite worse. Most of your money is in the hands of a man whom you just saw die.

*

Detective Chet Bradley set down the receiver of one phone, reserved for intra-office calls, and picked up another, which dialed out to the state and country at large. He had just finished speaking with the head of forensics about this latest affair.

Massive brain trauma resulting from a single bullet wound to the back of the head, a three hundred caliber Winchester short magnum bolt-action round, was the clear and indisputable cause of death.

The distance and the angle of the shot seemed to indicate a trained marksman. No regular Joe crazy was going to make that shot – this guy was some sort of professional.

Fingerprinting confirmed that the corpse's identity matched that of his Arizona driver's license. The victim was Nicholas Updown, Caucasian, 45-years-old, an entrepreneurial businessman far from home for unknown reasons. Those reasons and the name and whereabouts of his killer were mysteries left for Bradley to solve.

First, though, it was his task to notify the next-of-kin, which explained the ringing on the other end of the receiver and the soft, intelligent voice of a woman.

"I need to speak with Elizabeth Updown."

The slow breathing of someone unused to being the subject of attentions from such an authoritative voice, no doubt. Bradley often experienced this response on cold calls such as this.

"This is she. And you?"

It was never fun breaking news like this. No matter how you worded things, nothing could lessen the blow of discovering that a loved one has suddenly passed. Bradley took comfort in knowing that, at the very least, she was surely worried after not hearing from her husband in some time and this would hopefully be the first step toward closure. The last step, of course, would be when her husband's killer was brought to justice.

"My name is Detective Chet Bradley, with the Iowa State police. I'm sorry to call like this and with such bad news, but I need to tell you that your husband, Nicholas Updown, is dead."

Silence on the other end. Then a surprisingly sarcastic voice.

"Excuse me?"

"Your husband, he was shot this morning, at a campaign rally, by an unknown assailant. Trust me, ma'am when I say we're doing everything in our power to find the person or persons responsible."

More silence.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?"

Then venom.

"You're goddamn right, something's wrong, asshole, and it's you. My *husband*, Nicholas Updown, is in the living room, on the couch. He just got home from work – I can see where he is from where I'm standing. So

I'd really, really appreciate it if you got a life and stopped trying to scare the shit out of perfectly nice people. Good fucking night."

Detective Chet Bradley was left with a dial tone and receiver in his shaking hand.

*

On the way back to your office, you spotted Ted scanning the aisles for you, and ducked into a restroom stall with your finger on the number three. Reuben Hackney, your chief financial advisor was soon on the phone and sweating hand grenades.

As you tried to get comfortable with your suit pants hovering over three layers of one-ply covering the questionably sanitary toilet seat, Hackney explained that you told him that you were looking for high risk-high reward, and *Deus ex Machina* was more of both than anything else on the open market.

"That's all good and well, Hackney," you spat, "But what the fuck are we going to do now that Updown's dead? And when was someone planning on alerting me to this situation, for Christ's sake?"

"Dead?" Hackney replied, "He's dead?"

You kicked the side of the stall, making the door quiver until the phone number to call for a good time was indistinguishable.

"Jesus Christ on a jackhammer, I need to find myself more competent employees" you screamed into the phone.

Hackney assured you that he'd tend to the situation, and, fuming, you decided you'd had enough of that particular venue and made your way back out to the office, where Ted's assault on your senses began anew. He had an innovative plan to appeal to the blue collar worker and you were all ears.

The evening seemed to be proceeding without further commotion until you got a return call from Hackney. You decided to use a little tact this time around, which was good, because if you'd gotten yourself too worked up, Hackney's news might have given you a heart attack.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Rip, but there's nothing wrong with Nicholas Updown."

You were pissed now. He would lie so boldly just to cover his own ass?

“Say again?”

“Updown’s alive and well. Your investments are safe.”

Not a crack was in his voice. Hackney was just asking for it now.

“Fucking *excuse* me? I saw him, Reuben. With my own eyes, his bleeding corpse. And now you’re telling me he’s just fine and dandy?”

Hackney cleared his throat.

“Well, um, yes. He’s in his office in Arizona as we speak, I just got off the phone with him.”

You smacked the Pat Robertson doll off your desk and started beating your fist into the wood vigorously.

“Call the police. Call the fucking police, because I don’t believe what I’m hearing right now and your career may just depend on it!”

You listened as Hackney seemed to shift in his seat. Your excitement seemed to be a bit overwhelming to him.

“I did call them, actually. Mistaken identity. Talked to the lead officer on the case, some Bradley guy, and he confirmed it. They’re not sure who the dead guy was, but clearly it can’t be Updown. I mean, gees, Rip, I talked to the guy, not thirty minutes ago.”

Impossible. It had to be. While Hackney relayed the news, you were opening a web browser on your laptop and doing an image search for Nicholas Updown. And there it was, attached to some old news story about his termination from the University of Arizona staff. There was his face, in living color, the exact same face, maybe a few lines short, a few hairs different, but the same face as the one on the corpse you saw that morning.

You hung up the phone. Your receptionist had been holding your appointment with a press secretary, but it’d have to wait again. You

opened your office window, the protesters long gone to their comfy homes for the night, and crawled out to the parking lot and your shiny cherry red Corvette.

Someone wasn’t being upfront with you. And if they were going to bother covering something up from a man of your stature, something

involving ninety-percent of your finances, chances were it was a damn good secret.

As you pulled the Corvette into drive, you knew Ted was going to have a stroke. Not that it slowed you down for a minute.

*

Chet Bradley's day seemed stuck in repeat. He had only set down a receiver for a few minutes when he had to pick a receiver up, this time the same one, to answer a call. Only a few minutes before, he'd been on the line with forensics, requesting a DNA test on the corpse to sort things out. Every so often, though it was rarer than a shark attack, two people would have matching fingerprints and it could create situations like this. DNA, though, might be the thing to clear up the picture.

The second call, a call in to see the captain, made Bradley wonder if someone else had different ideas.

Jeremy Moench had been head of the major crimes unit in the state for the last twelve years and, as he explained to Bradley, after clipping a fresh cigar and jabbing forward with it, he didn't get that way by asking for needless tests all over the place.

"So it's a case of mistaken identity," Moench said, "Stranger things have happened. Even DNA tests are wrong sometimes, and they're sure as hell not cheap."

Bradley drummed fingers against his slacks. He'd had this run around before.

"With all due respect, Sir, I only ordered the DNA test, because I didn't want to waste company resources hauling ass to Arizona myself."

Captain Moench sighed, sniffing the cigar.

"Listen, I know you're young and gung ho. The ink on that detective certification is still drying and all, but you have to understand, you're not bigger than the department. One case, is not bigger than the department. If you think this one's really important, we can pass it on to the FBI, but, frankly, we can't afford to be wasting some of our best young talents on some case where a wino stole someone's ID and forensics screwed up the prints."

He tossed the cigar into an open waste bin, on top of several others.

“Don’t smoke ‘em, can’t with my heart, but God I love the smell.”

The Captain stood up and gestured for Bradley to do the same, walking the detective toward the door.

“Listen, Bradley, I like you, I really do, and I want to see you do great things here. I’ll give you a little more time on this case, say, twenty-four hours.”

Bradley stopped, in the doorway.

“A day, sir? I don’t see how that’s anywhere near enough time for a proper homicide investigation!”

Moench just shook his head.

“See, there you go, Chet, you’re going about this all wrong, son. That Updown guy or the wino, or whoever the Hell you’ve got down there in the morgue is just a pawn in this. You’ve got to see the bigger picture here. This was about some political nutter who didn’t want that Donner guy at the rally getting the nod for the Republicans. If you really want to solve this, you’ll figure out who wants Rip Donner dead, instead of wasting department money on dead ends.”

Discouraged, but with a new direction, Bradley went from the Captain’s office to his car. As luck would have it, he pulled up near the entrance to Donner’s headquarters just as Rip Donner was climbing out the back window. When the red Corvette came spitting out of the parking lot, Bradley wheeled his own ride around to follow. Time to see what a difference a day could make.

CHAPTER SIX

ELIZABETH

Nicholas Updown is in bed, at last, a four post California king that dominates the small, white walled bedroom, his beautiful wife, Elizabeth at her corner of the monstrosity, a body's length away. Not four hours ago, he was making time with a mysterious intruder in his laboratory. Not one hour ago, he was eating rotini and pesto in front of a *Discovery* channel special on cosmic string theory. All old hat for him, and it's the Sage he can't get off his mind. While Elizabeth reads the latest issue of *Popular Science*, Updown stares at the brown, flowered bedspread, feeling for all the world like the last pickle in a jar of brine.

His raven haired bride sets down her magazine with a pout and snags the pull string of her *Hello Kitty* bedside lamp. She moves like a kitten herself, crawling slowly across the mattress and rubbing a front paw over Nicholas' thigh. Nuzzling his ear, her hot breath climbs over his skin like a friendly neighbor.

He sighs and pulls an elbow inward, stretching it against his chest. Elizabeth runs the hand up his thighs further and then between them, uninterested in subtlety. Nicholas strokes her hair and stares into her pretty eyes, but all he feels is sad. Elizabeth purrs, insisting –

“Let's make a baby. Let's just try again.”

Nicholas grasps her hand, lifting it away from his unmoved gender. He strokes the back of it, tenderly, lovingly, apologetically.

“I wish I could be more of a man to you.”

He was more of a man, once, he recalls, in the days when his professor title was more than just honorary. When he was a young and impulsive Doctor of Physics at the university in Arizona, he regularly terrorized lecture halls full of hundreds of first and second year students. Elizabeth was one of these, dark looks and cat-eyes drawing attention in the row she shared with half a dozen of her Barbie blonde sorority sisters. They giggled together, Elizabeth included, through the minutes leading up to his lecture, but when he began, Elizabeth's eyes were the only ones locking in. Updown could tell her mind was one of the few in the room that could keep pace with his, one of the few he'd taught during his time at

the University that could, in fact. Though, with the stadium seating, he spent his time in front of a wipe board, and she, several rows up, her calves and knees teasing him above eye level in skirts as short as anything.

It was he, in his manly boldness, who'd called her into his office one day, after class. Asked her to come see him. It wasn't anything prurient, though, he actually wanted to pick her brain, see what she was majoring in, if she had any interest in pursuing the hard sciences.

"You have a gift for the analytical," Professor Updown told her. She blushed, fingertips smoothing down the pleated grey number wrapped around her thighs.

"Let's talk about time travel," Elizabeth whispers now, biting his ear, and pushing him down on the bed. "Take me to the future, baby."

Nicholas strokes the bare skin of her back, absently.

"Future travel's the easy one," he said, launching in directly, "Just need a lot of energy, is all, a lot of speed. The speed of light is constant and is always measured as constant, no matter how fast you're going, and everything's fine and dandy as long as your velocity is constant enough, even with the theory of relativity and different points of perspective. No, it's when you get up to a tenth of the speed of light or more that things start to get weird, irregular, not explainable with classical science, or anything Galileo came up with."

Elizabeth moans, unhooking a beige cotton bra and flinging it to the ground.

"Mmm, Professor Updown, tell me more!"

"Well, once you get that fast, time becomes relative, starts to dilate, and things get strange. Time passes differently for the person traveling that fast than it does for a stationary human being. Say you were here in bed and I blasted off into space –"

"Yeah, Nick, blast off into space, baby!"

She leans in, covering his neck and chest with hungry kisses.

"So I blast off in a spaceship away from Earth, traveling near the speed of light toward some distant star system, slow down, realize how much I miss my lovely wife, turn back around, nearing the speed of light again, and return to Earth. And know what I find?"

Elizabeth lowers her middle, grinding rhythmically against her lover.

“Tell me baby, tell me good.”

“It turns out that traveling near the speed of light sped up my time perception, putting me in a state of partially suspended animation, whereby my body temperature and metabolic rate were reduced and my perception of passing ‘time’ slowed to a crawl. Of course, if I did this, my body would actually likely decrease in size and my mass would become greater, making me a smaller, denser human being than you know now. Not to mention that all of my friends and relatives are dead. You’re dead, everything I knew is gone.”

Updown’s erection fades.

“Goddamn it, Nick,” Elizabeth says, rolling off.

They both breathe heavy, a tense moment passing.

“So, time travel to the future’s possible, then?”

Nick sits up, wipes an arm across his forehead and folds the comforter down to his knees.

“Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, there might even be easier ways to do it than getting a near light speed spaceship, and ways to do it with a bit more precision – but really, what’s the benefit of traveling to the future? And there’s pretty much a myriad of tragedies, so much loss for the hypothetical traveler unless he can also travel to the past.”

Elizabeth rubs a hand over his neck, kneading the muscles there until his spine loosens and turns to pudding, laying him back and slowing the rate of his heart.

“Then take me to the past, Nick, take me back.”

It was that day in the office, in the middle of a discussion on wavelengths of light in the visual spectrum that it happened. Nicholas was explaining that whether you move toward a light source or move away from it, the light will take just as long to get to you. With light having a constant speed, the way this is justified is that the actual wavelength changes.

“Astronomers are using that fact to measure how galaxies move closer and further from Earth and how fast,” he said, “When light is moving away, there is a red shift in the light, the wavelengths get bigger, so the stars in a galaxy moving away from us have a tint of red.”

Elizabeth was shy, examining her fingernails, painted a deep azure. She stretched her hands out, showing them to the Professor.

“I read that chapter,” she said.

“So you can tell me what color the stars are when they’re moving closer, then?”

Her hand crawled forward on his desk, his own inches away.

“Blue,” she said, “When the stars get closer, everything shifts to blue.”

The past. The past, Nicholas thinks, as his wife eases down his boxers and places her tongue and mouth over his salty skin. There is so much wrong in his past. So much he wants to forget, but wants to fix even more. Time travel to the past is impossible according to the known laws of physics. Every scientist worth a grain will say so, every teacher he’s ever had laughed in his face when he even bridged the topic.

“You know the theories,” he says, “You tell me.”

Elizabeth runs her tongue across his navel and smiles devilishly. She begins her lesson, one hand on his surging penis like a pointer.

“You’ll say time travel to the past is impossible, Nick, but without a unified theory joining quantum mechanics, quantum gravity, and general relativity into one, there are quite a few holes open for … manipulation.”

She squeezes his dick and it grows harder. His eyes roll back and his heart beats strongly.

“For instance, maybe we’re wrong about the impossibility of moving faster than light. It could be a lot like future travel, really. Einstein’s theory of Special Relativity postulates that the speed at which one can travel can change one’s perception of time, right?”

Nicholas grunts it as her hand flies faster over his flesh.

“Right.”

“So, theoretically, if you had enough energy, if you could move fast enough, so fast that you burned past the speed of light, time would dilate to such a degree that causality would reverse. The future would happen before the past. You would actually be moving backwards in time.”

He smiles, his hips moving in time with her hand now.

“Like if I sent you a love note, a love note to my dear Nicholas and from my reference point, it was traveling faster than light, then in your reference point, it might be traveling backwards in time. And then, if you responded with a faster than light note of your own, which was backwards in time in *my* frame of reference, then I might actually receive your note

before I even sent my note to begin with. Boom, baby, time travel to the past. And just stick a person in there instead of the note, and you've got it."

Nicholas moves a hand over his wife's pert breast, fingertips savoring the butter soft skin.

"The love note idea is cute, that's for sure. But you'd need an infinite amount of energy to push a slower-than-light signal to faster-than-light speeds. And that's just a signal, can you imagine with a human? It's just not pragmatic to think we could ever deal with those levels of energy."

Elizabeth pouts, pushing his hand away and moving to straddle his hairy legs.

"But nothing in the theory of relativity precludes the possibility of tachyons, Nick. A hypothetical particle like that could move faster than light speed all the time."

His hands grope her buttocks, pulling her over his engorged member. He grips her hard, stimulated by the discourse.

"Not only is there no evidence whatsoever that tachyons even exist, analysis with the quantum field theory suggests that even if they did, there would be no way to harness them to move anything *else* at faster than light speeds. Hypothetical particles don't exactly come with bucket seats to ride in."

She bites his neck and he yowls, playfully.

"Well, if you're going to be a meanie. Let's talk wormholes, then."

"I can think of a wormhole I'd like to plunge into."

Her body rides up and down above his now.

"Wormholes are a solution to so many of the problems presented by general relativity. After all, a wormhole, essentially, is a ... mmm ... hypothetical physical anomaly that could act as a shortcut through space and time."

He tugs at her hair.

"Always with the hypothetical."

She claws at his back.

"So was gravity, once. To act as a transport through space and time, a wormhole would only need two mouths, like a couple of giant funnels put back to back -"

She turns, rear end to him, reverse cowboy as they writhe.

“Not only would there have to be wormholes for this to work,” he puffs, “they would need to be traversable.”

Elizabeth slows the pace then speeds up again, humping him vigorously.

“Uhh ... Morris ... Morris-Thorne.”

“Morris-Thorne?”

“1988, they published a paper about a ... just such a traversable wormhole. All it needs is a spherical shell of exotic matter to hold it open so objects could ... mmm ...”

Nicholas cups her bosom and pulls her close, his chest sweating against her back as he moves in and out of her. She catches her breath and continues.

“So objects could pass safely through.”

“Bu-uh-but exotic matter? Really, exotic matter?”

“I’m feeling pretty fucking exotic, baby.”

He starts to moan, but catches himself.

“It breaks the laws of the universe, though. Exotic matter, by definition, Liz. It’d have to have features like negative mass or, um, being repelled instead of attracted by gravity. Stuff nothing else has.”

“Tell that to Herman Bondi.”

“Brilliant!” he shouts, slamming against her insides now. “His 1957 paper, about mass being negative as well as positive without it being a logical contradiction at all. Negative mass would simply, what was it?”

Elizabeth begins to squeeze her thighs, desperate for Nick to explode inside her.

“It’d have to involve some counter-intuitive form of motion, repulsion by gravity instead of attraction.”

“Exotic matter, perfect ... except, if gravity were repelling it, wouldn’t exotic matter be pushed out to the farthest reaches of the universe, far from highly gravitated masses such as the sun and planets?”

“Mmm ... fuck, Nick, gravitate *me!*”

“But it’s a moot point anyway, with Matt Visser, right? Negative mass cosmic strings could take the place of exotic matter and, another hypothetical physical feature of the universe, a defect of the very fabric of space-time based on reality, hypothetically formed when a region of

space-time underwent a phase change, moving from states like liquid, gas, solid, plasma. A cosmic string would be like a crack formed when water freezes into ice. And it'd be microscopic, fucking tiny, diameters the size of protons. With density like that, sure, their gravitational pull would probably be greater than Earth itself, meaning there couldn't be any cosmic strings on Earth or even within the grasp of human scientists. But, but, if you *could* create a traversable wormhole, then it'd be a simple matter of accelerating one end of the wormhole to a velocity greatly exceeding the other and then bringing it back (like the hypothetical traveler to the future), so that the accelerated wormhole mouth would age less than the stationary one as seen by a fixed observer outside the wormhole. Since time would act differently inside the wormhole than outside it, with synchronized clocks at either mouth remaining synchronized in the frame of reference of a traveler *inside* the wormhole, then a traveler entering the accelerated mouth would actually exit the stationary mouth at a time *before* he entered the accelerated mouth. Boom, time travel to the past.

“For instance, if I put a clock at both ends of the wormhole showing the time to be 3:00 PM before one end was accelerated, then after the end was accelerated and returned it would read 4:00 PM, while the stationary end would read 5:00 PM to the outside observer, and the stationary end would only read 4:00 PM to me, because I entered the accelerated end and when I exited I would be exiting having traveled an hour into the past. I would've created a closed timeline curve, which, theoretically, could be manipulated to travel seconds, minutes, days, even decades into the past—”

Even after he stopped for a breath, it took Nicholas a few moments to realize that he'd stopped thrusting, that his erection had shrunk in his preoccupation. Elizabeth climbed off of him and rolled on to her side.

*

“What do you miss about her the most?”

Ostrander had taken to smoking his pipe during their sessions. He'd been worried that the patient would mind at first, but after several reassurances, the Doctor eased right into the bad habit. The patient

claimed he'd died of lung cancer at least twice already, so what'd it matter if he went for three?

"Just the touch of her, I guess," the patient said. "She was a vision. An absolutely striking beauty. I don't think I ever satisfied her."

The Doctor gnawed at the tip of his pipe, bitter fumes burning up his nostrils.

"And why would you say that?"

The Patient shifted against the couch cushions, weighing them down with his shoulder and head until they became concave against the wooden frame.

"If I had satisfied her, she might still be alive today."

*

Nicholas wakes to the smell of frying eggs. He'd spent the night dreaming of her. Of what happened when those blue painted fingertip finally touched his. Of the glory of the first time they held hands.

Their office meetings increased after that and soon they began to confide in each other, speaking of things other than science and speculation. She told him of her distance relationship with her parents, who'd had two kids a couple decades before her and were already ready to retire when she surprised them by coming into their lives. They had plenty of finances, and were funding her education, but she didn't hear much from them beyond that. They discussed their favorite songs and movies that made them cry and what they liked to eat. Elizabeth told him she hated eating alone and it didn't take much before the office hours turned into lunch meetings at various Chinese or Thai or hamburger joints. He'd usually pick up the tab, using the excuse that he was the man or the older one, and she'd demure, preferring to accept his payment than to bug her distant parents for more money in her account. He secretly did this because he liked the way it made him feel – that these were more than meetings between teacher and student with mild flirtations mixed in, but dates between boyfriend and girlfriend.

It wasn't long before it became clear she felt the same way. Their first kiss was fantastic. Up against the door of her car where she'd stood for forty minutes saying how much she should probably get going but

always getting caught back up in the laughter and banter. He just couldn't resist any more and dove in. Her lips were soft and sweet and accommodating.

And then that was it. She was his and he was hers. They tried keeping it quiet for the rest of the semester, not letting her colleagues or his on to it, but their love was blooming for anyone who looked closely enough to see.

Nicholas snorts. Such were dreams. He gets up from bed and ties on his blue terry cloth robe. Elizabeth doesn't speak as he makes his way into the kitchen and her face buries the *good morning* in his throat. She slides a plate towards him and he sips coffee and they read the paper in silence.

As he scans over the front page a chuckle hits the back of his throat. Stephen Hawking had once mentioned the real proof that time travel to the past is impossible. Because, if such travel did exist, they'd all be overrun with tourists from the future. Just like all those yahoos believing in extraterrestrials. If they really did exist, why don't we have any documented evidence of them after all this time? Why aren't they visiting our leaders and appearing on public access television?

No, there's just a bunch of weirdos like that one in his office making shit up and trying to screw with his head. Not a mention of that stupid story about his brother on the front page, nothing like that. Nicholas muses about how to update the security system on the front door of his office and his wife folds over the local section.

She points, face twisted up in confusion.

"Isn't that your brother?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SAGE

I am recalling how much I used to enjoy mythology. At least before it started feeling too close to home. I sit in a secluded spot in a patch of woods you would not know in northern Michigan. Not even a full cycle of the sun has passed since I stood in Nicholas Updown's laboratory, but travel is no longer difficult for Me, even through space. The woods are filled with white pines that tower over My head and glow supernaturally pale in the twilight. Mournful hoots of hidden owls disturb the hush. Twigs snap in the distance and rodentia scurries about unseen.

The pine smell soothes Me, though, as I recline on a carpet of these aromatic needles, working by pinky-small battery powered flashlight. This technology seems somewhat bizarrely juxtaposed against the arcane ritual I enact.

Cradled in My lap is an unfurled document, parchment thick, and as wide as seventeen standard computer pages, or fewer than three human hugs. It stretches to mossy rocks on either side of me, scrolling out with an ancient fury. This artifact's contents are very futuristic, though. Blotches of ink mark every inch of its cracked and yellowed surface, the meanings of these I will not say to you or anyone, and, most curiously, push pins also dot it regularly, the strands of yarn stretched between them forming a twisting grid of futures, pasts, presents, and possibilities.

My encounter with Nicholas Updown has caused a major reverberation on this grid – powerful as earthen plates rubbing against one another at a fault line – and I pull loose a pin here, relocate a strand there, opening up new doors and nailing old ones shut. I feel like the Apportioners, the Fates. Called Moirae by the Greeks, Parcae by the Romans, and the Wyrd Sisters or Norns by the Norse. Maybe it's the reason for My cloak, for My sense of the theatrical, but it does something to a man's mind when he spends his days spinning out the thread of another man's life, measuring it, waving it into a greater pattern, and then bringing out the terrible shears when the time is right and cutting it sharp.

Sometimes it feels like it would be easier to just cut them all, to snap all the strings that reality dangles from, to leave the frayed ends to decompose on the ground, reality observed by none, and not existing without its observers, like the tree falling alone in the woods, making a sound, perhaps, but silent in any way that matters.

It seems so hard to reconstruct an event, to make things proceed by a certain order, to force the events of time to march along like obedient soldiers. So much easier to muck about with causality, to slap a butterfly and muscle up chaos.

I feel confident now, though, as I review My grid. Updown's trajectory is on pace, his motion is solid, his journey should be progressing according to the master plan. And if it does not, I will be there, watching, manipulating, waiting in the shadows.

This is My task, as the true Apportioner of history, the true master of Fate, the wise one, the Sage, the controller of reality and destiny.

Such are my thoughts as I receive the message from one of My informants that opens a new fault line in the surface of My scroll. It seems a pawn has wandered far from his side of the board. Rip Donner has pressed forward ambitiously, making a power move against Me, seeking out Updown, and I cannot take this happenstance lightly. Contingencies must be explored.

I give the scroll one long last look, then roll it up. Crickets begin to chirp all around and I linger a moment. The night air is cool against my mouth and I savor each breath. At My age, I often wonder how many more moments like this I will have. But I have much work to do. So as the evening sun fades the last bit below the horizon, like a ball of gold ore being melted into a molten liquid and draining away to some hidden compartment, I disappear as well.

Though even with the scroll at My disposal, it's sometimes hard to pin things down precisely, I know one thing for certain. When another human being sees Me next, I will be in a new place and time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

You don't know it, but your actions are currently turning the direction of an entire universe. How can you know such things? You're a mere politician, dedicated to the mundane and controversial of your polity. Struck only by events within or directly affecting your self-preoccupied nation. What could you know about the grand scope of this world, this universe, this reality?

Instead, you are zipping down the interstate in your shiny cherry red Corvette, with your chrome wheels and your turbo injected engine, flirting with ninety miles an hour and head banging to hard rock guitar riffs. Your campaign manager is cursing you out over the phone, but you're letting your voice mail handle that. It's Phoenix or bust for you. Updown laboratory or no glory. You told Me that one once, with that stupid chuckle of yours. Poetry's never really been your forte.

But you've always been into finances. That flawless ruby on your high school class ring and the diamonds dotting around it as you grip the leather stick and shift into higher gear is no accident. You've always been in love with flash, with cash, with bling. Lost time is one thing for a candidate in a major campaign, but lost money is everything. You've heard the statistics. It's always the same. A candidate who outspends his opponent wins nearly every time. More money means victory, but here Updown is chopping your legs off from under you. Thanks to him, you no longer even know what financial resources will be available to you in the months to come. So, if anyone on your campaign staff thinks you're okey-dokey having millions invested with some mad scientist nutbag you've never met who has a strange quasi-conspiracy feel swirling around him, well they're a bigger asshole than you'd care to see in person. Now Nicholas Updown, well him you *need* to see in person. You'd send a lackey, but hell, lackeys like your financial planner put this gun against your head to begin with.

You realize you're grimacing. This snarl of your teeth and all the loud music and forehead thrusting are giving you a headache. So you turn the volume down to nothing and relax your jaw.

It's the dead of night now, and you're leaving campaign headquarters far in your dust. After you pass the first state line of many, you decide it's the perfect time to stop for the night and get loaded at some cheap motel. The next exit leads you down a dusty road with dilapidated shacks lining it. One actually has wheels on it, no joke. You turn right off the ramp, no traffic in sight, and spot a wooden sign blowing with the breeze and welcoming you to this hole-in-the-wall hamlet with an advertisement of its citizen count. Double digits. Yee haw.

Perfect spot for a town hall meeting, you think, enjoying playing politics even with yourself. Gather thoughts and opinions from the local shitheads about why their lives are so shitty and what shit they think you should do to lessen the shit they're going through. You think you'd enjoy hefting a few beers and planning to cut taxes and government waste. People eat stuff like that up. You'd show them a real man.

The town's one main street, though, yields no drinking holes and few buildings whatsoever. You resign yourself to a one pump gas station and walk inside to inquire about the john and a six pack.

"This here's a dry county, Bub."

That from Yancey Yokel the local, who has about four teeth to his soul and wears one of those work shirts with a name patch on it. His patch says Fred, but you know people only wear ones with their real names on it half the time anymore, so you'll stick with Yancey. You get the key to the shitter instead, a delicate metal job with a big wooden fossil dangling from it, apparently to dissuade people who might otherwise forget to return it. Out back, you tromp through damp grass and find the door, chipped paint less than encouraging. You crack it open and the smell floods your senses like maggots worming through ribbons of feces. Your foot pushes the door shut again, you unzip, and piss on the outside wall of the restroom. Serves them right for not providing sanitary conditions, you figure.

Back inside, Yancey looks ready to close up shop, but you're not feeling like moving on quite yet. You examine a few packs of cigarettes, scanning over the lists of additives and surgeon general's warnings, trying

to decide which will kill you most efficiently. When the decision seems narrowed down to a couple of impossible to choose from options, you shift focus to an aisle full of candy bars. You've never seen so many varieties of *Snickers*'s before resting your eyes on this dusty shelf. Bars with almonds, with extra caramel, with white chocolate, with peanut butter, with peanut butter crunch, light bars, king sized bars, jumbo king sized bars, the *Snickers*'s section alone stretches from the checkout counter back to the refrigerated goods.

It's near the latter area that you see it. A spinning rack of cheap paperbacks chilling next to the comic books and gossip mags. You give it a twirl. Bloody tales of hardboiled sleuths. Harlequin romances with swooning heroines and love interests unable to keep their puffy pecs under wraps. Even some hack science fiction. Like this one, *Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9*. What a stupid little title that is, you're thinking, as you run a finger over the bent spine. And then you see it, beneath the tip of your ring finger. The name of the author; no less than Nicholas Updown.

*

Edgar Unum stepped off the bus into a field and began his hike. This had better be worth it, he thought, considering that this little trip was costing him the last remnants of vacation time in his coffer. It had better be the story of a lifetime for how far he was sticking out his neck.

Still, electronic means of communication had proven such a brick wall and his curiosity had mutated into such a creature that what other choice did he have? Edgar strolled through the field of long, golden wheat.

A few hundred yards rolled along easily enough, though burs were growing their own cities on his socks. But soon the heat of the beating sun proved too much for a man used to living in climate controlled havens, and Edgar began to swoon from the exertion. Not often one found himself in the country these days, as there weren't many fields like this left on the Earth. But a true journalist would track a story to all ends of the Earth.

She had been difficult enough to track down, this Lillian Lazarus. Unum had only discovered her location through old property tax records,

and the first two residences had turned out to be halfway houses for members of Forever Life. The “Citizens of Tomorrow” living there, as they called themselves, proved mostly mum and worthless. They seemed zombified by their task, “Waiting for the Coming,” as they called it, and spent their time mostly sleeping or meditating or sipping tea. Unum knew he had to go to the source, to the very founder of the movement to discover what this was all about. And now he was in a field, marching toward a classic looking big red farmhouse. And there, in the pasture, he spotted her, a fierce looking woman gesticulating wildly with an open hand at the flannel clad posse around her. Those signature blonde-grey locks bounded about her neck and she spotted Unum in kind, just as he fell to his knees, the humidity taking its toll.

He felt her hands on his body as the world slipped away; heard her soft voice whispering about a weary traveler.

*

Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9. You slide the novel from the rack. The blurb on the back cover extols the virtues of this “innovative work of speculative fiction.” From what you can surmise, the basic plot involves a super advanced squadron of astronauts, called “space angels,” who rescue other astronauts with failing equipment from their inevitable demises.

Ninety-percent. The number won’t leave you alone as you clutch the dusty paperback. This bozo has that much of your money tied up in his little fantasy worlds. You pull two double shot espressos from the shelf, add the book to your pile, and pay Yancey in cash. Nothing for the campaign officials to track, you figure, as you stumble back out to your car. Leaning back against the supple leather, you crack the first can open and gulp the first half down. It’s going to be a rough ride, but hell if you’re not going to be in Arizona before you sleep again.

WINDOW THREE
FUTURE TENSE

CHAPTER NINE

WHO KILLED NICHOLAS UPDOWN?

Nicholas Updown vividly remembers how the church used to look. The typical wooden walls constructed into a large haven of sconces and kneelers, shaped like a cross when seen from above. Stained glass images of Christ's bloody path to Calvary burst out in deep crimsons and golds. Rough carpet laid forty years hence with patches worn through to the floor boards, withering in neglect. The hard backed pews stern like an angry sermon. Up upon the altar, a podium for the Pastor to speak from, ceremonial cloths cast over it like burial shrouds. On one side, the choir loft where no choir ever sung. On the other side, near where a keyboard and a handful of low wage musicians led the congregation was the newest item in the building – a white marble Baptismal font, large enough to drown an adult from the waist up. And, of course, there was, hanging high over this, the ancient looking crucifix, three times the size of a normal man, burnt umber with age, its withered, dying Christ merging with the cross itself. His head to one side in agony. The crown of thorns piercing his brow. Nails in his hands and feet. Tommy once told him that it was supposed to remind all those caught in sin's embrace of the eternal sacrifice made for them. It just reminded Nicholas of childhood.

He grew up in this church, in the pews, in the rectory attached at the back. The one time he tried bathing in the newly installed font was the only time he heard his brother use the Lord's name in vain. Nicholas was twelve and drunk off of purloined communion wine. Tommy was twenty-eight, and the younger of the pair of Priests serving the parish at the time.

"That's the goddamn blood of Christ!" Thomas had shouted in his shame.

Two years before, their father had died when a conveyor belt fell on top of him and crushed in his chest and spine. The auto plant where he worked dialed back the numbers of days without accidents to zero and Nicholas felt his own life restarting as well. He packed up his meager number of worldly possessions, watched from afar as Tommy arranged for the sale of everything their parents had owned, and tried getting

comfortable in the stuffy house of his occasionally lucid grandmother. Thomas was finishing seminary at the time and protested to Gramma that he lacked the ability to provide proper care for his brother.

It was often Nicholas caring for Gramma, though. Dementia was slipping in as she tried best to enjoy her golden years. Nicholas had to watch her social security checks like a hawk – she had a habit of blowing them on smokes and whimsies, forgetting about the constraints of her fixed income. And when it came to medication, she was even worse. Gramma had to take eight pills every day. For allergies. For aches and pains. For calcium. For her mental state. For her heart. For God knows what else. Yellow horse pills, blue tablets, green and white gel caps, round light red chewable numbers. She would keep these in her pill boxes and, as long as she both refilled them reliably and remembered which day of the week it was, had no problems staying properly medicated. Every morning, afternoon, and night, Nicholas ritually reviewed her habits and ensured that every pill was in its proper place.

The one thing Tommy did was provide chauffer service for Nicholas to and from school on days when he could not take the bus. When he began participating in an after school science club, he went off the public transportation clock and Tommy was called upon to step in. It was on Nicholas' twelfth birthday when Tommy came late, having gone over time in an interview with the Royal Oak parish due to his own verbal exuberance, and when the brothers opened the door to their gramma's house, they found her on the floor still clutching her remote control. When they got to the doctor, Nicholas knew the diagnosis before it came. He had examined her pill bottles and a certain shortness left him with two theories, either Gramma had intentionally overdosed on heart medication, or she had kept forgetting that she'd taken her pill and taken it again and again over the course of the day. She was remanded to the hospital for long term observation. Nicholas would no longer be able to live under her care, and when Tommy became Father Thomas and moved into the rectory in Royal Oak, Nicholas joined him, Spiderman suitcase in tow.

And now, as Nicholas Updown stares at the bare remains of the Church he grew up in, the Church that claimed the last living member of his natural kin, all that remains is a scrap of wall some thirty feet high and that crucifix, fixed at the top, exposed now to the elements and

proclaiming its sadness to all the world. How this wooden cross and Christ, this scrap of wall, remained after the complete obliteration of all else into a smoking crater was a mystery to him.

“More than a mystery, a miracle,” says his brother Thomas – Tommy – still sixteen years his senior but now folded beneath that age.

Tommy is still a simple man, retaining a certain bland non-identity even as the wrinkles bag more loosely around his eyes. His eyes, themselves, are light and blue, like crinkling cellophane, his hair has surrendered completely to grey, without a single rebellious streak of walnut brown remaining. His smile is slim, all lip, a Puritan smile on a Catholic priest, as if the combined religious influences taught him that God allowed contentedness or smugness, but could not tolerate mirth. This smile always keeps a touch of sadness, or maybe it was condemnation behind it, just out of view. When not presiding over Mass, Tommy kept to very Spartan garb, plain black pants and matching button down shirt, complete with the signature white tab of collar. For a man whose Church had just been smashed to bits, his back is straight, his gaze wide, and his voice holds a tinge of satisfaction.

“The demolition crews want to tear it down,” he says, “But I won’t hear of it until I receive communiqué from his Eminency. To think, a real live miracle here in my humble Parish. Through this disaster we are shown the grace and power of God.”

This is utter bullshit, of course, Nicholas Updown is certain. But he learned a long time ago that it was not worth incurring his brother’s ire and getting into protracted debates on the merits of faith and religion. And he prefers to avoid the pointed queries such conversations led to. He prefers to keep conversations curt and practical, like a man of science should.

“So you’re waiting on word from the Pope? Will he rebuild the Church for you? I’m sure if you don’t cooperate with the construction workers soon, the insurance companies will start pulling money off the table.”

