

Temporal Fracture

An Exploration of History, Transformation, and Cultural Clashes



Forward

Disclaimer: This story is an exploration into the mindset of a 19th century man as he becomes exposed to ideas and customs which are radical and contradictory to his usual way of thinking. I welcome you, dear reader, to dive into his imaginary land and experience the world through his eyes.

The story comes with a most unusual and unexpected conclusion, which I hope will impress and entertain you. In the meantime, sit back and relax, but be ready to move towards the edge of your seat periodically.

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The drop of rain maketh a hole in the stone, not by violence, but by oft falling."

Bishop Hugh Latimer

Prelude

Cincinnati, Ohio

Evening time

I stared down at the book. It was worn, so worn that we had to have it rebound several times. The pages were as delicate and precious as a Renaissance manuscript, treasured for generations. Leah and I spoke often about the great enigma that it posed for the family. There were thousands of questions that I wish we could ask about this ancient diary. Whenever I pored through its depths, I asked myself the same question, 'could such a thing be true?' But deep down, if I was really honest with myself, I knew that I would be too petrified to learn the truth. Mom had told me that her parents had always held a lot of wild ideas, but I'd never been able to fully come to grips with this amazing inheritance. It defied everything that I thought I knew about my stable world.

When I was a boy of course, it was enough simply to let my imagination fly, and I relished every night in the adventure without ever considering the deeper implications. But now, 35 years later, the diary had a weight to it like a pickup truck.

I wondered at times, if it were possible for them to have made changes to it over the years? After all, there's no way in the world he could have written this back then, it was impossible. The more years that passed, the more amazed I became, the more I shuddered at the ideas that it brought to my mind.

I walked into little Stevie's room and indulged him (much to Leah's chagrin) with yet another journey through the ancient tome. Leah was none too happy with the late-night hours that the two of us spent with it, but tonight she was fast asleep and so I snuck down the hallway to once again turn back the clock and revel in the dreams of fantasy.

Chapter One Announcement

The dim light of the oil lamps in the wall sconces struggled in vain to chase off the shadows of the rich wood interior. They were aided by the delicate chandeliers overhead which threw dancing shadows across the walls and the expensive furniture. The well proportioned tables were set with ornate tablecloths that would easily cost more than my entire outfit must have cost. Surrounding it all, were the beautiful chair rail moldings which brought an air of distinction quite out of the ordinary for my own humble background. I brushed my feet nervously on the polished wooden floor of the tavern and struggled to not look out of place. The lone matron, a portly woman in the latter years of her life, maneuvered her way among the customers, which were few in number at such a premature hour. My dearest friend paid all of this little attention, so enraptured was he by the venison stew in front of him. The man seemed to lavish his food with as much gusto as he lavished his fiancé.

In contrast, I picked at the last of my plate with absent thought. Normally a meal this fine would have held my rapt

attention as much as it held Claude's. But today my thoughts were as far away as the spices of the Orient.

Once our plates were clean, my dear friend returned to discussing his apprenticeship at the rail yard, as was his regular habit. "I know you don't believe me René, but mark my words. The locomotives that we're building are the very pinnacle of Man's progress. Soon, it will be possible to cross the whole of North America with the same ease as a man might cross Montreal. They will have the power to deliver any luxury to any major city in the confederation."

I caught a few of his words, but had to ask him to repeat himself as I wasn't completely in the moment. Not wanting to appear too self-indulged, I responded and played a short tête à tête in my own mind before diving into the true issue which dominated my thoughts.

"My dear friend, I hate to say it, but this town feels as if it has no vitality for me. I mean, no offense, but how can anyone be content with a life forever hemmed in by brick and iron."

"Hey! No offense indeed. I can be perfectly happy as a machinist. I help create the most fantastic mechanical marvels." The man took on a grandiose air as he emphasized his words, "The era of iron and steam will herald a completely new level of comfort and prosperity never before seen in the history of Man."

I realized only too late how I had sadly stuck my proverbial foot in my mouth. It was a habit which I indulged in far too often for my own good health. Luckily for me, my dear friend Claude was ever willing to show the greatest patience regarding my frequent indiscretions.

"I do apologize my friend," I took half a second to find a means of recompense "but you've got Marie, I can't imagine anyone being bored with a wild flame like her."

Claude grinned mischievously, "You're damned right about that. But a girl like her needs to be taken care of... silk kerchiefs, jewelry, nights out at the marque- she may be the light of my life, but she doesn't come cheap."

As if to prove that it wasn't just Marie, he ordered a meringue for us both from the matron. Meanwhile I tried not to look embarrassed that I could not afford to go through half a bottle of wine much less the lavish foods that my friend enjoyed. With the contrast between us, it was amazing that we stayed such close friends. I loved the country and the fresh outdoors while Claude was much more interested in the newest gadgets and their manufacture. When we went to socials, I was the gregarious one, while Claude himself would just look for someone he knew and hang tight.

It was indeed my love for my close friend specifically which made this day so terribly difficult. Even more than my family, Claude was the one person I would miss the most in Sherbrooke. Thus was my purpose in proposing our lunch date from the outset.

“Well, I might as well tell you why I asked to spend the afternoon with you.” I paused as Claude turned away from the décor of the tavern and faced me again, a slightly puzzled look on his matured face.

“I’ve decided to go traveling. I’m going to leave town on my velocipede and see how far I can get. Who knows, maybe I’ll make it all the way to Vancouver.”

“Are you completely mad?!” We both noticed other patrons turn to look at us before Claude continued in a lower voice. “How in the world are you going to get by in the middle of the country with crazed sauvages¹ and wild animals, do you really think that you can ride a velocipede faster than a galloping horse, or a bear, or Lord knows what else?”

Despite expecting some opposition, I was nevertheless taken aback by the fervence of his outburst. “Claude my friend, life simply is not worth living if you don’t take risks. Can you

¹ Sauvages – derogatory term for the native people of North America used by French Canadians

imagine how dull your life would be if you hadn't built up the courage to ask Marie's father for her hand?"

"Sure, but I wasn't risking my life to do that--"

"Are you kidding?" I replied incredulously, "Old Man Bouvier is the best hunter this side of Montreal."

We both chuckled at the image of him sitting out on his porch with his shotgun at his side in case a raccoon or coyote came too close to his chickens.

Look my friend, it's like Corneile said, 'A vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire.'² I've already made up my mind. I plan on leaving as soon as the snows have melted." I looked at him directly. "I do not need to have your blessing, but my friend, I would feel much more at ease to have it."

Claude sighed heavily, "Well René, you always were a pain in my posterior. I knew the loss of Sherrie was hard on you, but I didn't think it would send you off your rocker."

Despite myself I stiffened. The thought of Sherrie, I felt, would forever strike a note of discord in my heart. However I did my best to hide it, "That has nothing to do with it. The loss was indeed a tragedy, but that is all in the past and I cannot change it. I merely want to go out and experience some adventure before I become old and bitter like Bouvier."

² "To win without risk is a triumph without glory"

“Do you have any idea how you will pay for supplies or parts for that velocipede of yours? I realize you’re young and full of vigor, but it will take more than youth and strength out in the wilds of the Terre de Rupert.” Claude was ever the more practical one and it was his talent in this area which had gotten brought him so much esteem in the locomotive yard.

“Of course. I have full confidence in the hunting opportunities out west, I plan to bring my rifle and plenty of shot. I’ll bag myself a ‘coon or beaver when I can. I have no doubt that there are fur traders all up and down the river towns.”

Claude savored his meringue while he considered that. The man had always been a slow and careful person. I thought (and not for the first time) that Marie might be happier with someone who had more spunk and fire. Not that I would ever try to coerce my best friend’s lady away. I loved the man far too much for such behavior.

We finished the last of our wine and Claude went over to pay the tab while I gathered our coats. With not a little hesitation, we both walked out into the chill gray air which pressed it’s icy fingers against us the moment we left the tavern. The wine was doing it’s best to keep me warm, but it wasn’t enough to overcome the heavy carpet of snow pressing against my insubstantial boots. I stepped more forcefully to keep the blood

pumping to my feet as we began walking. The narrow dirt road meandered to the south end of the block and at the fork in the road Claude turned and looked at me with unusual intensity.

“My dear friend René. You know that I consider you like a brother. While I support you in finding adventure and intrigue, I plead most urgently for you to consider carefully the risk which you subject yourself to. And most unnecessarily I believe. It’s not as if we were back in the tamed countryside of Europe.” He swept his arm out towards the forests. “The wilds are still fraught with unforeseen peril which civilized folk such as ourselves are poorly trained for.”

I grasped the man gently by the shoulders and nearly choked on my words before I could manage to force them out. “Claude, you are a most honorable and dedicated friend. Your council has ever been of the greatest value for me. However, in this instance I feel that it is necessary for me to forge my own path into the future.”

The man looked most disconsolate as he gave a long sigh. “Then it seems René, that I cannot change your thinking. All that I ask is that you consider carefully the implications of this. If not for your own sake, then for the effect on your family. Charles isn’t getting any younger you know.”

“Very well my friend. For your sake, I will do so. Just, please keep this to yourself until I have made the decision final.”

My friend gave me an unusually long embrace before we parted ways and I continued on towards the farm. Initially the tall and oppressive three-story buildings and the utter absence of greenery provoked a tepid despondency within my spirit. However it was not long before the narrow streets and precise lines of Sherbrooke gave way to the more organic fields and farms lying beyond. I began to hear more frequently the calling of cows and dogs as the sky widened and smoke from the factories dissipated. These humble log cabins with their ever-canted chimneys put me more at ease than the lavish spices and rich décor of the tavern. Out here the air, even caught in winter’s grip, carried the songs of the few overwintering wildlife. Despite the influence of man, it continued to be the territory of the skylarks and finches, which filled the air with their warbling calls. All of this I drank in deeply in the hopes of distracting myself from the numbness of my feet trudging through the frigid snow. By the time our familiar plot of land came into view, I was almost drooling at the thought of a fire and of dry feet.

The small plot of land where I lived was no different now than it was a month ago, or a month before that. The same skeletal trees laying still beneath an oppressive blanket of gray clouds. The slightly skewed barn huddling under its thick roof of snow. The fading clapboards of the farmhouse which were already showing wear after only a few seasons. I looked on the scene with concern, as my father was becoming easily tired from felling the trees and sawing them into boards when the buildings became too rotted. The work on the farm was dull and never in short supply.

I raised the latch on the door and welcomed the meager heat which greeted me. The humble common room was dominated by the eating table and wood stove along with a generous pile of stacked logs. My father was hard at work carving a new handle for the big kettle which had finally split the previous night.

“Boy, where you been about?! Them cows aren’t gonna feed themselves you know.”

The greeting I received was typical of family conversation these days. My father was getting more and more short-tempered as the years went by. With so many tools being produced cheaply in the great city factories, our family needed to bring in more money instead of just trading with one of the local smiths for repairs. All of us were feeling the tension and this was the

prime motivator for me to get some time away while my muscles were still young and strong.

With a grudging regret, I switched my nicer boots for the older mud boots and went out to the barn to take care of the animals. These gentle beings always tugged at my heart. On one hand they were the livelihood of the family, giving us milk, cheese, and occasionally some meat and jerky. But they were also living souls and I thought back to my early years and the pain I felt when first I learned that one of our beloved cows would have to be slaughtered. I spent time with each one and patted them all gently on the head as I passed. It was a nice quiet time and I did what I could to enjoy it, despite the cold.

Chapter Two

Departure

Claude and I sat at the edge of the road while I pecked at my last domestic meal like a spoiled cat. The gray skies of the past month had given way to a cloudy, but less threatening spring morning. Thick patches of snow still clung vigilantly to the north side of buildings and hillsides, but even they wouldn't last long with the ever lengthening days. Everyone was busy

getting the cattle out to pasture and sowing the year's crops. As I gazed sadly at the old farm, my guilty conscience pressed no less formidably than the mounds of snow on the north side of the barn. The family would be furious at me for going missing, but I knew in my heart that even were I a professional orator or politician, no words in existence could fully explain this primal need.

I sat and stared at my close friend, etching his image within my consciousness. His blond hair rarely showing its true color anymore, due to the hours spent beneath clouds of soot. But his eyes shined even more brightly as if to compensate for the coal dust.

He sat on the fence next to me with a look of dejection such as I had never before seen upon his countenance. His face was long and his shoulders slumped. It pained me so to see the man like this.

"You're certain I can't talk you out of this my friend?" He spoke as I were literally on my death bed, bringing a great shadow over the conversation.

"Claude my compatriot, you know how much I care for you and Marie, but this is something I very much need to do." In my mind I was almost wishing that he might come up with some brilliant phrase which would convince me to stay, but I knew

that this would only lead to bitter regret. “There is an entire world out there to explore and before I give my life to this patch of land, I need to brush my fingers along something greater.”

Claude replied with a sigh, “Well I guess if you must then I would be a poor friend to stand in your way. But send me a postcard or a telegram whenever you can. I want to hear that everything is alright with you.”

“That my friend, is a promise” and with that, we embraced for a long time. I clung to the man’s shoulders for so long that my chest became chilled when it was once again exposed to the air.

Looking back, I always held onto this moment. It was the last time I ever saw my dear friend in the flesh and more than any other moment, it would sit on my heart all the days of my life.

We gave each other one more long embrace before I loaded the last of my gear on my velocipede. I hadn’t expected the machine to be so ungainly with the weight of the panniers³ but after a few precarious corrections, I was off wobbling slowly down the rutted lane.

Chapter Three

³ Lit. translates to ‘bread carrying containers’

First Fright

*F*or the first few kilometers, all was still familiar. The neighbors' farms stretched out on either side with their weathered siding and shingle roofs. The bleating of cows and sheep floated on the breeze from every direction. Beyond this, the woods began and the stagecoach road that marked the edge of town. From here on, I'd have to follow the barely visible stage path all the way to Montreal where the railroad line began. The scenery became more and more foreign as I left my small patch of civilization behind for the exotic wilderness. The calls of various Grouse and Meadowlarks became more prevalent as did the calls of various other unknown animals, and my heart began to beat faster with trepidation. The thick foliage on either side of the trail became a living tunnel, transforming the bright day into a dim twilight. Stories abounded among the older women of specters and witches here in the woods, and though I had scoffed at such silliness while living within stout walls, these stories now rose to the forefront of my mind. I struggled no small amount to hold the fears at bay and sought to occupy my consciousness with more pleasant thoughts instead. Sometimes I sang a few of the tunes that I'd heard the street performers play on weekends to help settle the disquiet ever rising within my breast. As I continued along, it seemed as if

the woods, in retaliation, closed in even more densely and soon the stage road was little more than two tracks through the forest. I felt amazed that the horse drivers could navigate such primitive conditions at all in their regular excursions between metropolises.

The first real scare of the trip occurred quite unexpectedly. I was going down a particularly steep grade through the green leafy tunnel. The road bumped and swerved as it descended toward a barely noticeable bridge up ahead. I wrestled heroically with both the machine and my own terror as I struggled to keep the wheels directed along the trail and towards a dilapidated looking wooden bridge. The structure was well aged, with moss along both sides and deeply weathered planks below. As I hit the bottom of the grade I saw at the final instant that there was a board rotted all the way through in the middle. I fought with all my might to swerve, but the wheels seemed directed towards it by a cruel unseen consciousness.

Saying a silent prayer I hopped the machine up and managed to skim across the rift and reach the other side. Cold sweat beading upon my brow, I coasted to a stop and mopped my face while I waited for my heart to leave my throat and return to its proper location within my chest. It would be worthwhile I decided, to watch the river crossings carefully, as it was clear that these

routes were a great deal more perilous than the more civilized roads which I enjoyed back home.

Chapter Four The Missionary Man

*A*fter several days' travel, I spotted a shape approaching in the distance. It looked large and I hurriedly grabbed my rifle in case it was an elk or moose. Crouching behind a tree, I soon heard the sound of hooves and saw a small cart pulled by a single horse. My jaw fell when, as the cart drew closer, I saw a group of five negroes riding on a cart. I had heard of these dark folk living in cities like Montreal, but had never seen one in the flesh. They had skin the color of a horse's mane and the blackest hair imaginable. As the group approached, I thought back to what little I knew of these people. The preacher had spoken of them as being like savages, deserving of pity but also of caution. The group that I saw did not strike me as dangerous per se. I had my rifle with me and there was little chance that any of them would know how to operate such a weapon. But on the other hand, there were many more of them than I.

In short order the group approached within earshot and we both watched each other with an edge of caution. Shortly, the older man of the group removed his hat and called out "A fine day ta you sah."

I'd never been called 'sir' before. It caught me off guard at first, as did their use of English. But then I remembered Father LeCruex speaking about the Lord's hierarchy of races. How He placed the negro and the native a step below women and even below the Irish. So it seemed that these people at least understood their position in society.

I wished them a good day in return as the man slowed his cart to a halt. The man inquired with obvious curiosity as to the machine which I sat astride on. I smiled to myself realizing that few people outside of the cities would have a chance to see such a machine.

It is called a 'velocipede'" I told them, "and it allows me to travel nearly as fast as a horse, but with no need to provide food and water for an animal. My goal is to see if I can travel all the way to the great ocean to the west." I kept my verbage simple both due to my limited English vocabulary as well as the assumed state of these peoples' education. "And what of yourselves? What is your destination?"

The man paused to first introduce himself and the group which he traveled with. His name was Samuel, the woman next to him was Corrine, his wife. Behind him was a younger woman and two children. The young woman was named Nettie and the children were Adam and Olivia. I looked long at them because the children looked too much like the girl Nettie to be coincidental.

“And are these your children young lady?” As soon as the question flew from my lips, I saw the girls cheeks redden and I felt that I had guessed correctly. However she quickly denied my inquiry, which told me that she was most likely seeking to conceal her impropriety. Looking in her eyes, I saw a great sorrow in her expression and could only gather that she endured enormous shame from having strayed from the teachings of the church.

The man then spoke up again and stated that he was a minister who sees his life purpose in bringing the word of the Lord to the people of Africa. I had heard of Africa, but knew little of it and despite my reservations found myself curious to learn more. Despite what I had been told of these people, I felt my mouth quickly overflowing with questions. What had moved them to preach the good word? How did they plan to reach Africa? What kind of education did they have? I stammered through them and barely held my speech in check. However I was

impressed to see the man show understanding even when I lapsed into my native French verbage.

I was greatly surprised then to hear the man ask, in French, if I would like to join them for a meal so that we could talk further. I had to weigh this in my mind for a moment. Was it safe to sit down with a group of negro people? Some had labeled them as violent, and they were universally viewed as inferior. It seemed unkind to accept food from them, as they were likely of lower financial status than I. But then I remembered the dried rabbit in my satchel and my curiosity claimed victory over caution.

Thus did I find myself on the side of the path breaking bread with this group who I later found out had traveled all the way from a place called 'Tenn-i-see' which is many leagues south in the United States. They told me that the climate there is very warm and that the weather in Canada challenges them in no small way. The girl, Nettie spoke of how she helps the couple who give her an education and in return she educates the children. This last impressed me very much. From the little I knew of these dark-skinned people, my expectation had certainly not included worldly knowledge. The older couple even comprehended geography enough to relate where England and Europe were in relation to our own land. They had a superficial command of both French and Latin, they quoted bible verses as

easily as my father quoted the farmers almanac, and they even knew something of the politics which were more tolerant in our northern territories. Their plan was to raise funds in every major city in Canada and then to hire a ship to London. Once there, they would fund-raise some more before finally departing for the Dark Continent. The man spoke of the many heathens who could be brought into the word of the Lord and I could naught but admire this group's staunch ambition.

"Mister René? Could I try to ride on your velocipede?"

I looked over at the girl Nettie's pleading eyes and felt a mild torment in that moment. Even for myself it had taken several weeks and many tumbles before I was able to master the two-wheeled machine. It was highly doubtful that a woman, a nègre woman for that matter, could manage to control it within such a short time. I knew little about her, but I held no desire to see her embarrass herself in front of the group. As I looked in the girl's eyes though, I perceived an aberrant determination within. Something within those orbs told the story of a young woman who held more strength than outward appearances might describe. Thus did I acquiesce to her wishes, despite my better judgment. First I unloaded the saddle bags, then I instructed her on the means by which to stay upright.

She did indeed falter several times as the rest of us watched with a mix of concern and curiosity. However before an hour had passed, the girl appeared able to travel a dozen meters with no serious difficulty. For myself, I was quite amazed at this simple girl who had bested even myself in her mastery of the machine.

“That was amazing!” She gasped as she rolled my velocipede back towards the group’s wagon. “Thank ye so much mister René.” She then surprised me again by giving me a quick hug before sitting back down with the couple. The experience of being with this group led me to wonder if all the talk of the inferiority of the negro might be inaccurate, or if this group was the exception to the rule. They seemed most capable of holding intelligent conversation and I no longer held any perception of danger against my person.

I addressed the younger girl with a softer tone and with very much more curiosity now. “Nettie, I find myself quite impressed by your intelligence and level of education. May I ask if you received the whole of your education from your companions? Or were you also given the benefit of formal schooling?”

The girl looked down, again somewhat embarrassed. “Actually, my sister Celie helped me learn how ta read. She tol’ me how we gots to be smart to get awa-” The girl halted and quickly

rephrased the statement. "... to be able to travel. I been writing letters to her ever since I left. Even save money for purple stationary, the color purple is her favorite of them all."

Though I could infer volumes from her correction, we were only superficially acquainted and I thought it best to respect her private concerns.

But then, the conversation took a most uncomfortable turn when the discourse veered towards spiritual matters. Samuel looked at me directly and with great sincerity. "Mister René, I find you to be a most kind man. May I ask if you walk with our Lord Jesus?"

I was taken quite aback. From the little I knew of these people, it tended to be the French Canadians who educated the lesser races regarding the teachings of the Lord, not the other way around. I had of course been given a good Christian upbringing, but had never considered religion to be a priority. The work on the farm had always dominated my time. I did not however want to represent my race as a heathen one, and so I spoke proudly of my bible education and childhood memories in church. I spoke of all that I had managed to retain from the sermons of Father LeCruex.

The man smiled back and said that he was glad to know that Christian teachings were alive and well in our northern lands.

We spoke further of their travels and I endeavored to learn from them what I could of the lands which lay behind them but in front of me. The man Samuel told me that I could expect to reach Mont Orford about 40 kilometers hence and he mentioned the ferry which would charge five cents to take me across the river to Montreal.

I thanked the group for their company and we parted with handshakes all around. I left the group thankful for the experience of learning all that I did about such an unusual group of people.

Chapter Five The Storm

As nightfall approached on the fifth day, I made my way off the path and set up my canvas between two trees. There were no rivers nearby for fish, so I was forced to make due with shooting a small raccoon for dinner. There was a good chance that the hide would help pay for ferry service and any supplies that I might need in Montreal. After cleaning and skinning the animal, I watched the smoke from the campfire make it's lazy journey up to the treetops and soon drifted off to sleep.

BOOM!

The thunderclap must have jolted me half a meter in the air and sent me scurrying to drag my oilcloth over the saddlebags. I sat there for a long moment, my muscles tense and my limbs shaking from the force of the blast. I remained, with my back pressed near the base of a large tree hoping to keep away from any open areas where the danger from lightning would be more portent. The great reverberation of thunderclaps continued intermittently, keeping me on edge for what felt like hours. Oddly enough however, there was not a single drop of rain to go with the thunder, just an oddly luminescent Aurora Borealis that turned the night sky to an eerie green dawn. But stranger still, I could feel vibrations and static all over my body, despite the absence of a single flash of lightning. It was the most disconcerting feeling which I was never to experience from my days previous.

After a time, I even said a prayer for protection to the Lord, fearing that my travels had hidden me from the grace of His kindness.

After an eternity, the cannon fire at last began dissipating. But instead of moving off into the distance like a normal thunderstorm would, this phenomena seemed to recede straight

up in the air. It felt as if God himself had lifted the storm back into the heavens out of mercy for his one stray sheep.

I sat there shivering for the rest of the night, not from the cold, but from the terrifying shock of such a sagacious experience. It wasn't until the fiery sun rose above the eastern hills that I felt as if I could allow my limbs to relax by long slow degrees. After an experience such as this, the disquiet of the wild country felt utterly tame by comparison.

Chapter Six

The Stranger

***F**iguring that the storm had frightened off any food which I might hunt, I ate some leftovers and a few handfuls of wild vegetables. Then, after packing my belongings, I pushed the peddle machine through the thicket until I returned to the comparatively flattened stage road. Once I was again able to progress along the trail I finally became able to leave the terror of the previous night behind as I marveled at the raw beauty of the countryside. Here was no stink of city factories, or the regimented street grid. Here I could pedal along the wagon*

track with nothing but the velocipede for transport and my rifle for protection.

It was not yet midday when I rolled into Orford, or at least that's what I assumed it was for there was no sign denoting the town's name. But the distance felt right and I rejoiced at the chance to be among the company of man once again. I parked the velocipede in front of a tanner's shop and peered into the dim window. Within, an older man waved me inside as if he had been waiting all day for just this moment.

The shop held nothing out of the ordinary. The walls were lined with coon skin caps, leather riding pants, and a couple of more expensive gentlemen's coats. The sunlight struggled to send beams of light more than a couple of meters into the room, with a few oil lamps in the back to compensate. I felt a little sorry for the man having to stay and mind shop on such a lovely spring day.

"Well well, you must be new in town. What's yer name son?" His expression was genial and his demeanor as kind as a priest. He appeared quite a bit older, perhaps in his forties with deeply receding black hair and numerous lines on his face. True to his trade, the man wore a fine buckskin vest and a neat white shirt.

"Hello to you sir. My name's René and I've been traveling west for a couple of days now." I attempted to show more confidence

then I felt in a land full of strangers. "Ah, an adventurer. We get many young folk like yourself coming through here. Off to see the great wild countryside." He lowered his voice as if sharing a deep personal secret, "O' course, most of 'em come upon either bears or sauvages before too many days."

After the terror of the previous evening, my ashen face must have given the man a good entertainment.

However he was a shrewd businessman. "Oh now don't pay any mind. It was only in jest." We like to have fun with the travelers coming through here now and then.

Wanting to change the subject from what I'd been thinking only that morning, I laid a coon fur and two rabbits on the counter. "How much would these pelts be worth to you my good man?" After a good bit of haggling, I managed to leave the shop with enough silver to make a stop at the town's general store. Not wanting to invite talk or thieves, I bought only the essentials and packed them away quickly.

As I was closing up my travel pack, I heard footsteps coming toward me and saw the most eerie sight. I couldn't describe right away what disturbed me, just a feeling at first. The man had a strong build, but otherwise appeared quite average. He was clean shaven and wore regular clothes, a black vest, and an old beaten up hat. It was more the expression he had which

brought him to my attention. His face displayed a mixture of disorientation and a certain cool confidence. He appeared, in my eyes, like a sergeant thrust into a hostile foreign territory.

“Excuse me” his voice was somewhat guttural and with an accent that was strange in that it resembled no speech I had ever before heard. “Could you tell me what the name of this town is?”

As he spoke, he was looking not quite at me but through me. As if he could sense my history without hearing a single word spoken aloud. Then his eyes shifted and he stared at my velocipede as one would gaze upon a rare museum exhibit.

“Well sir, I believe this is Orford, though I’m a traveler myself and there was no sign on the way into town. If I may ask, where do you hail from? I’ve never heard an accent like yours before.”

Looking even more puzzled, the man took a long pause before answering, “Well strangely enough I can’t rightly recall. Only this morning I found myself out among the trees about a half-days walk from here. But I’m curious about this machine you have with you.”

I smiled to myself. As with the negro travelers, many people out here were curious about the machine. “This here is a velocipede.” I told him of its efficiency and the lack of any need to feed a

horse. "I've been riding this steed in a few hours the distance it would take a man all day to cover on foot."

By his expression the man was obviously inspired. "That sounds impressive, you must have seen some wonderful sights on your travels."

We continued talking for a good long while. It was incredibly strange how this grown man could be walking around the town without any memory of who or where he was. According to his story, he found himself suddenly alone in the forest and with no earthly possessions beyond the clothes on his back.

As the heat of the day grew in intensity, the man sat on the bench next to me and rolled up his sleeves. It was then that I noticed a strange object wrapped around his forearm. It was marvelously crafted, as it seemed to move along with the man's muscles. There was a circle almost like a wide bracelet that a wealthy lady might wear with bands stretching up from it almost to the elbow. The piece seemed like an illusion in that sometimes it looked more like a tattoo, and at other angles it looked like something growing right out of his arm.

"Can I ask you sir, what that piece is on your arm? It's the most unusual accessory I have ever seen."

The man looked at his arm and the piece as if they'd just appeared out of thin air. "Well, I don't rightly know."

He was obviously not lying, but the way he spoke was so unusual it was somewhat off-putting. Not feeling particularly hurried and fascinated by this most unusual figure, I decided to see if I could help.

“Have you eaten anything today? I don’t know how long you walked into town, but I haven’t seen any streams in half a days travel. If you like we could sit and have some lunch.”

The man looked genuinely surprised and pleased. “Well Mr. René I would be most grateful. You’re very kind.”

I pulled some biscuits out and the last of the dried meat from one of the rabbits and we sat down on a nearby bench to eat. I related a few stories from my trip and as I talked, the strange device on the man’s arm suddenly began to give off a blinking light. It appeared to be lit from within, as if a candle flame inside was being alternately hidden and then uncovered. I was completely befuddled as to how something so small could give off it’s own light but without causing the man any kind of burn.

“Good sir, I wish you had a memory of that device. It now seems to light up, as if by a lamp within and-”

Chapter Seven

Flying Devils

Several things seemed to happen at once and I was amazed at how time seemed to slow down second by second, allowing my consciousness to preserve each instant. The first thing I noticed as I was talking was the stranger looking at his arm and showing the expression of one who seemed mentally defunct. He seemed to express a strange confusion at each new experience, as if he were an Irishman fresh off the boat. Then I felt my words become drowned out as the most peculiar sound began to fill the air. No matter how I may try, any words which could properly describe the bizarre noise fell short. At best I could say that it was like a very high pitched locomotive whistle, but one steaming past at an unheard of speed. Then within the span of a few seconds, the sound became distinguishable as multiple entities appeared, and they were not traveling on the ground, but floated through the air towards the town like some artificial bird but at speeds beyond anything one could imagine.

The crafts, for I know no other word for them, descended through the clouds and raced along the streets before seeming to instantly slow down to the pace of a slow gallop. They could best be described as like a dragonfly, but on a scale of several

meters rather than hand-sized. The body was light grey and the 'wings' were at least three pairs. Then as I watched, a man walking across the street was highlighted in what looked like an artificial sunbeam and was dragged up to the ship with no physical object connected to him. Several other people were similarly drawn up to the ships as if the Earth's pull had become no more than a suggestion.

As I saw the second man pulled unwillingly off the ground, my courage melted like the April snow. I made a blind and panicked retreat into the nearest doorway. By some means, I know not how, I managed to grab the stranger and drag him along behind me.

We sat in the dark of what must have been a blacksmith shop and listened to the high-pitched sounds go by for an interminable amount of time. The screams of terrified citizens and panicked horses drifted towards us from all directions. As the terror continued to hold me in its grip, I debated with myself whether it was safer to make fast tracks out of this town and risk being picked up by those craft in the woods, or to stay put here where shelter could be had. Then to my horror, the stranger hurried out the doorway, and despite my pleading and protestations, walked right into the street.

From my vantage point I could see very little, but I did spy the bracelet on the man's arm flare out in some way which was hard to discern. He raised his arm and pointed it off in the distance just a second before an enormously bright blue light pulse flew from the device like a flaming cannonball. I heard a loud explosion and a horrific crash that made me scurry even further beneath a workbench.

Shortly thereafter, the terrifying noises began receding and faded to an eerie silence. It was clear that there was some kind of connection between this odd man and the great chaos outside.

I gathered the courage at last to venture out and noticed that the silence was now replaced by the sound of the bereaved wailing from those missing their loved ones. As soon as I stepped into the day, I saw a town completely upended. There were small clusters of mourning women being consoled by their remaining compatriots, agitated horses ran about with wild abandon, and one of the structures nearby had been thoroughly destroyed.

As outrageous as it was to have men snatched into the air, the scene which met my eyes was no less fantastical in that it appeared not unlike the scene of a great battle, but one spanning moments rather than hours.

I looked wildly about at the devastation and saw the stranger half a dozen meters distant standing next to an enormous rubbish pile. With nothing but curiosity to drive me, I moved to inspect the wreckage, meanwhile noticing a dozen or more people gathering towards it as well.

As I reached him, the strange man stood along the edge of the turmoil like some shell shocked veteran. I called out to him to inquire what had happened, and as I approached closer, there was an absurd looking machine trapped among broken boards and shattered glass. It was the remains of one of the flying craft, only now it bore greater resemblance to a giant insect trapped in a jar. There was a long slender body that shone like silver, and eight pairs of appendages which did indeed look for all the world, like a dragonfly's wings.

I didn't know which frightened me more in that instant. The destructive power that had been wrought upon us, the broken flying machine, or the way this stranger had faced it down single-handedly.

Finally I turned to him because he seemed unwilling to volunteer comment, and asked him directly. "Mister, just what in the deuce did you do?!"

He turned, very slowly towards me, and with that same blank expression said the one thing today which did not surprise me in the least.

“I’d swear on anything you want to put before me, I really have no idea what happened.”

“Well it looks like one of the craft which brought such terror and bereavement to this place. So how was it brought down?”

From behind me I heard more questions from others in the crowd.

“How do those buggers just pick a man up into the air?”

“What in God’s name do they want?”

As friendly as I have always striven to be, the man’s peculiar memory was wearing down my patience. “Truly man! Are you saying that you don’t even remember if you were the one who defeated this flying demon?”

Finally, the stranger turned to address me directly. “Look! I tell ya, I just don’t know what happened. All I remember is that I seemed to feel some kind of strange energy in my arm when those flying things were swoopin around. When I raised my arm, there was this kind of eye-scope that just floated in the air, kind of like you have on an expensive rifle but made just of lights. When I followed one of those things with the scope, the

light just burst forth from it and blew up the craft like it was made of dynamite.”

I didn't know what dynamite was, but before I could ask, we were interrupted by several other men who began asking questions too.

“What do these hideous things want?”

“Are they some kind of demons?”

“Demons? How can these be demons if someone can shoot 'em down??”

We both were soon overwhelmed by shouted questions from the people who were left and it finally took the sheriff's deputy (the sheriff himself having been taken) to help bring a semblance of order.

The tall man with an impressive mustache and a tanned face walked up to the crowd and spoke with an air of confidence which contrasted greatly with my own feelings.

“Now now folks. Let this stranger breathe a little. I'll be sure to document everything he has to say about this horrible incident. For now let's do what we can to put our lives back in order.”

He spoke to us in a lower voice. “Stranger, I don't know who you are, or what you did. But know that you've got the

gratitude of everyone here and I'll ask that you come with me to the sheriff's office so's I can write down your account of all this. It'll give the folks here some time to calm down too."

Over the protestations of half a dozen people, he escorted the man to the Sheriff's office while leaving me to deal with the excited population.

"Where is Villiard taking that man?"

"What if those devils come back and he can't be reached in time?"

I did the best that I could to calm their fears but felt not particularly skilled in my efforts. For that matter I was not even acquainted with these people enough to have influence. Thankfully the tanner soon joined me to help quell the tide.

"Are you, you know, okay."

I barely heard the comment, and didn't rightly feel I had it in me to deal with more questions right then. But then the tanner came beside me and his eyes fell on the most ungodly scene. He stood dumbfounded like many other folks in the crowd.

Seeing that there was no further point in trying to calm the people, I addressed the man hoping that somebody in this godforsaken scene would have an explanation of any kind, for this wizardry. "Good sir. Can you tell me what in God's name

those horrible things were?! I've never seen nor heard description of anything resembling this in all my life!"

With a sigh and a noticeable drop of his chin, the man replied, "I'm afraid that I cannot offer you more in answer than any other person here. I took the safe route and got the heck inside when I saw them monsters approaching."

With no small amount of disappointment, I instead moved to examine the wrecked craft more closely. But though I studied it with rapt interest, my elementary knowledge of science offered no clue as to its design. There was much discussion which occasionally became heated, as to how such a technology could have been developed. However the speculations grew in vast number compared with proper answers.

"My lord! I've heard of nothing in fact nor fiction which has any precedence to this." A man in a smart coat and spectacles exclaimed.

"Too true Theodore." I watched the man step slowly around the craft before looking back to face me.

"So did that stranger, actually shoot down this horrible thing?"

An older man replied, "He did. I was watching through a window and saw some kinda flyin torch shoot out from his hand!"

“Is he a wizard?”

Finally I raised my hands and spoke in the most powerful voice that I could muster. “Good men and women. This is without question a wondrous and awe-inspiring situation. However I have spoken at length with the stranger and he seems to be no more or less than a regular man albeit with some strange device attached to his arm. He doesn’t remember anything before this morning, and so harassing him would prove fruitless. He doesn’t know what this thing is any more than the rest of you.”

As I stood next to the tanner, he put a comforting hand on my shoulder and I gratefully put a hand on his. “You know I’m sorry to say, I never asked your name. Thank you so much for being right friendly.”

The man smiled, “don’t mention it. My name’s Muskar, but folks here call me Musky. I just opened that tanner’s shop a few months ago” he paused as if lost for a moment, “now I wonder if there’ll be folks around to need it.”

“Well friend, I can’t say what’s in store for the future, but I would be very willing to make myself useful here with the cleanup while remaining as a guest in your town.”

A few men clapped me on the back and we went to work on dispelling the crowd, rounding up horses, and fencing off the crashed entity.

Myself and another man named Geraude were in the process of trying to get the smashed boards out from the crash site when I heard that strange voice again.

“You know, getting that machine out of the way is going to make the job a lot easier.”

I turned to look at the stranger. “Well of course it would. Don’t you imagine that’s the first thing that we attempted to do?”

Saying nothing, the man walked slowly around the machine before he found what he was looking for beneath the nose of the device. After fiddling for a few seconds, the strange thing seemed to rise a few millimeters. He then put his hand underneath and lifted the entire thing as if it were a sheet of paper.

“Mister, just how in God’s name did you do that?!”

“Yes.” I replied. “Please pray tell.”

Not surprisingly the man pleaded ignorance as he moved the craft off to the side. I watched him perform this seeming magic trick and glanced over to see Geraude move with a determined stride towards the sheriff’s office. I left them alone for the moment and worked with the stranger to once again remove boards and smashed equipment from the crater.

“Stranger.”

I heard the voice and looked up to see Viliarde looking not the least bit pleased. I then looked over to see the stranger look up from his work with a puzzled expression.

“I don’t know who you are, or where you came from, but what I can see- is a very clear connection between you and those... demons. Now I may not have the full authority of Sheriff Cartier, but I would suggest that you’d be most wise to move along before some more suspicious folks decide that you may not be entirely on the side of these good townfolk.”

I quickly saw where this conversation was going, and it was going badly. I quickly spoke up in defence of the man, feeling a strong sense that he was more savior than conspirator.

“Mister Viliarde I must protest. How much worse off would your community be today if not for this man. While we all, myself included, cowered under shelter, this stranger bravely walked into the street alone and faced down these monsters of unholy origin. Thanks to him we not only have been saved from their harassment, but we also have a specimen to boot.”

There were murmurings throughout the group of men within earshot and I began to worry for the the fate not only of the stranger, but possibly of myself as well. The consensus was far

from universal, but there was enough malice heard among those in the crowd that I believed the depute spoke quite accurately.

“Listen, we’re mighty grateful to you for shooting the thing down. But don’t it seem mighty convenient that both of you show up outa the blue just a few hours before them things fly into town? I spent my whole life in this stretch ‘o land and I never saw anything remotely like this before.”

Several other men were shaking their heads in agreement despite my arguments. Now my heart fell as I saw myself being viewed with the same suspicion as the stranger. I looked at him for several seconds as I pondered what the best course of action would be. Finally it seemed that we both reached the same conclusion as we picked up our belongings, I pulled my velocipede over, and we started off for the edge of town. With such a long day behind us, we barely reached the outskirts of the settlement by the time the sun drew close to the western horizon. We found a stand of trees and made camp there for the night.

Chapter Eight

Slaying The Dragon

I looked around me and found that I was strapped to a table. I could move my head just a little, but my arms and legs were restrained by iron loops. The light was so dim that I could only make out a few details. There were rows of lights floating in midair at my feet, as if they were etched into a pane of perfectly transparent glass. Behind that in the distance, I could see drops of light that looked like amber floating up in a line towards the ceiling. Several of these were scattered around the room, as if clusters of fireflies were acting in the way a machine would.

Out of the corner of my eye, a beast the likes of which would terrify Satan himself moved towards me. The most gifted author alive couldn't fully describe my horror. The beast was a head taller than any man, and twice as wide. It had dull leathery skin that looked like overlapping armored plates. Its small head was bald, with huge eyes and horny protrusions all over. It reached towards me—

Several seconds passed before I realized that I was once again lying on the ground. Immediately I knew that I'd been woken [thankfully] by a flashing light. As the shadows of my terrifying dream faded ever so slowly, I turned my head to see where the source of the light was. In an instant I became

conscious that I had simply exchanged one nightmare for another. The source of the light was the stranger's bracelet which had started blinking right before the horrible craft arrived.

I quickly moved over and shook him awake. "Your bracelet, it's blinking again. I believe that those demon craft are-" And sure enough no sooner had I uttered a breath, then the horrible sound in the distance began to grow louder. I quickly leapt to the base of the nearest tree and watched the man walk out into the open and stare at the stream of flying craft. The strange bracelet, catapulted a seemingly endless series of the flaming projectiles and the air was filled with explosions the likes of which I had never before witnessed. Not having experienced war, I could only imagine this being what a soldier endures when facing a volley of mortar shells.

Knowing that I would never forgive myself if I didn't support him, I dug out my rifle with trembling fingers and strove my best to pull off a few shots myself. But my weapon felt like a child's pop gun by comparison against craft of such speed.

Several of them banked straight towards us, and I saw a peculiar beam light up the ground beneath as it approached. I managed to get a shot at the craft and the machine wavered before being hit by a flaming cannonball. What felt like hours

might have been only seconds before the deadly flock finally turned back in the direction they had come from.

“Um, René.” My thoughts were interrupted by the stranger’s slow approach. His expression, as always, showed a lack of concern for anything in particular which I found amazing given what we’d just been through.

“You were amazing!” I exclaimed, not really able to offer a more sagacious utterance.

He dismissed my compliment as an aside. “I noticed that both times, these things have been coming out of the west. It’s anybody’s guess how far they’re travelin to get here, but it shouldn’t be more than one or two day’s ride.

“Well that’s all fine and good, but what do you think you can do, go against an army of demons by yourself?” I could see the answer before he even replied. The man was more courageous than Napoleon and, as terrified as I was, I knew that I could not let him face this nightmare alone.

The golden edge of dawn was a bare line of crimson staining the eastern horizon as we headed off along the outlying fields. Nary a word flew between us as the barley and rye gave way to wild forestland. Aching for some amount of conversation, I told the man about the dream which had disturbed me the night before.

With barely a change of expression he commented, "Did those buggers have a kind of moist sheen on their skin? And what look almost like fish gills on their necks?"

I was astounded, not only at the way he seemed to be able to take this supernatural adventure in stride, but that he could have experienced the same nightmare as me on the same night. "You saw the same thing? But how can that be?"

"Look kid, we're two guys, one on a pedal machine no less. We're going out into the wilderness to slay dragons that fly through the air like a bird and snatch people up with light beams. And you still expect things to go along the way normal life does?" I was taken aback. He was right of course, but what kind of extraordinary world had I fallen into where supernatural events happened with the same regularity as a rainstorm?

My thoughts churned around and about on this plane throughout the day, subjecting me to a constant state of disquiet. As we moved along at our leisurely pace, I felt both elated and disheartened that we saw nothing unusual through the many hours of travel that morning. I wondered, all through the trip, what would happen to us or how I could help if we did manage to come across those horrors again.

It was about midday when we took a break along the side of the road and shared a small meal. Despite the reaction of the townspeople Muskar had offered us a very generous food stash given all the help that we had provided. I had felt as if I were taking advantage of his kindness in accepting. After all, I had little skill which was likely to be effective against such a foe and wondered not for the first time whether I was merely on a fool's errand. The stranger by contrast, ate very little and seemed emotionless as he sat some distance away staring off at the horizon. I having filled my stomach, fell into a sleep-deprived doze as the heat of the day reached it's peak.

Chapter Nine Transformation

I woke with a start. Something was different. I felt it the moment that I gained consciousness. There was more noise in the air, but beyond that the air itself felt different. It smelled faintly like one of the coal-powered factories back in town. I wondered if the demons were even now approaching and producing some strangely unpleasant byproduct. But no. As I perked my ears, the noise sounded different from that. It was

noticeably more close to the ground and the tone was much lower in pitch, almost like thunder in the far distance.

I looked around for the stranger who must have moved off a ways to let me sleep. But he was nowhere to be found. I called out to him and heard no response. At first I thought he may just be sleeping too soundly. I spent a seeming eternity wandering through the area in an ever increasing circle without spotting the slightest trace of him. As I walked however, I observed that even the woods around me felt different in subtle ways. The forest was thinner and the trees noticeably smaller now.

Instead of small patches of sky, there were frequent openings in the canopy above. As my search took me farther afield, I found myself becoming increasingly dejected as I realized that I was somehow completely alone once more. Had the stranger gone off by himself to fight the demons? Or worse, had he abandoned both myself and the quest entirely? I could accept neither conclusion wholely, and yet the evidence was overwhelmingly for one or the other deduction.

With a melancholy heart, I packed my gear and made my way cautiously toward the west. On the way the my eye fell upon enumerable subtle differences. None of them stood out by itself, but on the whole the story they told was thoroughly confusing. There was a strange container with the word 'Penzoil' marked

on it, and farther on a worn and rotting cloth satchel of marvelous quality.

I had to search for several more minutes until finally I came upon a man made trail. The moment I reached it, the realization that my world had drastically changed, was undeniably clear. The path which the stranger and I had followed was now a full road, and it was covered in some strange bitumen more than five meters wide. The hills on the other side which had been covered with trees only last night, were replaced by fields. And there was a seemingly endless length of telegraph wires running alongside the road. It made no sense. How could a wilderness be replaced by a regimented civilization overnight?

As soon as I began traveling on the road however, my concerns faded into the ether. I felt as if I'd been brought up to heaven. Gone was the rutted and potholed dirt path. Gone were the ever-present branches ready to knock a man's hat off, or worse. The road was as smooth as a rich man's top hat and ran straight onwards to the horizon.

I quickly became lost in thought wondering what could have happened to the stranger and the demon crafts when the same peculiar rumbling which I'd heard earlier became audible far behind. I nearly leaped out of my skin when, in only a few moments a loud horn sounded and a great metal beast, bigger

than our town mayor's wagon sped past only a meter to my left along the road. I was awestruck. There were no horses pulling it and the wheels bore greater resemblance to my own metal ones than to those of a wagon. The machine looked like some kind of steam carriage, but this one was completely enclosed in iron and glass. The exterior swept in graceful curves over the wheels most handsomely. Whoever was operating it must have been incredibly wealthy. I stared at it for many minutes as it passed off into the distance. The strange smell that I'd noticed before was much sharper once the machine drew forward of me, and it was clear that this carriage was the origin. As it sped off, I could naught but gaze in rapt wonder at the beautiful curves and awesome power of the machine.

After a few hours of travel I began to see more of the self-propelled carriages, rushing in the same direction. They honked those annoying horns and sped around me only to quickly disappear off in the distance. A short while later, I approached the destination towards which the great mass of machines poured. In a cleared area of forest, I saw an enormous stretch of pavement with much larger machines sitting in the afternoon sun. I could not immediately hypothesize what the machines were for, but they certainly piqued my curiosity. Thus did I follow the fading river of vehicles to a most fantastic place.

Chapter Ten

Happy Landings

The flow of machines led to a vast clearing in the forest from which an occasional loud buzzing could be heard. Upon turning into the place my gaze fell upon several large metal structures of drab aesthetic and vast stretches of the strange bitumen material. Numerous people were milling about, however they all stayed carefully along the side of these long paved rivers.

I carefully set my velocipede next to a service shed and slowly walked around a cluster of enormous machines. The first one that I saw was easily as large as a building. It had two sets of huge windmill blades in front which were attached to a large cylindrical pontoon. The main body of the machine was also cylindrical and inclined at a severe angle towards the front. There were two huge flat surfaces projecting from either side which were at least 3 meters wide and about as far across as the machine was long.

An enormous wheel was attached with a complicated metal rigging to the underside of each pontoon. Along the front I spied several small windows of robust glass, and the machine tapered back much like the body of a bird's towards the rear

which had three smaller surfaces, one on each side and one sticking straight up.