His brother stares at the Crucifix as they speak, either marveling at the intactness of it, or eager to avoid eye contact with Nicholas.

“The Vatican will be sending a representative from the Under Secretary at their Congregation for the Causes of Saints soon to provide

the witness to the miracle and offer confirmation or not on its official status as a sign from God.”

It is strange seeing Tommy, face-to-face like this. A sullen silence had grown up between them since Gramma died. Nicholas had been fourteen then, and used to living under his brother’s stern but neglectful care. He’d been forced to attend his brother’s Midnight service on New Year’s Eve, and she’d passed in the hospital, dying as she lived those days, alone. Four years after that, Nicholas gained access to the inheritance money in his bank account and went off to University. He hadn’t gone to school out of state by happenstance. And that was it, all they’d seen of each other until now. Until she’d picked up the morning paper, Nicholas forgot he’d even told Elizabeth that his brother was a priest named Thomas in Michigan.

Yet he’d felt compelled to come all this way, to speculate on the rebuilding process of a church he’d done his best to deny for decades and a brother he didn’t know anymore. Why? Had it been the strange prediction from the cloaked man? Or more a wistfulness for the years gone by?

“I still don’t understand what’s so miraculous about this. So Jesus ducked the meteorite. Stranger things have happened, surely.”

Nicholas shivers as the bitter Michigan wind finds the pores in his overcoat and cuts at his skin. Despite growing up in the state, his internal thermometer had long since acclimated to the dry heat of Arizona. He realizes, forgetting about the weather for a moment, that he, too, has been staring almost exclusively at the cross.

“You haven’t seen the best part, brother. Always so reluctant to faith.”

His voice seems to tisk at Nicholas, but before the scientist can muster an indignant response – how could his brother have any idea what Nicholas always is or isn’t these days? – Tommy is shuffling toward the edge of the crater. In those soft soled leather shoes, his feet never seem to leave the ground.

“The Catholic Church believes that after they die, would-be saints remain very active in this world. We pray to a community of saints in Heaven, remember? Ask them to pass our messages on to God, to smile upon our Earthly blunders. If someone we pray to possesses a special

grace from God, we believe that affects of prayer to them will be seen on Earth. These effects can be any number of amazing events.”

Nicholas notices rosary beads dangling from Tommy’s pocket, standard priestly accessory, no doubt. But, as they walk, his brother fingers the beads. Is he praying even now, in the middle of this conversation?

As they move across the thin field of graying snow, leaving footprints uncovering first grass and then dirt and rock, the moment feels timeless, like it could be any moment of Nicholas’ life since the day his grandmother swallowed the pill that proved one too many.

“How’s this a miracle, though? If anything, it seems like a curse. The whole town is left untouched, no one is killed, but God decides to destroy your whole church? I wouldn’t see that as being in anyone’s best graces, Tommy.”

Nicholas is still staring down at his brother’s fingers when they come to a stop, pausing upon a pink bead.

“A Church is not walls of wood or stone, Nicholas. A Church is made of people. And miracles do not tear people from their faith, they bring them closer to God. Like that meteor brought the symbol of Christ on his cross closer to the world in the open air, take a look ahead and see what God has wrought to bring you back to Him.”

*

Nearly a day passed before the all points bulletin went out. Chet Bradley was in his car when it happened, speeding down an interstate, with that dodgy red Corvette slipping in and out of view at every turn.

He was hardly surprised when he heard it. Serious presidential candidates simply didn’t travel this far, this long, without a large entourage. For some reason, Rip Donner had gone off the map.

And soon enough, the world was abuzz about it. But Bradley had front row seats. Pundits wondered and speculated and demanded answers that weren’t forthcoming, while Bradley just watched the muscle car through his windshield and laid his foot like a brick on the gas to keep him in sight.

Something was possessing Rip Donner like a mad man. Something was sending the candidate off, without rest, down interstates and highways as if his life depended on it. Chet Bradley could have easily made a few phone calls and set up a roadblock and brought the man to a stop. But he wanted to see where this path lead. Wanted to see where Rip Donner would finally stop of his own accord. And he wouldn't stop either until Donner did.

On the side of the road the first night, finally, when Bradley thought his knuckles were about to fold back the other way from the pressure of staying on the steering wheel so long, Rip Donner allowed them both to rest. Bradley dozed to the sounds of political pundits debating the relative characters and political consistencies of various Republicans and Democrats.

By the morning light, when Donner cranked into gear again, and that big engine rev shook Bradley from his slumber, all the media talk had shifted to the subject. Where in the world had Rip Donner gone? No more talk about George Taylor pummeling Donner on the economy, or about how this was the year for Democrats. The only reason anyone mentioned another candidate for president anymore was to relay their reactions about Donner's sudden and unexplained disappearance.

The second night, when Bradley checked into a cheap motel thirty minutes after Donner, both under assumed names with wink wink amounts of don't ask don't tell cash bolstering their anonymity, Bradley perching at the peephole to watch Donner's door across the hall, the television stations behind him carried non-stop coverage, with that pirate-faced campaign manager providing cover stories at first and then causing controversy when he finally admitted that no one knew where Donner had gone and that he'd stopped returning calls. Half the news anchors seemed to suspect some sort of kidnapping angle, but no ransom notes had surfaced yet and in the meantime America had nothing to do but speculate, gab, gesticulate, and hold its collective breath.

Bradley could've ended it all with one call to Captain Moench. And Moench called him, in fact, after the allotted twenty-four hours passed, demanding to know why he hadn't been in to the station. All Bradley would tell him, despite plenty of colorful offers to terminate the detective's employment, was that he was following a lead. To let on

otherwise would've resulted in immediate media attention. The key witness in this case would have been swept away at once and, worst of all, Bradley would never get to find out where in the world Rip Donner was going.

*

Nicholas lifts his gaze. And there, deep in a cavern thirty feet down, is an ethereal show of light, more impressive than when his family saw the Northern Lights on a camping trip once, so many, many years ago, when Dad was alive and Gramma was well and before Tommy moved away. The light swirls around and around like a red tornado, but is flat as a disk or a plate. The air streaks around it with red like the blood of Christ and in the center is a glowing, pulsating mass of purple and red, like a cluster of lightning. Its diameter, Nicholas estimates, must be about equivalent to the length of a small car, fender to fender, no more. Molecules spark around them; Nicholas feels electricity trembling up and down his limbs.

"The meteorite landed here, made this indentation, and this wonderful light burst forth when I pulled it out," Tommy says. "Ever since, the arthritis in my hands has been gone, I've felt more energy and vigor for life, even my prostate has felt lighter."

Ignoring his brother, Nicholas pushes forward, past Tommy's outstretched hand.

"Nicholas, wait –"

As he moves closer to the mass, it is as if it recognizes his presence and wishes to say hello. The red streaks flow into a river, reality bending as it funnels toward him, attracted to this new arrival. And as Nicholas tries to extend his arms toward this river, he is blasted away, lifted into the air, and sent sailing back toward where Tommy once was. By now, Tommy has moved back to safety, and reaches a hand down to yank Nicholas away from the swirling red tentacles.

"I intended on telling you about that," Tommy says to his brother, whose mouth is taut.

Nicholas is thinking. That cloud of red, whatever it is, seems to be attracted to him. His brother's words seem to indicate that this type of reaction is normal for the cloud. Nicholas' body, like any known object, contains positive mass. And yet, Nicholas was pushed away by it even as it seemed to wish to reach out to him. According to theories on negative mass matter, under certain conditions, anomalous conditions which, perhaps, exist in whatever corner of space the meteorite flew from, a system can be created whereby negative mass is attracted to positive mass, yet positive mass is repelled by negative mass. But normal matter isn't negative in mass. *Normal* matter. No known matter is negative in mass at all. Which means this can't be normal matter. It can't be any matter previously known to man. It has to be –

“Exotic matter,” he whispers.

Except it doesn't seem to be repelled by gravity. So how can it be exotic matter? Nicholas will have to sort this all out. Will have to run tests and experiments and so much more. He is starting to write a mental laundry list of procedures to tackle when his coat pocket vibrates, sending a flutter through his heart. After a moment, he realizes this is not an aftershock from his encounter with the cloud, but rather his cell phone, which he flips open, expecting to hear from Elizabeth on the other end. He hopes all is well in Arizona.

“Nicholas Updown, it's urgent I speak with you.”

It's you, you bastard. Rip Donner.

“What? Who is this? What's this about?”

An unhealthy pause.

“This is going to sound strange, Professor Updown, but just a few days ago, I saw you die.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE POWER OF GOD

I listen to this call from the tap I've placed on Nicholas Updown's cell phone. Map enough of time and its possible outcomes, and it is not that hard to approximate all knowing and all seeing. Your actions here do not surprise Me. Little surprises Me now. I am lightly impressed by your ingenuity, but knowing ahead of time exactly what you were capable of, no shock overwhelms Me.

I consider alerting your eye patch wearing colleague, Ted, of your whereabouts, certain that his forces can yank you back into your responsible life of campaigning and politicking. I consider, alternately, notifying the press, though I imagine all the local Yancey Yokels you've encountered on your road trip have been passing tips their way all the while and yet you've managed to duck direct media contact so far, with a combination of fast speeds, back roads, misdirection, and always staying one step ahead.

Besides, I've tried both those methods before, and to no avail. As soon as you called Updown, the damage was done. A seed was planted that will not grow into the tree of knowledge for some time, but once it does, it will be too late to turn back. No, this time I choose to ride out the storm and see what you will do, unmolested, what will become of you if you are left to your own devices.

Unfortunately, there are other forces that do not view events the same as I, and they are coming for you even then. And no, I do not refer to your campaign staff, or the media pundits, or even the plucky Detective Bradley. Those coming are of a much more ruthless sort.

*

"Do you know why you're here, Nicholas?"

Doctor Ostrander views his patient from behind a glass partition. His eyes are streaked with red from lack of sleep.

"Because I might be crazy?" he says, a bit louder than necessary. "Because I keep seeing spacemen in the corners of my eyes? Because I

invented a time machine and now people won't leave me alone, now they want me to do everything for them, fix everything for them, help them all fix up their pathetic little lives?"

The doctor nods slowly, waiting a minute, hoping this pause will demonstrate for Nicholas how civilized discourse should proceed. After an episode such as his, a lot of relearning is necessary.

"I see. Now, tell me, Nicholas, if you have a time machine, why aren't you in the future? Or the far past, exploring the Wild West or a medieval joust? Why are you here?"

Nicholas Updown stares at the wall, arms resigned in the tightly wound straight jacket.

"I had to be here. To save you from death, Doctor Ostrander. You're my friend."

Doctor Ostrander jots down a note. He must be vigilant about any concerns of transference. The patient seems to feel quite emotionally attached and is even describing the doctor/patient relationship as a more formal friendship. Best to deflect, for now.

"Didn't you want to save Elizabeth? Shouldn't you be with her?"

The patient's eyes narrow. Then he looks confused, as if he's having trouble reconstructing events.

"That whore? I ... I don't know. I think maybe I wanted her to be dead."

"Hmm. Interesting. And why did you want her to be dead, Nicholas?"

Nicholas stares off to the wall again, a moment lucid and a moment gone. His head rocks back and forth.

"Did you know that Friedrich Nietzsche was crazy? That he stopped believing in God and then he went nuts in 1898 and stopped writing and stayed that way for eleven years until he died? Bet you didn't know that, did you?"

*

I occupy Myself in your apartment during your absence. It is rare that these days afford Me such luxury. I especially enjoy the whirlpool tub in your master bath. There are, of course, many cameramen and

police officers posted around your neighborhood and near your windows, but I have ways to travel completely incognito.

And so here I am, My feet up on the tile mosaic on one wall of your bathroom, in a tub filled with soapy bubbles and soothing bath salts, candles lit around the room for an ambiance that will not show up on your electric bill, and a slim novel in My hands.

It's the same book you've just bought at the gas station from Yancey. The same exact copy, in fact, earmarked in all the same places, cover bent to the same degree. I picked it up from a mutual friend some time from now. Just who is a surprise that I'm sure you'll be able to piece together in ample time with enough thought. Even as the world hunts you like a rare and savage beast, I am savoring the opening lines of a hack science fiction writer's opus:

COSMIC SPACE ANGELS OF JUPITER 9

By Nicholas Updown

Jupiter 9 is the ninth in a series of planets claimed by the race of Humankind to bear the name of its giant gassy predecessor with a blazing red eye. Jupiter was the Roman name for the Greek God Zeus, ruler of the Gods in Olympia and master of Thunder. Of this series of planets, Jupiter 9 is the first to be deemed inhabitable and the colony created there provides an invaluable source of Daxonium mining, without which half the Interworld Spacefleet's many battalions of hyperspeed warships would be left without adequate fuel. As such, Jupiter 9 is the target not only of the usual amount of accidents associated with high risk workplaces, but also the site of innumerable attempts at sabotage by the Interworld Federation's many enemies. It was during one such terrorist attack that the intrepid Captain Derringer Von Raysong nearly met his demise and, in avoiding it, first encountered the Cosmic Space Angels.

Von Raysong had just piloted his DAX93 Minloader cargo ship through Jupiter 9's atmosphere, to begin the long monthly transport home to Mars 3. Here, Von Raysong thought, in addition to selling the precious mineral to local traders, he would pick up a show in the Cantina and perhaps a barmaid or two once he took his share of the profits off the top. The DAX93 Minloader carried twenty cubic tons of Daxonium at a time, just enough to fuel one Warship for about fourteen weeks. The cargo ship required a crew of three to operate it. This crew was led by the head pilot and Captain, Von Raysong, and also included his co-pilot and Second Lieutenant Gargax Sly, and, finally, the Galley Cook, Freddy Nietzsche.

Now most folks casually familiar with interspace Daxonium transport might find a Galley Cook a completely extraneous member of a cargo ship crew,

but they would be quite erroneous in this supposition. A cargo ship the nature of the DAX93 Minloader needed every spare bit of thrust possible to carry extra load over the long trip across the star system. And, believe it or not, a big expensive food simulator weighed several times what a fortnight's worth of old fashioned biological food and the scrawny Nietzsche weighed.

It was Nietzsche, in fact, who ended up being the herald of disaster. For, no sooner had he served the steaming bowls of summer squash pudding and remarked that something seemed off in the recipe than an explosion rocked the hull of the space vessel, bursting a hole in the ship and exposing the crewmembers to the great suck of space.

It is a piece of trash novel, of course, but the angels in it stay with My mind. They are relentless. They speak as one, like a Greek chorus. They take it upon themselves to see that no one dies. What a world this would be, I think, if no one dies. You know what men I speak of. You know what a world this might have been with them in it, how things might have gone, if I had just gotten things right. For this fact, I curse you now, but it's also for this fact, Rip, that I still keep you alive.

Do not think for a second that I respect your former position of power or your celebrity. Do not think that this will save you if I later feel it necessary for you to die. I do not adhere to conventional mortality. I can be heartless and cold and single-minded, especially when it pertains to one such as you who has done so much harm.

I am not done trying to unravel your mess, though. I hold the power of the timestream in My fist and have the ability to warp it as I choose. My will is the gravity the universe bends around. I can travel to the past and rewrite history. I can travel to the future to know what will come of My actions before I take them. I will always find another plan. Everything will go as I wish it to, Mr. Donner, because I am the possessor of the God Machine, and He Who possesses the God Machine has the power of Time Travel. And He Who has the power of Time Travel has the power of God.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PRESIDENTIAL TREATMENT

Y ou were insulted when I referred to you as a pawn. I saw as much on your face. No, don't try to speak or move to confirm nor deny. It is not important that you do so. I already know how you feel. We have spoken of much of this before, you and I, more times than the stars can count. No, you would not remember, so do not bother to try. You are insulted by the word pawn, because you feel you are more than that; that you act of your own accord, and you do. You certainly possess free will.

Still, pawns move more often than not to protect their king, and that is what you, whether you know it or not, were put in place to do from the very beginning. You find the word insulting, but remember, even the lowliest pawn, if it crosses the board, can be transformed into a powerful queen. Why am I telling you this? Why am I not sparing the details, but pouring them on, one after another, no matter how complex they get? Why am I making a story of your life, of things you have seen and things you haven't, thing you'd know and things you never knew? If I told you now, you would not yet understand. But, in time, you will know everything. You will see how it all fits together. In time, when you are ready. When I have no more time to tell.

What is important, for the moment, is that at this moment in My tale you are making your way across the nation in your shiny red Corvette.

The sun rose a few hours before and the energy drink's "boost" ran out on you an hour or two before that. You've been ignoring Ted's calls and those of other campaign higher-ups he's likely recruited in case you're pissed at him. His voice messages sound desperate, like a dog pleading for a table scrap. He begs, screams, bitches, moans, tells you every single which way that you're throwing away your political career.

At least you're getting plenty of publicity out of this stunt. The radio stations are covering your "unexplained disappearance" for hours at a time, before switching to sports news, banal chatter, or poppy rock. The media wants to know where you are. The FBI bloodhounds have been put on your trail. You curse yourself for keeping the cell phone in

your possession for so long, knowing that the powers that be can trace your signal. Still, somehow, you're unwilling to snip this last lifeline to the outside world. After all, what if you somehow ended up in over your head?

You're afraid of the media finding you first, off your guard. It may be a big country, but it won't take much for *someone* to make the Updown connection. If Captain America the intern could do it, anyone could.

You abandoned the interstate a few towns back, after your first close call with a news van. They almost ran you off the road before you lost them. It's been all back country highways and instinct since then – no GPS on your ride.

But, lately, you've started noticing a black sedan in the corner of your rear view mirror. Always just beyond the horizon, slipping in and out of sight. You try to convince yourself that you're paranoid, but it doesn't take. Once, at a rare stoplight, it comes close enough that you can make out a strange hood ornament, some silver shape about the size of a child's fist. The car keeps popping up, and wouldn't it make sense for someone like the FBI to locate you sooner or later? You paid for all the cheap motel rooms in cash, but there's still the triangulating of the cell signals.

So you speed up, trying to lose the phantom tail. And somehow you never can. So you slow down, trying to get a better look at them. And somehow you never do, they always remain just out of range, with just enough cushion to stay a ghost. If it is the FBI, you think, why wouldn't they just pull you in? Or are they running you to a roadblock, not wanting to turn this into a high speed chase?

You take a few turns at random, whipping into and out of them quickly, like a pro. You're getting off course this way, but it's worth it if you can get a few minutes alone and safe. After each sharp turn, you methodically examine the rearview mirror, each side mirror, and your blind spots.

Once you're thoroughly convinced that your machinations have left the black sedan in your dust, you pull into a rural neighborhood and start trolling for live ones.

It's with dark glasses and a *Marlins* baseball cap you bought for image reasons pulled down that you approach a farmer with a beat up old rust colored pick-up truck. The truck's a beaut, classic redneck high

living complete with tailgate and pro gun rights bumper stickers. There's even one of those Jesus fishes, though it's put on backwards.

You find Farmer John loading rocks from his field into the back of it and ask him what kind of mileage he gets on that thing, and if he'd ever consider selling. You even wave a wad of cash under his nose to accelerate the process, but this fails to impress him.

"Sorry pal, but I need her for my livelihood."

You wonder what's so special about a truck full of rocks. Then you ask him if he'd take your car in a straight up trade.

"Well, now, what kind of car did you say this is?"

But he already knows. You can tell by the way he eyed the chrome wheels and cherry red finish when you first pulled in. You saw the glint there. No man alive has never wanted to own a car like yours.

Still, there's the matter of the rocks.

"I need 'em, pal."

So you sweeten the offer. Your Corvette for his POS and three hundred dollars (you work him down from half a grand) for the bed full of rocks. He hands you the keys and you hand him yours and you're both off, each feeling like you've gotten the better end of the deal in some strange way.

For him, the perks are obvious. For you, it meant trading away one in your stable of dozens of fancy cars and some pocket change to save your campaign.

The truck drives about as well, or as poorly really, as you thought. It's no help that the weight of the rocks acts as a ballast, making it so you have to stomp the gas pedal down until it squeaks just to get up to fifty-five. At one point, you become so frustrated that you pull off at a rest stop and start heaving the heavy chunks of igneous and metamorphic out in frenzied tosses. You dig out about a third of the pile before you stop, panting heavily, brow damp with sweat. Then you climb right back into that hunk of junk, grimace at its throaty start up and take her back out to the highway. You smirk when you push her to sixty, taking any small victory where you can get it.

Soon enough, your pain is looking to have passed. You cross over the state line into Arizona, full of relief and jubilation. Never in all of your

travels on the campaign has any state name offered you so much sweet relief.

And then you see it, the horror of it curving back into your peripheral vision. A black sedan. It can't be the same one, you tell yourself; it has to be some freaky coincidence. But there's the hood ornament again, gleaming silver, and this time you can make it out. It's an R. It seems strange, but even if it's the same car, even if, then the driver is surely still just looking for your cherry red Corvette, not giving half a glance over to this rickety farm truck with a small mountain of rocks still in the back. And yet, the foot that'd grown lax on the gas pedal starts to feel heavier and your new truck wheezes hard as you push her for all she's got. To your dismay, she hasn't got any more than she had before, and the black sedan creeps closer.

And then a second black sedan moves into view. The same ornament protruding from its hood. And a third black sedan. And a fourth. You're trying to con yourself into believing you can outpace them when one merges on to the highway up in front of you, and there's no more denying that you're fucked.

Checking the other side of the split highway for openings – and there are many with so few people out under the high sun in this rural part of the country – you swerve into the grassy divide. You're still topping fifty when your tires eat dirt and you're praying to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit that you won't roll, but the truck stays up, flipping on two wheels for only the briefest of seconds, and you manage to swerve between the road and the shoulder until you get the truck straightens out and you're headed safely in the opposite direction blowing a black gust of smoke from its tailpipe.

A few miles later, there's no sign of the army of black sedans and you think you must be completely losing your shit. Maybe that last encounter was more than paranoia, maybe it was a full blown hallucination, brought on by sleep deprivation, or the stress of this entire situation and the feeling of your secure, privileged life slipping away.

You think back to your office and Captain America the intern. You think back to your financial advisor and your conversation with him. According to all of these sources, Updown is still alive. Are you imagining these black sedans? Grown bored with all the mundane and dreary

citizenry you've met on the campaign trail, you've fabricated this entire ordeal to fulfill some twisted need for adventure? But as your heart pounds in your chest, you believe it's real. You know it's real. So what are these black sedans all about?

Are they sent by Updown himself, elaborate bodyguards funded by the monies invested by shortsighted fools like you? Or are they sent for him, like the sniper you can swear you saw claim his life?

It seems time for you to speak to the man, to announce your arrival, whether it means telling him to call off the hounds, or warning him that you're coming and bringing Hell at your heels. Scanning your mirrors again, just to reassure yourself that your trail is gone, you pull off the nearest exit. Parked along a random side street, you shuffle through your papers until you find a listing for Updown's company. You dial the number there and after one ring, you hear the heavy breath of, presumably, Nicholas Updown himself.

"Nicholas Updown, it's urgent I speak with you," you say.

He's surprised, doesn't recognize your voice.

"What? Who is this, what's this about?"

You adjust your rear view mirror, unsure of how to say this.

"This is going to sound strange, Professor Updown, but just a few days ago, I saw you die."

Before Updown can respond, you see it, coming behind you, a nightmare of a reflection. Like a tide of black water. Like a murder of ravens. You flip the phone shut and try to start the engine of the truck. But when you look up, it's too late. They're on all sides of you, the black sedans. The cars have you sealed in completely, not a gap half as wide as your truck anywhere around. They stop, engines purring around you, like you're buried in a sea of grinning cats. What do they want with you? You're tempted to leave the truck, to take off on foot, but there's nowhere to run. You search the glove compartment for something to use as a weapon. If you can get to the trunk bed, maybe you can heave a rock or two, slow them down.

In unison, what must be forty or more driver's side doors crack open. Together like that, it sounds like a fault line grinding. But all you notice is all the black when they emerge. Black suit jackets, black pants, polished black boots, black ties, black fedoras, black wrap around

sunglasses. They swarm in on all sides, the sheer number of them confusing and overwhelming your senses, making it difficult to pick out their individual faces beyond the fact that in that moment they all look alien and the same.

Your own driver's side door is yanked open. Cocky bastard, so used to power locks, you hadn't even thought to press down the little tab. Something tells you though, that this crowd would not have let a simple door lock slow them down. These men in black suits are everywhere, you feel like you're surfing in the crowd of them, like you're lost in a sandstorm of them, like they are an infestation of fire ants crawling up every one of your limbs. As exhausted as you are, as hard as your heart beats from fear and exhilaration, all it takes is a small blow on the head to knock you out. And as you go, you can swear that for some reason you thought you saw something beneath those fedoras and sunglasses. Something strange covering his eye – the thoughts are lost to you as you too go black.

*

The best Chet Bradley can do is watch from a distance, pulled over on the grass, sporting a pair of binoculars to zoom through the barricade of automobiles. Bradley's years on the force gave him plenty of detection and driving skills necessary to keep up with you. But even he hadn't seen this tide of sedans coming.

He trails them, at a safe distance, knowing that at any point one might veer off from the pack and knock into his own car, sending a strong message. But they seem single minded, concerned only with the delivery at hand, and Bradley remains safe for the moment.

They take you off the main highways, through many dusty, seemingly abandoned roads. Through bright sun and vacant desert. Cacti dot the landscape and buildings seem non-existent after a while. There is only Bradley and the sedans.

And then he sees it, blending seamlessly with the barren background. A large compound, as golden as sand, and invisible from any significant distance. It is here that the sedans park and the men in black

suits drag your limp body out. It is here that Bradley waits, pulsating with curiosity, but too smart or too scared to follow.

*

When you wake up, the migraine is a bitch, like marbles rolling around under your skull, bumping up against your brain. You're strapped down to a wooden chair with bungee cords and in a darkened room you can barely make out the figures of three or four of the men in black suits. You still have yet to get a clean look at one of their faces.

Clearly they aren't the press or the FBI. You've never heard of either treating their subjects exactly like this. Even if the FBI suspected you of some greater crime than giving Ted an ulcer, they have slightly more polished procedures. Which means these guys must be something much, much worse.

God, what a fucking tool you are. You can't believe what you've gotten yourself into. Sacrificing campaign positioning to get to the bottom of this mess is one thing, but now you've gone and put your life at risk. Your campaign won't be much without its candidate. Cursing yourself, you decide that you should have never left the sight of your security detail. A man like you, not just for your notoriety, but also your own personal finances, is a prime target for abduction. Terrorist groups can snatch a guy like you up knowing your family will pay, and use it as an efficient means of financing their latest holy wars in this country or across the world.

You're full of questions for your captors, actually. Full of slick talk and pleas. Not that you're one to negotiate with terrorists, but if it means getting out of their in one piece, you're willing to tell them whatever they want to hear. Too bad that a tight cloth gag makes it hard to even breathe.

And then you hear a voice breaking into the room.

"God dammit, I thought I told you not to hurt him?"

The voice sounds familiar. You might be able to place it, were you more coherent.

"It was just a small bump on the head, Sir."

And that one, sounds familiar too. Could it be?

“And why the hell is he tied up? Did I authorize that?”

“He’s considered a flight risk, Sir.”

It is. You recognize the voice. But you don’t understand it.

“Enough of this bullshit, I’m going down to talk to him.”

It’s Ted. One of them is Ted. But the other one? You’re still trying to place him.

“Sir, is that really advisable?”

Shut the hell up, Ted. What are you saying, you little cocksucker? If it really is Ted, why all this cloak and dagger? You’d like to believe that his involvement means you’re safe and secure, but knowing how fake Ted can be at times, you’re not ready to jump to that conclusion just yet. For all you know, he’s some sort of extremist operative. Or just an opportunist who saw a chance to make a buck.

“Don’t talk to me about advisable, Ted. I didn’t come back here for a tourist jaunt.”

“No, Sir, I realize it’s important to save the campaign, but do you really have to talk to him personally? Doesn’t that break some sort of rule or something?”

And then, the way he says it, what he says next, well, you finally start to realize who he must be. You realize it, but do you believe it?

“I make my own rules, Ted. I’m going in.”

The footsteps echo as you try to piece it together. It can’t be. It can’t be. What you’re thinking doesn’t make a damn bit of sense. And then the lights flip on, blinding you for a second. And when the haze clears there it is, everything you can’t believe.

“The corpse you saw,” he says, “Is Nicholas Updown but isn’t. Though that’s all I can tell you about that at the moment.”

As you stare into his face, your face, though, you’ve forgotten about Nicholas Updown for a moment. For the man you’re looking at *is you*. Maybe not as you looked in the car’s vanity mirror a few hours ago, but you nonetheless. You see a few streaks of grey you haven’t spotted before, maybe a deeper set of crow’s feet.

Someone removes your gag, and couldn’t have had better timing.

“You … you’re me?”

“That’s right,” you tell yourself.

“Rip Donner?”

You smile down at yourself.

“It’s President Rip Donner, actually. But Rip is fine. I mean if you can’t be casual with yourself, who can you be casual with, right?”

You start laughing, but notice you’re not laughing along and stop short. As for you, you’re speechless.

“They were right,” you muse to yourself as they untie you, “Even the second time around, it’s pretty fucking surreal.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

KAIROS

Nicholas Updown listens to the silence emitting from his cell phone. Tommy, standing behind him, places a thick hand on his shoulder. The mass of presumed exotic matter swirls red in its hole a few feet away.

“Do you see now, how this is a miracle?”

Tommy studies his brother’s face, unused to how age has contorted its emotional responses. His memories of Nicholas are of rage and bitterness and defiance; this version, looking so vulnerable, so confused, disarms him.

“Are you all right, Nick?” Tommy has the voice of a man who has heard a thousand sins confessed. The voice of a man who has seen guilt and fear and the other burdens of humankind. This voice implores Nicholas Updown to unburden himself, to free his soul of the entire, bizarre situation he has fallen into.

But the old scars between his brother and he run too deep for that. Nearby, the red mass pops and crackles with static notes. The brothers stare at it, losing themselves in it like a strange hearth. Its swirls draw them in, as if they are extensions of their own past.

Nicholas can’t help but remember those days in the Church. His back slumping on the unforgiving wooden pew, his eyes blurring over the thick language of the Biblical testaments, so unlike scientific writing that he felt a keen knack for, and Tommy, of course, Father Thomas, face red from exasperation, hands waving and fists pumping as he proclaimed the presence of an angry God. Nicholas can still see the faces of the congregation as they looked back then, some of the older folks nodding occasionally with respect, some clear-eyed schoolboys and girls seeming to take him seriously, but just as many in dazes or dozes, giggling with their siblings, young couples cozying and rolling their eyes not so secretively. To Nicholas, Tommy then was a steam engine in a jet engine era, all puff and pretense and no place in a modern world.

To Nicholas, Tommy now is a killer. He is a man who took away the last scraps of his home. Who turned his back on Nicholas for a greater Master, the Man Upstairs, who was so much more important than looking in on a younger brother.

“And now you give a shit?” He finds himself speaking aloud.

Tommy’s mouth knots up. His eyes blink, perhaps too hard, and he turns away.

“Of course I do. What do you want me to say?”

“I’m not a member of your Goddamn parish—”

“Nick, I wish you wouldn’t—”

“Don’t call me Nick.”

So they stand in silence, skulking to either side of the red wonder, placing it between themselves like a battle line drawn in the sand.

*

When Edgar Unum awoke, he found himself staring at the flapping nylon seams of a white teepee. It was wide enough for him and about four others his size to stand side by side and he was lying in it, his feet poking out into the blazing summer heat. He blinked and tried to raise his head, but strong hands forced him down.

“Where am I?” he asked.

A pretty brunette in nurse’s scrubs flashed Edgar a broad smile.

“Welcome to Forever Life,” she said.

The attendants held Unum down and insisted he sleep for a few more hours, but when he next woke, he urged them to recognize the return of his physical strength.

“Just a little heat exhaustion,” he insisted to the doctor, imploring for his release from the medical tent.

Minutes later, he was outside, and saw for the first time that the white tent was one of many, of all colors and shapes and sizes, large, small, round, pointed, camouflage green and royal purple. The tents were assembled haphazardly and their placement had no discernable pattern. Though the arrangement did allow a somewhat large open circle in the middle where portable tables had been snapped together and piled with disposable dinnerware and cheap fare.

At the solar cell coffee machine, Unum chatted with two boys in their early teens chewing on peanut butter cookies. He noticed that, like everyone at Forever Life, these two wore white sweat pants and t-shirts, which in their case were irrevocably stained with grape punch and grass.

“I’m Edgar,” he said, offering a hand, which the boys each took in turn.

They introduced themselves as Chad and Tad and both seemed to smile a lot. But they never laughed. Unum wondered why he was noticing things like this and brought the conversation around to his line of interests.

“Well, so, clearly, I’m an outsider here. I was wondering if you kids could tell me a thing or two.”

Chad folded his now empty paper plate in half.

“What do you wanna know?”

Unum stirred his coffee, internally lamenting a lack of sugar or cream.

“Just what is Forever Life all about?”

Tad’s smile grew wider.

“Just what it says, dudes. All about living forever.”

Unum took a sip of the coffee. It was bitter and lukewarm, but he choked it down.

“And how do you live forever?”

Chad and Tad exchanged looks, and Chad parted his lips to respond, when a woman emerged from a red tent behind them, dressed in the same white sweatpants t-shirt combo.

“Boys, come in here! You know better than to chat with outsiders!”

They ran off, tossing plates into a bin beside the table as they went. Unum jumped a bit, startled as a man, also in white, but this time wearing strange hat muscled up behind him.

“Yes, dealing with outsiders is my job.”

The hat, Unum realized, was made from the same material as a tennis ball, was basically the skin of a very large tennis ball made to fit a man’s head.

“And you are?”

A smile sprouted with game show host suddenness.

“Why, a guest ambassador, of course!”

Unum set his coffee down, abandoning it for the moment.

“Then maybe you can tell me where I can find Lillian Lazarus?”

The guest ambassador, whose nametag read *Mark*, squeezed Edgar’s shoulder, maybe just a little bit too hard. His smile remained unchanged.

“Now that’s one lady no one sees.”

*

“All right, so, this is definitely a phenomenon, Tommy, this thing you found, but I’m convinced it’s some sort of exotic matter, something brought to this planet from … well from some sort of unusual cosmic *event*, a … call it a bubble. It’s hard to explain, really, but I’ve read about this type of thing, theories about things like this, about the universe wanting to be more symmetrical. Kind of like things always want to take the path of least resistance, that kind of thing. Kind of a natural law. So, anyway, going on this natural law, this bubble event horizon thing might exist in some corner of the universe, containing an alternate reality that would help make this universe more symmetrical by unleashing material that did not follow the same laws of physics as we know here in *our* reality. Material like this red crazy swirling cloud over here. It’s matter that doesn’t follow normal rules; exotic matter, that acts differently – just how differently I don’t know, but I think there’s a chance here, a chance, Tommy, that I can, that I *will*, exploit it for the project I’ve been working on.”

Tommy coughs.

He raises an eyebrow.

“You just can’t accept that there might be such a thing as a miracle, can you?”

Nicholas grabs a clump of snow and grass and dirt and chucks it at his brother.

“God dammit!”

“Nicholas!”

The clump pauses midair between the brothers, then flies back at Nicholas, repelled by the energy swirling below it. Nicholas bends his neck, ducking the clump.

“So it wasn’t just me,” he’s talking to himself now, “It happens with everything that enters its gravitational pull. Clearly this is some sort of negative mass matter, there’s just no denying it given these strange properties.”

The presumed negative mass exotic matter itself seemed rooted to the meteorite somehow, he observed, and that was locked deeply under the hard winter ground, which explained why the matter’s natural repulsion to positive mass matter didn’t send it blasting back into the atmosphere from whence it came.

Tommy waves his hands.

“What about my arthritis? Are you going to explain that away with scientific mumbo jumbo too?”

Nicholas holds the clump and thrusts it in his brother’s direction.

“Layman’s terms, then. The red cloud was repelled by this handful of mud here, but since the red cloud seems stuck at the spot it’s in, and since it’s a much larger object than the mud, the mud ended up being knocked back as a product of the reaction.”

Tommy stands, pointing to the crucifix, cheeks billowing like the days on the pulpit locked in Nicholas’ memory.

“Jesus Christ healed me with this! He sent this rock … this … this *meteorite* from the Heavens as a reminder of God’s glory and His might.”

Nicholas stands as well, brushing snow and dirt off his jeans.

“You’re right about the might of a God, Tommy, but it’s not Jesus Christ, it’s you and me that have it in our hands now.”

*

So, Edgar Unum settled in. What other choice did he have? There was no returning to the SCG now. No, he had started fancying himself as an investigative reporter, and there was no undoing that. Besides, if he was right, the obits biz had become obsolete anyhow.

The initiation into Forever Life wasn’t as scary as you might think. Unum had to hand over his wallet and his two ID rings and what basically amounted to all of his worldly possessions beyond his remaining rings and the clothes on his back. But other than that and a few memorized chants about the sacredness of life in the candlelit circle between the tents one

night, there was nothing at all to joining the organization. If you had some cash on you and you supported everyone's right to live, you were in. The ambassadors seemed eager to expand membership, if anything.

In fact, the only aspect of the entire thing that people seemed to want to make difficult was Lillian Lazarus. The day he arrived must have been a fluke, because he hadn't seen her outside since. She was said to spend the majority of her time in a large RV, painted a gleaming white and kept spot free by a personal staff numbering close to thirty. That staff included a security detail armed with large biceps and very unfriendly looking baseball bats. As eager as Unum was to talk to head honcho, one look at the dragon tattoo streaking up the arm of one of these ever vigilant guards was enough to curb his enthusiasm for the moment.