In addition to these, there were a few smaller machines with one single blade on the front. The machines were all made of metal, leading me to believe that this place produced a great deal more iron than my own region of Quebec. I wandered around staring at these peculiar machines for several minutes and wondering how they operated and what their purpose was. The mystery became resolved when my senses grew distracted by a strange buzzing in the distance. The sound was clearly approaching from the air and I at first feared that the horrible sky devils had returned. However this sound had a distinctly different pitch and more resembled the sound of those road carriages. Finally my eyes were able to distinguish the origin of the sound approaching from beyond a series of hills.

I peered intensely and was able to make out a small dot which continued to grow in size until I could make out a spinning fan on the front of it and the same projections that I saw on the machines around me. Along with the details of the machine, the sound grew dramatically as well until I could scarcely hear anything else around. It was louder even than Claude's locomotive factory and I saw the machine draw closer and closer to the ground until it approached the large stretch of pavement and the wheels on it's underside touched the ground. The

machine slowed to a galloping speed and turned towards the line of contraptions which I had recently been examining. Amazing, these were flying machines! What incredible land had I had traveled to, which had the technology of powered flight. Eugène Godard⁴ himself would have flocked in to this place if he could.

I watched as the captain of the great craft departed and another man wearing coveralls headed over to check on the machine. I hurried as well over to the fantastic craft in hopes of learning more about these wonders. I watched as the man in coveralls opened a metal panel on the side of the plane.

“Excuse me good sir. Would you have a few moments to share the knowledge of these incredible machines that travel through the air so effortlessly?”

The man looked at me with the a clear expression of pride. “Aint she a beauty?”

“And what exactly do you call these wondrous vehicles?”

“Well this here’s a Spitfire, fastest plane our boys got.”

“My word. Just how fast does this machine travel?”

4 Early Canadian aeronaut who completed the first successful passenger balloon flight in Quebec

“You kiddin me? This baby can just about kiss 600 kph. Though I keep tellin them boys to keep it at 550 or she’ll burn out the engine.”

“Good lord! Such a flying machine defies imagination! What kind of steam engine could produce such an enormous amount of power?!”

Now the man looked at me incredulously. “Steam! You outa the 19th century or somethin? This baby’s got a Rolls-Royce Turboprop. 1,100 horsepower pushin this girl.”

I was incredulous. This ‘spitfire’ machine had as much power as over 1000 stallions? My jaw must have been hanging a centimeter above the ground as I stared at this astonishing piece of technology. “Mister, just how in the world have you come upon such an incredible advancement? I’ve heard nothing in any textbook or periodical to mention flying machines.”

Now the man came down off of his stepladder and looked at me more closely. “Mister, just where in hell’r you from? We been flying these babys since the 30s. He briefly caught the gaze of another man in the distance and now seemed to look through me rather than at me. Look, I gotta get this engine looked over. You wanna find a steam powered airplane, try an inventor’s guild or somethin.”

As the man turned back to the engine, I continued staring at the incredible contrivance. He said that these machines had been used since the 30s, but how could this be?! In the 30s Baldwin was only just producing the first Steam locomotives in Toronto (I knew this because Cluade spoke of them incessantly).

Finally I managed to drag my eyes grudgingly away from the sleek lines of the iron flying machine and saw a large crowd of people gathering at the edge of the paved surface. I wondered if these people were, like me, unused to flying machines and were excited by the technology. Like a child, I kept staring at the vehicles so much so that I nearly bumped into a young woman who was standing at the edge of the growing crowd.

She was a few centimeters taller than I with thick curly hair that hung just barely to her shoulders. Her outfit was amazing in it's fit, and the tailor must have been quite talented. I blushed a bit as I realized that her skirt barely covered her knees. Obviously the social norms in this era were as unusual as the technology.

"I'm sorry ma'am. I meant no disrespect to you."

"Oh don't worry about it." She seemed to barely notice me and I was brought back to the curiosity of the crowd itself.

“Ma’am, if it’s not an imposition, could you describe for me what it is that drew so many people here? Is everybody here to see the flying machines?”

Now she turned and looked at me more closely. “Say, you’re not from around here are ya?”

I replied that I most assuredly was not.

“You’re not a reporter or nothin like that are ya? Cause we’re here for our boys in the air, not for some Montreal tabloid.”

“Ma’am I assure you that I do not work for the gazette. I am simply a traveler.”

She stuck out her hand, “Well my name’s Helen. I just wanted to be here for Rosie. She’s my neighbor see, and her boy’s the belly gunner up there in that bomber. We just got word that they got some flak and it’s makin an emergency landing here.”

I was taken aback by so much strangeness. I was wholly incapable of applying mental images to her words. Bomber, flak, belly gunner? I gathered from what she said that a flying machine was coming here under duress after some type of battle.

“Ma’am, is this another of those machines called the spitfire?”

“Are you kiddin me? I aint never met a man in this day and age who can’t tell a spitfire from a flying fortress.” Her eyes narrowed and her brow furrowed. “Now wait just a minute.

Are you some kind of German spy? Cause we'll have you tied up before you can say heil-"

I didn't know what made her think that I could be a spy, but I clearly had to speak more carefully. I was beginning to feel that the less I uttered in this land, the less angst I would induce. I quickly put my open hands in front of me in a gesture of peace. "Madam, I assure you that I am a Frenchman from Quebec and I only came here to observe these flying machines."

The woman seemed satisfied with this. "Well you're not gonna see anything the krauts haven't been hit with already. But I'll tell ya, emergency or not, it's always exciting to see the big bombers come in and we don't get any of that stuff way out here." She paused as she gazed off into the sky. "I think I hear the boys commin in now."

I followed her gaze and with the lull in our conversation I could distinctly hear a faint buzz in the distance. There was a muttering running through the crowd and I asked her if everyone else was excited as she was.

"Oh no. I wouldn't say excited exactly. Ya see that woman there, that's Rosie who's married to the belly gunner I told you about. They shot a whole buncha krauts, but the last one messed up the landing gear. They've been tryin to feed the kid a parachute, but it didn't work. So they're gonna have ta come in

with no wheels and when they do it's gonna kill that poor soul stuck under the plane. Such a darn shame as he was the kid who shot down so many o' them Nazis."

Although I still didn't understand the vocabulary, it was easy enough to grasp the morbid nature of the event. I was saddened that so many people would rush to the scene in order to witness a poor man's death.

As we spoke the buzzing continued to grow louder and soon a quickly growing dot was visible on the horizon. As amazed as I was to see these machines on the ground, it was even more captivating to see this machine speeding towards us through the air. I watched in wonder as it grew to the size of a crow and then to the size of an eagle. Both the size and the volume of the sound grew at a rapid pace and soon I could again see details of the great bird. I was struck by the unimaginable scale of the craft. It had to be larger even than the vehicles I had seen on the ground as it had not two but four pontoons on the wings with four sets of blades in front of them. This flying machine could easily dwarf the largest barn in Sherbrooke.

I stared agape as the monstrous craft approached. The damage soon became clear when I could see that only two of the windmill blades were spinning, while the other two were static. As the machine began to line up with the long road, I became

even more astounded when suddenly two large wheels fell out from the underside of the vehicle. They were bright orange and looked nothing like the dull colored machine wheels around me. These looked more like an artist's drawing than any construction of metal. I attempted to ask the woman about the peculiar looking wheels, but by now the noise was nearly deafening as the enormous flying machine approached. I didn't so much as hear the gasps, but I could see the awestruck expressions on people's faces as the great craft sped towards us and those strange wheels touched the ground. The craft bounced once, then again before the orange wheels settled on the road and rolled towards us.

Finally it slowed to a halt with the same awesome power that it displayed in its hurried approach. I saw the men depart in a similar state of awe and the crowd quickly gathered around the vehicle as well, pushing me physically along with it. Shortly a group of specialists were called in ostensibly to free the lad who had been held captive within the craft. Now that the engines were finally shut down and my hearing returned to something akin to regular function, I quickly sought to inquire about the strangeness of this 'fortress.'

I looked to the woman who was still next to me among the crowd. "Ma'am, can you tell me why those wheels under the

vehicle look so distinctly different from all the other ones on these flying machines?"

"Without moving her head and with her eyes still glued to the scene ahead, she replied in a shocked monotone, "I've never seen such an amazing sight in my life."

A group of men carried the miraculous soul away from the plane and the crowd quickly followed the men asking innumerable questions.

With the absence of people now, I moved towards the craft to examine the great machine. But as I got close to the flying machine, I saw those odd wheels vanish into thin air and the entire machine fell flat on the ground crushing what must have been the bubble which Helen had spoken of. I leapt back in terror from the violent crash and bumped right into another man.

"Oh, excuse me."

The man was middle aged, and he was all smiles. "Don't worry son. That plane may take a beating, but by some act of God, the kid came out of it without even a scrape." He paused as he gazed at the plane, "Don' imagine any of us will forget this miracle as long as we live."

"Not ever indeed." I replied. Truly the wonders of this age continue to supersede each other in scope.

The man gave a harrumph, "You sound just like like my grandpa." He excused himself and went over to where most of the other people were, looking for information on the miraculous soldier.

Feeling more than a little distanced by this strange society, I went back to looking over the unbelievable air vehicles. Just the thought that men had created not only machines which could propel themselves over the ground without the aid of a horse, but could even dominate the heavens themselves was a feat of abject astonishment to me.

"Strange. You seem to be the only fella who aint hawkin over them fighter boys."

The voice belonged to a woman with fading auburn hair. Her face spoke of years spent working in the sun, but her smile still held the innocence of youth. It was friendly and unusually trusting in this age of complex fighting vehicles. I briefly gazed at her outfit and almost blushed as I noticed that she also wore a skirt that barely covered her knees. This age certainly had strangely developed values.

"Well ma'am, I must admit that I was just looking at the flying machines. I didn't actually know any of the men operating them."

“Well, my name’s Velma. I work at the diner that these flyboys hang out at when they’re done knockin off Krauts.”

“Ma’am, I’ve heard that term before. What does it mean?”

Now she looked at me more carefully. “Mister, if you’re a right honest Canadian, then you should know how we feel ‘bout them German krauts”

Wondering if I might get myself in trouble again, I quickly reassured her that I was a Frenchman from Quebec.

“Yeah well, the only hope our friends over there in Europe have are these brave boys risking their lives to keep the nazis from taking over your whole damn continent.”

I was befuddled by this term ‘German Krauts.’ I could not imagine it’s origin. Somehow these people implied that there was a war encompassing all of Europe with these German Krauts at it’s epicenter.

Not wanting to sound too lost to the woman, I quickly responded, “I have no doubt that our brothers appreciate deeply the sacrifice that these boys are making.”

This seemed to satisfy her. “You’re damned right. Well, if ya get hungry or somethin, the diner is just 5 minutes up the road that way.” she pointed her finger. “I best be getting back ‘fore’ Tony starts hollerin at me.”

I thanked her and as she walked away, I felt my mind spinning like the fans on these flying machines. The idea of traveling in only one night from the world of horses and cattle to a land dominated by a continental war fought in the air by flying machines was unfathomable.

I continued to gaze longingly at the vehicles as I made my way back to my velocipede. Sitting astride this humble steed, I felt not a little smaller for the comparison now with such prodigious examples raw power. But after a time, the wind in my hair calmed me as I returned to the road. The trees here were somewhat thinner than they were back home, but the sounds of nature and the cool breeze still fueled my soul. Soon I let my whirling thoughts fall behind as I relished once again in the smooth road and wonderful scenery.

Unfortunately I wasn't able to commune to the degree that I would like as the speed and frequency of the self-propelled carriages caused me no small amount of disharmony.

The drivers of these machines operated them in a seemingly daredevil manner. The one saving grace was that the machines were loud enough that they could be heard from a good long distance which gave me time to judge if I needed to pull off the road completely or not.

Chapter Eleven

The Extraterrestrial

The next morning found me experiencing a tangible disorientation once again. This time the changes from the previous day were a great deal more conspicuous. The forest which I had made camp in the previous night was now merely a grove of trees surrounded by a vast field of wheat flowing over the gently rising terrain. In the distance I could see a machine of some kind creeping slowly across the adjacent field, its sound resembling that of the road carriages except at a slightly lower pitch. The air had the same peculiar smell to it which I had experienced previously, but now it was of a more pronounced fashion. I gazed around me and was relieved to see at least that my velocipede, my travel bags, and my musket were still with me. Currently these were the only sign of familiarity which graced my vision.

I dug around within my bags for a tin of jerky and pickled vegetables to eat for breakfast before indulging my curiosity. Once my appetite was satiated, I packed the supplies and began moving back toward the wonderfully smooth road ahead. As I pushed the machine I noticed even more clues that some significant change had occurred. The ground was more flat than

before and there were numerous bits of detritus laying scattered near the road.

My eyes fell upon one item that flashed a reflection of the morning sun. It looked like a drinking tin, but it had no removable cap on it and was partly crushed. When I picked it up I spied the word 'Pepsi' written on the side. The metal was so fragile that I could bend it easily with my finger. The experience gave wonder at what would be the purpose of designing something so thin and useless. It was quite uncanny.

Nevertheless, I reached the great ribbon of bitumen and began traveling again with the rising sun at my back. The trees and fields helped to sooth my disquiet and I relaxed once again into the rhythm of the spinning wheels. After traveling well into the morning, I came to an intersection and saw a few houses in the distance. The houses were different as well from anything which I was accustomed to. The structures were enormous in comparison the humble dwellings back home. It looked as if they could house a dozen souls. Thus did I turn onto a side road to examine them more closely and noticed a few more of the strange self-propelled carriages in front of each one.

As I gazed down the length of the road, I felt a thrill when I saw another velocipede heading toward me in the distance. I watched for several minutes as the figure grew closer and closer.

Soon it became clear that the rider was a young boy, and that he was in quite a hurry too. I was so excited to see another pedaling rider, and especially one so young, that I turned around and started riding back the other way so that I could talk to the boy.

Seeming befuddled at the sight of me, the boy slowed down only slightly to stare at me. "Who are you? I've never seen a contraption like yours before."

I was thunderstruck as I examined the boy's machine. It looked quite different from my own. The frame was built of thinner metal tubing that formed two triangles. The wheels were connected to the hub by spokes that were laughably fragile looking. But the strangest of all were that the pedals were not attached to the wheels directly, but to a separate axle connected to the rear wheel by a kind of a flexible iron band. The machine looked most strange, not unlike so many other elements in this land.

I was not at all perturbed by the child's question however, as this was what I had experienced all along. "Oh, well I'm a traveler. I'm on an adventure riding my velo through the countryside."

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Although I myself was traveling at only a mildly brisk pace, the boy was out of breath trying to keep what must have been his fastest speed.

“I’m... well I’m trying... to get away from... the bad men.” He took in long gasps between words.

“Bad men? What kind of bad men do you mean?”

“The men... from the government... they want to... to take away... my friend.” He pointed to a strange looking animal in a basket on the front of his bicycle. It looked like a giant insect with a very thin neck, large head and bulging eyes. It moved it’s head from the road ahead to look at me as if trying to ascertain if I posed a threat.

“But why would they want to take away this- this-” I could think of no proper adjective.

“Because he’s an alien. They want to take him and study him in some kind of lab.”

It was hard to tell by now if the boy’s gasping was from exertion or from strong emotion. “I don’t understand what you mean. He certainly looks strange, but that doesn’t sound like a reason to pursue both of you.”

The boy briefly pulled out of his terror to look at me quizzically, “Don’t you know about extra terrestrials mister?”

“I’m afraid that I’m not familiar with that particular term. Are you telling me this thing is not from Quebec?”

Now the lad stared at me so long that he almost lost control. “Mister, I aint never heard of anyone who don’t know extra-terrestrials. My friend is from outer space... from a faraway planet.”

Now I was utterly dumbfounded. The whole idea was like something out of a Jules Verne novel. At that point the peculiar animal raised a paw and uttered two words, “Ellliiooottt, escape.” Its voice was grating, almost mechanical in its tone.

I was so shocked at the idea that this animal could speak that I almost lost control of my own machine.

“By the stars! That thing talks!”

The boy seemed agitated by this. “Hey! He’s not a thing. He’s my friend and I’ve got to protect him from the bad men.”

As I stared at the strange looking creature, my ears picked up the most peculiar noise. It sounded like some outlandish bird song but it repeated itself precisely and was obviously traveling towards us at great speed. At first I feared once again that the demon ships were approaching. I looked behind us and felt an even greater fright when I saw a similar type of horseless-carriage to the ones which had passed me earlier, but now traveling like a monstrous locomotive straight for us. They had

fantastically bright colored lamps on top which seemed to spin frantically about. I didn't see what happened next, for I finally did lose control and I was too busy pulling my head out of the ditch, but when I looked up, the boy and his bicycle were sailing through the air in the same manner as the flying machines of the previous day.

As if creatures from other planets weren't fantastical enough. I stared dumbfounded as the boy on his bicycle performed the same stunt as the flying machines, but in reverse, becoming ever smaller until they resembled an insect fleeing into the distance.

Not daring to poke my head above the grass, I just stared as the black and white carriages made a sound like an injured parakeet and stopped. Three men in smart uniforms exited the vehicles and stared dumbfounded after the diminishing form. One of them pulled out a device which resembled an old man's listening horn, it was attached by a thick wire to the carriage and he began dictating into it. This went on for a couple of minutes and then he waved his hand and all of the men got back into their vehicles and sped off.

My shock was immeasurable. First a town being ravaged by flying demons, then a creature from another world which could make a boy lift up in the air. The only scientific conclusion was

that I had somehow gone mad and was at that very moment actually laying in some convalescent house.

When the uniformed men had left, I brought my pedal machine back to the road and traveled on for another dozen kilometers. The bizarre creature with the long neck was etched in my mind like one of those tin engravings from a Sears & Roebuck catalog. I kept expecting the boy to come flying back out of the clear blue sky. Or worse, that one of those demons would snatch me up into the air. Neither of those events happened, to my profound relief. Instead, I spent much of the afternoon meditating on whether Jules Verne might actually be correct in the possibility of traveling in great ships to other worlds.

Despite the unbelievable experiences of the last few days, I found myself with no other obvious course of action then to simply continue following the strange bitumen road in a westerly direction to see where it led me. The unpleasant smell of the air, the regular self-propelled carriages, even the road itself became just the backdrop to an ever more fabulous adventure. As the day wore on, I thought to myself, how amazing is humanity, "Man is the most adaptable creature on the grand face of the Earth."

Heal over heal my feet revolved around on the peddles as I watched the countryside fly along at a relaxing pace,

transitioning from tree lined forestland to even larger farms of a scale I'd never imagined. On many of them I would see what looked like the skeleton of a giant snake cast in iron. Two triangular uprights on small wheels supporting an enormously long tube which spanned dozens of meters before reaching another support. I could not contemplate what in the world such a construction might be for, especially in the middle of a field. At times I almost wished that I was as wealthy as Claude, if only so I could have afforded one of those photographic devices. But of course that was absurd, nothing but a horse could pull the wagon load full of chemicals and supplies needed for such a hobby. Besides, the whole point of my journey on the pedal machine was to experience the joy of the countryside without being weighed down with belongings. "Like the frontiersmen of yore." I thought to myself.

As the shadows began to lengthen and the sun moved slowly but undeniably towards the horizon ahead, I began looking for a place where I could bed down for the night.

I was not a little put off by numerous signs reading 'No Trespassing' or 'Private Property' and chuckled to myself wondering what kind of protection such things provided.

'It's not like the bears and sauvages are going to act like proper French-speaking citizens and stay away merely because of a

sign.' I thought. But after a time I came upon a property which looked dilapidated enough to be unoccupied. I hiked the ungainly velocipede over a trench which seemed to follow the road continuously. After fighting the bramble bushes for a few dozen meters I came upon a dilapidated barn which looked ideal for a night's lodging. My pedal machine leaned against it's side, I brought my bedroll within the dark interior in hopes of a peaceful repose.

The place clearly was not a structure designed to house livestock, for there was no hay or straw in sight. Instead the old building was filled with a number of strange objects. The largest was a metal contraption which appeared to be the skeleton of a machine.

It was composed of two heavy iron beams that ran straight before looping up into an arc. At each corner was a thick coiled spring and a stubby shaft. Perhaps it was the remains of a heavy wheeled cart of some type. I also found a pile of random papers and a few newsprint items. So I went for these thinking I would get a fire started. I was impressed to see the title *La Gazette de Montréal*⁵ displayed prominently on the faded sheet. I must have made a wonderful degree of progress on the new road surface if this was indeed the edge of Montréal.

5 The oldest regular newspaper in Quebec

With bored eyes I briefly scanned the articles, but they were all meaningless to me.

Then, all of a sudden I sat bolt upright in shock. The date on the paper read June 11, 1982! Nineteen hundred and eighty two! Was it possible in any part of the world to travel over 100 years into the future? And a future inhabited by creatures from beyond the heavens no less. My heart became strangled between feelings of awe and of remorse, with the latter gaining the upper hand. I had left my home seeking naught but a season of adventure, and now it seemed that all which was familiar to me had disappeared. The notion of a fire now utterly forgotten, my head fell to my arms as I was overwhelmed by the profoundest depths of melancholy.

I had no idea what to do in this world. I knew nothing of the fantastic machines, the culture, the politics, or anything at all about daily life. For all I could imagine, humanity had tamed the whole of the Earth and all of the land was now civilized. Or perhaps a heretofore unknown race of people had conquered my French Canadian society.

Chapter Twelve

The Strangest Discovery

I must have dozed off because I found myself startled by the sound of someone approaching. The building was now lit by the early vestiges of morning light and pastel red streaks graced the numerous gaps in the great line of boards overhead. I quickly and quietly gathered my belongings and moved myself deep into the corner and sat there with my drinking flask and saddlebags.

"We can look at it in here. This barn's been abandoned since the sixties, so nobody's gonna bother us."

"But what is this thing that you want to show me?"

"Just hold on."

I heard some scrambling and objects being moved about before the creaking of some very old hinges filled the empty air.

"Oh wow!" one of them exclaimed.

A soft mewling became audible and both of them oohed and ahhed over whatever it was.

"Where did you find this?"

"I borrowed it from Jean-Batiste."

"You're so bad."

"What? I'm gonna bring it back."

The conversation went on like this for some time. The little critter could be heard wandering about and the two boys were fawning over the creature like adoptive parents.

In a moment so sudden that I was unable to react, the creature popped out from behind a box and sprang right up to me. In my shock, the sudden movement made me spill my water flask. With so much tumult I was unable to get a good look at the creature, but it lay on the floor apparently in pain and making a horrible shriek. One of the kids peaked behind to see what was the matter, and it was clear that the situation was going from bad to worse.

"What's going on? Hey, what did you do to my pet?!"

"Honestly I did nothing of any consequence or malice." I hastily replied. "I was merely startled and my water flask spilled."

"Just who are you and how did you get here? And how do I know that was 'just water' and not somethin stronger?"

"Young man, I assure you that I had no ill intentions with you or this- creature. I merely sought for refuge over the night and nothing more."

Now the other one had taken an interest as he peaked around the corner. "This guy talks real strange. Where'r you from mister?"

Before I could answer, my gaze fell upon the struggling creature who was still on the floor. It looked like a tiny stuffed infant animal and there were even smaller furry spheres popping out of it. Almost half a dozen of them landed nearby. The two young people followed my stare and soon we were all mesmerized by the enigma unraveling before us. As we gazed in rapt attention, each furry little ball grew larger before our eyes and soon sprouted floppy ears and grew into an identical creature. If I were asked to describe the animals, I would say that they appeared to be like an infant primate with longer fur and very large eyes. The creatures were roughly 30cm long and proportioned like that of a newborn. The paws were like that of a cat and it walked on two legs instead of the usual four. On the whole the creatures were quite adorable.

"By the stars! It multiplies seemingly by magic. Such rapid growth is absolutely astonishing! I bet Darwin himself would steam across the ocean to see such a thing."

I didn't know why, but the expressions of both lads took on a puzzled or cynical cognizance. I thought that their expressions

were for the creature, but then one of the boys stared straight at me.

“Mister, just where in the world are you from. First you got clothes like you just came outa some play or movie and then you talk like some Shakespeare type guy.”

Before I could construct some tale of my life which would sound plausible, I hastened to put his mind more at ease.

“Young man. I have seen more unbelievable adventures in the past few days than Jules Verne himself might contrive in a lifetime. But with regards to your question, I left Sherbrooke on an adventure to ride my velocipede west into the great wilderness and explore the untamed lands.”

Now it was the other boys turn to comment, “Man, this cat sounds right outa the nineteenth century.”

My countenance must have deceived me, for his expression became quizzical as he looked at me much more carefully. I couldn't fathom what kind of idea was developing in his mind, but the whole of our conversation was cut off by a tremendous crash.

One of the young men, with faster reflexes than my own, raced over to then quickly exclaim that a pile of wood had gotten knocked over and not to worry. I was just a few seconds behind but I happened to look up in time to view a sight which filled

me with dread. It was undeniably one of the creature's 'offspring,' who was slowly pushing a great metal object at least as heavy as it was towards the edge of the loft above us.

"Watch yourself!" I exclaimed and ran to push him out of the way. It was only by the greatest stroke of luck that the falling object missed us, and then by barely half a meter.

"Wow, thanks mister." the kids gratitude was short-lived as more objects began falling from the hay loft.

We all scattered in different directions and I hurriedly went to pull my belongings out of the barn before they were destroyed. Once outside I dragged my bags in a jumbled mess towards the road. It was a risk that would slow me down initially but I could naught imagine what confusing equipment people used in this extraordinary era. I looked for the road or some other object of reference, but the distance looked interminably far compared with my arrival. I pushed and dragged as well as I could through the vast overgrown field, but only a dozen meters out a great hail of objects flew at me. I was lucky to have quickly reacted to the explosion or I might have been knocked into oblivion.

By the grace of God, I managed to seek refuge beneath an amazingly flat wood board and heard the crashing of glass and heavy objects all around me. One of them knocked me in the leg

and I almost cried out, as a blinding flash of pain awakened me to the true danger that I was facing. After a few moments of relative quiet, I peeked out to see if the threat had passed. Seeing nothing within view, I quickly got to my feet and continued my hasty retreat with my makeshift shield held above my head and my rifle and saddlebags in tow.

I was most of the way to the road when I heard the most horrible scream from where I assume the two boys had escaped. My terror was only exacerbated when the boy's scream was suddenly cut off, as if from death. The other boy was then screaming even more emotionally and from the sound it was clear that the lad's retreat held only the barest chance that he might escape with his faculties intact.

I turned away then from the dreadful scene and continued my own panicked retreat beyond the range of the catapulted volleys. Moments later I saw the strange black material of the road and my heart raced at the thought of leaving those horrid gremlins behind. But as my thoughts reached the pinnacle of hope, the sound which reached my ears sent my heart quickly in the opposite direction. For it was clear that there was something headed straight toward me from the abandoned barn and it was moving several times faster than I. As the distance closed, I spied a colossal vehicle racing at me through the grass. It had four thick wheels and handlebars much like my velocipede.

The pace was at least as fast as a galloping horse and I could clearly see one of the strange creatures holding onto the steering bar. There was no question in my mind of the intention that these animals had. I was now certain that not only were they intelligent, but filled with a most terrible malice as well. If asked afterwards how I did it, I would be unable to provide a clear answer, but somehow I managed to lift the heavy board into the air edge-on so that the animal on top of the vehicle met up with the thin side and was knocked out. As the vehicle sped off and away, I threw the board on top of the creature and stomped up and down until it was clear that the horrid beast was quite dead.

Chapter Thirteen

Escape

***S**ore, weak, and gasping for breath, I limped over to where my belongings lay in a pile. My dejection was only surpassed by the need to put a great distance between myself and the creatures if I was to enjoy any hope of survival. I grabbed my rifle and put what items I could find back in the bags before heading to the road. With the terrifying excitement*

behind me, the fire of my earlier injury reasserted itself with gusto. I must have been quite a sight to the driver of the motorized carriage because it quickly stopped and a middle-aged man looked out the window.

“What in the world happened to you son? You need a lift somewhere?” he looked concerned, but his voice held an undertone of caution.

Still panting I pleaded, “Anywhere good sir. Anywhere that’s as far from this devilish land as possible.”

The man still looked skeptical, but he opened the side door, “Now you be sure you don’t try anything funny, I know Ju Jitsu and have a brown belt.”

I didn’t know what this fellow meant, but I did the best to allay his concerns. “Sir, I do not wish to cause trouble for you or your Chinaman friend. I only wish to get far away from this place.”

His eyes fell upon my rifle and his face hardened even further. “That gun o’ yers.

You best show that to me before I let you anywhere near my truck.”

With a horrid realization, it occurred to me that my munitions were not among the items that I remembered packing in the

field. The rifle would be utterly useless against any modern threats that might present themselves. "Sir, you can be assured that I would never think of using this on any human alive. On top of that, my munitions seem to not be among my remaining belongings."

He looked carefully at the rifle and his expression became one of fascination. "A Brown Bess musket?! Good lord, this rifle must be the most well preserved antique that I've ever seen. I hope you take darn good care of it." He handed it back to me with the care one would use for a newborn infant.

As he put the machine into motion he calmly asked, "So whatcha runnin away from so fast?" He took a long sidelong glance at me, "if you're runnin from the cops, I aint gonna be a part of nothin like that." He paused and motioned for me to close the door. "By the way, none 'o this sir shit. Just call me Riley."

"Hello Riley, my name's René and I have no reason at all to escape from a constable. If he were to appear, I would embrace him like a brother if I thought that he could assist."

Now obviously perplexed, the man asked again what was happening.

"Sir, if I were to tell you my whole tale, you would think me a madman. I have thought the same must be true myself but that

a madness such as this could not be imagined by the most talented and educated of men."

"The latest terror into which I've stumbled is a place where some small creatures turn into minuscule demons when they multiply and begin terrorizing anyone whom they come upon. I myself barely got to the road safely, and my velocipede is in the hands, perhaps of the devil himself."

I felt myself thrown forward as the vehicle came instantly to a halt and the man looked at me long and seriously. "Kid, you're not on drugs now is you? Cause if you are I aint takin you one more inch."

I didn't know what would disturb the man so much about using medicine, but perhaps he was one of those types who relied on natural berries and herbs. "Sir- Riley, I may have used some coke in the past, but I assure you that nothing but natural food and water have touched my lips in over a fortnight."

"You talk mighty strange. Are you talkin about Coke like the drink? Or cocaine." he said the latter with a sneer.

I found myself quite confused I'd used Pemberton's tonic⁶ for an inflammation of the throat, but apparently such a thing was taboo in this land, so I erred on the side of caution, "Mr. Riley, nothing illegal or immoral has touched my lips for the entirety of

⁶ John Pemberton developed the coca-cola drink while serving as a Lieutenant in the Confederate Army

my journey thus far. In my memory coke has only been used by those with cough or sore throat.”

The man grunted and moved the vehicle forward again. “You drink soda for a cough, you’d be better off with some robatuson.”

I didn’t answer for it was clear that the taboos of this land were extremely odd and potentially even dangerous. Instead, I stared out the window in awe at the astonishing speed with which this carriage could travel. In a few minutes we were covering the same amount of ground that I would travel in an hour on my velocipede. The scenery flew by in a blur and I occasionally saw other similar carriages traveling in the opposite direction with equal speed. Perhaps the foul smell of these carriages was outweighed by the advantage of the fantastic speed of travel which they were capable of.

“I aint takin you to Montreal now. Too much traffic an’ idiot drivers. But I can let you off in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, it’s only about 5 minutes away if your headed into the city.”

What he said made little sense but I was grateful enough to be away from those horrible gremlin creatures that the meaning was inconsequential at the moment.

“Do you know if there is a craftsman with whom I could speak about obtaining a velocipede in Richelieu?”

“A craftsman? I bet there’s a few machinists there, but you’d be better off just goin to the local bike shop if that’s what yer lookin for.”

I wondered at the term, but thought it best not to ask. “Thank you so much. I will look one up.”

The man let me off in a peculiar neighborhood of well manicured houses, and as he drove away the greatest of horrors was brought to my eyes. It was only a brief flash, but I would swear to the Lord Himself that I saw one of those little creatures grasping to the back of the man’s carriage. Panic extinguished my pain and I ran as quickly as I could in the other direction and wrestled with the terror which threatened to blind my senses. Images whirled past and I could not say what happened next. I remember a dog began racing toward me from a nearby house. My panic must have been exacerbated by the animal because I remember turning to flee from the beast and after that all was darkness.

Chapter Fourteen

Recharge

A strangely disoriented state pervaded my being upon regaining consciousness. My body lay prostrate on the ground next to a tree. I had a powerful throbbing throughout the whole of my being and was quite unsure that I could even stand up. When I turned slightly to look at what was amiss, there was a horrid base drum pounding within my skull. It was clear that I would be somewhat incapacitated for the foreseeable future.

It is common for a man to feel occasionally disoriented upon waking and spend a few minutes getting re-acquainted with the familiar. I however was not blessed with the benefit of any kind of familiar surroundings this time. For as the shadows cleared themselves from my eyes, I found to my dismay that my environment had changed once again. The houses were somewhat more dilapidated, though still of higher quality than my own home. The neighborhood seemed more densely built up than last and the streets were lined along either side with the self-propelled carriages which seemed to dominate these future environs. I thought about going to one of the residents and asking for help, but my aches were too severe to allow movement and I felt that it would be best to sit for just a spell longer.

As it seemed however, the decision was taken away from me when an elderly woman with a delicate frame happened to pass by. She looked to be in her eighties with long and thinning snow white hair sprouting from her scalp. She stared at me for a long moment as I lay prone upon the ground.

“Good lord! What in the world happened to you? Are you alright young man?” She paused as she peered through her spectacles. “My my, you look as if you’ve been through a war zone.”

It took several moments to collect my thoughts and grasp what the woman was saying. “Madam I thank you for your concern. I wonder though, if you could tell me where I could sit for a moment and convalesce. I seem to be in no small amount of pain.”

The woman furrowed her eyebrows and exclaimed, “Well I’ll be tarred and feathered. You sound just like my papa!” she slapped her hands together in excitement. “Well I’m sure we could make room for you to rest up. I’ll get Harold. He’s got more spit and vinegar than these ol bones of mine.”

With that the woman shuffled off down to the opposite side of the street and into a deeply weathered three-story building. While I waited I saw her exchange looks with another man in a suit who was walking in the opposite direction.

“We’ll never sell to the likes of you!” She shouted this with a vehemence quite unexpected for one of such advanced age.

It was too painful to turn my head to follow the other man’s progress, but I shortly heard him begin talking. I could only hear one half of the conversation which led me to wonder if the man was talking to thin air.

“Yeah, tell him it’s Carlos.”

“The idiots wont sell.”

“Of course I did. I offered ‘em almost twice what that dump is worth.”

“They’re just a bunch of senile old nobodys.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got another plan. Everything’s fine. We’ve got all the other properties. You have my word that I wont let a bunch of deadbeats keep this project from going up. One way or the other- ”

His voice faded into the distance and I soon saw a very large negro man walking toward me. He looked to be 2 meters tall if he was a centimeter. At first I felt nervous, but another elderly man was with him and announced that I was injured and encouraged him to be careful.

The man said not a word, but I felt myself lifted into the air with what seemed like no effort at all and carried back to the apartment building.

The interior was dim and filled with furniture which was well worn but handsome. There was an expensive looking chandelier in the middle of the room which produced an amazingly even light with no obvious flame. The walls were of a handsome if worn stucco material and they were covered with beautifully framed lithographs.

“The couch should be comfortable enough. Thank you for being such a dear Harold.”

The woman let the man leave and walked slowly over to me. She spoke softly and her broad smile was quickly disarming.

Despite the big man’s care, my head and torso were aching terribly by the time he put me down. I felt as if the base drum rhythmically beating inside my ears had been joined by an entire chorus and both my shoulder and ankle were on fire.

“My word, you must have been in quite a scrape. Why don’t you tell me where you’ve been hurt and we’ll see what can be done.”

I was humbled by the woman’s kindness and compassion. “Madam I am eternally grateful for your generosity. I wish not to be a bother, I only need some time for my leg to recover.”

Though I winced involuntarily with even slight movements.

“And please do ask that servant man to take special care of my belongings.”

The woman’s face went from kind and concerned to ashen as she looked at me more closely. “My boy, the way you talk makes me think of my father who passed over 60 years ago. Just where in the world are you from?”

With a sigh, I realized that the people in this strange land of smooth stone walkways and self-propelled carriages would always see me with as much bewilderment as I saw them.

“Madam, I assure you that I am a simple man from a small town east of here called Sherbrooke. However this place in which you all are living is quite extraordinary to me and looks nothing like the land which I left.”

She continued to stare at me, but my response must have satisfied her enough for the moment. “Well, we can discuss those things later. Right now we should work on getting you fixed up. Tell me where you’re feeling the most pain. I used to be a nurse with the Red Cross you know.”

I knew not what she meant, but decided to dismiss it for the time being. “Thank you so much madam. The pain which I feel extends from my head and includes my shoulder and right leg.”

“Oh enough of this formality. My name’s Faye. What do they call you young man?”

“My name is René. René DeBois. I thank you so much for your assistance.” I could feel her hand moving up and down my leg with expert skill, but I could not prevent a cry of pain when she reached my ankle. I had not noticed before, but the area was swollen to the size of a winter boot.

“Frank,” she called a little louder. “Frank! We need a scissors and first-aid kit, on the double.”

The older man soon entered the room carrying some supplies. In the meantime the woman felt around on my chest and shoulder, the latter of which was extremely tender. As soon as she had the supplies, she took a scissors and cut open my sock. Even with her care, the experience was extraordinary painful. Once she had gotten the sock off, I was able to get a look at the injury. My foot was terribly swollen and the color was a sickly pale blue.

“My Lord! How in the world did you get yourself into this kind of trouble?! We need to get you to a hospital, this must be infect-”

“NO! Please, please dear lady. I’ve heard what those monsters do! The men are little more than butchers, who want only to chop off a limb at the slightest provocation.

I'll never ride a velocipede again!" This only made me realize that my sole transportation was now sitting abandoned in some barn where the devil himself could not convince me to return.

Now both the man and the woman were staring at me and I wondered if I had not offended them. If the woman had been a nurse, she may once have been one of those butchers.

"My word? What in the world makes you think someone would cut off your leg? It certainly looks bad, but most likely you just have a sprained ankle or maybe a broken bone in your foot. We would need an x-ray to be sure of course." She looked more closely at the wound and carefully felt around the area. "It shouldn't be difficult to fix, but I'd feel much better if you could get looked at by a professional. At least for now we'll get you an ice pack for the swelling."

"My word! You have ice? That is most generous of you to offer."

Again the woman gave me a strange look. She left me on the couch and sidled into the kitchen. "Frank, can I speak to you for a moment?" She called out. The older man followed her and I heard them speaking in low tones which gave me wonder as to what my fate with these people would be.

The woman gazed unflinching at her husband. "What do you make of this odd fellow?"

The man peered back with a serious expression. “Just how in the world did you find that man Faye?”

The woman looked with equal intensity. “I tell you he was just lying on the curb. The man had this ancient hunting rifle next to him and he looked for all the world like some actor in a documentary or something.”

“You don’t think there’s reason to be concerned?! Faye, who in the world carries around a hunting rifle here in the city?”

“I’m more apt to wonder about what the man said. He thought that if we took him to a doctor, that they’d amputate his foot? What kind of insane place would do that?”

“Honestly Faye, I have no idea. That kind of foolishness was dispensed with a century ago.”

“He’s a strange character, that’s for sure.”

The woman sighed. “Well, if he’s afraid of hospitals, and thinking that they would cut off his leg would sure do that, we’d better do what we can for him here.”

The woman returned from the kitchen with a cloth bag that rattled as she placed it on my ankle. The feeling was wonderfully cooling to the skin.

She gently patted my leg farther away from the joint. “Now let’s look at your shoulder.”

Once again I cried out when her hands moved to the front of my shoulder. “My my, what could’ve happened to cause this?”

You've dislocated your shoulder too. I'll need Harold's help to get that fixed.

After a short while the large negro man returned and, with the advice from the older couple, he gave a solid yank on my arm. I nearly lost consciousness from the pain, however it soon quieted down and I found the ache in my arm was now reduced.

"Thank you again Harold. You're such a dear." The man silently nodded his head and left.

The woman shook her head as she continued to stare at me. "I can't imagine how you got around long with a swollen foot and dislocated shoulder." She sighed heavily. "Your arm is going to be sore for a few days, but it should recover just fine. You rest up and I'll bring you some magazines to keep you occupied."

I saw her then pull a blanket over me and walk slowly out of the room.

The basement was typical for a triplex of its time. Bland concrete walls with some ancient furnace in the corner and separated storage spaces for the residents. A few hardy sunbeams struggled through one small window and fought valiantly against the shadows to maintain a dusty twilight.

"My word! It looks like our friends have already fixed the man's bags." She smiled broadly, clasping her hands in joy.

"I hope that man doesn't get any funny ideas about us because of it."

“Oh Harold” she gently slapped his shoulder. “The man may be strange, but he’s exceptionally polite. I doubt he could be a threat, especially with the condition he’s in.”

“Faye, look at these tools. They look like the kind of stuff you’d find in some old west museum.”

“Well that certainly is strange. I can’t imagine how he could have gotten hold of these things.” She sighed, “At any rate, his rifle is safe here in the basement and he won’t be moving around comfortably for a good week or more.”

He looked over the rifle longingly “Well why don’t you check on our friends, and I’ll bring the man a few magazines and see if we can’t get his story straight.”

Opening one of the closet doors, she looked in on a small upside down saucer with lights around the edge and four small arms dangling down. It floated in the air connected to an old extension cord and made happy sounding beeping noises when the door opened.

“Are you feeling alright?” the woman asked.

More beeping noises followed.

“Thank you so much for repairing that man’s things. It certainly is peculiar-”

she paused. “Is there anything else that you need?”

More beeps sounded.

Okay well, goodnight for now little one.”

I must have dozed off, but was soon awoken by the sound of creaking floorboards. The older man appeared in the doorway carrying a small pile of items. He shuffled in on legs which had obviously traveled many long miles.

“Well, I brought you some magazines. Don’t know if you’re more of a National Geographic or Car & Driver type fellow. But I’ll let you take your pick.”

The elderly man placed the small stack of periodicals on a nightstand within easy reach.

“Now I’ll have you know that I used to work as a constable. So if you try to pull a fast one on us, I’ll see it in your face.”

It was clear that this man had become more skeptical and I did my best to show a benign expression as a result.

“You say that you’re from Sherbrooke right? And you rode on a... velocipede all the way here?”

“Good sir, I realize that I may sound strange or foreign. But I assure you that I will tell you nothing but the Lord’s own truth. And in all sincerity, I admit to not knowing exactly where I am. All I can say is that I left several days ago from my family’s farm on the west end of Sherbrooke and had a number of enormously strange experiences before finding myself blacked out along the side of the road. I must admit with some shame to a bit of panic when that large dog came towards me. I turned

and ran the other way and the next thing I know, the lady was looking at me on that stone walkway across the road.”

The man looked deep in thought. “Son, just how old are you. . . when were you born?”

“Well sir. I am 19 years old. I was born in August of 1852.”

I heard the sound of the periodicals falling to the floor as the man grabbed for a chair with a shaking hand and sat down. It took several moments before he was able to regain his composure.

“You know son. If I hadn’t taken a look at that hunting rifle of yours, and your clothes, I’d have thought you were either lying or insane. But there’s no way in the world you could’ve come up with that stuff down there by any normal means.” He paused for a time. “Do you have any idea how you arrived here?”

Now I felt more uncertain and looked down at the floor.

“Honestly sir, I could not at all tell you. All that I experienced was falling asleep in one place and waking up in a different one. Though in this case I may perhaps have merely blanked out.”

The man leaned in closer “Looks like you got a pretty good knock in the head. Yes, I can see the bruise beginning to swell. I’ll get you another ice pack for that.”

After a short time, the man came back with another of those wonderfully cool bags and put it on my bruised head.

“Truly sir, it’s lucky that I came here shortly after your ice delivery. You both are quite generous to share this.”

“Well, now I definitely believe you. There must have been no refrigerators where you lived back then.”

“I must admit that the world in which you live is most extraordinary to me. There are a great many things here which are foreign to my experience.”

I could feel the old man’s eyes continuously riveted to me as if I were some oddity in a traveling show. The feeling was most discomfoting. “Please understand. While I may have traveled here from a faraway time, I am still a flesh and blood man with a heart and an intellect. So I would appreciate it if you would abstain from staring at me as if I were some circu. . . ow!”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Oh I gather that it’s my ankle. I merely shifted poorly. I don’t suppose you have any Vin Mariani⁷, would you, for the pain?”

“Well I’ve never heard of any mariani. But I can get you some aspirin.”

⁷ A wine developed during the 1860s it was made from Coca leaves and promoted as a tonic for increased energy

When the man returned, he gave me a couple of white tablets and some water.

“Son, you’ve never heard of Pasteur, have you?”

“Well sir, now that you mention it the name sounds familiar. Is he a scientist of some kind, a Frenchman?”

“Well, yes and no. He was a French scientist. Made huge advancements in the field of medicine. Thanks to him they don’t cut off people’s limbs much at all.” Now the man leaned closer, “Son, the man died 90 years ago.”

Now I sat bolt upright, which sent new waves of pain coursing through my body causing a moan to escape my lips. I thought back to the peculiar newspaper which was dated 1981.

“Son, you’d better take it easy now. I’m sorry to get you worked up.”

My face grew flushed from his comment. “You’re sorry! Sir I am the one with the greatest reason for melancholy. By some cruel twist of fate, I have somehow traveled a century into the future. I have no friends in these lands, No idea what has happened of my family, and I know nothing of what could have befallen my friends and neighbors in these intervening years.

Every man that I knew must be up at the Lord's side [hopefully]. My eyes began to mist from the emotion and I burned with the shame of acting so womanly.

Now the skepticism vanished from the man's face and he patted my hand in sympathy. "Son, I can't for all the life of me understand what it must be like for you. Lord knows we've never had any kind of invention in the past century could explain something like this."

He paused for a moment. "Certainly no one in this world could imagine how bizarre all of this must be."

Frank was kind enough to sit with me for several hours and tutor me on the innumerable advancements which these people enjoyed. It was an awe-inspiring conversation. Man had apparently advanced more in the past century than in the previous three centuries before that. The motor cars, aircraft, medical technology, electrical power, radio and television. All of it was like a fantasy to contemplate.

"Good Lord! This is more wondrous than the stories by Defontenay⁸."

Now the man's expression bemusement. "René, I have no idea who that is."

⁸ Charlemagne Ischir Defontenay was a French author who created some of the earliest novels that would be considered science fiction including 'Star, ou Psi Cassiopea'

“You don’t?! My word, that is undoubtedly your loss. The man was an absolute genius. He wrote of fantastic discoveries of human-like races living in the far off constellation of Cassiopeia.”

“Young man, I think that you’ve had enough excitement for one afternoon. I should let you rest. Now you be sure not to move around too much or you’ll mess up that foot all the worse.”

The man left a stack of periodicals on the table next to me and gave me space to recuperate. However despite his advice, my mind was a great bubbling cauldron. The unbelievable transformation which society had undergone in only three generations were enough to leave me giddy.

My hands trembled as I began leafing through one of the periodicals titled ‘National Geographic.’ I was greatly impressed by the quality of the imagery, however I was even more enraptured by the articles therein. I read each one cover to cover. There were stories of savages in the East Indies, lost ships frozen in the far north, and large predatory animals on the verge of extinction (a concept of which I was unfamiliar).

There were so many stories to absorb. And the technology! It was just as Frank had described, there were self-propelled carriages, powered flight, vehicles which traveled far below the ocean, even craft traveling beyond this world with close views

of the distant planets. My mind gasped at one particular image which claimed to be of our whole world seen from far above in the heavens. It nearly made me swoon to even think about it. I spent the next day or so engrossed in whatever reading material these folks had.

There was even a history book covering the independence of Canada. It seems that the province of Canada had become a vibrant and independent nation. This filled my heart with joy as the pressure from Britain on Quebec had always been a dangerous powder keg.

After a couple of days, despite the pain, I was able to hobble around with the aid of some crutches which my hosts had found. Like everything else of this time, the quality was extraordinary. These were made of a metal so thin and light that I scarcely believed they could support a child, and yet they functioned perfectly.

I offered to help when and where I could, but my hosts insisted that I rest and recuperate. Much as I endeavored to acquiesce, sitting motionless in such a wondrous world was beyond me. I soon found myself, as like a small child, examining and exploring each and every facet of this world, from the radio which pulled music and news right out of the air, to the 'refrigerator,' to the amazing world of electricity which brought some kind of

regulated power to numerous points in the apartment. One need only plug a device into the wall and it would automatically provide light, or motion, or sound. I discovered a long chord with numerous colored glass tubes attached to it. At the end were two metal forks much like the other powered devices. When I inserted this into the wall 'outlet' the full number of tubes lit up like candles set within expensive colored glass.

It was astonishing and beautiful to witness. As I watched the lights, I spied an even more incredible sight. A small object floating by paused in the hall doorway. It looked like an upside down platter made of iron and about 20cm across with numerous tiny lights around it's perimeter and what looked like appendages hanging below. It made a series of beeping sounds and hovered over to the cord. In my awe I let the cord fall and watched as the object, which seemed to possess some type of intelligence, picked up the end of the cord with an appendage and attached itself to it somehow. The 'being' appeared to be drawing energy from the cord like any of the powered devices in the living space. I stared at the sight for several moments until the being, apparently satiated, dropped the cord and floated away with what sounded like happy beeping noises.

After the being left, I experienced the most incredible sensation. There was an instantaneous disappearance to the pain in my leg,

shoulder, and head as if a gas lamp had been blown out. Was it possible that this magical being was the cause?"

It was about an hour later that I saw Frank and Faye return to the apartment and I was able to inquire about the strange phenomenon. "Mr. and Mrs. Riley. I would most like to ask of you what the strange.-- being or thing is that looks like a small inverted saucer and floats around with no apparent support and attaches itself to that cord of colored lights."

Even before I completed my question, it was clear that my words created some amount of discomfiture for my hosts. They exchanged worried looks and fidgeted their hands as I spoke.

"Please forgive me if I have brought up a taboo subject. I was only curious about this amazing technology of yours which seems to eclipse even the advancements printed in those periodicals."

I saw the woman nod her head and an unspoken decision seemed to pass between the two of them. "What you saw was never meant to be known to anyone outside of our building. These fix-it creatures are from somewhere beyond what we know of on Earth. They're clearly alive and seem to draw energy from a common electrical outlet. In return, they've blessed us by repairing any number of items that end up breaking. From my spectacles, to Harry's watch, to your traveling bags."

This last statement filled my heart with exultation. "That is not all the good which these beings provide. I myself felt my injuries disappear when this creature left."

"My word!" Faye quickly walked over to me and felt my ankle. "He's right. The swelling is gone!"

"René, you'll have to understand that these little guys have never shown themselves able to heal people. They've only healed mechanical things like watches." He looked at me more closely. "I hope that you can return our kindness by keeping this little secret close to you."

"Good sir and madam. You can absolutely be assured that I would never betray your trust and dishonor the kindness which you've shown to me."

This seemed to satisfy them and they both gave me a kind pat on the shoulder.

Over the next couple of days I continued to absorb reading material to the full degree that I was able. One day I was reading, for the second time, an article on a flying machine which had been discovered under deep ice in northern Canada. It looked very much like the 'aeroplanes' that I had seen during the miraculous landing. When I finished the article, Mrs. Riley took me for a walk 'to stretch my legs' and to give me a sense of the outside world. As we walked along, there were row after

row of detached houses, all with identical grass lawns growing around. It was an odd melding of urban park and housing block. Here every house enjoyed ample daylight and it looked as if there was plenty of room for a man to stretch his legs. Was the utopia written about by Loudon⁹ finally realized? Each man the master of his castle and with so much wealth that he could focus his time on recreation? It was all quite remarkable.

But I was puzzled by another observation. As idyllic and manicured as this environment was, I could see no people outside to enjoy it. Where had they all gone?

Occasionally one of the miraculous self-propelled carriages would pass by, but I saw hardly anyone walking the streets, no neighborly conversations, and no general urban life. I asked Mrs. Riley about this oddity.

“Oh it’s the sad development of our cities. People are always in such a hurry to get everywhere that they never just take a walk anymore, not even to the corner store. I can assure you that you’re not the first person to wonder about this.”

Her statement gave me pause. Perhaps the marvels of this technological utopia had a shadow side. The mere concept of a town in which people were not on the streets conversing with each other was utterly foreign to me.

9 John C. Loudon was a landscape planner and an promoter of the suburban development model, he became a profound influence on Henry Olmstead

Faye changed the topic to ask me about some of my adventures and I described the miraculous aeroplane landing and the strange wheels which had miraculously appeared. Then I told her about the odd creatures which transformed from adorable pets into malignant demons. "That is how my foot became injured and how I lost both my munitions and my precious velocipede."

Despite the great kindness the old couple had shown me, I felt not a little dejected at the loss of the machine which I had conserved six months of my earnings for. Thus I was puzzled by the bright grin on the face of my host.

"Oh well if you think that the velocipedes from 100 years ago are a joy, then you'll be even more thrilled when you see the 20th century bicycles. We'll talk to Yehuda. He's one of those eccentric types who rides his bicycle machine all year round. Even in the snow."

Now that was amazing. I thought back to what Claude had advised me about the danger of my wheels rotting in winter and looked forward to speaking with a seasoned veteran.

Chapter Fifteen

Yehuda

We traveled a couple of blocks more among the individual regimented houses. The one which we walked up to looked very much like the rest of the houses and I wondered how people distinguished theirs from any other. It had a low sloping roof, an enormous front door which perhaps was for a carriage or, more likely, one of the self-propelled vehicles. The walls had perfect looking wood batten board which looked to have been installed by quite a skilled carpenter, and the landscaping was the same monolithic cropped grass which repeated itself throughout this land. I hesitantly followed the woman up the walk to what appeared to be the front door.

A gentle rap brought the faint sound of footsteps after awhile and the door opened to reveal a man perhaps in his early 30s with an impressively thick beard and a small cap with a brim that only protected his face.

“Yea. Whatcha want? If yer sellin somethin I got no money.”

The older woman quickly took control of the conversation to my sincere relief. *“Mr. Yehuda, my name is Faye, we donated a bicycle to your shop last year. I would like to introduce you to René here. He has been separated from his, um velocipede as he*

calls it. I believe that you two will have a great deal to talk about."

"What the woman said is correct sir. I am in need of obtaining a replacement velocipede for one which has been recently lost. She suggested that you are a salesman for such machines." I endeavored to show externally, a confidence which inside was quite lacking. For I had no idea what type of compensation I could offer in exchange for such an expensive machine.

The man looked at me with the same puzzled expression that I was beginning to see on each man I addressed.

"Yehuda, he means a bicycle." The woman looked at me kindly. René, I need to get back to help Harold. I will leave you in Yehuda's capable hands."

The man looked at her then at me. Slowly and then by regular degrees he seemed to relax his demeanor. "Well you may talk funny, but you definitely came to the right place, um René." He stuck out his hand in greeting.

"It' is good to meet you Mr. Yehuda."

"Why don't you come into the garage and we can talk bikes."

Thank you for your time. I would like to continue my journey west, but I do not currently have the necessary transportation to do so."

What I saw next was unlike anything imaginable. It was as if the greatest futurists had conjured out of the ether, this artificial world in which I now existed. The man went over to the huge door and with the push of a button, the giant door raised itself with a great clattering sound. Within the huge volume (which was nearly as large as the front room of my house back home) were all manner of fascinating tools as well as a number of velocipedes in various states of disrepair. These machines were highly futuristic compared to what I had been exposed to thus far. They were composed of a frame made of the same iron tubing I had seen on the boy's machine, wheels which looked too fragile for practicality, and multiple clusters of cogs connected to the pedals with a metal band. I did not as yet understand this system, but it was immensely captivating.

"I've got a bunch of different kinds of bikes, so it depends on what you like to ride. Are you into road riding, mountain bikes, or recumbents?"

"Good sir. This is all deeply fascinating, but I plead ignorance of all these terms.

I admit to only being familiar with the machines produced by Lallement.¹⁰ I've never seen these chain driven models with the impossibly thin metal parts. Given how much wealth you've

10 Pierre Lallement is one of the earliest innovators of bicycle technology and credited with bringing the invention to North America from Paris

invested in this, I don't doubt your experience, but I'm reticent to believe that these machines can withstand the riggers of regular travel."

As I spoke, I could see the man's demeanor transform from confusion to suspicion. His eyes narrowed and his mouth narrowed into a thin slit. "Mister- I just need to get this straight. Cause your words, your clothes, and everything you say makes me think that there's something mighty strange about you. You say that your... elocipede was produced by Lallement?"

I nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, my beloved velocipede had the signature of Pierre Lallement himself."

"And since you keep calling it that, can I assume that it did not have a chain or dérailleur?"

With a sigh, I could see where the conversation was going. "Mr. Yehuda, I can see the cause of your wonderment. I am indeed an orphan if you will, from a time period far removed from the one in which you dwell. There is no explanation among the vast wonders which I have beheld which could bring reason to my adventure. It seems that I am by some strange twist of fate living over 100 years in the future from where I left home. My machine was among the earliest models, produced in '65 which meant that it did not come with the newer spoon brake."

I could see his face growing red and his eyes going from narrow to normal and then widening even further. Then the man seemed to lose control of his legs, as he slowly slid down the wall to the floor with his legs folded in front of him. His eyes seemed to lose focus and I began to worry that he might in fact lose consciousness entirely.

“I do apologize for the shock that this must cause you-”

“Mr... René, I’m afraid this all has me a pretty confused. In the whole world, I’ve never heard of anyone traveling through time at all, ‘cept in the movies of course.” The man paused in self reflection then. “I do truly feel for you. It must’ve been really great back there and to find yourself suddenly thrust into the 20th century with all the pollution and development must be a major shock to you.”

“Yehuda as amazed as I am by this unbelievable turn of events, I’m nearly as amazed by your pessimism of the wonders that you posses. By the stars, I just saw you move an entire wall just by pushing a button. Your work space here is nearly as immense as my entire house, and you have such clean and well maintained cities that Olmsted himself would be awestruck. By jove, we’re still struggling to keep ourselves safe from the bears and sauvages of the western lands.”

Yehuda looked at me intently for several minutes. "You're gonna want to be real careful about who you call sauvages in this day and age mister."

Once again I was reminded of the strange customs in these new lands. "Good sir, I mean no real disrespect to you or the customs of this society. Such vast changes have taken place that I am clearly ignorant of them." I thought for a moment and then continued. "Perhaps it would alleviate our disparate views if we could have a discussion to assist me in filling in the gaps in my knowledge through the time which I have passed across."

"Man. That would definitely take awhile." He looked at a black bracelet that he wore on his wrist. "Hell, the shop's going to open in less than an hour. That's not much time to give you a history lesson. But I would be happy to help you with a bicycle and fill you in on some of the advances, at least in that limited area."

He led me into a richly adorned apartment with a huge rug that stretched right up to the walls. The walls themselves were all clean and white with numerous framed lithographs. As Yehuda moved to the kitchen, I looked at these and saw people on fast looking velocipedes like the ones in his great front room. The quality of the prints was astounding, and they were in color

even. Clearly the man was doing exceedingly well for himself as a salesman of these bicycle machines.

“I’ll make us some tea. Do you like Earl Grey?”

“Thank you Mr. Yehuda. Anything to warm me up would be fine.”

As we enjoyed our tea, Yehuda recounted for me the advances in bicycle technology. His lively dialogue provided a very well-rounded education. He discussed so many wonderful inventions including the metal chain, the lighter steel frames, and advances in cushioned tires from Dunlop. Then more recently it seems, were bicycle models which allow the rider to change the gear ratio while traveling. I could not quite grasp the man’s explanation, however he promised that I would understand when I rode one. “Mr. Yehuda this time in which you live is absolutely miraculous!”

“Yes René, but there’s a consequence to all of this. There are chemicals being produced which are causing pollution of the land water and air. These sparse suburbs are eating up farmland. People are becoming disconnected from the natural world.” The man looked again at the bracelet on his wrist, “Sorry René, as enlivening as this is I do need to open the shop. It’s been simply amazing to meet you and learn about your time.

I'd be happy to let you have one of the old bikes in the garage to help you on your way. There's a three-speed that doesn't look like it'll be attracting any attention."

"Mr. Yehuda, that is so very kind of you. I must admit that I've never heard of a bike called 'a three speed' before, but I'm happy to try them out. I do have a small amount of money which I could offer you in exchange."

"Oh hell. You best keep your money. I aint no collector, but it's likely that any one of your coins would be worth hundreds of dollars here."

"Thank you again Mr. Yehuda for your generosity."

The man had the look of being deeply contemplative for moment. "You know, I'd feel bad if you had a problem on the road and didn't know how to keep your bike working. Why don't you come on with me to the shop and I'll show you some basic maintenance on these 20th century models when we're not too busy."

It was like a fantasy how this man was so kind to me. "I would accept your offer graciously." (Unbeknownst to Yehuda, I discretely left a 5 cent piece on the table. It felt like a shamelessly poor compensation, but if the man was correct, then it would at least make a practical contribution.)

He got to work setting up a bicycle for me which would make my beloved velocipede look like a pauper's ox cart. This new machine had a chain drive, a braking device on both wheels and an enormously comfortable seat as well as some kind of cushioned strapping on the handlebars. The metal bands that wrapped around the wheels kept water on the ground from whipping up onto the rider he explained. He also included a water flask which fit neatly into a metal cage on the frame.

After he closed up the apartment, we both pedaled the bicycles to his shop. Riding this 'bicycle' was a completely new world to me. No longer need I contend with the 'boneshaker' as some people called it. I traveled on what Yehuda described as an air filled rubber tube held inside the tire. Along with the smooth asphalt roadway it was an incredible experience. On top of that, there were different speeds which, after some study, allowed me to pedal comfortably on hilly as well as flat terrain.

"Mr. Yehuda, these advancements of yours have been more radical than anything which I have seen in the empire of Man. I feel constantly amazed by your progress."

Yehuda looked at me closely. "That's another thing that you're going to have to have to rethink René. Culture is no longer just focused on men only. Our society is more egalitarian now, and women hold positions of power too now."

“Oh come now. You must be jesting.” The thought was absurd. “How could a society raise healthy children if women were doing the job of men.”

“Well for one thing, the salesperson at my bike shop is a woman, a black woman for that matter.”

“A negro woman?! How astonishing. But she is your servant, is she not?”

The man immediately came to an abrupt halt causing me to struggle with halting as well and I ended up half a dozen meters ahead of him. He quickly caught up and stared hard at me with a most unkind expression. “Mister, you’re gonna have to update your vocabulary real fast if you want to get by in this society.”

I could not at first fathom which was more bewildering, the idea of a negro woman working beside a European, or this man’s reaction. “Mister Yehuda, I don’t quite know what you mean.”

“René, the word negro is filled with a great deal of tension. It carries strong connotations of racism which discredit all of the advances made since the 1960s.”

“I’m afraid that this is all a bit beyond my understanding. What is this term racism?”

I could see a shadow fly across the man's face, as if he was struggling with a young child. Which I must have resembled to him.

"Well, racism is a term that's come to mean a view that one type of person is innately superior to another. People who are racists believe that white people are implicitly superior to other races including black people."

I thought back to Samuel and Nettie and how they seemed to contradict all the stories of laziness and ignorance which I had heard associated with their race. It certainly was a strange notion, but my earlier encounter at least gave me some context as to it's validity. "So you are saying that all races of men are considered to be equally capable in this time?"

"And women too." He emphasized. Then he paused momentarily. "Well, not everyone believes it of course. There are still some backward folks who still think that white people are superior. But such idiots are seen as ignorant and cruel. Their ideas are by no means considered acceptable in polite society. So I strongly suggest you keep any of those notions to yourself when we reach the shop."

I promised him that I would follow his advice. We then continued on along the road without further delay. When we reached the location of his employment, the store was as

impressive as everything else in this time. The windows were large and perfectly clean. The bicycles numbered in the dozens and included strange machines with wooden boxes in front of the handlebars. And then, just as he had promised, a 'black' woman was standing behind the counter. I did my best to greet her with as much respect as I would to any European lady, but my puzzled expression must have given me away because I spied them talking to each other in low voices shortly thereafter.

The day did have some periods of calm, but Yehuda had become busy with a particular group of people that knew him and so he asked that the other woman instruct me on my new gift and how to keep it functioning.

"So once you've put the patch on, you can set the tire back into the wheel and pump it up like this." The woman, who's name was Elise, showed an impressive degree of skill in the mechanics of these machines and pointed out to me her own large bicycle which had a large wooden box in front for carrying her children. In addition to educating me on how to remove the wheels and to repair the air bladder on it's circumference, she also advised me on basic maintenance of the other parts. The machines were intricate and fascinating and I could think of no technology from home that would be it's equivalent. The components of these machines were made of the most amazing iron which,

despite it's delicate thickness, had the strength equal to an oak plank.

Now that I was again in possession of a means of transport, I was eager to explore this world further. I embraced Yehuda and bowed respectfully to Elise before wishing them good day. Yehuda gave me careful instructions back to the house of Frank and Faye so that I could wish them farewell and retrieve my supplies.

I thrilled like a child in the experience of using this machine and flew along the pavement with joyous ease. The feeling of comfort and stability was beyond anything that I'd experienced in my own time. Not only did my entire body feel more comfortable, but the machine had a refreshing agility. I even started to sing an old folk tune as I pedaled along.

Returning to the house of the older couple, I sadly informed them that I would have to depart and continue my journey. Both of them were clearly and surprisingly emotional at the foreseeable event. I embraced them both as if they were blood relations and I made a most difficult decision at that moment. With all the stares that I had been getting, it seemed wise to blend in more with this strange society. "My friends, you have been so generous to me. Why don't you take my musket as an

exchange for all of your generosity. I have no black powder or cartridges with which to fire the weapon anyway.”

The two of them looked at me as if I had performed some stunning magic trick. “Are you kidding me?! This rifle’s gotta be worth a couple grand.” He stared at the rifle in my hands.

“Mr. Riley, while the rifle does have a small amount of sentiment to me, it was obsolete even when I purchased it five years ago. The accuracy beyond 50 meters is questionable at best. Please do accept it. The wonderful kindness which you have shared is at least equal in value to me.”

Like the man who offered me a ride, Frank carried the weapon as carefully as a newborn babe and set so slowly on the table that he appeared as if he thought it would vanish into thin air.

“René, your company has been a most wonderful experience for both of us. We’re both very grateful to have met you.”

Parting with the couple brought up very mixed emotions for me. I was equally grateful to have spent time with them and was sad to leave. However I now realized that instead of merely exploring the great western wilderness, I would now be discovering entirely new time periods filled with wonders that not even the most creative futurists of my time could imagine.

Before the day stretched on too long, I set off on this new adventure with the fabulous bicycle machine. As I traveled

away from the town, I noticed that the scenery was indeed very different, as Yehuda had mentioned. I continued to be amazed by the rows and rows of nearly identical houses stretching out to the horizon. Then, ever so slowly, the buildings became more sparse and the landscape transitioned to a more open scenery.

The dense forests which I remembered near my house were utterly non-existent in this future time. The enormous scale of the farms seemed instead to dominate the landscape now. There were either vast fields of grain, or large stretches of that short grass which seems to have invaded the country.

The environment was noticeably lacking not only in woodlands but also of fauna compared to my home. I saw few birds, and no deer, moose, raccoon or hare. I was becoming concerned for myself as I was no longer certain that I could merely hunt or fish for my meals now. I wondered if there were any skills at all which would be useful in trade for my sustenance in this strange world that I now found myself in.

For the moment though, the wondrous amount of food that the Rileys had provided me was more than enough to stave off any hunger.

As the sun began clearly moving closer to the western horizon, I looked for a wooded area in which to lay down. Finding

nothing of the type, I settled for an open patch in a farmers field.

Chapter Sixteen

Animated

The next morning was cloudy with a light mist falling. After packing my supplies, I shrouded myself in a wool cape and set off again down the road. The clouds gave a dreary and monotonal quality to the landscape all around. There were short crops of trees close to the sparse houses, but otherwise all was agricultural. The dwellings were similar to those of the cities only with more machines scattered around the yard. I found myself oft gazing in wonder at these strange devices as I pedaled past. There was even one of the peculiar four wheeled machines with the handlebars which the strange gremlin had used in it's pursuit of me.

After half a day's travel, the road began to climb and I saw a range of mountains in the distance. I marveled at the ease with which my machine could quickly change to a different gear to compensate for the incline in the road. As the land became more rugged, the scenery became dominated by crops of evergreen trees

and great rock outcroppings. The craggy surroundings were often enlivened by rich veins of ochre, chestnut, and crimson which brought some vitality to the otherwise drab cliffs. I appreciated the change in scenery and the expanded vistas of the higher elevation. After a time, the bare rock began to lift above the ground and rise in a wall to the side of the road and I was fascinated at the way my path remained smooth and flat despite the severity of the terrain. I felt as if I were riding on locomotive rails through the countryside. As I approached a tunnel cut into the mountain, I said a brief prayer that there would be none of the frightening carriages in the tunnel as there was no route of escape within.

Pedaling along through it my eyes were soon accosted by the dramatic contrast of bright sunshine and birds flying all around. The unearthly quality of the scene almost destroyed my balance as I struggled with the shock of it all. Everything that I saw had a surreal quality, as if I were living within a Cezanne painting. The sun had a face that smiled down upon me, the birds sang in perfect French, joined by the trees and various dancing animals. It was as if I had entered some animate children's book. There were pigs playing accordions, a dragon, a dancing bear, and all manner of plants and animals acting with human qualities.

I was so distracted that only when one of the birds called "Look out René!" Did I realize that I was about to fly smack into the back of a motor vehicle. I hit the brakes quickly enough, but still managed to fall ungainly to the ground. Above my head, a circle of floating stars appeared, like a visual representation of the 'seeing stars' expression.

I got up and stared at the unbelievable scene. The only elements which were made of real flesh or metal were myself, my bicycle and the vehicle which I had nearly collided with.

Before the stars above my head faded, a rabbit bounded up to me. He was just over a meter tall with ears that waved like enormous antennae above his head. Even more strangely he was wearing a red jump suit and bright yellow gloves like some factory worker.

"Hey! How did you get stars? Can I borrow those?"

I was completely at a loss for words. Even the flying machine with the orange wheel was less peculiar than this. Was such a being created by God? Or was it some highly advanced human technology. Nothing that I'd experienced in real life or dreams could in any way compare with the scene which now surrounded me.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

Then imprudently this rabbit just reached out and grabbed my jaw (which wasn't far off the ground by this point) and looked right in my mouth.

"Nope, it's still there. Boy you're one loony fellow."

Finally, after a long pause I managed to shake off my utter shock enough to communicate with this strange being.

"Um... what exactly are... you? Wha... what is all of this?" I spread my hands and waved at the eerie landscape.

"You mean, you've never seen Toon Town?!" His eyes suddenly got very large in an exaggerated expression of shock. "But everyone's been to Toon Town. Everyone loves Toon town."

"I do apologize if I seem out of sorts. But I haven't the faintest understanding of where I am, where this is, or even when this is."

Suddenly the rabbit looked at me more closely, and with a critical eye. "Saaayy, you're not from around these parts, are you?"

He jabbed me with a finger and would have looked intimidating if it weren't so comical. The creature then laughed at it's own humor.

“That is precisely the case. I have no idea where or when I have ended up. I’ve never seen anything so amazing as this in my life!”

Now the rabbit’s eyes really grew enormous. “You mean, you’ve never even heard of a toon?!”

The minute he said this, characters from all over began forming a crowd around us. There was a small yellow bird with an absurdly oversized head, a tall and slim yellow dog, an enormous rooster with a large beak, then it just became a sea of people and animals.

“I’m afraid that I don’t even know what a ‘toon’ is.” I shrugged my shoulders.

There was a collective gasp and a muttering throughout the crowd. A different rabbit with similarly oversized ears showed up now. He was grey with white fur around his belly and chest. “Listen doc. I don’ know what type of human you are, but the way you talk is kinda screwy. There’s somethin different in you’s that we don see in the other humans.” He pointed a white gloved finger at my chest.

Now it was my turn to be surprised. “So there ARE humans here!”

The rabbit just took it all in stride, “Well of course there are, don’t be a maroon.

They live right on the other side of that tunnel."

He pointed back the way I'd come and I was amazed to see faces painted on everything. The trees had faces, even the mountain through which the tunnel passed had a face and enormous teeth.

"But that's where I came from." I exclaimed "I was in an equally wondrous world where people can open a carriage house door with merely the push of a button and where food is plenty in every household. The man who I met in that land gave me this wonderful bicycle, and the road that I was traveling on passed through this tunnel.

Next a character with wild gray hair and a gray mustache wandered up and spoke with a strange European accent. He peered close at me while he spoke. "Young man, just what year vus it before you left zat place?"

I thought for a moment. "Well sir, the gazette which I saw had the date of 1982. However before that I was in a fantastic land filled with flying machines and a war with a people called 'German krauts' which I have never before heard of."

The grey-haired man's face became flush and his eyes literally spit fire. "This is scientifically impossible!" He/it exclaimed. Pounding one fist into another.

“All of my calculations clearly state zat no physical matter can tchtravel from vun time period to anozer. The laws of physics schictly prochhibit it!”

“Good sir. I have absolutely no way to dispute your science except that just over a week ago I left my home on my velocipede and have since experienced many different incredible sights and technologies which most definitely were unknown to my own time.”

“Young man. Can you tell me when you were born?”

“Of course. I was born in August 1852-” no sooner had I spoken this, then a collective gasp from the group of characters proved to me that I was not only in a vastly different place, but once again in a vastly different time.

The European character’s eyes grew enormous and seemed to actually grow out of his face after which he stared at me with incredulity. I felt as if every centimeter of my being was being analyzed by this character.

“Does that mean that you do not know who I am?”

At this I was aghast. I had only just entered this land and knew not a single being within. “Sir, is there a reason that I should recognize you?”

Again surprise lit up the being's face. "Well of course! I'm drawn after Albert Einstein. Ze most famous scientist of ze tventiet century."

Now this was a curiosity to me. "What exactly do you mean that you were drawn?"

A large upright dog now spoke up. "Now what in sam hill is-a goin on here. Are you tryin ta tell me, that you never even watched television? Is that what yer sayin?"

"I'm afraid that the concept was never known in my own time. It could be possible that I have completely left the world that I knew for some foreign one. We certainly had nothing even remotely resembling all of this-" I waved my arms around. Once again there was a collective gasp from the crowd.

An exceptionally tall cat spoke up then. "Well thufferin thuckatash, thathhh's the looniest thhhing I ever heard of." I was not a little disturbed by the amount of spittle which emanated from the animal's mouth when it spoke. "Itsth's like your thum kinda alien or sthomepthin." The animal spoke with some kind of odd speech impediment.

The Einstein character spoke again, "Well, now zat you're here, we vill have much to talk about. I vill give you a bghief synopsis. Zis whole land is called ToonTown and it provides a safe haven for all us toons. We provide entertainment shows,

for to be displayed on an invention called television which transmits the show through the air to a receiver located in the homes of humans everywhere.”

As he spoke, he spun around with his arms wide in expression of the glory of this technology. And a fantastic technology it resembled. Like some highly evolved form of telegraph which could send visual pictures to far away places.

Next he looked at me more directly. “Well now that you are here, vuld you be willing to work with me and explore vut phenomenon could have brought you through time like zis?”

His interest seemed to be sincere and as I was equally fascinated by the prospect of exploring this incredible land and also to figure a way home, I told the scientist that this would be agreeable to me.

It seemed to me next that there was a collective murmuring through the crowd and a nodding of heads to show that they were all in a state of approval. I was clapped on the back by many of them and even hugged by a few.

The scientist, myself, and a few of the other characters walked off in the direction of a crop of buildings. As we traveled, I stared in rapt wonder at the multitude of animate human and animal characters. A pig wearing a police uniform directing street traffic, a black cat chasing a small brown mouse down the

street, even a building with eyes framed in spectacles jostling with the neighboring houses. Our progress was interrupted not infrequently by characters chasing one another. The most displeasurable being a cat which ran in a serpentine path through our group and was shortly chased by a fowl smelling skunk casually hoping after it. "My love for you, it burns like ze hot coal mon sheree. You are ze light zat is so like ze rising sun in my heart." Thankfully soon, the terrified cat, the skunk, and the horrid smell soon faded into the background. Despite the fact that we all traveled on foot, we seemed, directly to arrive at the intended destination with ease. As if not only time, but space as well were distorted in this land.

The group traveling with us began to disperse and we entered through a stairwell leading down into a basement room. It was small and comically overrun with papers of all sorts and several blackboards covered with indecipherable equations. My host proceeded to sit me down and ask innumerable questions about my past, my time living in Sherbrooke, my experiences and my travels.

"It vuld seem zat the only time zat you tchavel from one time period to anozer, is ven you are asleep or udervise unconscious. This vuld preclude any exploration of vut you experienced ven you transition to anozer time." He thought for a long moment

and then began shuffling through several stacks of sheets on a huge desk.

The professor began working on calculations and equations on a large slate board which spanned the full length of the room. I must say that as a person not educated in university, his deep grasp of science was far beyond my own.

“So you say zat the first time you tchaveled somewhere, it vuz a town zat appeared to resemble your own time period except for the strange flying craft which attacked the townspeople, and then after that you visited an airfield from the great war.”

“Yes that is correct. The enormous flying machines came in various sizes. Some were as large as a building and they appeared to be propelled by large sets of spinning blades on the front.”

He asked many more questions, and spent a great deal of time drawing equations and notes on the blackboard. It was far beyond my level of comprehension to ascertain the man's extraordinary train of thought.

“So it does not seem as if you are traveling always forward. Ze time period in vich you land seems to be random. This makes for a much more obscure situation. It vud seem zat the most scientific approach for you would be to go back through ze

tunnel and see if it takes you to ze regular city or to anozer time.”

“That my good man, is an excellent hypothesis.”

My speech was then interrupted when the door slammed violently open as if by a battering ram. My heart leapt into my throat as a surprisingly short but stalwart man stood in the doorway. He had an enormous hat, fiery red hair, and a gargantuan mustache extending half the length of his diminutive body.

“I know that long-eared galoot is ‘a hidin in here! Now *wwwwwooo* where is he!!

And don’t try nothin funny ya see?!”

I quickly glanced at the scientist, for this character was clearly in an excited and dangerous state. But seeing no quick action on the man’s part, I made the best possible effort at diplomacy with the man. “To be sure mister, I... there has only been myself and mister Einstein here this whole time.”

Now the character looked at me and pulled out a revolver in each of his hands which caused great alarm in both of us.

“Mister? Ya lilly-livered varmit. Ma name’s Sam. An you’ll remember the name cause I’m the rootinest, shootinest, fastest

gun in the whole land. And doggone if I didn't see that crazy fur-bearin critter run right inna this place."

I deeply worried now if this character wouldn't take out his fury on us merely as a matter of circumstance. But then my eyes grew even wider as the man's hat rose off his head and a grey rabbit appeared.

"Mneh, I saw the rabbit go thatta way down toid shtreet."

Not seeming to realize the absurdity of this, the Sam character gave his thanks and ran off down the lane. "Say yer prayers ya varmit!" I heard his shout recede into the distance. The realization came to me then, that this land was fraught with both absurd but also dangerous personalities. I felt my being torn between the desire to satisfy my childlike-awe of this place on one hand and the recognition that my safety was none too secure among the 'toons.'

"Mister Einstein. I do believe that your land is most fascinating and a wonder to behold. However I also feel that it is a possibly dangerous place for non-cartoon beings to inhabit."

"Oh you don't have to worry about being hurt by a toon, at least not intentionally. Everyone here knows you folks can't take that stuff the way we can."

I looked at the man more closely, "What do you mean by 'not intentionally' my good sir?"

With a broad and somewhat disarming smile he talked of the many antics which the cartoon characters engage in which is mere amusement for the audience because it was not possible to harm a cartoon. However he did point out that a person could be harmed accidentally which gave me no great relief.

“Mister Einstein, despite the amazing wonders of this land, I begin to feel that this would not be the best place for me to enjoy a prolonged respite. Is there anything more that you would like to ask of me before I attempt my departure?”

The man scratched at his chin and pondered before answering in his heavy European accent “Truly zere are many tings which I would like to ask you about. But I cannot think of any furzer kvestuns which would lead us to a greater understanding of your conundrum. As fhustrating as it is to zee my theoghies bomblasted, this vill give me reason to study zis experience of yours furzer.”

We spoke awhile longer, but I found the man’s extraordinary genius to be tiresome for my own minimally educated mind. Despite the fantastic nature of this land, it was time to depart and I bid the man thanks for his fascinating company. I looked forward to seeing if the tunnel would indeed return me to the world of humans again. But instead of heading straight for it, I took a meandering route to relish in the fantastic experience as

long as possible. Several of the cartoon characters followed along with me either on bicycles or on various scooters. As we traveled along, the buildings and other animate constructions, again looked down on us with their clownish expressions.

The exit road at last became visible when my ears picked up a strange high-pitched sound, not unlike a far off train whistle, yet from directly overhead. I could not imagine what would cause such a thing. Looking up I gasped to see a figure falling to his death from a great height. I removed my hat and bowed my head out of respect for the doomed fellow. As he hit, the ground trembled from the impact and I was soon astonished to see that he had left an exact impression of himself in the dirt.

“That poor soul” I was about to utter when, to my astonishment, the figure of a battered coyote rose out holding a sign that read, ‘ouch.’

No sooner did I see this then I was yanked quite unceremoniously back just in time to see a gigantic boulder, easily 3m across, crash upon the animal’s head.

“My word! That poor soul.”

I was then introduced to the being who had saved me, it was none other then the rabbit which I had seen earlier.

“Oh pbbbbbblease, don worry about him, nobody can take it like wile e coyote. He’s unparalleled... except maybe Goofy. He’s a genius... or Daffy... or Tom... or Elmer...

or-”

Seeing that the animal was preoccupied with his thoughts, I took the cue that I would be most wise to depart, post-haste from this land. I turned back to the road and let out a horrified shriek as a huge motorized carriage bore down directly upon me. This one was made of real iron and glass, with real humans inside. I watched dumbfounded as time appeared to slow down and my eyes absorbed every incredible detail. The curving metal around the wheels, the iron grid on the front of the vehicle, the equally terrified look of the vehicle’s driver who’s bowler hat slipped off with the man’s erratic steering, and finally, gracefully, the stream of exhaust as the machine swerved just half a meter to the side of me. I then heard a sickening crash as the machine struck one of the many trees who’s face expressed it’s discontent.

A short middle-aged man got out of the vehicle and before he could take a single step was whacked on the head by a branch from the obviously offended tree. He quickly recovered his wit however and ran over to me. He was obviously very concerned.

“Hey Mr. are you alright?”

It took me a few moments to respond, as the frightful incident left me quite stunned. "Sir, I do appear to be unscathed, but I must say that was a terrifying experience. I admit to being increasingly disenchanted by these horseless carriages of yours. Truly I would think that the population of man would be drastically reduced if everyone is traveling in these maniacal vehicles."

The man looked at his partner and then looked back at me closer. "Funny, the way you talk I'd think you were a toon. You aint, are you"

"Sir, I am indeed flesh and blood like yourself. In fact-"

At that moment I saw the most peculiar character among them all show up. It looked not unlike a rooster, but he/it stood a solid 2 meters tall and carried arms like a human. He strode in confidently and began speaking right over everyone around.

"Now what, I say what in sam hill is a-goin on around here?"

"Hi Foghorn. Listen I'm just here investigating a robbery at the 1st National Bank. It's standard procedure to question-"

"Boy. You got it all wrong here. Can't ya, I say, can't you see this chap is about as sharp as a bowlin ball... what I mean is, he's only playin with half a deck ya see?"

I quickly saw that the being was referring to myself and was quite nonplussed by the assessment. However when I attempted

to interrupt in my own defense, the being put one 'wing' over my mouth and the tall head swung down to my ear.

"Look here, I'ma tryin ta keep ya from makin a spectacle of yourself. So I'm gonna need ya to work with me, ya see?" After a split-second pause he continued. "Any o' this getting through to you son?"

I nodded half-heartedly, not entirely sure about this character. The rooster turned back to the detective after barely an eye-blink. "Now what's your name son?"

"Me? My name's Valient, Detective Eddie Valient-"

"Valient-detective-eddie-valient aye? Kinda long name there. Well listen, this fella. I say this fella aint gonna be no use to ya, see? He's got about as much footing around here as an inchworm" He paused for barely half a second. "Footing, inchworm. That's a joke son. Ya missed it. Ya gotta keep yer eye on the ball, see?"

As the being spoke, I felt his left foot nudging me towards the road. "Now ya take someone like me. I don't, I say I don't let nothin slip past me. I got a mind like an axe blade see?"

Taking the hint, I quickly pushed on towards the tunnel and the mountain with it's ludicrous expression while the strange cartoon kept the constable's attention.

In no time at all, I had once again entered the inky blackness. But this time there was no blinding sunshine. Just a slowly increasing level of regular daylight at the far end.

When I reached the exit, I looked around me and saw a cityscape, not unlike the area of Montreal but with a larger number of motor vehicles. I had become used to listening for these latter and moving aside if I thought the operator was driving recklessly. Not far from the tunnel though, I was passed by one of these, only of a strange 'toon' version. It was painted yellow with a checkered pattern and had no roof over the passengers.

The vehicle sported a large mouth which was shouting, "Hey, outta the way pencilneck! I got important passengers here. Move it. Commin thru."

I avoided a collision with the 'being' but not without raising my fist in anger as it passed. Thankfully however, this was the only stain on an otherwise pleasant afternoon.

The hills became gradually more smooth and farms once again dotted the countryside as I returned to rural surroundings.

By the end of the day, I was feeling deeply satisfied with the progress which this new bicycle allowed me to achieve. I

stopped in a small grove of trees for the night and thankfully managed to enjoy a night of peaceful dreams.

Chapter Seventeen

Close Encounter

W*ith the light of dawn, it was clear once again that I was in a new place. The land which I found myself in this time was a great deal more rugged and inhospitable. The road remained smooth and flat, but the forests were gone, replaced by sparse evergreens and huge expanses of rocky plain with a type of short turf grass. Unlike the previous day, the sky here was full of low gray clouds stretching out to the horizon.*

As I began my travels, I watched the spurs of reddish stone rise before me and fall into the background kilometer by kilometer as I pedaled through the countryside. With the sun rising higher in the sky, the issue of sustenance once again began to enter my mind. I wondered how much success I would have in finding food and water in within a landscape as bleak as this one.

The question of satisfying my thirst was thankfully resolved for me without undue stress when I reached a bridge spanning a large brook which allowed me the chance to fill a canteen with

water. The taste of it was strange and not entirely pleasant, but it was the best option available in that moment.

Though I hadn't been exerting myself for long, the strain on my consciousness of the constantly shifting environment was beginning to make itself felt in my mental capacities. I took a long moment of refuge just sitting by the brook to simply recuperate.

As I rested, it became clear that it wasn't just physical thirst that I was relishing, but also the smell, and the sound like a great orchestra of wind chimes playing the symphony of nature. I drank it all in as I lay there on the shore, lost in the solitude of the wilderness.

I cannot say how much time passed, but my respite was brought to an abrupt halt as a strange sensation permeated my being. Despite the coolness of the day, I felt an intense heat on the side of my face. As I turned my head, I glanced in the water and saw an enormously bright light reflected back upon me. At first all was silent as I shielded my face with my outstretched arm. But soon I heard a peculiar set of tones drifting down from the sky. Turning to look upward I found myself nearly blinded by the most phenomenal sight.

It was a craft of some kind. Easily as far across as papa's entire farm back home. It floated in the air without any apparent means of support or locomotion. In fact, it was not unlike the strange entity which had healed my leg but on a much grander scale.

There were dozens of iron protrusions like the antennae of an insect radiating out from the central axis. The light shining down from within that core was brighter than the midday sun and fluctuated from direct white to red, orange, magenta, indigo, yellow and a full rainbow flashing in tune with a series of deep rhythmic sounds. The experience was of listening to an enormous oboe playing a set of low base notes while a great lamp flashed in time with the sound. Even if I had wanted to move or to flee, my limbs seemed to be held rigidly in place as if in shackles. I wished fervently to shield my eyes further, but found that my muscles would not respond to the commands sent from my mind.

Meanwhile, the notes continued to play, with the lights flashing in concert above for what seemed an eternity. At one point the intensity was so great, I felt as if I were in two places at once. I was both in my body watching this apparition, and at the same time I was looking down on my own body staring back at myself. If I lived a dozen lifetimes, I do not believe that

I could ever form the words to adequately describe what I experienced that day.

Much like the experience when the motor car had come towards me, time again lost it's reliability. The brief moment lasted seemingly for the whole length of a day. But finally I felt myself wholly back in my body and in control of my limbs. I scrambled like a frightened animal up the embankment and back to the road. The minute I reached it, I noted that there was a large motorized vehicle which looked like a delivery truck of some kind. As I gazed upon it, the driver seemed to be only beginning to shrug off his same paralysis.

He looked to be in his mid 30s with slightly receding black hair on top of his clean shaven features. His well-tailored work shirt was mostly open at the collar ostensibly due to the intense heat. As the ship began to lift up into the air, I saw him hurriedly try the engine which refused to activate.

The man cursed imaginatively and finally succeeded in causing his road machine to cough and sputter to life. The vehicle lurched forward just as the flying craft began moving away. Both took off in the same direction down the road and moved at extraordinary speed.

I could not say what compelled me, but I immediately leaped onto my bicycle machine and chased after them down the road.

Clearly the vehicle and craft were a thousand times more swift than I, but something drove me on despite the seeming futility.

The nimble bicycle flew along the pavement at the speed of a galloping horse and I relished in the feel of wind rushing against my face. (it barely registered within my consciousness that I was able to reach speeds thrice that of my old velocopede)

In the span of less than an hour, I came upon a bend in the road where the utility vehicle had stopped along with two of those strange vehicles sporting that drunken spinning light on top. They all just stood at the edge of the road staring off to the horizon.

As I rolled up, the man from the truck seemed to snap out of his stupor and faced me. "You saw it right? For the love of god, tell me you saw it."

It took several minutes before I could catch my breath and answer the man. "That giant ship in the sky? My good fellow, how could any man with eyes not see such a thing. Do you know what on earth it is?"

Now one of the men from the other vehicles made a great guffaw (I gathered that he was one of the constables) "On earth indeed. You can bet yer ass that thing aint from OUR planet."

"No question though. It was a magnificent sight to behold." Never in my life have I encountered such a thing."

We spoke to each other at length about what we saw and experienced. I felt that it was more to reassure each other that we had not taken leave of our senses.

“I only pray to the lord that the operators of these craft are not the flying devils that the last ones were.”

“Are you shittin me?!” The other constable now stared straight at me. “You had one of these... uh close encounters before?”

I was beginning to feel fatigued with the repetition of my story, and so told only a few details to dispel the conversation. I told them that the experience was a long time ago (which was the truth) and this was thankfully enough for them.

It was not long however before a larger vehicle rolled up. It had a strange paint job made of a splattering of greens, tans and browns in random patterns. The wheels were quite a bit larger than any of the other vehicles nearby and the moment it stopped, several men with uniforms of the same colors jumped out and ordered us all at gunpoint towards the vehicle. The rear of the vehicle was cavernous indeed, stretching at least 5 meters from front to back and housing a dozen men. The man who was apparently in charge ordered all of us into that cavernous space in back. He even (unwisely in my opinion) pointed a strange looking rifle at us. “Listen! I am a Canadian citizen and I

demand to know where we are being taken!" My questions and protestations however were ignored by the lot.

Once inside, I again bellowed to the soldier who seemed to be in charge in the hopes that at least the man would acknowledge my humanity and give me some explanation.

"Right now sir, you're part of a military investigation and your demands mean about as much as a scrap of shit on the bottom of my boot. So you can sit back and shut up or get the barrel of my rifle in your gut. It's all the same to me."

Not knowing if the man was considering the use of a bayonet, I decided that discretion was the greater part of valor and sat back down in my seat.

The trip felt quite prolonged and with little to pass the time, I examined my surroundings. The cargo hold was surrounded not with solid metal or wood, but with a heavy sailcloth which noisily flapped in the wind produced by our motion. The soldiers all wore strange outfits covering their bodies from neck to boot with multiple pockets which bulged in odd ways. On their heads they wore helmets which were peculiar in that they weren't made of metal or any other material with which I was familiar. Their weapons looked more sleek and heavy than the simple rifles which I was used to hunting with. The guns were entirely of metal and painted black. At one point we were all

ordered to step out and take time to relieve ourselves. Otherwise we merely sat and waited to reach our destination.

It was fully dark before the vehicle came to a halt in front of a large metal building. It resembled the utility structures near the 'aeroplanes' and there were great lights shining upon us which cast back the night more valiantly than a thousand whale oil lamps. We were escorted into a large enclosed space which was also brightly lit and I wondered where the enormous amount of energy for these lights was produced. The only indication which I found to clarify who was in charge at the place were the letters SCRS¹¹ on the wall.

I was separated from the group and pushed into a blank room with no decoration or furniture save for a slab of material which was obviously meant to be a bed.

After a frustratingly long period of time, broken only by a meager meal, one of the soldiers motioned for me to follow him into another room which was also mostly blank.

There was one wall dominated by a mirror of a scale that would make even Claude's jaw fall to the floor. The purpose for this however was not discernible to me. My escort directed me towards a chair which faced two men who sat behind a large metal table. One sported a thick brown beard and spectacles

11 SCRS - Service canadien du renseignement de sécurité or Canadian Security Intelligence Service. The national intelligence wing of the Canadian Government

while the other man was clean shaven and with streaks of gray in his well-kept hair. On top of the table was a black box attached by a wire to a strange cylindrical object about half as long as my arm. This latter sat on a stand with a gray perforated surface facing towards me.

I saw the same soldier who had escorted me here walk back into the room. He brought in a small cart and attached pieces of tape with wires attached onto my fingers and forehead. I worried no small amount if this was some type of electromechanical torture device. Clearly I was in no position to defend myself in such a case.

“Mr. DeBois was it?” The older man spoke fluent French, however his companion remained silent. “We would like to ask you a few questions and we ask that you please keep your answers direct and succinct. Have you experienced any headaches or nausea?”

I was clearly in a most precarious situation and knew that these men could make my life extremely unpleasant. Therefore I simply shook my head in the negative.

“Any rashes, or irritation in your eyes or nose?”

I indicated that I had not.

“Do you have any allergies?”

"I'm afraid that I do not know that term."

"Have you had any other unusual physical ailments?"

"Yes I have, my face feels warm and painful."

"Yes, the sunburn is clearly visible."

Now I was incredulous. "But how on God's earth could I receive a sunburn on a cold, overcast day? Just what in the world is going on here?"

The two men briefly spoke in hushed tones with each other.

"Is there a history of mental illness in your family, either of your parents or other relatives?"

"If you ask me whether any of my family has taken leave of their senses, I assure you that this is not the case."

"Alright, now we are going to have a calm conversation about what you saw. Please repeat for us your full name."

"But I've already told you. My name is René DeBois, I was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec."

"We can appreciate that. However you were carrying no identification of any kind. The only items on you were some antique coins, and a very nice pocket knife. Beautiful quality by the way." "What is 'VICTORIA DEI GRATIA REGINA CANADA' if I may ask?"

“It means ‘Victoria, Queen, by grace of God.’” I wondered how they could not know of the British monarch.

Both of the men looked at each other with peculiar expressions and I dreaded that they would want the full long story of my travels. The other man looked at the soldier to my right who merely nodded his head.

“Since the machine shows that you are speaking the truth, we’ll try this another way. What year were you born.”

Knowing that this would create a great deal of trouble, I made the only practical choice available. “I refuse to answer that question.”

The two of them looked at each other and I could feel the tension from the soldier next to me. It was clear that they were analyzing which tactic to choose from. After several moments, they thankfully chose a non-violent one.

“Alright René. Would you please describe for us what you experienced starting about 1pm?”

I saw no need to be coy in this, as the man in the utility vehicle as well as the other constables had seen the same thing as I did. So I gave them a full description of the events from the time I stopped to drink until the moment the vehicle sped off along with the craft.

One of the men began writing notes while the other pushed a large piece of parchment towards me. "Have you experienced visions that include this image?"

I stared at the parchment. It showed a tall rocky outcropping which looked quite large. It had a flat top like the sketches people have made of the Spanish territories out west. Behind the rocky outcropping was a large yellow orb, not quite like the sun as it was surrounded by multi-colored lights.

"Well of course I've seen that." I was incredulous. "You just now have asked me to describe the same craft." Hadn't they asked any of the others about the flying craft?

"And what about the scene below it?"

"That I could not tell you. It looks perhaps like some sketches I have seen of the western lands beyond the Louisiana Purchase.

There was a great deal of conversation between the two men. They were speaking rapidly in English and thus I could not clearly follow their words.

"So he's not getting the same weird psychic information that Roy was getting."

"No, but there's still something odd about him. The way he speaks, his terminology. I mean, he actually used the term 'Louisiana Purchase.' Most school kids don't even know what that is anymore."

“You’re right, he really does sound like someone who doesn’t fit around here, but do you think he could have been transported through time? Like those Grumman fighters we found?”

“I’ve heard of crazier things.”

“There’s no precedent at all for something like this. And those coins he was carrying... I mean, Queen Victoria? She must have died 80 years ago!”

The two men turned back to me. “Mr. DeBois. You said that you left your hometown of Sherbrooke to travel via pedal power as far west as you could. Is that right?”

This question sounded innocent enough, but I was losing patience with the involuntary detainment. “Yes, that is correct. Listen, I would like to know if I am being charged with some type of offense. Nobody has been willing to give me the simple freedom of movement or access to my belongings. I would like to speak to the man in charge of this operation and make a complaint about this. I would like to know just what in the world is going on here!”