Instead, he learned about Lillian's organization. And the facts kept coming. Membership was estimated to be in the low hundreds and growing. It was rare for Lillian's RV to be camped as it was now, as she was more often than not jetting off to various locations the rank and file weren't privy to. There was a clear hierarchy among the members of Forever Life. There was Lillian Lazarus, there was her support staff, there were the fuzzy green headed Ambassadors (in charge of the recruitment and initiation process) and there was everyone else. Rules were few but the few there were had great emphasis placed on them. Ambassadors attended to all guests. Support staff dealt with all security issues, but rank and file must go through Ambassadors to address any concern. Even Ambassadors were discouraged from communicating with the support staff much, though. And they, in turn, were discouraged from talking with Lillian unless specifically called upon. No one was to leave the compound unless granted work leave, in which case the profits of their work were to be given back directly to the organization, or unless they were asked by an Ambassador to join a recruitment drive. Besides that, days were spent drinking coffee, eating simple meals, playing kickball or cards, or other activities much like that. The fields were well kempt and green and offered plenty of fresh air to run around in. Though the tents were sprouting up every day and constantly threatening to overwhelm the property lines, it had not gotten to the crisis point yet.

Above all else, members of Forever Life were asked to do two things. They were asked to use the available recycling bins for all their

waste, to, as one Ambassador put it, “reduce our carbon footprint” and they were asked to never harm another member in any way. It was unclear what happened to members who were found harming others. All Unum could gather is that they did not stay members of the community and did not stay on the compound long afterwards.

“So what do we get out of all of this?” Unum found himself asking one night at dinner with Chad and Tad.

“Besides the chance to further the cause of the noble sanctity of life?” their mother replied snarkily.

“We get to live forever!” Chad declared.

Tad smacked him on the arm.

“Dummy, everybody gets to live forever.”

Chad screwed his eyes at his brother in a disturbing face.

“Yeah, duh,” he said, “But we don’t have to wait so long to come back.”

This caught Unum’s attention.

“To come back from what?”

The brothers laughed at this.

“From dead, duh!” they said.

The first two months passed almost before he noticed. Unum volunteered to be part of the labor force on the compound and spent his time raking leaves or hand plowing fields of grain used to make the food on their communal table. It was one day, after the latter, that he was hiking up to the nearest tree to relieve himself, that he saw her again.

She was mere feet from the tree he’d chosen, conversing with a gaunt black fellow, dressed impeccably in an all white tuxedo doubtlessly made of silk. Rather, she was talking and he was holding a digi-ring nearby to make a holo transcript of the moment.

The security detail was not in sight. Perhaps she’d sent them off so she could enjoy the surroundings in peace? He crept up closer, keeping the giant tower of bark between her gaze and him. When he reached the tree, he hugged its massive trunk, pressing his face closer in hopes of making out her words.

Lillian’s hair was flowing freely in the warm sunlight of midday. Her skin looked soft and smooth and lightly freckled beneath a simple white ankle length summer dress. Unum saw her head turning and darted his

own back behind the trunk, breathing heavily. Thinking how close that was.

And then he felt the tip of the wooden bat against his back.

When he turned, the man with the dragon tattoo was behind him, not smiling a bit.

Edgar raised both hands, to indicate he would comply without struggle. The guard grunted, and motioned for him to come along, then.

Together, they walked out, into the clearing, where Lillian did smile, facing him.

“Ah,” she said her voice strong as a river, the voice of a leader, “Edgar Unum. I’m glad we’re finally meeting.”

*

“I’m not going to fight with you over your views, Nicholas. We don’t see eye to eye. Fine. I’ve made peace with that many years ago. So, I’m going to practice as I preach now. I’m going to thank the Lord for the gift He’s given me today.”

Nicholas is snapping pictures of the swirl on his cell phone camera, tuning in and out of his brother’s speech enough to slip in some snide remarks.

“The insurance money for the church?”

Nicholas’ phone flashes. Tommy grits his teeth.

“To thank Him that you’ve come back into my life. One of my many regrets in this world is the way I let you drift away from me after the passing of our parents and grandparents.”

Nicholas’ fingers grow still on the mobile’s keypad. A gurgle dies in his throat.

“What was that, Nicholas?”

He stares at Tommy, then flips the phone shut. Nicholas averts his eyes, pacing a few feet further from the exotic matter, so that he’s hidden behind the crimson tentacles.

“The way you say that. So casually. ‘The passing of our parents and grandparents.’”

Tommy handles his rosary beads.

“They’re in a better place, Nick.”

Nicholas turns back toward his brother, the effect elevating the levels of his voice even more.

“Like their death was part of a fucking checklist! You’re a damn monster, Tommy. They’re in the ground and you and I are in a worse place because they’re gone. Is there any other way to see it?”

The priest squeezes his fist around the beads, eyes shifting upwards, praying silently for guidance.

“I’m grateful for the years we shared with them.”

Nicholas starts pulling more wads of grass up and pitching them at the swirl, one by one, and watching them fire back around him on all sides, a slow motion energy cannon.

“I read once that a man doesn’t know his own mortality until his parents have died,” he says, “Died and left him.”

Tommy winces as each clump flies close.

“That’s what it’s all about for you, isn’t it? Yourself. Your wants. Your life.”

Nicholas doesn’t look at his brother. He’s staring into the swirl, gleefully losing himself in it.

“Isn’t that how human beings are wired, Tommy? To look out for ourselves? To survive?”

Tommy rolls his rosary beads up into the pocket of his robe and inhales sharply.

“Sometimes to survive, brother, we must humble ourselves. We must resign ourselves to what this life is, to its fleeting nature. And we must resign ourselves from life as well.”

Nicholas is firing clumps with increased fury. The ground below him is torn up like fish flesh in the jaws of a hungry alligator.

“Forget the priesthood, Tommy, you could have a nice little career as one of those assisted suicide doctors.”

Tommy is yelling now.

“There’s a difference between accepting death as a natural part of life and killing yourself!”

Nicholas pants, hands growing raw from scooping shards of ice and stones with the mud and grass. Cuts have emerged on his knuckles, painting the snow with drops of his blood.

“It’s all giving up. Just one sometimes takes longer than the other.”

Tommy begins circling his miracle, moving toward his sibling.

“Is that why you’re so angry? Because you think our parents quit on you? You think they abandoned us?”

Updown pauses, leaning down on one palm to catch his breath.

“No, you’re the quitter, Tommy. You stopped living for survival when you started living for Jesus. Our parents, the way they went …”

To Tommy, growing nearer, Nicholas looks like a defensive lineman, feral breathing, three point stance.

“At least they fucking fought. They just had no way out.”

Tommy shakes his head, blush deepening along his jaw, like a disappointed schoolmaster.

“But that’s just it – they *did* find a way out. Out of all the suffering and misery and loneliness in this world. They found that way through Jesus Christ, the same way I have.”

Tommy has circled the crash site now. Is close to the heaving form of his brother. He wants to put an arm around him, to scrape away the pains of the past with human touch. But he is afraid of how Nicholas might respond. Nicholas pants, but there is a cold stillness in his voice.

“How can humankind find peace when the specter of death hangs over all we do?”

“By accepting it.”

Tommy wipes his brow. Despite the wintry weather, this conversation has sent warm blood churning through his body.

“Jesus Christ conquers all death, Nick.”

Nicholas’ fingers find a jagged stone jutting from the Earth. He picks at it.

“Then why isn’t he here to tell us about it?”

Tommy stands behind his brother, not wanting to look at him anymore, not wanting to look at his self-proclaimed miracle, content to just stare at the mostly bare parking lot, where Nicholas parked his dark purple four door car a few hours ago. It tells Tommy a lot about his unknown brother. He is practical, economical, but not without style. He rates safety over flash, and wants a family of his own.

“He’s here, Nick. He’s all around us.”

“That’s worse than a transparent eyeball.”

Nick had always hated reading Emerson in college. Just some hack on hallucinogens in the woods wasting time while men of thought and measurement were trying to unlock the real secrets of the universe.

“Your study in science should be enough to show you there are things in this world that cannot be explained.”

Just as Tommy could hardly explain his brother’s presence after all this time, here, with him, among the ruins of the home they once shared. To Tommy, this is just as much a miracle as what the meteorite wrought.

“Not *cannot*. Just have not. I even have explanations for your ‘miracle,’ I just haven’t analyzed them in a lab yet.”

“That *miracle* is from God.”

Nicholas’ searching fingers have found the loose spot in the dirt and yank the stone free.

“I don’t care what it is. I’m making it mine and soon I won’t have to worry about God or death or any of that.”

Tommy winces, the pains of this conversation seeming to find a focal point in his arm.

“What are you planning, Nicholas. What do you keep referring to?”

Nicholas rotates the jagged stone in his palm, running his fingers over the uneven edges.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Under his robes, Tommy’s sweat is growing hot and urgent. His armpits tingle with an itchy sensation that would be more irritating if not for the throb in his arm making the rest of his body feel light.

“Try me, brother.”

“A device. A device that will let me go back and make it all right. That will let me snatch them from the jaws of death.”

Nicholas fires the stone at the swirl.

“A time machine? You’re talking about a time machine?”

The stone collides with his brother’s miracle, then reverses direction and fires back at its thrower with twice the velocity.

“Yes.”

Just as the stone reaches him, Nicholas slides out of the way, feet collapsing and his torso diving for the ground.

Tommy does his best to avoid Nicholas' flying body, but ends up with his brother's shoulders driving into his knees, collapsing the old Priest with greater force. His mind is lost in the argument, though.

"But why defy God?"

On the ground, Tommy's eyes are squeezed shut, tears burning through his pain.

"Why not let Him guide your hand," he winces, "Let Him show you whether this device of yours is part of His plan or an abomination?"

Nicholas, on his face, speaks into the snow.

"I don't believe in God anymore, brother."

The air around Tommy seems to be filling up his head like a balloon.

"Because you've closed your heart to Him, Nicholas. Have you talked to Him?"

Nicholas, groans on to his side, too old for this type of physical activity, does not look at his brother, locking his eyes on the swirl instead.

"How, Tommy, how? Maybe when you're a priest you get to have God on speed dial, but that's not how it works for regular guys like me."

Everything's feeling light and airy for Tommy now. Everything, but he forces his mind to stay in the moment. He sits up.

"Kairos. There's something Catholics call Kairos. It's the Greek word for time."

Nicholas' breathing starts to even out.

"Chronos is Greek for time."

"No, Chronos is the Greek word for *sequential* time, for time that passes second after second, in an objective, qualitative way. Kind of like a scientific version of time."

Nicholas sits up as well, rubbing his aching shoulders.

"Time is a fourth dimensional measurement of reality, another way to perceive and calculate the world we exist in. There's no getting around it with different words from dead languages, that's *exactly* what time is."

"Kairos is ... is God's time."

Updown sighs as his brother expounds the thought.

"It's qual ... qualitative. Subjective. N ... not limited by sequential nature or laws of physics. Greeks saw it as moments in life you seize. Make your own."

Nicholas wipes the snow and damp knuckle blood from the surface of his cell phone and checks the time.

“If I wanted a speech on Carpe Diem, I could read self-help books.”

“More than living … for the moment, Nick. Greeks saw time as a runner who never stops. Had long hair flowing on forehead and bald in the back. If you saw him coming, you were strong and heroic and wise enough, you could grab his hair and experience Kairos.”

Nicholas is scrolling through his snapshots of the exotic matter.

“And if you missed, you were stuck staring at the back of an ugly bald scalp?”

“Ye …yes.”

Nicholas rolls his eyes.

“So this is different than seizing the day how?”

“Be … because. Is different. Kairos comes with a … crisis. Like death. Is danger and opportunity both.”

He thinks of his grandfather. That last sigh, the fleeing of life from his body transforming his face from this warm, animate object to this cold scrap of leather. The delicate, bony old hand curling limp. Of how his grandmother must have felt, alone in her hospital room, her heartbeat slowing to nothing. He thought of their parents.

“So why do you want to yank the hair?”

“Chinese character for … for crisis has two meanings. Danger and oppo … oppo … chance. Things of the past abandon … leave us, we can face a future danger or take chance to life affirm. Can do good, make good, with God during … in crisis. Turn crisis to Kairos. To God’s time.

Nicholas deletes some overflow photos of Elizabeth from his phone and uses the extra space to start snapping more of the swirl.

“Guess what? I don’t care. I don’t care. I don’t care.”

His hand tightens around the phone.

“Tell me this, Tom. God is supposed to be eternal. Is supposed to exist outside of any constraints of space or time, to perceive it all and act on it all as if in a single instant, right?”

He doesn’t await a response, but presses on.

“Yet we’re forced to live in this sequential nightmare?”

Nicholas spits on the ground. Isn’t that great.

“*Of course* it’s not our place to complain about that, is it? Wouldn’t be *our place*. Well, your God, if He does exist, is a tyrant. The only time He seems willing to share is this bullshit, feel good Kairos? No thanks, Tommy. Tyrants like that ought to be overthrown.”

Nicholas flips the phone shut again and turns to his brother. Tommy lays in a heap, not moving, not breathing. Nicholas Updown stares at the snow, the ground, his brother, the swirl pushed suddenly into the corner of his mind.

But, before he can cry out, before he can run and yell and beat upon the chest of a corpse, I am there to tell him. I am there, appearing from nowhere behind him, My arms around the scientist, My hood dark over My face.

“It was a heart attack,” I say, holding him back, “A long time coming.”

He struggles to get free, to go to Tommy, but My grip holds firm. He fights against Me, but My grasp is too strong, I came too prepared for this moment, and he is too overwhelmed.

“He’s dead?”

The question lingers in the air as Nicholas’ eyes fill.

“It’s time your work began anyway,” I say. And soon I would have him back in his car, back to Arizona with a sample of the exotic matter, back to use the proper equipment to analyze this abnormality. Soon, I would have him there, but for the moment, I let him weep.

“He’s dead,” Nicholas says.

“I will provide what help I am able to,” I say. “You may call Me Abraham.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CHRISTOPHER LINCOLN PARADOX

Updown sits in his laboratory peering up at his computer monitors, which climb the wall and loom above him with all the dark glory of some black crag. His look is quizzical. A few hours have passed since his return from Royal Oak, Michigan, where even now Catholics are laying a Pastor to rest. I have seen to filling Nicholas' days with other matters, though, having brought samples of Tommy's "miracle" meteor back with us and running an array of tests on them. The property, itself, was willed to Nicholas, and a team of construction workers is building a high security electric fence around the premises in our stead. The good Catholic community of Royal Oak will have to find somewhere else to worship.

Updown's perplexing look is connected to the tests, though. Examining the data we've collected on the phenomenon, Updown's consternation grows. As a scientist, he is now far out of his depth. He feels certain he's gotten his hand on before now completely theoretical negative mass matter, and he realizes that such matter may have potential for use in time travel, but he just can't figure out how to connect the dots. Frustrated, he clicks his web browser away and swivels his chair. In lieu of any moments of divine inspiration, he turns to Me.

"So, you call yourself my assistant. Shouldn't it be the other way around? You're the one with all the secrets here, right?"

I keep My distance from Updown, standing behind a lab table, hood buried in a microscope, where I examine a grain of the meteor rock mineral placed on a slide. When I answer, I do My best to put strains of humility in My voice.

"I am not the discoverer of time travel, Nicholas Updown, you are."

Updown flips through a file folder on his desktop, then tosses the folder on to the floor.

"Well I'm not exactly feeling like the genius you say I am," he says, "And if you're really from the future, you must know what this is all about. How this whole thing works. Just what is this thing I'm trying to make here? Is it a tachyon generator, for instance?"

I calmly take notes from the slide. I note a lack of crystal structure, a pitted surface absent of cleavage, and black opaque color with dull luster, all properties of Tektite rocks, meaning the likely composition was silica glass with some heavy metal impurities, such as iron or magnesium.

“I believe the name you chose for your project is The God Machine, Nicholas. So I would gather you are attempting to invent God. But, I suppose only you could say for certain.”

Updown buries his head in his hands.

“You’re the one from the future! You *would gather* that’s what I’m trying to do? Hell, man, you tell me. You knew all about this exotic matter and the meteorite and the church and Tommy. You knew it was all coming and you watched as it did. And then there’s that hood of yours. You’re so damn secretive about everything, even your face. Do you have a hideous scar under there? What’s wrong with letting me in on things? Or, fine, if you don’t want to give it all away, how about at least a hint to send me on my way?”

Tektites are still poorly understood as a grouping of rocks. Geologists speculate that the irregular heat and pressure involved with a meteorite’s impact give Tektites their unusual features, such as the lack of crystallization.

I look up from the microscope and Updown is staring at Me, waiting for an answer.

“I will not say much, Nicholas Updown, but I will say this. I am from the future and I know a great deal, and it is dangerous for Me to tell you too much of it. I know more of your past, present, and future than you could possibly know. What I revealed to you of your brother’s church and your brother and even the meteorite were nothing you would not have found out yourself. I have done nothing to directly interfere with your timestream and will not divulge any knowledge to you that would do so. Were I to reveal the path to time travel to you instead of letting you be its origin, it would doubtlessly create a temporal paradox.”

Yes, a paradox. I can see from your eyes that you are unfamiliar with the term, which surprises Me, considering what an intelligent man I know you to be. Perhaps this situation is merely overwhelming to you, what with the unraveling of My narrative such as it is. Still, I will remain patient.

A paradox is the setting of two equally powerful truths at cross purposes and rendering both impossible as a consequence. The most famous as far as our purposes here are concerned is known as the Grandfather paradox. Simply put, according to this notion, were a man to travel into the past and kill his own grandfather before the conception of one of his parents, a paradox would be created. After all, if the man's mother or father was never born, then the man himself could never be born, and then the man himself could never have traveled back to the past and killed his grandfather. The truth that the man was born through the lineage of his grandfather and the truth that the man killed his grandfather before his grandfather created this lineage are equally compelling and cancel each other out.

So how to resolve things? Theorists offer three distinct suggestions. The first theory holds that a paradox may never occur to begin with – fate blocks the free will of humankind when necessary to cement the integrity of the timestream. Many even postulate that this is evidence enough that time travel is impossible. Clearly, we know now that this much is untrue. As for the idea of predestination of events, perhaps there is something to it, and it would certainly echo My occasional feelings that My hand is directed by fate itself. Under this theory, when the man attempted to kill his own grandfather his attempts would be blocked at every turn, until he either quit trying or until his parent was conceived, making his efforts moot. Often fate chooses to block the man's attempts by killing him, thus offering an appropriate award for his hubris.

The second theory, however, holds that a paradox by its very existence creates an alternate time stream, which forks from the original like a river, at the very moment of a paradoxical event. This theory basically concedes to the inevitability of paradoxes occurring as a result of time travel, no matter how hard the traveler attempted to avoid creating them. Under this theory, the traveler to the past would have no delays in assassinating his grandfather, as the elder man would not be his true grandfather, but his alternate reality grandfather at that point, and a completely separate universe would burst from the moment in which the man traveling to the past never existed due to his actions, but the assassin himself continued existing due to the fact that his origins lay within the

first reality. So the man would have wiped an alternate version of himself out of existence by killing an alternate version of his grandfather. His murderous actions would have caused him to travel between dimensions. Many believers in this second concept also hold that an infinite number of timestreams exist in an infinite number of realities, each representing a universe where a single different choice was made, with every possible choice represented.

The final theory is decidedly more apocalyptic, espousing that irresolvable paradoxes would rip apart the very fabric of space and time, spiraling the universe into either some nameless, unimaginable chaos, or into altogether complete nonexistence. This one is a favorite among writers in movies of science fiction.

Though unsure which of these are the answer to how a paradox truly operates, or whether more than one version is true depending on the circumstances, I take it as one of My many duties to prevent clear paradoxes whenever possible. In fact, in mere moments, I will face such a threat from a revolutionary named Christopher Lincoln.

*

“How did you know my name?” Edgar Unum asked this as Lillian and he sat side by side with their backs against the wide trunk of a three hundred-year-old oak. She handed him a dainty white porcelain cup of hot tea, passed over from her hovering assistant.

“I know everyone’s name,” she said. Lillian had a gentle grace about her. She smiled warmly and the wind rippled her hair over her face in waves. “This is Tacy. I know him. I know every person on this land.”

Tacy, her assistant nodded with a flourish.

Edgar sipped the tea and relaxed a bit. She had just been reading up on the recent member initiation reports.

“So, sorry for intruding on you like this. But maybe it was for the best. You said you were hoping to talk with me?”

Lillian curled the hair back behind her ear. Each gesture she made was soft yet purposeful.

“Yes, I said that.”

Edgar forced himself to look away, toward the open field, where stalks of grass as high as his thighs swayed lazily. A woman like Lillian didn't become the leader of a group like this by giving everything away. Still, he came here to be a journalist.

"I'm dying to know," he said. "What made you start Forever Life?"

Lillian reached forward, her fingers splitting Edgar's hair and rubbing against his scalp.

"That, dear Edgar, is a secret. But I'm willing to tell you."

Edgar closed his eyes, exhaling slowly, as her fingers massaged at the back of his head.

"I would really appreciate that."

Lillian pulled her hand away and then he felt her warm breath near his ear.

"But I need you to do me a favor, Edgar. Will you do me a favor?"

Even behind his eyelids, Edgar could see her smile, the rosy blush on her proud cheekbones, the freckles on her shoulders.

"Yes," he said. "I will do whatever I can, of course."

So she began her story, the words flowing over Edgar like the tides. In her voice, the events became a timeless legend, an origin myth as powerful as that of the Garden of Eden.

"I was born a long, long time ago, Edgar, and grew up in the later part of the twentieth century, more than 100 years before today. My life was simple, I had a job, I had friends, I kept in touch with my family. I walked through life, enjoying it just enough for it to be worthwhile, but never really pushing for more.

"Then, one day, I died."

Edgar blinked his eyes open. Lillian was relaxing against the tree, the steam from her ceramic mug evaporating over her chin.

"I died in a fire. Or I should have. I was trapped under burning rubble, the oxygen had left my body, I was poised to asphyxiate or worse. And then, suddenly, I awoke, in another era, in another time – this time. It was strange and frightening and I struggled to find my place. Then I discovered there were others like me. Others displaced from time, others who had cheated death and traveled from there to here and now. So far as I can tell, I am the first. Perhaps the Savior took delight in the ironies of my last name, I don't know. But –"

“Wait, the Savior?”

Edgar cut in, not wanting her to skip past relevant plot points. This was a detail he had not read in the press clipping about her traveling to the future, and he was guessing it could explain much of the operations of Forever Life.

“Yes. Some call him a man. Some call him an angel. Some think it God Himself. But as I tell all those in this community, his identity is less important than what he has done for us.”

“Which is?”

Edgar pictured her beautiful pale yellow hair, now bobbing back and forth in the breeze, alit with terrible orange flames, withering and burning into black snakes.

“Given us life. Forever life. This savior clearly wants us to keep living, does not want death to be the end, but only the beginning. He was the one who saved me, was the one who saved us all, is the reason I brought this community together. So we could further his goals of life without end.”

Edgar felt his head dip down. How much did Lillian really know about him? Did only those who were rescued from death by this Savior fellow come and join Forever Life? What was the punishment for unwanted outsiders?

“Edgar,” Lillian edges closer to him. “I know you have not been saved. That you have not cheated death and traveled like many of us here. But that does not mean you are any less valuable to the family of Forever Life.”

He felt himself nodding, eager to have her continue, eager to hear how he could make a difference.

“As we expand our influence, as more of the saved join our number, and more like you see the value of what we have to offer, our enemies, too, grow in kind. Yes, enemies, Edgar, women and men with cold, black hearts who do not wish for humankind to conquer death. These are small in number, for now, and their rhetoric is mostly ill-defined. But one group, one mysterious group that I still know too little of, appears to have powers that perhaps can rival even those of the great Savior.”

Edgar gazed at Lillian once more.

“How could that be? How could they be that powerful?”

She strokes his cheek, lovingly.

“And what do they want, dear Edgar? This is what we must know. I know you are a reporter, my Edgar. I know where you came from and now I know where you must go for me. These people call themselves the Guardians. I need you to join them, to discover everything there is to discover about them, and then to help me, Edgar, help me decide what we must do about them.”

*

Updown is, at this moment, still in his chair, still arguing with Me about My purposes.

“You don’t sound like much in the way of an assistant, frankly.”

I gesture to the microscope, as if to show him the fruits of My labor.

“Though, perhaps, assistant was a poor choice of words, Professor Updown.”

He lifts the notebook where I have jotted My findings on the meteor slide and scans it over with casual interest. Nothing he couldn’t have done himself, given the time.

“Uh huh, and what would be a better one?”

I wander over to the computer monitors, sliding My feet. One screen shows the picture outside the large electronic garage style door in front of the building as broadcast by the newly installed security camera. A woman is approaching. As she gets closer, I identify her as Elizabeth. So beautiful and young.

“Historian, perhaps? Your work is of momentous importance to the future.”

Updown starts filling in the spaces between My notes with notes of his own.

“You would know, I suppose.” He lowers the notebook to the table. “We’re trying to create a God machine, right? So if you’re trying to create something, never mind the materials such as this exotic matter, first what are the necessary properties?”

Elizabeth’s pixilated image seems confused, unsure if there is a front door to this office, or how to get in. Apparently she does not spend

much time at the office. I press the button front of the monitor and the screen goes blank.

“Well, what are the properties of God? Were you to attempt transubstantiation and were unsatisfied with using cheap wine and old wafers that tasted like thin sawdust, what would you, a scientist, shoot for?”

Updown walks over to the computer bank and snaps on the monitor.

“Well, all powerful, all knowing, immortal and eternal, I guess, to start things off.”

The image of Elizabeth outside settles back into focus. The buzzer out front sounds as she’s finally located it. And then, behind the engrossed professor, a swirl of red smoke like wisps burst from the air, expand into a circle six feet in diameter and propel an intruder into the lab. When he is through, the vortex seems to suck all of the wisps back into a pinpoint of light, which blinks out of existence once again.

The man is tall, olive green eyes boiling with intensity, East Indian in complexion. He appears clean shaven, though most of his face is covered in a surgical mask. Track pants, a worn rock band t-shirt, and sneakers suggest he values comfort above all else. But what concerns Me most is the advanced version of a fifty caliber BMG handgun he points in our direction.

This weapon looks like the lovechild of a flashlight and a cannon. It perches in the intruder’s grasp like a coiled cobra, ready to strike. I am now all too familiar with the ability of that gun to shred internal organs.

This is because I yank Updown’s office chair out of the way with one geriatric push of My arm and leap in front of our attacker as a shot shakes the floorboards. A single bullet enters My belly and explodes out My back, leaving a hole the size of a softball in its wake. No longer equipped with a reasonable amount of intestines, I grapple desperately for survival. I pull My pair of rusty metal shears from the folds of My robes and plunge them six inches deep into our attacker’s throat.

As he gargles the taste of death in his mouth, I consider the immediacy of the situation. Had I missed the mark, you see, Nicholas Updown would have been slain before the creation of his machine, by a future killer using that same machine to do it, and a paradox might have

ripped apart our very reality. If, now, I do not find a way to save My Own life, another assassin might come in My absence and finish the work.

What I did not tell Updown is that I am much more than his Historian. I am the Protector of his very life. He is slumped against the computer bank, is slowly recovering from his shock enough to begin expressing the likelihood of My needing a visit to the emergency room. With no time to explain Myself, and knowing the fate of the universe rests in My hands once more, I hold My guts in with one hand and regretfully pinch a nerve on Updown's neck with the other, sending him into a harmless state of unconsciousness. Then I take to My hands and knees and tear apart the intruder's clothing, looking for identification.

I recognize the mark of an identification chip in his wrist and I scan it with a special ring on My finger, revealing this man's name and date of birth and any other biographical information I can digest in under a minute's time. This is Christopher Lincoln, a man from the future, and he must be stopped.

Knowing the amount of blood pouring from My guts has grown obscene, I reach for the other item found in his pocket, a fist-sized metal ball. Even after holding such a device so many times, it still most resembles a pool ball to Me, except with silver layers and grooves and a red glow emitting from the center and leaking out from various portholes along the surface. Without further hesitation, I press a green button atop the ball, no bigger than a bedtime mint, and the red glow explodes forth, forming a new portal beside the corpse.

I crawl into this. The scarlet wisps swirl around Me and absorb My body and I disappear from Nicholas Updown's world.

When I next see the light of day, I am decades into the future. I have also moved from Updown's laboratory, through space as well as time, to a rather innocuous looking maternity ward, where rows of bassinets lined with impersonal pink and blue baby bedding welcome Me, some empty, some filled with sleeping babes, some filled with screaming ones. Another, more mature scream awakens several of the sleeping babes as a young male orderly finds My sudden appearance disconcerting. But I turn My immediate attention to the tiny bed before Me, where a the soft, tiny blanket is pastel blue, and a miniscule brown hand grips at the edge, pulling it over his dimpled face. The child's lips purse, like a fish's,

and his heavy lids lift just the slightest bit in recognition of a visitor. A truly beautiful baby boy. This newborn considers Me carefully, neither crying nor cooing, as more orderlies near. The child is tired, he has had a busy birth day, seventeen hours of labor for his weary mother. Seconds before the orderlies descend upon Me, I act.

Though tempted to totally remove any threat through outright infanticide, a look at young Christopher Lincoln's angelic features proves too much. Instead, I take the baby fat of his right wrist between My thumb and forefinger, open the sharp edges of My shears around it, and snip down. I hear the slicing noise as fresh infant skin and tissue rip apart. Undeveloped bones snap like kindling before the pressure of the blades. As I repeat the action with his left wrist, young Christopher Lincoln's physical shock has subsided and his silence has turned to terror and wails that cannot be restrained.

I can be, however, and the first orderly to Me places his hand like a wrench tightening around My shoulder. My last image is of the twin stumps on the baby's arms spurting blood like tiny volcanoes, before My vision grows dark and a headache sears through Me. I feel My mind torn apart as if by a lightning bolt and when My retinas clear again a medical team has surrounded the babe, blocking My vision of his pitiable torment, and I am being carted away on a fast moving gurney.

Above Me, a robotic arm tries in vain to cauterize My wound, and doctors whisper about the inevitability of My demise. I know that this is wrong, that all did not work as I had hoped, or I would not still be here, in the future, with this wound, for Christopher Lincoln would never have come to shoot Me to begin with. As I search My mind, shaking loose the fuzz, I find the new memories there, bright and clear and indistinguishable from the others. Christopher Lincoln still came back, at the very same moment as before, still leapt into Updown's lab, gun held aloft. Only in My new recollection, his fists were cybernetic prosthetics, the 12 mm semi-automatic pistol was his new firearm of choice, and his aim was even more deadly accurate. In fact, as I look down, I realize My wound has shifted, from My gut to My chest, and the neat red hole makes Me realize that My efforts have, at best, merely hastened My death.

*

Edgar sat in a metal folding chair, one of a crowd of around a dozen facing a podium and waiting. Around him, unlikely men and women purported to be parts of this all-important gate keeping agency. They wore jeans and sweaters and track pants and over the counter camouflage and baseball caps. They were Caucasian and Asian and East Indian, several had earbuds in, listening to their favorite tunes and others shifted in their seats in unease. The man next to Edgar was in the latter group, his name tag reading "Chris." He was one of the East Indians, with dark hair and a grimace on his face. Edgar noticed he held a newspaper and wore black gloves on his hands like a killer.

It had not been easy for Edgar to get to this point. Several months had passed since the day he spent with Lillian chatting against that oak. Most of it had been spent getting acquainted with his new persona, that of Crispin March which, thanks to Tacy's ingenuity, came complete with the bogus ID chip implanted in his wrist. Crispin had a shining military record, had never voted for an Independent, and was a fan (according to his purchases over the years) in the newest version of Arena League football. Edgar portrayed him as a quiet, amicable type, interested in defending his nation and holding conservative, Christian views, though not without an open mind.

This was an interest meeting, they had told him. Though not without veterans in their midst, most of those around him were new recruits like he. Most were interested in, as the initial contact had put it, "defending national interests here and abroad."

Edgar, as Crispin, had joked and given that initial contact one of those extra firm handshakes men give other men when they want to show how tough they are, and after a slew of personal questions, he was given the time and location for this second meeting.

When he came in, many of the others were sitting there already and after Edgar-Crispin's early attempts to make small talk were rebuffed he too sat in silence. The most he got out of one woman, Mary, a new recruit like him, was that the leader was coming. According to Mary, no one really seemed to know the name of the leader or what exactly he was leading them in.

“All I know for sure,” skin headed Mary said, “Is that they call him the Lawman.”

*

With no time to worry about what the doctors see or do not see, I roll on to My back and press the green tab again, the portal opening beneath Me. When I finish My tumble on the other side, thirty-three years have passed and I am at Christopher Lincoln’s apartment. In his era, the wrist-implanted identification chips also record credit purchases. Lincoln had made his last such purchase this afternoon at three. It is noon now, and I hope to find his contraband time travel device in his dwelling while he is out to lunch.

I lie on the plush carpet of his living room, the holo wall broadcasting traditional Indian dancers throughout the room. Their transparent images shuffle and spin and step over My back as I bleed from My mouth, heart wheezing in My chest. A Christopher Lincoln, looking very much like the one who shot Me, and very little like a man gone to lunch, lays on his green memory foam couch in spandex boxer shorts, face handsome without the surgical mask, and smooth olive eyes shocked at My sudden interruption of his cinematic experience.

He flips off the couch, darting for the holster hanging from the basketball hoop affixed above the entryway to the hall. My hood falls away and I know he will have no mercy if he recognizes My face. I throw the shears through the five feet of air between us, and they stick in his lungs – a repairable enough wound with the medical technology in this era, but certainly an inconvenience for My antagonist.

Even this far in the future, time travel devices are very hard to come by. I have seen to that. Men like Christopher Lincoln do not usually have access to them and for very good reasons. On My hands and knees, I search madly for the device, wondering how he happened to procure it to begin with.

I know, of course, that he may not have obtained the device yet. That if he had, he might be storing it somewhere else for safety. I am partaking in a high stakes gamble, with My own life slipping away and still only a small part of what is at risk.

I scramble through his bedroom, bent over in My pain, My breaths growing fewer and weaker. Lincoln is breathing heavily himself, still on the ground in the living room. I see him, in the corner of My eyes, cybernetic hands plucking the shears from his side. He pulls himself up by the corner of the wall, one hand fumbling for the gun.

And then I see it, the small metal ball in plain view on Lincoln's pillow. He trains the gun on Me and I make for the device, snatching it up from its spot and bashing it against the concrete wall.

When My vision clears from the newest migraine, I realize I am speaking aloud.

"Well, what are the properties of God?" I say, feeling as though I am watching outside of Myself as I repeat these words. "Were you to attempt transubstantiation and were unsatisfied with using cheap wine and old wafers that tasted like thin sawdust, what would you, a scientist, shoot for?"

Updown walks over to the computer bank and snaps on the monitor.

"Well, all powerful, all knowing, immortal and eternal, I guess, to start things off."

I blink, and then My stomach clenches, as if ready to be fired on again. A phantom pain shivers through My heart. But when I glance over My body, I realize there are no signs of any blood or bullet wounds.

The image of Elizabeth outside settles into focus. The buzzer out front sounds as she's finally located it. Updown presses the com link to open a channel and speaks into it.

"I don't suppose you've brought lunch," he jokes.

Behind Updown, no portal emerges, and none will, at least not with Christopher Lincoln at the other end.

On the monitor, Elizabeth shuffles and looks up at the monitor shyly.

"Nick, we need to talk."

As for you, I know now you must wonder how it is, even after averting My paradox and resolving the Christopher Lincoln threat against the timestream, that I remember any of these events at all. Perhaps in the process of battling this threat, I created the parallel dimension I earlier discussed. I feel out of My depth with this issue, with no way to measure or to be sure. What I do know is that despite the logic that suggests to Me that, surely, when I recovered from My migraine and continued My

conversation with Updown that I should have no recollection of Christopher Lincoln ever being present in this era, for it now never happened for Updown or Myself, I recall the entire experience in vivid detail. It only did not happen because of Me, My actions were needed to prevent it, and I recall these actions as plainly as any other part of My life, though My body carries no scars from the experience. This is not the first such experience of this type for Me, nor is it the last. Though I can change the physical consequences by altering causality, I carry the burden of remembering each variant timestream that ceases to exist. I wear this stink of failure in every fold of My robes. For every paradox I have prevented, there are billions of memories no one else seems to retain. I alone know of these threats, and I alone guard against them.

As for Nicholas Updown, he lets in his wife, and she asks why he's not going to his brother's funeral, and if he can explain to her what's so much more important in this lab of his, and, from the timber of the conversation, I can see he has problems all his own.

WINDOW FOUR CONVERGENCES

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FAMILIAR FACES

You still can't believe you're face to face with yourself. Sitting in a back room in the compound, you admire the good taste that's gone into furniture and interior design. You and yourself recline on a sultan sectional sofa that redefines the word "luxury." The brown leather is soft and melts before your body like cream. Rich walnut flooring is covered by a thick, tan, hand-loomed shag rug that exalts itself to meet your feet. An ornate glass coffee table adds to the dignity of the ambiance, its smooth green surface appealing to the eye and the perfect destination for the chilled glass of aged Chardonnay when your hand grows tired of it.

The room is lowly lit, giving the impression of an intimate gathering. And it is quite intimate, with only you, yourself, and Ted in the chamber. Armed guards, in their uniform black business suits and ear buds, wait at every exit. You compliment your host on the jade serving dish cut with a design of sprouting roses in the middle, and overflowing with plump, pink, de-veined shrimp. As you and your host both really know, the shrimp are your favorite part of the serving dish.

Your president self and you both chew on these with abandon as you survey the array of oil paintings, including the typical pastoral scenes of blurry flowers, religious scenes with halos and graphic deaths, and one in particular that grabs your eye. After sorting out the shades of gold leaf and symbol, you settle on the image of a man and woman sharing a passionate kiss. The man holds the woman against him and obscures his face in hers. Kneeling, the woman is resigned to his actions, and clutches his neck in her hand. It is beautiful.

"Is that a Gustav Klimt?" you ask.

"It's called *The Kiss*," you reply, "It's actually quite famous, as I know we're both aware. I had the good fortune of picking it up at a charity auction recently. It's usually in the Lincoln bedroom, but I decided to bring it on the trip to show you what surroundings you'll soon become accustomed to. One of the many perks of our position of power."

You sip the chardonnay, glancing again at the lines on the face of your host.

“Shouldn’t you be off worrying about re-election?” you ask.

“The beauty of time travel,” you reply, “Is that you may return to the moment just after you left and no one will be the wiser. Just so long as no one in this time knows I’m here, that is. Besides, this is our second term, so I’m in full blown legacy mode.”

“And what is our legacy?”

You both set down your glasses. President you exchanges a knowing look with Ted, then stands.

“It’s time I showed you something,” you say.

You and Ted lead yourself down an adjoining hallway, covered in regal purple paint, and then to another room, not far from the suite you’ve just left, but out of the sight of the guards posted at the front doors. This room seems much smaller than the lounge with the brown leather sofa, the Klimt painting, and the jade serving dish, but it’s hard to tell as the lights are dim. You can barely make out the dimensions of several bunk beds, each with a shadowy form prone in it.

Ted flips on the light. And then you see more of Ted. A lot more.

“I have discovered,” you tell yourself, “That there are ways to clone that have nothing to do with sheep or DNA.”

The forms in each bed rise and you see then that each of them have the same shock of white hair, the same eye patch over the left eye. These were the men in the black sedans. They grin at you, a dozen or more, in perfect unison. They scratch their bellies near the bottom of their undershirts. They yawn, simultaneously. All of them are Ted. An entire room full.

*

Sometimes, when I feel the need to wander, I visit the past and see familiar faces. Let Me tell you a story of what I’ve seen. There once was a man and a woman. They were very much in love. The woman was much younger than the man, and she was full of sexual energy and zest for life. She wanted one thing most in the world, a baby, and she would tell the man this from time to time, in half whispered conversations after midnight, or by cooing over tiny shoes at the discount store. All the properties of a wonderful mother were hers; kind eyes to gaze upon a

newborn soul, a nurturing touch that could dissolve pain like bath foam under the faucet, and most of all an undeniable lust for the role.

The man wanted more than anything to give the woman what she wanted. He tried night after night, rubbing himself raw against her insides.

His passion for her overflowed into their lovemaking, and the lovemaking was good. But still, she was not with child. Often, he would find her, sitting on the toilet lid, alone, eyes blurry and red. Finally, they stumbled to a professional's office, each convinced the idea was their own. This professional took samples from the man and woman, their blood, their urine, their reproductive fluids. The professional had charts and computers and degrees on his wall. He took their blood, their urine, their reproductive fluids, and told them to come back in two weeks time. And when they returned, in two weeks time, the professional pulled out his charts and computers and degrees on his wall, and told the man that he was sorry, but the man was broken, he would never be a father.

This woman was Mrs. Elizabeth Updown.

*

"This is a trick," you say.

The man you face told you he was from the future, that he was you, but what if he was a clone of you as well? Or maybe something simpler, less science-fiction. A hustler, an impersonator, all part of an elaborate con. This whole thing with Nicholas Updown, it stank from the beginning, you think, and now you know why. You're being played, by professional actors and grifters hoping to take you for millions.

"I know what you're thinking," your look-alike says, "Probably down to the word. Actors and grifters, the whole deal, believe me –"

You back away in horror, closing the door to the sight of Teds.

"Believe you? *Fuck* you!"

"I know it's hard to take all this in, Rip, but if there's one person in this world I wouldn't lie to, and, let's be honest, there's probably only one, it's myself. Updown's work leads to all of this, but it's just the start. There's so, so much more, and that's why I'm here."

A Ted opens the door and there they are again, the whole troupe of them, yawning and blinking as one. You shove the nearest one away from you and circle back further down the hallway, back toward the lounge.

“I thought you were here to save the campaign.”

“I’m here to save our *presidency*.”

“Well, by all means, but how about you leave me out of it?”

Your doppelganger nods to one of the Teds.

“Number twelve,” he says, “The photo.”

One of the Teds reaches into his trousers and pulls out a small color photograph. He hands this to your look-alike, who waves it at the distance that has emerged between you.

“It’s real,” is all he says.

You creep closer and snap the photo from his hand, the sharp edge of the photo paper stinging your fingertips. The composition is poor, as if the camera were placed on a tripod and forgotten about. Three men stand in the photo, grinning, arm in arm. They are three men, but they are one, all their faces the same above their stained white lab coats. Three men, identical, each of them Nicholas Updown.

“Impossible. This has been doctored.”

“No,” one of the Teds replies, “Updown’s the one we got the idea from. When we first got the ability to time travel, we went into the future to see what more he’d come up with. He eventually decided to … duplicate himself, in order to extend his reach. It’s much easier to keep track of all of time when you’ve got more than one of you to do it.”

You shake your head.

“So he’s a triplet, something freaky like that.”

“Then why didn’t it come up in your research with … oh, what did I call him, Captain America? Face it, Rip, that Updown you saw gunned down wasn’t the only one. How else could he have been on your campaign stage and in his laboratory here in Arizona all at once?”

You cast a gaze over the room full of Teds, realizing that the vast majority of them are not, in so many ways, the real one. The thought disgusts you, turns your stomach. To be seeing such an abomination first hand, these false faces, these facsimiles, how dare they act as if they have the same claim to life as you?

“So which one of you is the real Ted, then?”

Your doppelganger sinks to the floor of the hallway, sadness filling his downcast eyes.

“Every war has its casualties, unfortunately. But we were able to create a slightly younger, more heart healthy version, so he lives on in multitude. No more jelly donuts for you, right, Ted?”

The Teds laugh at this joke. Clearly it’s a familiar one to them, as you sense that familiar fakery in their pitch. To you, they look like a funeral parlor’s worth of zombies.

“So Ted dies and this is how you choose to honor him, huh? I know the guy was a sonnovabitch sometimes, but he was still a man, dammit. A human man. He deserves better than to be … be … photocopied!”

You shake with righteous anger, an odd feeling for you. Your doppelganger rises, passion also filling his eyes, as if he’s a distorted mirror standing before you.

“New technology, any new technology, is not without its dangers. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. There are people who would prefer Updown never makes his discovery of time travel to begin with. People who would just as soon see him and *you* both dead and buried. And some of those people are the ones we’d least suspect.”

You grip the sides of the doorway, trembling.

“And how do I know you’re not a copy too? How do I know someone didn’t program you to take me out?”

“Because I’m here to help you. To tell you things. Like that the Updown who died at your feet, I’ve reason to believe he was trying to kill you. Time travel is not a perfect technology. Sometimes it can twist and gnaw at a man’s very soul. Do not mistaken Nicholas Updown’s soft exterior for weakness. He is every bit the threat of you or I.”

“So you killed him? You came back and killed him before he killed me?”

The President shakes his head.

“We’re not sure who did it. That’s one thing we were trying to find out here, but we’re not having any luck. It was too dangerous to get close to the rally itself, and even as it is, I’ve grown afraid that if I spend any more time here, I might alter this timestream in ways I’d come to regret. And yet …”

Your doppelganger approaches you, staring directly into your eyes. You've practiced this look yourself, hundreds of times, trying to teach yourself to seduce with genuineness.

"The Updown of this time doesn't know what's going on," you tell yourself, words gentle and charming, "He bears no grudge against us. He hardly cares about anything he's so swept up in that project of his. I remember all the steps I took to win this presidency, and I can do it again without a second thought. What I fear I no longer have is the youthful passion for tangling with Updown. I have seen too much and grown too discouraged. I need your energy, your fight, your rage, Rip. The feelings that I once possessed in such abundance. I need you to go to Updown and find out who wants to kill him. Who wants to kill both of us. I want you to make sure he invents his time machine."

You have a hand on your shoulder now, caressing it reassuringly. Your presidential eyes stare into your spooked eyes, trying to engulf them in a wave of peace.

"And when he does invent it, I want you to steal it, and kill him. Do it for the sake of all humankind."

You feel dizzy. You brush off the hands of your look-alike and back away.

"This is insanity," you say, "You mean to make a fool of me. Or steal all my money. Or worse, though I'm not sure what."

The Teds approach, imploring you with their single serving eyes, like a basket of butt ugly puppies, but you sway and spin. And you run.

"Mr. President," the Teds whisper, all together, a roar.

You do not hear, though, as you rush into the lounge. You snatch up the jade serving dish, then, never pausing in your sprint, and dash it through a tinted window. The guards are alert at once, hands going to their guns, but your doppelganger hurriedly waves them off. Were you to hurt yourself, after all, were you to kill yourself, this future version of yourself would never be.

A man who is thorough with his deception, you reason. But you take advantage of it all the same, the many protests of Teds fading from your hearing as you crash through the window, the remaining splinters of glass scattering in your wake, your rusty old pick up truck back in view.

You hear one more snippet of conversation as you go; this from your doppelganger himself.

“No, Ted,” he says, “Let me go. This is something I need to do. But have the men keep an eye out – the only one with more enemies than us is Updown.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MEETING OF MINDS

You start up the engine of your truck, keeping a watchful eye for any more Teds in black suits or doppelgangers wearing your face. The shitty old pick up truck soon puffs its way up to full speed and you're on your way, never turning back like a man afraid to turn into a pillar of salt.

You don't see the tail who's reattached himself to you, though. A man with rosy cheeks and a blond goatee. A man with a Colt .45 and a badge. Detective Bradley keeps enough distance to remain inconspicuous, and stays close enough to keep his destiny affixed to yours. He is not so interested in bringing you back to your campaign as he is in figuring out what you are searching for. The Nicholas Updown case has left as sour a taste in his mouth as it has in yours, and he too is not about to let it go.

In an hour, you are at Updown's front door, ready to pour on the charm. You note the rough sandstone exterior as you stride up the front walk, tufts of yellowing scrub grass dotting the yard. A large white garage door dominates the front of the house, and you take notice of the two giant windows looming above the garage and the third above the porch. The windows are screened in with thick wood trim painted grey. Tropical looking trees provide sparse shade until you reach the covered front porch, under which the sun's brutality fades significantly. A humble enough home for a man supposedly about to shape the future of all of humankind, you muse to yourself.

You ease your lips and teeth into their familiar politicking grin and rap on the front door. A moment passes.

Then another.

You pick at your teeth, annoyed.

You knock again, louder and longer this time. Behind you, you hear a rumbling car engine die in a slow purr. You glance, praying it's no black sedan, and see instead a beat up white Taurus pulling into park a few houses over. You don't know it, but Bradley has arrived.

Irritated, you rest your hand on the doorknob, which feels a bit loose. You try it and realize the front door is unlocked. For a man with so many enemies, Updown does not seem very afraid.

You creek the door open cautiously, peering inside. What greets you on the other end is homey enough. Big windows with red curtains. A ratty love seat with some stuffing coming out of one frayed arm rest. Over the love seat, a nondescript painting, or more likely a poster copy of a painting, featuring bland squares and circles, and protected under glass. Above you, the ceiling fan rattles anxiously. Updown must be somewhere around there.

Looking further into the house, you spot a light on around a corner, where the kitchen must be. You edge inside, taking care that your wingtips tread softly on the thin, ochre carpet. Soon enough, you're gazing into the light of the next room, where it's all white appliances and varnished wood counters. Papers and knickknacks litter the counters, with a knock off brand coffee maker bobbing above them like a raft on rough seas. Standing before the coffee maker, with his back turned to you, is a man in a fuzzy, navy blue bathrobe, pink bunny slippers on his feet, and a thick, dark head of hair.

He turns around and you recognize him, even with sleep in his bleary hazel eyes, three days growth on his chin, and coffee stains on his teeth. Nicholas Updown holds a mug of fresh brew with a miniscule reproduction of the periodic table of elements decorating it and promptly spills the contents on his robe.

*

Let Me tell you a story of what I've seen. There once was a man and a woman. They were very much in love. The woman was much younger than the man, and she was full of sexual energy and zest for life. She wanted one thing most in the world, a baby, and she would tell the man this from time to time, in half whispered conversations after midnight, or by cooing over tiny shoes at the discount store. All the properties of a wonderful mother were hers; kind eyes to gaze upon a newborn soul, a nurturing touch that could dissolve pain like bath foam under the faucet, and most of all an undeniable lust for the role.

The man wanted more than anything to give the woman what she wanted. He tried night after night, rubbing himself raw against her insides. His passion for her overflowed into their lovemaking, and the

lovemaking was good. Then, one day, she was with child. Often, he would find her, sitting on their back porch, smiling into the sunset, alone, eyes blurry and red. Finally, they stumbled to a professional's office, each full of glee at their good fortune. This professional took samples from the woman, her blood, her urine, her reproductive fluids. The professional had charts and computers and degrees on her wall. She took the blood, the urine, the reproductive fluids, and told the woman that something irregular had occurred. And when the woman sat down, the professional pulled out her charts and computers and degrees on her wall, and told the woman that she was sorry, but the woman was no longer with child, she would not be a mother.

This woman was Mrs. Elizabeth Updown.

*

"Son of a bitch!" Updown yelps, eyelids spreading wide, "Who the hell are you?"

The shmuck must not watch very much television, you think.

"I'm Rip Donner," you say, remaining warm and composed, "And I'm campaigning to be the next president of the United States."

Updown waves the mug like a gun.

"I'm getting real tired of people breaking into my property!" he says. "Since when do legitimate presidential candidates make house calls to nonvoters living in the middle of Arizona?"

You hold your hands up non-threateningly, and slide one to the counter, plucking up a roll of paper towels and handing it to Updown sheepishly. He takes the roll in one hand, still holding the mug like a pistol in the other, and smears the entire roll cautiously at the saturated spots on his robe.

"Actually, the real reason I'm here is to check on my investment. You see, I recently realized that a large amount of my personal fortune is tied up in this company of yours and its project, what do you call it, Deus ex Machina?"

Updown holds the clump of wet paper towel in his hand and stares at you, like a child caught jerking off in his bedroom. Coffee spills he is

used to, but potentially rebellious investors coming to visit? Still, he's a bit of a politician himself.

"Whatever happened to phoning ahead? Or knocking, for that matter?"

You reach to tear off a few strips of the paper towel from the dry side and press it against the spot.

"Here, let me help," you say, dabbing. "To tell the truth, I did knock, but when you didn't answer, I got a tad impatient, and tried the door. Poor manners, I confess. And I actually called as well. Maybe you'd recognize my voice better if I told you I'm the guy who saw you die?"

Updown sets his mug on the varnished counter, and collects the wad of newly brown paper towel from your hand.

"Well, that changes everything, doesn't it?"

You nod, encouraged.

"In that case, I think you're going to need to get the hell out. Or do you have some story about how you're from the future too? It's like I'm Scrooge in the damned *Christmas Carol*."

A belly laugh bursts from your mouth, filling the room. This appears to make Updown nervous, and his eyes get wide like an animal, slanting to the knife block in the corner.

"Have those time travel nutjobs been harassing you too? I met some sort of con job on the way here that tried telling me he was a future version of myself. Utter craziness, like something I'd read in a book."

Yes, a book. That reminds you, and you hold up a copy of his paperback, *Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9*.

"Did I mention I'm a big fan?"

You gesture to the coffee maker, now that Updown no longer has kitchen knives in his eyes.

"That smells incredible, by the way, would a cup be too much to ask?"

Updown reaches into a cabinet above him, still uneasy, and pulls out a mug that says *#1 Wife*. He squints into the bottom and then, apparently satisfied, places it on the counter and pours the dark liquid into it.

"So, I've only just run into this book, but I'm definitely enjoying it. Have you written others, or is this your opus magnum?"

He's staring into his own coffee though, fluid swirling as he refills it.
"I don't really write anymore."

You lean on the edge of the counter casually, hands waving freely now as you speak, in full politician mode.

"That's a shame. I'm really enjoying the twists and turns of this one so far. At first I thought that Freddy Nietzsche was just going to be comic relief, I didn't realize what an important role he would take in it all."

Nicholas Updown seems to be tuning you out, and he wanders to the living room, finding a place on the loveseat, crossing his hairy legs. You tilt up from the counter and follow him in. He looks up at you, seeming unsure what to do with your presence.

"So, why did you give up on writing? I mean, I'm no book critic, but you seem like a real talent to me."

You sip at your cup of coffee.

Updown sips at his.

"Most authors love chatting about their work," a husky alto cuts in, "I'm not sure why Nick gets this way."

Turning, you see gorgeous raven black hair and deep brown eyes. She's tall, tinged pink from the Arizona sun, wearing a flirty fuchsia bathrobe and, as far as your glance to her hint of soft cleavage implies, little else. You smile brightly at her, the most genuine smile you've given anyone in years.

And, much to your heart's pleasure, she looks you in the eye and smiles right back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GUARDIANS OF THE UNIVERSE

Edgar Unum, or Crispin, as he now thought of himself (since nothing encourages method acting quite like the distinct feeling that you may be slaughtered gangland style if you mess up and reveal your dishonesty), had moved, after the rousing speech from the Lawman, the urine analysis lineup, the polygraph test, and the microchip scan, into one of several back rooms along with one of many groups the larger gathering had been divided into. They were now experiencing “the next step.”

Mary, the woman who’d told him the Lawman’s nickname, stood beside him. She was a hardcore type, her head shaved to stubble, and a tattoo of an eagle poking out from the top of her high collared red turtleneck sweater on the back of her neck. Crispin and she were two of around a dozen new recruits crowded into a sweaty chamber about the size of four standard passenger elevators mashed together. He flapped his black trenchcoat, which he had wisely emptied of all regulation journalistic recording equipment before coming, and pushed his thick glasses up his nose. The East Indian man from the crowd, the one with the black gloves and sour look of unease, stood at the head of the room and addressed them.

“My name is Christopher Lincoln,” he said, “And I am the first lieutenant of this organization, known alternately as the Guardians, the Time Guardians, and the Guardians of the Universe.”

Crispin surveyed the reactions of those around him. The thick bodyguards flanking Christopher Lincoln nodded deliberately with blank looks on their faces. Many of the recruits seemed confused or uneasy at these grandiose titles. Mary’s face seemed to shout “rock on.”

But it wasn’t the first time they’d heard such grand proclamations today. Crispin thought of the Lawman and his keynote speech. The Lawman was an older fellow, his beard and crew cut fading from light blonde to white and his cheeks flushed with passion as he pounded upon the podium.

“There are those who guard every dimension this great nation is measured in,” he said, “From all forms of threats and criminals, those who

would steal from us, those who would destroy our culture, those who would take the lives of us and our children. There are guardians of the great lengths of each coast, stopping smuggling vessels from reaching our shores. There are guardians of the widths of our borders to the north and south, introducing drug traffickers and would-be illegal immigrants to justice at every checkpoint. There are guardians of the heights of this great nation, from the depths of Death Valley to the heights of Mount McKinley and even clear up to outer space, wiping out fears of nuclear strikes or terrorist airplanes. There are guardians of each of these three dimensions, firmly in place and defending our noble homeland. But what of the fourth dimension? Who has stepped up to guard time?"

Christopher Lincoln's bodyguards opened their jackets and began placing equipment on a conference table stretched behind the Lieutenant. Lincoln pointed to the devices on the table, arcane and barbaric tools once used by ranch hands in the ancient American West to brand steer as part of the beef industry.

"If you're here," Lincoln said, "you have passed many tests today."

As he spoke, one of his bodyguards held up a branding iron and the other pointed a ring at the brand. A thin red point of light hit the brand, a laser, and the pattern began to glow orange and hot.

"You have shown yourselves to be upright American citizens, followers of the law, believers in future progress, believers in the necessity of defending American interests in both space and time. I'm not here to question you on any of that, you have already proven yourselves. No, what I'm here to do is to see if you have the courage, the guts, to be heroes."

Lincoln took the iron from the outstretched arm of his bodyguard and held it aloft. Crispin spotted the glowing "G" on the brand.

"Now," Lincoln said, "Who's first?"

*

You have joined Nicholas Updown in what he calls his "office," some monstrous amalgamation of a large carport, a computer warehouse, and the Hollywood version of a mad scientist's laboratory. Seeing as you are an important investor and all, you both agreed (though he only with

mutual prodding from Elizabeth and yourself) that a tour of the facilities and a proper introduction to the project would be in order.

“Nicholas is brilliant,” Elizabeth had said, “Prepare to be very impressed. And then prepare for him to ramble on until you feel so completely lost that you’re absolutely ready to *die* of boredom.”

Rip and she had laughed and Updown had snorted and so it had been. And now you were wincing at the screams and whines of neglected animals, placed in tight cages by a man too obsessed with the past and the future to bother looking outside his immediate sphere of attention.

“So,” you say, “This is something having to do with high energy?”

Updown sighs, clicking open a PowerPoint presentation on one of the many computer monitors stacked against right hand wall. You hate PowerPoints.

“Energy, yes,” he mutters, “Have you ever heard of particle accelerators?”

You shadow box, full of predatory energy still from your first meeting with the lovely Elizabeth.

“Like that hadron collider thing that’s supposed to open all these black holes and destroy the universe?”

You grin and chuckle at how up you are with current events. There are few topics you can’t effectively converse on at parties and events – one of the many talents necessary for an up and coming politician.

“That’s one example, yes,” Updown says, “Most particle colliders are used to accomplish varying rates of decay in subatomic particles. For instance, a process called electron capture combines electrons and protons together at high energy rates and accelerates proton decay, which converts the proton into a neutron and an electron neutrino.”

You pause in your shadow boxing.

“It’s all Greek to me, Prof. What’s that got to do with high energy?”

“Well, there is something called exotic matter, which has subatomic particles with unusual properties. If you started colliding these exotic matter particles with other – I mean, as it is, we can use electrons and protons together to make something new, or take an electron and a positron and ram them together to make a photon, the most basic element of light, just imagine what –”

Updown seems to have had a thought. He pauses in his presentation and begins drawing mathematical equations on a dry erase board with symbols well beyond your depth.

“Yes,” he says, “High energy. Renewable energy. Trust me, Mr. Donner, you’re safe to go back to your campaign, I’m going to make you a very rich man.”

You chuckle at this.

“I’m already a very rich man.”

He’s still scribbling away at the board, drawing signs for gamma and the speed of light and time dilation and so on.

“Oh, so much richer,” he says, “So much richer than you ever dreamed.”

*

“There is a threat,” the Lawman had told them, “Worse than any America has ever faced. Worse than the tyranny imposed by British overlords. Worse than the civil unrest over slavery that tore the nation in two. Worse than the sudden, unprovoked attacks at Pearl Harbor. Worse than the evil empires of Nazism and Communism that once swept through Europe and beyond. Worse than the threat of nuclear immolation. Worse than terrorist attacks on Oklahoma City, the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and the Hoover Dam. Worse than the Electron Pulse. There are men in this world, men among us, who claim to be patriots, claim to be Americans, but who have created such terrible technologies that they stand poised to tear not only this nation but all of time and space asunder.”

Mary was the first volunteer. She gladly rolled her turtleneck sweater sleeve up, exposing the pale white flesh of her bicep to the orange glow. Crispin felt a bit embarrassed to dwell on how his biceps stacked up against hers. Her teeth gritted together, but no cry of pain came loose as the brand met her flesh, just a rotten, terrible burning smell as the “G” singed itself into her skin.

Seeing her courage, others were inspired, and a haphazard line formed, with Crispin at first trying to resist its pull, but seeing so few still

outside, let himself get swept up, accepting a fate better, at least, than death.

“Somewhere, somehow,” the Lawman had said, “Man has found a way to travel through time. You might think this is a miracle, an awesome, amazing scientific advance akin with portable telecommunications and the growth of artificial organs, but I stand here today to open your eyes to the truth. Such power is more than any man should have. Such is the power of God and we are fools to try to wield it. Playing games with time leads only to paradox, tragedy, and the terrible temptation to twist time to your own will. For your own selfish, shortsighted reasons. Such criminals in time are the ones we have been created to stop. There are guardians for the length, the width, the height of this great nation, and we are the guardians of its time.”

When Crispin reached the head of the line, they did not ask if he was ready, only yanked his sleeve up and pushed the brand against him. Its heat was so great he felt almost numb to it, pushed beyond pain, the feeling too large to even feel. So much larger than his arm, than his body, than his silly journalistic goals. Then the brand was removed and the cool air hit the scorched flesh and he screamed.

*

While Nicholas Updown scribbled away at his little math problems and diddled away on his science experiments, you made your way back to his suburban home, confident that your monies were in the hands of a man who was highly intelligent, if a little cracked.

Since you last saw her, Elizabeth had changed into far more conservative garb. A simple cotton summer dress falls elegantly over her supple female form, blue and yellow flowers contrasting sharply with her own dark features.

“That husband of yours, he’s a live one.”

She smiles, her pert lips parting away and revealing what looks like so many clean white teeth that you’re tempted to try to count them.

“What’d I tell ya?” she says, patting the open cushion on the loveseat beside her. “Sorry about the sitting arrangements, we never really entertain and it’s just the two of us, so we never really felt the need

for much furniture. Most of the time I'm sitting here by myself anyhow, and too much empty furniture might make me start seeing ghosts."

You sit, and find yourself within her womanly aura, smelling the flowery scents of her shampoos and lotions. And you suddenly realize what's been missing in your life of sweaty political theater and fast food riddled road trips.

"Seriously," you say to her, smiling, "Do you understand a thing Nick says?"

Her lips slide back together, the smile growing slyer.

"Actually, I studied physics under him once upon a time," she says, "So it's not his intellect that's the problem."

You suddenly become aware of how disgusting you must be, having been on the road for so long with no shower or change of clothes. Best to keep her talking, you think, feeling uncomfortably warm all the sudden.

"So there's a problem, then?"

"It's just," she says, "Sometimes I wonder if a mental connection is enough."

She's turned away from you, embarrassed to be saying this to a complete stranger, perhaps, so you relent.

"I'm sorry to change the subject on you, but do you happen to have a shower I could use, Mrs. Updown?"

She's glad to speak of something else and ushers you right up, out of the loveseat, to the master bath. Leaning over to show you how to adjust the hot and the cold, the strap of her dress falls down her pale shoulder and she turns to look at you, eyes looking clever when her pupils dart to one side.

"There, you should be all set. By the way, you can feel free to call me Elizabeth."

You nod, earnest.

"Elizabeth."

*

Now a full-fledged member of the Time Guardians, Crispin March joined several of his partners in temporal law enforcement at a political rally in downtown Manhattan during their off hours. So far, his time with

the Guardians had been spent reading thick manuals on physics and causality and practicing with taser guns in the holo shooting range. Lethal firearms, Christopher Lincoln explained with palpable angst, were not allowed under Time Guardian bylaws due to the temporal disruptions killing someone from a time other than your own could cause. Crispin had asked Lincoln more than once if he could see what a time machine looked like, but Lincoln had merely scoffed at him, warning that as a rookie he was not ready for such a privilege and if he kept bringing it up, he'd be placed on permanent restroom duty.

After one particularly dull training session, Mary suggested that the group of newbies avoid the regular juice bar jaunt and instead check out the big political rally downtown. Apparently, Edgar Unum wasn't the only one who'd realized that people had stopped staying dead and the rhetoric of Forever Life had not only gotten out, it had garnered a large number of opponents.

Now, here, in this sweaty crowd waving signs, Crispin could not hear Mary's words though she shouted at him. He simply shook his head and took in the writhing mass of signs waving back and forth in intersecting motions.

Right to Die they read and *Don't Make God Keep Waiting*.

People were up on a podium amid all of this, shouting into sound amplidampeners that amplified the sounds of their voices and quieted the sounds around them all in a cone of audio distortion. These cones reached Crispin all at once and he heard the voices combating inside his head.

"We are Heaven's Angels," one said, "you can spend your lives on this Earth all you want, but we accept Death as the next step to joining our Father in Heaven."

"This Savior is a false Savior," one said, "The only true Savior is Jesus Christ. Only He can give you water that will not leave you thirsting, the food that will not leave you hungry."

"Death is a natural occurrence," one said, "Without the natural cycle of birth and death of any one species, the Earth will become overwhelmed, natural habitats will be wiped out, natural resources diminished. The Earth was never made to house this many people!"

“What standards are being applied to this,” one asks, “Everyone is suddenly being saved by this mystery force? Who will be saved next? Hitler? Bin Laden? Karsano? Where will it end?”

“You used to be able to say *death and taxes*,” one said, “Death and taxes are the only thing you can count on. What will this so-called Savior leave us to count on?”

And then there was she. Rising up from the crowd, pushing away those with amplidampeners, and placing hers, three times as large, five times as powerful, not a cone but a sphere encompassing the entire square of protestors in its sonic bubble. Lillian Lazarus.

“And what greater miracle is there than Life? What other gift would God want for us? Which of you among us would refute our most natural right? The right to live, to live as long as we may. Forever life – I want it, I cry it, I demand it – forever life!”

A sign flapped through the air, its plastic staff smacking her thigh. The sign was followed by more signs, loose bricks, rocks, shoes. Lillian ducked under this assault, and protestors dove in, eager to overwhelm her.

Crispin, no, Edgar now once more, dove as well, throwing his body up upon the stage, shielding hers from their fury.

“Who is the Savior?” he asked her, “Where is he now that we need him?”

But Lillian just stared at him, frozen under his shadow. Then mumbling, stuttering.

“I … I don’t know.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAN ABOUT TOWN

You, having enjoyed expelling the filth of the road from your body at last, are realizing that you have nothing clean to change into, and that the dirty clothes you'd scarcely consider re-clothing yourself in have disappeared from the towel rack during your shower anyhow. In their place you find a thick, soft grey towel and you rub down your hair and chest with this vigorously. Placing this around your waist, you next go in search of your lovely hostess.

In the living room, you snap on a table lamp with a chart of the stars on its shade. Every bit of this house seems to have Updown's stamp on it, but if you look closely, you can see hints of her, fresh cut tulips on the coffee table, the honey and vanilla scent of her lingering in the air. You shake your head, unused to being affected this way by a piece of ass. But she's more than that, isn't she? She's Elizabeth.

You sit on the ratty red love seat, unconcerned with leaving a wet spot on the scruffy back. These people are overdue for new furnishings as it is, you reason. Beside the crystal flower vase on the coffee table sits the copy of *Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9* you brought in with you. With Elizabeth nowhere to be seen and feeling unready to face the latest from the 24 hour news stations, you pick the novel up and give it another go:

The far reaches of space lapped at Captain Von Raysong's wavy blonde locks like an unruly kitten, as the hole in the hull of his ship widened due to the expansion of pressure. Gargax Sly tried yelling questions over the sound of this cosmic wind, but his voice was overwhelmed and his great black body was pulled toward the hole. Only his quick thinking and spider like splaying of limbs stopped him from being yanked completely into the airless void of space.

As for Freddy Nietzsche, he had been sitting with his platinum spoon and plastic lobster bib, lips pursed at the perceived oddness in that night's summer squash pudding. Now a tidal wave of squash pudding was whipping past his head, splashing against Gargax Sly's straining muscles on the way out of the ship. Somewhere, Nietzsche thought, space creatures would be eating well this night.

The ship's emergency systems were flailing like pee wee spaceballers after a fumble, red lights ablaze and flashing, warning sirens blaring, and back up lights blinking on and off in place of the main power. Captain Von Raysong's control consol lit up in a burst of electrical energy, his ability to direct the ship in any way now torn from his valiant hands. Courageous in this hour of need, Von Raysong whisked back his gorgeous golden locks and did what any good Captain does when a gaping hole has gutted its way into his ship. He sat down and closed his eyes, breathing deeply, prepared to die.

Unfortunately for his attempts at composed dignity, and Nietzsche's culinary contemplations, the suck of space had not overlooked them, merely taking longer to find their torsos, and soon was lifting them into the air as well, jamming them against Gargax Sly's body, wedging all three into the same hole. This pull of space was putting a great burden on what remained of the integrity of the DAX93 Minloader's outer shell, and this started peeling away, metal bending and stretching to the ends of its malleability, and then tearing away in long strips until Gargax Sly's limbs no longer had any hold, and the trio of space adventurers were sent asunder into the blackness of space, far away from their only connection to their human world.

Here, floating in the airless, heatless, black of space, these three men, Captain Derringer Von Raysong, Second Lieutenant Gargax Sly, and Galley Cook Frederick Nietzsche all passed most completely out.

And then, the angels came.

You hear a rustling from the hallway and when you look up there she is, still in the flowered cotton summer dress. Her dark eyes enchant you, as they gaze up over a plastic TV dinner tray piled with tasty looking sandwiches on diagonally cut wheat bread, and a bowl of fresh fruit.

"I thought you might be hungry after that road trip," she says.

You put down the book.

"Just, uh, catching up with my reading. That looks great."

She smiles.

"Thanks, Nick's a big fan of my lunches."

She sets the tray down.

"I can see why."

You pick up a sandwich eagerly and, forgetting your usual polished public persona, have half of it down your throat before she can get out her next sentence. Elizabeth laughs.

"I forgot to lay out some clothes for you, didn't I?"

You shrug, mouth full.

“I was going to snag some of Nick’s stuff, but I wasn’t sure you and he were the same size. Maybe fifteen years ago, but he’s put on a few pounds recently.”

She sighs and sits next to you as you swallow down the rest of the sandwich and wipe your mouth with the napkin she’s provided.

“I don’t mind if they’re a bit big. I’m trying to lay low right now anyhow; the change might be nice for me.”

Elizabeth snags a blueberry from the bowl of fruit and pops it in between her lips. The atmosphere is cool in the living room, air conditioning combating the strains of Arizona sunshine. Your arms shiver a bit, but you feel a warm flush in your chest.

“Nick’s so clueless about all that political stuff, but I recognized you the moment I saw you, you know. I mean, I don’t get that into the primaries, but you’ve been all over the news ever since Iowa.”

Iowa. When you saw Nicholas Updown gunned down before your eyes.

“About that …”

“Oh, sorry,” she says, chewing on another blueberry and winking at you, “I plan to vote Democrat.”

You grab the fruit bowl, holding it for hostage.

“Well, in that case, I might not let you have anymore of my berries.”

*

Rest assured, had Nicholas Updown been a fly on the wall in that conversation, had he been less concerned with his revolutionary scientific discoveries, and more concerned with his wife, he might have thrown you out of his house at once. But he knew your presence there meant big money, and big money was exactly what he needed to take the next steps.

But another man *was* a fly on the wall, listening in, concerned for his own reasons. Chet Bradley had staked out a position across the street, reclined in the back seat of his white Ford Taurus, headset on as he used his own high tech equipment to hear every word coming from the Updown residence. But what really concerned Chet Bradley was not that you were growing closer to Elizabeth on the couch, the heat of her body staving off the chill from the moisture on your skin, but that you were in

that house, in that state at all, while on the radio the reports were that Governor Rip Donner had returned to his mobile campaign headquarters and was planning on addressing the nation in half an hour.

*

You and Elizabeth are flush in the middle of a conversation now. She has apologized for her husband's absence, his neglect of his investors, again his clumsiness with visitors (they get so few), and his obsessions with his work.

"It's just the way he's wired," she says, "Morning, noon, and night, all he talks about is that project of his. I suppose that's what an investor wants to hear though, huh?"

You nod, plopping a blueberry into your own mouth (there's one left now) and shift into an arena you're more comfortable with.

"It's all about dedication to the important things," you say, "That's what this whole campaign I'm doing is about. The importance of values, of sticking to your guns, remaining true to your core in face of a frightening, ever-changing world. This consistency, this stubbornness, even, is what this nation needs sometimes, it's what people look for – someone they can rely on."

Elizabeth's finger traces the rim of the fruit bowl. She's eying that last berry.

"And they can rely on you?"

"Absolutely."

You put your fingertips on the bowl's edge as well, letting her know she's in for a fight.

"What makes you so ... reliable, Rip Donner?"

You smile, again, your real smile. You're not sure you could pull out your candidate smile right now if you tried.

"Because I know that once you discover what's most important to you in the world, you never let it go. That's what being a Compassionate Conservative's all about."

She plucks up the berry, between two fingers.

"And yet you're neglecting your campaign?"

She places the berry between her lips.
“And your husband you.”
And then you kiss her.
You lean forward and place a hand in her hair and kiss her.
And she kisses back. She’s surprised by your sudden move, but she
kisses back sure enough, her lips tart and sweet.

*

Rip Donner, *you*, address the nation in front of a Middle American farmhouse. You tell them of your adventures, of your quest to free yourself from all of the over-hyped, buzz-word fixated, media frenzied mess of the standard presidential campaign and to really reconnect with the working class of America. You did just that on this trip, on this solo car ride across the nation, and you come back now more invigorated than ever, more convinced than ever that changes need to be made in the highest office and you’re the one to do it.

“We’re going to make America strong again!” you shout, as Billy Bob and Sally Mae farmer look on and then receive your vigorous handshakes. The Corvette story is polling particularly well with women voters and the elderly.

Strange enough for you, of course, is the fact that while you’re delivering this speech, you’re also, at the very same moment, feeling Elizabeth’s soft white hand as it sneaks the folds of your towel loose and reaches inside.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHANGING LIVES

Chet Bradley wasn't sure what to think about the two Rip Donners. One speaking live on the radio, rallying the Republican party around his leadership. One inside the Updown house, rolling around on the couch with the very woman who had slammed the phone down on Bradley not so very long ago.