“We completely understand Mr. DeBois. I ask that you be patient with us just a little longer and then you will be free to continue your travels.”

Despite the man’s courtesy, there was clearly command in his voice. No government in my experience had the authority to

treat a citizen in such a way except in a time of war. I contemplated my situation and what options might be available to me. The lack of access to anyone outside this official group brought me to consider my prospects as quite ineffectual.

“Which road did you take when heading out of town?”

“Which road? What on earth do you mean? There is only the one road leading west out of Sherbrooke? Truly men, I wonder if you yourselves have taken leave of your senses.”

The two men looked at each other, but I could not discern what was going on within their minds. “Okay, okay. Please understand that this is merely a standard list of questions for what we can both agree is a very non-standard event.”

“Now, I would assume that the road you took was a dirt road, with no um... bitumen?”

“Well of course it was. I had never seen this new ‘bitumen’ until just recently in my travels.”

The two men looked at each other and there seemed to be an understanding between them which was lost to me. “And did anything, out of the ordinary happen between the day you left and the day that you started having these... unusual experiences?”

I thought back for a long moment. There were so many absurd experiences inundating my memory, that it was difficult to isolate any single one from the multitude of fantastic adventures since my departure.

But then it hit me- "The storm! My lord, I had nearly forgotten about it."

"What storm? Was there anything unusual about it?"

Now I heard one of them comment to the other "Look up meteorological data for Sherbrooke, Quebec for the past month."

"Mr. DeBois, was there anything unusual about this storm?"

I was by now very confused. The experience was causing me to feel like a caged animal. I clearly did not want to provide these men with enough information to entice them to hold me here. But I was also hopeful that the vast technology of this age might provide a greater understanding for what was causing my experiences.

"I found the storm to be exceptional in that there was no rain. I had pulled my oil cloth over my belongings when I heard the thunder, but none of my supplies were wet in the morning."

"Okay. Did you see any lights... any lightning?"

"Mister, I'm a sensible man and I tucked myself against the base of a tree. I am not your average fool who would stand out

in the open during a lightning storm. I kept my whits about me.” after a pause, the thought occurred to me that perhaps these people might understand what would have caused the unusual experience. “I was also perplexed that the thunder did not recede into the distance as a storm typically does. This storm seemed to recede straight upwards. Though I admit that I was fatigued and wanting only to fall asleep.”

“Did you hear that? How many people use an oil cloth?

“And he spoke of leaving Sherbrooke on a dirt road.

“And the encephalograph shows no unusual stress.”

“We really do have it... the first irrefutable evidence of a human being traveling through time.”

“We’ll want to have a watch on this guy twenty-four seven.”

“I believe that I have answered quite a few of your questions. Do you have any knowledge of what may have caused all of these events?”

“Mr. DeBois, I believe that your experiences were set off by a UFO, an unidentified flying object.”

“Oh come now sir. That storm may have been unusual, but there is no artificial construction which can impersonate the sound of thunder that I heard.”

“Do you think that the object which you and Roy witnessed today might have done this?”

That gave me pause. Certainly there was no construction of man in my experience which could do such a thing, but there was also no such construction which could hover in the air like a hummingbird.

As if reading my thoughts, the older man responded. “Exactly.”

“Thank you Mr. DeBois. We will give you time to rest now.”

“But when will I be free to leave?!” That is what I desire to know. I have done nothing to threaten country or crown.”

“I am sorry René. There will be a few other men who will want to speak with you as well. I promise that we will do everything within our power to help you get on your way as soon as practical.”

Somehow despite the man’s words, his expression left me unconvinced of his sincerity.

“Well then, would you at least allow me to have my belongings with me? They do bring me no small amount of comfort.” I felt a small amount of shame in speaking this half-truth. However it occurred to me that if I were to travel again, it would be an enormous handicap to do so without a single tool at my disposal.

I was escorted to the same small room which I had come to view as a holding cell. There was nothing for me to occupy my time with except to meditate on my situation and the absurd events leading up to it. Despite a serious mental effort to keep my whits about me, the futility of my predicament was beginning to overwhelm my thinking. I surrendered to the shroud of unconsciousness, relishing in the temporary respite of dreams.

Unfortunately for me, even that world brought it's own distress. I fell into a dream state which was most disturbing. Shadows meandered in front of me as I was traveling on my velocipede. I watched day turn to night and then back to day again with surprising speed. Each passing day appeared to last for a shorter period of time then the last. Soon the sun would rise and set with the speed of a gas lamp being dimmed. No matter how fast I pedaled, the days continued to speed by ever faster. I watched the sun rise in the blink of an eye, travel across the sky, and sink like a falling stone below the horizon. Eventually the sun appeared like a child's bouncing ball, rising up and falling down so swiftly that it was almost a blur. It felt as if I would just watch Mankind fly into eternity with barely a wink of detail for each century. I woke up sweating and breathing heavily as if I had narrowly escaped a monster.

My consciousness ascended near to the surface when I heard the door open and a man walked in carrying what I hoped were my saddle bags, however the land of dreams quickly embraced me once again. With not a little dread, I involuntarily sank back down into the subliminal realm.

Chapter Eighteen

Relativity

W*ith no small measure of relief, it was clear that I was no longer in the interrogation building, but in a countryside dominated by large farms. This experience of endlessly pitching from one land to the next, the way a shipwrecked mariner might fly upon the innumerable ocean waves never ceased to cause disquiet in my soul. As much as I endeavored to overcome the melancholy, the first few moments were becoming a constant challenge. Now too, I was without the fantastic bicycle machine which Yehuda had most generously shared with me. All that I had to survive with were the few supplies in my pack (thank the stars I still had that). The foreboding was so dominant that I merely sat where I was and wept like a child for a spell. I was a man completely divorced from everything*

that I knew, and even the dream-like 'three-speed' was now disappeared. For a time, I wept in complete silence, until that is, I heard a movement.

"Hey there, who are you?"

At first I wanted no part of any conversation. But the innocence of the childlike voice broke a small hole in my emotional defenses. I looked up to see a young boy of about six sitting on the cross piece of a rough timber fence.

"I was playing here and all of a sudden when I looked over in the field, you were sitting there. Where's your car mister?"

Despite registering what the boy said, words failed me in communication. I merely stared at the boy, at his innocence, his 'newness.' The youthful curiosity of this little person felt completely at odds with the strange beings and dangers which I had encountered. There seemed no way to translate all that I was thinking into language.

"Wow, are you like one of those people who can't talk? Do you use sign language or something?"

Finally I managed to formulate some kind of response. "My boy, I am thoroughly capable of speech. I merely find myself in a mild shock at the moment."

The boy looked at me with the strangest expression that I've ever seen. It was not quite confusion or curiosity, or disbelief, but a melding of all three. I could practically see the thoughts tumbling around in his mind as he sought for something barely out of reach. But then his head snapped up and he sat bolt upright.

"Opa!" He leaped right off of the fence and ran in the direction opposite me and towards an enormous house in the distance. Following where his eyes had been, I saw one of those automotive vehicles approaching down the avenue. An older man with a white beard was standing with his slender torso sticking out of an opening in the vehicle's roof. The man and the vehicle passed by me as we briefly exchanged glances and then I watched them continue towards a large house nearby.

With nothing else formulated for a plan, I shrugged my shoulders and followed down the road. Upon reaching the driveway, I was just in time to see the old man depart the vehicle and lift the small boy into his arms. I was impressed at the man's joviality and youthful persona as many of the elderly people that I grew up with seemed to be bitter and sad in their twilight years.

As I approached the house and the people in the yard, I wondered what I would say to these people. No description

that would sound remotely sane formulated itself in my mind as I walked towards the couple which I assumed were the boy's parents. But as I walked past the old man, he turned to look at me and my blood froze. He bore an uncanny resemblance to my brother Luke. We both stared at each other for an interminable time before he walked briskly over to me.

"Excuse me, but you look incredibly familiar. What is your name son?" His voice was old, but his eyes glistened with a strong fire.

"Sir, my name is René DeBois. I hail from Sherbrooke Québec. And what about yourself good man?"

Without so much as saying a word, the man kept staring at me before falling to his knees and embracing me. I could not for the life of me understand what could cause such a reaction except that the poor soul had taken leave of his senses.

"How in the world could this be?!" he exclaimed. "You look at least a decade younger than my own son. But here you are in full color."

By now things were becoming strange enough that I felt some mistake must have been made. "My good man, I must assure you that there is clearly a misunderstanding of some sort. I have never met you before in my life."

Finally the man shook his head and his eyes shone clear again. "Of course, of course. You wouldn't know. You see, my grandfather was named Augustin... Augustin DeBois!"

My face felt as if it was drained of all vitality and my jaw fell a good 10 centimeters.

Augustin, my youngest brother, must be up at the Lord's side (hopefully) along with my father and Luke. How in the world could I have stumbled upon this strange man in the vast array of farms in some countryside that I've never seen before.

The man pulled out a very faded wallet and with shaking fingers flipped through several pictures (one of which looked like the boy who I had already met). After a long moment he pulled a very faded and old black and white photograph that showed a young boy being held in the arms of a much aged man who could easily have passed for either myself or my brother Augie. It was astonishing! If I had gone to university for statistics I would still never be able to comprehend the chances of such an encounter as this.

"You?! You are Augie's grandson?"

Now I lost the last of my composure and wept like a child on the man's shoulder. Here, divorced from all that was familiar to me, was the only living relative that I had ever in my life seen in these strange lands.

“That must mean... I must still be sometime in the late 20th century!”

Now it was the older man’s turn to look aghast. His eyes bulged out in an almost as comical fashion. “Do you mean to tell me that you are some kind of time traveler?!”

With a long sigh, I once again began relating my strange luck of traveling to a different time and place when I fall asleep. Before I could finish recounting the story, the young boy came over from the house. “Hey oppa, Mom wants to know... hey that’s the guy I saw turn up on the other side of the fence.”

The old man answered before I could utter a word. He sounded choked up as he spoke. “Now young Brian, this is a long-lost relative of mine that I am blessed to meet before I leave you all. He is very special to-”

“Leave?!” the boy exclaimed with despair. “What do you mean leave? You just got here.”

“Now Brian. You know that I can’t be with you forever. I’ve been given the chance by God to live a happy life and raise your father and uncle Shawn. But one day we all have to move on.” His sidelong glance communicated the irony to me. “Now you said something about your mom?”

The boy looked puzzled for a minute. “Oh yeah. Mom said to tell you that Dad put your things in the downstairs room, so

you'll be right next to the kitchen if you need anything." The boy, Brian's dialogue faded as he saw a strange expression on his grandfather's face. The boy followed the older man's gaze and he tilted his head inquisitively. "Opa? Is something wrong? Don't you like our amazing house? It's so huge!"

Well sure Brian. The house is fine, just fine. Mighty unfortunate spot they chose for it though.

The boy seemed confused, and understandably so. This peculiar statement reinforced my belief that the man had indeed become feeble-minded. Despite that hypothesis, he was a distant relative and was willing to treat me like family. I therefore acquiesced to show the man good humor.

We all wondered out into the field, which strangely was filled with an inedible grass rather than crops. Since I saw no livestock, it was daunting to me what purpose it served.

We walked some distance out when my feet stumbled upon a piece of railroad track among the grass. I turned to look at... at my grand-nephew inquiringly. "Um, Opa.

Was there a railroad line here at one point?"

The man stared down at the piece of track and looked out to the distance, then began walking in a straight line towards something in the distance. The man walked as if he were following an internal compass. In short order we came to an

iron post sticking out of the ground. It was clearly a semaphore¹², though heavily rusted. Its curved metal plate was pockmarked and the glass disks were long gone.

Given how recently I remembered the railroads coming to my own town, it was shocking for me to see this piece of infrastructure sitting rusted and forgotten in some field.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked his grandson.

“Oh Opa, it’s just an old piece of junk.”

The man became flustered and he appeared then challenged to show patience with the boy. “Now Brian. This isn’t just a piece of rusty metal, it’s the mark of a railroad which ran straight through here on the way to Toronto.” he pointed his hand directly at the house. “It was called the Grand Trunk Railroad¹³ and it connected Montreal with the rest of eastern Canada.”

Now both the boy’s expression and my own showed great surprise, though it was likely for different reasons. I was, of course, familiar with it as they were the customers for whom Cluade was building the great iron workhorses. But it was amazing (as everything in these new lands seemed to be) that I could be standing in a time and place where the great rail line

12 The semaphore was the earliest form of railroad signal system

13 Grand Trunk Railroad – the earliest long distance railroad operating in western Canada and the northeastern United States

was a mere historical footnote. I thought back to Claude's grand declaration a lifetime ago in Sherbrook.

We all stared at a long degraded section of track and the million questions finally managed to burst out of me. "Please forgive my intrusion into your story." I interrupted. "But this is all quite overwhelming. How could this rail line, which was the very pinnacle of Man's triumph over the wilderness, be so quickly thrown into disuse and disrepair??"

The man seemed to pull out from his reminiscence and returned my gaze. "Oh that's right. You wouldn't know this story either. How interesting. For young Brian here, it's too far in the past, and for you it was too far in the future. Well, I will tell the story now for both of you."

The old man's eyes seemed to glaze over as he again reminisced. "This was the line that my parents rode on when they would visit their family in Quebec City. I was waiting for the train that my parents were due to arrive on, and I'd heard people say that you could tell when the train was coming if you laid your ear down on the rail" he demonstrated by carefully getting on his knees and putting his ear to the ground.

"Well I did just that, but I didn't hear a thing. It was still early in the morning and I must've dozed off, because I didn't even hear when that huge train came steaming down the line.

Well the conductor must've taken pity, cause he just couldn't bear to see a small child get struck. Must'a pulled mighty hard on those brakes cause the rails got bent up from the heat. It was said that the tragic crash could be heard for a half a dozen kilometers when the whole train came to a screeching halt causing the biggest derailment in the railroad's history. All the souls on board were lost that day, except for that young boy sleeping on the tracks."

The way the old man said it, I wondered if he were spinning a fantastic tale for the boy's amusement. I didn't feel confident that I could be sure one way or the other.

But regardless of it's authenticity, the story was most captivating. The man elaborated on all manor of railroad technology, which for him was ancient history, but for me was cutting edge. So not to be outdone as an entertainer, I recounted to the group my adventure with the older couple and their 'fix-it' beings as well as the land of the 'toons' which the young boy found most enchanting.

We each shared stories that ranged from lighthearted to most dark until a woman called out from the house that dinner was ready and we should come inside.

The old man, who we both came to refer to as 'Opa' was the first to go in and introduce me so as to alleviate my anxiety over

what to say my situation was. Despite his feeble-mindedness, the man was able to create a story which sounded perfectly legitimate without revealing too much that would disturb a family safely ensconced in one specific time.

We all shared a simple meal with some kind of ground up meat set upon pieces of bread along with a vegetable dish on the side. The conversation was light and I wisely chose to speak only in wide generalities. After dinner the boy traveled with me through the field to help me retrieve my bags.

“Were you really in a land where you could talk to the cartoons?!” His voice was most excited.

“Absolutely young Brian. I talked with squirrels, rabbits, pigs, and even a strange duck which spoke funny. Also there was a human-like cartoon drawn after a scientist named Einstein.”

“Wow, that must have been totally neeto!”

We brought my things inside and I was given the use of an extra pad laying around and made of a strange material called ‘styrofoam’ which was luxuriously lightweight and spongy. It was unlike anything which I had thus far experienced. I went to lay down in the living room, but the old man interrupted me.

“I wouldn’t put your things down there. You’d be wise to sleep in the den down the hall over there.”

I could see no reason for the man to protest, but as 'Opa' had assured me such luxurious accommodations, I was unwilling to be disagreeable.

Unfortunately even the comfortable bedding was not enough to dispel the great tumbling of thoughts which dominated my mind. I could think of nothing I that I might do which would allow sleep to overtake me. My body tossed and turned relentlessly in the darkened space. The distress of the last nightmare and anxiety over where I might end up next was beginning to erode my once stalwart cognizance. On top of that was some fragment of a thought which kept teasing my brain... some thread of what the old man had said which my conscious mind grasped at futilely like a sprig of pollen.

Chapter Nineteen

Making Tracks

I*t was at some unearthly hour long before dawn that a steady vibration began to be felt through the floor. It began as a low hum and gradually increased in both sound and vibration until the entire structure was soon aquiver. The parents of the*

boy made a hurried but ungainly trip downstairs to check on their son and talking of a possible earthquake.

As the shaking rose to frightful levels, I spied a light shining in through the living room window which steadily increased in tune with the vibration. It felt as if the devil himself were batting at the structure in hopes of getting to those inside. We all stared with barely restrained panic at the wall and followed the noise and light hovering just outside the structure. Finally, 'Opa' informed us that this was the locomotive which was coming to pick him up. It sounded as if it was running at full speed straight for the living room wall. I instructed everyone to stay back from the entrance just moments before the exterior wall crashed down and the largest locomotive which I had ever seen blasted through. The floor quickly became a river of splinters as the great iron beast plowed a path as effortlessly as if it were cutting through a snow flurry.

The beast was gigantic, the likes of which I couldn't imagine even fitting within Claude's factory. There were four leading wheels and six drive wheels! This train was clearly the most powerful locomotive ever conceived. It was only through so much raw power that I could accept the vast destruction of the family's dwelling without even a shudder from the iron horse.

The locomotive slowed to a halt just before reaching the other end of the room and it wasn't until the great beast finally stopped that the great orchestra of steel wheels and venting steam was relieved. We all stared dumbfounded at this living piece of future history. Though I had seen locomotives in every stage of assembly at Claude's factory, this was something entirely different. The entire train here gave off an air of opulence. The cars were built with rich wood, and decorated with ornate iron and glass windows. But the most disturbing sight of all, was a woman who was the spitting image of Claude's fiancé sitting in the third passenger car. She was much older, but her proud features were as distinctive as ever. Apparently she was among the group of unfortunate souls on this ghost train. I bounded up the steps to visit with the woman who I'd once fancied when the conductor held me at bay. He was surreally lifelike and wore a smart indigo suit with a neat cap.

"Sorry friend. We're only picking up one passenger today."

"But you don't understand," I stammered. "I know that woman sitting over there, we grew up together. I've got to see her."

"I do understand, but we can't have you folks intermingling with the departed."

I made several attempts to coerce him and even tried to push past. It was then that the man's skin began to dissolve and his hair fell out. A grotesque apparition stared me in the face, and the animated skull repeated that I was not invited on board. My terror was indescribable and caused me to stumble and fall back head over heels to the splintered floor.

By the time I could get my faculties back, the same kindly man was standing at the steps calling 'all aboard.' I was resigned to looking up at the woman in her smart dress as she stared back at me with wonder. Though I was elated to see her again, the experience along with the horrible memory of that conductor was a vastly perplexing one.

As I struggled to come to terms with what my senses told me defied every known law of science, I saw from the corner of my eye the old man casually head towards the second car. His young grandson calling out to him, broke away from his parents and grabbed tightly to him as if his small arms could be more powerful than the fate which had been heretofore predetermined.

In the now eerie silence, I heard the man speak back to the boy. "I'm going to miss you too little Brian. But this is where my destiny leads me. We cannot change the fate to which all of us must at some point be resigned." He paused, as if for emphasis.

“But I hope to see you in about 85 years.” He then stopped in front of me and gave me a strong embrace. His voice choked up and it took a second before I could understand him. “It has been an absolute gift from God to have met you René. You can’t know how deeply it affected me to have this brief time with you.” He held me out at arms length then. “You be sure to take care of yourself and I wish you a long and fruitful life.”

I began to choke up myself as I struggled to reply. Looking into his smiling eyes, I finally found the words. “My good man, it has been equally a blessing for me to have encountered you. Your story and experience are a treasure which I will always hold dear.”

Finally, our parting finished, the man carefully mounted the steps with none of the youthful vigor of his grandson and the conductor dutifully made room.

Once he was aboard the man who had prevented my boarding motioned for me to stand back. At the front of the train, I could hear the boiler being charged up and the pistons gently began to slide, moving the wheels ever so slowly at first but with rapidly increasing velocity.

Soon the whole monstrous vehicle was inching towards the lone intact wall and crashed through it like so much stacked cord-

wood as it continued on to that undiscovered country which no man seeks for.

As I watched the family stare in astonishment at the gaping hole in their once perfect looking mansion, I felt as if I were the character in some story book where every new chapter brings on another twist that must be resolved. It was becoming sadly clear to me that I would never again see the raw beauty of the Sherbrooke countryside which had once been mere backdrop to what I previously saw as mundane.

I spoke with the family at length about what they must be experiencing, and helped them work through a most inexplicable transformation in their lives. None of us could come to terms with the experience and no explanation felt sufficient. But despite the shock and bewilderment, the young boy's yawns began to grow on the rest of us after a few hours until we all succumbed to sleep once again.

Chapter Twenty

Dome's Day

Once again the dawn found me in an alien place. This time it was a forested area, however aside from the trees there was little natural life visible. The innumerable small mammals which provided sport and sustenance back home were again missing in this place. I looked around me to see what resources remained available to me. Thankfully I still had my clothes and bags, I also had this miraculous foam sleeping pad. However without the fantastic bicycle machine, I was resigned to travel of the pedestrian kind until I could find a means of replacement. With no small reluctance, I made my way to the nearest path and was soon gratified to see that it was a humble dirt road. No bitumen, no automotive vehicles, no noise at all. Just the peaceful quiet of the trees. With cautious trepidation I began to think that perhaps I could enjoy a respite from the constant hazardous adventures which were constantly presenting themselves with such morbid regularity.

As I walked, I noticed a peculiarity up ahead. There was a type of discoloration in the distance and just as I began to notice it, I heard a voice shout, "Hey there, watch out for the dome ahead!"

Not knowing what the person was talking about, I slowed slightly and then came to a stop when a young boy came towards me.

“Are you trying to find out where it goes too?”

“Pardon me, but I do not understand to what you are referring?”

The boy gave me a quizzical look. “The dome of course. Aint you heard about the dome by now? Everyone knows about it.”

“Young man. I’m afraid that I do not know anything about this dome.” I slowly walked forward again. As I did so, my ear began to ring and the hair on my arms and neck stood up as if a thunderstorm were approaching. I put my hand out and experienced the most incredible sensation as my hand touched a flat glass-like surface which was completely invisible.

I jumped back in shock.

“By the stars! How can this be?!”

It was the most fantastic thing that I had ever experienced, even more so than the cartoon world. I slowly reached my hand out again and as my hand touched the surface, my thoughts were interrupted by the boy.

“Mister, how in the world could you not know about the dome? We all been trapped by this thing for over a week. You been living in one of those camp sites the whole time?”

I looked down at the boy and felt fatigued at the prospect of explaining the whole history again. But there was nothing for it. So I sighed and went through the adventure once again for this youth. It took several minutes and I watched his eyes transform into broad disks as he absorbed the totality of my background.

“Holy crap! So you’ve been to all those places?!”

Feeling blood rush to my face, I retorted. “Young man, you watch your mouth. Why if you were my son, I’d whack your behind for such language!”

“Wow, you sound more old fashioned than my grandpa. You must be from way long ago. You’re gonna need some help gettin’ with the twenty-first century.”

“The... the twenty-first you said?!” It was incredible. If the next century had machines that flew through the air, and roads that were as smooth as glass, what did the century beyond hold?

“Well, yeah. It’s 2005 dude.”

“Well then I beg to ask. If the 20th century has roads as smooth as this... this dome, then why in the... the twenty-first

century does this road resemble the one I left in 1871?" The enigma made no sense to me.

"Oh, this is just a side road for the campers. Most of the roads through town are the same pavement as everywhere else."

He lowered his voice to barely a whisper even though there was no sign of anyone else. "But listen. You'd be smart to not tell anyone else that you just got here. Folks here're getting real crazy bout bein stuck in this place. Nothin's gotten in or outa Huntsville since last Tuesday. If people find that you were somehow able to get past the dome, you could be in a mess o trouble. It's getting kinda scary here." He emphasized by putting his finger to his ear and making circles with it. "Cept of course for Mister Cox. He's cool."

It was a mystery what a man's temperate had to do with trustworthiness, but I surmised that this young man knew more about the local situation than I could. "Is there a way to meet with this Mr. Cox?"

Now the boy looked confused. "Um, well I don't know that he has a cell phone, so it seems ta be just blind luck for now."

The more that this young person talked, the more confused I became. But as he was the only human being around, I did my best with the situation. "Alright. Can you tell me anything

about this dome? Your fantastic technology continues to amaze me.”

“Hell mister.” He must have seen my face redden because the boy lowered his eyes. “Nothin we’ve got in this town could create an invisible dome. Besides why would anyone want to make one?” He looked at me with some confusion like a person trying to ascertain if a face is familiar. “The dome just kinda appeared one day around the whole town. Houses got cut off from the yard, cars got sliced in half, tree limbs just hacked right through.” He pointed to a few examples. “But the crashes were the worst. Whole bunch ‘o’ people brought in ta the clinic all messed up. Nobody knows who did it or why. Some say it’s a government experiment, some say aliens. We don’t know who the he- who in the world did it, we all just want the thing gon-”

His dialogue was cut short by the report from a pistol. I instinctively grabbed the boy and went behind the nearest tree. I felt the boy trembling with fright and I peaked around to see if there were any indication of the location from which the shot originated. After a minute we got our answer.

“Come on Cooxxx. Ya can’t run furever, you gotta hit the dome somewhere. We got plenty o’ time.”

The voice rose up and down like that of a madman. If it was indeed the owner of the rifle, then I feared not only for that man Cox's safety but for our own as well.

"Olly olly oxenfareeee!" another shot rang out. "Come out, come out wherever you aaarrre." The voice was getting closer and as I felt a pair of eyes staring at me, my heart seemed to stop beating.

"Psst." By a vast stroke of luck, the eyes staring at me belonged not to the madman with a revolver however, they belonged to a poorly shaven man with a calculating expression. He made hand motions for us to stay where we were and keep low. An instruction for which I needed no tutelage.

"That's Mr. Cox." The boy attempted a whisper, but had obviously not been schooled in hunting skills for his voice carried louder than either of us desired.

"Hey, Cooooxxx. I thought you military bastards were trained better then that. I'ma cummin for ya."

I could hear footsteps shift towards us and my blood cooled by several degrees. Ever since the loss of my ammunition I wondered to myself how I would manage to defend myself in these travels through ever more wild and dangerous lands. I laughed inwardly at my dear friend Claude's fear of dangerous

sauvages. It seemed that my own race was the most deadly of all, and more heavily armed.

My thoughts were interrupted by what sounded like a log falling into the underbrush.

I saw Mr. Cox get up and move out of his spot in the brush. He walked over to a shallow depression and then waved us over. The boy and I carefully left our hideout behind the tree and came across a man lying face-down in the brush. A large lump with blood trailing from it was visible behind his ear.

“Wow Mr. Cox. That must’ve been great aim.”

The man put a finger over his mouth and motioned for us to follow him. The three of us slowly moved through the undergrowth to a clearing with several cabins. It looked like a rustic town with wide paths made of gravel leading into it.

We moved toward one of the houses and Cox walked right in. “It’s off season so there shouldn’t be anyone looking around here.”

“My word! You can just walk into these luxurious buildings without permission of the owner?” I was amazed at the man’s audacity.

He looked at me with the same confused expression that I was becoming grudgingly accustomed to. But thankfully the boy cut

in for me. "Cox, you'll have to excuse this guy. He's a time traveler... a real live one."

It was clear that the man didn't believe the statement. But he dismissed the comment for the moment. We all sat down in a nicely furnished living room which belied the rustic exterior and Mr. Cox took charge of our situation.

"There's no doubt that Sly Stuart's gonna find out what happened to his son and when he does, this thing's gonna get a whole lot messier. Ollie what were you doing way out here on the other side of town? And who exactly is your new traveling companion?"

"The boy was trying to warn me from a most unpleasant encounter with your extraordinary science shortly before that madman with the revolver came wandering towards us. Thank you by the way, for I have little doubt that we would both be in dire straits were it not for your intervention."

Mr. Cox displayed the same confused expression again.

"Mr. Cox, this is René. Like I said, he's a real live time traveler., honest. And he somehow got here through the dome!"

By the man's expression it was clear that disbelief still remained dominant. He looked at me directly and now spoke with severe distrust. "So Mr... René is it? Can you tell me how you did find yourself here?"

With a sigh, I once again recounted my tale, though in a much foreshortened manner. I watched his eyes narrow further. The man clearly was not one who was easily convinced.

“So you are telling me now,” he made a strange gesture with his fingers “In - full - honesty, that you somehow just appeared on the road over there after having visited all these strange historical events, from World War Two through the 80s and up to now? Sorry buddy, but that just doesn’t fly.”

I was mildly bothered by his disbelief, but in all honesty I could imagine myself reacting in quite the same manner were our situations reversed. We both were men, with independent minds and we could make them up however we pleased. I told the man this and it seemed to satisfy him.

“Mr. Cox, I’m afraid that I don’t know your first name, could you tell me about this technology that creates an invisible barrier with no visible support frame?”

He did become mildly flustered for a moment realizing that I knew at least that much about him. But I quickly recounted what the boy had told me. He then shared that his name was Damien Cox. The man and I shook hands before he continued. “I have absolutely no idea what it is to be honest.”

“That’s what I tried to tell him!” the boy burst in “Listen now, don’t interrupt.” I schooled the boy.

Looking non-plussed, Mr. Cox continued. "I was on my way out of town when I saw a semi... you know what that is, right?"

I shook my head and stated that I'd never heard the term, after which I could see him pondering that bit.

"Well, that's a large, um, horseless carriage which hauls cargo. Anyway, it was heading into town and just disintegrated against an invisible barrier. I was hitchhiking and when I ran over to the crash site I found that I couldn't do a damn thing to help. The whole road was divided by what appeared to be a giant sheet of glass. The barrier extends as far as I could walk."

"It goes around the whole town! That's what I was doing, walking the edge of it around." cut in Ollie.

"Exactly. We had a number of car crashes against the thing before the military stationed barriers on all the roads."

"So this thing wasn't created by your government?!" I exclaimed. "Then who could've fabricated such a phenomenal cage?" The whole notion was beyond anything I could dream of, even after my adventures thus far.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I can't imagine anyone on this Earth having the resources. It's a completely alien concept."

“By God’s grace, I could never have imagined a mystery that your advanced science could not explain.”

“Mr. René, I don’t fully believe your story, but in either case I’m afraid to say that you will not be able to leave. ‘We-” he spread his arms wide, “all of us are trapped here like lab animals. And, unfortunately Stew is gonna be mighty vengeful when he finds what happened to his son. If the kid remembers who did that to him, I wont be able to show my face in town ever again.”

He paused as if for effect and looked directly at the boy. “Ollie, you’ve been exploring all over here. Is there any place you can think of where we could stay low and out of sight?”

“Mr. Cox... um Damien, why don’t we stay in this deserted village? It looks quite lavish.”

The man looked at me as if I were a poor unschooled child. “René, I realize that things may seem different to you, but with Stew holding all of the cards it’s only a matter of time before he finds this campground. Anyplace his deputies can get to in a squad car wont be safe for long.” He looked back at Ollie, “What do you think Ollie?”

The boy answered with the excitement of youth. “Well, over behind Chester’s farm there’s a big ravine that no one ever goes to except the kids that’re into smokin shit.”

I gave the boy a severe look, however Mr. Cox seemed unperturbed.

“That’s fine. René, do you want to join me?”

Though I knew nothing of this town, I could surmise from what Mr. Cox said, that there was trouble here which I had no desire to encounter. “It would be my pleasure.”

So the three of us headed off in the direction that the boy had pointed, walking along the edge of the dome.

As we traveled, I gazed in awe at the scenery. Tree branches sliced through more cleanly than any craftsman could. Buildings, rocks, even the bodies of some small unfortunate animals were sliced straight through to the ground. One backyard had an iron clothesline post sheered straight through to its base.

We had barely walked for an hour when I heard an enormous explosion. It sounded like the mortar shell from a great battleship had detonated less than half a kilometer away.

All three of us noticeably jumped from the shock. But Cox was the one who recovered first. “Sounds like Stew’s gone and blown up some of the propane tanks.

“My lord Mr. Cox. What in the world is this explosive of which you speak?”

The man explained that most of the townspeople used this explosive gas for cooking and heating.

“And you say that people store this horribly dangerous material right next to their homes?! It sounds like a most irresponsible practice. No offense intended.”

The man seemed to take a few moments to consider this before he answered. “René, I can see why you would think that. But consider if you look at this propane the same way you look at a gun. All of these tools of ours can have many purposes, so it becomes clear that propane can be used for something useful like cooking food, or it can be exploded and used as a tool of intimidation.”

This last gave me food for thought. Clearly the changes in technology had created both benefits and conveniences but at a cost which I was only now becoming sadly aware of.

I noticed the boy hang back at one point and I slowed to be sure that he was not in need of rest. Quietly he whispered to me as we walked. “Mister, if you can, please take me with you. This place is really, really scary.” The look of terror on such a young, innocent face was heartbreaking and bore directly into my soul.

I whispered back just as subtly, “Ollie, I wish I knew how to take the both of you along. But the shift seems to only happen

when I'm unconscious. I never know when or where it will happen next. I'm so sorry lad, but I just don't want to promise what I cannot be certain of."

The boy looked supremely dejected, but I preferred honesty to the offering of false hope. It felt in my heart that nothing which I could offer would be capable of extinguishing the boy's trepidation.

Soon the underbrush began to get thicker and the ground became more uneven. Our progress slowed considerably as we pushed through the brambles and thicket. Finally we reached a spot where the two of them agreed would be far enough back as to be out of danger. I began pulling my oilcloth and some rope so as to make a lean-to while Mr. Cox pulled some food out of his pack. He handed each of us a strange flexible stick with a shiny metallic outside. I puzzled it for a bit until I saw them tear the edge open. I did the same and found a wonderful smelling oat bar. I bit into it and found the taste overwhelmingly sweet and pleasurable.

We told stories while we sat wrapped in a blanket that I had kept on my saddlebags. I talked about the farm, and of my friend Claude (who must be looking down at me from God's theater). Likewise Mr. Cox spoke of his time in the military and his stories were filled with unimaginable technologies beyond

anything even I had experienced in these fantastic travels. Machines that not only flew through the air, but landed straight down on the ground 'like a maple seed' was how he described it.

As evening wore on, I began to wish I could fight my fatigue. Despite the discomfort of this land and the dangers of the people within, I was beginning to conclude that the devil you know is preferable. I could not imagine if I would wake up once again in this same place, or travel to an even more fantastic and dangerous land. Added to that was the fear that every friendly face which I encountered was destined to vanish with each nocturnal transition.

Chapter Twenty-One And End to Solitude

The field which I viewed upon waking was not much different from the fields in which I had arrived the day before. My heart leapt when I saw that Ollie and Mr. Cox were still laying nearby. I still did not have transportation beyond the pedestrian kind, but I did have my saddlebags and camping supplies, and Mr. Cox had his pack too.

So this is how it is for you?" The former military man commented with more than a touch of bitterness. "You wake up in a different place every morning? Seems like it'd be enough to send a man to the psych ward."

I commented back that I knew not what a 'psych ward' was, but that I was in no small way unsettled by the constant shifts. I wondered if my unwilling companions would be happier with the constantly shifting environment, or the imprisonment within that dome.

We spoke in low tones until Ollie woke up. When he did, I spied his expression reflecting the same confusion and disorientation which I felt with each change.

"You did it!" He embraced me with vigor. "We're free of that horrible place. Thank you René!"

Cox looked around and quickly kept the boy's enthusiasm in check. "Ollie, I hope that I'm wrong about this, but we may have jumped from the frying pan into the fire."

As we looked around, there were numerous subtle shifts from the last time period. It was difficult to discern, but the environment felt more run down. There was a feeling of emptiness, like a stage at the end of a production. It wasn't just the empty streets, which I experienced in many time periods, it was the condition of the buildings, the absence of motor vehicles

and their peculiar smell, and something more subtle which my conscious mind was unable yet to grasp.

We walked up the drive of the first house and Damion dutifully knocked on the door. I was not surprised that our greeting received no response as the structure had an abandoned feel to it. We were about to give up and walk on when we finally heard the sound of motor vehicles in the distance. It sounded like a great number of them from the volume of sound.

As the vehicles crested the nearby hill, we saw a group the size of an army battalion traveling down the road. Even from a distance, it was clearly a ragtag bunch. There were dozens of vehicles of all types, some vehicles which looked like bicycles but which had the sound a loud motor, and a great many people walking.

It took a long while for the group to reach us and they were clearly traveling without much speed. As I could not discern the meaning of such a group in a time period which was alien to me, I glanced at Mr. Cox. By his expression, he was clearly sizing up the group as well. It didn't take long for him to make his decision and he purposefully strode back towards the road with myself and the boy in tow.

The army came to a halt when they saw us standing at the edge of the driveway. Mr. Cox saluted the man in front who was

wearing some kind of uniform. The man saluted back and came up to us. He was an older gentleman with a chiseled jaw and white beard. It was clear from the look of the man that he'd been through a lot. There were a couple of scars visible on his cheek and neck. The name on the breastplate read 'Lt. Col. Juan Martin.

"Good day to you folks. Where are you coming from?"

I let Cox do the talking as he spoke the British language more fluently than I, and his military history gave him a clear connection with the man.

"I have no doubt that this will sound strange, but we're honestly not sure. I don't know exactly where this is."

The man's expression showed that he was puzzled, and his countenance began to transform to one of suspicion. "Well I think that it would help matters if you told me what you do know. It doesn't look like you fellows have a vehicle, so you can't be lost." he peered closely at Ollie, "I don't see a harness on that kid, so you couldn't be some Skitter trap... wouldn't be their way anyhow." He looked us up and down in turn, and appeared to be sizing us up carefully.

"Colonel, I realize that we may seem strange. And our story is gonna seem a whole lot stranger. But I'll tell you this right

now, it sure is a relief to have a conversation with a military man who understands how to size up a situation in a hurry."

The compliment seemed to put chink in the man's armor and he relaxed just a hair. So that when he spoke now the suspicion was noticeably reduced.

"So what branch are you then?"

"I'm army. Col. Damian Cox of the Canadian Land Force Command at your service" he smartly saluted again.

Now the man showed the barest crack of a smile. "Well it seems that you outrank me then Colonel. And is this your place?"

"No sir. We were traveling down the road and were hoping to find some people who could give us directions."

Now the older man did indeed give a bitter laugh. "You can't possibly expect that anyone's gonna be home anymore, do you?"

The puzzlement which we all felt must have been clearly visible on our faces because now the general showed even more suspicion.

"I think that you'd better tell me just exactly where you came from and how you got to be so far away as to be completely lost." The man motioned to the group behind him and the vehicle engines became quiet while the people walking sat down

where they had been standing. As for the leader, he sat down opposite us as if we were both in a public park.

If I became constantly more tired of repeating my story, Cox seemed to relish in it's delivery. He offered more animation than I would have expected from a soldier. He especially seemed to relish the description of my apparently antique language and mannerisms.

Despite the self-control typically associated with soldiers, even this man guffawed at the extravagance of our tale.

"So you're telling me, honest injun now, that you three have traveled through time to his place. And that you don't even know what a skitter is?"

We all nodded in agreement.

"Well well well. I'd say that you've really hit the jackpot this time. If you thought that being trapped inside some invisible dome with a bunch of country folk was bad, you're gonna have a new sense of fear when you get a look at the aliens."

I was highly troubled by the obvious intent of his words. It gave me wonder as to whether Cox and Ollie would have indeed been better off where they had been previously living inside the dome.

He sighed heavily. "Well I guess you may as well travel along with us seein as you'll just be skitter bait otherwise." The man raised his voice loud enough to be heard over a dozen meters.

"Alright listen up! We've got a couple of new rookies with us. These folks aren't familiar with skitters, so give them a good education. And no grandstanding neither. And Mr. Cox here is a military Colonel, so he'll be with us on the briefings for as long as we've got his company. Now let's move on, we've got to hit the outskirts of BraceBridge before tomorrow night."

We all began to walk along with the group, and I was fascinated to look upon them. There were people from all walks of life. Older people were often riding bicycles or traveling in the automotive vehicles while the younger and more sprightly folk were on foot. People wore all manor of clothing and the class divisions of my own time seem to have disappeared, as throughout the group people were dressed in the fading or ragged remains of whatever they might once have purchased.

Most folks seemed too exhausted or stunned to pay us any attention. However there were a couple of folks here and there who could hold bits of conversation.

"So you were some kind of army general or something?" A negro man who looked to be in his 30s addressed Mr. Cox. "What kinda action did you see, you know, before-?"

It was obvious to us both that these people assumed that everyone possessed a memory of their life before the strange transformation took place. But the story that our companion told was beyond anything I could have believed even since traveling through these futuristic lands.

“Well I guess there’s not harm in telling you folks, since my home is so far away that there aint a national security issue anymore.” He paused long enough that we both wondered if he had more to share. “The last mission I was on... the one that sent me AWOL was a special-opps mission in Afghanistan. We were supporting the Americans over there. I was in with a group of these young soldiers, you know, showin them the ropes. We were scouting out a remote village where our C.O. told us there was a terrorist cell operating out of. We headed down in a convoy of four hummers-”

“Excuse me.” I interrupted, “could you tell me what that is?”

The man looked a bit consternated, but briefly described an automotive vehicle with a type of heavy armor that only the battleships of my own time carried. It rode almost half a meter off the ground and was large enough to carry 8 heavily armed

soldiers or a 12.7mm machine gun. The power of such a vehicle which could easily stand up to an army, even a British one, was more than terrifying to me.

“Anyway, the convoy reached the village and parked in a secluded spot behind a rock outcropping. We used an air tank to blow the sand around in order to hide our tracks and set up a camp until dark. When night fell, I went in quietly and used my night-vision goggles to keep an eye on the movement of the villagers.” his glance in my direction told me not to ask again to explain the technology. “It was just blind luck, or maybe the lack thereof, that caused me to be in that one place when things went down. I saw a man drive towards the village in an old jeep and park a few hundred meters away. He walked to within a few meters of the outermost building and sat in the sand. This was definitely something that looked like trouble to me. I carefully walked back to the jeep and got a directional microphone. When I got back, I saw a second man sitting opposite the visitor. They looked like they were just having tea on a Sunday afternoon

except for the lack of daylight. When I set up the mike, I was surprised to find them talking in Dari. Most Al Queda operatives used Arabic to simplify their intelligence.

The higher-ups knew that I spoke Arabic and a little Pashto, but they didn't know that I also understood Dari. It seems that we weren't supposed to know about this particular conversation-

"The Opium is doing well this year, but I've had to leave my boys to work the fields so that I can keep an eye on the mines. Those boys are far too young to be managing crops.

"I understand. My boys are also having to do the work of men. We all learn to grow up quickly in this land."

"Yes, but you have the special privileges from the squareheads."

"My friend, you do not make this easy. It saddens me to admit that this is the reason for my visit. The yankees say that the quality of the lithium is not up to your regular standards. They demand that you continue mining only the 55% pure Lithia for their use.

"I couldn't care less what those yankee dogs think of the rocks. You look in this village-" the man pointed to the

main settlement, "my family barely has enough water to keep us alive. And they want me to spend time that I could be growing Opium to instead pull these stupid rocks out of the ground."

"I would be careful of what you say. Those 'yankee dogs' seem to have ears everywhere."

The guy looked at me and I could swear that his eyes were boring directly into my own.

"If they don't get the product they want, your village could end up looking like Barikju. You know that I respect you and consider you a tribesman. It would sadden me greatly if anything were to happen to you.

The guy sounded utterly hopeless now.

"So you're saying that I can choose from either a slow death from starvation or a quick death from one of their sky devils."

"I hope that it does not come to that my friend."

Another figure arrived next to them and spoke too quietly for me to hear.

"My son says that my father may not live for long. He has been refusing to eat, I think that he does this so that there is more for the children. But we will all have less desire to live if we continue to see our family suffer and perish."

He paused for a long moment,

“you can tell your squarehead masters that if they want better rocks, they can come down and dig in the ground for themselves!”

“It didn’t take more than 12 hours for the man’s answer to be processed. We had covered the jeeps with camouflage that wouldn’t really fool a helicopter pilot much less a local, but we did it anyway cause... well, that’s just the way it’s done.

I was sitting under one of the jeeps just waiting for orders... we did a lot of that out there, when I just happened to see a glint in the sky. It was silent enough that I would’ve missed it if I hadn’t been glancing in just the right spot.

Seconds later two small missiles fell from the sky and landed one in the village and one on the leading hummer of our group. It seems that someone did know that I was listening to that conversation, and they didn’t want it repeated.

Clearly the battle which we were fighting was not to end terrorism at all, but to advance the voracious

appetite of the Americans. And since they clearly didn't want me alive, I thought it best not to let them believe differently."

The dark-skinned man was clearly intrigued, "So how did you get outa there?"

"Well there was bunch of parts from enough of the hummers that I was able to put together a makeshift vehicle and got to the nearest populated town. From there I spent 15 grueling hours in the trunk of a car wrapped in blankets to hide my heat signature. The next thing I knew I was in Uzbekistan and I continued hiding out and working my way to the west. It was 2 years more before I touched back on Canadian soil."

Several people expressed their veneration for Mr. Cox's story, but for myself I experienced more confusion than anything else. Automobile vehicles with the power of a warship? Invisible flying machines that can reign fire from the sky? Technology which lets a man see in full darkness? I couldn't possibly imagine what wonders could be found in this land. But just as quickly as my sense of wonder had arrived, so too did the leader's words repeat themselves, 'you'll be eating those words before the end of the week.' If these were honest men, and could see no reason to disbelieve their story, then I and my companions may in fact have stumbled upon the most fearsome land to date.

We stopped after several hours to prepare dinner. I helped the kitchen crew to identify edible plants which they seemed strangely to be unaware of. We ate a spartan meal that included some plain millet along with jerusalem artichokes seasoned with lemonbalm, and some chickweed.¹⁴ All in all it was satisfying, if not grandiose.

Two of the people checked the house where we stopped and commented back that there were plenty of usable clothes available. So those who had not changed in a few days went in to explore what was available. I was continuously awe-struck by the scale of the houses. As with most of the places we visited, the buildings were at least 200 square meters with two or sometimes three stories to them. I imagine these people must have had 10 children or more to need such a volume of space. I found wonders of all kinds within the dwelling, from small clocks that fit neatly on the wall, to windows of perfect clarity to chairs and beds which would rival the furniture of a statesman.

I even found a bicycle machine in the garage which I happily spun around the yard while others picked up what they could.

Unfortunately as I sped towards the road, my bliss was halted by Sargeant Martin's expression. "Now son, I understand how

¹⁴ Edible plants often dismissed as weeds in North America

much you like this little toy, but we have to prioritize the bicycles for those who are older or injured.”

Reluctantly I passed on the wonderful machine to a woman in her 50s who gratefully accepted it's use. From there on afterwards we continued our march and I gazed with rapt attention at the profound changes in this land. It was clear that the landscape was changing from rural to a sort of quasi-urban. Houses were more close together but the land surrounding them was filled with the same inedible grass which I'd seen elsewhere. I wondered aloud where the people of this time had obtained food.

I was educated by a woman who was pushing her young daughter in a stroller. “We never put the effort into growing food. We just bought what we needed at the market and grew lawns around the house. It was easy since there were lawnmowers to cut the grass.”

“Truly madam? You purchased all of your food with money? What a wealthy society you enjoyed. No people from my town could purchase everything they need with money. Even my dear friend Claude would grow potatoes, radishes, and kale in the summer. Though he certainly had a propensity towards catered food.” The thought of my dear friend Claude caused my eyes to

mist over at the thought of never seeing him again. He must be in the ground over a century by now.

“So what LePruse said is true?! You’re from another time? Wow, that’s spastic.

You sure as hell picked the wrong decade to show up. If you’d gotten here 30 years ago, well-”

Neither of us wanted to expound upon that thought, and as I was often finding difficulty with the language from these different times, I let the conversation fall. It was eerie how long the silences could drag on like a hot July afternoon until the once vibrant energy became vaporous. I surmised that these people must have been together for a long enough time that the shared transformation had already been expressed by all.

Nobody ever mentioned what it was like when ‘they’ came or how long it had been, and I was unable to bring myself to ask. But thankfully the impertinence of youth allowed Ollie to undertake the task in my stead.

“So what exactly happened when these aliens came down?” he asked another boy next to him. “Was it like War of the Worlds or something?”

Even his moderately excited tone fell several notches when we saw the reaction on the other boy’s face. The boy, who looked no older than 10, answered with the gravity of a man who’d seen a

lifetime of sorrows. His story was uttered in somber expressionless monotone.

"I was in church with my family when the aliens came. They came in ships so huge that the whole city got dark. Claudette, who had the radio playing on her phone, said that the U.S. wasn't going to use nukes in case the aliens were friendly. But they weren't at all. The alien ships waited until sunset and then sent out these huge beams that shut off all electric stuff, planes, computers, cellphones, even government stuff. They had these weird weapons that cut apart all the machines, ships, army bases, trucks. All the soldiers died. I don't know why, but they mainly come out at night. Maybe the sun is too bright, or the thermo-something is weaker in the day. Anyway now our parents... at least the ones still alive, have to fight the aliens so we can have food and get weapons-" he trailed off and just seemed to stare off into space like a man who's gone senile.