Bradley wondered just what Nicholas Updown was up to and where he went during the day. Clearly he was not being attentive to his wife and clearly he and Rip Donner were not the best of friends. So why the Updown look-a-like at Donner's rally in Iowa? And why the Donner look-a-like on TV now? Feeling like he was trapped in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, Bradley flipped through his file on Updown and found second address for him. He decided it was time to move away from Donner for a bit and start paying closer attention to Professor Updown.

*

Nicholas Updown was in his lab still, bouncing ideas off the Sage.

"From the measurements I've made on this exotic matter, I think it just might fill an incredible gap in science that could let me do things no scientist has ever done before."

It was quite a statement. The type of statement Nicholas Updown had been waiting his entire life to make. And it wasn't like all of the false fancies he fed his potential investors. Something had clicked inside the man's head and he meant everything he'd just said.

He flips a switch on a microscope plugged into a laptop and the giant monitors overhead project images of tiny red glowing particles scurrying around like panicked ants.

"One of the reasons time travel is so difficult to accomplish is that we cannot make things travel the speed of light, or, really, anywhere close to it. Near light speed travel is needed to go to the future and speed in excess of that hallowed ceiling is necessary to reverse causality and return to the past. But what if you actually converted matter *into light*?"

Then it would be a simple matter of accelerating or decelerating those light particles to move them backwards or forwards in time.”

The Sage, resting on his weary laurels, adjusted the edge of his dark robe’s sleeve, carelessly.

“And how do you convert those light particles back into matter?”

Updown flipped one of the monitors over to a screen full of complex mathematical formulas.

“All of this is based on theory, with some facts sprinkled in and maybe just as much speculation, but bear with me. Electrons and positrons can be combined together to produce photons – the basic light particle. So basically, you can take all the electrons in matter and zap them with positrons and you’ve turned it into light. Protons are a bit harder, but using electron capture, you can convert protons to electrons, neutrons, and neutrinos. If you then convert those electrons to photons using more positrons, you only have to worry about the neutrons and neutrinos.”

The Sage flipped off the computer screen.

“There’s no math out there that will let you obliterate neutrons into light,” he said. “And there’s not much experimenting you can do when neutrons are only sustainable in isolation for fifteen minutes at a time.”

Updown flipped the computer screen back on.

“Look closer,” Updown said, “Up until now, yes, it was impossible to convert those neutrons and neutrinos into anything useful. But every measurement I’ve made on this exotic matter points towards the notion that it might actually be the anti-matter for neutrons and neutrinos. Matter and anti-matter isn’t a new concept. Electrons have theirs in positrons. Neutrons and neutrinos might have anti-neutrons and anti-neutrinos and this exotic matter I’ve found might contain them.”

The Sage paced away from Updown, his voice measuring out these conclusions with a teaspoon.

“Anti-matter for non-charged particles? Typically, anti-matter is defined as something with the opposite charge of matter. Electrons have a negative charge and positrons have a positive charge and so on. Neutrons and neutrinos are intrinsically neutral in their charge.”

Updown was flustered, but kept his head.

“I know, I know, but this stuff *isn't from our universe, Abraham!* If I'm right about that Suzy bubble, that this stuff, that meteorite, is from a universe with different laws and rules, maybe this is anti-matter at its most unique. The type of anti-matter that will let us obliterate regular matter into beams of light. I could make something travel at light speed, don't you see?”

These words traveled smoothly into Chet Bradley's listening equipment and he started wondering more and more if this weren't somehow an elaborate practical joke.

“But really, there's only one way to find out,” Updown said. “We need to build a particle accelerator and start banging some of this stuff together.”

*

Nicholas Updown's father died in an automobile factory in Flint, Michigan. He had been working there for a few years after being laid off by a similar plant following the time he'd taken off for his wife's hospital visits and funeral arrangements. He was a quiet man, stern with Nicholas, but hard working and always wanting the best for his two sons. When young Thomas went into the seminary, his father blustered with pride. When young Nicholas got an A on a science test, his father blustered with pride.

And, one day, when his father was inspecting the metal undercarriage of a vehicle moving down the production line, a giant conveyor belt with all the size and power to move car bodies across the warehouse fell upon him without warning or mercy.

I have seen this several times.

I have seen him, noticing the peril in the last second, pushing a co-worker to safety.

I have seen him, breaking beneath the blow of the structure.

I have seen him, teeth grinding in pain before he loses consciousness. His chest and spine crushed. His heart stopped. His blood spilled and the numbers above the floor dialed back to zero. Zero days without an accident.

I have seen this, many times.

*

Dr. Ostrander sips a cup of coffee and stares across the room at his patient. Nicholas has been remanded to a straight jacket after he stabbed an orderly with a pen and tried escaping through a second story window. They had told him the straight jacket was for his own protection, but he wouldn't stop jerking his elbows and wriggling his wrists under there. The whole thing made Ostrander feel a bit ill at ease.

"If you loved Elizabeth so much, Nicholas, why do you think you had such struggles in your marriage?"

Nicholas continued his jerking motions.

"Not going to talk today?"

"Excuse me?"

A small dot of red light appeared from within the confines of the straight jacket.

"Not going to talk today."

Ostrander set down his coffee cup and stood up to get a closer look at the red light expanding from Nicholas' form.

"And why not, pray tell?"

The red light swirled out against the nearest wall into a giant mass the size of Nicholas.

"We've got places to go."

*

You heard Updown's car pulling up the driveway in time to slow your naked thrusting – this was your second go around – and hurriedly reassemble your outfits. In his haste, when Updown marched through the door, he did not notice the crumbled state of your pants or the tell-tale cherry red lipstick on your collar.

"I need a particle accelerator. A giant, special particle accelerator and I know I can make this project come to fruition. A giant, special particle accelerator and just a few more busy months in the lab and we'll all be rich beyond our dreams."

You glanced at Elizabeth, thinking of a few more busy months here at the Updown residence. You make out a blank check to her husband.

The particle accelerator itself takes a few months to build and all the while Nicholas Updown micromanages every step. In the meantime, his absence has only made Elizabeth and you grow fonder.

When the massive new facility in the Arizona desert is finally built, Nicholas Updown begins running tests. He spins electrons and positrons together, performs electron capture, and finally throws exotic matter into the mix.

And then, the first time that the exotic matter smashes into the isolated neutrons and neutrinos, a cloud goes up over the Arizona desert. While you're feeling the heat of Elizabeth's skin against yours yet again, a giant cloud of smoke and the heat of the blast from Updown's exploding experiment could be felt for almost a mile.

Thank God, Nicholas Updown thinks, that he built that facility like a nuclear bunker.

*

Let Me tell you a story of what I've seen. There once was a man and a woman. They were very much in love. The woman was much younger than the man, and she was full of sexual energy and zest for life. She wanted one thing most in the world, a baby, and she would tell the man this from time to time, in half whispered conversations after midnight, or by cooing over tiny shoes at the discount store. All the properties of a wonderful mother were hers; kind eyes to gaze upon a newborn soul, a nurturing touch that could dissolve pain like bath foam under the faucet, and most of all an undeniable lust for the role. The man wanted more than anything to give the woman what she wanted. He tried night after night, rubbing himself raw against her insides. His passion for her overflowed into their lovemaking, and the lovemaking was good. Then, one day, she was with child. Often, he would find her, sitting on their back porch, smiling into the sunset, alone, eyes blurry and red. Finally, they stumbled to a professional's office, each full of glee at their good fortune. This professional took samples from the woman, her blood, her urine, her reproductive fluids. The professional had charts and computers and degrees on her wall. She took the blood, the urine, the reproductive

fluids, and told the woman that she was going to be a mother. Months passed, and the woman's belly grew and grew, her cheeks flushing with motherly pride. And then the day came, with sudden wetness and inconvenient timing. The man got scared and ushered his wife into the car, eager to get her into the hands of the professional. And when the woman sat down in the car, something irregular occurred. Labor came and came hard and the man was forced to pull the car to one side and take control himself. The man got scared, without the professional there, and the woman cried and screamed in pain. Soon, the woman was with child no more – the child was instead bleating tears into the arms of the man. In his pride and joy at this new miracle it took him a moment to glance upon his wife.

And when he did, his pride and joy turned to sudden horror. For the woman was no more. The toll of the experience had brought about her death. This woman was Mrs. Alice Updown. Nicholas Updown's mother.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PROGRESS IS A LOCOMOTIVE

Repairs on the facility took several more months, with an energized Updown as the overseer. The explosion, he rationalized, was caused by the discarding of the gluons, basically the energy holding the subatomic particles together. When he obliterated the anti-matter into the neutrons and created light from this, he also released the gluons and the amount of energy was far more than the accelerators could contain.

In his repairs, Updown also updated the facility to account for this, managing to create a way to channel these energies into hundreds of generators that in turn powered the facilities. He would no longer have an electric bill now, as he was generating more energy than all the utility companies in the state of Arizona every time he slammed particles together.

Finally, Updown was ready to try his process on matter larger than the atomic level. He placed a big green Granny Smith apple down into his overgrown machines and isolated it into subatomic pieces, zapping its electrons into light, its protons into pieces, and finally throwing the exotic matter into the mix. He was left with a ton of energy in his generators and a swirling mass of photons.

“That’s all good and well,” the Sage said, “But you can’t put a human being in that until you figure out how to reverse the process.”

*

Chet Bradley had witnessed the building and rebuilding of the facilities in person, managing to catch on as a member of both construction crews. His boss had called months ago, barking out demands over the phone, and Bradley’s attempts to explain the unexplainable, the two Rips, the two Updowns, the talk of time travel, the need for follow up, all of course went for naught.

Bradley sent his badge in to the office in Iowa via overnight shipping. The gun he carried was his own. And now, having eked out a semi-permanent residence in his Ford Taurus, Bradley spent his days and

nights viewing the hidden cameras he'd installed during his construction work, as Nicholas Updown screwed with the course of space and time and Rip Donner screwed with Nicholas Updown's wife.

*

Reversing the process, it turns out, was not the easiest thing to do. "Information loss," Updown said, staring at the mushy brown pulp that used to be an apple. "Even if we managed to get a human being through from one time and place to another by converting them to light and back, I'm not sure the reconverted product would be pretty."

All that energy wasn't just a good source of power for the facility – a lot of it was essential to the core structure of the matter he was obliterating. Even if Updown managed to blast power back into the mass of photons after moving it through time, it seemed impossible to do this with the right amount of precision to avoid sending normal, healthy humans through time and ending up with mutated, bloody messes.

"So what now?" the Sage asked.

"We keep trying," Updown said.

And with the next try came a new phenomenon. Updown had read about such things, had heard that there was a chance that it could happen if you started slamming around all sorts of particles at high speeds and high energy levels. The next time Updown put an apple through the process, a tiny, dark hole appeared from nowhere, obliterating the light from that spot.

"A black hole!" Updown shouted.

But it did not rip the world apart, it did not suck Updown and the Sage and the laboratory into it. Its mass was, thankfully, much too small for such tasks. It had barely the power to take in a few particles of light and, after a second, it disappeared altogether.

*

Luckily, a Savior was not needed. Edgar Unum's body shielded Lillian from the assault, and, within minutes, the area was swarming with law enforcement representatives and their amplidampeners didn't just block out sounds besides their own, they also caused temporary paralysis.

Later, his cover blown, Unum joined Lillian back at her mobile compound. His act of heroism had at least, it seemed, gained him access into Forever Life's inner sanctum.

One of the features of this sanctum was the staff psychologist, who was a popular man after near-death experiences (or just as often after *actual* death experiences).

"He's a good man and the type you can tell anything to," Lillian told Edgar. "I'm going to need you, so the last thing I want is any post traumatic stress."

And when Lillian told someone she was going to need them, that was all that had to be said. Edgar Unum sat down, in a black marble and white walled great room, with Forever Life's psychological consult, Dr. Charles Ostrander.

The Doctor held a cup of coffee but had long since kicked the pipe.

"So, Edgar, it is Edgar, right? You want to talk about what happened today?"

Unum had his vidrecorder ring on and aimed toward Ostrander.

"Actually, I'm more interested in hearing about this Savior."

*

Updown had become intensely interested in creating the blackholes. They did not appear every time he obliterated apples (which he was buying by the crate now), but he found that when his tests reached a certain energy threshold their frequency raised significantly. His hope was to create a sustainable blackhole somehow, but had yet to make one appear for more than a few seconds.

And then he got the idea to aim the result of the particle acceleration at different points in the lab. A few hundred tests later, one of the blackholes, instead of fading from his view, stabilized and started glowing red. And expanded.

And then it sucked his Batman lunch box into it.

"Did you just see that?" He asked the Sage, who only nodded.

Creeping closer to the event horizon, Nicholas clutched a nearby microscope. He tossed it toward the hole, which pulled the object in the rest of the way. Soon, the microscope had disappeared into the black and red swirl as well.

Moving closer, Updown picked up a hamster cage and hamster and cautiously placed it on the floor in front of the hole with outstretched arms. Without hesitation, the greedy portal yanked the cage to its mouth and ingested it whole.

And then Updown felt the pull on him.

His hair, starting to thin from long hours in the office, felt the pull like sucking winds. A thousand tiny hands pulled on his lab coat and pants. Updown grabbed the leg of a table, thankfully bolted to the ground.

He strained and grunted, pulling himself forward and finally escaped the hole's grasp.

"I'll have to remember to stay clear of those event horizons," he said.

*

Unum was standing in Lillian Lazarus' face, his own cheeks puffed red with anger.

"Bullshit!" he yelled, "Fucking bullshit. You know who your Savior is, you've known all along. And you lied to me."

Lillian, now in fitted jeans and a lavender wool pullover, raised her hands in peace.

"Calm down, Edgar, we can talk about this."

"You think I wouldn't find out? I'm a journalist, Lillian. I know how to get information out of people when I want to."

She placed a hand on his shoulder, felt his muscle strain under his white cotton t-shirt.

"The reason I let you talk with Charles is that I don't care what you know anymore, Edgar. I'm ready to trust you with all the secrets of Forever Life."

Edgar's cheeks were still inflated, the blood still pulsing in his features. He was exasperated. He didn't know what to do. So he kissed her.

And what they did next was definitely life affirming.

*

Nicholas Updown measured this new phenomenon in any way he could think of. Size, shape, light spectrum, even the energy it was emitting. Numbers began piling up. So much data and nothing to do with it, he realized at last.

But there was something striking about that red swirl. Something that made this unlike any other blackhole he'd created.

"It looks just like the exotic matter," he said.

And so he started making comparisons. The size of the light halo emitted by the exotic matter and that by this hole. The gravitational pull related to each. Finally, the radiation signature each put forth.

And then he wandered around the lab with his Geiger counter. Normal, normal, normal, until, finally, he found a match. Radiation levels at the same point as the exotic matter and the red blackhole that was still swirling on the other end of the lab. Incredibly high radiation levels with no clear source.

Updown rushed to the controls of the particle accelerator and aimed another reaction at this point. When a blackhole emerged there, it too swirled red, and out came a hamster cage, a microscope, and a Batman lunchbox.

"It's a wormhole!" he shouted to anyone who'd listen. "I've created a wormhole."

*

Unum sighed in the arms of his lover. She gazed up at him, brushing the gold grey locks from her eyes.

"I think you're ready now," she said.

His eyes, sans glasses frames for once, asked the question for him.

"Ready," she said "to meet Nicholas Updown."

WINDOW FIVE
AN UPDOWN FOR ALL
SEASONS

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE SHOT HEARD ROUND THE YEARS

This wormhole conclusion, Updown reasoned, explained how a blackhole with such a seemingly small mass could not only sustain itself, but also pull large objects through it and then deposit them at another opening in another physical location. It actually wasn't small in mass at all, the bulk of the mass just wasn't in this time, or dimension, or whatever; Updown hadn't exactly figured the last part out. But, somehow, he was opening a hole in the fabric of space-time and sending objects through it, then punching another hole somewhere else, allowing them to reemerge.

"The radiation readings matched," he explained to the patiently listening Sage, "Because those are places where our universe is rubbing up against a parallel universe. Or maybe a different timestream. I don't have all the vocabulary figured out. But I think our reality is right next to whatever reality that meteorite came from and by creating blackholes in the places where the two realities are buttressing, I can actually punch a hole, essentially tunneling from our world into that one. Because the exotic matter came from that reality, the radiation matches – all matter in that reality, or at least a large amount of it, probably shares the properties that this exotic matter exhibits."

The Sage nodded.

"Don't you see what this means, Abraham? It means I've figured out how to make time travel possible!"

*

Meanwhile, at the Updown home, you and Elizabeth are speaking casually on the state of politics and gender inequality in the nation, while sipping Long Island Ice Teas. You also just so happen to both be naked in the whirlpool.

"So you're telling me you don't think it's a problem that women still make seventy-five cents for every dollar men do?" Elizabeth demands. "Whatever happened to equal pay for equal work?"

You drain the contents of your glass and set it, empty, on the ridge of the tub next to a dark red candle.

“Maybe I’d buy the equal work thing,” you say with an arrogant belch, “If you women weren’t always getting horny and knocked up all the time.”

She rolls her eyes, but there’s a smirk behind her frown. She finds your chauvinism silly but charming somehow and you know in a minute you’ll have her against the bathroom wall.

You reach over the edge of the tub for the pitcher of booze and look at her.

“Top you off, babe?”

*

After his wormhole realization, the breakthroughs came for Updown like a stream of falling Dominoes. It was a simple matter of using the harnessed energy produced by the same reaction that was creating the wormhole entryways to accelerate one end of the wormhole.

Updown started sending pocket watches through the hole. He’d grab them in pairs, synchronize the times, accelerate the entryway, and send one through while holding on to the other. The watch that popped up on the other end never matched the one he held in his hand. The specific variations in time seemed to depend on just how much energy Updown dumped into the hole and just how fast he accelerated it.

He sent the first one twenty minutes into the future. He popped it into the hole and didn’t see it again for twenty minutes straight. And when it came out again, not a minute had passed on the watch from the moment he sent it in.

Then he accelerated the wormhole further and sent another watch through. This time it was gone for thirty-three minutes. In this same way he kept sending watches progressively further and further in time until they stopped appearing at all. When would they appear again, he wondered? Tomorrow? Next year? Next millennia? Updown was dying to know just what the limit was on his new toy when it happened.

Somehow he sent so much energy into the system that the watch didn’t go into the future at all. When the watch came out of the other end

of the wormhole it wasn't running behind the control watch. It was running ahead. Five minutes ahead, which meant it had been running five minutes longer than the control watch. Which meant Updown had sent the pocket watch five minutes into the past.

He clutched the two pocket watches, one glowing gold in each hand, and grinned at Abraham.

"I'm ready to tell her," he said, "I'm going to tell her."

The grin affixed his face all the way out to car. It did not fade as he pulled it into drive and sped towards his house. It felt warm on his cheeks as he pulled into his driveway and unlocked his front door.

And when he got home she was nowhere to be found. And she hadn't heard the door unlocking. And you hadn't heard the car pummeling the gravel driveway beneath its tires. And he had never suspected a thing until in his rush to find her he threw open the bathroom door and found his wife sitting bare assed on the sink, thighs wrapped around you as went to work.

And then his smile disappeared.

And then Nicholas Updown reached into the pocket of his lab coat. The same lab coat he wore when I first saw him, when I first snuck into his lab and was rudely greeted by flying bullets. He still had his revolver in this lab coat, had kept it there since I'd disturbed his sense of security. His fingers wrapped around its handle now and brandished it and cocked the hammer back and sent a bullet to the chamber and blew out the back of your adulterous stinking brain.

And Elizabeth, beautiful Elizabeth, that dark haired Jezebel with her pert breasts and seductive eyes, she held you still in her thighs, your blood splattered on her pale skin, and she did not scream. She did not scream. She just waited for him to fire the next shot, knowing he would not miss.

*

Except Nicholas Updown didn't fire again. He wanted to. In his mind he went through with it. He could feel that tension building behind his forefinger, its twitching hunger on the trigger. But he didn't fire. And suddenly, unexplainably, Nicholas Updown found his mind bending, events

shifting in his cranium, and suddenly he was reliving the last thirty seconds.

He was throwing open the bathroom door again. He was feeling his world implode in your face's arousal. He was reaching for his gun.

And then a red swirling hole burst into the room and a white haired man with an eye patch stepped out, grabbing Rip by the shoulder and pushing him through, disappearing him into the wormhole. And this white haired man, this Ted, he had a gun too and Nicholas Updown's head was swimming – this wasn't how it was supposed to go – and Ted was firing the gun, the bullet was flying for Nicholas Updown's heart.

And then hands were pulling him and Nicholas realized that another wormhole entrance had opened, behind him now, and he was falling through it.

*

When Nicholas Updown woke again he was, to say the least, a bit disoriented. He blinked his eyes. Everything was white. And warm. And quiet. Something about the splotches on the ceiling looked familiar. Comforting.

Then he realized he was lying in the now drained whirlpool tub in his master bathroom. He sat up. Ted was gone. The blood was gone. The wormholes were gone. But two things remained.

His wife, naked, shaking, sitting on the bathroom counter. And the gun, cool and easy in his hand.

How much of what he'd just seen had happened? How much of it happened and then been undone? For a technology he had only begun to figure out, Updown was noticing a startling amount of time traveling taking place.

“What happened?” he asked his quivering bride. He stood up, gun at his side and stepped over the rim of the tub.

“What in the hell is happening, Elizabeth?”

Her eyes stared wide, not at him, not at the room, not at anything. Nicholas caught his breath, watching her. She never blinked.

“What's going on, Elizabeth?” he demanded, approaching her. “What's going on?” His free hand shook her shoulder. “What's going on? What's happening? What's happened to us?” He slapped her face once.

Then again. “Why won’t you talk?” Again. Again and again and she slumped down on the counter, tears stinging her bloody lip.

Nicholas Updown saw his wife, broken, weeping. He looked into the mirror and stared at his own rage.

“What have I become?”

His grip loosened on the gun. It fell from his grip and clattered on the floor.

He left Elizabeth there in her crumpled heap.

He ran to his car.

He started the engine and rumbled down the driveway, topping fifty before he even turned on to the street.

He reached one hundred twenty before he got to his “office.”

He swerved toward his office, determined to end this, to destroy the Frankenstein’s monster he had unleashed when everything froze.

Time itself froze, the car, the wind, the radio on a single note.

Debris paused midair. Clouds held stock still in their drifting. Everything froze but Updown himself, who just sat panting and confused. And then there were men everywhere. Men covered in fuzzy green jumpsuits the texture of tennis balls with moon boots made by *Nike* and masks on their faces like deep sea diver masks. There were a dozen of them. Then two dozen. Then four dozen and more snapping into view every second like pop up ads appearing from nowhere, overwhelming his view.

They are familiar and strange all at once. Bizarre and inevitable, recalling those phantom photocopies who had haunted his path to progress. Those roads not taken, those what if whippoorwills – this horde of green and fuzz and moonboots and heavy breathing, they took Updown back to all of this and though he was not stopped like time and space around him, he felt for all the world as if he could not move.

But the moon men swarmed around him still. A murmur rose among them, like a low rumble of distant thunder. Nothing audible. Nothing intelligible, but it was there.

They crowded closer, these strange beings. They crowded closer and one removed a helmet.

It was him.

They all removed their helmets.

They were all him.

All Nicholas Updown.

*

And I am in the bathroom now, unhindered in My task. It is easier, I find, when they are already dead on the inside.

Elizabeth, slumped in her madness, does not look up when I walk into the room, My robes flowing on the tile. She does not look into My eyes when I lower the hood and gaze upon her.

I step forward, certain in My task. The cold metal shears find a perfect place in her heart. I'd fashioned them with just this spot in mind. I twist them once, twice, and twist her life away. And she expires, extinguishes like a bright flame in the night, without a notice, without a sound.

I leave the shears in her chest. On the floor I find Updown's revolver and I place this in the folds of My robe. On the kitchen counter I find a book, dog eared and read through. It is Nicholas Updown's book and I tuck it away as well.

My hood back over My face, I creep out the back door, bones creaking, moving slowly and surely as death.

*

"I've lost my damn mind," Nicholas Updown says.

They blink, together, the hordes of them. Updown finds himself blinking as well, almost as if he's compelled.

"We assure you," their voices come in unison, "your eyes do not deceive you, Nicholas Updown."

He pushes the car door open and swings his feet out, hungry for fresh air.

"My eyes?" he says, "No. It's my 'me's' I fear."

They twist and turn their heads, gazing at each other, conferring at a volume no louder than the brushing of their chins against the fabric of their suits.

"We had to come here," they say as one, "We saved your life from that Interloper. That time criminal. That thief of history. That Ted. He

changed time,” they groan in unison, “He could not be allowed to kill the Creator.”

Updown wants to lower himself to the ground, but his legs will not stop shaking.

“The Creator?”

“We are you, Nicholas Updown, and you are we. Our creator, our master, our image,” they explain. “In the future, Nicholas Updown, we are in the thousands. We serve as president, vice president, the senate, the house, the judiciary, the governors of every state, diplomats, researchers, scientists, movie stars, generals, guardians of Time itself. No one has accomplished more than we. No one is more important, Nicholas Updown. The people see us as gods among men. We are Gods, Nicholas Updown, and you are God to us.”

The shaking spreads up his body, to his chest, to his arms, and he hugs himself.

“I just wanted to make the world a better place.”

“And you have, Nicholas Updown. We have learned to slow aging to a crawl. We have learned to enhance and improve our bodies to near human perfection, except our faces, which we keep to honor our Creator’s image. We are infinite, now, Nicholas Updown, and omnipresent, and omniscient, and omnipotent. We are gods, we are the machine, and we are the conquerors of death.”

Updown’s feet grasp for the cement but cannot take hold. He slips and falls forward, landing on his hands and knees.

“And what now?” He asks, “Why are you telling me all of this?”

They move back from him, making room for their Creator and the rumble comes from them again.

“It has gone wrong,” they say, “Someone has messed with time. It must be fixed. It will be fixed. It will be fixed, Nicholas Updown. And we will fix it, we the Time Travelers, we will fix it.”

And Nicholas Updown, a broken man, a weak, shaking man on his hands and knees, was starting to believe them. He was ready to put his life in his own hands, hundreds and hundreds of his own hands, when he heard that familiar suck of air and the black and red swirl exploded out from a mass of time travelers.

And I came out of that hole, pointing his gun. And Nicholas Updown somehow was not all that surprised to see Me fire it or to feel a bullet lodging in his lung.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

EARTH ANGEL

She was timid then. Scared, even. When he gazed at her shaky, tight-lipped smile, there were no signs yet of the powerful, assertive leader who would later emerge.

She was his first. He'd tried on the suit before, of course. The skin-tight fuzzy green surface was there to retain static, and underneath there were coils that channeled the exotic energy directly, vibrating the material, and his body as a byproduct, to unbelievable speeds. Inside the mask were life support systems that sustained the traveler until he slowed down enough for air molecules to catch up with him.

On the belt was a small red knob, which could be cranked clockwise to increase the speed of the traveler. With it, he could move fast enough that everyone around him looked frozen. At one o'clock, he could zip across counties. At two o'clock, he could slip between seconds, swim in between minutes. At three o'clock, he could shoot forward in time, minutes, even hours. At four o'clock, he moved days, at five o'clock weeks, at six o'clock months, and at seven o'clock years. At eight o'clock he moved decades. At nine o'clock centuries. At ten o'clock too far to count. And once he hit eleven o'clock, he started moving backwards.

He'd gone out like this a few times, mostly keeping to desolate parts of the globe. The middle of deserts. Uninhabited islands. Far up in Siberia. The middle of the ocean once, by accident, which almost caused him to drown had he not acted fast. Just enough to get a taste for it. To explore, while he figured out what he was going to do with this power.

In his spare time, he read. Newspapers were his favorite thing – old newsreels of times long forgotten by most. But they were more than just nostalgia to him, they were research, study. He read feverishly, learning everything he could about the past. And one day he read about her, the fire, and the loss.

He felt moved. So he did it. He cranked the knob to eleven and waited until he found her. The suit brought him to her and then he popped back into reality, flames glowing all around. Glowing, but not flickering, as the knob was on two o'clock now and nothing was in motion.

Still, he had to act carefully, not wanting to touch any inch of the invaluable fabric to the flames. He did not know how much damage it would take to render the suit instable, but since finding out would likely mean he'd either gotten stranded in some foreign time or been blown to kingdom come, he did not want to find out.

He scanned the room for her, pushing back thick walls of smoke like curtains. The mask protected his eyes and throat from the sting. Under foot, the Berber carpet was black and scorched. In the middle of the room was a pile of ceiling tiles, slanted like a roof, burning like a pyre.

He reached toward a board, but he wasn't faster than heat, and the blisters sprouted on his hand. Swearing, he stumbled back. Then, searching, he found a standing lamp and wielded it as a pike, pushing the pile of tiles away, digging her out.

And there she was, under the pile, just a limb, smoking form. She looked so fragile, so close to death. He pulled her up into his arms and wishing he could tell her it was going to be OK.

Then he turned the knob.

On the other side, he stood in Central Park, her body dangling over his shoulder. He set her down gently and started performing CPR. Ear on her chest, he heard a beating heart weak but steady. It grew stronger each time he pumped more smoke from her lungs, replacing it with breaths of his own. Finally, she woke, eyes blinking, coughing away the last wisps of the past.

Her hazel eyes were shell shocked. Scared. Confused. She looked at him and he could tell she didn't know what to think.

His first. Hers was the first life he saved.

"Congratulations," he said, "Welcome to the future."

He put his hand to the knob again.

"You get a second chance," he said.

Then he disappeared.

*

It hurt getting shot in the lung. A lot.

Sharp metal peeling back muscle tissue. Blood vessels bursting inside of him, flowing freely into all the wrong places. He began to feel as

if he would drown in his own life fluid. The thought made him feel sick and weak and swollen.

But they would not let him die. They rushed around him, taking him into their arms, forming a great green nexus about him and then vibrating all at once until he vibrated with them.

The world shook all around him, blurring his view of tidy houses and highways. The world blurred around him and he closed his dying eyes to it and then everything got light and felt like nothing, like falling, like a dream.

And then he awoke, in the future. Far, far in the future. Though all he knew was that he was in some sort of domed room. The walls and ceiling were as one and appeared to be made of reflective glass. He was lying on the room's only piece of furniture, a bare white foam mattress with no bed frame beneath it. He lay there, lung wound somehow miraculously repaired, bullet gone, and no one there to explain.

He decided it must be the future because the walls and ceiling were clearly not just walls and ceiling, but a screen of some sort. Not to mention that, projected right in the center, in digits larger than himself, were the date and time. 5:10 pm September 12th, 2109.

If that was right, the Time Travelers had brought Nicholas Updown more than a century into the future. And after what he had seen so far, he had no reason to think it wasn't right. He could only imagine what the future had in store for him.

*

I did not try to stop them from carrying Updown away. In fact, I had fully expected them to do so. I wanted him gone, out of My way. He had failed to live up to his part. Had flinched, had walked away from killing Elizabeth, forcing Me to do it in his stead. This Nicholas Updown was broken, was off the correct path.

And for this I blame you, you fucking pawn. I had watched Nicholas Updown kill his wife in cold blood hundreds of times before. Before you were there. Had watched him pull that trigger without a flinch, watched his satisfied smirk knowing that cheating whore could not live. All before you came along and altered things, you rat. You didn't think you were

always the one she had an affair with, did you? No, there were others, many others, before you replaced them. But your presence there, you and your savior Ted, created a little wrinkle in time. For some reason it gave Updown pause, made him rethink that necessary murder. And it forced Me to be creative.

So I hopped into the past and made Myself another Updown. You heard right. As your future self let slip to you, cloning is no longer just genetics and DNA structures. There are other, more interesting ways.

We had thought it would be a paradox. Ted actually was the first, though he got the idea retroactively from Updown, who himself got the idea from Ted. It's a bit hard to follow after a while, but I do know that Ted, unconcerned with things like destroying space and time, the arrogant old heel, did it years before Updown ever did.

The basic approach is this. Our Time Traveler, let's call him Barnabus, travels one minute into his past, at the same physical location. There he meets his chronological predecessor, let's call him Adam. So Barnabus meets Adam, B meets A, just in time for Adam to travel back in time to essentially repeat the journey Barnabus just made.

If Barnabus doesn't alter the timestream at all with his presence, Adam will travel to the past again just as Barnabus did the first time around, and disappear from Barnabus' view. Barnabus, meantime, will move forward. The two will no longer be conscious of each other, but will be two parts of the same person on the same string with a single loop where they intermingled.

However, if Barnabus decides to live dangerously, he might throw a wrench into the works and *stop* Adam from traveling to the past. If Barnabus is so daring, as Ted was one fateful day, theoretically any of four things could happen.

Barnabus might find that he's *incapable* of stopping Adam, as Barnabus' presence would mean Adam's trip back was predetermined. Since they are really the same person at two different points in their personal timestream, without Adam traveling into the past, he could never meet himself. This outcome would reinforce beliefs such as fate and predestination as Barnabus, whether it meant him slipping on a phantom banana peel, or Adam feeling a sudden surge of strength to fight him off,

would become literally incapable of a simple action such as stopping Adam from entering a wormhole.

Or, perhaps, Barnabus would find he's most capable of stopping Adam's trip back in time. He might grab Adam's shoulder, or trip him with an outstretched foot, or even hold him at gunpoint for a mere sixty seconds and derail what had just occurred. In this case, Barnabus might disappear, having altered the timestream so that he could not have been there to begin with. His stopping Adam from going to the past means there is no logical reason for him to be there. Although, Adam only didn't go to the past because Barnabus *was* there. The contradictions in this possibility seem enormous and unavoidable.

Which is why as a third possibility holds, perhaps Barnabus' mad hubris would stop Adam from traveling back and yet Barnabus would stay in the present time with Adam and since this would, seemingly, violate all sorts of laws of space and time, all Hell would break loose and the entire universe would be thrown into a deep, dark well of entropy. This is, of course, the possibility that would hold most rational men of science from trying it out to begin with.

Or, perhaps, a fourth thing could happen. A thing that, unexplainably, is what happened to Ted. Perhaps Barnabus would stop Adam from traveling back. Perhaps Barnabus would not, in this action, cause his own disappearance, but would instead stay in the present time with his time twin, Adam. Perhaps, despite seemingly violating what seem like natural space-time laws, no hell breaks loose and there is no entropy. Perhaps the only result is that where once there was one man, now there are two, identical but for a minute's difference in their age. As near perfect clones as humankind could conceive. Two exact copies of the same man, this Adam-Barnabus, your Ted, Nicholas Updown's self; two exact copies of one person coexisting in the same place at the same time.

But how is this explainable? Has Barnabus just accessed a version of himself from a different universe? Has his violation propelled him to an alternate dimension? Are there multiple timestreams? A multiverse? Such questions have always been beyond My scope, but seeing as Ted was able to bypass the first two possible outcomes and the results of the third have yet to take place, clearly the laws of this universe are more adaptable than I once suspected.

Not that I cared too much if I could explain it in the end, though. My aims are not fame or publication. I don't look to be called the next Einstein or to be forever revered by academic peers and copycats. I only care about knowledge in so far as it furthers My ambition. I only cared about such knowledge so far as I could use it to My advantage, to seize the power I so desired.

Which is why I made My new Updown. I slipped between seconds in time and made Myself a copy of the Professor from right after he pointed his gun at you and right before Ted came to your rescue. Then I carried this Nicholas Updown, unaware, in a short enough space that he had no time to register a thought, into the minutes after Elizabeth was dead, after My Own past self had left the room. There was Elizabeth, her corpse, Rip gone, blood on Nicholas' hand. I could tell he did not know what to think as I rushed through the doorway and caught him in his swoon.

"Nick," I shouted to him, "Nick! What have you done?"

And he would learn. Every tiny detail of what he had done in My account. How he stumbled upon the secret lovers. How he blacked out in rage. How he shot at you and then dragged your corpse outside. How he stabbed his own bride in the chest. To show My loyalty, I would volunteer to dispose of the bodies, to clean up his mess. All I wanted was a share in the God Machine, I would tell him. It is more important than all of this.

"And just think," I said to him, "Once the technology is perfected, you can go back and undo all of this."

I knew that in the moment, these words were of great comfort to him.

*

Chet Bradley realized that the bizarre moments were only getting worse. He had spent half the day following Nicholas Updown's car back and forth between office and house as the man tore recklessly across the quiet roads. Dangerous driving was nothing to a cop, though. No, it was when he followed Updown back, and all of time seemed to stop.

Not that he'd really even noticed it. Maybe a vague impression, as Bradley was frozen in his own vehicle, about five car lengths back, halted

in between thoughts about whether his future children would believe any of this and if cops that went rogue still got severance pay.

When his mind unfroze enough to continue that thought, it was to the sound of a bullet. And then things got really weird. A horde of men in fuzzy green suits were surrounding Nicholas Updown. More of these armies of look-a-likes, Bradley thought. It was time to get to the bottom of this, though. Stop them from murdering Updown, if that's what they were up to.

So as they huddled about the scientist, Bradley ran forward, gun drawn, and grabbed the arm of a man standing at the outermost edge of the circle to shove him aside.

The man felt strange under his grip. He was vibrating. And then Chet Bradley was vibrating too. And then all the blood rushed to his head and he felt faint.

When he woke up, he was in a library in some building he didn't recognize. He was sitting in a chair with a book open in front of him. The book looked unfamiliar to him and his head was sore. Maybe he'd been day dreaming these things? He lacked the strength to stand. Eager for something to anchor him to this world, he glanced down to the book.

Here is what he read:

The trio of adventurers awoke in a barren limbo. Not the same life defying twister of space they floated through during their last conscious memories to this point, but in a new place, of mysterious origins and destination. They knew not where they were, how they got there, or, when they bothered to really think about it, who was really responsible for all of this.

Von Raysong glanced at his image in a splinter of glass found on the marbled ground of what appeared to be a ruined citadel of some sort. Stone walls and towers of one pervasive shade of grey were all overgrown with ivy, no citizens were in sight, no animals made a sound, and they were left feeling quite abandoned and alone in this marble courtyard, with those walls and tower and ivy outgrowths surrounding them on all sides.

"Clearly this was a case of sabotage by one of the Interworld Federation's many enemies," Von Raysong mused, "But whom? And why?"

They all knew the why, though, of course, what with the importance of their Daxonium shipment to the refueling of the Interworld Spacefleet's many battalions of hyperspeed warships. Von Raysong was simply being rhetorical, as he was apt to doing when he came upon an opportunity to muse.

"Maybe it was the Hez Allahs," Gargax Sly offered.

"Maybe we did something wrong," Freddy suggested.

He was shot two double barreled glances of disapproval, and decided that, rather than joining the conversation between the ship officers, perhaps he was better off tracing the intricate, shifting pattern that undercut the marble floor's design.

"It may have been the Hez Allahs," Von Raysong replied, "Though they are usually not so explosive. It might have been the Plasma Nation, or the Koreandars, or even the Jalongs from Venus 6."

Gargax began musing on this, until Von Raysong, seeing his musings starting to intersect and overlap with Von Raysong's own musings, shook his mighty blonde locks in disapproval, resulting in an abrupt and obedient end to Gargax's musings.

"I thought, Sir," Gargax Sly simply said, "That the Jalongs from Venus 6 had been destroyed in the Battle of Vector 7G."

Now free to fully take advantage of all available musing territory, Von Raysong mused on this, and mused on it hard.

"Perhaps you are right, my First Lieutenant," he charitably allowed, "But even if we are to cross off the Hez Allahs and the Jalongs from Venus 6, we are still left with a veritable catalogue of possible enemies. We must do everything in our power to identify the culprits of this untimely attack so that we can bring justice to their doorstep with all the speed and honor of an Interworld Federation Warship."

It would, of course, have to be an actual Interworld Federation Warship enacting this delivery of justice, but Von Raysong knew a guy who knew a guy who had a captain of one such ship on his speed dial. Von Raysong raised his fist and pumped it a bit to escalate his last point, and, if you were to ask his opinion on the matter, looked quite heroic and iconic in doing so.

"Maybe the Jupiterians were tired of us taking all their Daxonium for cut rate prices," Nietzsche said, but it was all double barreled glances of disapproval again, so he rightfully resumed his role of marble pattern tracing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE

My brand new, shiny clone of Nicholas Updown was rather depressed to find out he had killed his own wife. Kind friend that I am, I coaxed him out of his bathtub, where he was threatening to start on his second bottle of gin, and drove him to the office, where he sobbed for a few more hours to the sounds of bleeping computer displays and half a dozen hamster wheels.

I gave him his space during this, letting the noises of his ambition soothe his sadness, turning My attention to other matters at that time, of which I always have many worth attending to. When his tears dried at last, I did two things. Suggested he go see that old shrink of his, and updated him on the progress of the wormholes.

“The best way to do something about this is by making this God Machine of yours really work. Not just a rudimentary design, but a practical tool you could implement with ease. If you’ve mastered time travel, you can go back and make sure she never dies.”

Nicholas wiped his eyes and turned to the consol. Mouse in hand he opened the Deus ex Machina folder to record the latest wormhole findings.

“No,” he said, hunting and pecking away on his keyboard, “I’m going to do more than that. I’m going to make it so no one ever has to die again.”

If only he had guessed the irony of his words! For that day was the first of many I saw Nicholas Updown die with My Own eyes.

The first time it happened, he was dragging a large battery pumped full of exotic energy to the testing facility. He thought he heard a sound behind him, turned to look, and ended up tripping over the battery. He landed strangely, broke his hip, but was so busy working on a breakthrough for portable wormhole generators that he put off going to the doctor for three days.

On the third day, the pain and immobility proved too much and he decided to call a cab and take a visit to his physician in town. The broken bone required surgery, which required anesthesia, which caused a bad

reaction, and instead of waking up in the recovery room, Nicholas' heart stopped and he never woke up again.

Unlike with the Christopher Lincoln paradox, however, I just sat back and watched it happen.

And then, not seconds later, he was back in bed, alive again, without the least bit of knowledge that he'd ever been gone.

The second time it happened, Nicholas had contracted a flu from a patient in the waiting room at his local physician's office. In addition to causing him to regurgitate for seven hours straight until nothing but water and then air came up from his convulsing stomach, this virus and the well-developed bacteria on the ill-washed dishes piling up in his kitchen sink conjoined into a nasty case of bacterial meningitis. Though after the fact I surmised the meaning of the symptoms, Nicholas and I were too engrossed in manufacturing the first of those nifty little billiard ball like miniature God Machines to bother much with his headaches, neck stiffness, fever, or occasional state of confusion. So instead of going to a doctor at all, Nicholas collapsed in the facility after seventy-three hours of infection and died a few hours later.

Unlike with the Christopher Lincoln paradox, however, I just sat back and watched it happen. And then, not seconds later, he was back in bed, alive again, without the least bit of knowledge that he'd ever been gone.

The third time it happened, Nicholas was picking through cans in the kitchen cupboards for a bachelor's dinner. In his absent state of mind he did not notice the poorly dented condition of the soup can he opened and in his rush for sustenance, he did not heat the food. The next evening as Nicholas wandered into his kitchen for another meal, he grew dizzy and the cupboard shimmied into twin cupboards before his eyes. He tried swallowing and found his throat incapable. The paralysis spread down his body slowly until he collapsed to the floor. Unable to move, his lungs could not pump oxygen into his body. A few minutes later he asphyxiated. The neurotoxins spread from botulism had done him in.

Unlike with the Christopher Lincoln paradox, however, I just sat back and watched it happen. And then, not seconds later, he was back up ready to eat again, without the least bit of knowledge that he'd ever been gone.

And there were car accidents. Horrible, ugly car accidents. A plane crash. A puffy purple infection sprouting from a paper cut. A brain tumor that he languished with for years. Cancer, of course, in various forms. Toxins and alcohol poisoning and that period of depression he threw hard drugs at. There was a deadly brawl at a bar. More than a few suicide attempts. Try as he might, Nicholas Updown could not die. Not for more than a second at a time.

The Time Travelers saw to that. And I was more than content to sit back and let them do their jobs.

*

And while Nicholas Updown's body experienced countless travails that were promptly wiped from time, his mind was feeling no better. He had taken My advice, though, and was visiting Dr. Charles Ostrander.

Ostrander was an interesting man, very vain with his capped teeth and twenty dollar hair cut slathered in thirty dollar product. He was a consummate professional, though, not one to accept nonsense or simply shrug off a patient's problems. And what's more, Nicholas liked him and felt comfortable opening up.

The first time they met, Updown took a seat on his designer sofa and Ostrander took out his notepad and tape recorder.

"So, Nicholas, what do you want to talk about today?"

And it all spilled out. His loneliness since the sudden "disappearance" of his wife. His suspicion, as he told Ostrander, that she was dead. His own fear of death. That he kept feeling like he was dying, dying in a thousand ways. That he was seeing visions of strange phantoms in fuzzy green suits. That he had nightmares about other loved ones dying, his grandparents, his parents, his brother. That he cried every day. That he sweated with fear every night. That as much as he feared it, he wished very hard for death at times.

"And," he confessed, "What's worst is when I try to pray. I fold my hands and stare at the Heavens and I just keep hoping and hoping and hoping that I'll hear something or see something or feel something that will set my heart at ease."

"Mmm hmm," Ostrander muttered, "But you haven't, I take it?"

Updown's eyes looked wide and desperate.
"No," he said, "No. No I haven't."

*

Chet Bradley stood at the podium, his voice on autopilot as he delivered those powerful words about how there were capable men and women in place to guard every dimension of this great nation but perhaps the most important one of all. He had spoken many times before about the fourth dimension, about time and how he himself had traveled more than a century through it to the time he now knew. He had lived in that future since the day he followed Nicholas Updown and the Time Travelers through their wormhole and was deposited in a public library. It was there that he eventually put down his book and discovered what strange miracle had occurred.

Once he was duly processed and on his feet, Chet Bradley tried to locate Nicholas Updown for questioning. This time travel was not a technology to be taken lightly. It was, Bradley believed, not a power that should belong to mortal man.

But Nicholas Updown was no longer an easy man to find. He did not exist in any of this era's communication directories. The government registries had not heard his name and police were unwilling to look into the matter. Bradley had no choice but to settle down and find honest work in the twenty second century.

As the years passed, though, and his light blonde hair began to fade to pale white, Chet Bradley did not forget what horrors he had seen in his past. His chief may have laughed at his findings, but they were no less pressing in Bradley's mind. The weapon Nicholas Updown held was no less dangerous than a million hydrogen bombs and belonged in the hands of a single, unsupervised civilian even less. So, having been born in a great nation founded on ideas such as democracy, representation, and checks and balances, he felt it his duty to put a check on Updown's seemingly unlimited power.

Chet Bradley was determined find a way to access time travel technology and then do everything he could to stop Nicholas Updown from

becoming an all powerful tyrant. It was thus that he started the Time Guardians and thus that he became known as the Lawman.

*

Edgar Unum was alone with him at last; Nicholas Updown, in the flesh. His hair a bit ragged, but looking no older than his fifties, even after all of these years of invention and strife. Unum had read extensively about the scientist whose God Machine project had been hot among investors but eventually lead to his financial ruin. Who had bizarre connections to the election of President Rip Donner. Whose wife mysteriously disappeared, causing him to cut virtually all ties with the outside world. Who disappeared one afternoon in the early twenty-first century and was never (or at least the news depositories claimed) heard from again.

And now here he was, sitting across an oak table from Edgar. The strangest, most important personality of this or any time. Edgar had convinced Lillian to leave the two men alone and now they sat, sipping green teas, and Edgar turned on his vid-recorder ring.

“Mr. Unum,” Updown said, “It’s a pleasure to meet a man I’ve heard so much about. I understand you’ve been a large part of both Forever Life and the Time Guardians?”

Edgar Unum smiled and leaned forward.

“Mr. Updown,” he said, “Please call me Edgar, and know that I’m a journalist. And that as friendly as you might be, I still have a whole lot of questions for you.”

Updown guffawed into his tea. Then he smiled and leaned back in the chair.

“Well,” he said, “This should be entertaining.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ASSEMBLING

Nicholas Updown was now a man living out of time. He had awoken in the future. In some strange domed room. In the year 2109. It was a great deal for him to take in. He felt the need to sit for a moment.

“I almost died today,” he told the computer consol before him.

“In fact, I think I *did* die today.”

And pictures flew across the wall-sized screen. Images replaying the scene from his recent memory. The horde of Time Travelers in green suits and Abraham in his hooded robe brandishing the revolver. Nicholas Updown was shocked to witness himself being blasted in the chest with a gunshot, falling to the ground breathless, and the travelers beginning their journey around him. And then everyone blinked out of consciousness, out of the screen like Hollywood magic.

“Who did that? Is someone listening to me?”

In response, the screens on the wall faded away to reveal clear glass. All around this domed room there were other, smaller rooms designed much like observation rooms used in police interrogations. But all of these rooms were empty. Updown sat alone.

“Where are the Time Travelers? My clones? The men who brought me here?”

And then the screens returned, darkening the glass and literally millions of images flashed upon them. Images of men with Nicholas Updown’s face meeting together hundreds at a time in Congress or the White House, playing on the fields of sport, speaking in front of reporters and the public, standing on movie lots barking orders, and then those in green suits, in so many places and times. The latter were surrounded by people of all races, all nationalities, from all time periods. So far as Updown could ascertain, these people had only one thing in common. They were all dead or dying.

“How many times have I died?” Updown asked, “I mean I know I’m still alive. But how many times have I been saved from death?”

A number appeared on the screen. Twelve. And then it changed. Thirty-five. Then fifty-eight. Then one hundred and six. Three-oh-

three. One thousand ten. And it kept growing this way, exponentially until Updown yelled.

“Stop! Stop it! I get it already.”

Clearly there were forces out there unhappy that man now had such power as he had created.

“So why aren’t I dead, then? Really dead? Dead dead? I mean, how can I possibly jump into a wormhole that many times to save myself? How can I know about it all in advance that way? I may have a God Machine, but I’m not God, not really. I don’t have the omniscience yet, the omnipresence. I can’t be everywhere at once.”

And then images began flashing on the screen again. The millions of Updowns in all times and all walks of life.

“I understand,” he said. “There’s lots of me. But how? How does this happen?”

Then the images faded to black, replaced by four giant words in white: You make it happen.

“Who’s talking to me?” he demanded.

But there was no answer. Just a blank screen. Artificial intelligence. No doubt he would eventually use the future technology to create a research room such as this where he could study all of known time. To bring himself closer to omniscience. And this is where he stood.

“All right,” Updown said, “Clearly I need to do some sort of cloning. So tell me what there is to know about cloning technology.”

The screen split into two. On the left were pictures of sheep moving about a yard. A title above these images read “Biological Cloning.” On the right were pictures of identical white haired men with an eye patches. Dozens of them at a time. The title above these images read “Chronal Cloning.” I won’t bother you with the details of this process again. Suffice to say, Nicholas learned them quickly.

And, soon, he got his hands on one of the portable God Machines his chronal clone and I had recently perfected back in the early twenty-first century. Then he set about saving his life.

*

The Lawman was holding a meeting with his three of his lieutenants, the seasoned Christopher Lincoln, a young hotshot named Pardeep Sani, and the newly promoted Mary Deacon who had freshly buffed her scalp for the occasion and wore a designer tank top that showed the full majesty of her soaring Eagle tattoo. They all seemed eager to add their own notions to the meeting. Christopher Lincoln had his usual lust for blood. Mary and Pardeep had been collaborating to improve the scientific wing of the organization. But Chet Bradley had his own purposes in mind.

“And the reason we called this meet up,” Mary said, “Is to give you a breakthrough.

Pardeep’s hands shaking with excitement, he twisted a knob on his projector ring and the room filled with holographic images of hard working women and men in lab coats at the Time Guardian research facility.

“We’ve discovered something we’d dubbed *Chronal Ripples*,” he said, “Basically, whenever someone uses Updown’s technology to open a wormhole from one time and place to another, it leaves a ripple based on the other dimensional radiation signature.” “What ‘Deep’s trying to say,” Mary interjected, “Is that we can find out who’s changing what in time and undo it. It’s like when they first discovered fingerprints or DNA. We’ve finally got a way to really start fighting time crimes.”

“That’s very good news, Mary.”

Smiling, their crew cut leader turned to the most veteran member of his inner circle. He was a former hitman for organized crime and no stranger to breaking and entering without garnering the notice of sensitive recording equipment.

“And how’s the other little project coming along?”

Christopher Lincoln smiled and with one gloved hand produced from his pocket a most curious glowing ball.

*

Nicholas Updown was surrounded by one hundred exact copies of himself. And each of those Nicholas Updowns, surely, was musing over the exact same thing.

The questioning, talking, pondering, musing all filled the room with an incredible ruckus. And then, all at once, it seemed as if they got tired of this and they fell silent.

This allowed the original to speak.

“Well, technically,” he said, “I am one hundred seconds older than the youngest of you. So I think it best I run this show, on basis of seniority if no wiser system can be devised.”

Though some of the Updowns who were merely one or seven seconds younger seemed to grumble at this thought, none of them were different enough from the original Updown to actually come up with a better idea, and soon enough they all fell in line.

“I think,” the original Updown said, “And think you are all thinking as well, that this Chronal Cloning is the solution to the problem of Omnipresence. However, as much as we think alike and talk alike now, as soon as we begin to go off in different directions and live different lives, that will fade away under the weight of experience. Without sharing the same set of senses, our single-mindedness will fail and be replaced by redundant and even sometimes opposing efforts. If we want to be successful here, we must keep that advantageous single-mindedness in existence. A hundred bodies, one consciousness. And, as you all know, since you all lived through it with me, after a little research I think I may have developed just the thing.”

The domed walls flashed the picture of a microchip, magnified exponentially, with the title “mindlink” above it. With the original Updown’s instruction, each version of himself held aloft a plastic syringe and injected one of the microchips into his neighbor’s skull. Once they had all finished, Nicholas proceeded to the part of the plan he had not thought up until after they had all been created.

He took out an even larger syringe, which contained the Master Mind Chip – he would run this show – and stuck himself in the forehead. Then he moved to his consol where he intended on sending out an electromagnetic signal to activate the technology. No sooner had he pressed the appropriate button than something popped inside his skull like a fried circuit breaker. This sudden burst of energy sent him to the floor.

And something seemed to pop in the crowd of copies around him as well. For they all stood and set down their syringes and spoke as one.

“We must make sure he’s OK,” they said in unison, their voices like a chorus, “We must not let our Father die.”

*

And then there is the story of you. Little Moses Baby that you were. It was I, Rip, in My dark robe and hood, who first delivered you to that doorstep in that wealthy gated community in Florida. I had done My research. I knew your mother could not have children, had gone through a battery of tests and procedures, but could not. That was before invitro fertilization had taken hold in the hearts and wombs of wealthy Americans. It was before men and women like your parents thought much of adopting foreign babies. But they were Christian. They would not stare in the face of an honest to God red blooded white American infant male and look the other way.

So as I stood in front of the proud white columns adorning their doorway, I set you down in a wicker basket. Your infant form swaddled in blankets. The whole thing was really quite Biblical but for the note and the \$10,000 wad of cash.

The note told them I was unable to raise this child. That I hoped they would do it in My stead. That you were a great child, destined for great things. I wrote that your name was Richard, and that you would grow up to be the President. I signed it something ridiculous, I believe. Something patriotic and saccharine, like “Betsy.” Better they suspect you the spawn of some distraught, down on her luck single mother than a wretch such as I.

No, Rip, I am not your father. Not exactly. But I did create you. You were My little experience with nature versus nurture. I wanted to see how a child like you would grow up with just the exact right influences. If any flaws you might innately possess would subside to other ambitions with stable surroundings and proud lineage. I watched from the sidelines as you grew, guiding your progress along the way, eagerly micromanaging your every influence, quietly gleeful at the possibility of eventually having a President in My pocket. Little did I know at the time how things would turn out. No, I was so confident then, so cocky.

And as I waited for your wealthy father to pull up in his Rolls Royce and find you cooing in that basket upon his front step, I pulled out that dog eared novel and read another passage:

Then Nietzsche said something that Von Raysong and Sly had not considered.

"What," interjected the Galley Cook as he realized that despite not knowing just how much time had passed since the crew somehow transported from certain death in the depths of space to this barren wasteland of stone and ivy and despite not having finished more than a bite of the summer squash pudding and despite normally having a famously voracious appetite, he was not a bit hungry at the moment, "If we are not alive at all? What if we died in that great suck of space and now we are in some sort of afterlife?"

"I have tried," he said, "To feel my heartbeat, and I cannot. I have found only that it no longer seems to beat at all. And I cannot help but wonder if you, my fellow crew members, have had similar experiences?"

Von Raysong and Sly, in a moment of weakness, allowed nervous reflexes, understandably shaken by this entire sudden and otherworldly affair, to snap in and place their mighty right palms over their usually surging chests, where they found themselves also to be quite lacking in the department of beating hearts.

Full of his usual tact and wisdom, Von Raysong, of course, was quick to dismiss the Galley Cook's outlandish hypothesis.

"Of course we're alive, nimrod," he said. "Corpses don't stand around kibitzing about these things."

Their new reality thus cemented in the minds of the first officers, Von Raysong suggested they explore their new surroundings and with Gargax Sly wielding a particularly impressive plasma cannon the size of a zebra's thigh, the men set out to do just this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FATAL FLAWS

Edgar flexed his wrist. He'd never had to hold up his vid ring this long before.

"So the mindlink didn't exactly work the way you wanted, then?" he said.

Updown sighed. It wasn't a fond topic for him, but one he'd spent much time musing on.

"No, no, it didn't, but those time travelers, they were like Pandora's Box. Once I created them and linked them and set them loose, there was no undoing it. Not that I wanted to, since they were saving my life a few hundred times a day, but even if I did, it would be impossible."

The inventor of the time machine bested by his own clones? Was it possible?

"But couldn't you just travel back in time and stop yourself from ever making the mind link to begin with?"

Updown laughed.

"Oh, Edgar – can I call you Edgar?"

He nodded.

"Edgar, Edgar, Edgar. You don't understand them at all if you think it's that easy. They weren't content to stick to the rather conservative one hundred clones I started them at. No, they reproduced like bunnies, each one making more than a hundred new copies of himself. I could travel back to that moment – or really to any moment before it as often as I want – there would always be one of them there waiting to stop me. No, they truly are omnipresent, and the mindlink allows them all to know what's going on everywhere they're at."

Edgar considered this.

"Could you just ask them to stop? You're in charge of them, after all, right?"

Updown smiled.

"Yes, I am in charge of them. But why would I want them to stop? All they're doing is what I'd do if I had a greater reach. They're defeating death, one person at a time."

“Is that why you called it the God Machine? Because these Time Travelers have the power of God?”

This question seemed to strike Updown. He pushed his chair back from the table and strode to a window. The room overlooked a cliff side with a snowy city far below.

“That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, no,” he said, “But it’s how it worked out. I won’t complain about all the benefits that have come. My own safety secured. Old friends and acquaintances from more than a century ago being snatched from the grave and returned to my side. Better health, slower aging, all the money I could want. No, the Time Travelers have been good to me – but every day since they day they and I became two separate beings, every day since that they have grown more and more different than me. And …”

He trailed off, prompting Unum to stand, to join him. Edgar held the ring up where Updown could see it, and switched the recording device off. A sign of trust.

“And what, Nick?”

“And they scare me sometimes. Charles has this theory, something called Temporal Dystopia. He can explain it better than I. I intended the time travelers to be our salvation. But if Charles is right, they might one day be our doom.”

*

Elizabeth’s death freed you to return to your rightful place as an American president. After Ted rescued you from your death at Updown’s hands, he left you in a secret bunker beneath the White House. You used the white phone attached to the wall there and soon a small secret service detail was there to usher you into the Oval Office. Your secret remained safe there until three men strode into the office from a meeting off-site. One of them was you. Of the other two men, one was your chief of staff, Ted. Had it just been those two, there would have been no issue with your secret. But the third man was a press secretary. Usually you would trust a man such a position with most of the secrets of your administration. But when he saw you and you saw his face seeing you, you knew this secret was too big.

So you leaped forward, and wrapped your hands around his neck.

“What are you doing?” Ted screamed.

But your future self held him back, watching, smiling, as you choked the life out of this innocent man.

Ted looked on in shock.

“Sir … Mr. President, Sir, I don’t know what to say.”

“Just find me somewhere to put this,” you said, still throttling the secretary.

Once he laid still and breathless, Ted too to making arrangements. He died of a sudden heart attack, you all decided, and no one would know any different. Ted would explore the hiring of a new press secretary and secure a place for this one at Arlington cemetery.

Later, the three of you had a private debriefing. You and your older self felt a tense vibe between you. You had found new joy retracing your old steps as president and doing it better the second time around. Nothing like knowing what international or domestic crisis was coming before it hit your Presidential staff’s radar and being fully prepared to handle all caveats with the clarity of a Monday morning quarterback.

As for Ted, he knew nothing of saving you from Updown – and was shocked to be brought into the circle when it came to all of this time travel nonsense. Clearly it was a Ted from further in the future, one you saw in that compound in Arizona when your future self first made contact.

“Listen,” you said to older yourself, “I’ll relent. I think your place is here, in this office, as President. You took all the steps, you earned it. Honestly, at this point, I think I’d be out of my depth.”

You laughed at yourself.

“That’s not the Rip Donner I know!”

“No, something’s changed in me, you’re right,” you said, “When Elizabeth died, something snapped.”

He nodded.

“I understand. She was the love of my life.”

“She was, wasn’t she? Not just some random sex. Not just some tawdry affair. I loved her.”

You put a hand on your shoulder, the pain still there for your older self but scarred over enough that you can offer some comfort to the version of yourself still feeling the bitterest sting.

“I’ll make sure you have all the resources you need,” you said. “Ted can help you run it. FBI, NSA, NASA, whatever it takes. We’ll get in that facility and we’ll get the technology and we’ll save the world from Nicholas Updown.”

You nod, a sad smile forming on your face. Older and wiser, you think, knowing you’ll take your own advice.

“Hear that, Ted?” you say, “We’re going to steal ourselves a time machine.”

*

Charles Ostrander handed him a file. An actual, real life, paper file. Unum looked at it, startled.

“If you pull the edge, it opens, and you can read all the pretty words,” Ostrander said, laughing gently.

Unum nodded.

“I’m not that much of a rube,” he said. “Just not used to seeing such antiques. This will tell me all about Temporal Dystopia?”

Ostrander considered this.

“The symptoms, sure. Not necessarily the cause, or what will come of it.”

Unum grabbed the edge of the folder tentatively and flipped it open. It read: *Temporal Dystopia is characterized by a lack of clarity and emotional stability on issues concerning time. Subjects often become confused about what time they are currently occupying or what events have taken place in their current timestream. They often express feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, or violent rage. Other symptoms include mild to severe headaches, blurry vision, disorientation, aches and pains, chills, vertigo, vomiting, and irregular heartbeats. Complications from Temporal Dystopia can lead to fundamental aging and mortality.*

“That’s a doozy of a symptom list. What does it mean by fundamental aging?”

“Just like it sounds. If you were so lucky to not die of accident or illness, you would still die eventually just due to your body breaking down over time. Heart failure, liver failure, that type of thing. We can do a lot with synthetic organs and other types of anti-aging therapy these days,

but you can only put things off so long.”

Unum nodded. “So why does Temporal Dystopia make that happen prematurely? Or maybe I should be asking what makes Temporal Dystopia happen?”

“Bingo” Ostrander’s eyebrows seemed to say, as if telling Unum he’d hit upon the right line of questioning at last.

“Too much time traveling, as far as I can tell. Nicholas is holding up all right himself, despite having come so far into the future. But despite being only seconds different in age than all of those clones when he formed them, they’ve aged a lot faster. I’ve seen a few of them lately – not the spring chickens they once were. They’ve lost a lot of spryness from those green track suits. It helps, I think, that they keep going back and cloning younger versions of themselves to fill out their population, but I think one of two of them have actually fallen dead of age.”

“Dead? I thought the Time Travelers defeated all death?”

Ostrander shook his head.

“For all the good they do for life, Updown’s technology seems to add a little back for death.”

“What do you mean? Are you saying the God Machine actually killed the Time Travelers, or just that it accelerated their life cycle?”

Ostrander fished out another file and handed it to Edgar Unum.

“I’m saying,” he said, “That other lives have been touched by this.”

Edgar reached to turn open the file, but Ostrander laid a hand on it, keeping it down from the moment.

“When Nicholas first put together Forever Life, he told me, he was a bit looser with his time travel technology. Everyone in his inner circle had a God Machine. This was fine enough, no one intentionally creating any paradoxes or going back to change the circumstances of time to better favor themselves, but human nature still caught up with them.”

Human nature? Not abusing the machines for their own selfish purposes sounded like exactly the opposite.

“What do you mean?” Edgar asked.

“I mean they got lazy. They started using them not as tools for shaping the architecture of human history, but for catching buses, or, worse, fast forwarding through the dull moments in their lives. They called it by all sorts of interesting names. Skipping, shaving, second

shaving, leap-frogging, or leaping, which also referred to longer jumps, such as weeks or months at a time. Why waste seconds walking down a sidewalk from one place to another, they rationalized, when you could just 'skip' to the sidewalk's end? It didn't help any that these short trips through the wormhole actually cause a biochemical reaction in the pleasure center of the brain –“

“Time traveling is addictive?”

“Only about as addictive as heroin, yes. But only after prolonged exposure. A few of the inner circle managed to slow down on their abuse of the machines once they started feeling strange, including Nicholas himself. Some, like this fellow, were not so lucky.”

He lifted his hand and Edgar greedily flipped open the file. There was a picture of a man inside, a black man with dark Jamaican looks and a gentle smile. His name was Markus. There was a birth date, thirty-eight years hence, and a death date, now three years old. Under known relations, there was only one name.

Lillian Lazarus. Wife.

Edgar shook off his shock.

“What happened to him?”

“He killed himself,” Ostrander said. “All the time traveling had warped his brain functioning. He wanted to go into a wormhole and never come out the other side, he was so caught up in the whole thing. When he told Lillian about his plan, she wanted nothing of it, of course. She tried to stop him, and he got angry, and they fought until she wrestled his machine away from him. He seemed fine enough with it at first, even thanking Lillian many times for saving him from the God Machine's awful influence, but it was all a charade. Deep down, he never stopped wanting to feel those red tentacles swirling around him. After about a month without a fix, he became angry and belligerent, and even assaulted Nicholas in an attempt to get a new machine.”

Edgar was shocked.

“What? Was the Professor OK?”

“He was just fine. The Time Travelers quickly surrounded him, leading me to wonder what Markus might have done if he were left alone with Nicholas long enough, and placed Markus into a detox cell on the Forever Life premises.”

“Detox. So he should have been fine, right?”

Ostrander sighed.

“The God Machine warped his bio chemistry too much. He’d never be fine. And when he realized he wasn’t going to get his fix, and that he’d torn his personal relationships apart, he decided he’d had enough and hung himself from the top bunk of his cell.”

So Lillian had a husband. A dead husband, sure, but death wasn’t what it used to be.

“Why haven’t the Time Travelers brought him back yet?”

Ostrander’s hand slid back under the file and he pulled it away, flipping it shut once more.

“Good question. I’m not sure exactly how they work. But you’ve got to figure even with as many of them as there are and as fast as they work, a person dies every second. My personal theory is that they have some sort of ranking system. I wouldn’t think that people with enduring mental issues who choose to off themselves are real high up on the priority list.”

That seemed easy enough to understand. Not much sense bringing back people who would only create more work. The whole thing seemed like a pretty daunting task as it was, combating something as enduring as death. The benefits seemed as if they might be temporary, at best.

“If time traveling is so dangerous, why doesn’t Updown put a stop to it?”

“Honestly? I think he’d like nothing more, sometimes. Members of Forever Life are no longer allowed to access the technology. After Markus died and the Time Guardians stole one, he put an end to that. And Updown himself hasn’t, to my knowledge, used one in years. Too afraid of going down Markus’ path, I’m certain. But the time travelers are beyond his control.”

Aha, an inconsistency. Something real journalists lived for. Edgar was pleased to have noted it.

“Nicholas told me that they would do anything he told them to!”

“Maybe that’s true,” Ostrander said, “Maybe. But even if it is, I’m not sure he could ever want them to stop enough to actually tell them to.”

Updown’s control over them seemed tenuous at best, then. Or maybe it was more of a question of control over himself.

“What’s holding him back?”

“His family,” Ostrander said, “He misses them.”

This struck Edgar as strange.

“His family hasn’t been brought back yet?”

“No, what you have to understand is that the time travelers have his mind, his brain. Which means that, like him, they prize life above all else. They’d never want to kill someone. In fact, Nicholas says it’s the one rule they live by, that no matter what they do to change time or save lives, they’ll never, ever, ever kill. That kind of conscience means it’s probably hard for them to look back at certain chapters of his life, though.”

“Certain chapters? What chapters?”

Had Nicholas Updown, the man behind the woman behind the organization now known as the foremost defender of life on Earth done something he deeply regretted now?

“The other thing about the way Nicholas and thus the Time Travelers think,” Ostrander continued, ignoring the question, “Is that they’d want to save the best for last. To bring them back when his work is nearly complete and he can spend all of his time with them. Which means it will be some time before he sees his grandparents, and his parents, and his brother. And until he sees her.”

“Her?” Edgar asked, “Who’s her? What chapters are you referring to? What’s Nicholas Updown’s dark secret?”

“I don’t know anything for certain,” Ostrander said, “But all my years of psychological training have equipped me with certain intuitions. You, though, are a man of facts, and cannot base your reporting on such hasty speculations.”

“I’m a journalist,” Edgar said, “Why don’t you let me decide for myself.”

Ostrander stood up, file folders tucked under his arm.

“I’ll get going now, I’m afraid I’ve already said too much.”

WINDOW SIX
WORLD WAR THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TRESPASSES

Edgar Unum became a household name overnight. The man who broke the story of a century. The exclusive video report. A few trillion hits a day on his personal newsblog. Cash pouring in from advertisers. A Pulitzer nomination already sitting in his message bank. And he hadn't even come out with the juicy stuff yet.

He couldn't walk down Main Street to buy an energy water without getting mobbed. He did it anyway, if only because after so many years in that drafty back cubicle, he loved the attention.

All the public love (and the steady income stream) had motivated him to quit the obit scene once and for all. Some contractual clause had opened a window for litigation over just who held the rights to any reporting Edgar Unum did while on the staff of the Arizona Sun-Times-Chronicle, but he'd let the lawyers sort that out. In the meantime, he had his days free to stroll through the city and watch the fans shove for positioning around him. These crowds during his mid-morning walks to the energy water vending machine seemed to grow every day.

Actually, as he looked up to the horizon, so did the city itself. Bigger and bigger every day, as if there were never enough room for everyone in it. He could swear there were two new high rise apartment complexes he'd never seen before put up within the week.

Edgar lifted his vid phone ring to his eyes and let the activation laser scan over his pupil.

"Updown," he said to the ring once the scan completed, and the professor's face expanded into the holographic image hovering over Unum's hand.

"Yes sir, Mr. journalist of the decade?"

"*Time's* saying journalist of the millennium, actually," Unum said, chuckling, "But I actually had a few follow up questions."

He'd made Updown look pretty good in the piece. "The Father of Time Travel" he'd called him, and he stated the case for Forever Life and the possibility of finally defeating death once and for all. He was planning

to save some of the more controversial stuff for down the road, once the well was dry.

“Just how many people have the Time Travelers saved?”

Updown, sitting in that great domed room, relayed the question to the computers, which were keeping a running tally of such data.

“Well, it goes up every millisecond, but a little bit over a billion right now.”

“A little bit over a billion? Are you serious, Nick?”

“You can come over and ask the computers yourself if you like, but, yes, that’s what I’m coming up with. I designed this thing myself, you know. I forget *when*, exactly ...”

“Aren’t you at all worried about the environmental impact of all of this? I mean I’m not in league with any of those World Wildlife Fund whack jobs, or the Green Gang, or even the EPA, but you can’t just add a *billion* people to the world and not run into serious problems. Are there even places for all of these people to live? Enough food to eat? I mean, we were running up against the wall on these issues when world population hit ten billion. Now it’s up to eleven billion overnight? Jesus, what about all the animal habitats they’re always whining about on the nets?”

Updown looked consternated.

“I’m working on it, Edgar.”

“Oh, you’re working on it. I mean, I know you invented something called the God Machine and all, but you’re not actually God, you know.”

Updown gritted his teeth.

“If you would like to see what I have planned, you’re free to come down to headquarters and take a look. I’m not shy about it.”

The Professor’s face grew hazy. Edgar was losing reception. And then Edgar got hit in the side of the face by an egg. The jagged bits of shell cut his cheek and the sticky yolk ran down the side of his jaw.

“Right to die! Right to die!” came the chants. “Time travel is the work of Satan!”

And then the mob swelled on all sides around him. There were hundreds and hundreds of people in every direction, all churning to this one spot like pumping veins, with Edgar the beating heart at the center of them all. More eggs hit him. Dozens more. He pushed away the admirers

who were quickly becoming overwhelmed by foes, hoping to catch a window large enough to exploit. He needed options and needed them fast.

Realizing he'd get no traction north, south, east, or west, Unum turned to his only alternative. Up.

He squeezed and shoved his way through half a dozen people to where the tail end of a fire escape dangled near the Earth. Reaching up, he strained his arms and stretched his fingers and caught hold of the bottom rung. Though his arms felt ready to pull loose at the shoulders, the adrenaline coursing through his arteries as the enemies of Forever Life closed in gave him the boost he needed to pull himself up.

"That's right Satanist, run back to your time traveling buddies!"

"What, you don't want to go make this never happen?"

"Fuck you time traveler!"

The eggs and insults trailed him as he scaled the rungs. By the time he got to the top, he was covered in sticky yolk and smeared with his own blood. Below, a particularly nasty, red faced man had fought his way to the bottom rung and was following. He was far more athletic than Edgar and did not have to suffer anywhere near the projectiles the former had.

Edgar turned behind him and hastily beat upon the glass door with an open hallway on the other end. The red faced man was about a rung from the top and closing in.

Some nice old lady whose elderly ears had apparently dulled the uproar outside, and who probably didn't spend enough time on the nets to know anything about this time travel mess opened the door for him. Edgar dashed past her with no time to express his gratitude, just as the red faced man arrived at the top of the fire escape. The journalist jockeyed his way to the nearest public restroom and spotted the man-sized robocleanser 3000 responsible for restroom cleanliness resting in one corner.

Acting fast, he grabbed this bulky unit and hustled it over to block off the doorway. Then he waited, one fist clenched and poised to use the laser cutter ring in any way necessary. He stood like this, for at least fifteen minutes, suspicious noises moving back and forth through the hallway, the occasional knock upon the door, but never a real attempt at forced entrance, until finally he broke down. He turned to the sink, legs

quivering, bracing himself on the counter. He saw the yolk and shell on his face and clothing. He ran his hand under the faucet to dampen it and started to dab at his clothing, but he could not maintain motor control. Edgar Unum looked at himself in the mirror, and then shook for fear of the world.