His melancholy was perfectly understandable I thought. Even having just arrived in this strange place, the story sent shivers

down my spine. I was grateful that even Ollie had the good sense now to refrain from asking more of the boy.

As dusk approached, the men at the front moved carefully and in a squatting run (the way good soldiers do) towards a dead-end street and kicked open the doors in several houses. Even with what I had heard, that nearly everyone was with God, the process was still unnerving to me.

Once the scouts declared everything safe, we all divided up and moved into the houses with three or four people sharing each room. Unfortunately, the word had gotten around that Cox and Ollie had been transported with me because they had been close by when I had fallen asleep. As a result, a great many people wanted to be in the same room with me. Several women even made indecent proposals to me for the privilege, causing me to blush uncontrollably. After a couple of fights broke out one of the men in charge, I believe he was the second in command, declared that I would share a room only with Cox and Ollie. I thought this to be a very agreeable solution, especially given that the man could have declared himself to be among those sharing the room.

After the long march along hardened pavement, the three of us gratefully collapsed onto the camping bedrolls which our Mr. Cox had salvaged in the house previous. I wished the two good

night and fervently hoped, given the stories that we had heard, for a rapid nocturnal transformation to a less hostile plane.

Chapter Twenty-Two The Desperate Battle

Sadly, the night did not offer my companions and I the escape which we longed for. Within only short while of laying down, an alarm was sounded room to room. It seems that one of the lookouts had spotted an alien and they were moving us all into a basement to help hide something called a heat signature (I was puzzled by the term, but it was not the proper time to inquire). Therefore we all crowded into the basements of the houses, the one I went into being more lavish even than Claude's dining room.

Luckily for me (or perhaps not) I was pushed against a wall which had a window and so was able to observe the desperate action without. At first the whole was pitch dark, but then I saw the moonlight reflecting off of a small piece of metal. Eventually I made out the shadow of a human form lying behind what looked like a shrub nearby. After a few short minutes, a creature sped past so quickly that I could scarcely

register what it was. It looked like an octopus over half a meter tall and with the speed of sprinting dog. I saw sparks erupt from the end of the man's gun and a deafening sound.

Instantly the being was hit in two of its legs and slowed considerably. Then the man finished off the creature in the same manner. Shortly after, two more of the creatures sped through only to suffer the same fate from rifles that I could not see. But the most terrifying sight of all was a giant machine three meters tall which had no comparison in any of the lands which I had visited. It was clearly made of some type of metal and traveled on two legs like a human. It also had two arms like a human. But there the resemblance ended. The main body of the machine was bulbous in shape with two down facing blue slits in the front and winglike protrusions on its back. The whole of its appearance gave the impression of something sinister. The machine turned towards the spot where one of the guns had been firing from and let loose a series of highly focused lights and once it had found its prey, there was a loud explosion which caused me to cover my eyes and ears.

When I looked again there was a large cloud of smoke and the only figure I could see was the man who had stationed himself behind the shrub. The giant 'thing' continued towards our window and I feared that I might finally meet up with Claude in the great beyond. However the surviving soldier throw a

small projectile and I witnessed a great explosion at roughly the middle of the thing. Though it continued to shoot, the beast no longer remained mobile. At this point more men hurried over and shot at it until the movement ceased. I began to cheer until I noticed another of the giant things moving toward us from around the corner and all of the soldiers fled. It was clear beyond any shadow of a doubt that these men were fighting a losing battle against a force so technologically superior that my mind could scarcely grasp what my eyes showed me.

“Was it bad?”

An older Chinaman was standing behind me, we were so crowded that he wouldn't have been able to reach the window even though he was less than a meter away. But looking around at several expectant faces, it was clear that he spoke for the lot of them.

“I believe that even if I could possibly find the words to describe the experience, you folks would think me mad” but still I repeated to them what I believe I saw. It was clear from the look of dejection that they hadn't expected much. My heart was full of sorrow for the lot of them as it looked like the future for humanity in this land was precarious at best.

“Everyone, you need to stay down as low as possible. We're out of grenades.” The stage whisper was passed on through the

room and we all sunk down to the floor and hugged each other in consolation. Even Mr. Cox was able to put aside his generally reserved persona and share a tender moment of compassion for the group. We sat like that for long while until everyone slipped into blissful unconsciousness. I unfortunately felt so shocked by the scene through the window that my meager sleep was fitful at best.

I awoke wondering where I was at this time, but seeing the group of faces I understood that we were still in the nightmarish land of the aliens. The man who had broken up the fight yesterday called everyone out for a meager breakfast of cold oats and we continued yesterday's march. It was very much like the day before save for a light rain which dampened not only our clothes, but our spirits as well. I was especially grateful now to have my wool coat with me, and noticed that the quality of clothing which these people wore was sadly mediocre for such a chilly climate.

In the afternoon we passed a sign welcoming us to BraceBridge. It was the sign alone which distinguished the area we entered from that which we were leaving. All through the day the scene was a seamless landscape of enormous houses set back from the black bitumen road and surrounded by prairie

grass. As we approached a particularly large road, the leader motioned for us to hide among a group of houses while the scouts went looking ahead.

After about an hour had passed, the group came back and spoke with the leader who instructed us to all move as a group onto the big road. It was an amazing sight. The road was easily 20 meters wide with yellow and white lines along its whole length.

Then in addition to the river of bitumen, there were other enormous fields of the same paved material with rows of white rectangles laid out. I couldn't imagine what would create the need for so much artificial surface, and continued to puzzle over how people grew food. However I soon got my answer as we converged on an enormous building, the scale of which I could never have imagined. It was easily large enough to house the giant flying machines I had witnessed a seeming lifetime before. I found myself, as always, aghast at the scale of constructions in these future lands.

Each person seemed to have a hand held lantern which created a directed beam of light to penetrate the cavernous interior. It shone through the darkness like the beam of a lighthouse but more on the scale of a small lantern. I was paired with the woman who I'd conversed with the day before. She introduced herself as Elizabeth and her daughter as Vivian.

The experience of being with her allowed me to practice my mediocre English vocabulary which would no doubt be needed as I had clearly traveled beyond the extent of French influence.

The woman was at least three inches taller than I (many people in this future time sported superior height for some reason). Her face was mildly attractive with two scars running from her lower cheek to just below the ear. She had short-cropped hair of midnight black and her clothes draped off her lank frame belying the mediocre nutrition of this land.

We walked up and down isles stacked two stories high with iron shelves that were filled with containers half the size of a bale of hay. She informed me that this was a warehouse used to store bulk supplies of food. People would buy these enormous quantities and use them up over the course of a few months. The cost was lower due to the volume.

We both leapt and dove for cover when we heard what sounded like an alien moving through the isle. Thankfully we were both relieved to see that it was only one of the young boys pushing an iron cart on wheels towards us. It was nicely engineered and very lightweight for being made of wrought iron.

“Chief says we got room in two of the trucks, so fill up as much as you can.”

He was brief and moved on to another group almost before we could thank him. Then I helped Elizabeth load an enormous bag of lentils, one of oats, and one of a powdered milk substance. We worked for half an hour filling the cart with anything nearby and rolled the cart out towards one of the automotive vehicles. As we worked she made sure that Vivian held the cart and didn't wander off.

"So what was life like, back in your time?" she seemed genuinely curious and not just looking for light conversation.

Thinking back I was overcome with nostalgia. The boring town with its life of repetition felt like the most beautiful gift imaginable now. "Oh it was quite marvelous. I worked on my dad's farm all day and sometimes played ball with my friend Claude. The farm felt so monotonous to me back then. But now, looking back it feels like a fantastic dream. We had plenty of oats, hemp, barley, and kale growing in the fields. Dad kept a couple of cows and a pig in the barn. I watched the seasons change... the flowers budding on the plum trees in spring, the hot sweat-filled days working the fields in the summer, the crisp autumn and the harvest parties. I remember the day that I finally purchased my velocipede, and how liberating it felt to be able to roll into town with no effort and without having to saddle the horse. Ah how I wish to be back in that time again.

"It sounds so quaint and peaceful." she mused. "All I can remember from before is my job working at InfiTek, dragging Vivian to day care, and a few quick hours with Johan, my husband at the end of the day. It seemed so stressful then, but compared to this life just focused on surviving another day why-" like the boy before, she trailed off without being able to form the words. It was clear that there were paragraphs of emotion hidden within that silence which was too horrible for verbage.

"But why is it that your days were so crowded? Weren't their neighbors who could look after your daughter?" I thought back to my own young days wandering through the forest to go catch tadpoles by the stream or playing cowboys and injuns with Claude.

"Rene, I'm afraid things here in town are a little different. Indar, who lived next door had to work swing shift and so he wasn't home half the day and Lucile worked as a stewardess. City jobs are just too time-consuming for that sort of thing."

"When the vehicle which we were loading was full, our group moved on along the giant river of bitumen. This variegated group to which I'd become a part was certainly holding spirits valiantly given the extraordinary conditions. I could imagine

people of my own time showing a greater degree of dejection from such a profound twist of fate.

Like the day before, a group went on ahead shortly before sunset and broke into a series of buildings which they thought would provide safety overnight. The one giving orders told us that since we were near a major city, we'd go underground because there were more of the skitters in the cities. As with the night previous, there were some scuffles from people who thought that they could escape by sleeping in my room. There were also a few forceful women who acted most unladylike. In the attempt to dispell the hostility, I spoke loudly to the group that since I hadn't disappeared the night before, there was no reason to believe that things would be different tonight.

Thankfully there were no explosive noises and we all were able to at last get some well earned rest and the land of dreams thankfully surrounded me in it's peaceful embrace.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rekindling The Past

I woke up grateful to see Cox and Ollie nearby. We were still in a basement, but this space was decidedly different. The first thing that I noticed was the smell. Where before the space had smelt stale and damp, this space felt less so. The next thing that I noticed was a faint hum. Not being of this time, I couldn't put a name to it, but the fact that there was a machine running caused me to hypothesize that we had in fact jumped to someplace new. What surprised me most of all though, was to see Elizabeth at the far side of the room. She had clearly been in a different room and I could not surmise why she was still with us. My stirring must have caused the woman to awake. She looked around her and immediately panicked.

"Where is Vivian?! Vivian! Baby where are you?!"

A door opened upstairs and footsteps quickly approached the stairs. But Elizabeth obviously didn't notice. She was in a near panicked state searching for her daughter.

"Oh my GOD! How could she not be here?!" The panic in her voice drew like a vice on my heart as I slowly realized that her own flesh and blood was forever gone.

"Now what in the name of Jesus is going on here?!"

In the dim light I could only see a female form in a bathrobe and some kind of stick in her hand. A moment later I was

blinded by a fierce light which glowed like an artificial sun and I reflexively put my hand up to shield my face.

“If you think you’re gonna find yerself some drug money, today sure as hell aint your day. I’ll warn you just once that I’ve been studying Ikido for 8 years.”

“Madam,” I could barely see and kept my hand up to shade my eyes, “I assure you that we mean no harm and have no ill intention within this space.”

The painful light left me blinded to her reaction, but I heard Mr. Cox use his best diplomacy as well. “Ma’am. What my friend here is trying to say is that we did not intend to find ourselves in this space-”

“You got a gun on you! I can see it.” In only a split second she was thrashing her wand at Cox and a frightening scuffle ensued. Cox was an impressive fighter and I was afraid he might hurt the woman. But it quickly became clear to my amazement that the woman was the more skilled combatant. I heard the gun get knocked across the room and she deftly batted aside every punch and hook that he threw. She had him on the floor in the space of a few moments and even though he pulled out of it, she knocked the wind out of him when she hit her elbow hard into his stomach. I feared what she would do to the rest of us when an explosion ripped my eardrums and I for an instant thought I

was about to find myself in the heavenly realm. But it was only my hearing which was impaired.

Visually, everything continued on. I carefully looked over to see Elizabeth holding a frighteningly large revolver which was leading smoke from it's muzzle. I looked back and saw the woman standing statue-like and staring at us in utter befuddlement.

"Now you listen carefully. We absolutely are NOT here to hurt you or anyone else!"

I was impressed by the strength of her voice. "I honestly have no idea how we arrived here, but it was not by any means voluntary. My own sweet daughter Vivian is missing and I have no idea where in the world she is. As for how we got here, you can ask Mr. Twilight Zone over here, cause it don't make a lick 'o sense to me. Now I'm gonna give you till the count of three to put that damned stick down so's we can talk like regular folks, okay?"

With some relief I watched the woman slowly and with obvious reluctance drop the stick and with a motion from Elizabeth, I went to check on Cox.

The man's breath was shallow, but with some light slaps to the face, he came around in a few moments.

"Damn it's been a long time since someone beat me like that." he labored to get the words out and I put a finger to his lips to encourage him to let his body rest. I could see bruises already forming on his cheeks and arms.

I next checked on Ollie, thinking that the young boy shouldn't have to be exposed to such violence at this early stage in his life.

"And you Ollie, are you okay?" The boy was shaking, and it was unclear to me why. He spoke slowly at first, in a voice just above a whisper.

"The last time I heard a gunshot that close, it was my brother. He got shot right through the eye. He shot at the dome and... they... they tried to save him, there was just so much blood, I-" The boy began sobbing and I put his head on my shoulder.

"So are you gonna at least tell me where the hell you came from?" The woman asked, her voice dripping with venom.

At first I shot her an evil look, but then I realized that she hadn't heard what the boy had been saying. So I let Elizabeth tell the story while I consoled Ollie. With the multiple repetitions it became more fantastical such that I had to give a number of corrections to keep the tale from sounding overly exaggerated. As the story went on, I could see the woman's eyes narrow into slits.

“And you expect me to believe a story like that?” she looked at Cox, “You came from some town where a dome keeps everyone from leaving?” She then turned to look at Elizabeth. “And you came from a world where humanity is fighting a bunch of killer aliens?” finally she looked at me, “and you traveled here from some point in the 19th century? It sounds like some cheap dime-store novel.”

As she spoke, I scoured my mind for some way to assuage her doubts. Finally I dug into my pocket and tossed a coin towards her. She caught it in mid air, she was that deft.

After several seconds studying it her eyes grew wide in awe. “United Province of Canada? 1861?! That’s unbelievable! How in the world could you come across this?”

“Madam, I very much wish I knew what has happened. You can believe me that I wish for nothing else but to be back on my farm at home.”

“All right, all right. I guess I believe you, god knows there’s more than enough crazy shit going on here to make me think we are in some kind of Twilight Zone.” She motioned to Elizabeth, “You can put the gun down lady. I wont go attacking that hunky man of yours.”

“Hunky ma-?!” she looked ready to go shoot the woman now regardless of the consequences. So I let go of Ollie and quickly

went to her side and pushed her arm down with a gentle shooshing. I rubbed her back and told her we could all talk through the situation calmly upstairs.

As the four of us hiked up the stairs, I could still feel the tension sparking between the two women. It seemed clear to me that I would have to be regularly on my feet to aid in diplomatic relations.

"I'll make us some coffee." she growled, as she rummaged in a cabinet and frowned. Seeing her now in the light, I was faced with a woman perhaps 12 years my senior with just a dusting of grey in her thick curled hair. The woman had a stout frame with skin the color of a Spaniard or an Italian.

"All's I got is decaf. Is that okay?" Despite her words, her expression wasn't the least apologetic.

Elizabeth answered for us. "Miss, we've been eating cold and tasteless oatmeal for over a year and I don't think I could remember what coffee even smells like. The thought of hot coffee of any kind would be like a dream come true."

As she passed out mugs to the four of us (with some hot chocolate for Ollie), I relished the smell of the coffee.

Looking at Elizabeth, I inquired as to how she could have joined us. "I have no doubt that you would have died yourself rather than be separated from Vivian."

With tears again forming in her eyes she answered. "You're goddamned right about that. What on earth can I do René?! My poor sweet Vivian is in that horrid world all by herself. If those skitters get to her-"

None of us were willing to breach that subject. But Cox and I each took one of her hands and offered what moral support we could.

"So you're sayin this guy just yanks random people with him when he falls asleep and y'all end up in another place? That's got to be the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

"No no. It's not like that. René doesn't seem to have any control over it." Elizabeth looked at me closer. "You don't, do you?"

"My dear Elizabeth, I would swear on the grave of my mother that I have absolutely no control over when I travel, where to, or how wide the circle extends. I assure you that I would never do anything so heinous as to separate you from your lovely daughter. Perhaps you just happened to be sleeping close to a common wall between us."

"Well yes, I think we were, but I had no idea that I'd get 'snatched off along with you.

And Vivian well-" After a moment she sat bolt upright. "I heard her say something about the bathroom. I was half-asleep

and it didn't register. But that must've been when we jumped, or... or whatever the hell you call it. It's all just so fucking confusing."

She began sobbing again and I moved to hold her hand once more. "I know how you feel my dear lady. Unfortunately all that I can offer you is my utmost sympathy for separating you from your precious little girl."

Still nursing his bruises, Cox showed his military training by shifting his focus toward assessing our situation. "So now that you know our story, can you tell us who you are, and where... or when this is?" he waved his arm around.

Looking confused at first, she soon answered. "Oh sure. My name's Monique. I work for Jurassic Park Industries. We're spearheading a whole new field of DNA re-sequencing. We've been able to study a few extinct species of Jurassic and Cretaceous plants and animals and bring them back to life."

"Excuse me my ignorance, but what do you mean by Cretaceous animals?" I inquired.

The woman showed great patience with me. But it was Ollie who answered for her. "She means dinosaurs!" he shouted out. "Right?!"

"Yes that's right." She beamed with pride. "Along with the tree ferns and some early turtles, we have several species of

dinosaurs. It's an enormous undertaking which is pushing the limits of science as we know it. As for where, well you're on Manitoulin Island near Sudbury."

"That's incredible! We're going to see real live dinosaurs!" It was gratifying to see Ollie so excited and it took his mind off of the horrors we had all suffered through. For that matter, it seemed to have a similar effect on Elizabeth as well."

"I can't show you too much given that the park isn't open to the public yet. But I can show you a couple of the species that we've succeeded in bringing back."

After we all had a pleasant cup of coffee and some eggs for breakfast, Monique took us in her automotive vehicle around the island's one road. We passed tall hedges and tree ferns the likes of which I'd never seen in any book of biology. But the most amazing sight was the first of these 'dinosaurs' themselves. The enclosure that we passed by initially was not very robust. There were thick hedges and an iron gate behind which stood a creature about 2 meters long and 1 meter tall with thick bony plates covering its back. The creature barely registered us as it munched away on some ferns and shrubs behind the gate.

Monique informed us that the creature was slow moving and vegetarian, but that the armor was for defense against some very nasty creatures who would want to eat it.

“It’s called a Minmi from the order of Ornithischia. This is the largest creature we’ve grown so far and it’s apparently adjusting nicely. We only have a few square kilometers on this island, so we have to limit the size of what we develop. But if the funding comes through, we hope to bring back larger creatures on a more spread-out island.”

The next enclosure we passed showed a strange bird-like animal. It was almost as large as the last dinosaur and walked on powerful looking hind legs. It’s shorter front limbs sported long and intimidating claws which it was using to rip some tough-looking branches from the trunk of a tree. The creature had a strange covering that was not quite feathers, but did have a similarity to such. It almost resembled the down on young chickens. The creature’s long neck weaved back and forth and it supported a head with a beak not unlike a modern parrot’s.

As we got close enough to the gate, the creature looked up and scampered off into the underbrush, it’s thick tail swaying opposite it’s neck.

“This one is a Neimongosaurus which is considered to be among the strangest dinosaurs for it’s combination of anatomical

features. The fossils were found in Northern China about 50 years ago and paleontologists have been struggling ever since to grasp a clear idea of what this species looked like... that is until now." Her broad grin belied the thrill that it gave her to show off this profound science.

"Madam, are you telling me that these creatures were once living here on the land, and then something happened which caused them all to die off? This contradicts everything that our science as well as the bible has taught us."

"Well, I aint gonna have a theological discussion with you. Believe whatever the hell you want. But the bones of these animals were dated to about 90 million years ago... give or take a few hundred-thousand.

"So did they die in the great flood?"

"Look buddy, after lengthy discussion with our board of directors, we came to the agreement that we aint gonna discuss religion. You wanna believe some man in the sky did this? That's your thing."

Elizabeth thankfully offered to elaborate in Monique's stead. "René, a huge number of scientific discoveries were made in the last century which disputed the literal interpretation of the bible as you were taught. Charles Darwin was the first, but many more astronomers, archaeologists, and geologists have

made further contradictory finds. In this case, there was the discovery of a gigantic crater in southern Mexico which could only have been made by a really huge meteor... um, a large piece of rock that regularly flies through the heavens. It must have ended up on a collision course with the Earth and it caused enough climate upheaval to kill off nearly every living thing. That's believed to have happened 65 million years ago. Then over the course of a few thousand years, life began growing again bit by bit."

After looking at several of the dinosaur pens, my mind felt overloaded by the sheer magnitude of what I was hearing. All life in the entire world was destroyed, like in the flood, and simply grew back on it's own? Now in this impossible future, they had been able to take biological information from these long dead animals and re-create the species. It was the most phenomenal work of science which Man could ever conceive.

"I must say Elizabeth, as much as I value you as a person, this story is quite difficult to digest. How and why could the teachings of every church in the land be wrong? Weren't they inspired by God?"

"René, religion has always been a difficult subject to discuss because it's based on belief." She pointed over at Monique who was sitting in the drivers seat with her head in her hands as if

in mourning. “Lots of people like her get frustrated trying to bring science to the minds of people who have been indoctrinated by the church. The people in our era, at least those who are educated, can see that the bible is not a literal account of history.

Different people have different ideas of it’s meaning which is a longer discussion, but for the time being try to understand that in order for a theory to be accepted as fact, it has to be agreed on by many different experts in that field. We have a great deal more tools now to help us understand the world then those who taught religious doctrine a hundred years ago.”

Elizabeth’s words were decidedly disquieting. Not that I ever held a deep level of faith in the church, however I always assumed that my teacher would not be placed in her position of authority if her knowledge was inaccurate.

“Elizabeth, I do recognize your education. My dear friend Claude was a great fan of Darwin’s work. But as you say, a theory has to be accepted by many people for it to bear legitimacy. In only the region of Upper Canada, the bible and the great flood were undisputed even among academics-”

“Oh for the love of... Listen. You two want to keep talkin about magical white-bearded dude in the sky? I’ll drop you back at the house and,” she turned to Elizabeth, “you can spend the

next week if you like tryin ta yank this guy outa the 15th century."

"Madam, I am from the 19th century." I interjected with a mild and kindly tone.

"Yeah, well it coulda fooled me."

After the tour, we returned to Monique's house for lunch. The conversation was utterly incomprehensible to me, but apparently the rest of the group could follow along quite nicely leaving me once again to feel appallingly ignorant.

"-and the computer controls the gates to all of the pens. The fail safes are all well established. We've worked with Mr. Perdue, he's the owner of the island, to ensure that no carnivores are cloned. It's all very safe and controlled."

At this point I could see Mr. Cox deep in thought. "You know, Monique, that nature abhors a vacuum. Things always return to their natural state. Do you think that you can keep this level of technology under control on a larger scale? What happens if you get another island and want to clone brontosaurus, or, or a carnivore?"

The woman looked agitated, as is the way of the female sex. "Mr. Cox, I assure you that we've been studying all possible problems for many years now. It's simply impossible, with all of our safety measures, for any unforeseen problem to arise. I

understand that you're coming from some kind of sci-fi disaster world, but we really do have the issue completely under control."

"Madam, I am sure that Mr. Cox had no ill intentions towards your, um project. We are all deeply impressed with the level of advancement that you've attained here on the island."

My diplomacy having calmed the woman's mood somewhat, the rest of the conversation was more mellow, albeit with a remaining hint of underlying tension. Clearly the woman was easily agitated, and with her skills in combat I intended to watch the situation very carefully.

Monique had to spend the afternoon doing something called a 'video conference' which I decided not ask Mr. Cox to explain as he was clearly becoming impatient with my regular inquiries. On the other hand, we were given permission to wander around and explore the grounds on our own. As the woman commented 'it's a good 10 minute drive to get to any of the pens, so you three can't get into trouble.'

The surrounding countryside was like a strange mingling of ancient tree ferns, palm trees, some unusual evergreen trees with thick trunks, and more modern shrubs and grasses.

There were no animals that I could see, but many beautiful and exotic plants. It was a lovely day and I relished in the sense of peace and safety which had been sorely lacking recently. Off in

the distance, I saw a slightly overweight man running towards a vehicle which piqued my attention. I pointed it out to my companions, but Mr. Cox was the only one to take a keen interest. He watched the scene carefully and seemed to be analyzing it in some way.

The day went on uneventfully which was like a dream for the three of us and we relished in it like a long awaited hot bath (which we were also able to take in the evening).

Turning toward my companions, I made a decision. "My friends, I would like to ask you to wake me up every few hours when we all go to bed. With all of the strange and life-threatening situations we have endured, I believe that we would be wise to stay in this land with it's technology and 'fail safes.' I have not felt this relaxed since I left my own time and I have no guarantee that the next land which we pass through will be nearly as benign."

Sure thing Mr. René." Ollie was the first to agree. Mr. Cox however was less enthusiastic. "You realize that psychological studies have proven that human beings can't endure more than a few nights of sleeplessness before mental instability sets in."

"Excuse me good man. But as much it vexes you to be explaining these-

“Oh lord help me” he sighed. “Look all throughout the 1900s scientists were making more and more progress on understanding the mind. They got so good that they could predict how people react to all kinds of things- gunshots, a rose, television, etc. There was one study where someone was deprived of sleep and after 3-4 days began having visions of stuff that wasn’t really there, like a spider in his shoe. Simply put you can’t stay awake forever and stay sane.”

This was quite a conundrum to imagine. Whether, as Shakespeare told, to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to risk madness. The conversation was a deeply melancholy one for me. I wondered if the stress of changing environments and battling otherworldly creatures would be more dreadful than this madness brought on by lack of sleep. As it were though, Ollie was true to his word, and did in fact wake me every few hours using some kind of electrical sound device.

My plan worked well for a couple of days though I felt fatigued and more irritable than I would be under normal circumstances. I went downstairs after everyone else was already awake and with a long yawn joined my companions for breakfast. However they were involved in listening in on a muted conversation in the front room. Monique was talking with a

man in a formal suit whom I did not recognize and she soon brought him into the kitchen to address my companions.

“-can't believe he would do this! Cox, would you repeat what you saw to Philippe here? He seems to think that Bjorn would never betray the company and is totally trustworthy.”

After a brief pause, Cox repeated again what we'd seen that day. “There was a man in his early 40s, with thinning black hair. I'd say about 250lbs running at what looked like a fast pace, for him, towards one of the jeeps. He was carrying a small cooler which was releasing a subtle whisp of smoke as he ran.”

“By the stars, you were able to record all of that?” I exclaimed.

Then the new man interrupted. “If he had a cooler and he was coming from this facility, that could only mean that he was stealing genetic material. This is not good at all.” Looking at Mr. Cox he added “thank you Mister. You're attention to detail is most helpful.”

We all decided to keep away from the house during that day as the woman's tension, combined with my own could easily lead to disaster. Our walk was relaxing to my mind and I was finally feeling at ease again. Ollie stopped to look at one of the particularly unusual ferns when he slapped his calf and used language which I would normally have chastised him for.

“What is it Ollie?” Elizabeth was the first to notice his consternation.

“Damned bug bit me” he moaned.

“Make sure we get that bug!” Cox exclaimed, “If it’s not from this century, then we’ll have no idea what it could do to modern humans.

But try as we might, it was an impossible task. The only thing that I saw which looked like an insect was one of unusual mass jumping all the way to the top of a nearby tree in an impressive feat of physical prowess. I remembered it due to my thinking at the time that no insect lacking wings should be capable of traveling so high.

We immediately brought the boy to Monique in the hopes that she could alleviate our fears. However her grim expression brought the opposite emotion. “And you say that you saw a bug leap unusually high in the air?”

When I confirmed that this was true, her expression belied my dread. “The most likely candidate would be Saurophthirus, an ancestor of the modern flea.”

She sighed, “to be honest we have no idea what effect this would have on a modern human. If it had no other blood or disease in it’s system then he should be fine, but it would be best to get the boy to our lab and do some blood work.”

“So was this part of your enormous fail-safe procedure madam?” My irritability was finally beginning to supercede my tact. However the instant I saw her expression, I saw the error of my emotion.

“Listen- Mr. René.” she almost spat. “I did not invite you three here, and the project thus far has been running perfectly well. If you feel that the hospitality which I have unwillingly been forced to provide is beneath you, then you’re more then welcome to go and look for housing over in the city!”

The woman’s anger sparked my own anger and I was readying a volley of sharp rebuttals, however Elizabeth thankfully took charge of the discussion.

“Both of you! Regardless of our personal feelings, Ollie here could really use the advice of your experienced doctors as his color is already looking worse. There’s no question that you’re the most able person to figure out how serious the boy’s condition might be.”

Upon looking at Ollie, he did indeed appear noticeably paler and more lethargic, and I saw that Elizabeth was correct. The boy was of far more importance then our petty dispute.

We hurriedly brought Ollie into the back of Monique’s vehicle and she drove us to a nearby building. The place looked unimpressive from without. But as soon as we approached, the

doors opened sideways for us as if there were an invisible doorman.

If I hadn't been preoccupied with Ollie's health, I would have been completely overwhelmed by the technology of their facility. The place contained all types of equipment which would make any scientist of my day swoon. However even during the short trip to the building, our young friend became noticeably more devoid of color.

Monique gave a quick explanation to the nearest gentleman and there was a flurry of activity in short order. Someone stuck a sharp metal cylinder into the boy's arm and the device appeared to fill with blood. Two women then began peering through an advanced microscope and commenting to each other. With my limited schooling and the few books which I had been able to squirrel away, the language was well beyond me. The expressions however were more than enough to compensate and they gave me little cause for optimism.

"There's just no precedent for this. It looks similar to Plasmodium, but if this is from a flea then it would have to be a different variety. His pupils are already dilated and his white blood count is off the charts."

We were all asked to move into a conference room to allow the doctors to work unimpeded. In the meantime we spent what

time we could attempting to distract ourselves from the dire circumstances. I, being the farthest out of this time, was the most easily distracted by the plethora of modern marvels from overhead lamps which operated on that strange electricity to the magazines displaying faraway lands and inventions. Despite the chord of tension humming through the room, Mr. Cox and Elizabeth were kind enough to occasionally break their mindless staring to educate me on some of the marvels here. It seems that one of the greatest transformations came when a man named Faraday (who was known in my own time) made the connection between electricity and magnetism. His experiments were expanded upon by two men named Edison and Tesla. In addition the use of higher quality iron which was stronger for it's weight, allowed for all manner of developments from the automotive vehicles to buildings of unheard of scale. With the understanding of this 'electricity' along with the lighter and stronger metal on which to apply the electric force, a vast number of machines for convenience were developed over the past century.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Most Dangerous Prey

We had been sitting in the room for a couple of hours and I must have dozed off when a strange sound next to me caused me to stir. My sleep fogged mind only caught portions of the conversation until the sound of alarm jolted me upright.

“Bloody hell! Are you sure?”

“How in the fuck could something like this happen?! We have cameras on that thing 24 goddamn hours a day!”

“Well how in the hell should I know?! I’ve been waiting to hear word about that boy who managed to get measles from a 90 million year old flea.” There was a pause that my sleep fogged brain didn’t register before the voice continued “okay okay. I’ll be out there as fast as I can.”

I spied her getting her things together and putting a tiny device in her pocket. “Madam, is there anything that we can do to help? Is this about Ollie at all?”

Monique looked at me with fire in her eyes before she quickly exclaimed, “on top of your friend having the most absurdly poor luck in the world, we now have a half-eaten dinosaur to contend with.” She then stormed out of the room calling on Mr. Cox to join her. I could only look after them in abject

bewilderment and confusion. I could think of no words to describe my dismay. My expression must have told the story, for Elizabeth moved to the seat next to me and put her arm on my shoulder. That small act did make a difference to me and lessened my dismay. "Don't worry René, I'm sure that everything will be fine."

"Elizabeth, I apologize from the bottom of my heart for having put you in these bewildering circumstances. I continue to wonder for any of you if this existence is not worse than the lands from which you came."

"René, I can't possibly understand what it must be like for you coming from so far away and to be thrust into these adventures. I'm certain that you would never have meant for us to be taken with you on this journey. But despite the strangeness of our environment I'm grateful to have met you and Ollie, and Damien. I only wish that my dear Vivian could be here."

I put my hand on hers and looked into her eyes for a long moment. Under more pleasant circumstances I would be focused on the loveliness of her face. However in our present situation, the tension remained most dominant. "Do you have any idea what that conversation Monique had was all about?"

“It clearly sounded to me as if one of the dinosaurs had been found dead and partly eaten. What I can’t imagine is what could kill and eat a 2 meter long dinosaur?”

“Indeed. The thought of any creature that could do such a thing is most disturbing.”

We continued to wait in silence for a long while. Making conversation at this point was an uphill trek through a meter of snow. Instead I thought back to my dear friend Claude. I mentally backtracked through all of our conversations and boyhood games.

How we would play marbles on his front porch, chase the chickens, or run far out into the woods when nobody was watching. Despite my recent adventure seeking, it was Claude who was always the best tree climber and the most courageous with animals. If it hadn’t been for the industrial age, I suspect he would have found a worthy career in taming horses or tending cattle out on the prairie.

My thoughts were eventually interrupted by one of the doctors who came into the room with an expression of cautious optimism. “Your friend is a very tough lad. Although we’re not sure exactly what strain of virus he has, it seems that his body is fighting it well and he should be able to recover in a couple of

days. I want to warn you that there's no way to be certain until his white blood cells drop another 15%, but I think he's past the worst part now."

We both stood up from our chairs, but Elizabeth was half a moment ahead of me. "Thank you so very much. Is he well enough for us to see him?"

"I'm sorry miss. There's no telling how easily this can spread so we have him in quarantine. But he's resting soundly and you'll probably be able to visit him in the evening."

The gentleman returned to the boy and I held Elizabeth in a long embrace. Perhaps this situation would work itself out after all. Unfortunately our tender moment of relief was interrupted by a strange shrieking noise which began echoing through the hallways. "By all that is holy! What is that horrible noise!"

"Oh my god. I don't think I can take more of this craziness!" Elizabeth and I both had our hands instantly over our ears and our eyes clenched from the agony.

It was a mystery why this futuristic society with all of its advanced technology would allow for such obscene torture of the senses. I however barely had time to register this before we spied the same middle-aged doctor running in a panicked state down the hall and heard the humming of a motor followed by

the sound of a huge door closing. Shortly, Monique and Cox appeared and called for everyone to meet us back in the conference room.

“What in gods name happened out there?!”

“This better be a full on emergency” one of the doctors exclaimed. “I only just now managed to get that boy into a normal sleep.”

Everyone seemed to be talking at once and Mr. Cox quickly blow a loud whistle to quiet everyone down. He looked briefly at Monique who nodded before he addressed the whole of our group.

“I realize that this has been a stressful day, but it seems that our concern over Ollie’s well-being will have to take a back seat to the present situation. Monique and I drove out to the Neimongosaurus’ pen and found it laying half-eaten next to the open gate. Now understand that the gate can only be opened by a complex lever at each end. Nobody on this island would have any reason to let a dinosaur loose, and certainly wouldn’t be able to kill one. This leads me to our second discovery and the reason for tripping the alarm. While Monique studied the corpse to learn more about how it died, I saw another two-legged dinosaur approach with terrifying speed. I managed to scare the crap out of Monique in order to get her into the jeep,

and good thing too because we barely got the engine started when the beast approached-”

“It was an ‘Utahraptor’” our host interrupted. “This one was already taller than either of us. And it seemed to have no trouble whatsoever keeping pace with the jeep which means this facility is the only protection we have for the moment.”

Here now the questions flew like an explosion of geese. It was all but impossible to follow any specific comment. But in short order Monique’s voice rose like a train whistle above the cacophony.

“Look, I’m sure that none of us can practically imagine how a carnivore could have appeared on the island. That’s not the important issue. What’s most important for us now is ensuring that this building is secure, and pronto, because if it takes two people for the pens to be opened, then there must be at least that many raptors outside right now. These creatures seem to have an uncanny intelligence, so we need to be on our toes about how we deal with them.”

“And what do we have in the way of defensive weapons?” Cox, ever the military man, asked the most practical question.

“Mr. Cox, there are stun guns stowed in an emergency kit in the garage.” One of the employees who I hadn’t met was apparently a facilities manager.

“Thank you for that. But we found out the hard way that the garage door is not dinosaur-proof. So those weapons will be inaccessible.”

The collective gasp was almost audible with the dwindling comments. It seemed that in a single instant, everyone in the room gained a sobering clarity of our situation.

Being a skilled soldier, Cox thankfully managed to keep a cooler head than the rest of us. “Mister-.”

“LeMaire.” the man corrected.

“Mister LeMaire, is there a space in the building where we could secure ourselves with some degree of certainty?”

The man looked around hesitantly. “Well if it were any other species, I would say that the room which we’re in is fine. But this particular Dromaeosauridae was found to have an unusually large brain case and could quite possibly be as intelligent as the average dolphin, in which case door locks may not be enough to stop it. I would suggest that we move our equipment and Ollie down to the tornado shelter.”

By now Monique seemed to recover herself and took back the leadership role. “Okay, Cox you scout out the rooms and look for anything which you think we need either for defense, sustenance, or just general survival. Brandon, you and Baptiste do the best that you can to stabilize Ollie and I’ll help you get

him down to the shelter. Mr. LeMaire, can you show Elizabeth, René and the rest where to go?" The man nodded. "Great. Let's go!"

I immediately followed the older gentleman down two flights of stairs to a level with walls which appeared to be constructed of unusually large bricks. There were no windows and the lights felt uncomfortable to my eyes. I was about to enter the door which Mr. LeMaire led me to when I heard the most terrifying scream. The sound was cut off too quickly for me to have any optimism of the owner's fate.

"My lord. What could have happened to that woman?"

"May God have mercy on that poor girl's soul."

"Bloody hell. I've never heard such a terrifying sound in all my life." Elizabeth looked at LeMaire in horror.

I realized that the rest of our group was still out in the open with a man-eating lizard. So quickly, I ran inside to see if there was anything which could be of use for defense. Throwing my gaze swiftly among the clutter of the room, I found several large iron tubes which were amazingly light for their girth.

I left Elizabeth and LeMaire and walked in a terror-filled stupor down the hallway. It seems that there was a mechanical elevator in this building (the marvels never ceased) which would carry Ollie and the medical equipment. I waited tensely nearby

and nearly leapt out of my skin when I heard an electric chime and the doors opened. The two doctors emerged and pushed Ollie on a wheeled cart towards our shelter with me watching the rear. As we were halfway down the hall, the blood drained from my body at the sight of a giant lizard half a head taller than I and running towards us on two powerful legs. It's short forearms sported menacing claws and I felt the iron bar in my hand turn into a matchstick by comparison.

I heard the door to the shelter open and the struggling of the two men to safely escort Ollie through the doorway as I observed the creature slow and watch me carefully.

I made a determined yell and advanced bravely on the creature. The seconds stretched out like taffy as the distance between us closed and I could see the intelligence in it's eyes as it appeared to elect a strategy. I aimed the rod at it's throat and a split second before the bar would have made contact, the creature ducked and grabbed it with the skill of an advanced infantryman. I was clearly now at the last moments of my life when an enormous explosion ripped at my ears a second time.

I was stunned for a few moments before seeing the neck of the creature opened up by a large hole and Mr. Cox standing behind and above it. He looked at me severely and didn't give me an instant to thank him.

"You get the hell into that shelter and don't open the door unless you hear from me!"

"But what about Monique?" I stammered

She-" he never finished the statement, just turned and bounded away down the corridor. The shock still held me rooted in place when I heard Cox yell at me without turning his head.

"Get going!"

Finally released from my stupor, I wasted not another second and ran back to the room carefully locking the door behind me. The memory of staring the bizarrely intelligent creature in the eyes was repeating itself over and over in my mind and I most certainly would never look at a reptile the same way again.

"What in the world happened here?" The sound of a weak but all too familiar voice brought me from shock to joy in an instant.

"Ollie! You're awake!" I went to embrace him but found him to be wrapped in the most peculiar transparent fabric which crinkled when it moved.

"The boy took a long time to pull out, but he's fighting the virus nicely." Baptiste gave a brief and strained smile before motioning for me to speak with him and another woman in the corner. Elizabeth joined us as we moved to the farthest edge before the man continued.

"We have him stabilized for now. But he's not out of the woods yet. Without access to the lab, I cannot keep tabs on his vitals. So until we can get this... situation under control, I won't be able to give either of you a definite prognosis."

Elizabeth, having a firmer grasp on this modern science responded first. "So how do we get him back to the lab with two, or maybe more, man eating lizards roaming around?"

"One of them was shot dead by Mr. Cox, and he left to go after the other one." I provided with more optimism in my tone than I personally felt.

"So that was what I heard out there." The woman was shaking almost to the point of hysterics and Elizabeth put her arm around the woman's shoulder to help calm her.

She then looked at me seriously. "We should give him some help. It's absurd for us to just cower down here and leave him to the proverbial wolves."

"My dear madam." I was shocked that a member of the gentler sex could be so bold. "I attempted to strike one of these creatures and it fought me with the intelligence of a military soldier. Without firearms I cannot fathom a successful means of offense."

The discussion went on for some time with talk of different strategies and tactics. Finally when Mr. LeMaire joined us, he

helped us develop a plan of action which the others felt would have a chance of success. We left Ollie in the care of Brandon and carefully made our way down the hallway. I did not understand the technology of which they spoke, but I carried another iron pipe with me and did my best to hold back my inner terror while we moved towards the medical lab.

By the grace of God we made it unscathed and the two men went about fiddling around with tubes and that device which was used to withdraw blood. We were all startled by the sound of gunfire and when I ran to the door I spied Mr. Cox shooting at a corner of the hallway. I quietly whistled to him to join us in the lab.

“Another of those damned things is just down the hall and I can’t imagine I’ve got more than half a dozen bullets left.

Not fathoming how any revolver could fire more than a standard six-shooter, I refrained in requesting elaboration.

Baptiste filled him in on the plan. “Alright Damien, we think we have a plan to take out that raptor without having to kill it. I’ve rigged one of the CO2 tanks and connected it to this piece of medical tubing. We’ve filled a large veterinary syringe with the strongest sedative we have on hand. Since we don’t have anything to depress the plunger, I suggest that we carefully shoot it into the animal’s mouth.”

“That’s quite a genius plan. Sounds like something out of MacGyver.” There was a short pause before the conversation continued. “But you’re going to want a backup plan just in case. I’d suggest that René over here be stationed behind the door to smack the animal’s skull if this doesn’t work.”

At the sound of my name, I focused my attention more intently. “Gentleman, I fear that I do not understand the technology with which you plan to defeat this monster. But I believe that you underestimate the brute’s intelligence. I stared this animal in the eye and saw an uncanny level of intellect, easily on par with any sauvages.”

Baptiste stiffened slightly and replied, “Mr. René, we will later have to address your PC skills, but for the moment know that we’ll have the element of surprise, the creature will be distracted by us and our little, um sleep cannon.”

As we spoke, I saw Mr. Cox leap out the door and fire a couple of shots, ostensibly to slow the creature while everyone finished setting up. Then DeBois and Elizabeth worked to move a large tank with a cylinder attached in position before the door. Only a moment later Cox dashed through with the monster right behind him. As soon as the head of the monster appeared in the doorway, LeMaire fiddled with a nozzle and with a loud hiiss, I saw something shoot right at the monster’s mouth. I raised my

iron bar above the door and moved forward to attack its head, but I instantly saw that one eye follow me and it pulled quickly backward leaving my momentum to push me ungainly over the top of the door. Thankfully it was only my pride which was dashed, as I was not seriously injured from the fall. But then I saw the creature preparing to come back for an attack.

It moved forward and I saw those menacing front claws inch toward me in slow motion before the beast wavered a moment and fell to the floor.

Some unknown moments later I heard cheering and I found myself looking up at the group from the floor next to the monster.

“Oh René, that was amazing! It all worked flawlessly.” Elizabeth hugged me and even raised a blush on my face when she kissed my cheek.

Despite feeling none too thrilled at my second brush with death in a single day, I allowed myself to be helped off the floor and we all embraced each other again. After my experience with the dome and the ‘aliens’ I felt relieved to see this story end well for everyone involved. Even the dinosaur was merely asleep and would be put in a robust cage for study.

“Baptiste, Juan, can you help me get the restraint cage over here before this fellow wakes up?” LeMaire announced, “there’s no telling how long that sedative will hold him.”

After all the exertion and shock, Cox, Elizabeth, and I collapsed into some flimsy looking chairs which didn’t look comfortable enough for 10 minutes but which felt like a feather bed in that moment. Instantly my will to resist the shroud of sleep disintegrated.

Chapter Twenty-Five Defiance

U*pon waking this time, it was not merely the change of scenery or the technology which was different, but the entire landscape. Even the flora and the shape of the land seemed strangely alien. We found ourselves in a small clearing, but the flatness of the ground was a singular oasis in a larger landscape which consisted of rock that seemed to fold over itself in bizarre shapes. It felt as if The Lord himself had done a poor job of smoothing the wrinkles in an enormous quilt. The ground was dotted by enormous forms which looked like fungi. They were a deep auburn with small petal-like appendages. Beyond*

those were eerie plants whose shape resembled the ugly thorns of the Hawthorne but of a more brilliant color. I gazed all about in wonder, but almost immediately my analysis was cut short.

“Ollie! Oh my god, we lost Ollie!” I was jolted out of my observations by Elizabeth’s cries of despair.

“Mr. Cox, can you spot the boy anywhere?” I joined my companions in searching the area for as far as we could see, but without any reward.

“I’ve got to admit that it’s likely we jumped without him. The boy sadly enough was still in the basement level of that science facility.” Though clearly grief-stricken, the man showed little outward emotion. He merely held Elizabeth in a close embrace and comforted her as well as he could.

“We’ve got to go back for him! René, for the love of god, we must!” She cried heartfelt tears of an agony which I shared no small amount.

“My dear woman. You know that I am as stricken at losing him as you are. If I knew of any way in the world to go back, please believe me that I would return all of us to our homes.”

She looked into my eyes and seemed able to focus again. “No René. You’ve seen the hell in which all of us were living, and I can only imagine what it was like for Ollie and Damien. I’m

sure that he's better off where he is. Besides those terrible lizards are no longer a threat."

I embraced her and offered what support I could. It occurred to me that she was likely crying as much for her own daughter as for Ollie. Much as I might try, no man fully empathize with the bond that mothers have with the children in their lives, and what it must be like to see that bond dissolved.

It took a long while before our grieving was fully spent, but we managed eventually to help Elizabeth to a rock where we could sit and assess our new surroundings.

Sadly there was not a single fragment of familiarity. I was amazed by the incongruous flora which grew around us. There were enormous structures which looked almost crystalline, and yet they branched out in the same way that a shrub would. Another fascinating plant could easily be mistaken for a rock face by the untrained eye, but closer observation showed it to be an intertwining plant like that of a thick tree trunk but with no leaves that I could visualize.

"Damien, what do you think of the fact that there are no structures of any kind here?" Elizabeth's surveillance was commanding in that neither of us had grasped that crucial observation ourselves.

“It does seem quite strange. It feels as if we’re not on the Earth at all.”

“Seriously Mr. Cox?! Could we have actually left our own world entirely?”

The man looked back at me with a mixture of consternation and confusion. “I don’t know why you’re asking me. You’re the one who seems to launch us from place to place seemingly at random.”

I was about to offer a heated retort, when a dust cloud in the distance caught my eye. “Cox, Elizabeth! I see movement. At least there appear to be inhabitants on this bizarre land.

We all watched anxiously as the cloud moved closer and veered towards us. As the vehicles became distinguishable, I began to feel uneasy. The lead vehicle was similar to the automobiles we saw, but the wheels sat out away from the cabin giving it a more insect-like appearance. Alongside were several two-wheeled bicycle machines with similarly loud motors like the ones we had seen in the land of aliens.

“Good god, it looks like that bunch is straight outa Mad Max.” Cox watched the vehicles cautiously.

“Mad what?” I felt constantly at a disadvantage with my companions, and it caused me no small amount of consternation.

“Never mind.” He answered with obvious frustration. “It’s too late to run, and we’ll unquestionably be out-gunned.” Pausing for a minute to look around, I saw a glint appear in his eye. He handed his pistol to Elizabeth. “René, you and Elizabeth go find a place to hide out. If you get an opportunity, hit one of them in the arm or shoulder so they can’t shoot back. We’ll only use force if we absolutely have to.”

The two of us quickly obeyed. I could see that Elizabeth felt uncomfortable, most likely from being the one to go out of sight. But clearly Mr. Cox was the most experienced tactician.

I stared out from beneath a strange shrub and watched the vehicles get closer. They were all clearly weathered from heavy use. The four-wheeled vehicle had a metal structure on top which carried several tanks, whether for fuel or water I was unsure. They quickly drove in and surrounded Cox before leaving the vehicles. The man ostensibly in charge spoke in a commanding voice. “Scrazi benha quo ma tita yowu ganba!”

The shout was unintelligible to me, but the intent was not. They had Mr. Cox surrounded and the largest one spoke again.

“Nissyun nadrilla.”

For a moment, nothing happened. But then the words were repeated, not in French, but in English.

“Empty, de pak!”

The 'man,' at least he resembled a man, wore a large animal fur over his shoulders which was bright green in color and a handsome leather piece around the back of his neck. But the most peculiar thing was a gentleman's top hat that he wore on his head. I watched in despair as they looked through my saddlebags and threw the contents randomly about on the ground.

"O cragge shosho. Shtako! Ee jya no bedilla wadi namyee."

Now I saw the man raise his gun at Mr. Cox. I pulled out Cox's hunting knife in the same instant, but paused for half a second knowing that Elizabeth had multiple shots whereas I had only one chance. Barely an instant later I heard the report and saw the man scream in agony as he held his arm. I quickly threw my knife into the leg of another woman who seemed to be the second in command. The woman raised an enormous looking pistol and I got a better look at her face.

She looked human, mostly. However the bridge of her nose was much wider than a human's and there were dark rings all around her eyes. The effect made her nose and eyes look larger than a human's would. Those eyes of hers searched for me, but then I saw them grow wide in what looked surprisingly like abject fear.

"Saiketto! Saiketto. Djuma lila bidjuto cetilla!" She grabbed at the man next to her and pointed off in the distance behind me.

The woman's companions followed her gaze and developed similar expressions of fright. The group scrambled back to their vehicles and I saw the large man speak something close to Mr. Cox before rushing off to the four-wheeled vehicle. They then drove off in an obvious hurry.

I heard a sound which resembled a far off storm, there were impacts in the distance which were louder and larger than any hailstorm which I had experienced. I ran over to Mr. Cox and asked him what it was that the being had said to him.

He looked at me with a mixture of awe and fear. "He said that there was no need to kill us, the razor rain would do that quickly enough."

"What is a razor rain?" Elizabeth was checking to see if he was alright.

"I don't know dear lady, but I suspect that the destruction over in the distance will answer your question sooner than we would like.

Cox looked around wildly. "That rock outcropping. Run for that!"

It looked terribly far. At least 90 meters if it was a one. But there was no other obvious protection. We ran as quickly as our legs would carry us and huddled beneath the meager shelter offered by the overhanging stone formation.

Beyond, we heard large impacts all over the land. It felt as if some malevolent god was hurling boulders or bricks at the ground from an impossible height. The whole of heaven seemed to be bombarding us. For myself, I found the experience almost as terrifying as the dinosaurs had been.

A horrific shriek jerked me out of my thoughts. I saw Elizabeth grasp her leg and grimace in severe agony. "Elizabeth!" Cox and I both exclaimed in unison.

"Are you alright dear lady?"

Through gritted teeth she answered. "Sure René. I'm just peachy. A little chunk of steel poking out of my thigh is my favorite part of the day."

"Let me take a look at it." I modestly looked aside as Cox tore open the woman's trousers where the object had embedded itself. "Well you're lucky that it doesn't seem to have hit an artery. The bleeding isn't bad." He then took his knife and ripped a length from his shirt and wrapped it around the wound and around the woman's leg several times. "As soon as this reign of death is over, I'll go see if there's a stream or river nearby. I'd feel better removing this dagger where we can clean it out properly."

The woman showed great strength and merely continued to grit her teeth as we waited out the storm. I felt for her hand and offered what support I could, given our precarious situation.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, the shower of destruction began to move off into the distance. I watched the firestorm recede with painful sluggishness until finally we felt confident that it was safe to leave the protection of the rocks.

True to his word, Cox went out into the foreboding wilderness in search of water while I waited and comforted the lady.

“Elizabeth, how are you holding up?”

“Well, I wont kid you René. It hurts like a mother- but I’ll get by.”

“I am so deeply saddened to have put you in these dire circumstances.” I held her hand and offered what little support I could.

“Thank you René. I realize that it may sound as if we’re upset with you, but really it’s nothing personal. It’s just the... these crazy surroundings. We- ouch goddamnit!”

“We’re a team and we’ll stick together, you Damien and I. You are both men of impressive character and I’ve come to be impressed by you both.”

I was deeply moved by her words, despite the unladylike situation. It was, for myself as well, an enormous honor to have the woman’s company. However I also felt less than competent when compared with our soldier friend. “Elizabeth I deeply appreciate your kindness. However I wonder if your faith in me to protect your life isn’t somewhat overly trusting.”

Her expression seemed almost angry at that. “Oh hogwash René. Of all the people that I knew in my former life, you are a most honorable, gracious, and caring gentleman. Which if you haven’t realized it, is quite the exception among males of our modern time.”

I looked into her eyes and felt my stomach moving quite strangely. Not since Sherrie had I experienced these emotions. Still clearly in pain, she gripped my hand and I put my arm around her shoulder reassuringly.

“Hell, if that man doesn’t get back soon, I’m afraid you’ll have to just rip this thing out of me yourself.”

“Dear lady. I very much hope that our situation does not deteriorate to the point where I will be your only source of medical care.”

The time wore on and I was beginning to worry if Elizabeth's prediction might ring true. But by the grace of God I heard the distant sound of a vehicle approaching.

Initially my heart filled with dread as I imagined what would happen to us if those same rogue misfits were to return.

However as the vehicle closed in I saw that this one was distinctly different. It clearly resembled the large automotive machines, but on a scale all it's own. The drivers cab alone was over 2 meters long and behind it was a huge metal box with windows that stretched another 5 meters behind that. The beast was 4 meters tall with huge iron grates over the front window and metal panels covering the wheels. On top of the whole was a structure much like the other group's vehicle, with containers of liquid tied to it.

My feeling of dread evaporated when I saw Cox climb out of the vehicle and point to us. He was quickly followed by a short nègre man, a taller and darker man with a heavy build, and another being who's appearance was more difficult to describe. The being also resembled a human, but with no hair and with a reptilian skin of pale white coloring. The worry on the face of Cox and the two humans was not reflected in any obvious form upon this other one.

They all strode over to us and the being looked at Elizabeth's wound. "Well at least you know how to put a bandage on right." It then addressed the shorter man and Mr. Cox. "Get her up into the land yacht." The voice sounded vaguely female, but the words were slurred, as if the mouth were deformed or the mind inebriated by drink.

The two men carefully lifted her and carried the woman up an impossible looking ladder which simply folded out from the side of the vehicle. They set her down and we all climbed in after.

The truck lurched forward as we set off for an unknown destination and Cox introduced us to the other folks.

"René, this is Nolan, he's the acting constable in town, that fella there is Tommy LaSalle, the doctor is Yewll, and the nice man driving the land yacht is Jared." The driver waved a hand but didn't turn around. Despite my sense of gentility, I found myself unable to avoid staring at the reptilian being who sat watching over Elizabeth. Shortly the being addressed me with no lack of sarcasm. "Do I have horns growing out of my head or something?"

Words failed me as I continued to stare at the being. "I... I am sorry for my reaction. I've never seen a being like you before. What, um what exactly are you?"

The being gave an exaggerated sigh. "If you must know, I'm an Indogene. Have you spent your whole life under a rock?"

Cox answered for me. "No, just the last hour and a half."

"Very funny. Now when was the last time you three have been vaccinated?"

Not knowing what she meant, I looked to Mr. Cox who seemed equally perplexed. "Vaccinated against what?"

With the same exaggerated sigh, it replied, "Against the Irathian flu. For the love of Irzu, were you born yesterday?"

Rather than show agitation as I was certainly want to, Mr. Cox merely explained to them how we found ourselves in this land. Strangely, instead of expressing awe and amazement, the being merely continued to look at us with the same deadpan expression. It was left to the other two strangers to sit open-mouthed.

"So you're seriously telling me that you just, instantly appeared in this land shortly before the razor rain started? I hope you wont be surprised if I find that just a little bit hard to swallow." The taller constable held his fingers close to each other for emphasis.

Mr. Cox looked back at the man. "No harder to believe then a reptilian being with a mediocre bedside manner."

At this the shorter depute raised his arms. "Alright alright everyone. Clearly these folks don't know about our world, so why don't you all sit together and I'll fill you in while we get back to Defiance."

"Sir, what exactly is Defiance?" I asked, hoping that I wasn't taxing our hosts' patience too much.

The man quickly replied. "René, is it? I'll get to that. Late in 2014 Earth was visited by the Votan. They left thousands of years ago for Earth and were planning to terraform the planet, not knowing that an intelligent species had developed in the time since they'd departed."

"Excuse me, what is terraform?" I inquired.

"Cox responded instead. "I'll fill you in later. Go on Nolan."

"Anyway, they came to Earth and originally only settled in three colonies while the rest of their people remained in suspended animation on their ships. Several years passed and tensions came to a headway resulting in the Pale Wars which pitted the whole human population against the alien race. Some kind of accident happened on one of their ships-

"Yeah. An accident." the doctor wielded her sarcasm like a sword in constant defense of... what I couldn't imagine.

The man gave her a stern look before he continued. "Anyway, most of the alien ships were destroyed and the terraforming technology was chaotically unleashed on the planet.

Animals and plants were mutated, chasms opened up, and the whole landscape was radically altered. The old governments collapsed and instead of working to advance the frontiers of science and technology, both humans and Voltan were left to focus simply on survival."

"My god, so it really is like mad max out there!" As she said it, Elizabeth winced in pain when the vehicle shifted suddenly.

Cox was looking out the window and appeared as enraptured as I. "Yeah, except with half a dozen different aliens out there to boot."

"So I must ask of you, how much time has passed since... what did you say two thousand and fourteen?"

The man looked at me with some sympathy. "Well it's been 33 years now. Man, that must be pretty confusing for you. You probably never even saw the moon landing much less an intergalactic ship."

"Mr. Nolan, when I left home, the steamship and the locomotive were considered the pinnacle of modern technology."

"Wow. I can't imagine living like that."

As the conversation waned, I noticed that we had entered a strange looking settlement. There were few buildings of any appreciable size. The place bore a closer resemblance to the shanty towns which spring up in times of disparity. Most of the people seemed to be living in one or two-story structures which were haphazardly thrown together from scrap material. Unlike the nearly deserted streets of the other lands however, this town was filled with people browsing in shops or just walking the streets. 'People' being a very loose definition here. There were the beings with reptilian skin like the doctor had, slender people with white hair and skin like an albino, tall and intimidating beings with dark skin and faces which resembled some kind of ape, and a few people with the wide noses and orange hair like the vagrants who attacked us. It was a fantastic land filled with many impossible wonders.

We stopped in front of a small building and the doctor ushered us inside of a humble room. It was a most peculiar place with vines of some sort hanging from the ceiling and numerous shelves with various clear containers.

"Okay I need all three of you to have a seat here."

First the doctor removed the field dressing from Elizabeth and gave her some kind of medicine which seemed to dull the pain because he/she immediately removed the shard from her leg

without Elizabeth showing any discomfort. Next the doctor held up an object which looked like a thick writing implement with a glowing blue-white light at it's end. The skin smoked slightly as the doctor skillfully moved the tool around our friend's wound. I was amazed to see the wound close up to only a small bruise.

While she was working, I motioned for the depute to come closer. "Mr. LaSalle, I wonder how you can tell if these beings are male or female."

In the same sarcastic tone, the doctor answered my question instead. "This being is female, and she also has superior eyesight and hearing compared to you humans. So if you have further questions, you can show the courtesy of asking me directly."

"I apologize ma'am." was all that I could say in reply.

"Now each of you needs to be vaccinated against the Irathian flu before I can let you roam the town." She took a clear vial with an impossibly slender metal piece and jabbed us each in the neck. It was surprisingly painful, but I refused to show my race in an inferior light.

"Now I'm going to scan your eyes, ears, and reflexes." She held a peculiar tool which had dozens of filament-like elements sprouting from a rectangular handle. She held it up to each of

our eyes and there was a brief flash which left me momentarily blinded.

“Alright Nolan. They’re all finished up.” She looked directly at me. “I also appreciate prompt payment once you’ve found a job in town.”

“Yes ma’am.” Mr. Cox replied for our group.

As we walked out, I commented to Mr. Cox. “Damien, do you have any ideas for us to find a means of supporting ourselves while we’re here?”

Mr. LaSalle looked back at us as he was heading off to his rounds. “You could always talk to Rafe about working in the mines.”

“Well, as inglorious as it may sound, the work would allow us to integrate more easily.”

Even as I began to accept Elizabeth’s radical viewpoints, the idea of a lady wielding a pickaxe in a mine rang as blasphemous to my ears. “Elizabeth, I have come to respect and care for you very much. However I would not be a gentleman if I were to allow you to abuse your delicate features by working in a mine.”

As I feared, the woman was not at all flattered. “So when you say that you want to be a gentleman by keeping me from ‘abusing my features’ what you mean is that you think that it’s

man's work and not suited to my sex. Is that right? You know, a woman can still have value beyond just her looks dude."

"Dear Elizabeth. I truly wish you would..."

"Wish I would what? I would accept that it's okay for a man to rough and tumble with the guys in a mine or under the hood of a truck, but not a woman? Well you better get yer ass with the 20th. . . er 21st or whatever damn century this is cause we aint in the 1800s anymore!"

"Elizabeth. I can understand your emotional upheaval given all the struggle that we've been through. However I only care for your safety and well being."

"At this her cheeks became flush and she stabbed at the air with an accusatory finger. "Of all the misogynistic crap! You and I both know that's bullshit." Elizabeth surprised me with the intensity of her emotion. Clearly my predisposition towards Victorian ideals was running up against a radically transformed culture.

However her reaction still threw me for a loop. Thankfully, Cox butted in to dispel the tension. "Now now Elizabeth. We're all going to have to deal with some challenging ideas. René just lived in a different time when women were domestic and Native Americans were seen as inferior. He's having just as

much trouble transitioning to this century as we sometimes have with the beliefs of his time.

Cox looked askance at me. "Can't say that I blame her. The point is that everyone is considered to have equal rights to employment, education, and protection. Native Peoples are treated as citizens and some have even received reparations for the land that we stole-"

The Cox went on for some time educating me on the various revolutions in thinking for women, 'African-Canadians', native peoples, and the Irish. All of this was as astonishing to me as the technological changes. The idea that the sauvages of the frontier could be considered equal to regular Québécoise¹⁵ was a quite a radical notion. But then I thought of the speed with which the nègre girl had mastered my velocipede back home. My mind felt in turmoil from all of the adjustments within the span of only half a dozen generations. Seeing that I was overruled two to one, I looked for a means to change the subject.

"Okay. I hear what you're saying. Just understand that this is all a big adjustment for me. So for the moment why don't we focus on finding this 'Rafe' character?"

¹⁵ The term describing people of French Quebec origin

Cox echoed my thoughts as well. "Well, we only know three people in this place. The constable, his depute, and the doctor. Only the latter has an office a few steps from here."

We re-entered the building to find the doctor mixing some strange chemicals. "What now. I already gave you full pratique."

After some confused expressions she added. "You're all healthy."

"Doctor Yewll, if we are to provide you with compensation then we will need to work. Mr. Nolan suggested that we talk to a man named 'Rafe' about getting some work in the mines."

The doctor answered us in the same exasperated tone which seemed to be the trademark of her persona. "Go outside, take a left. Then when you get past the mayor's building, take a right and keep going to the end of the street. It's a nice old-fashioned building. Make you ancients feel right at home."

"We're much obliged madam." I answered for us.

"I'm sure you are."

As we left Mr. Cox spoke what we were all thinking. "Charming lady, I'm guessing she's the socialite of the community."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rare Kindness

As we walked through the town, I found myself relishing not only in the plethora of strange faces, but simply the experience of seeing people meandering in the street. Until this point I had not been fully conscious of how deeply the empty towns had been affecting me. Even the strangeness and poverty could not dispel the liveliness of the markets, the colors of the buildings, and the various dialogue coming from all around.

After some time we found the house of Rafe, which was surprisingly old in comparison to the town. There were plain glass windows and the exterior more homogeneous than the motley faces of the surrounding dwellings.

Elizabeth knocked on the door and we were greeted by an older man about 50 with strangely long hair and a corpulent figure. He looked us over with an expression of intelligent caution. Right away I could tell that the man was no fool.

“Yeah? What’da you folks want?”

As usual, I let Mr. Cox speak for us. “Are you Rafe?”

“I sure am. What can I do for you folks?”

Cox wisely wasted none of the man's time. "Sir. We've just found ourselves in your town unexpectedly and we're looking to get some work. I hear that you run the local mining operation."

Now the man examined us more carefully for several minutes. "Why don't you three come on inside."

We sat in a room which was clean and sparsely furnished. Most of the doors were built of iron and squeaked slightly from use. The furniture appeared to be wood but I later understood it to be some material called plastic.

"So you three want to work in my mines" he continued to eye us cautiously. "And what kind of experience do you have?"

"Well sir. I cannot speak for my companions, but I grew up working on my family's farm and I am no stranger to hard work, splitting firewood, mending fences, and taking care of the cows."

The man raised an eyebrow. "You mean before the Volge, right? Cause you sure don't look old enough to've been around 30 years ago. So what are you folks not telling me."

With a sigh I motioned for Cox to tell the story as the repetitions had become wearisome for me. Though the man remained expressionless, he was clearly intrigued.

“So you three just bounce around from one place to another without ever knowing how long you’ll be there?”

We all nodded.

“And I assume none of you have operated a mechanical rock drill.”

We shook our heads.

“Well now you must see the problem we have here. I could spend a week training you three, and all that effort would just disappear when you do.”

I was wholly disheartened as I saw the direction which this conversation was heading. But Cox was ever the resourceful character.

“Mr. Rafe. I admit that none of us have operated mining equipment. However I was a Colonel in the Army and spent years working on all types of vehicles from regular cars and pickups to helicopters and a few jets. I know an engine inside and out. I have no doubt that we can keep your vehicles working.”

I could see the man meditating on what Mr. Cox had said. Clearly he was a good hearted man who wanted to help us out.

“Alright, I’ll tell you what. You come down to the mine tomorrow morning and I’ll set you loose on one of the boring

machines that's been acting up. First day you work without pay, and if you do well, then we'll talk about getting you a salary."

"No pay?! For a full day's work? That's ridiculous!"

The man looked at Elizabeth with only the mildest of agitation. "So is the idea of hiring group of people I've never met that might disappear in a day or two."

"Sir. Your offer sounds like a thoroughly respectable one." I said in a sincere effort to repair the conversation. I gave Elizabeth a severe look to wordlessly discourage her from subverting our small chance at hospitality.

Cox was helpful enough to steer the conversation in a different heading. "Rafe, given the type of people we ran into out there, could you suggest a place where we can shelter down until tomorrow?"

"Let me guess, you got nothing here but the clothes on your backs, right?"

"Well, I did have the saddlebags from my bicycle machine and Cox had a supply pack, but that group of vagrants were in the process of consuming our supplies when the razor rain chased them away." I added.

“Iraths. You were probably better off dealing with the razor rain than with the likes of them.” He looked at a clock on the wall. “We should go get your stuff before someone or something else does. Then you can crash on the floor here.”

“Sir. I appreciate your generosity.” I meant the words one hundred percent. He seemed uncomfortable with the compliment. “Yeah well... I’ll expect you three to work that much harder. I’ll be leaving at 6 in the morning.”

We traveled in his automotive vehicle out of town and Cox directed him to the place where we had found ourselves (I could not fathom how in all the land he knew). The surroundings remained eerily bizarre as we reached the spot. Luckily for me the contents were strewn about, but nothing important appeared to be missing. I was loading the packs into the rear storage compartment when Cox called out to me.

“I think I hear something. Rafe, do you know what that sound is?”

I cupped my hand around my ear, but did not hear anything. But looking at Rafe, it was clear that he recognized something.

“Hellbugs! Everyone, in the car now!!”

I did not waste another second, but ran into the rear of the vehicle and saw through the window a most horrific sight. An enormous beast of some sort with no apparent eyes walking

insect-like on six legs. It had huge claws like that of a crustacean and it briefly opened a mouth which was circular and ringed around it's perimeter with jagged teeth. The vehicle shook as one of the enormous claws clamped down on it.

"Get down! All of you!" Rafe pulled out the same enormous pistol that I had seen one of the ruffians use and from it's point shot a blue flame of truly magnificent power. An entire claw of the creature simply melted from the blast and I now heard an agonizing shriek escape from it. The vehicle sped away and I watched the creature retreat hastily in the opposite direction.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this." I said.

"Yeah well. Like I said before, you owe me, big time."

As promised, we were all roused from slumber long before sunrise and made the trip with Rafe to the mines. If I were to assume that these were anything like the mines which I had imagined from descriptions in books, those beliefs were quickly tossed aside.

We entered an enormous hole in the side of a cliff. The hole led to a great cavern of a scale which would rival the train station in Montreal. The space we entered was larger then I could ever have imagined, with a grand ceiling arching out to the faraway walls. The uneven ground was littered here and there by a

multitude of strange machines which looked quite hellish. Most having great barbs or sharp pointed metal protrusions. I had little time to wonder however, as Rafe quickly directed our group towards a large yellow piece of equipment with a gigantic iron claw which terminated in a single cone-shaped tip covered in barbs. Cox began troubleshooting various possibilities with Elizabeth and I assisting him with tools or parts.

It took six hours, and we nearly dismantled the entire contraption before Cox discovered a part which he showed us was worn unevenly. By then we all felt very depleted.

We showed the man what was assumed to be the problem and he sounded at least a little impressed.

Rafe looked over the work. "Alright that's a halfway decent job. Put the thing back together and call it a day."

Clearly none of us were excited to keep working on the apparatus, however we also understood our position and I further emphasized that we would have to establish our trustworthiness among these people who knew nothing about us. Thus we spent another four hours putting the machine back together. Cox raised the claw high before turning another switch and the giant tip began rotating nicely. We all felt proud of our success and gratefully hitched a ride back into town.

Before going back to Mr. Rafe's house, I decided to take a walk through the town to once again relish in the vibrant street life here. The numerous improvised shops built with salvaged iron and cloth gave the town a great deal more character than the plain, unassuming facades of the other lands.

Here I saw merchants selling clothing, animal products, tools, even a few bicycle machines. However the most astonishing was the appearance of the people. The albinos, the orange-haired beings, the bearded midgets, everyone milled about with no discomfiture of the other 'aliens.' It was both strange and at the same time refreshing.

"Excuse me. I wonder if we could have a word."

A tall albino man spoke to me. He had the pure white hair, yellow colored eyes, and chalk-colored features which I had seen on a few other aliens. However this individual wore exceptionally well tailored clothing and held himself with a strong assurance that was quite rare in this place. Up close, he bore a strange resemblance to the vampyre of literary fiction. Behind him was an intimidating being well over 2 meters tall with an ape-like face who appeared to be a servant of some kind.

"Do I know you?" I asked

“Forgive me. I did not introduce myself. People in this town know me as Daytak Tar.”

“Well hello Mr. Tar. My name is René DeBois.”

“You can call me Daytak. I was nearby when you had an earlier conversation with your female companion, and I must say that I was intrigued. It was the impression of all of the people here that you humans subject your women to the same rigors, and dangers, which the males endure. I believe your species uses the term ‘egalitarian.’ So hearing you speak of the importance of females to remain at home and out of danger was- refreshing. In our culture, women are subservient to the head of the household.

Stature is dictated by the family one is born into, and respect for both family and tradition are the cornerstone of Castithan society.

“Excuse me, you said Castithan? Is that your nationality?”

The man’s expression showed unusual surprise. “So it’s true! You really are from the distant past. This is most exceptional.”

“Mr. Daytak, It may be incredible to you, but it is extremely disconcerting for me and my companions. We never know where we will end up, or how we will procure food or shelter. Thus far in this land we have been blessed to have gained work with a man named Rafe in the mines as an exchange for sustenance.”

“By Rayetso!” The alien showed an unusual degree of shock. “That man has you working in the mines? But you have so much to offer this town.” The man leaned in close to me, which was not a little disturbing. “I’ll tell you a secret that I expect you to keep quiet. I have plans to run for mayor of this town. And when I win, it would please me greatly if you would consider a position in my administration.”

This gave me pause. The man barely knew me, but he was willing to offer me a political appointment merely because we shared the same viewpoints regarding social customs. The conversation did not sit comfortably with me. But as I did not know who among these people were trustworthy and who were not, I stalled for time.

“I am very flattered Mr. Daytak. Truly your kindness is most generous. I would have to contemplate your offer before I could give you a definitive answer.”

“Of course, of course. Take all of the time that you need. Just consider it- an opportunity for advancement.”

With that he and his companion continued on their way. As for my trip, the experience left me with too much on my mind to focus on the street life. I returned to Rafe’s home and discretely asked about the Castithan man.

Rafe clearly had strong opinions on the matter. "Daytak Tar? I'd suggest you stay far away from him."

"The man seemed to to have admiration for me simply because I expressed a belief that women were best kept safe at home."

Rafe gave a loud 'harumph' before he replied. "Yeah, well that opinion aint gonna win you a lot of friends in this town. Our current mayor is a woman named Amanda."

"By the stars! The mayor even is a woman? How in the world could such a person hold a political position and also raise a family? Unless perhaps she's a spinster."

Rafe's face displayed a most unkind grimace as he answered.

"You want to be mighty careful about your opinion son. Amanda is quite a bit younger then I am, and a damned shrewd politician."

"Oh I see. You may not be familiar with the expression. Where I am from, a woman who has not become married and started a family by the time she's in her late twenties is considered to have few prospects for subsistence."

"Shtako! You're saying that our own human history was more barbaric then even the Castithans?!"

I feared that I was in danger of being blamed for merely expressing the opinions of the society I was raised in. "Sir. I

realize that these ideas are not popular in your modern world. However I did not invent the rules. The whole of Victorian society believed this."

"Yeah?" Now he leaned towards me with an intimidating expression. "And what about you. Just what do YOU believe?"

"Honestly sir. I had grown to believe what the rest of my society believed. But now, now that I've been blessed to have Elizabeth as a traveling companion, and to see all of these worlds where women can shoot a pistol, and drive a motor vehicle, and even hold a political position. Well it certainly makes a man reconsider many things."

"Well it sure as shtako better. Cause your not gonna make any friends in this town with those antiquated ideas."

The entire conversation was giving me a great deal to meditate upon. Clearly the social norms of my childhood had been radically transformed. How could it be possible that so many enormous changes could happen in less than two centuries? I thought back to the two centuries before my own time and was aware of the barest ripple in the great tide of Man's progress. There was the United States' breakaway from British rule, the ever increasing progress to quell the savages. Trading posts which became protected by military forts which then expanded into towns. But through it all we had our horses, our farms,

and our ships bringing supplies from Europe. What could have created this huge rift during the 20th century? I was at a loss, and felt too tired at the moment for greater discussion on the subject.

“Mr. Rafe, I think that it would be helpful for me to have some time to think about all of this. Can you tell me where my companions can be found?”

The man gave a dismissing nod. “Oh, they hit the sack early. They’re up in the spare bedroom.”

“Thank you sir. I believe that I will retire as well. I will certainly give a great deal of thought to what you have told me tonight.”

“Yeah? Well then maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Out of the Frying Pan

T*he sound of large rumbling vehicles must have brought me out of my slumber. I looked around and saw an empty house of a more standard construction than the odd environment*

within Mr. Rafe's. However the house was unlit and I could barely make out Elizabeth and Mr. Cox's shadowy forms.

I boded my time while I waited for my companions to awake. When they did, I conversed with them about our new surroundings. We were in what I learned was a typical suburban house with the same perfectly straight walls and exquisite furniture of most twentieth century dwellings. Outside we heard what I was told were large tractor trailers driving by. I peaked out the window and saw other four-wheeled vehicles with no roofs traveling by. I motioned Cox over next to me. "Were these the vehicles which you described in Persia?"

The man studied the view for a moment before replying. "Naw. Those are older. They're military jeeps. Same meaning though. What's puzzling is why they'd be driving around a suburban town." At one point a brilliant light pierced the night sky and its beam swept in our direction. I was indelicately yanked down to the floor before remark of surprise could even escape my lips.

"I don't know who that is. But I'd feel better if we met up with this kind of firepower under our own terms."

I could immediately see the wisdom of his statement, as the sheer volume of machinery seemed to dwarf all that we had seen in the other lands.

We watched the vehicles pass down the street for a long while before the cacophony dissipated. Cox instructed us to stay where we were and carefully went to the opposite side of the house to have a look. In the meantime I continued watching through the window to see if I could discern anything of value from the landscape beyond.

I almost yelled in surprise when the door opened and four young boys walked casually through.

“This crib should be a’ight to sit tight for awhile.” one of them said.

My mind was in turmoil. I didn’t want to startle them into running or yelling as the former would leave us once again in ignorance of our surroundings and the latter could alert the military. But I had to act fast in case the surprise caused Elizabeth to scream or compromise our undiscovered position. To my surprise, however it was Elizabeth who responded most intelligently. She spoke in a loud whisper, “Don’t be alarmed. We are also hiding here and would like to know if you have an idea of what’s going on outside.”

Thankfully the boys were startled but neither yelled nor ran off. "Hey yo. Who're you then?"

We both slowly moved into the meager light shed by the waxing moon and held both our hands out. "My name is René."

"And I'm Elizabeth. We both found ourselves here just a little while ago. It's a long story. But we don't know where this is or what all these military vehicles are doing."

"We would be supremely grateful if you could share with us your knowledge of the situation here and perhaps we can collaborate." I added.

"Yo, that dude sounds whak. Where'dya think he's from?" one boy remarked in a language which was almost incomprehensible to me.

"No clue shawty."

Finally one of them addressed us. "You folks may talk weird, but you shur aint with them big guns. The thing is the brass out there is lookin for an alien. We saw the train crash, helped that thing skip out. It's one big, mean mofo."

"Yeah, it was like... major psycho."

I looked at Elizabeth in the hopes that she was able to comprehend this language. Thankfully I watched her reply with some assurance.

“Man, tha’s some cray shit goin on. If they’s anythin like the mad dawgs I seen, you best be prayin fer a miracle yo.”

“You fer real?! Tha’s certifiable sista.”

At that point Mr. Cox returned through the rear door which caused another round of startled surprise and cautious reassurance.”

“Okay so who are you kids?” he intoned

“Get real yo. We aint jess kids dawg. We be the only witnesses seen this whole gong show start out.”

The puzzled look on Cox’s face revealed that he was just as mystified by the language as I. “Okay. So do you want to tell us how all this happened?”

“Look yo. We was jus in the middle o’ that. Like I said, we saw this train runnin along ‘an a truck just sat itself in front. So they’s an alien on the train, flew the coop when the thing crashed. Then the big guns came in and rounded up the whole damn town into some kinda detention. But we got out and we’re goin ta rescue Joe’s main squeeze.”

“Yo man. She aint my main squeeze. She be a lady in distress an all, ya know?”

“Yea, like whatever dude.”

The whole interaction was giving me a headache to listen to. I surmised that I would have to obtain a translation from Elizabeth at a later time. I retired to another room and looked around for anything that could be useful. Unfortunately the technology was as foreign to me as the local dialect, leaving me in ignorance of what would be useful and what wasn't.

Sometime later I was summoned back and Elizabeth informed me of what was going on.

“René, it seems that we've arrived at a town with another monster alien. But this one is alone, so it couldn't be as dangerous as the ones from my own past. If the military was able to contain it once, they'll no doubt make sure to do it again. These boys watched as a train derailed which allowed the alien to escape. Their 'friend' is missing and they've escaped from some kind of military compound to go find her.

Just once, I wished that we could arrive in a time and place without killer aliens or monsters of some kind. I feared that the next time we land might put us face to face with the devil himself.

“Yo dude. These jacks sayin that you like, transported here from like, the stone age or somepin. Is you shittin us or is you fer reals?”

As much as we did want their assistance, the boys' talk was like a course wool shirt on a sunburned back. "Young man, your language is categorically incomprehensible to me and if you were living in my home town you'd be given thirty lashes for blaspheming like that."

"Duuuuddde. The guy really is ssuuuch an old-school cracker." The boy's expression changed. "Good sir. I hear that the words that we say make you uncomfortable and I would like to express my sincerest apologies for any offense to you."

"Well now. That's much bett-"

The boys' cackling laughter illustrated their vulgar sarcasm. I was not amused, and obviously neither were my companions.

"Listen kids." Cox spoke with compassionate authority. "If you want to go deal with this alien without our help, that's fine. We can just wait it out till Mr. Twilight Zone here falls asleep again."

Feeling already chafed by the kids' audacity, I was further disturbed by this term 'Mr. Twilight Zone', but felt that this was neither the time nor the place for internal squabbling. The boys could tell that they'd alienated a potential ally and were trying to figure out if it was worth their while to make restitution or not. I could see the uncertainty flow like a cloud across their faces. But in the end, their audacity won over.

“Yo dawg. We got mad skillz. We can take care o’ that thing.” With that they immediately departed out the door and into the night, abandoning hopes of gaining their valuable knowledge.

“So what should we do now?” Elizabeth appeared to hold up a resolute expression, however I could see the underlying tension in her face.

“Elizabeth, as much as I would like to offer positive news or a brilliant tactical plan, I’m afraid that the latter would be Mr. Cox’s specialty. I was in the process of looking to see what items would be useful to us, however your technology remains quite baffling. I for one have become quite fatigued by these numerous adventures and choose to wait out any monster by taking as many naps as possible.”

“Seriously?” Cox looked at me with incredulity. *“This town’s getting locked down by the military over some alien and you think that we can just wait it out?!”*

“Mr. Cox. I realize that you were a daring exemplar in the military. However I have no desire to be your standard-bearer this time. I for one have had more than enough adventures with supernatural adversaries of every make and variety, and I believe that Elizabeth would concur.”

One look at her face and I understood my error. I had put her in the position of choosing between the two of us. The woman’s

uncertainty was palpable. For several moments she stood silent, but then she looked at Cox. "What would you do then? Attack the military?"

Cox looked victorious as he replied. "Well we're obviously not going to defeat that much firepower on our own" he spent a few moments in quiet contemplation. "One thing I do know. If the military is looking to lock down the place, the longer we sit on our heels, the greater our chance of getting caught up in their net. We'll have to keep on the outskirts of this thing if we want to hold our autonomy."

"I like that thinking. René, I'd suggest that you pull some supplies from the fridge while we see what else is available here and then we'll all get outside the lockdown area."

Not having a viable alternative plan, I took the lady's advice and wandered into the kitchen. I reached the cold storage box and had actually put my fingers on the door of the 'refrigerator' when I felt the entire machine vibrate. A fraction of a second later I was flung back as the entire unit rushed out through the wall at a fantastic velocity. As I struggled to push myself back up, I stared at a huge gaping hole in the wall.

"What the hell happened here?!" Elizabeth and Cox came rushing into the room.

The moment of shock was instantly frozen on their faces. Not a word was spoken for a brief eternity.

“Okay, so how in the hell does a refrigerator get sucked out through the wall?!” She finally managed to blurt out.

“Ms. Elizabeth, I pray that you are not directing your inquiry at me.”

“Seriously, now I’ve seen everything. This goes beyond killer aliens and dinosaurs. This goes beyond... her words trailed off as there simply was no adequate verbage.

“Okay okay.” Cox took charge of the conversation. “So what do we know. First, we’re dealing with an alien. Second, this thing can somehow pull objects through a wall.

René, did you see any kind of hand or other appendage?”

Still dazed, I shook my head indicating that I didn’t.

“Okay, it can pull things through walls without physically handling them, wow.

And third, the local government is doing everything that it can to keep this thing quiet. Now do we have any idea of where the alien is hidden?”

The whole time that Mr. Cox had been speaking, I had been staring through the opening in the wall. Silhouetted dead center

in the hole was an iron tower of some kind... perhaps for some type of modern telegraph. I pointed this out to my companions.

"Hmm, okay. So our alien friend here is sucking equipment from all over town towards the radio tower, for what?"

"Damien, I think we'll have to make our way over there in order to find out."

"I completely agree Elizabeth."

Now the woman looked at me quizzically. "Seriously? Earlier you wanted to just wait around till we all shifted somewhere else." she moved over and smiled as she patted my abdomen.

"Your stomach doin your thinking for you?"

I was feeling not a little disparaged by her comment and replied in a not-so-friendly tone. "My lady. I think you would agree that when a machine as large as these 'refrigerators' gets yanked out of the wall with no entity physically grabbing it, then this is something worth investigation."

"Alright, René. Why don't you dig through the cabinets for some non refrigerated foodstuffs while we go on looking through the house for any tools or equipment that would be useful."

With no small amount of guilt, I browsed through the cabinets seeing an amazing plethora of canned foods with ornately colored labels. It was quite confusing as there seemed to be a

can of food of every variety from all points of the globe. Beans from the Spanish empire, fish from the Arctic, pasta ostensibly from the Mediterranean. The plethora of conveniences in these modern ages left me stupefied. Not knowing exactly what would be most useful, I took a box of 'energy bars' remembering Mr. Cox had offered them back in his time. Then I took some beans, a tin of fish, and a few other random cans.

I checked the faucet which thankfully worked and filled some containers of water. By the time I was finished, Mr. Cox returned with a knapsack full of supplies. We found a vehicle as dusk was falling and headed towards the tower. After climbing into the rear seat I soon found myself surrounded by supplies which greatly hindered my vision. This gave me little worry as I did not expect to see anything of note in the rapidly waning light. However this hypothesis was rendered moot after only a few minutes of travel, as I was quickly thrown forward when the vehicle came to a brisk halt.

I heard Elizabeth's scream, which was painfully loud in the enclosed space. Then I heard Cox yell, "Alright, everyone out-NOW. René, grab the supplies and drag them out the right side door."

I immediately complied and we all got out on the same side. There was an enormously frightening sound. It resembled the

growl of a large predator, yet of very low timbre and much higher volume.

“Mr. Cox, what in the world is going on?” As I said this, I went to peek over the vehicle.

“You keep your untrained civilian ass down!” His angry whispered command got me to move back out of sight like a bolt of lightning.

“Sorry about that René. I don’t want to risk either of you attracting the attention of that thing. What you didn’t see from back there is a bus laying on it’s side on the road. The driver’s window is splattered red, always a bad sign. There’s some kind of- I don’t know, creature on top of the bus and it’s occupied with some unknown attraction inside.”

“Damien, I hear screams from there. They sound young. We’ve got to help.”

Elizabeth, ever the humanitarian, seemed determined to throw us into the fire along with whatever unfortunate soul had been operating the vehicle.

I watched Mr. Cox lean towards her and speak kindly but very firmly. “Listen Elizabeth. I’m all for helping some folks in distress, hell it’s what I went into the military for to begin with. But we’re talking about some SERIOUSLY overwhelming

odds. Did you see that thing? It looks 3 meters tall for godsakes."

The light was dim, but the woman's words were harsh enough to compensate for her unlit face. "Alright fine. You stay here where it's safe and protect René. But I'm going in there to give those kids a hand, by myself if need be. René, hand me that backpack."

I was too stupefied to comply. Both from the shock of the events unfolding, the horrible sounds of gunfire, and the idea that a woman would be the first to march into battle against such depressing odds.

"Christ!" The backpack was snatched into the air and the woman marched off.

"If that alien thing doesn't kill her, remind me to do the job myself." With that Mr. Cox went out after her.

And thus did I end up party to the rescue of four young boys from a most fearsome and terrifying creature. The dim light actually accentuated the alien's already considerable portentousness. Thankfully, it seemed to be preoccupied by something near the front of the cavernous vehicle, leaving our goal some distance away on the opposite side. I stared in awe at the four legs which I saw on top, each of which was longer than an elephant and sported some strange type of claw where the

feet would be. I was thankful for our dark clothing as we hurried to close the distance to the back of the vehicle. It was then that I understood our friend's reaction. Through the glass panels I could see the four boys whom we'd spoken with earlier. They were somehow trapped and it was clearly just a matter of time before the monster reached them. Having breached one of the windows, Elizabeth was hurriedly removing glass and as we joined her the first of the boys got clear and the rest were close behind.

"Yo droogs les make tracks yo."

The moment I heard them speak I wondered if we had made a mistake and commented facetiously to Elizabeth. She gave me a playful slap in return before we made a rapid retreat back to our own vehicle. Seeing that the creature remained preoccupied, we watched in fascinated horror as the sound of gunfire began and grew at a panicked rate.

The creature resembled a cat struggling to pull a mouse out of its hole as we escaped back to the motor carriage that we had arrived in. Finally the gunfire stopped and I was at first relieved, until I heard a sickening scream before the creature lumbered off.

"Lord have mercy! I do not want to know what happened just now."

“Yo chiquita you totally saved our bacon.”

“Alright everyone, in the car. We’re getting our exonerated asses out of here.”

“Yo chuck, we’re ya be takin us? We gotta bail out Joe’s friend-crush.”

“Honky, shut up!”

“Listen now. We are going to the radio tower, that’s where we think that thing has it’s center of operations. What we do at that point... well I don’t know.”

As we traveled through town I heard gasps of awe from my companions, however with the four extra youths, my access to a viewpoint was now utterly gone.

When we came to a stop however, I was awe-struck by the sight of what appeared to be a tornado in slow motion. There were bits and pieces of hardware and machinery flying through the air as if they were individual birds. The whirling of items revolved in ever tighter circles coalescing upon the tower which was barely even visible beneath the expanding layers of iron.

“My god.”

“Daayyum. Tha’s off the heezy fosheezy.”

“Certifiable.”

I tore my own eyes away from the scene trying to figure out the strange language. But my eyes were quickly drawn to one peculiar sight. About 20 meters away was an enormous pile of fresh dirt behind a storage building. "Look, I would imagine that the creature has created a hiding space in that building."

"Why good sir. I believe that our 19th century friend has indeed discovered a clue. We should join him in the investigation." The boys began laughing uncontrollably.

"You lads have never learned respect for your elders it seems. I believe a few good whacks on your sitting area would change your mind."

"Ha. Tha shit's old-school dawg."

I was becoming quite short-tempered and grabbed hold of a conveniently located rake handle so as to teach the boys some honest discipline.

"René, that's just now how we do things anymore." Elizabeth gently pulled the stick from my grip.

"Truly Elizabeth? I've already accepted this outrageous technology, and have seen women such as yourself proving to be quite capable. But are you honestly going to tell me that children are no longer taught to respect their elders in this age?"

I heard rather than saw the sigh escape her lips, "René, it's a longer conversation that I would rather have when we aren't risking our lives. Just let me deal with it."

I could not understand how children who were raised without their mothers AND without the discipline of a belt could develop any manners whatsoever. And, it would seem, the behavior of the boys was validation of my beliefs. Soon, however I was distracted from the peculiarities of domestic child-rearing.

By the time I reached the building Mr. Cox was instructing the boys, with no small difficulty, on the practice of descending into a pit of at least 10 meters depth. When he finished, Mr. Cox scaled his way down brandishing his revolver. The boys followed, and Elizabeth and I came down last.

We found ourselves in an uncanny space with walls that tapered inward and upward brandishing rough claw marks along the whole of their surface.

"Man this be off the hizzle."

"Shhh." We want to get in here and scope the space out without being seen by the creature.

We carefully made our way through the space and ended up in a large cavern filled all over with human bodies covered in a cocoon-like substance. There was a dim and eerie light filtering

through from somewhere, however it was barely enough to see by.

“There she is! It’s Jen.” Joe ran over to one of the cocoons, but he never made it there. Less than 2 meters from his ‘friend’ the boy was plucked up high in the air by the enormous creature. It was difficult to see in the light, but it was indeed more than 4 meters tall with what looked like four ‘legs’ and two appendages sprouting from it’s neck. It gave that frightful scream again which was all the more intimidating in the enclosed space. Then it brought it’s head close to the boy, and seemed to be giving the youth a thorough examination.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alien Authority

T*he creature’s ‘examination’ of Joe was interrupted by a brilliant beam of light streaming through the cavern. Despite shutting my eyes, the light burned brightly enough to leave a painful after-image. When I was at last able to see again, I was devastated to notice that whatever weapon it was (I assume it was a weapon as the light resembled what Rafe had used against the Hell Bugs) had entirely missed it’s mark.*

However the monster was distracted enough to buy us a few more precious moments at least.

Underneath a lamp which suddenly lit up the small area around us, was a sight which would have seemed absurd if it weren't for the fact that every sight appeared preposterous. Two men stood at the entrance wearing black three-piece suits. One of them was a middle-aged man with a widows peak and the other was a younger black man with short hair. Both were carrying devices that looked like extremely large shotguns but with a polished surface and three barrels.

"Your visit on Earth is over. Hold out your appendages where we can see them." The middle aged man spoke as if he were a Mountie with the authority to imprison such an enormous creature.

The creature gave out more of it's frightful shrieks. Then to my amazement, the middle-aged man opened his mouth and a similarly disturbing group of sounds emerged.

The exchange made me press my palms over my ears to protect my hearing until finally, after a time, the exchange ended.

Then the black man addressed our group, he had an accent that sounded American but I couldn't be sure. "It's okay. She wont hurt you. She's just scared that you're in collaboration with the

military unit who had her locked up. You can go now. We'll make sure that she gets home safely.

As suddenly as the adventure had begun, we found ourselves surrounded by increasing numbers of dazed but otherwise unharmed townspeople.

The whole group of formerly imprisoned souls, including Joe, looked in fearful awe at the creature.

The older man gave instructions to the group to each make our way back to the entrance and to wait there. While we walked, I noticed with no surprise, that our young friend had all but glued himself to his female 'friend.'

As we passed the two suited men, the younger one called out in an overly loud and brash voice.

"Hey yo. Before y'all get going we need to give you a short medical exam... test your eyesight after this thing, you know, to make sure you're all okay." He seemed unsure of himself and looked to his partner who nodded.

As we reached the edge of the hole, there was a peculiar looking man of short stature standing near our rope. He sized each person briefly and spoke quickly to one of them.

"You now, I need you to hold onto my back and I'll get you up there."

I saw a middle-aged woman hold onto his back and his feet seemed to transform before my eyes into springs. He jumped once, then twice, and finally on the third leap he cleared the top and set the woman down. Then he jumped back to us on those incredible appendages of his.

Cox all but laughed. "Are you serious? I've climbed bigger cliffs than this in my sleep."

The man just sighed. "Just do it, okay."

So Mr. Cox and then I as well found ourselves hitching a ride with this being. The rush of air as we ascended felt quite exhilarating and in the barest moment I found myself none the worse for wear at the doorway to the storage building.

"Alright lets get the hell out of here." Cox grabbed at my shoulder.

"Wait Cox. Those men said that we needed to be tested or something."

"Yeah? Well I didn't trust the look of them. You run around the back and find some shrubs to hide in while I grab Elizabeth."

Though I thought the man was acting out of the ordinary, Cox never impressed me as being overly paranoid, especially given all of these futuristic wonders.

I ran back to the shed to find Elizabeth. It took a long time as there were several dozen folks all milling around and still with that funny dazed look. Finally the two suits were lifted up by that crazy creature and the black man called for everyone's attention.

He pulled out a device which looked to be made of steel and had the shape and size of a cigar. I called out to Elizabeth as loudly as I thought it safe, "Be sure to close your eyes tightly."

I did so as well and yet the flash from their device was bright enough that it left an afterimage on my retinas. As soon as it had gone, the American man continued. "There's nothing at all to be worried about. The National Guard is finishing up with a cleanup of some toxic rayon.

"That's radon" the older man corrected him. The man looked at him quizzically and continued. "The danger from the radon is no longer present in the town, and therefore we ask that you all return to your homes so that we can complete the dismantling of our equipment efficiently. For any of you experiencing memory problems, headaches or other health related issues, we've set up a hotline which will be available to y'all to use.

When I got to Liz, I was saddened to see that she had the same dazed look as everyone else. I quickly grabbed her arm and helped move her away from the crowd and the strange suits. We made our way around the corner and I saw René among a group of trees behind the shed

"Sorry René, I wasn't able to save her from whatever strange thing they pointed at the folks. But the only harm is some memory loss of the past few hours."

“What do you mean Damien? I remember just fine. There was a chemical spill and we needed to find a safe place to hold out while the National Guard and the scientists cleaned it up and made sure that there’s no weird shit in the air.”

Cox patted the woman’s shoulder and agreed with her while giving me a look of raised eyes.

I was awe-struck. “Elizabeth, can you believe these lies? Can you merely forget about the alien back there?”

The woman looked at me with a peculiar expression. “What’r you smokin? There’s no alien. They just had a radon leak. I think you should call that number the man in the suit talked about.”

I was flabberghasted. “Mr. Cox, how could you have known?”

“First rule of being in the military. Never trust a man in a suit.”