*

“God dammit, Chet, you’re missing my point!” Christopher Lincoln yelled, pacing back and forth in front of his Lawman leader and tossing his hands up in frustration.

“The bylaws are the bylaws for a reason,” Chet Bradley said, “Violent force is just too dangerous. You never know whose grandma you’re going to shoot, what wild spirals you could send time off into. You could end up making it so I or you or any number of our friends and family never exist to begin with.”

Lincoln held up his 12 mm semi-automatic pistol as if presenting evidence to the jury.

“We’re not a bunch of kids fighting crime capers anymore, Chet. This isn’t some who stole the Mona Lisa bullshit. Nicholas Updown is trying to change the way the whole world works and instead of just tracking a bunch of radiation trails, we need to take the fight to him. I’m tired of sitting on my laurels, we all are!”

He gestured passionately to Pardeep and Mary, both standing silently by.

“Is that right?” Bradley demanded. “Are you all in this together?”

The others remained silent a moment. Then Pardeep nodded quickly, before glancing away. But Mary held his gaze.

“We’re public servants,” Bradley said.

“We’re soldiers, Sir,” she said, “And with all due respect, it’s time we realized there’s a war going on.”

He nodded, as if to accept that it was out of his hands now. The Time Guardians were no longer his.

“You can fight it without me,” he said.

Lincoln trained his pistol on his former leader.

“Not so fast. We’re going to ne-“

Bradley shut him up with a right cross. Lincoln stumbled against a table, holding his mouth, then took a second punch to the abdomen. He fell to the floor and Bradley stomped on his hand, forcing him to release the gun.

The Lawman scooped the weapon up and then pulled the God Machine from his coat pocket.

“Actually, I plan to take it with me.”

He pressed in the little green button in the middle and a wormhole entrance popped into the room, sucking at his graying hair.

“Follow me at your own risk.”

He sidestepped into the portal. Lincoln reached for his ankle holster, pulled a second, smaller weapon, and fired – once, twice, into the opening.

The hole closed and he turned to his co-conspirators.

“And where were you idiots? You just stood there and let him beat my ass?”

Pardeep smirked.

“Maybe we thought you had it coming.”

Lincoln scrunched up his face.

“*Maybe we thought you had it coming,*” he mocked in a bratty voice. “Maybe I ought to find a hole to throw you into too. Lucky for you, you’re still in charge of R&D around here. Now how in the hell are we going to get another God Machine?”

*

You and Ted watched from a black sedan as the police cars surrounded Nicholas Updown’s lab. There were no warrants, no warnings shouted out, just a hand held battering ram and a front door liberated of its hinges.

Dozens of men sprinted through that door in all sorts of operational gear, with an alphabet full of letters adorning their jackets. They had guns, and gas masks. They wore bulletproof vests and held badges they did not wave.

They pushed past the cages of animals, some capsized, several open, with hamsters and chickens and rats and cats whimpering and

whining and squawking and snarling and scattering under foot. They tipped over microscopes and knocked down telescopes and tripped over computer chairs and got to work trying to break open the computer systems. They tossed the plastic DNA stairways and fossils off the desk; they sniffed at the strange chemicals and tore up floorboards.

And after hours of searching, they called you in and you looked around and Ted stood beside you looking as well.

But there was no Nicholas Updown to be found. Little did you know it, but he'd disappeared into the reaches of time and taken his only copy of his God Machine with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

EVERBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD

You didn't take the news well.

"So you're telling me that he wiped his whole fucking hard drive before we got here? The whole fucking thing?"

Your computer expert stared up at you, nervously pushing glasses up his nose.

"Yes, yes, sir, but it's possible we can still recover –"

"Well then do it, dammit! The team sent to his house hasn't found anything, nor the team sent to the high energy collider. Nicholas Updown's faded into thin air and I'm not going to sit on my hands while some little Nancy boy like that gives it to me in the ass just because he's the only one with some piece of technology! We're going to get his secrets and get our own damn God Machine, and you're going to find the files to make it happen!"

The tech nods and salutes.

"Sir, yes sir, Mr. President."

Lackeys. You sigh and turn to Ted, nodding for him to follow you for a walk outside. Together, you stroll through the battered entryway where the remains of the heavy metal door cling to one final twisted joint.

"How did he know, Ted? We burst in unannounced and he had time to wipe his data, to disappear completely, to take every clue about his project with him? He had time to open up the damn animal cages before he went?"

Ted shakes his head.

"I can't explain it. Maybe it was someone working for him. Didn't you say Updown had a lab assistant?"

"Yeah, he had a lab assistant. Some creepy old guy in a robe. But what is he, psychic?"

*

Christopher Lincoln, shortly after his introduction as the new leader of the Time Guardians, threw a party in honor of the Lawman's retirement

from the force. Their beloved former leader, he explained to the rank and file, unfortunately was too eager to get to his vacation home in Bermuda to actually join them.

Lincoln didn't have to deal with many more questions about Chet Bradley during the subsequent celebration, as he spent the bulk of it in a back conference room with Pardeep and Mary. With the Lawman out of the way, all three were very interested in discussing a new direction for the organization.

"Back when Nicholas Updown was rather new in our time and was part of the formation of Forever Life, he was much more liberal with his time travel technology," Lincoln explained to his cohorts. "Though he's since tightened security, making another direct burglary such as the one I pulled off to obtain our original God Machine unlikely, the God Machine once owned by Lillian Lazarus' husband found its way on to the black market."

Mary cast him a look of utter shock. She wasn't used to being impressed by Lincoln's antics.

"You didn't?"

"I did," Lincoln said. "It wasn't easy, but I tracked it. The exchange will take place tomorrow."

*

Chet Bradley, meanwhile, had found himself in familiar haunts on the other end of the wormhole. The grass, the trees, the spacious thoroughfares. The fields of corn, the neat little box houses. Iowa at the turn of the twenty-first century.

He was far too busy ranting to himself to pay much mind to the time or place, though. Bastards didn't know the meaning of defending their country. Didn't bother recognizing the President as commander and chief. Didn't respect due process or Miranda rights. They just wanted to charge into battle, guns blazing.

Not that Bradley was so down on guns themselves, he thought as he crossed beneath the shade of a tree, about three hundred yards from an open air stage in the middle of the county park. Guns were excellent tools, good for protection, for those who were properly trained in their

use. Not for hotheads like Christopher Lincoln and the rest of them, though. They weren't crutches for the blind and ignorant all too eager to pull the triggers. To Bradley, the best gun was one you never had to fire. But Christopher and Mary, hell, they'd probably go back and wipe out the Nazis before the United States had a chance, then turn around and wipe out the Italians and the Russians and the French and the British while they were at it.

A man bumped into Chet's shoulder as he hurried past, swinging his head back for a hasty apology as he ran on. It seemed that a swarm of people were gathering in the area for something. The laser vision correction he'd undergone in the twenty-second century had given Bradley amazingly sharp vision, but he still had to brace himself against the trunk of the tree and stand on tip toes to see over the assembled crowd to the stage.

Ah, simpler times he mused, as he saw one of the nation's great Presidents striding out from behind the curtain, suit and tie, to deliver a speech to these good country folk. And then, in the corner of his eye, he saw it. That all too familiar scarlet swirl.

"Are you ready to make a difference?" the man on the stage is shouting, "Are you ready to make America strong again?"

And as the crowd's applauding, Chet Bradley is tracking the dark figure that zipped from the portal as it fights its way through the crowd, on to the stage.

"What I want to do is give the power back to the people! This is your country, America, time to reclaim what's yours!"

The intruder jumps on to the stage. Bradley suppresses a shudder of déjà vu, instincts pushing him to action as the interloper dives for the President. The temporal Lawman pulls out Christopher Lincoln's pistol and without a second thought, does his duty to his country.

The shot echoes through the park. A woman screams. Aides swarm in to pull Rip Donner from the stage. And Chet Bradley tucks the hot pistol into his jacket. As he's walking quickly away from the scene, careful to keep his eyes forward at all times to stave off suspicion, he realizes that he's finally solved his murder case.

*

Your scientists manage to recover some of Updown's notes. Sadly, Updown wasn't much of a note taker. Though his technology was operational, his theories and data were far from publishable. Considering the number of domino-like advancements he'd made since he began his work on the God Machine, the scientists told you that they could only hope to begin to reproduce the results with decades of work and billions of dollars. And even that was a guestimate based more on optimism than fact.

As you threw your tantrum, rage boiling over within you and out at your underlings, I watched from a safe vantage point, having a private chuckle at your misery. You thought you could usurp Me then, didn't you? Thought you'd be able to snatch away the power of God to wield for your own intents. But, as I said before, you are a pawn, merely a pawn, and I meant for you to stay that way.

After you finished your ranting and the blood drained sufficiently from your face, you sent your men back to work and retired to a private corner to discuss your alternatives with Ted. Having already seen that particular soap opera before, I returned instead to My favorite piece of brain candy:

So Captain Derringer Von Raysong and his loyal First Lieutenant, Gargax Sly, set off to explore the nature of their new world, hypothesized to be the afterlife by their Galley Cook, but looking like just plain this life in its stone walls and towers, marble floors, and overgrowth of ivy to the officers of the DAX93 Minloader. Their first task in this exploration was to escape the confines of the stone and marble courtyard, so Von Raysong had Gargax Sly hoist the Captain's mighty 46-year-old body (or two score and half a dozen) up on to Gargax Sly's broad black shoulders, allowing the rippling bulk of the Captain's many mighty pounds to gaze higher into the air, perhaps high enough aloft to spot what might be on the other side of the stone walls and towers. Unfortunately, Gargax Sly still felt quite fatigued from the destruction of the DAX93 Minloader and the descent into the great suck of space, all likely to be attributed to the terrorist actions of one of the Interworld Federation's many enemies (though which one was still surely anyone's guess). Sly's unfortunate fatigue led to Captain Von Raysong, mid lift, with his knees at the level of his First Lieutenant's chin, being most definitely dropped, and all of his many mighty pounds falling to the marble floor where quite a few of his bones cracked heroically and shot great amounts of pain throughout his entire body.

"Oh fuck," Von Raysong offered.

Gargax Sly, in his shame, and Freddy Nietzsche in his marble pattern preoccupation, remained most silent. Von Raysong sat a moment, quite stunned in his horrendous pain. But after that mighty moment, his head began to clear.

Deprived of their opportunity, at least at the moment, to further explore their mysterious surroundings, Sly sank to the marble courtyard, joining his Captain, who courageously cleared the air for further musings and set to figuring out what their next intrepid step should be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HISTORY REPEATING

So, you decided to shift gears. For the moment, you told yourself, you would resign to merely being President of the United States and limit the amount of money you funneled into God Machine research to a discrete amount. As far as you understood things, if a you from the future had made it back to your time, then at some point in the future you *would* get your hands on a God Machine. It was fated; it was that simple. You just had to sit back and be patient.

Patience, though, was hardly your forte.

You drummed your fingers on the arm rest as Ted drove you into Washington from the airport. You hummed a little rock rift to yourself, trying to concentrate on the foreign policy brief in your hands. You could do this, you were sure, could get right into the swing of things.

Ted had briefed your older self of your impending arrival; relayed the information that you were ready to take back over. You knew all too well that this type of message wouldn't sit well with yourself. Thus, you weren't a bit surprised to find yourself still sitting in the presidential chair when you walked into the Oval Office. And rather than become irate, you sent Ted to the door to give the two of you a moment alone, and then slowly pulled it shut, ensuring your privacy even from your most trusted ally.

And then you reached into the inside pocket of your suit jacket and pulled out a hand gun and pointed it at yourself.

"Pointing guns is no way to get me to relinquish my position of power," you said, "You of all people should know that."

You ignore this, pointing the gun at your older head.

"I want it," you said.

"What?"

"I want the God Machine you came here with."

Your other self chuckles brightly, scratching your grizzled presidential chin.

“Funny thing is I knew the answer already. That’s the thing about being from the future. I’ve done this all before, except last time it was I in your shoes.”

You reach into your massive writing desk casually, trusting yourself that you won’t be overly eager to pull the trigger and off yourself. Then you pull out an engraved wooden box and lift the lid. Underneath, there are a few rolls of fat Cuban cigars.

“I don’t want any of our damn cigars!” you say, waving the gun impatiently, “Where is it? Why won’t you give it to me?”

You pick up a small silver knife from the desktop and slice off the end of one of the Cubans. It’s round and plump in your hand and you find it most satisfying to hold.

“Because, you brilliant man,” you say coolly to yourself, “I knew I would have this very conversation with myself. And as Ted has explained it to me, if I were to give the God Machine to myself, then I would create a paradox, because if you got it from me, how did I get it to begin with?”

“I don’t give a damn about your paradoxes! I need to see Elizabeth again.”

Holding the cigar to a lit match, you take a trial puff. Satisfied, you slowly release the smoke from between your teeth and shake the flame out.

“Ted said I would say that, and he was right, the old codger. That’s why I gave the device to him, and after he saved my life, he destroyed it.”

You feel a vein pulsing in your neck.

“Destroyed it?”

You jab yourself in the nose with the butt of your gun. A bright burst of blood runs down to your lip and you drop your cigar.

“Whad da hell?”

Apparently you couldn’t predict *everything*.

“Just feel lucky I’m not the suicidal type,” you say. “But I have no need to kill you. You’re never going to exist anyway, not like you are now. Because I’m never going to become such a pussy!”

As you stare at yourself, blood oozing from your nose, you see your older eyes open and stare and feel as those little hairs on the back of your neck stand up to meet a gush of cold wind. You see the red light

reflecting against the wall behind yourself and when you turn, there's Chet Bradley, looking these days like a gray old wolf.

He seems unsurprised to see the gathering of you two, and addresses you both forthwith.

"I have what you want," he says, holding up the device for you to see, "Say hello to your new Secretary of Defense."

*

Nicholas Updown *had* been working on the overpopulation problem. The suits he'd made for the Time Travelers, those iconic fuzzy green tennis ball numbers, were actually quite the innovation. Woven within the fabric were batteries containing the exotic energy created every time a God Machine opened a wormhole. Using this intense energy, these batteries vibrated the suits at inhuman speeds. So fast, in fact, that they could approach and even exceed the speed of light. All a Time Traveler had to do was locate a radiation signature from the exotic parallel universe and vibrate to a speed fast enough to pop through and out the other side. Basically, the suits allowed the Time Travelers to become their own personal wormholes. They also allowed the Time Travelers to move too fast from the human eye to see, to slip between the seconds and save human beings moments away from death without other people seeing what happened or creating any sort of butterfly effect.

He knew the material in the suits had untapped potential. So, he explains to Unum during a tour of his new project site, he extrapolated his suit developments into, of all things, a new type of housing. Unum watched as workers on high ladders rolled strips of green material over a building. It was the same stuff as that in the Time Travel suits, Updown explained, and they would cause the buildings to vibrate at similar speeds.

"What this will allow," he said, "Is for two buildings to actually co-exist in the same spot simultaneously. Both will be on intermingling schedules in which they will spend half of their time in a wormhole in the other dimension, and half their time in this dimension. I have to make sure I keep the timers in working order, so that the two buildings don't collide, but this technology will allow us to virtually *double* the world's livable territory."

Updown planned to institute this same technology to make more farmland, more factory space, more room at vacation spots, and so forth.

“And that’s only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to food production. By moving farmland in and out of time, we can actually speed up the food production schedule so that you’re planting the seeds one day and harvesting within hours if you want. The more and more I learn about this technology, the more I believe I could move mountains if I wanted.”

“Won’t that just cause damage like in Earthquakes?” Unum asked. “Vibrating all of those buildings, I mean.”

They shared a laugh.

“Oh no, no, no,” Updown reassured, “The entire building’s surrounded with the material, even the foundations below. So the building vibrates evenly and there’s nowhere for pieces of the building to fly off to. Instead, they all speed up together and move into the exotic matter dimension.”

“So, essentially, everyone will be doing a little bit of time traveling every time they step into a building?”

Updown nodded, vigorously.

“Not, like to the far past or far future or anything. Just in and out of moments of time. You might go in for eight hours of sleep and wake up and go out with a whole night of fun still available to you. This technology will allow people to stretch their days, their productive work hours, their recreation, and never miss out on a full night of sleep.”

Sounded wonderful to Unum. But then something occurred to him.

“That’s an awful lot of time travel for regular, every day people, Nicholas. What about Temporal Dystopia?”

Updown rolled his eyes.

“Been talking to Charles, I see? Concerns of TD are greatly exaggerated. Frankly, there’s no scientific ground for suspecting that time travel, in any way –”

He paused as an elderly man in a navy cardigan and an even older woman in a sky blue flowered dress walked out of a nearby apartment complex hand-in-hand.

“Oh, Edgar, great,” Updown said, “I’ve been wanting to introduce you to my grandparents.”

*

Christopher Lincoln lifts a butt cheek off the memory foam couch cushion. He enjoyed the softness and conformity of the material, but after a while, it started to feel a little too much like a part of his body. His toes dig against the plush carpet of his living room. Holo images of traditional Indian dancers twirl and gyrate around the room. He'd picked up the God Machine this afternoon. Felt it cold and metal and real in the palm of his hand. Just like the one he'd handed Chet Bradley years ago, when they were still the crusading types.

It was in his bedroom now. Making an indent like a crater in the middle of the pillow. He was working up his nerve, now. It was no small feat to travel back a century and shoot a man in his back. Not even a man who'd caused as much grief and pain as Nicholas Updown. Seventeen animals had been added to the endangered species list since Updown had decided it was a good idea to send the world population skyrocketing over night. Five had gone extinct, but he was sure Updown would get to rescuing them, eventually. The damn hypocrite.

Riots had increased in every nation in the world until they were every day occurrences. Updown thought he was doing everyone such a big favor by saving them from death. But the thing was, a lot of people *wanted* to die. It was natural. All part of the cycle. You get old enough, you just get sick of puttering around on this planet. And Updown was breaking the cycle. He was breaking everything. And he had to be dealt with.

And then the portal appeared, scattering the holographic images. A tall, hooded man, bleeding on the carpet, and holding up a pair of rusty shears. He seemed familiar somehow.

And then Christopher remembered. The news vids after his birth. All the coverage of the shocking attack on the maternity ward. He looked down at his hands, robotic monstrosities, thanks to that man now bleeding on his carpet.

His military training kicked in. He flipped off of his couch and darted for the holster hanging in the hall. And then he felt the blades sticking into his side and the breath left his body. He collapsed in the middle of the hall, blood oozing down his side.

The hooded man was rustling around in his bedroom. He was going to take away everything Christopher had worked for. He was going to save that damned Nicholas Updown and let his tyranny over all of time continue. Christopher couldn't let his life be for nothing. He grabbed a patch of carpet and started dragging himself forward. Started dragging his body along the ground, feeling the rough rub of the carpet on his bare, bleeding flesh. But it was too late. That damned red light was already seeping from under the bedroom door, and Christopher knew he'd made the leap.

No more God Machine, he thought, as he drifted out of consciousness.

Hours passed this way, the images of dancers still floating through his living room like spirits haunting his dreams. And then he blinked his eyes open with her standing over him.

"Mary," he said, "Thank God."

She grimaced.

"It's gone, isn't it?" she said.

Face sullen, Christopher nodded.

He never even saw his gun in her hand. Or felt the bullet hit his skull. Incompetence was one thing Mary would not permit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TIME CRIMES

Nicholas Updown's holo image was being broadcast across the nets. In the lush living room of the trailer Edgar Unum currently shared with Lillian Lazarus, the holo-Updown strode in front of their Picasso digiprint, shaking his fist in a prideful gesture.

On their nearby leather sectional, Edgar and Lillian cozied together on one end. Sitting on the other end looking prim and proper, were Agnes and Peter Updown, Nicholas' grandparents. They seemed to be nice enough folks, even if they spent most of their time with closed mouths and wide open eyes. Nicholas had snatched them each from the jaws of death and now they were watching him in a technology that for them was more than a hundred years too advanced for them. As they watched this technology that was already shocking to their systems, Nicholas broadcast his intention to run for the presidency of the United States. Unum could only imagine how incredibly surreal this was for them.

What did they think of the ghost images floating around the room as the holo projectors offered various camera angles? The crowds watching Updown crowding around them in electronic proxy. Surround vision. Reporters waving recorder rings trying to ask the "smart questions" and Updown explaining that he made his decision with the full backing of Forever Life and as the man most capable of understanding a world that has been shaken and reshaped by a dangerous and powerful new technology.

Paul Updown scoffed at this part and Agnes sighed. On screen, supporters were cheering and opponents of Updown were yelling loudly. Paul got up and stretched.

"Is there a refrigerator around here?" He said. "I swear, I don't know how to do anything in this damn place."

Unum shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Lillian got up.

"Is water OK?"

"I'd love a beer," Paul said, "But I'd take water."

He was still grouchy about the strict diet his grandson had placed him on and had members of Forever Life enforce. No alcohol, no tobacco,

light on sodium and saturated fats, all of that. What Paul Updown thought about his grandson, who'd yanked him from his death bed, taken him to present day hospitals capable of laser evaporating his cancerous tumors, and was now making an incredibly bold political gambit, Unum could only guess.

*

Mary Kimball was not like Chet Bradley or Christopher Lincoln. She was unlike any leader the Time Guardians had ever had. Her first duty as acting leader, in fact, was to install a shooting range at their headquarters. Her next was to equip every member of the squad with military grade assault rifles and hand guns.

She strode in front of her troops, a military sergeant now, her hands tightly clasped behind her back, her chest puffed out like a peacock. They stood at attention, in a row in front of her, uniformed head-to-toe, expertly cleaned rifles slung over their shoulders, synthetic leather boots polished black and bright.

"Times change, gentleman," she barked at them. "And plans must change with them. Gone are the days when we screw around with technologies beyond our control. Gone are the days when we sit and whine and pine our lack of God Machines. No longer do we play the role of patsy. No, now we take control. We use the fists and firearms God gave us and we take this fight to the enemy! Could I get a hell yeah?"

"Hell yeah!" the troops barked back in unison.

Mary jammed a clip in her rifle and slung the weapon on her back. Then she waved her troops forward, jogging with them to the SUVs.

*

You smirk at Chet Bradley, the fool, as your security guards hold him tight by his arms. Your counterpart, holding a tissue to his nose, excused himself to respond to a Blackberry call, some policy meeting or press conference somewhere, you didn't really give a shit.

"You're making a mistake, Mr. President," Bradley says.

You shake your head.

“No, I’m finally doing something right.”

You reach into the middle drawer on your presidential desk and insert a small silver key into the lock found there.

There’s a brief whirring sound and wooden panels slide over each other, revealing a secret door on one wall of the office. Your men shove Bradley through this entryway before he has a chance to react. On the other end he’s plunged into darkness with sound proof walls all around. There’s no vent in the room – the air is pumped in with a special device, recycled from other rooms. No light or sound from other rooms will come with it. You turn the key again and the panels slide shut behind him. Breathing in and out will be Bradley’s only stimulation for some time now, other than running his fingers over the smooth, solid walls, and concrete floor. You hadn’t given him a chance to get out a second word of protest. You’re sure that in the time it takes you to get around to letting him out again, by the time you actually have use of him, if you ever do, he’ll have come up with all sorts of clever things to say.

“Secretary of Defense my ass,” you say.

And then you dismiss your men and call in Ted. Once the two of you are alone, you pull out the God Machine, turning it over in the palm of your hand.

“So this is it, huh? This funny little ball causes all this trouble. How do you think it works?”

Ted shrugs and takes the metal ball from you. He presses the tic-tac green button and the requisite red disc expands into view.

“Nothing to do but try it out, right?” he says.

Ted walks forward, God machine in hand, into the swirl, and disappears, pulling the swirl after him until both man and energy pop out of existence.

And, minutes later, they pop back in.

“Took me a few tries,” he says, walking out of the swirl, “But I’m back.”

You realize that Ted’s arm, the last thing to move through, was hanging on to something. Has hand was, in fact, pulling another hand, and another person through.

“And look what I brought with me.”

Another Ted.

“So that’s how this gets started,” you say.
You take the machine from Ted’s hand and smile at the twins.
“Let’s see what else this bad boy can do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

INSTIGATION

Nicholas Updown sat in his campaign “peace room,” as Lillian had nicknamed it, overlooking her, Edgar Unum, Charles Ostrander, and several other high ranking members of Forever Life who had undertaken the cause of getting him elected to America’s highest office.

It was a charming little two room building. The main room was the wide hall with enough room for a conference table and floor to ceiling walls of one way glass that offered a perfect view of the outdoors, while acting as mirrors to anyone who’d try to look in. A small utilitarian restroom was the other room. Updown had never been a fan of public restrooms but did, at least, delight in an age where all cleaning was automated.

In the “peace room” the conference table was actually made of a living tree. The building was constructed with respect to its root system and the tree was specially grown into the shape of the table. A wayward branch may have stuck up here or there, but mostly it was impossible to discern between it and a regular every day conference table. It even had ports on its surface for holo projectors to beam their images through. It all felt a bit stern and serious for Updown, but rather than feel overwhelmed, he chose to seize the moment with the authority he felt he’d earned.

“We need to talk policy,” he said. “What’s our message?”

He looked around the table.

Lillian, demure in a white singlet and Capri pants, tapped her fingers.

“Life, of course,” she said. “We’re pro life in all its forms.”

Edgar, in acid wash jeans and a slick white hoody, shook his head.

“That’s going to alienate both bases. Liberals on abortion rights and Conservatives on war and capital punishment.”

Updown sighed. Political contentions hadn’t changed in a century, only grown more divisive.

“We need to say something about the temporal dystopia,” Charles offered.

“I don’t see why” Updown said.

Charles, in his snow white turtleneck sweater, stared back at Updown patiently.

“So you don’t think it’s a problem?”

“Can you *prove* it is?”

The doctor shook his head, not exactly.

“I see no need to address any phantom menaces.”

“And what about the economy?” Edgar said.

Updown massaged his scalp.

“Ugh,” he said, “This is a disaster. I don’t know congressional procedure from sparrow droppings. How am I supposed to convince people I have the experience for this kind of responsibility?”

Lillian looked up.

“Because you’re the kindest, most caring man in the world,” she said. “Because you saved my life, and generations of lives.”

Updown sat down in his chair, swaying side to side, lost in thought.

“Because,” Lillian said, standing, “You’re the only one in this whole damn world who knows how time travel works, who knows what its consequences are, who knows how it can be used to make this world a happy place, heaven on earth, where you don’t have to sit around and wait for everyone you love to die and leave you. Where all of the happiness and goodness doesn’t have to butt up against a deadline. You’re the one who can sort out the overpopulation and the food shortages and everything that comes with your master plan.”

Updown grunted. Lillian walked to him and hunched down, her chin near his arm rest, big eyes gazing up at him.

“And you’re the one who *has* a master plan,” she said, “Because you’re the one who’s mastered space and time. The master of the God Machine. Not only are you qualified for the job, no one else even comes close.”

Updown broke a smile.

“Well, then,” he said, “I guess I don’t have any choice, do I?”

This reverie was broken when a concrete block smashed through the plate glass window and glass splayed over the living conference table, nesting in coffee cups and the folds of their clothing.

Charles stood up to let the glass fall from his sweater. Lillian wheeled Updown's chair to the far wall and shielded him with her body, hands poised in the air like a panther. Edgar charged the ring on his right middle finger – the one with a heat laser in it.

On the other end of the gaping hole in the “peace room” were individuals of a less than peaceful ilk. Though, surprisingly, they were not after Nicholas Updown.

They were far too intent on killing each other at the moment.

The concrete block that had crashed through the window had been thrown at the head of a ginger haired man who was now grabbing another man by his neck and applying large amounts of pressure. Outside, the scene they'd been too busy chatting to observe was one of horrors. Cars overturned and set ablaze. Wailing infants in the hands of a cowering mother, children clutching at her arms while nearby a man's face was being pummeled with a wrench.

Somewhere, a shot rang out as a woman took a bullet in her chest. As she lay, bleeding out, not far away another man was feeling as the metal handle of a protest sign was shoved through his throat. As he choked on his own fluids, somewhere else, a child of six or seven was set on fire.

And Updown could see what no one else could. Maybe it was his biological link that allowed it. Maybe it was something even beyond the explanation of science, but he could see them, everywhere, in their green suits, snatching corpses and replacing them with live bodies in separate locations.

A shot glass flew into the room and exploded with a bang near Updown's head.

“What should we do?” Edgar asked, his face flushed with fear.

Updown considered it.

“Let them kill each other all they want,” he said. “They'll just wake up in prison.”

And as soon as he thought of it, he knew it was true.

*

Nicholas Updown sat before his typewriter sipping coffee. Two creams, three sugars. He didn't enjoy coffee, it was a necessary evil. In another room, his wife Elizabeth was glowing with the impact of the news. The stick had come up with a plus sign. They were pregnant, and she'd never been happier.

All of which meant he'd better hit the gold with this one. He put his fingers to the keys and began clacking away.

And then the angels came again. These were the Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9. Though they also served the surrounding star systems, they earned this moniker due to the much higher rate of casualties necessary for them to attend to at that banner planet that the crew of the DAX93 Minloader knew so intimately from their recent Daxonium cargo runs. There were other Cosmic Space Angels, of course, ones serving Mars 3 and Venus 6, and Earth 15, and all of the other settlements known to humankind and Jalongs alike. But these Cosmic Space Angels were the Cosmic Space Angels of this star system and Jupiter 9 and distinctive as such. When they descended upon the barren marble courtyard from the gray overcast skies above, their golden feathered wings cast great shadows that loomed over the entire land of stone and ivy, covering the crew of the DAX93 Minloader in temporary darkness and making Von Raysong, at the very least, quake in noble fear as he wondered what new threat Fate had brought to torment he and his intrepid crew.

When the angels landed, and the darkness cleared, Freddy could see that there were three of them, all with golden feathered wings stretching as wide as horizons in both directions, but otherwise appearing to be men, just like him. Their faces were bright, their eyes clear and green, their hair flowing and brown, just like Freddy's own hair, but so much more silken and abundant. They were quite completely nude, their penises pale and erect in the sunlight reflecting off their spanning wings.

"We," they said in melodious unison, "Are the Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9. We have rescued you from the great suck of space, brought you here to this place of Limbo, and now wish to charter you on to Heaven."

*

You were pissed off. Your experiments with time travel had not gone according to your vision. The Ted clones had been sent ahead to scout, and while they were at it you figured you'd have a little fun.

This fun involved such mischief as going back and arranging so the Sphinx's nose was never broken, or stealing the Mona Lisa right after it was painted, or swaying the results in the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

And, of course, at every turn, they were there.

“Time Guardians, they called themselves, Sir,” Ted reported.

Chet Bradley, that clueless oaf and his gang of so-called law enforcement officers. Trying to make sure the “righteous path of time is preserved.” All they were was a bunch of joy kills as far as you were concerned.

So, when you finally decide to jump into one of the portals yourself, with Ted at your side, you expect no less than a run in with those stooges.

And then you’re there, in that cluttered and unwelcoming house once more. Another version of you is no doubt sipping Long Island Ice Tea and laughing while you splash about in the tub. And you’re standing near the threadbare couch, wondering what to do with yourself.

You grasp a brass candlestick sitting on the mantle. The president did it in the garage with the candlestick. Or maybe the hallway with the revolver. You could find one of those, you’re sure. But then you’d have to wait for him to come. And that’s not why you’re here, not for him. You’re here for her.

So you walk down the hall, where your bare feet trod minutes before that fateful day. Your damn footprints are still in the carpet from your last run to the kitchen. And the déjà vu sweeps through your body like a dizzying wave as you grasp the handle of the bathroom door.

A heartbeat away. And your heart beats as you hold the knob.

A breath away she’s there, soap slippery on her silky skin and her hands sliding through your wet hair. You can feel it, leaning with your mouth on the door, as you felt it so long ago.

It’s then that you know for certain that you love her.

And then you twist the doorknob and everything goes hazy.

Firm hands grip your arms. You see the green of the suits on all sides.

“No,” you cry, “No, I was going to save her.”

And you know they won’t let you. They won’t ever let you. Though you know you’ll try it a hundred more times more. Try to talk her into coming away with you on some vacation far away. Or running away with you for good. Try to smother Updown with a pillow in his sleep. Tell her you adore her a hundred, thousand times. But it won’t make a difference. They’ll always be there, always one step ahead with their damn suits and

speed and prevalence. They'll never let you have her. Never let you be with her as long as they walk the Earth.

“We need the machine,” they say. “It does not belong to you.”

But, rather than giving it to them, you push the button. A portal spreads open, splitting into view against the wallpaper of the hall. On the other end, there is a sea of Teds. They pour out, like clowns from a circus car, tackling the green clad Updowns, and ripping you free of their grasp.

“It does now,” you say, leaping through the portal.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ESCALATION

You fly out the other end of the portal, back into the oval office, where you fall ass over teakettle on to the desk, face down in a stack of foreign briefs. You wonder if people ever get used to traveling through space and time like that. Behind you, the red swirl shrinks then pops out of existence. You know the Time Travelers will be here in seconds, if not sooner.

Reaching into the proper drawer, you turn your key and Chet Bradley sees light for the first time in weeks. He blinks groggily.

“I –”

But you have no time for his words, you’re already talking on a red phone and marines, army helicopters, swat members, secret service agents, DC police officers, and FBI agents will soon be swarming the White House lawn.

And then they are there, in your office, standing in front of you in their green fuzzy suits.

“Give it to us,” they demand, for some reason warning you and talking to you instead of just yanking it from your arms. Their call. You spit at the nearest one’s mask, smearing the visor.

“Take them down,” you shout into the phone and as you’re pushed down behind your desk for safety, the bullets begin to fly.

You hear their grunts and cries of horror as their bodies are ripped apart and blood and tennis ball skin coats the walls.

And then you’re running; secret service agents on either side, down the hall and outside the white house to a waiting limo that will take you to a safehouse in bulletproof security. As your head turns, you see them filling the lawn near the Washington memorial, bleeding in the reflecting pool. Yet, despite all of the casualties they take, their numbers don’t seem to be diminishing any. And yet, yours do.

“What’s happening?” you say, stopping short of the car, panting, hands on your knees, “Why does it seem like our forces are growing smaller?”

You turn to your left and realize the officer you thought had been there is not any longer. In his place is a Time Traveler.

“Why won’t you let me save her?” you say.

The Time Traveler removes his helmet. Behind you, where the limo is parked, your driver has been replaced by another Time Traveler. He removes his helmet as well. You’re shocked to see Updown’s face on them both.

“You! You fucking murderer!” you cry. You lunge at the one in front of you and stab his eye with your pen. The pen lodges there and he falls to his knees, writhing in pain.

They don’t fight back, you realize. Yet they’re winning the war. How? The Updown in the car casts a blank stare in your direction.

“We’ve realized death is not the only threat to our quest, President Donner.”

You jump into the back of the limo and wrap your hands around his neck.

“There’s more to …”

His voice dies off as your fingers dig at his windpipe, but his monologue is taken up by two more traveling your way as gunfire echoes behind them. They speak in unison, their voices like a song.

“We’ve discovered the other time travelers. Their manipulation of the God Machines threatens our Ultimate Purpose – the absolute defeat of mortality. We’ve decided to seek out the origin of these contraband devices, and were shocked to discover they started long before Christopher Lincoln and the Time Guardians. No, it is you, President Rip Donner, who is guilty of first attempting to usurp our power.”

You finish off the driver and throw him from the car as the Updowns stand in front of you, still talking. Sliding into the driver’s seat, you crank the engine and put the car in reverse, the open window allowing their chant to continue permeating your senses.

“You are the earliest disseminator of the God Machines. The first blasphemer. By now you have realized that we will not violate the Ultimate Purpose. That we will not kill. But your threat is great. We have found another way –”

You shift to drive and jam down the gas pedal. They collide with your front bumper and, after that they’re hard to hear.

As you zoom through the carnage of the capital lawn, ripping the limo up to forty, then fifty-five on that hollowed grass, weaving between army men and Updowns, you try to hail the Joint Chiefs, the Vice President, your Chief of Staff, anyone on your cell phone. It's impossible to get a signal, but finally you slide around a corner and spot a cluster of Marines a few clicks ahead. You pull the limo up to them and shout through the window for news.

A stern looking colonel salutes but you tell him to hurry the fuck up and tell you what's going on.

"Why aren't we winning this damn thing?" you ask, engine still purring, "Those idiots aren't even fighting. I killed half a dozen myself on the way over."

The colonel, well, you thought he was a colonel, as the insignia on his chest now seems to be that of a two star general, wipes his brow and looks at you.

"Sir, with all due respect, Sir, we have all kinds of advanced, space aged, computer guided weaponry with pinpoint accuracy, but none of that's going to, again, with respect, Sir, none of that's gonna do a Goddamn thing against temporal shifts."

The engine hums and your foot feels restless at the gas pedal. Temporal shifts? Where did he learn to talk like that?

"I mean, how can I expect an assault crew to do a thing to these guys when a second after I dispatch them they were never born?"

"Excuse me, General?"

The officer turns and glances beside him, where Chet Bradley is standing, holding a device.

"It's a Temporal Chronicer," he says, "Keeps track of how much they're traveling through time and what they're doing with it. Turns out we used to have a much larger force."

So they could not condone death. Call its prevention their Ultimate Purpose, and now, now, they're taking good men with good souls and ... you were flabbergasted.

"They're removing people from existence?" you shout.

"Good people, Sir," the now four star General says, "Soldiers. Good men."

“I’ve never seen them act like this before, Rip,” Chet Bradley says, “Something must’ve snapped in them.”

Your fists clench. You’d like to snap something in them.