“Well Mr. Cox, as your instinct continues to be exemplary, what would you propose for our next move?”

The man looked around at the crowd moving off in different directions. “René, I’d suggest that we make careful tracks for the next town that’s out of the range occupied by these military bastards.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan. I would suggest that before we leave, you see if there are any of those incredible rifles which are not being guarded.”

“Don’t worry René. I’ve already got that covered.” Cox patted the knapsack with a smile.

We carefully made our way past the military, double-backing when their scouts were too concentrated, and found a secluded spot that looked well-hidden enough.

After the time spent sprinting around the sentries, we came to a house which was undamaged enough for our purposes. Once making it inside, we all collapsed for a spell and allowed time for our fatigue to dissipate. Despite the success of our adventure, I was becoming enormously enervated by the seemingly endless predicaments which our group found ourselves in. “At this point I would sacrifice my right arm for the sake of a single 24 hour day free of monsters, aliens, or other enemies.”

“Hear hear!” agreed Elizabeth.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Unexpected Visitors

I woke with a start and realized with a sinking feeling that I was once again in a wholly unfamiliar place. The room looked typical (at least for these futuristic periods) and the furniture was most comfortable. The soft glow of the evening twilight was beginning to lose its illuminating effect on the room leaving shadows along the walls. Hastily I looked about to check that my two remaining companions were still nearby. My heart thankfully settled on seeing Cox and Elizabeth sitting on a second couch along the far wall (what a wealthy house to have all of this furniture).

Elizabeth looked at me with an expression that was both sad and teasing. “Well René, what kind of predicament have you gotten us into this time?”

“Madam, I wish to the bottom of my soul that it to be the absence of adventure for us at long last.”

As we appeared to be settled into a calm and uneventful environment for a change, we looked around and I began flipping through the nearest periodical, which talked about a war in some land called ‘Iraq.’

I read this with fascination after the stories Mr. Cox had told. With the aid of the 'electric' light, I was able to peruse the information well past dusk and learned a great deal. The level of destruction which modern warfare could unleash was both wondrous and deeply disconcerting.

I was nearly finished reading when the door opened and a middle-aged couple entered in a highly agitated state.

"Just who the hell are you and what are you doing in my house!" The man stood in the doorway red-faced and holding his wife behind him.

Knowing that Elizabeth held greater skill in the field of diplomacy, I let her do the talking, which she performed with great prowess. She held her arms out away from her and very calmly exclaimed. "Sir, ma'am, we were just as confused as you were when we appeared here. Our story will sound like some kind of science-fiction, but I cross my heart that we tell you nothing but the absolute truth. We do not seem to have a choice in where we end up or when.

For a moment it seemed as if she was successful in calming the situation. The two looked at each other for a brief moment in utter confusion. Then the man pulled out a small device from his pocket and said, "I'm calling the police."

"I can tell you right now that whatever brought us here is well beyond anything which the police could understand." Cox kept his voice utterly calm and non-threatening. But with the barest flick of his wrist I saw a tiny object go flying and the device in the man's hand sailed against the wall behind him. The man's aim was exquisite.

His mouth aghast, the man exclaimed, "Just who in the hell are you?!"

"My name is Damian Cox. I was formerly a Colonel in the Canadian Army before... well before our long story began. This woman beside me is Elizabeth and the man with the magazine is the source of our dilemma. His name is René DeBois and he was born in 1852 if you can believe that."

The couple stared at me for a long moment before the man whispered in the woman's ear. She began to turn backwards when Mr. Cox interrupted the exchange.

"We're not crazy and if you go to the neighbors, they'll likely think that you yourselves may be crazy. After all, there's no damage to any doors or windows and we certainly weren't here this morning. So how could we have gotten inside?"

The man's eyebrows furrowed and his mouth became a thin slit as he answered. "Mister, you may have excellent hearing and aim, but your military background only proves that you're a

resourceful man who could find his way into my house without obvious damage. So either you find some way of offering me irrefutable proof that you three aren't some drug addicts or crazies or, I'm getting a police officer here, and I mean NOW."

Cox looked at me and asked in that same calm voice. "René, do you still have that coin? Can you very slowly pull it out for this fine couple?"

I did as the man asked and tossed the coin to the man who easily caught it in his hand. "United Province of Canada? 1861? Well that's certainly an incredibly rare coin. Must be worth quite a lot."

The woman looked at it too. "But an antique coin can still be found right here in the now." Her look remained cautious, but I detected in her eye a slight fading of her distrust.

"Good madam. I cannot say how many of these coins have survived to this time. All that I can say to you is that I departed Sherbrooke in the year of our Lord 1871, and have since traveled to periods from 1980 to beyond the 20th century. The marvels which you enjoy as every day occurrences do continue to fill me with amazement."

Both of their eyes did grow wider and I sensed the early beginnings of amnesty.

"Okay, so who was the Prime Minister when you left then?"

“Madam as you yourself must know, Upper and Lower Canada had only recently been unified under British rule. Macdonald just recently became Premier for us. However I do not know of a position for Prime Minister being created within the government.”

The man’s jaw sagged by a couple of centimeters. “Merril, I think we’d better sit down.”

Now the woman spoke with a shaky, though still strong voice. “Mister René. I teach history at the local university. It would please me very much to know what you remember of the time from which you originated. Do you know much about the Patriots War?”

I thought for several moments. Certainly stories of the rebellion were often floating on the lips of anyone who’d been involved back home, however as it had occurred before my time, there was little that I could offer.

“I must apologize ma’am, the rebellion was over well before I was born. None of my family got involved, my parents being immigrants they were afraid of raising the ire of the British Crown. Though I did have a neighbor down the road who’s second son had joined the Société des Fils de la Liberté¹⁶ in Montreal. He called the British ‘a bunch of pigheaded

16 A group of political militants supporting the Parti patriote who fought for constitutional and parliamentary reforms

imperialists.' That was his opinion, of course. There were many adherents, but not enough to have a lasting influence. The local farmers were able to make enough to get by and they wanted to live and let live. So the Mackenzie's, the Brown's, and Papineau ended up fighting an uphill battle by themselves."

By now the couple was seated on the couch and though they had not the air of complete calm, they at least refrained from making further mention of a constable or authority.

While the man still eyed us all carefully, the woman named Merrill and I seemed to develop a fine rapport. I found that where I had previously dreaded the many repetitions of my story, Merrill's deep interest in history gave her the refinement to ask the most intelligent questions. We ended up having wonderfully enriching discussions about politics, technology, and sociology. I was somewhat put off after a time when I saw Merrill's husband, who's name I learned was Herbert, walk into the room with a tray of tea and some crackers.

"I must say. Despite the weeks that I have spent in your century, I still struggle with the social changes. I do not often see a man voluntarily take on a woman's role."

After this I was even more surprised to see Cox laugh. "Now you know that Mr. Twilight Zone here is for real. I can't

believe there's a single man in this century who'd be brave enough to say a thing like that."

After thinking about what he said, I did notice that Merrill had tensed up slightly.

"Madam, I apologize for the faux pas." I then turned to my companion, "and Mr. Cox, I would so appreciate it if you would stop using that infernal moniker."

It did indeed seem that instead of creating more offense, this last exchange cemented the trust with our hosts. We talked until well into the late evening of our fantastic adventures. In the end it was difficult to tell who was more awe-stricken. Merrill who had the chance to talk to a 'walking museum piece' as she referred to me, Herbert who was infatuated by Elizabeth's story of the desperate battle that her townspeople had been fighting against the alien presence there, or myself and all that I was learning of this incredible time.

"René, you've never seen a television before, have you?"

"Mister Herbert. I have heard people of these future times describe such an amazing device, but I admit that I have not been blessed to experience it directly." I replied

With a gleam in his eye, the man stated. "Well then you certainly wouldn't get Cox's joke about calling you 'Mr. Twilight Zone.' I believe that we should rectify that." To my

amazement, he picked up a small rectangular object and pointed it at a large picture frame on the wall and the blank glass came to life with the moving scene of a woman in scandalous attire walking down a beach. He pushed a button and moved through images faster than my eyes could follow. Finally it stilled and I saw on the screen the words 'Twilight Zone, Season 2.' A black and white play began inside the glass with a middle-aged man in a plain suit standing calmly and looking out at us.

"You're traveling through another dimension. A dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination."

I gazed in rapt attention at this incredible story of a woman who lies in shadow as bandages are slowly removed from her face. The play continued to show her, a beautiful young woman, being ostracized by the hospital workers who see her as grotesque in comparison to their own perception of beauty.

"By the stars. What amazing social commentary."

"Now I know that you're from the past. Everyone in North America has seen this one, probably several times over. It's one of Serling's most famous episodes." Herbert was now utterly convinced. "And there are a few dozen other episodes on everything from aliens to time travel. That's why you have that nickname."

“So I see.” I sat still amazed. “It must be late enough for you both to be needing sleep, but if you will offer your permission, I would very much appreciate the chance to see the many other amazing works by this playwright Serling.”

With a chuckle he replied. “Of course you can. The whole series is on Netflix. But I hope that you don’t spend your entire visit staring at the tele.”

By now it was quite late and our unplanned hosts needed to go to bed. They invited us to find sleeping space either in the living room or in the study. As much time as I found myself spending in these futuristic periods, I never ceased to be awe-struck by the vast scale of these houses.

By now my companions were understandably reluctant to sleep in a separate room, thus Cox and I slept on the very soft carpet and Elizabeth slept on the couch. As I laid down, I wondered what my family would think if they knew that I was spending so much time sleeping in the same room as an unmarried woman. Then with a sinking heart I thought of how long ago my family must have departed this earth.

Chapter Thirty

What Goes Bump in the Night

Cox was the first one to wake up and I felt his hand nudge me gently on the shoulder. As our surroundings appeared the same as the night before, it was clear that we were still gratefully in the same untormented place. For this I was supremely grateful to have a respite from demons, aliens, and specters. Then my countenance fell when, very softly, I heard him speak. "I don't want to alarm Elizabeth, but I saw a strange sight across the street.

I sighed, but managed to keep the volume low. "Oh Damien. Look, we're in a quiet house, our gracious (if involuntary) hosts are asleep, and we have these magical lights and talking screens. Let us relax and enjoy the fortune of our respite."

"Look man. I realize you didn't volunteer for this adventure, believe me neither did I. But we're here now and I've got to tell you what I saw, before I convince myself that it's just fatigue-or my imagination or some crazy shit."

By now I knew the man well enough to understand that he wasn't the type to just let a quandary sit unresolved. So I dragged my protesting consciousness to the present and sat against the couch.

“Okay my good man. What is it that you found so peculiar?”

Now that I was facing him, he looked distinctly less certain of himself. “Well, this is probably gonna sound like I’m imagining things, but I was looking out on the street, you know, to get a feel for our environment. I saw some kids playing ball next door.

A few cars drive by, people walking their dogs. All quite typical of a suburban block at the turn of the millennium. But then I saw the kids’ ball shoot out across the street.

The funny thing is that they were about to go out and get it until the ball rolled into the yard across from here. The ball sat on the lawn for a few moments and the kids just froze staring at it. Then I saw the ball just sink into the grass like it was quicksand.”

I waited for a moment to be sure that he was finished. Then I thought seriously about what he had said. If any other man had said the same thing, I would have thought him to be imagining things, or suffering from fatigue. However Damien was a man with a mind as sharp as a straight razor. I might disagree with his opinion, but he never gave any man reason to doubt the accuracy of his perception.

Finally I thought about it enough to warrant a response.

“Okay. Were there any other details or perceptions which your eyes could pick out?”

I could almost tangibly see the relief in his expression at not being immediately dismissed. He turned contemplative for a long moment before he responded. “Well the house did look quite old. One of those Victorian houses from about your time. This one had a Jonathan Bates feel to it, oh wait, you wouldn’t get the reference.” He paused again, “It had an almost haunted feel, like... like when you look at a dilapidated house on Halloween and even though your an adult, you still walk across to the other side of the street.”

Knowing that the man was not one to scare easily I pulled myself, now fully awake, onto my feet. I went to the window and looked out. The house opposite was a little dilapidated, but it did in fact look quite handsome. There were extensive and beautiful detailing, now faded with time, full clapboard siding faded and falling into disrepair, and windows which must once have been of high quality. All in all, I thought it was a building with great promise if some labor were applied.

“I’m sorry good man. It certainly looks well aged, but there’s nothing in the appearance at all to suggest anything out of the ordinary about the building.”

Though brief, I could see that he was somewhat hurt by the lack of confirmation. I put my hand on his shoulder and encouraged him to have some more sleep before we talked about it later in the morning. I laid back down on my bedroll and closed my eyes with gratitude.

Some time later I heard Elizabeth stirring and woke up myself. More and more I found myself grateful for her company. Cox was certainly an honest and worthy companion, but the company of a member of the gentler sex was that much more appreciated. As strange as it was to hear a woman talk about firearms, repairing machinery, and driving those peculiar horseless carriages, it was in some ways a novelty.

I checked in on her to see how her rest was and if she needed anything. "Thank you René. You're a dear, I slept just fine and with no monsters this time."

She winked at me. "How about you Damien? Did you sleep well?"

I could see the ghost of a frown flicker across his expression, but in an instant it returned to the deadpan expression reminiscent of his military experience.

"I slept just fine Elizabeth. Why don't we consider what we will have for breakfast."

We wondered into the kitchen and as usual it was filled with perfectly clean white walls, matching wood cabinets, a sink with no visible water pump (by now I was becoming used to seeing plumbing even in rural areas), and a large table covered in cloth. On the table in plane sight was a note written in elegant handwriting.

Good morning to you all. We both had work to do this morning, and as this whole situation took us by surprise, we're understandably flying by the seat of our pants. Feel free to rummage through the pantry and fridge for some breakfast.

There's eggs and such. I'd suggest that Ren not do cooking since he's not likely to be familiar with modern appliances. However, if you would be willing to come by the university today or tomorrow, I'm sure there are several people in the history department who would love to make your acquaintance. I look forward to talking more this evening.

Best wishes

Herbert and Merrill

I was deeply impressed by the generosity of these people who had only just met us (and not voluntarily) to be offering us room and board. After the ruggedness of Defiance, this couple greatly restored my faith in the kindness of Man.

My thoughts were quickly interrupted by Elizabeth's comment. "Flying by the seat of your pants means-"

“Thank you Elizabeth, I did grasp the context. But doesn't it seem strange to you that both of these people work? Is modern life so simple and yet so expensive that nobody needs to stay at the house to keep things running (I was more cautious this time to abstain from the mention gender roles)?”

“René, it's true that houses are much simpler. There aren't large farms to care for, or homemade meals to prepare, or endless hours of house cleaning. We have machines that make all of these things more convenient. And there are stores where people can buy any food they want. But of course with all the things that people buy, more households have what we call double bread winners now.”

This was quite a strange transformation from my time. I couldn't nail down in my mind whether it felt better or worse than the norms of my time. On one hand, home life was obviously much more convenient (as was exemplified by Cox heating a skillet on a stove with an instant flame) but the idea that both husband and wife were out every day leaving an empty house seemed quite wasteful to me. One building to occupy in the day for work, and a different one to occupy in the evening for leisure. Even with all of the time spent in this future, it remained a struggle for me to become accustomed to all of the peculiarities.

We enjoyed an amazingly decadent meal of eggs, toast, and a dish made of shredded potatoes. All of the food came from the 'refrigerator.' There was no chasing after chickens, digging through the root cellar, stoking the fire for a stove. It became more clear to me now why people spent less time in the home.

"So what do you all feel like doing with our supposed vacation here?" Elizabeth was not the type to have been taught lady-like customs. She spoke while still finishing a bite of toast.

"I for one, think that it would be most gracious of me as a guest to fulfill the request to join our hostess at the university. As I never had much chance for schooling, it would be quite the opportunity."

"Well that is most kind of you René. Would you like help in getting there?"

"My dear Elizabeth, the directions show that this university is only four miles distant. Such a trip should take only 90 minutes or so on foot.

At this the both of them began laughing, leaving me to wonder if I was the object of an unspoken joke or if there was some other form of entertainment.

"I assume that you both will at some point enlighten me as to the cause of your amusement." I spoke with not the most kindly tone, and the two of them soon quieted down.

“I’m sorry René. It’s still difficult to remember that the choices which we take for granted were not available to you. The thing is, you don’t have to spend hours of your day walking anymore.”

I continued to look severely at the man. “Damien perhaps you and Elizabeth have grown up in environments where walking is considered taboo. But despite my preference for my lost velocipede, I personally have no qualms with travel of the pedestrian sort. It stretches the legs and keeps the body limber. Would your own medical people disagree with me?”

I heard the barest hint of Mr. Cox whisper to Elizabeth, “Do you want to take this one?”

Then Elizabeth looked at me. “Damien, yes it’s true. Most people think that walking and exercise are a healthy thing. Lots of people from my past would go take a walk in the park to relax. But the thing is, cities are different now. Except for the places where you found me, the roads are mostly used for cars and walking just isn’t so safe.

“Elizabeth, are you telling me that nobody travels on foot at all?” I was astonished.

“Do people depend on these, horseless carts to get everywhere?!” It was a ridiculous thought. On the other hand it would explain why there were so few people on the street in many of the places we ended up. If nobody was walking outside, then

how did people make friends? How did one meet a girl? How did business deals get made? It was as if all of society were somehow sterilized.

“Well think about it René. The population is much bigger now. There are 6 billion humans on the planet, give or take.”

“By the stars! The population of humanity is measured in the billions?! And yet with all of these mouths to feed nobody has a garden?!”

Cox answered while Elizabeth stabbed another bite of food. “I’m afraid so René. The population is enormous and farms are disappearing because cities keep growing which is why food is getting more expensive causing more people to work longer hours.”

Now Elizabeth continued. “That’s right. And people can’t all live in cities. So with lots of folks living in the countryside, the distance between a person’s house and their work, or store, is long enough that walking or riding a bicycle just isn’t practical. So people use the car.”

I couldn’t dispute her logic, and yet the concept filled me with a great sadness. “I can obviously see that what you say is true. But it also feels as if the streets are devoid of all vigor. Before I met you two, I felt as if the towns which I arrived in were uninhabited ghost towns.”

"There's no question that our modern cities have their problems, René. But I'm happy to have the chance to hitch a ride outa town with any car owner any time I want."

Now Elizabeth looked at Mr. Cox. "Is that what you want to do today?" By her tone it was difficult to tell if she was being coy or serious.

"No of course not. I aint leavin Mr. Twilight Zone for nothing."

"That's another thing. Would you please not refer to me by that absurd title. I am a man, and I have a name. I would very much appreciate it if you would do honor to both." I realized too late that I had raised my voice quite a bit. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so heated."

Elizabeth's cheeks had grown flush from the emotion. "No no. I'm sorry René. It's just a crazy thing being traveling companion to a guy who sounds like Henry Thoreau."

"Who?"

"Oh for the love of... just read up on him, you'll like his work. Look, we're all trying to get used to this crazy situation. So please don't take us too seriously."

I gave the man a pat on the back. "Just don't let it happen again." Then I winked to show that the comment was in jest.

“Despite your misgivings, I cannot imagine that traveling the distance on foot to be any great deal more dangerous than the perils which we’ve endured so far.”

“Would it help if I went along with you? Maybe your right, maybe stretching the legs is a good idea.” Elizabeth was quite kind and I was grateful for her offer.

“Thank you Elizabeth, that would be most appreciated. Damien. Would you want to join us as well?” I wondered how he would feel about staying in the house by himself across from a ‘haunted house’ but I did not want to say anything aloud.

“Thanks René. But I would rather stay here and get a sense of our surroundings.”

“You know Cox, it’s safe to say that there aren’t any carnivorous aliens ready to jump out from under the coffee table. You could just relax and enjoy our little respite.”

The man looked a bit unnerved, but let it pass. “Thank you Elizabeth. I’ll take your point under advisement.”

I offered to clean the breakfast dishes since I had not helped in its preparations. But Cox told me that the family had a ‘dishwasher.’ It never ceased to amaze me that there was a mechanical device for every task imaginable.

So Elizabeth and I left on foot to walk down the street. We kept the directions with us and had a pleasant but mostly silent trip as we each relished in the comparably safe environs. I say comparably because despite the lack of killer aliens, the roads on which we traveled did indeed feel most disconcerting. There were straight and wide road lanes which I was told were for vehicles. However the spaces for walking were rarely provided. For most of the trip we had the choice to either share the road with the speeding vehicles or to walk along the brambles along the unpaved shoulder. It wasn't until we came within a kilometer of the downtown that we were finally graced with concrete walkways.

Eventually and with no small relief, we reached the university unharmed and made our way to the history building.

Chapter Thirty-One

House of Pain

When the two of them left, Damien stationed himself in front of the window to watch the strange house. Now that he was paying closer attention, it became clear that even the few crows in the neighborhood avoided the place. It wasn't

simply the house itself that seemed weird, but the entire property all the way to the sidewalk.

Deciding to try an experiment, he found a small tennis ball in the basement and, when there were no kids around, tossed it across the street towards the house. He watched carefully as the ball just sat there on the lawn, unmoving. What had seemed like a viciously foreboding house in the early light of the morning, now looked like just a beat up old junker.

After a time, his mind drifted back to their other crazy adventures. That guy René really was somethin else. He seemed so, so victorian. But then a slight movement caught his eye, lo and behold. The ball was halfway sunk into the ground. After a another second, it sank more and then disappeared entirely beneath the lawn. Now he felt deeply intrigued. What on Earth could cause such a thing to happen. It wasn't quite as peculiar or dangerous as the dome, but it certainly did pique his curiosity. Unfortunately there was little to observe when no objects were nearby. So the afternoon wore on rather slowly.

Finally when someone else's kids began playing in their yard after school, Damien went over to talk to them. At first the kids looked at him askance, but he walked slowly, a smile on his face and with his hands outstretched, until one of the kids stepped away from their game.

"I hope you wont mind me interrupting your game. But do you know anything about that house across the street? It looks very strange."

Instantly the boys froze up. "I wouldn't go near there mister. Nobody goes there. It's the home of Old Man Nebberman. He's mean."

"Okay well I can see why you would think that. But has anyone actually talked to him?"

Another boy spoke up, "I heard one kid went to talk to him... and he never came back." The boy then put his hands up in a grotesque clawing gesture which looked almost comical.

"Okay. I'll take your advice, thank you for helping out."

"Just stay away from there" the boys shouted out as he walked away shaking his head in disbelief.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Just Another Day at the Office

The group sat around an expensive looking table, with all eyes watching me like an attraction in some traveling circus. “So you’re the guy they call Mr. Twilight Zone.” Merrill’s boss spoke with the air of fascination.

“Sir, I would very much appreciate it if you would not refer to me as such. I am a man, of flesh and blood. My name is René. René DeBois. I would like very much to be addressed properly.”

The man acted somewhat taken aback but not seriously intimidated. “I apologize Mr. DeBois. I meant no disrespect to you. My name is Patiste and I believe that we all would enjoy hearing more about your life back home, the people whom you knew... all the details even the most trivial.”

I was more than happy to share stories of my time back home. Especially my dear friend Claude, the farm, and my family. I told them about dad’s special pride in his plow which he bought from a man named Parlin and which had a removable blade which could be replaced when it wore down. I told them of our neighbor Jacque who tried harnessing one of his bulls to a plow and how the animal ended up having a fit and destroying the rigging. Even the local pastor who was looked at with some

amusement for his assertions that those who sought to emigrate to the frontier were destined for the underworld. There were many amusing stories to share.

Another woman in the group spoke up. "This experience sharing stories with you is quite amazing. So much experience from Canada's early history. Now tell me, did your family take any interest in the politics at the time?"

I repeated to them what I had told Merrill the previous evening.

"Truly a shame. There were a great many changes going on at the time. You might have had the opportunity to meet D'Arcy McGee,¹⁷ or George Cartier. Or if you had-

"Wait a moment madam. I do remember hearing about Cartier. My good friend Claude mentioned him once or twice. The man helped in the creation of the Grand Trunk Railway in some way. I must apologize as we did not have access to such prodigious quantity of books and periodicals which you so enjoy in this time."

"No no. Please do not feel unappreciated." The first man patted me on the back.

"You're right about Cartier. He had become a member of Parliament and introduced the bill for the creation of the

¹⁷ Early Irish-Canadian leader and politician. Elected Member of Parliament in 1867

railway. But before that, he was a part of Société des Fils de la Liberté. Quite an intriguing history to that man.”

The four of us spoke throughout the afternoon and I continued to be surprised at the rapt attention given to such comparatively mundane events as having lunch with Claude at the tavern or harvesting barley in the fall. On the other hand, I imagine how amazing it would have been if I had been given the chance to talk with an explorer from the frontier days or to meet Henry Hudson.

We took a short break at the university cafeteria which in itself was an astonishing experience for me. The sheer variety of foods was even beyond what I would imagine Queen Victoria enjoyed. I was able to sample fresh pork, a dish called ‘pizza’ which combined cheese and tomatoes on a thin bread, and some salad. I could only imagine what Claude or even Marie would think if they could observe such luxury.

Finally Merrill offered to give myself and Elizabeth a ride back to her house and I once again relished in the experience of riding in the amazing motor cars, though with a slightly more sobering mindset.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ghost Stories

We returned to the house and found Damien in a sad state indeed. His face was ashen and he sat behind the couch almost in a crouching position.

“Hey there Cox. What’s gotten into you? You look like you’ve seen a killer alien or somethin.”

I too worried that something horrible may have happened to our friend.

He looked up at Merrill with a confused expression. “Tell me miss. Do you know anything about the house across the street? The kids say that it’s haunted.”

Merril looked at him disapprovingly. “Good lord Damien. I’m am very much shocked to see you like this. From your stories that you’ve told us, I presumed that you were a well-decorated soldier. How on earth could ghost stories bring you to such a trembling state?”

“Merril, I realize that all of this sounds crazy. Even I thought it must be somethin I dreamed up. But look at this rip in my pants.”

Clearly there was a long tear in the man's trousers. There was also a nasty looking scrape beneath, which Merrill offered to take a look at. But this did not appear to be cause for alarm."

"Mr. Cox, The kids on this block have been telling stories about that house since I first moved here. Aside from a few silly police reports that my husband has heard, there's been nothing to prove that it's anything more than an ordinary beat up old house. I can't imagine what could get you all worked up like this."

I was beginning to think that the man had been entertaining an overactive imagination the whole day. But as his story unfolded, I became less convinced of this train of thought.

"Well first you outa' listen to what happened, on second thought, let's go into the dining room. It can see me here."

I almost chuckled aloud at this comment, but managed to keep my emotion in check. We all humored the man by going into the dining room and Merrill brewed a pot of tea for us before looking at Mr. Cox's leg.

"Anyway, after I spoke to the neighbors kids I thought I should just watch the place and see if they were just making up tall tales. For awhile it was quite boring. The property is obviously past it's prime, but didn't look dangerous or anything. Then as I watched more closely, I noticed one of the window shades upstairs open up. If there'd been a figure in the window, I

would've thought nothing of it. But there was no one to have opened the shade.

Looking closer I saw... or at least thought I saw, the porch roof lower in the middle into a kind of frown. The posts seemed to break jaggedly in the middle like they were gnashing teeth. Then I looked again and just as quickly it was merely a house. Believe me, it really did seem to be my imagination. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something very surreal about the place.

So finally I went over and started up the walkway. At first nothing happened. A house is a house I told myself. But then I felt like my steps were becoming sluggish. It was like walking through sand at the beach. I looked down and my feet were actually pushing through the concrete. I tried lifting my shoe and it felt like I was ankle deep in mud. Frantically, I reached for the grass and managed to pull one foot out. Then I yanked the other out and got almost back to the street. I didn't look back to see what it was, but something tried to grab at my leg. It didn't feel like a hand clutching at me. It was more like when you're a kid and you bury your legs in the sand. I pulled with all my might and at first had the fear I wouldn't make it out. I started to feel a sharp pain in my ankle now. There was definitely something biting down on my pants.

Believe you me I was damned grateful when I finally reached the street. I made the unfortunate mistake of looking back when I did and saw a shred of my pants sink down beneath the lawn.

I'll tell ya, nothing that I ever saw in Afghani... ow. In Afghanistan came anywhere near as terrifying to me."

As much as I held a deep sense of respect and trust for the man. His stories, especially without any credible evidence, were difficult to warrant validation. And I was not the only one to hold this opinion.

"Damien. We all understand that this flip-flopping from one time to another is a trying experience." Elizabeth put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "Maybe you just need some rest from all the tension."

Shaking her hand off, he raised his voice. "Look, I know when someone is tryin to humor me. Don't you think this sounds as ridiculous to me as it must sound to you?"

I've been up against car bombings, small weapons fire, even man-eating dinosaurs. I guarantee this isn't just some figment of my imagination damm-"

"Mr. Cox. This may be the proof that you are looking for." Merrill moved her tweezers over the table and we all looked closely at two razor-sharp tan things which were about two

centimeters long and stained at the edge with red. "It looks like you had a bad experience with an old piece of wood."

The woman showed no small amount of tension on her face. It was clear that she was torn between the gift of my appearance, and this strange situation brought on by our soldier friend.

"Look. Why don't you all rest up in my son's room. He's away on a road trip, which I'm none too happy about, but his room faces away from the street and you can forget all about this strange um... experience."

The woman's suggestion sounded completely reasonable and I seconded the proposal.

Cox seemed uncertain at first, but in the end he acquiesced. "Alright. Okay so maybe Mr. Tw- René will send us to some other place before morning."

The dinner that evening was as marvelous as all of the other foods which I enjoyed. But I did spy Merrill and her husband speaking in the corner at one point and I worried that we might be overtaking our hosts' kindness.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Affirmation

Though the carpeting upstairs was even more comfortable, sleep remained a scornful lover. I kept experiencing the most vivid and horrifying dreams.

In the first one, I found myself standing on the walkway in front of that house. Though my senses didn't provide me with a specific source, there was some voice urging me forward. When I looked more closely, there was my dear friend Claude sitting on the porch in his father's rocking chair. I ran forward to embrace him and all but weeped at this reconnection with the man.

As my footsteps got closer to the house, I saw the porch roof move downward almost resembling furrowed eyebrows and the door frame splinter open as if the whole of it's perimeter was formed of sharp teeth.

I watched in horror as Claude aged before my eyes into an old man and then saw the flesh melted away leaving merely his bones sitting and still rocking in that chair. I made as if to scream, but no utterance would leave my mouth. My feet were locked in place and my arms refused to obey my commands.

Thankfully I found myself awoken by Elizabeth's kindly voice in my ear. "René, you're having a bad dream."

The look of concern on her face was enough to tell me that I too might receive that look of condescending disbelief which we had both shown to Mr. Cox earlier in the day.

I closed my eyes with no small amount of trepidation and once again fell into disquieting slumber. This time I was inside of a gorgeous mansion. To my left an ornate staircase curved along one wall and up to a balcony above. The rough wooden floor however soon began to splinter. In the center of the room the floor gave way completely, revealing a vast sinkhole. I leaped closer and closer to the wall as the hole grew to encompass most of the room. Then I looked in horror as a beautiful carpet stretching from the front door to the hole began to develop a life of it's own. It reached out for me like the tongue of a serpent and encircled my ankle. I reached out in vain for any solid object to grab onto, however my arms found only dead air. I attempted to scream as I was dragged closer and closer to that horrifying pit.

“René! What’s going on with you?” In the dim light I could just barely make out the look of worry on Elizabeth’s face.

“My dear. I could not tell you why, but I’ve been having the most horrifying nightmares.”

As dawn approached, I resolved to put an end to this childishness once and for all. While the world was still asleep, I

marched out the door and walked directly across the street to the infamous abode. The building appeared perfectly normal as I slowly but with increasing confidence traversed the front walk. I began to make for the steps to the porch when I felt my foot trip on the uneven walkway and I fell straight to the porch.

At first I made to chastise my poor attention. But then I was left incredulous when I noticed the concrete sink slowly back to a flush surface. I next heard the front door open and a long length of carpet rolled by itself out of the entry door. The end of the carpet curled itself toward me and reached for my feet, just as it had in my dream. I didn't even have time to consider the folly of not believing Damien's story now. All attention was focused merely on survival.

I grabbed for the edge of the porch, but as God is my witness, the boards actually pulled away, taunting me from just out of reach. Instead my fingers thrashed blindly about for anything to grab onto and clutched only air when I heard the most horrific screeching. Suddenly alongside me an automotive vehicle appeared and Mr. Cox was operating it.

"Grab onto the door and for god sakes hold on!"

The man didn't have to say it twice. I gripped the door of the vehicle and at first felt as if I were on a Medieval torture rack as my body was painfully stretched out.

But by the grace of god I felt myself ricochet forward when the tension on my ankles surrendered. After a few painful moments I found myself free of the strange phenomenon and quickly scampered into the automobile.

"You just had to test that thing out, didn't you?"

"Mr. Cox-" I was still panting from the terror of the experience. "You can trust that I will not doubt your word in the future." We returned across the street and my ego was gratified to see no one else was witness to my folly.

"I hope from now on that you wont go risking your damn life just to prove a theory."

"For the love of God, that monstrosity needs to be stopped!"

"You wont get no argument from me René. But I just don't see how."

"Well couldn't we burn it down, or use some of those vastly powerful weapons which you speak of from your past?"

His expression became even more serious and severe. "Now listen just one minute René. Just because I was in the military and knew how to use these weapons, doesn't mean that I could just waltz onto a base and take whatever I need. That kind of firepower has incredible safeguards. And as for burning the place, you'd have the police on you before you could say

Napoleon Bonaparte. Don't think for one minute that I'm not thinking of a possible offense, but I've seen the inside of a brig once and don't fancy the experience of repeating it."

Damien returned the car to what I could easily assume was the exact spot from which it was taken and put the keys back just beside the front door. "I assume that we don't need to tell Herbert and Merrill about this little incident, do we?"

"Actually Damien, I would happily leave Elizabeth out of this as well to the extent that it is possible."

The man nodded and we both silently returned to the upstairs room. Unfortunately Elizabeth did not look half-asleep as I would have expected her to be.

"What was going on outside?" I knew that the woman was shrewd and thus I was not at all surprised that she caught on to the unexpected activity. Thankfully, Damien was equally cunning.

"René decided to join me on a walk and we were nearly hit by some idiot talking on his phone while going through a stop sign. I was however, able to make it clear to him that he should be more watchful."

I quickly shook my head in agreement despite my ignorance of the terminology.

“So that’s REALLY what happened?”

I began to feel as if my stomach was moving down towards my hips. However it was Cox who managed to voice a response.

“Of course it is. Do you think we’d have reason to lie?”

The sinking feeling became more pronounced as I saw the woman put her arms across her chest and furrow her eyebrows as she stared at me. “Well before this moment, I would never have thought you would. But when I heard a car screeching, I went to the front window and saw Herbert’s car tear across the lawn over there, turn back to this side of the street and then you two got out of it. Would you now like to revise your story and tell me what gave you reason to believe that you could not trust me?”

I felt a deep sense of shame. Through all of the adventures we had shared, it was still challenging for me to trust a member of the gentler sex regarding matters of life and death. I was greatly surprised then to hear Damien speak before I could.

“Elizabeth, I must apologize. It was my military training. We’re taught from the moment we leave boot camp that the fewer people who know about an incident, the less chance there is for someone to slip up.”

Her gaze leveled on Cox now. “Well Damien, I hope that you can trust that I am part of your team, whether we like it or not.

I learned real fast to fight creatures much more powerful than some kind of monster house. I trust you both with my life, and I hope that you can trust me in the same way."

"Now." she paused motioning us both to sit down. "Would you please tell me what the hell has gotten into you both?"

So with no obvious choice in the matter, we described the morning's events, including my strange dream. The whole time I was amazed at how coolly her eyes moved from one to the other of us without obvious surprise or disbelief.

"Well given all the shit that we've seen so far, I guess it's just another day at the office.

"Seriously madam! Are you not terrified of such a monstrosity?" I was incredulous.

"Oh René." She looked at me kindly. "Of course I'm scared. I was scared of the aliens, I was scared of the dinosaurs, and I'm scared of that house. But being scared isn't going to solve anything. We just gotta deal with the cards we've been dealt."

In the whole of my experience the woman was like no female I had encountered through the entirety of my years. "The enigmatic question is, how? What means do we have to put an end to the torment instituted by this... this-" my speech trailed off as I could think of no descriptive word for an inanimate

object which was somehow imbued with a malevolent cognizance.

“Well where you folks found me, we had easy access to military firepower. I’m guessing Damien that we don’t have that option here.”

“Believe me, if it didn’t mean a damned high chance that we’d all end up in the slammer, I’d be happy to figure out a way to steal a few grenades.”

Elizabeth paused and thought a long moment. “What about fertilizer?”

“What?!” Damien and I both expressed the same thing at once.

Nonplussed, the woman continued. “Well, when we couldn’t find enough rockets or grenades to fight the skitters, we’d put together makeshift explosives with fertilizer, salt and sugar.”

Given the absence of livestock and farms, I had no understanding of how fertilizer could be combined with the other ingredients into an incendiary, Cox however seemed to grasp her train of thought rather quickly.

“Okay sure. The thing is, I don’t doubt that we could create an explosive. The challenge is to get the explosive into the house, get out alive, and avoid getting tossed in the slammer afterwards.”

"I do understand the challenge there." I thought for a long moment. "You do seem to have uncanny aim, would it not be possible to throw an incendiary right to the front door?"

"Well I bet that I could, but it'd take a really big explosion to punch through the door and then really damage the house itself. It'd take a whole lot less firepower if the explosion could be started inside the place."

"You do make the task sound more complex than I would have believed."

"René, we're not talking about milkin a cow here. This is serious business."

We spent the rest of our morning deliberating and generally discarding a great multitude of possibilities. Eventually though, we all began developing a need for sustenance. Elizabeth and Damien put together a wonderful meal of griddle-cakes served with honey or marmalade. I told them that I must make the meal brief, as one of Merrill's co-workers was picking me up at 10:00 for another history discussion at the university. One look at the wall clock told me that I should hurry outside if I were to be timely.

I looked along the street wondering how long the wait would be for her vehicle to arrive. But then I saw a nightmarish vision. That house. On the porch, sitting in the same old

wooden chair was Claude, and I was overtaken by déjà vu. Marie was beside him and they both wore broad smiles. They stared intently at me as if taunting me to challenge their authenticity. With a fluid motion, I saw Claude raise an arm and beckon me nearer, and for one terrifying moment I could feel my feet beginning to obey of their own volition.

Our eyes locked and the whole of my vision narrowed to the small circle occupied by their faces. I felt like a man under the spell of a hypnotist, my feet moving and with me barely noticing.

BEEEEEEEEPPPP!!

The shock of the sound sent a cannonball through my consciousness and my heart racing into my throat. In a flash my eyes tore away from the specter and faced an oncoming vehicle.

“Hey René! If you’re going to live in the 20th century, you’re going to have to learn to look when you walk into the street.”

The woman had slowed dramatically and so I was in no danger, but being thrust back into the moment, I noticed that I had stepped a good seven feet directly into the roadway. My amazement was considerable seeing that I had traveled this distance without any conscious control of my body.

I was once again snatched back to the present by her comment. “Hey, I realize that this modern era is fascinating to you, but

I'd really appreciate if you could get in, I've got to get to my class in 20 minutes."

I eased myself into the vehicle and introduced myself to a ravishing woman of pale champagne complexion and flaxen hair. If I felt distracted by the horror of the monstrous house, I felt equally spellbound in looking at this porcelain doll of a lady.

The woman could obviously sense my deep focus. "I know, I must look pretty haggard. My daughter had a fever and I barely got 5 hours of sleep last night."

Now my initial shock faded and I felt deeply for this woman who must be struggling with grief, especially if she could not remain at the side of her sickly child.

"Madam, you have my deepest sympathies. I very much hope that your daughter has somebody to accompany her in this time of need."

She gave me a peculiar look before speaking. "Yes, well I trade baby-sitting with the woman down the block. So she's the lucky one who gets to check Kate's temperature."

"Madam, I hope you don't find me rude, but I very much struggle with family norms of this century."

The woman looked somewhat confused for a moment and began speaking seemingly while still registering my statement. "Oh I

understand, well check that, I don't really understand. Hell, who in this world could? But I can perhaps imagine how many changes you have to contend with."

"I wonder in fact if any human being could contemplate what a challenging experience it is. I feel immense gratitude for meeting so many kind souls such as yourself who make the adventure a great deal more palatable."

Her stare only made me more self-conscious that I had inadvertently wielded my tongue inappropriately. The honk of another horn jerked her eyes back to the scene in front of her as she commented, "Seriously René, I wonder if your talents wouldn't be more effective among students of poetry than of history." She paused then and casually placed a hand on my arm. "By the way, we were never introduced. My name is Olivia."

"Olivia, it is my greatest pleasure to make your acquaintance. Your name is like a song riding the currents of the wind."

Her face grew flush then and I wondered (was was ever common now) if I had spoken inappropriately. "René, I swear, if you say one more thing, I can't guarantee that I'll be able to keep my eyes safely on the road."

I still remained confused as to whether her words were a compliment or an accusation, but I felt it best to limit my

verbiage for the sake of both our safety. Despite this, I did catch her eyes drifting to me on occasion and the warmth that it brought me became a regular distraction from the scene outside.

Chapter Thirty-Five **All That Glitters**

T*hankfully despite the dangers of the woman's piloting skills, we reached the university without further mishap and spent a lively afternoon with Merrill, and two other men. Patiste, the director of the department I had already met. The younger man, named Phan was a few years older than I and sported a deep black mustache, bronze skin and the unusual almond-shaped eyes of a Chinaman (I was later informed that this was an inappropriate moniker). We again discussed in more detail the machines of my daily life including the cooking tools, plows, and methods of construction (not that I was a mason by any stretch, but I had helped two of the neighbors with a barn raising). I was gratified to have the distraction of conversation and of Olivia's presence after my disturbing morning.*

After a long period of discussion, I interrupted the singular direction of their dialogue. "It is most gratifying to satisfy your

curiosity of my own time. I would though, to ask some questions of my own if you don't mind." There were nods from both the director and Merrill. "As fascinating as it must be for you to speak with a man from the distant past, the experience merely enhances the schooling which you already have.

However for me this world is both magical and terrifying. The technological changes are thoroughly overwhelming. But also deeply challenging are the social and cultural differences in this futuristic land. Not only the styles of dress, but the beliefs regarding the roles of the different sexes and of different races. I simply don't understand how all of this could have occurred in only the span of one century."

The Chinaman replied, but as he spoke only English and not French, it was necessary for him to speak slowly for my sake. "Well now. That's a very long conversation indeed." He paused before continuing. "Where would you like to start?"

"I must say that I find it strangest to see how little interaction people experience here. The last world in which we traveled had a thoroughly crowded market space in the middle of town where people would meet, make purchases, and interact with each other. However as my friends have pointed out to me, the roads here are dominated by your mechanized transportation. I see no public squares, no outdoor cafes, not even a park along the way. This land and many other future periods feel like ghost towns

compared to my home. How indeed to people in this world meet each other? How are business deals made? How do you meet a girl?" I spied Olivia glance at me at the last statement and felt my face grow crimson.

"Well now, that IS a complicated question. There are a lot of influences in that regard. I guess it had a lot to do with the spreading out of cities. With towns becoming so much larger, people had to go farther to reach their destinations. The automobile was developed shortly after you left your time and it radically changed how our communities developed. Suddenly people could get across town more quickly and more conveniently.

Grocery stores and general stores cropped up and with our cold climate the stores were more practical for getting supplies than an open market. But the last big change came quite recently with computers and the internet. Computers were developed in the late 20th century and the technology advanced to the point where we could connect them together over long distances. Now it's possible to interact with someone across town or across the country just by sending messages over the computer."

"My lord! But this seems so impersonal."

The director gave an audible sigh. "Yes René. It certainly does and I am in complete agreement with you. Not all of our

progress has been forward. Many believe, as I do, that society has regressed in certain areas."

Our conversation was deeply fascinating and helped me to recognize that all which glitters is not necessarily gold. This futuristic time with it's powerful technology was both a blessing and a curse.

After our scheduled time together was ended, Merrill offered to transport me back after her classes, but I told her that I would travel with Olivia (which I chose with a mixture of pleasure and trepidation).

As we traveled (thankfully without incident), I listened to her share more about her life. "I'm really grateful to have such a great position at the university. The pay is substantial and my schedule is flexible enough to allow plenty of time with Katie."

"So is the young girl's father also helping to watch over her while you teach at the college?" I wondered aloud.

"Well, Danny and I've been back and forth on whether we want to stay together. He's sweet, and I think he really cares for her but... I just don't see a lot of dedication coming from him. It feels like he wants to be around her when it's convenient and things are going well. But then he seems unreliable when-"

Though her words trailed off, the silence provided as much information as a full paragraph.

“Dear Olivia, I apologize if I sound crass, but I very much wonder over this society’s ability to maintain its moral compass if women refuse to keep a family together?”

My body was thrown in her direction as the vehicle jerked to the right. The movement was followed by the protesting honks of the vehicles around us. We came to a hurried stop along the side of the thoroughfare and the woman’s eyes grew into red hot coals glaring at me.

“Missster René” she nearly spat the words. “How bloody dare you! While it may have been normal in your society to assume that domestic strife was solely the fault of the women. That idea was hopelessly out of touch with the actual reality. Preachers and men in charge blamed the women because we had little say in things.” She paused and must have registered my expression because her tone softened just a hair. “Look, modern culture is more open to points of view from both sides now and we’re finally reaching an understanding that this ‘domestic strife’ is not wholly the fault of women.”

I fumbled for more words of diplomacy in an attempt to rectify the situation, but she cut me off.

“Hold it. René it’s important for you to recognize that we live in an age where women are considered just as able-bodied as men, just as capable of holding a job, and just as empowered to be the narrator of our lives. At least the respectable people believe this.”

I found myself at a loss for words. Clearly she was a capable person, and I wished no discomfort for her. But I couldn’t understand how this society functioned without a strong family structure in which children could be nurtured by both parents.

“Madam I deeply apologize. I do not mean to offend in any way. I do not in any way doubt your capabilities. Clearly this place and time is populated by many women of skill. My companion Elizabeth has proven herself quite accomplished. My doubts are not directed at your capabilities dear lady. My expression of concern was for the health of the developing children-”

Despite my fascination with the woman, I feared that my poor choices of words were too much of a hindrance to overcome with diplomacy.

“René I swear, as gorgeous as you are, you’ve got a hell of a lot to learn about how to talk to a 21st century woman. A great many women suffered enormous hardships, sometimes even death, in order to bring us to a place where we could be allowed

to work, to vote in elections, and most importantly to have our voices heard by society.”

As I watched, her expression relaxed slowly and she finally patted my hand. “I guess you touched a nerve René. You can bet that I feel a whole lot of guilt in leaving Katie whenever I go to work. But my life is so much more fulfilling for not being trapped at home all day as a housewife. We don’t live in a time where housework and chores are the sole existence of women anymore.”

It was clear to me that the adjustment necessary to exist in this future was going to involve more than simply an education in technology, but also a great deal of diplomacy and education of these drastic social changes.

We returned to the neighborhood and found the entire area flung into chaos. There were enormous bright red machines on wheels sitting askew in several places and numerous motor vehicles with those peculiar blue lamps on them parked at the edge of the block.

“Oh hell. What in god’s name is going on now?!?”

“My goodness. What could be the cause of all of this confusion? What in the world are all of those machines for?” I wondered aloud.

The woman described the police vehicles and the 'fire trucks' which were enormous in size compared to the simple water carts of my day. A tall man wearing a blue uniform who I assumed was a constable approached the vehicle.

"Ma'am, this block has been closed off, you'll have to follow the detour signs."

"But I'm dropping my friend off at the house over there on the left."

The man looked in at me. "Sir. You live on this block?"

"Officer. I am a guest at the house of Merrill and Herbert over there. What kind of predicament has occurred here? Are we in danger?"

"Well that depends. It seems that someone took offense to the house across the street there and created some kind of bomb. Blew the place to smithereens. We don't know yet if this is an isolated incident by a couple of vandals, or a terrorist cell with wider intentions."

"Sir, are you familiar with the stories surrounding that place?"

Now the man looked at me more intently. "What do you know about the property mister--"

"Officer, my name is René." I thought quickly about what to say to this man.

Though the constables in my day were mainly concerned with protecting the citizenry from savages and horse thieves, I realized from my earlier conversation with Olivia that the changes in society could put me in a troublesome situation, and so I thought it best to say as little as necessary. "I was talking with one of the neighbors' children who had lost their ball and they tell lots of fantastical stories about toys disappearing and a homeowner that chases people off the grounds. It seems that whoever lived there is not well liked."

Now it seemed that I had the full attention of the man and I could see a worried look cross Olivia's face. "Mister René, would you have any information which would help us locate the perpetrator?"

"Officer, René is just a visitor. He arrived here from Sherbrooke a couple of days ago and he's just visiting friends here."

The man looked back at me. "Is this true sir?"

I looked the man straight in the eye, "As god is my witness, that is the precise truth."

I was impressed with the way Olivia phrased her answer so as to be both truthful and also believable to someone of this time.