“So we kill them. We kill every fucking one of them. We can do that, can’t we? Can’t we just put fucking bullets in their skulls?”

Chet sighs and taps a few buttons on the Temporal Chronicler. It buzzes and clicks.

“We have, Sir. According to this, about one hundred and twelve thousand times. It’s no problem for them to keep bringing themselves back.”

You nod. Time to think outside the box, you decide.

“Then we just have to kill them all. All at the same time, before they knew what hit them.”

Your foot, still hungry on the gas pedal, gets fed and the limo zips over the hill, honing in on your target like a heat seeker.

*

Crouching in the “peace room,” Lillian, Edgar, Charles, and Nicholas Updown and the others were getting antsy as they tried to wait out the riots.

“Are the numbers thinning enough yet,” Charles asked, “I could really use some coffee.”

Lillian smacked his arm.

“Don’t be a nimrod,” she said, “Your life is more important than coffee.”

He scoffed.

“It’d just be a little pain. No bother about my life, those little green men would take care of that.”

“Still,” she argued, “No reason to be reckless.”

Edgar was tweaking his rings like a nervous habit. He gazed down at the simple golden band on his left pinky, the least technological of the bunch. Its only purpose, really, was as a reminder of where he’d come from. The ring belonged to his father, and his father before him. Edgar toyed with it, sliding it up and down over his knuckle.

“I’d love to just see what was going on out there,” he said, “Maybe just take a vid or two.”

Updown coughed.

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” he said, “Not as long as I’m in charge.”

Heavy boots crunched on broken glass. Updown’s eyes shot up.

“Not while I’m in charge either,” said a gruff female voice.

It was Mary. And Pardeep Sani. And about half a dozen uniformed and heavily armed members of the Time Guardians.

“Kill the bastard,” she said.

*

I’m a hack Updown thought. A damned hack writer who will never amount to anything. He pounded the keys of the typewriter. No, no, no, no. Do it for Elizabeth. Do it for love. He slapped his face. Such a failure, always a failure. Could never get it right. Just wanted to make her proud. Such a stupid idea about stupid angels and astronauts and he was an idiot. A joke.

He tore the page from the machine and flung it across the room. If you’d been there, you could’ve read these words:

Having been confronted with the noble fear inspiring, golden feathered wing shadow casting, pale erect penis wielding Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9 and their rather hospitable but auspicious offer to charter both he and his crew to Heaven, Captain Derringer Von Raysong let out a merry, deep throated chuckle and urinated on the front of his pants.

The Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9 stood like striking statues of the classic style – winged Davids frozen in granite as the crew argued about their fate.

“I don’t know what the *hell*/this shit is,” Gargax Sly said.

Captain Derringer, hands shaking fiercely, reached for his astro assault pistol and held it before the Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9 with startling bravery.

“Just wh ... who do you think you are?” he demanded, trying hard not to accidentally look at the pale and erect penises of the angels in the golden beams of sunlight streaming down from above.

The Cosmic Space Angels of Jupiter 9, mutually annoyed, rolled their collective eyes and pointed at the noble Captain’s space shooter.

“We have already answered this question,” they said.

And the weapon evaporated into a fine pink dust.

Gargax Sly came next. A famous flexi-weight blood wrestler on his home world of Earth 15, Gargax Sly was no slouch in the muscles and intimidation department. He spun towards the nearest angel, beastly arms windmilling on either side, uttering a guttural battle cry. The angel slid deftly to the side as Gargax approached and the First Lieutenant barreled past, his forehead making direct contact with the stone wall of that barren limbo.

"There is no need for violence," the angels said. "We have come to be your salvation."

And so Captain Derringer with his messed pants and now pink powder covered boots turned to First Lieutenant Gargax Sly, whose red forehead bump was sprouting in unicorn fashion and the two men came to a silently accord.

Then they came to a verbal accord.

"I think we should go with them," Derringer said.

"Yes, I think that's a good idea," Sly said.

And so the two men stood, wobbly, and gave quivering salutes to the new masters of their fate. Captain Derringer Von Raysong nodded to the company chef, Freddy Nietzsche, who was still sitting cross-legged, tracing patterns on the marble floor, to do the same.

"Come on, Freddy," he said, "We're going on a little trip."

"I'm not," Freddy said, without looking up.

Both officers turned to him, eyes flashing with fury.

"What did you say?" Derringer demanded.

Freddy still didn't look up.

"I'm not," he said, "I'm not coming."

*

Edgar Unum's ring fires a bright blast of laser. It strikes Mary in the face, cutting her cheekbone. She cries out, ignoring the scarlet crescent on her face, and lowers her rifle, jabbing the saber end into Edgar's shoulder. He screams and Charles rushes the attackers. Shots ring out, tearing him down and Lillian throws her body over Updown's.

A revolver's report fells one of the Time Guardians. Then another and another before they turn. There is Peter Updown in a blue flannel shirt, looking like Paul Newman with a smoking gun. A World War II vet; the crafty kind.

"Couldn't give up all of my vices," he said, firing again, and felling Pardeep Sani. The remaining Time Guardians stop him from saying more. Their rifles are set on full auto now, and Peter's body is in three pieces before his face realizes he's dead.

Edgar leaps forward, tackling Mary and shoving the laser ring down her throat. She feels the burn down to her vital organs, and Edgar looks to them, not worried about the remaining attackers who are shifting their aim to him.

“Run!” he shouts. And Nicholas Updown runs. So does Lillian.

They hear but do not see the shots that kill Edgar Unum as they flee. He was always a friend. Now, Updown thinks, he is a martyr.

Outside the building, Updown spots his grandma, Agnes.

“Are you OK?” he asks, panting.

She does not respond, staring into the devastation before her.

Nicholas takes hold of her shoulder and shakes it.

“Are you OK?”

She blinks then looks to him as if just realizing he’s there.

“I prayed every day, Nicholas. Every day since I was a child. I lived my life as a good Christian woman. Do you know why I did that, Nicholas?”

He strokes her shoulder.

“Because you’re an amazing woman, Grandma.”

She shakes her head.

“No, not that,” she says, “Because I wanted to go to Heaven.”

He clasps her hand, but it is limp in his grasp.

“We need to go, Grandma.”

She does not move.

“I wanted to go to Heaven,” she said, “And now I’m here.”

*

And then there was you. On your little quest. One ear on the phone with Chet Bradley, who’d borrowed the four star general’s cell. You have one hand on the God Machine, waiting for Chet to make the proper calculations. He tells you where they all came from, what time and date they originated from and you program the coordinates into the God Machine.

“I think I’ve got it,” you say, “Thanks.”

And then you press that little tab and that eerie red portal swirls open several feet away.

You turn to a man you've recently met. He's a ranked official of some sorts in the armed services. His name is Isaac. But what you care about is that Isaac is helping you lift a thermonuclear warhead with a 50 ton payload with a detonation timer under thirty seconds and counting.

"I sure as hell hope you know what you're doing," he says.

"Just hoist!" you bark back.

And you do, hoisting, thick in the knowledge that if it doesn't get through the portal in time, you'll be leveling half of DC and evaporating yourself.

Nothing like the resulting adrenaline to power you and Isaac through. The two of you fling the mad device toward the portal, which swallows it, and then swallows itself.

And then you're standing in an eerily quiet bunker with your silent accomplice at your side, no doubt a bit flustered at being in the presence of the President.

And you're only half aware how much you've just changed the world.

WINDOW SEVEN
FALLOUT

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

REFUGEES

It was like cellular death. When living cells die, they shrink down, inflate small bubble like warts on their surface, and then start rotting from the inside. The DNA and protein in their nucleus degrades, their mitochondria, the cell's miniature energy factories, start breaking down due to the release of a chemical called cytochrome c. The parts of the cell split into small fragments covered in membrane. This exposes the phospholipids phosphatidylserine, normally a layer below the membrane, to the surface and it acts like a beacon to various parasitic entities such as macrophages and dendritic cells, which engulf the remaining fragments and tear them apart in a manner akin to what a Mexican fire ant colony might do to a bloody knee.

Cell death is a sign of new birth, actually. Mutations, developments, growth. It does not come without reason. Cell death allows tadpoles to absorb their tails on the way to becoming frogs. It helps fetuses dissolve the webs between their fingers and toes. It causes menstruation and allows for the human reproductive cycle to exist. Without death, there is no life.

Nicholas Updown could not help but rely on his scientific background to try to explain his sensations. A second earlier he was staring at the forlorn creases of his grandmother's frown and now he was lost to the world and his senses. All his sight was darkness and flashing images as if a dream. His sense of sound and touch were blurred and shifting. He could not taste or smell more than his own saliva.

What he felt, I now speculate, was the rewriting of memory on his brain. The biological reformation in his hippocampus of his chemical experiences and sensory recollection. Like a key being reformed to match a new lock, his brain was reformed to understand the landscape that now surrounded him. And how different that landscape was.

Gone were the massive skyscrapers and six lane highways. Gone were the crowds and traffic. Gone were the rioters and the Time Guardian paratroopers. Gone were the oceans of concrete, the sparse trees, the canopy of traffic lights. Above him was a grey sky full of wispy

clouds and beneath him was scorched brown earth. Memories of Forever Life and his growing, vibrant, populous world faded.

“How did this happen?” he asked.

But Grandma was not there any longer. No one was. He looked back over his shoulder, and there was a metal trash barrel with flames licking its rim. A dusty form huddled over it, rubbing hands together. Updown suddenly realized how cold he was. He stood, then realizing that his right leg was numb, and without it to support his weight, fell back down again.

“What’s going on?” he shouted.

He thought this loud jubilation would die in the dusty sky above, but he was mistaken. The dusty form straightened up at the sound of his voice and scurried towards him. He realized now it was a woman, her graying blonde hair leaking through the tattered hood of a grimy old sweatshirt. She leaned over him, her skin sooty, her teeth deformed.

“Oh, Nicholas, having another of your episodes?”

It was Lillian.

Nicholas looked at his hands – they were as sooty as her face. His whole body felt dirty and his leg felt lame. The city was gone, its people were gone. Everything was wrong.

“What happened to my leg?” he asked.

She shook her head, sadly.

“It all happened that day. Not too long after you brought me to this time. I honestly think you forget about it on purpose.”

Nicholas searched his memories, desperate to understand, and then, there it was. The Time Travelers, the failed mindlink, and then, before they could set off on their quest, a bright light, an explosion, using the only God Machine he could to snatch himself and Lillian from the jaws of death.

“Are we the only survivors?” he asked.

Her lips clamped up. Then, she sighed.

“You should try to get some rest, Nicholas. I swear, if you hadn’t saved my life, I would’ve left you years ago, all the use you’ve been to me.”

He groaned and leaned up on his one good leg. The other must have been injured in the explosion. But who did this, he wondered. Who

was responsible for rewriting his world? For destroying everything he loved?

Lillian was walking back to the fire now.

“And you *know* we aren’t the only ones,” she said. “They’re still out there, they still blame you for all of this even though you lost just as much as they. We can only pick at the remains of this world so long, Nicholas. Everything’s dying, the radiation’s poisoning everything we eat. It’s poisoning us too. I spat up blood again this morning.”

She licked dry lips then shook her head again, like a nervous twitch.

“Sometimes I think we should just let them catch us. Be done with this all.”

He crawled toward her, his dead leg scraping against the cracked earth.

“Let who catch us?”

She gave him a look, as if appalled to be made to say their name.

“The Time Guardians, of course.”

And what about his God Machine? His hands rummaged through his pants pockets. Nothing there. Nor his jacket. He pulled off his boots and shook them, but no luck. Only clumps of gravel.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

Lillian just looked at him, screwing up her nose in a queer way, and turned back to the fire, sighing and shaking her head. He crawled closer, hands grasping the legs of her pants, tugging them.

“Where, dammit, woman, where is my God Machine?”

She placed a hand on his head, firmly at first, as if to shove him to the ground, but then the touch became tender, like that of a heartbroken mother.

“Oh Nicholas. It kills me every time I have to tell you again. It’s gone, dear Nicholas. They’re all gone, all of your machines.”

And he remembered. Opening the portal, his desperation, how he’d zipped across town to save her and then in his eagerness to bring others in had let the heat of the blast make him drop the device. How it’d tumbled to the ground and he’d reached out for it, but Lillian had pulled him into the portal just before it closed. How his leg had been the last thing through and had felt the impact of the explosion. How his world had melted before his eyes in that swirl of red and the machine had taken

them to the future, after the fires died down, but not far enough, not nearly far enough. This world was dying, was dead now. The sun was dimmed by the thick clouds of ash in the sky. The land would not support life. The canned food was almost gone – fewer and fewer gas station stores left to raid.

“There have to be survivors still,” he said, “On the other side of the world, far from the blast. We need to get there, to safety, to restart our lives. I need to go somewhere that I can rebuild it.”

Lillian just stood at the fire, ignoring this outburst. She’d heard it so many times before. Then she sighed.

“You won’t get a mile in your condition.”

“Then we get a car!”

She gazed around, hands in the air, as if to say, best of luck.

“There must be a way, dammit. I’m not going to die like this. I’m Nicholas Updown. I held the power of God in the palm of my hand!”

She laughed.

“Oh Nicholas,” she said, “I feel so sorry for you.”

She saw he was crying and went to place an arm around him.

“It’s … it’s not me I worry for. It’s her.”

Lillian’s hand rubbed over the rough cloth on his back, coaxing him to go on.

“Elizabeth. My wife. I never told anyone what happened. How she really died.”

She looked at him, his bleary red eyes, and she began to understand. She saw that guilt in his eyes, that fear, and she knew his darkest secret. He’d never told anyone before. Not even Charles.

“This is all my fault. All my fault. I pissed away the power of God.”

“And now you’re going to die,” she said. “Just like me. Just like a rat.”

*

You had done this, of course, with your dirty damn bomb.

You felt it too, the rewriting of your mind. Just like Nicholas Updown though, for some reason, you felt remnants of the past world still in your mind. Maybe this is a side effect of those who travel through time.

Those haunting echoes of what has come before. I have noticed this ability in Myself, and have seen it in most who have moved unnaturally through time. You certainly possess it as well, though after a bit, the memories become blurred and confusing and only those with the forethought to write it all down can ultimately sort things out.

That is why I'm telling you this, of course. The beginning of the explanation. Telling you everything that has gone before in your life and in this time of yours. The crimes you have performed against mankind. I can never really be sure what you already knew or thought you knew. But we are almost there now, almost to the end of your journey.

Because you were there still, hooting and hollering and hugging Isaac wildly jumping up and down. You had won the war, you believed. You radioed the General and he confirmed it.

"Sir, there's nothing going on here, Sir," he said. "All's quiet on the Western Front."

So it had never been. And yet you still held the God Machine in your hand. Somehow Nicholas Updown had survived without his precious Time Travelers backing his every move. Long enough, at least, to invent his damnable device. That, though, is a tale I will come to, because for now you had more pressing issues.

For you and Isaac had ended your embrace, which, with his faded memory had grown quickly awkward. Now you were back in the limo, on the way to Pennsylvania avenue with you driving and his confused looks and your promises of a beer on you. You're waiting for the slow turn of a traffic light, when you see a man bolting toward you, his trench coat flowing behind him.

It's Chet Bradley. You lower your window to greet him.

"Chet, thank God!" you shout. "Maybe you actually remember what happened."

His hands jets through the window, the right holding you by the neck and the left plowing further down to the God Machine in your suit jacket pocket. He flips a dial to the far end and then presses the button.

As the red swirl expands, reflecting its light on to Isaac's awed face, he responds.

"Damn right, you son of a bitch," He says, "I remember everything."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LOOSE ENDS

It must have been unpleasant for you. When Chet Bradley dragged you through that wormhole and left you stranded on the other end, lonely in the dark. When he ignored your pleas and placations, instead socking you in the abdomen and walking away through a new portal while you held in your lunch. It must have been downright miserable for you, and that's before you even woke up strapped to this chair. Before I started telling you this story.

Chet Bradley was fine enough, though. At least for a moment. He took the portal back to what were familiar yet unfamiliar times. Back to the offices of the Time Guardians which he no longer remembered parting ways with. His mind, actually, was quite full of mush, as not even his last journey through time made much sense anymore with the existence of the Time Travelers obliterated from reality. Yet, like you, Chet Bradley's journeys through time had somewhat scrambled his biological circuitry and allowed him some sense of those timelines that had shed in the wake of your nuclear disruption.

He arrived in the burnt Earth of New York city where he found little left to look upon. No buildings, no traffic, no people in sight. It seemed wrong, yet it seemed right in the same instance. It must have been unpleasant for him as well.

Bradley wandered around the town for hours, using the God Machine to skip in distance miles at a time. He was looking for someone, anyone, who could explain to him what was going on. After a bit, he reached the former headquarters of the Time Guardians. All that now remained were the broken foundations of a once great building. Just some charred concrete remains and scattered dust. He saw some singe marks and some blood stains on the rubble. Every here and there was a scrap of clothing or a piece of shoe, some relic to suggest that there was once life in this place.

He did not realize he had tripped a silent alarm, and was thus surprised when the crunch of boot soles echoed in the vast expanse behind him. And when he turned, there they were, once the Time

Guardians, now savage hunters, uniforms a mess of rips and tarnish. Hands still gripping tight on well polished assault rifles.

Mary was with them; somehow the shifting sands of time had spared her life. Her bald head was no more, having been overtaken by a shock of unkempt mouse brown hair. She glared at him with the same fierceness in the eyes of the Eagle tattoo on her bare neck. And when he saw her, he felt tension on the level of two unfamiliar jungle cats meeting by chance. But they were familiar, quite familiar, and yet neither was quite so sure anymore what their grudge might be.

“They’re mine, now,” Mary said, looking to her armed compatriots. “And we’re Hunters, not silly police officers like you wanted us to be, but Hunters of the corrupt. There’s power left to be had in this place, and we’re taking it.”

Little did she know what power Chet Bradley really held. For the device he clutched in his pocket, the God Machine which had brought him here, was the only item left of its kind. And he was not about to give it up.

The Hunters pointed their weapons at him. He ran. As bullets echoed from their guns, he pressed the button and the red swirl of space before him disappeared him from their deadly paths. The portal closed behind him. Mary stared at it, short of the necessary breath to curse the air that remained.

He must have continued leapfrogging portals in this manner until he met living persons once more. Portal to portal to portal through stretches of gravel and desert and dust. Then he found life again, huddled around the flickering flames that lapped the rim of a rusty trash barrel. Two dirt choked hobos, rubbing their freezing flesh. Deciding they looked harmless enough, Bradley decided to make contact.

I can but imagine his surprise when their dirty faces were close enough to be made out and their ash strangled voices hacked out greetings and he began to realize how familiar they appeared. His focus was on the man, sitting with one unmoving leg stretched before him. Had he not been so fixated on this sad and curious creature, perhaps he would have been able to save himself.

But he did not share their filthy camouflage and Lillian had recognized him in a second. To her, he was more than just Detective Chet

Bradley. He was the Lawman, the founder of the Time Guardians, and therefore as responsible as anyone for the death of her beloved. Edgar Unum, you see, had even in this altered reality, been declared by them a traitor to the State and been cut down by the prowling Time Guardians. Though he could not know it, Lillian judged Bradley guilty of Edgar's murder in her mind and decided upon the necessary sentencing.

She had one keepsake from her fallen lover. One of his many rings. She'd used it to build this fire. Chet Bradley had no idea that she wore it as she stood at his back. Had no idea of anything but the pain he felt when she used the laser to lacerate his spine. As he fell in a slump, the cuts continued, growing more wicked and irregular with every wild slice of her wrist. She hacked at him like a butcher. A mad cackle flew from her mouth as she worked, tearing Chet Bradley's mortal flesh apart.

His last thoughts it seems were only of the God Machine. Though I cannot imagine his motivations for doing so – perhaps he dreamed he could escape once more – Bradley pulled the device from his pocket. As the lasers ripped him asunder, the device rolled from his palm. And soon, as Lillian's eyes saw only blood, Nicholas Updown glimpsed upon it and saw something else.

Salvation.

When Nicholas Updown glanced back to Lillian, he saw the hate and the fury and the bloodlust in her retinas, and he realized something. Something that fluttered in his stomach and twisted his intestines and filled him with the most unbearable nausea. All of his work, his strife, his love of life was for naught. Humans would always kill humans. Would always wrong one another. Even if he could cure every disease, end accidents and hunger, stop aging, even then human beings would still keep death going strong. They would still take up arms against one another. No amount of Time Traveling angels could end this Armageddon humankind had enacted against itself. There would always be crimes of passion. Always wars of words and religions. Always men mad enough to risk the world for their ideals and level weapons of mass destruction upon us. Nicholas Updown saw all of this by looking at Lillian Lazarus' blood spattered garments. He saw all of this by looking deeply into himself. He was a murderer too, after all. They all were. And no amount of power over space and time would change that. No amount of rewriting the past

would change the nature of humankind. His hands shook and though they were clean, he felt blood upon them.

He made his choice and pressed the tab and fell forward into that swirl of red, leaving Lillian alone with her fire and her vengeance in the city that had been blown to kingdom come. She would die there, choking on dust and hunger, no longer caring for life once her vengeance was had. And Nicholas Updown, he was in a better place.

But, before I tell you what became of him, the Professor, the foolish father of time travel, perhaps Rip Donner, you would like to know more about yourself. How you came to be here. And who you really are.

For you see, Rip Donner, you are more than just an orphan plucked from time and put on the proper doorstep. You are an experiment in nature versus nurture. An attempt to discern the true essence of a man and what we – what I am capable of.

As you grew in your new Floridian wealth and affluence, I provided the funds, of course, and the encouragement through your parents, for the various surgical procedures you underwent as you grew. I made sure you changed that nose I'd always hated, and built those muscles I'd never had, and wore those colored contacts for so long that you forgot what it was like to look into your own true eyes. I made you, Rip Donner, and in more ways than just your image and your career. I made you from the day of your birth – snatching the infant Nicholas Updown out of time seconds after his own entrance into this world.

Don't you see, Rip? You look different now, you act different, but your innate attraction to Elizabeth was not a mere coincidence. Your pull to matters greater than yourself, greater than almost the world. Your hubris, your inclination to reach for the power of God Himself, none of this is happenstance. You see, Rip, you *are* Nicholas Updown. The son he never had. The man he never had the guts to be, but became because I took you and had you raised under different circumstances. You are Nicholas Updown remade and reborn, and now I'm sure you want to know why all of this was done.

You want to know why your life was manufactured, a sham. Why you were raised to be President, pushed to power. Why you found yourself drawn as a magnet to unhappy Elizabeth. Why you were tormented by the Time Travelers and why you were driven to do what you

did. Was it even your own free will that you acted upon? You're wondering that now, I'm sure, and perhaps you should. My chess metaphor was no accident. You did act as My pawn in so many ways, Rip Donner. And now as you sit here, and My story nears an end, I know you are still full of more questions than answers.

But before I begin to give you the answers you so fiercely seek, I think there is another story I wish to give you the end to. That story within a story that has carried you through this clustered and confusing narrative. The story of Freddy Nietzsche. Perhaps if you see what became of him, you will know what to do with yourself, even if he did not. For this is how his story concludes:

The noble and intrepid Captain Derringer Von Raysong and his brave and muscle-bound first lieutenant Gargax Sly had most completely disappeared into the great beyond. They had been carried, two Cosmic Space Angels to each of their heroic arms. Air lifted above this mysterious stone and marble limbo and beyond the reach of Frederick Nietzsche's eyes.

That bold crew of adventurers were fast followed by a flock of angels, all golden and glowing under the twinkling of distant stars. This troupe of winged wonders took off in migratory pattern, close behind the former officers of the DAX93 Minloader in what could only be considered a Canadian flying wedge.

One Cosmic Space Angel of Jupiter 9 remained. Standing golden and majestic and erect before Nietzsche.

"You are making a mistake," came the angelic chords.

Nietzsche nodded, still tracing his pattern.

"I'm afraid to fly," he claimed.

The angel's angelic features did not crease.

"Freddy Nietzsche, you arrived here in an interstellar spacecraft. You are not afraid to fly."

Nietzsche nodded, still tracing the pattern.

"I'm afraid of the sky," he claimed.

The angel's angelic features did not crease.

"Freddy Nietzsche, you've spent every day of your life picking patterns from puffy clouds; every night noticing considerable cosmic constellations. You are not afraid of the sky."

Nietzsche nodded, still tracing the pattern.

"I'm afraid to die," he claimed.

The angel's angelic features softened.

"Have faith, fair Freddy. I come to chariot you to a better place."

The angel placed a strong, perfect hand upon Nietzsche's arm. But the man could not bear it and began to weep.

"No," he said, "No, leave me here with my work."

The angel's angelic features slumped and sloped into shapes of sadness.

"Do not dismiss this so easily, Freddy. You will not have another chance should you refuse."

Nietzsche shook his head, still tracing the pattern.

"I cannot," he said, "Do anything else."

Had Nietzsche gazed up, he would have seen a single tear tracing its way down the great Cosmic Space Angel of Jupiter 9's heaven blessed cheek. But Nietzsche did not look up. Not as the angel's great golden wings expanded, carrying him to the great beyond. Not as this miracle of faith and feathers flew from view. Not at all did Freddy Nietzsche look up from his solid, stable marble ground.

And he would never look up again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

END TIMES

I imagine that by now you've figured out who I really am. The clues have been manifold throughout My tale. I've taken no true effort to hide My identity, but merely spoken from a perspective that required a new name to truly understand. You see, Rip, I've been so many people across My lifetimes that I've truly grown into more people than simply one. Why, even in this room, there are three of Me. There is, could you turn your head, another of Me plucked from time, strapped to the chair at your left. Then there is Me. And then there is you, another Me. Because, as you can see, if you allow Me to remove My hood here, as you can see, Rip, we're all the same, even in our differences.

Take the man next to you. Just who is he in My mad, twisted tale, and how did he end up here, I'm sure you're asking. He has all the same memories I do, though I created him, with one pivotal exception. Before he heard this tale I told you, you see, he blamed himself for Elizabeth's death. Thought he had killed her with his own hands, for that's what I told him he'd done when I stood by him on that fateful day. He is the version of Myself I plucked from time after Elizabeth's death and placed in time to continue work on the God Machine after the Time Travelers carried Me to the future. I used him as a pawn too for a while until the time came that the God Machine reached full development. In order to hold him together, both physically and mentally, many steps were taken for this copy of Myself. Originally the Time Travelers, and then I posing as them in their absence, were responsible for saving him from the jaws of death countless times as the weeks and months unfolded. Do you know how much time I spent doing this, Rip? Why My face has more folds than a walrus? How many centuries I've spent sifting through the sands of time, how many years are on these bones that I've barely kept cobbled together for so long?

And then, for his mind, there was Charles Ostrander. The good doctor saw Me the first time around, in My grief over Elizabeth's adultery and My resulting rage. Even before I created you, she cheated on Me. It was My Own foolish choice, I suppose, having chosen My work over My

love of her so long before. But broken hearts are not rational things, Rip Donner, and Mine did what it did, and I believe had I not done so, I would never have found the motivation or drive to complete My work, and neither you nor I would be here now. Perhaps that would be for the better. All the hours I spent talking with Ostrander did not give Me an answer to that.

Nor did they hold My duplicate together. For he lost his own mind and ended up in the sanitarium. Eventually, he found a way to have a God Machine smuggled into him, don't ask Me how he did, I never quite figured that one out, and saved Dr. Ostrander from dying in that era at the hands of a disgruntled patient. Then he spent some time bouncing around the past and future. If he could work his jaw, I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you just what he was doing all that while.

Honestly, I forgot all about him for a bit there. I was doing so much more important work.

Which brings us to Me. Though I've gone by many names. Introduced Myself as Abraham to Myself. I'm still he, Nicholas Updown, the original, at My worst. Not saved from a single moment of My history, not without a single horrid memory I've brought to this world. All I really wanted, you see, was eternal life. I was so afraid of death, but now, after all I've seen and done, after how much I've destroyed this world with My machinations, I've changed My mind.

When I saw Lillian Lazarus, as big a convert to the cause of life as there ever was, there with her hands covered in bloody rage, for yes, it was I that saw her there, I realized how futile My dreams and ambitions were. And I started craving death. The first time this happened was before you'd done your work with the atomic bomb. In that version of our history, Mary led her assault on our fortress and shot Edgar Unum in the face. Rather than trusting the protection of our Time Traveler friends, Lillian reacted poorly. Perhaps it was the emotional duress of losing another loved one, but she attacked back, turning Mary's weapon upon herself. Every time I shift the universe, it has the same result – Lillian proving to yet another version of Me the hopelessness of humankind.

I was unhappy with what I'd done to this world, of this infinite game of Sisyphus boulder rolling I had created for Myself. But they wouldn't let Me stop it, the bastards. I wouldn't let Myself, really. I had planned to

bring her into things only when My future paradise was perfected, all the overpopulation problems figured out, all the riots quelled, everything under My merciful thumb. I wanted Elizabeth to be My Queen in My Heaven on Earth. But they stopped Me from this – kept saying I was violating causality. That if I saved Elizabeth I would not finish My quest of saving everyone, that I might destroy everything that we had been working for. Every time I went to save her from death, they blocked Me. They'd gone insane, you see, from the Temporal Dystopia. They were mad on the high of time traveling and the power of their abilities. They feared that if I saved her, I would see them as worthless, would take away the power I'd given them. Instead, they took away any power I once had to change My Own fate.

So I tried killing Myself. Couldn't live a life as a fallen God. But they wouldn't have that either. Every time I planted a bullet in My head, or went back to assassinate another version of Myself, they were there to prevent Me. I even went back and tried to destroy the God Machine before it was created, but they wouldn't let Me do that either, as it would blink them out of existence. My hands were tied. That's when I first decided to create you, and put this entire plan in motion. And then to trigger My manipulations at that rally, when I whispered those words to you. I chose them carefully, knowing you'd read My enough of My novel and trusting that the parallels would come clear. That you would take up arms against those out of control angels, and end their dominance over Me. That you would stop their singing by any means necessary. You proved the worthy pawn, Rip Donner, and your apocalypse, though it reinforced My disgust at the capabilities of humankind and Myself, liberated Me from their awful influence once and for all.

And it should have led to My death, for once the Time Travelers were no more, there should have been no one to save Me from Chet Bradley's bullet at your rally. Except I had the one duplicate remaining, the one beside you now, and he, like those Time Travelers, was still obsessed with preserving life, our life especially, and he saved Me in their stead. He and I fought across the reaches of time, I trying to end both our lives and he blocking Me at every turn. Eventually, we stumbled upon the place outside this room, eons past your radioactive holocaust, after the Earth has pulled itself together and fallen apart again, ages beyond the

permanent destruction of humankind, its total obliteration from the terra firma. And the destruction of the sun, and the solar system and Milky Way. We came here, to the end of time to argue the relative merits of life and death. He, not really knowing what horrible actions I took for this God Machine, not having ever truly felt Elizabeth's blood on his hands, argued for hope and life. I, in My despair, argued against him.

So I retreated back into time to further bend and twist circumstances to My will. I tried stopping the creation of the God Machine again, and he stopped Me there, expecting the attack. Then I decided to bring in My greatest trump card. I visited Chet Bradley in his darkened cell and explained your crimes against time to him. I gave him the coordinates here and asked him to send you to Me after you destroyed the Time Travelers. That it was the only way a man of your ilk could be stopped. I told him to do it and then hand over the God Machine to Nicholas Updown in his own time. But Bradley had to take things into his own hands, had to zip around like a deity himself, and he paid for it at Lillian's hands.

And we met back here, My duplicate and I with you in tow. I told him that I would explain the story of what happened to you, and let you be the judge of our future. In his naivety, he put his trust in Me. And then I injected his neck with a chemical solution that has paralyzed every muscle in his body. And he has been forced to sit in his chair, his ears, his eyes still working, but unable to so much as move his tongue to speak against Me. He's afraid, you see, terrified of the death I've grown to crave. We have every reason to fear death, Rip Donner, and would even if the Time Travelers had continued to exist. There's only so much the human body can take, you see, even with all the advancements we've made. It's that fundamental aging. There's no way to stop it. You can only repaint and refurbish human flesh so often before it all just crumbles into dust. We've been at this for thousands of years now, My duplicate and I, back and forth through time. We're dying, with or without reaching an agreement to do so.

I told him that we would let you decide what would become of us all, but the truth is, I've already decided. I told you that outside these walls was the end of time, and I was not exaggerating. Really, My duplicate and I previously met with the safety of a few years between us and the event

horizon. But since we have been in this room, a rudimentary God Machine itself, we have been moving further and further into the future. In mere moments, time will catch up with us.

With My duplicate incapacitated, I had the freedom to wipe all of us from the face of history if I had so chosen. But, instead, I decided to bring you here to thank you, Rip, and to explain this all to you. To let the weight of our shared history sink into you and to see if a man much like I, raised under different, maybe better circumstances, could do better with this knowledge than I did. I thought perhaps the pawn can become a queen and save Me from this nightmare once and for all. But I can see now, with your features still frozen in shock that you will have nothing to say that I would care to hear.

My secret, Rip, is that I hate you. I hate seeing what I became in you – a crueler man than even I was in My original version. More petty, more vain, more cocky and more selfish than ever. Though she died before you were ever created, the last million times or so I've seen Elizabeth die you were intimately involved. So I hate you for that. I hate you for being the one she loved more than Me. I try to justify it to Myself. That she loved you because you were just like Me. A younger, freer Me. That it went exactly according to My plan, that all My efforts to create you were successful. But, really, I just see you as the man who took her from Me, who took hope from Me, who took self-respect from Me.

So I brought you here to thank you for all of that, Rip Donner. And to see the look on your face when you knew you were going to die. I've removed the tint from the windows now, so you can see outside this great glass and metal cube we're soaring through space in. If you look outside, those strange sights you're seeing, that's the end of time. Scientists from our time, when they first theorized it, nicknamed it the "Big Crunch." Since you don't have My same scientific background, I'll explain it to you a bit. I want you to know what you're seeing. I want you to understand all to well just what you have coming for you, Rip.

Time and space are finite, you see. We can only stumble around in them for so long before we run out of possibilities. And just as when we fall further into the future with each day we age and the amount of time we have left begins to shrink, the Universe itself has been shrinking for some time. The gravitational pull that exists between all matter in our

universe has, over the eons, finally caused the universe to contract upon itself, pulling everything in toward one central point.

This did not happen quickly, of course, but took many, many lifetimes to reach this dark conclusion. All those swirls you see outside are the twists of matter thinning out and pulling toward that compact center. All around us, things are beginning to grow dense and clumped. In many places the matter has grown so dense that it has collapsed into black holes. The unique properties of this ship have thus far allowed us to escape such a fate, but not for much longer. For, soon, all the little black holes will squish together into one, a single, unified black hole, everything squeezing together like a child's hands pushing together a wad of cotton candy into a little lump of pink sugar. A big crunch and all life is gone, all matter is gone from existence. Enjoy life while you can, Rip Donner. Were there any way for matter to escape this speeding doom, perhaps someone would be able to listen to that digital recorder strapped to your chest and hear this whole sordid, bloody tale. But soon that and you and I and My duplicate and every other scrap of existence will be blinked out.

Chet Bradley took the God Machine that brought you here with him. Then, so many eons ago, he delivered it to My hands. And while you listened to this story, I fed its contents through the ship's garbage disposal, letting it fall into the entropy outside these walls. Even now, I can see the glass around us becoming misshapen, the knots of gravity bending it into a malformed monstrosity. I can feel death close within My bones and I'm happy, Rip Donner. I'm happy and I'm terrified. Maybe you could have done better than Me, but you'll never have your chance now. Maybe another person could have done better than I did in My stead. I nipped at the toes of God and could not handle His kick. And now, mortal God I've become, I've become like any other God in this cynical universe. Out of time.

BACKWORD
BEING

Dear brave reader,

The tome you hold before you is produced not without trouble. Nor without trepidation. Not without crisis, nor tremor.

My name is Rip Donner. Though I suppose it might just as well be Richard. Or President Donner. Or, for that matter, Nicholas Updown. The story before you is the last of what was told to me, what was programmed inside of my mind with the intent that I would be able to share the story of Nicholas Updown's struggles with the world. What happened where that narrative ends, I can only tell myself. For no other witness to it still exists.

The original Nicholas Updown met his sweet death in the Big Crunch at the end of time. As did his duplicate. These events I but assume, for I was not there to see them.

In his last effort, the one Nicholas Updown who still believed in life fought the paralysis that had overtaken his body and heaved his scarlet and metal ball at me. The man who fathered us both had forgotten this last thing. Had forgotten that his duplicate had needed some way to arrive there himself. The God Machine already had the coordinates programmed into it. That bursting swirl of red light was already expanding from it.

As the integrity of the strange glass and metal cube split apart and the remnants of reality warped from my view, I did not have time to grab that object of power. I could only fly through that portal, thanking God and my brave liberator that I could still hold on to scraps of life.

And now I'm alive, on Earth, writing this account. When I arrived, it was in a calmer time. It was a world that had not yet heard of Nicholas Updown. He was, doubtless, being raised in some bitter Michigan church far from my own domain. And I wasn't concerned with him at all. For, after all my years of ambition and violent self-assurance, I had learned that only one thing truly made me feel alive. So rather than tracking down young Nicholas Updown, rather than finding him and crushing him in his weak youth, I made my way to Arizona and the University

there, where I applied for a job. I didn't know when it would happen, not exactly. Maybe not for another decade or two. She might not even be born yet. Maybe she would help me find new hope. Maybe she would help me find God. I couldn't know any of that for sure. But I did know that, in time, she would come there to that university and that when I saw her face again, her living smile, when I held her hand in mine, it would be worth the wait.

Richard M. Donner

Phoenix, AR
February 29, 1976