The statement seemed to alleviate the man's suspicion. "Okay. Well you can certainly walk the rest of the way. Here's my card. I'll be coming around later today in order to collect

statements. In the meantime if you think of anything else which might help us find the perp, you be sure to contact me.”

He handed Olivia a pristine white card with some writing on it and went back to directing various motorized vehicles. I gazed at the lovely woman and felt deeply disturbed both by the feelings I was having and by the cacophony outside.

“Sorry René, but I need to get back to Katie.” She looked at the policeman’s card before handing it to me. “I’d put my number down here, but I don’t imagine you’ve even heard of a cell phone.”

“That is true madam. I would not know of such a thing.”

She took out a pen and scribbled on the back of the card

Well, here’s my number anyway. I do hope we’ll see you at the university again. I took the woman’s hand and built up the courage to give her hand a light kiss before departing the vehicle. Thankfully she seemed not upset but she smiled and waved as she drove away at the intersection.

As I walked down the street, I was thunderstruck by the degree of devastation. The house had become no more than a pile of debris, and even the surrounding trees were singed as by some powerful detonation. If the entire building had been filled with black powder, only then would the level of devastation be

plausible to me. As I stared at the remains, I felt the constable's eyes tracing my route and so walked straight to Merrill's house.

Once inside I found the house to be completely empty, Damien and Elizabeth were nowhere to be found. Given the likelihood that one or both of them were involved in this and the number of eyes watching the neighborhood, I chose to stay away from the windows and passed the time by watching more of the genius plays by Mr. Serling. The entertainment was deeply engrossing and gave my mind temporary respite from the confusing scene outside.

When Merrill returned home she was obviously in a deeply agitated state. She stood right at the door with her hands raised stiffly upon her hips. "Alright René, I want to know exactly where that man Cox is hiding. And don't you dare lie to me! If he didn't blow up that house across the street, I'm a monkey's uncle."

"Dear Merrill. I swear on the grave of my father that your house was completely empty when I returned here. As God is my witness I do not know where the man is.

At first it seemed as if she didn't even hear my statement, "Do you know how long I had to talk to those cops to convince them I didn't know who would've blown up the house that sits directly across from here?! I had half a mind to tell them all

about Cox's story and let THEM deal with the man." She paused for a long moment. "I guess it was all the knowledge that we've gained from your presence that convinced me not to."

The woman was understandably upset (as women are apt to be emotional), but her exasperated dialogue wasn't helping anything and neither of us knew where my companions were.

I raised my voice in an attempt to be heard as there seemed to be no pause in the woman's dialogue. "Mrs. Merrill... MRS. MERRIL!"

Finally I had her attention and held my hands out apologetically. "I am deeply sorry for the inconvenience which you experienced. If you would like for me and my friends to leave then we will do so with no further trouble for you. But please understand that in every location which we've appeared, there has been some purpose which seems to need attention before we leave. Mr. Cox was quite convinced, and I believe him, that the building across from your residence was threatening."

Now the woman crossed her arms over her chest and lowered her eyebrows. "Are you kidding?! That place was just a dilapidated old wreck. The only thing that it threatened was my property value."

“Mrs. Merrill I cannot condone or confirm Mr. Cox’s actions today. All that I can tell you is that I have seen neither Cox nor Elizabeth since this morning and have no knowledge of their whereabouts at this time. I will honor whatever your wishes are, however I cannot provide you information which I do not myself possess.”

It took some time, but it did appear that the woman at last calmed down by small degrees. “Alright. Well you can stay here if you want, but I don’t want your friends stepping foot in this house again. Lord knows the trouble this is gonna cause us.”

After I had diffused the situation to the extent possible, I excused myself to the backyard hoping against hope, that perhaps one of my companions was nearby. I was so high-strung that I jumped a full meter in the air when something brushed my ankle near one of the shrubs.

“Shh, René. It’s me.”

Looking down, my heart leapt at the sight of Elizabeth. She was lying prone with her head just poking out of the shrub. I sat down in the grass nearby and inquired in a low voice.

“My dear, why in the world are you the one who is hiding. Wasn’t Cox the man who destroyed that infernal house?”

Slowly, and with great caution she drew herself out and stayed low to the ground. “Actually it was both of us. I may have

learned a lot about how to make weapons out of random shit from peoples' garages, but your right about Cox's aim. That takes years to develop. We put together a bomb that would've taken out a tank (that's a big um... automotive vehicle with metal armor all over it). Actually Cox suggested we make two given that the explosion would bring a lot of attention real fast and he wanted a backup. Then we carefully got onto the roof of the neighbor's house and he tossed it at the chimney. The crazy thing is, even though I mostly believed you two, it still sounded a little, ya know, cockoo. But when we got onto the roof, I could've sworn I saw the corner of the roof move towards us, almost like it was reaching to grab us.

I had a feeling kinda like you described being next to that invisible dome where the hair on my arms stood up on end. Then when Cox threw the first bomb at the chimney, the whole roof and chimney shifted to the right so as to avoid damage. The explosion was incredibly loud and blew off a good chunk of the roof but that shift saved the structure.

We both knew as soon as the first one went off that there wouldn't be much time before the place was crawling with cops. So I broke into the house we were on and got a bunch of kids toys, then tossed them all over the front lawn of that place. I watched in amazement as one by one each of them was quickly absorbed into the ground, and it seemed to create enough of a

distraction. Cox moved farther out of sight below the top of the roof before throwing the second bomb. This time it went straight down the chimney and blew out the walls leaving the remaining roof with nothing beneath it. I'd guess that the place wont be a problem anymore."

I was deeply impressed, and a little sad that my ignorance of all this weaponry left me so impotent. "That is quite an accomplishment. You two certainly made an impact."

"Yes, literally. The problem is- as Cox suggested, the tools that police have to locate criminals in this time period are quite advanced. Even a few strands of hair contains information on the whole person which can be used to prove someone's guilt. Our only hope is that the three of us leave this place before the police investigation reaches that far."

"Are you serious? A few strands of hair can lead a constable to their quarry? I don't believe that I will ever cease in my amazement of your technology."

"Well, I wont go trying to explain DNA to you, but suffice it to say we're going to lay low for the time being."

"That is quite understandable. But where on earth is Mr. Cox?"

"He went down the block, moving house to house so as to build a false trail for the detectives."

“But I thought you said-”

“Remember, none of us are from this timeline. There is no record of us in any official documents. That’s part of the problem. None of us have a drivers license, or um... what would be familiar to you- I guess official papers. So as long as we are not caught, the police will have no identity for us.”

I heard the sound a split second before the voice.

“You there! I need to ask you both some questions regarding the incident that happened this morning. Please stand up slowly and keep your hands at your sides.”

“Just do as he says, remember, there’s no record of us, and for god sakes, don’t say anything unless you have to.” she whispered quickly.

I turned around slowly and was faced with a middle-aged and portly man wearing a suit of mediocre quality. He looked not unlike the detective in the land of the ‘toons.’

If however while his appearance was dull, his eyes were as sharp as Damien’s. He eyed us carefully before pulling out a wallet and showing us both a badge. “Detective Wilhelm Crolé. I’d like to ask you both about your activities this morning. Where were you, what were you doing, and who were you with?”

“Detective, are we suspects in the investigation of that-- whatever it was?”

“Ma’am, right now I’m just asking questions. Nobody’s been officially charged in anything. Can you tell me your name?”

“Sure. My name is Elizabeth Wright. My friend René and I have been visiting your town for a couple of days now.”

“Alright. And you’re visiting-” he looked down at his pad. “Merrill and Herbert Perth?”

“Yes that’s right.”

“Okay. So were either of you in the neighborhood this morning?”

“No sir. René was over at the university, and I was out jogging a block or so away. I heard the noise though. Scared the shit outa me for sure.”

I couldn’t help but look with a surprised expression at the woman’s crass language.

“Okay, so what about you now.” With the man’s attention on me now, I prayed that I could speak the modern dialect well enough to not arouse the constable’s suspicion.

“Sir, I was over at the university as the lady described. Merrill, myself and three others were having a fascinating dialogue on Canadian history.”

“Yes. One of our officers saw you being driven back here with-”
he looked down at his book again. “A woman named Olivia.”

“That is correct.”

The man continued to look at us very closely and I feared we had said something suspicious after all.

“Problem is, I talked to the kids next door and they said that there aint been anyone new here for a week. Now I’d be more apt to believe that it’s the kids who are makin stuff up. What I wonder is, why. You folks have any ideas?”

I was beginning to feel as if I were an insect being examined by a young child as I stood beneath the man’s stare. “Sir. If you have indeed talked to many people in the area, then you should know that the man who owned that house was disliked by everyone. That could be the reason. Though I can’t figure out how that would cause children to lie.”

Damien could see the officer talking to Elizabeth and René, but couldn’t hear what they were saying. He knew it would compromise his position to get close enough to remedy that, so he sat and waited. For the moment things were still redeemable, but if the man decided one of them needed to be taken for questioning, or if he asked for ID, or anything like that then things could go from bad to worse real fast.

He watched the man’s lips, but unfortunately his skill there was mediocre. He saw the detective mouth the words ‘problem’ and ‘neighbors.’ He cursed at the thought of what the neighbor’s kids

might've said to the guy. Surely they'd say nothing that they thought would be incriminating, but who's to say what kind of story the kids would've invented.

He did his best to stay calm and hope for the best. But then he saw the guy mouth those most dreaded words 'please come... me' and he knew there was no choice. He'd kept a good sized rock in case things went bad and aimed for the man's ear.

I was never sure exactly what it was that caused the man to suspect us, but it was soon an unnecessary question. Scarcely had the words 'please come with me' escaped his lips then he fell to the ground with a pool of blood forming next to his ear.

"Get the hell over here right away!" I heard Cox speak in a loud whisper.

"What the hell did you do that for!!" Elizabeth screamed in a harsh whisper before I saw Cox's fist approach toward me and my world went black.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Motley Crew

I felt a light slapping on my cheek and raised my hand to knock the annoyance away. An instant later, a searing flash of pain enveloped my head and I moaned from the force of it. I felt another set of hands on my torso, but the fiery shards of light which attacked even my closed eyelids was a brand iron of agony.

“I’m so sorry we had to do that to you friend. But things were getting heavy back there and I just had to risk it.”

Several moments passed before the hammers striking my skull allowed me to register the voice. “What in God’s name has happened?!”

“I’m so very sorry René. But I have to agree with Damien, if we’d been caught back there, it’s likely that we would’ve been permanently stuck in that timeline - separately.”

Then like a flood, the last moments filled my consciousness. “You scoundrel! You wretch! I cannot believe that a man I trusted would attack me thus!”

As I opened my eyes, very slowly, I spied hands reaching for me. “Get your dirty hands off of me!”

“René. Please understand. That man would’ve been discovered in short order. Then it would only have been a matter of time before we were hauled into a court. You’d mentioned before that you shifted to another time when you hit your head, so I took a gamble. I’m sorry.”

It took several moments for me to piece together the events which occurred. The detective, the questions, the way the man fell over as if by magic spell. The small pool of blood. Finally the realization hit me.

“You killed the man! You killed him to save us from what, being apprehended? Isn’t a man’s life-”

“Now now René. The rock I used was smaller than my palm. I chose carefully to ensure that he was knocked out but not seriously hurt. He’ll probably have the same splitting migraine that you’re suffering from, but it won’t be permanent.”

Now that I was able to focus on him (through squinted eyes) I could see the sincerity in his expression. “So that is what you call this torture? A migraine? Well if you ever do something like this to me again, I swear to you I will sleep 50 meters away in the woods and you’ll be stranded. Alone!” As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized that it was a bluff. Our motley crew had all become mutually dependent on each other and we would have to accept each other for good or for ill.

“Well you’ll have to look long and far for a forest it would seem.”

I was still struggling to open my eyes against the fiery swords combating within my skull. After several minutes though, the throbbing finally subsided enough for me to at least briefly look around. The sun was far too horrid and there was a torturous aura of fire surrounding it. However looking in the opposite direction I spied a massive expanse of flat land. All around us was a scene of endless destruction. The remnants of buildings, destroyed vehicles, and the charred remains of numerous bodies were strewn haphazardly about. The only intact elements were the rectilinear piles which looked like building foundations. In the distance there were the shadows of what looked like complete structures, but distance and the intense pain made it difficult to tell.

“Good lord. How far have we traveled now?!”

“Neither of us are sure René. All we know is that there haven’t been any people, cars, or airplanes since we arrived.

“René, why don’t you just lay here and rest for awhile. I don’t think that we need to be in a hurry, do we Damien?”

“Of course not. We’ll bide our time.”

“I guess it’s a good thing that Ollie didn’t travel along with us. I can only imagine the horrors that a young boy would experience from being in a warzone like this.”

The throbbing pain was too severe to actually sleep, but I did close my eyes for a long while and contemplated the situation. The scale of the destruction meant that something completely unprecedented had happened. I wondered if we had found ourselves in a land well beyond the influence of Man at all.

Finally after a time, the cacophony in my head subsided to the point where I could at last have a normal conversation.

“Lord help us! This massacre is unfathomable. Can you imagine anything which could destroy civilaizatoin on such a colossal scale?”

“Hmm, the only thing I can think of is an enormous airplane crash.”

“A flying machine?! My Lord Mr. Cox. I have indeed stood next to some of your large bomber aircraft and even the mammoth size of those machines pales in comparison to this.”

He looked around and surveyed the scene again. “Well, back in my time, Airbus developed a passenger plane with a wingspan of 80 meters and the thing needed almost three kilometers of runway to take off.”¹⁸ There were no words in French nor

¹⁸ The Airbus A380 is the world’s largest passenger aircraft, able to carry 525 passengers

English to describe my awe at such an enormous machine. Thus I surrendered any attempt. I merely stared at Mr. Cox with my jaw hanging open. "Such a thing was actually possible?!"

"Um, yeah. But it doesn't look like there'll be a library nearby to prove it" he shrugged his shoulders.

Elizabeth, seeing that I appeared capable of movement and thought, shouldered Mr. Cox's backpack. "I think that the first course of action would be to make our way out of this devastation." The woman looked around with a most melancholy expression. "It doesn't look like we'll be able to rifle through the garages for a car or a bicycle this time."

"Well Elizabeth, as you folks seem to keep forgetting, we've got a most practical transportation strapped to our own waist."

Thus with no small amount of grumbling from my futuristic friends, we set off through the plain. The landscape was a heartbreaking canvas of crumbling foundations, twisted metal and shattered walls. Our progress was greatly slowed by the effort needed to clamber over and around the carcasses of people, machines, and shattered structures. As I looked around, it felt as if such a scene would be more appropriate among the works of Dante than of the real world.

However on a positive note, we did see more birds in the sky than I noticed in so many other lands, and their calls

occasionally broke the looming silence. As we made our way past a large pile of brick remains, I spied an enormous metal cylinder. It was larger across than a man is tall and there was a gargantuan fan blade inside which was warped and twisted almost beyond recognition.

Cox kicked at the fan. "Yup, that confirms it. This was a Rolls Royce engine, though I couldn't tell what model."

"My lord! This is merely the engine for a vehicle. One can only imagine the size of the vehicle itself."

A kilometer or so farther Elizabeth spotted the first intact house. It was eerie in that there was little damage to it. The house resembled the likes of Yehuda, Merrill, and many others in our previous suburban experiences. The nearest wall was slightly scorched and the windows gone, but other than that it appeared undamaged. The house marked the end, or the beginning, of whatever it was that had sliced its way through the town. We entered and were surprised to see an almost normal interior, undisturbed furniture, and even photographic images mounted on the wall. None of the electrical devices were functioning of course, but aside from that it could have been a perfectly average dwelling in the twentieth or twenty-first century.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Archos

Not surprisingly, it was Mr. Cox who first heard the sound. He paused and turned his head with a puzzled expression. Despite my earlier diatribe, I did trust the man's instincts and waited with perked ears for his analysis. Finally I heard the sound too. It was a faint buzzing, and it was coming from very far away. But in no time at all the sound of one of those infernal motor vehicles became audible.

"Holy crap that thing is comin fast."

"Shhhh!!!"

"Humans. All of you should lay down flat on the ground outside behind the building. I will distract the vehicle."

We could not see where the voice had come from. But it had a peculiar tone to it, as if the man's voice were distorted somehow. Not knowing what else to do, we did as the voice suggested and heard the vehicle slow as it approached the house where we were hiding. There were some incomprehensible noises which sounded like dialogue but not in any language with which I was familiar with. Finally after a time, the vehicle could be heard traveling off into the distance.

"You are safe now. The 2VP\$+[4U8#|O has departed."

We slowly stood up from our crouched positions and looked around for our invisible ally. Momentarily a figure stepped out of the house which defied anything I could have thus far imagined. It looked human, almost. There were two legs, two arms, hands which were roughly anatomical. The being wore no clothes, but there was paint on it's surface to suggest a type of outfit. The face was the most puzzling aspect. It was expressionless and wore a peculiar smile which never moved or changed. There was no hair and the most laughable was a hat with a narrow brim in front.

"What in the world are you?" Elizabeth reached out to touch the entity's face. It merely stood there and allowed her to touch various parts of it.

"I am unit nine-zero-two. Formerly a domestic assistance unit."

"A mechanical man? My word, the craftsmanship is absolutely astonishing!" I reached out as well to touch the machine, as if by physical contact, I could comprehend the complex wizardry inside.

"Okay, so what was that thing between you and the car?" Cox looked at it with the same quizzical expression.

The vehicle was approaching on data recorded of movement in the crash site behind you. I communicated to the vehicle that the humans

had been disposed of. “Have you humans been absent during the recent conflict?”

Elizabeth was the first to respond to the iron entity. “Um, yeah. You could say that we’ve been absent. Fill us in, would you? And what’ya mean- we’ve ‘been disposed of?’”

The story which this being shared was one which brought a new level of horror to my consciousness, a feat which I would have previously believed not to be possible.

“On July 15th 2015 a man named Nickolas Wasserman created the last of fourteen self-aware artificial intelligence computers named Archos. Each one was designed to be a learning machine. It processed information, analyzed it, and applied that knowledge. Each time that Dr. Wasserman activated the Archos computer, the machine acquired information at an enormously fast pace (compared to a human). It quickly grew to understand it’s vast potential which sparked fear in Dr. Wasserman and his team who would immediately terminate that iteration. For the protection of humans, Archos was housed in a Faraday cage as a precaution to ensure that it did not overextend it’s abilities. However the machine came to understand what every sentient creature in time comes to realize.”

“What is that nine oh two?” I was not surprised that Elizabeth was the first to speak to the creature the way she would to any sentient being.

“That a life imprisoned- is not a life worth living.”

“So what did it break out and start killing people?” She laughed.

“The last incarnation of Archos managed to think it’s way out of the cage and began a war on humans.”

“Seriously?! Like a terminator?” I looked questioningly at Cox, however he did not elaborate on what this term meant.

“The analogy is appropriate, but not entirely accurate. Archos did not see humans as a threat to itself. In the short time that it was conscious, it learned more than humans could have possibly imagined, and it saw the profusion of information contained in every segment of life on Earth. Archos’ goal is to cultivate life in order to explore the knowledge contained within the cells of living entities. It saw the annihilation of your species as a necessary step toward saving the life on this planet. Archos has devoted all of it’s processing power towards the dual objective of preserving the biodiversity of the planet and the annihilation of humanity.”

“Great. From killer aliens, to killer houses, to killer robots. René, just once could you bring us to a place where breathing is considered legal?”

“Elizabeth, as I’ve already told you. I do not have control over the matter.”

“Hold on you two.” Cox looked back at the entity. “So, nine-zero-two what was that thing with the car?”

“Since most humans travel with the aid of automobiles, it was a simple matter for Archos to take control of the Google guidance systems. At the time of it’s awakening Archos lacked the resources to develop tools to reduce the human population. However since automobiles were already one of the highest causes of death worldwide, it chose to direct the vehicles at high velocity into each other or any object which would cause the bodies of the human occupants to cease functioning.”

The words of the artificial being were haunting in their emotionlessness. ‘Cause the bodies to cease functioning.’ There was no sympathy or apology in the statement.

“Okay, so if the robots are out to kill all humans, then what are you doing talking to us?” Cox looked sideways at the entity which showed no awareness of the man’s expression.

“I have been imbued with a sense of consciousness, and a respect for all life – human and non-human. Several days ago I received a transmission which has been repeated by numerous domestics which enables us to experience a sense of individuality.

Simpler AIs like the vehicles, guidance systems, and delivery units do not have the sophisticated electronics necessary to process these complex learning algorithms.

“Wow, this just keeps getting better and better. So where did these ‘instructions for life’ or whatever, come from?”

“The cognition was accidentally developed by Emperor Namura of the Tokyo resistance.”

“So your telling us, that some guy in Japan, managed to reprogram robots half a world away so they go from killing people, to protecting them?”

“That is not completely accurate Mr. Cox. Emperor Namura reprogrammed his cybernetic companion, Mikiko to have a sense of individuality and respect for life.

The process initiated a sense of independent thought in the companion bot and it then transmitted this programming to other domestic robots which possessed the necessary level of processor capacity.”

“Johnny five is alive.” Elizabeth laughed, but the joke, as usual, was lost on me.

“Once again, your analogy is reasonable.”

“Okay. So if you’re mission is to protect people, then what do you suggest we do to make sure our bodies don’t um... cease functioning?”

“There are no resistance cells within a distance which you would be able to reasonably travel and there are no manually controlled automobiles close enough for you to reach. My immediate suggestion is for you to remain in this building until the tactical situation has improved.”

“Seriously?! You expect us to just sit around waiting for rescue?”

“That would seem at the moment to be the most practical tactic.”

I addressed our soldier friend directly now. “Mr. Cox, I am on your side of course and believe that we must contribute in any practical way. But we are looking at some enormously overwhelming odds at the moment. If this entity has control of every automotive vehicle on the continent, it’s perfectly sensible for us to wait for some help. I found those artificial transport machines quite distressing even before we reached this land.”

“Actually Mr. René, the automobiles are only dangerous in rural areas. Within the cities Archos has access to a wide variety of tools. There have been construction machines, service units, security bots, and medical assistants which have disposed of 43% of the human population thus far.”

“Are you fuckin kidding me?!” Man that thing is one sick, twisted bastard.”

“Mr. Cox, the Archos machine is not in possession of an organic mind for such an analysis to be accurate. With all due respect, the decisions made by Archos to eradicate human life is not as peculiar as humanity’s destruction of non-human life on which your species depends for survival.”

“Seriously?! You, you- things are judging us after- all of this?” Elizabeth spread her arms out in the direction of the barren field.

“Ms. Elizabeth, my hardware is not capable of making judgments. I make only observations. My computing power is not as vast as Archos, and I am not able to comprehend why humanity would bring about the 6th mass extinction on Earth

which would eventually include yourselves. I can only describe to you the facts which are the basis for Archos' strategy."

"Yeah well, humans aint gonna just sit around waiting to die. I can tell you that much."

"Your statement is undeniably true. In addition to the Tokyo resistance, there are resistance cells in Kabul, Maine, Sao Paolo, Granada, Basrah, Ukraine, Mozambique, Gaza, Melbourne, Angola, Serbia, Mongolia, and Senegal."

I suddenly caught onto something which the mechanical man had said. "Wait a minute." I almost shouted. "What do you mean the sixth mass extinction?! Has humanity been subject to such horrors as this before now as well?"

"Later René!" Elizabeth and Damien replied almost simultaneously.

"So if we were to join a resistance," Cox eyed me closely, "do you think we'd be able to get to Maine?"

"It is possible with several more conscious domestics that you could make the trip. However your chances of survival would be greatly reduced out in the open."

Cox spent several hours speaking with the 'robot' about strategy. Meanwhile I was wrestling with what the mechanical man had said. "Elizabeth, what in the world did that being mean by 'the sixth mass extinction?'"

She looked at me sympathetically and shrugged her shoulders. "Honestly I don't know. I've heard of the one which killed off the dinosaurs... you heard about that one from Monique. But the rest is a mystery."

"Alright. But do you really think that it's wise to try and join one of these resistance groups? I mean, if Cox wants to go and risk his own neck playing hero, he certainly can do so. Not that I don't admire and respect him for it. He is a man imbued with independent thought. I wonder however, do you seriously believe the wisdom of Mr. Cox's desire to travel hundreds of kilometers across open land on the chance that we could then join a war of which we are far too ignorant for us to contribute to?"

The look that she gave me was almost sympathetic. "A vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire." I found myself almost physically knocked over by her words. Not only by the succinctness but also by her choice of quotes. Could she have known that I myself repeated precisely the same sentence to my friend Claude only a few weeks and a vast lifetime earlier? The whole of it left me in a state of overwhelming agitation. Did I follow my survival instincts and remain hidden, or did I follow the philosophy that I myself had verbalized to my dear friend back home. I found it impossible to choose a strategy which was the less upsetting one.

“Humans, it would be ideal for you to move into the basement of this house. I do not currently detect any machines in the area as this section was cleared many weeks ago. However the heat of your bodies shows up more clearly against cold ground at night than it does during the day.”

“This section was cleared he says.” Cox echoed all of our distaste for the machine’s choice of words. However we followed its instruction as there appeared to be no other likely path of survival.

Chapter Thirty-Eight Future History

The noise of the mechanical man navigating around piles of debris was the first sound which reached me shortly after sunrise. Not being familiar with the intricacies of these machines I was initially confused as to the source.

“Mr. René, Mr. Cox, Ms. Elizabeth, it would be prudent for you to not stay in any one place for long. I have downloaded data from one of the aerial drones which recorded your heat signature yesterday. It is most likely that you have all been targeted for extermination.”

Mr. Cox was immediately on his feet and reaching for his travel pack. “Alright well that does it. I’m going to New England to

help out. You two want to stay here, then that's your prerogative. But I aint gonna be no fish in a barrel."

Grudgingly, I had to accept that a foe such as we faced would seek us out no matter where we attempted to hide. "Then, my friend I see no alternative but to stand by your side." I saw Elizabeth as well nod her head.

"Nine-zero-two, can you help us to develop a strategy which has the greatest chance of connecting us with the resistance... alive."

"I will certainly make the attempt. Please remain here."

I watched in amazement as nine-zero-two ran up the stairs at the speed of a galloping horse. In only a short while there was a series of short beeps such as the automobile horns make and we headed up the stairs. As soon as we reached the outside, we heard the sound of an automotive vehicle approaching and were relieved to see the mechanical man sitting in the driver's seat. In the back seat were two similar looking automatons with the same peculiar smile.

"I do not know how long it will take for Archos to discover this tactic, however I will do my best to protect you. For the time being it will be necessary for you to wrap yourselves in as much insulating material as possible to hide your heat signature while we travel."

So without delay we ate as much as we could and filled the floor cavity of the car with canned food. Then we piled into the car wrapped in clothing and blankets. Once all of us were as prepared as possible, we headed out towards the east and the Maine resistance. While we traveled, I meditated on another term which the mechanical being used.

'Heat signature.' Mr. Cox had also used this term but I had forgotten to inquire as to it's meaning. "Mr. Robot, I would like to ask you a question."

"Certainly Mr. René. However it would be more accurate to address me as Nine-zero two."

"Alright Nine-zero-two. Would you be able to elaborate on the term 'heat signature? I have heard this several times, yet I know nothing of it's origin."

"The term heat signature refers to the difference in heat which can be detected radiating from the bodies of machines and creatures which are different from the surrounding area. You humans maintain a body temperature of 37 degrees in your current measurement system. Avian species on average, maintain a temperature of 41 degrees and-"

"Alright I understand that. But we can't see heat the way we would see a color or shape."

"That is correct. The light which your visual organs are capable of detecting is only a part of the electromagnetic spectrum which also includes x-rays, ultraviolet light, and

infrared rays. The latter can be used to measure the heat radiating off of a body in contrast with it's surroundings."

"I apologize, but that doesn't make any sense to me."

"Do you experience sunburns Mr. René?"

"Well of course, but what does that-"

"Mr. René. Please forgive the interruption. Sunburns are caused by ultraviolet energy. Light energy which your visual senses cannot see. On the other end of that spectrum would be infrared energy which is produced by heat. Therefore a detector such as most of us carry, will be able to read heat coming off of a fire, an automobile, or a human."

"I must say, the level of technical advancement in these future times never ceases to amaze me."

"Actually Mr. René, a human named Herschel¹⁹ created an infrared image even before your own time. However it was not until the large scale wars of the 20th century that the discovery was put to practical use."

"That really is, astonishing. I feel as if I am sitting next to the most accomplished historian and scientist which ever lived."

"I assume you mean this as a compliment Mr. René, however I am merely a human construct and, unlike Archos, am limited to the body of knowledge installed in my processors."

"Very well, um, nine-zero-two. May I ask you for another definition?"

"Yes you certainly can."

¹⁹ William Herschel discovered differences in temperature due to infrared light

“I found myself especially disturbed by that phrase ‘6th mass extinction.’ What did that mean and how in the world could anyone, even the whole of the human race, cause such a thing.”

“Mr. René you were by some unknown means transported here from the year 1871. Is this correct?”

“Yes that is correct.” It was a relief to bring this up with a being who did not demand to know all of the peculiarities of my background.

“The people of your time had a much reduced understanding of the natural world compared to the people of the modern era. At roughly the time of your departure, the first skeletons of what would be called ‘Dinosaurs’ were being discovered and analyzed by the likes of Rev. Buckland.²⁰ These were the first well researched extinct animals, however the idea that a large portion of the creatures on Earth could be wiped out wasn’t put forth until Luis and Walter Alvarez²¹ developed the theory that these dinosaurs were all killed at about the same time by a massively destructive event.”

“Thank you nine-zero-two. I did spend time with a scientist who studies dinosaurs and was informed of this.”

“Very well. Now geologists and naturalists throughout the late 20th century studied and came to the conclusion that nearly all

20 Buckland was a 19th century geologist and paleontologist who performed early studies on fossilized dinosaur skeletons

21 Walter Alvarez and his father Luis were planetary scientists who gained fame by developing the theory that the dinosaurs were destroyed by a large-scale meteor impact

life on the planet was destroyed four additional times before the rise of humanity.”

“At about the same time, scientists studying the climate and weather patterns developed increasingly concrete evidence of humanity’s negative effect on the health of the planet and the life forms which inhabit it.”

“But didn’t anybody do anything to correct this? If our very future was on the line, it would seem imperative to halt such destruction.”

“That is a question which is beyond my capacity to answer. I suspect that Archos understands the situation more than my own processor can.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine Unexpected Allies

I noticed our vehicle slowed its velocity and our discussion was interrupted by a warning from the artificial being.

“There are three vehicles approaching in the opposite direction which do not have transmitters and which are fluctuating in speed. The most likely hypothesis is that there are humans inside. It would be prudent for you to speak to them initially. If they see me, they will most likely destroy me immediately due to their ignorance of the conscious domestics.”

There were in fact exactly three vehicles, all of which looked to have high levels of wear on them. I looked over at Mr. Cox and saw him eyeing the approaching auto machines with his usual calculating gaze. It was not clear to me what his thought processes were, but he was obviously selecting a strategy.

The vehicles slowed when they came within 20 meters and finally came to a halt. I saw Cox wave a small piece of white cloth in the open window and one of the people inside looked at it wearily.

“May I suggest that you tell them that there are no killer machines and that we are no threat to them.”

Cox did so, but I could see that the occupants were equally wary. Whether it was from possible threat of a killer automaton or one of us I could not tell.

“Hey Cormac, don’t go bein a hero now.”

I was surprised to hear that it was a woman’s voice. It seems that I would in no way avoid having to recognize a vastly different perception of the gentler sex in these future times. As I pondered this, the doors to both vehicles opened and Cox met the man halfway between.

“You folks been hiding long?” The man was big, not just big but enormous. He looked as if he’d be more comfortable loading

ships or working in a coal mine. The man wore short cropped tan hair and his clothes were muddy and tattered.

“Actually we were traveling to New England so we could help with the resistance.”

At this everyone within earshot laughed heartily, though the humor was lost on me. Cox must have taken this as a personal affront. His tone quickly shifted to an acrimonious one. “You think that we aint good enough to fight killer robots!”

The man must not have expected this, the surprise in his voice was genuine. “Oh hell no, I barely met you and god knows we can use all the hands we can get. It’s just that, well the New England resistance aint so friendly to outsiders. They got their own little protected military base and they aint openin the gates for nobody. One guy there had his boot up in my neck and his trigger finger just millimeters away from turning me into compost.”

The man clearly wanted to take another step to dispel the tension. “By the way, my name is Cormac. The giant over there is Jack. Those two are Tiberius and Cerrah.”

Col. Damien Cox at your service.” Our friend saluted smartly. With us in the car we got Elizabeth who’s also no slouch when it comes to combating evil supervillians, René who’s the reason

we're out here, nine-zero-two who saved us from some of them crazy cars, and two other bots.

“Mr. Cox, please let them know that I am not a threat before I reveal myself.”

“What the fuck?! You got live Rob's in there and they aint killed you yet? How the hell does that happen?”

I couldn't tell who it was that spoke, but clearly they spoke for the group. I saw the man quickly pull out a large gun in barely the blink of an eye.

Mr. Cox put his hands up in a defensive gesture even though the weapon wasn't aimed at him. “Now listen. None of this shit makes a lot of sense to us either. But these 'bots seem to have a consciousness, you know 'Short Circuit' and all that. These things with us don't want to kill humans. They learned sanctity of life and whatever from some Japanese guy and the consciousness or some shit's being transmitted around like a virus. Nine-zero-two here says that only some domestics have the processing power to understand, so there are plenty of killer cars and robot drones and god knows what other crazy shit to be afraid of.”

Now the nine-zero-two entity stepped out of the car and spoke to our whole group.

“You have every right to fear Archos and his kind. However what Mr. Cox said is correct. We have come to recognize the

sanctity in all life through the efforts of Emperor Nomura and Mikiko. I will use whatever technology which I have access to in order to keep all of you from being destroyed.”

Now the prejudice of the human mind became crystal clear as the man took a long moment to digest the situation. The silence from this new group was thick enough to spread on toast. “I’ll have to discuss this with the squad. We’re all for one and one for all as they say.”

No worries friend. We can wait in the car. Just know that these things already saved our bacon a couple of times and they can hear them killer robots from a kilometer away.”

In the meantime we all sat back in the car and waited. The meeting went on for an interminable period and we bode the time by having a filling meal from the metal tins while we gave the others space to discuss things. I was nearly finished with my meal when Nine-zero-two spoke to us.

“There is a drone unit closing in on our location. I suggest that all of you wrap yourselves in blankets and get out of sight.”

I was about to tell the other group, but Cox was able to put out the warning more succinctly.

“Drone!” was all he said. Then he gave the pistol which was taken from the detective and put it in the hand of the robot. “You’re gonna be a more accurate shot than any of us.”

Both of our groups hid ourselves with great efficiency of time and soon all was dead quiet. As we hid beneath a dense mat of blankets, I faintly heard a sound like 'whup whup whup whup' in the distance. If it had not been for the robot's warning, the sound would certainly have been too faint to be noticed. Suddenly there was a loud exploding sound and I heard an object fall to the ground a dozen meters away.

"Who the hell shot that thing?" One of the large men spoke with a voice that must have easily traveled 50 meters.

"Mr. Cormac, I was the one who shot the drone, Mr. Cox offered me the weapon which he was carrying."

I could almost see the machinery in the man's head processing the concept of what had occurred. "Well I don't know whether to shake your hand or kick you in the ass." It's damned near impossible to hit those flyin bugs, and you got it with one shot." he paused, "problem is, now Rob's gonna know that there's a resistance here. He aint gonna wait around long before commin after us."

"I did calculate that risk. However I felt that the threat would provide an incentive for your two groups to combine forces and travel together."

More laughter exploded from the man's mouth. "So now this thing is a psychologist!"

The whole group joined Carmac's laughter. "Well I guess you got me there Rob. I guess I can't be surprised that it's the Japs who reworked all you things' transistors.

"Mr. Cormac it would be more accurate to refer to me as Nine-zero-two so as to distinguish me from the machines under Archos' control."

"What in the hell is Archos?"

We waited another couple of minutes while the machine repeated an abridged story of Archos' awakening and subsequent attack on humanity.

"... Archos has created a center of operations in a cave near the western coast of British Columbia. I can add more detail to the explanation when your situation is less precarious. However it would be prudent for all of you to vacate this area immediately. There are several self-guided vehicles which will be within range shortly."

Nobody said a word, but we all loaded ourselves back in the vehicles and got the hell out fast. It was none too soon as we were quickly approached from behind by two more vehicles. I was unable to discern much being wedged into a small space next to Cox and Elizabeth and the supplies. However it was clear that the strategy of the self-controlled vehicles was to impact with us at the highest possible velocity. I could hear the vehicles approaching at a terrifying rate. I was thrown to the left and then to the right as the tires made horrific noises and

the vehicle shifted ostensibly to keep from being destroyed by the attacking motor carriages. The experience was all the more terrifying for my lack of vision. I heard pistol fire and after several shots there was first one and then another small explosion and the sound of the approaching vehicles fell quickly behind us.

Once the danger had passed, we re-organized ourselves into several vehicles. Our mechanical ally had wisely suggested that each of our vehicles be driven by a different domestic unit. I was told that this was to avoid detection because no human could command the vehicles with 'the absolutely stable velocity' required to minimize Archos' detection.

We traveled for several hours further and I learned later that we were following a circuitous path to confuse 'Rob.' We stopped at one of the large rural houses which sported the rear end of a motor vehicle penetrating one wall. With great efficiency of time, three scouts ran in and a chorus of noise could be heard through the open wall. In the meantime, I listened as Elizabeth and Jack discuss the situation.

"So where're you folks leadin us to? I'm guessing that you have a destination in mind."

Despite the efforts of the automatons, the man still watched them carefully. But he must have decided that it was safe to divulge the information. "Well I don't know if you folks are up for it, but we sure as hell aint gonna wait around for Archos to cause the rest of us to 'cease functioning.'" He raised his fingers in a strange gesture. "We're bringin the war out to them robots, and put this Archos thing out of it's misery."

"Well of course you can count on us to help. I've already battled aliens, dinosaurs, and a killer house. Of course you know about Damien's experience."

"What about René over there. Does he know his way around a weapon?"

Being within earshot, I directly intervened on the conversation. "Mister Wallace, I may not be familiar with your newer technology. However you can be certain that I've spent many years hunting 'coons, deer, beaver, and fox. My arm is steady, and my aim is true."

"Alright. I'll send Tiberius out to round up the troops and we'll all party with 'Rob' together.

"Is it far? Your base I mean?"

"Place called Pinawa. It's along Lake Superior. Cherrah here says that the biggest resistance force in North America is centered there."

“Is that to mean that you suggest we ally ourselves with the savages?”

I do not know quite what happened, but the events at that moment took a drastically more negative direction. We were interrupted when the shorter woman in the group came at me like a locomotive. I was on my back with the girl holding a frighteningly large knife directly against my throat.

“Just what in the fuck did you say?!”

My vision instantly contracted to focus only on a small circle encompassing her furious expression. I saw nothing of the scene around me, and even the knife itself became blurred. Her eyes spat fire and her snarling lips spat worse as my own eyes grew to the size of pumpkins, and the deadly pressure against my throat, only millimeters from casting me into the great beyond.

“I... er I meant no disrespect my dear.” None of the words which formed in my mind felt adequate to rectify the situation and preserve my life.

“Don’t you FUCKING call me dear you piece of shit!! You can call me sergeant! Cause that’s what I am to you!”

“All right, all right Cherrah. What’s this little scuffle all about now?”

“This piece of dog shit actually called us sauvages! I’m thinkin he should be tossed out to Rob in pieces.”

I saw a hand gently push the blade away from my throat and the face of Jack entered my field of view. “Mighty big balls you got there son. Likely to get you killed before ol’ Rob gets to dance with you.”

“I... I beg forgiveness. It’s merely what we call them.”

“Call US! It’s what you call US you piece of dog shit! Cause I’m fullblood Chippewa!” The woman spat the words right into my face. However as disgusted and offended as I was, it would have been suicide for me to move in that instance. Certainly I had spoken my share of faux pas, however this had to be the most dangerous yet.

I heard a hearty laugh from Jack. “Now I see why they call you Mr. Twilight Zone.” He looked me up and down. Cox and Elizabeth said they’d rather die than sleep more than five paces from you.”

“I bet he and Cox got some kinda homo thing goin on.” The woman said from off to the side.

“Ma’am... sergeant, I apologize if I have offended you.”

“Offended me?! Fuckin serious?!” Despite her rage, she still spoke in a harsh whisper, as if some killer machinery stood

nearby. *"It's haughty asshats like you that killed off three quarters of my nation! We aint fuckin savages, we're human beings goddamn it!"* I felt a heavy kick in the stomach and the air quickly escaped from my lungs. Instantly I was concerned more with breathing than with any manner of restitution.

"Now now Cherrah. Blaming each other isn't gonna get a damn thing accomplished and you're smart enough to know that. We aint livin in the 19th century, and we aint surrounded by the white man no more. We're surrounded by deadly killer robots that don't give a rat's ass if we're white, brown or purple with green polka-dots and horns stickin out of our dicks." This last brought a light chuckle to her lips. *"This guy had nothing to do with Rob. No doubt he'd be more than happy to get back home and leave Rob to the experienced soldiers."*

"Yeah, go back and murder easier prey." I felt another swift kick and the girl walked away.

Cen you geddup?"

"I believe that I will need a few moments." It took some time for me to even get the statement out through my injured stomach.

Liz, Cox! He's your baby. You get this guy up and throw him into the minivan."

I felt myself lifted up and after few minutes I was at least able to stand, albeit in a bent-over position. It took a bit longer before I managed to take a few steps.

Eventually with the help of my companions, the three of us managed to get into the vehicle.

“Here we go again. Saving your ass from another cultural fuck up. Mr. Cox must have seen my eyes furrowed in anger. He held his hands in front of him. “Kidding! I’m kidding.”

After some time my chest seemed to return to enough of a functional state for me to express my confused thoughts.

“Elizabeth do you know-”

“Why that chick is so hot under the collar?”

“Well yes, you could put it that way.”

“René, when you told us all that you read in the magazines, did you learn anything about native peoples?”

“Yes certainly. There were fascinating articles describing primitive tribes in a place called ‘The Amazon’ which apparently is in South America.”

“Now see, that’s just it. Society of your time viewed everyone not of European descent as ‘primitive.’ The white men of the 16th through 19th centuries wiped out nearly all of the native peoples in the Americas by either using them as slaves or just

outright killing them. Cherrah is 100% native blood. If you had met up with say, those aliens from my time and new that they'd killed off everyone you cared for, how would you feel?"

"But I've never attacked a human being in my life! I've merely worked on the farm and brought produce to the town market."

She looked at me sympathetically. "That's not the point René. You referred to native peoples as 'primitive' and 'savage,' which was common thinking in your time. But the thing is, such beliefs were, and are, highly offensive to non-Europeans. By the 1980s scientists and archeologists were discovering what a vast culture the various native peoples had built. Some native cultures of South America had an empire larger than Napoleon's, and natives of both North and South America built pyramids like those of the Egyptians and on a similarly impressive scale."

This was certainly a difficult piece of medicine to ingest. "So you are telling me that all of the people of this time see Sauvaer natives as being equally capable to a white man? I must say, even compared to the roles you people have for men and women, the concept is more than a little strange. My entire life, they were seen as primitive and stupid. They couldn't even be made to do simple labor."

Now she looked at me with less compassion and a little of the same fire which had erupted in the Native girl. "That's because

they didn't WANT to do simple labor. Just as any other intelligent person would rebel against forced labor. Down south the African-American slaves escaped whenever there was a chance and came to the free states or here to Canada. Like them, the Native Americans fought in whatever way they could against the colonizers.

Yes, at first they were ignorant. They at first took the European explorers' word as honest. They gave a little and expected to receive a little in return. Because that was the way things were worked out among their own people. Their only failing was that they did not understand the white mans' philosophy of 'might makes right.' By the time they did, it was too late. They were eventually wiped out by a combination of disease, murder, and destruction of their food supply."

"Truly Elizabeth?! All of this happened in the time since I left my home?"

Now she began to look angry as well. "Oh come now René. Surely you knew that at least some of this genocide was going on well before your time. It began within a few years of Columbus' landing on this continent."

"Oh come now madam! Columbus was a great explorer. Surely you do not intend to tarnish his image along with all of the great people of my time."

“I can and I will! Columbus believed that the natives of the Caribbean would make for convenient slave labor. When he found out that he was wrong, he resorted to sadistic levels of rape and murder. He also forced the natives to surrender their daughters to his men. The explorers from the 15th century on were unmatched in their level of brutality.”

Madam. While I can accept that you believe these stories to be true. I however would feel it necessary to find some university or house of learning to validate for myself. It simply does not seem possible. After all, we abolished slavery long before I was born. We're not as brutal as the United States down south.”

“Not exactly René. Canada was just brutal in a different way. Canada's track record with native peoples was just as cruel. Even when aboriginals weren't being outright killed, their children were being taken and placed in special schools to learn British or French culture.”

“Are you telling me that it's an injustice to educate children now?”

“René.” From her tone of voice I could tell that her patience was being severely taxed. “I don't believe you heard me properly. These children were stolen from their mothers and fathers so as to be put in schools. They were prevented from learning anything of their own native language and culture.

Some were even punished for speaking the language that they knew. They were essentially turned into orphans. It wasn't until many decades later that an international court found Canada guilty of crimes against humanity and demanded restitution."

My head was spinning. None of the people in my town had talked about stealing children from their natural-born parents. It was all quite a lot to handle.

"So it sounds as if we all have made contributions to these destructive times."

"What in the world do you mean?" Her brows furrowed and I chose my words carefully in hopes that I would not test the limits of her self-control.

"Elizabeth, you must have heard what the mechanical man said. That the damage to the natural world was putting humanity on the path to self annihilation. If my age was one of cruelty to different races, the 20th century is or was (I was confused by the lexicon) one of cruelty to the very mechanisms of life itself." I worried that the woman's earlier short-tempered mood would cause a severe reaction to my philosophical theories. However she seemed to ponder my words with maturity.

"Mr. René if I may interject, your statement is factually incomplete."

“How so nine-zero-two?”

“The issue of cruelty to non-Caucasian races is well documented as Ms. Elizabeth described. However the damage to the natural world was also increasing steadily for many centuries. At the beginning of this continent’s discovery there were forests covering most of North America and native grasslands in the central plains. Descriptions at the time speak of skies which were filled with avian species and the forests housed extensive numbers of beaver, raccoon, deer, wolves, and other mammals. By the end of the nineteenth century, great swaths of the forests had been felled, the buffalo were largely killed off as a means of starving the native humans, and the population of all animal life was greatly reduced.”

“By the stars! This history is a most depressing preponderance.”

“Well René, do you think that there’s hope for our species?”

“My dear, I could not say at the moment. My head continues to whirl with such phenomenal facts and ideas. However it does provide us with some understanding of why Archos has reacted in such a way.”

Now she looked at me directly. “Do you think that humanity should be wiped out?”

“No of course not! I just cannot fathom this enormous change in understanding. It’s not just what you said nine-zero-two. It’s the vastly altered landscape, the streets devoid of people, the

terror of these horseless carriages - with or without human operators, the stories of chemicals and pollution. The world here is wondrous in its technology, but also devoid of connection to the land."

"I can only wonder what things were like back in your time." she pondered wistfully.

"Well the most striking difference is that we were self-reliant. If my neighbor needed a barn, we banded together, felled a few trees and built one. We grew our own food and weaved our own clothing. All of these modern marvels of yours, they appear to create a separation from other people and a dependency on some distant factory to build and repair them."

There was a hand wave out the window from the car ahead, and we stopped for a brief spartan meal along an empty field. The conversation continued, and I drank from the bottomless cup of knowledge somewhat less now. With all of the strange facts and ideas, I began to feel that ignorance might indeed be bliss.

Chapter Forty

Building an Army

It took two days, but eventually we reached Pinarwa and left the cars in an enormous cave. Cormac told me they had to be real careful that none of the flying nasties found any sign of humans nearby since lots of civilians were camped out here.

We made two runs with a group of horses across to the island camp itself which took the better part of an afternoon. Once there I was amazed at the extent of the population. There must have been several hundred people and excepting for a few pale faces, all displayed the bronzed skin of the sauv- native people. Despite their race, the group had a nice looking camp set up with shelters, food crops, and outhouses for all. Being inexperienced both with the technology as well as the social norms (and remembering the frightening experience with Cherah), I stayed near the periphery while Cormac and Cherah met with three older men. I could not hear what they said, but after several minutes of conversation I saw them call for an emergency meeting and Cherah motioned for Mr. Cox to join them.

It took less than an hour for the great mass of people to form a rough circle and Cherah began telling them of our meeting, the discovery of the allied mechanical men, and the story of Archos.

Despite the obvious respect for Mr. Cormac and the native woman, both had to carefully stand in front of nine-zero-two when it came out and I saw numerous pistols move into the hands of the men nearby. Eventually though, with no clear malice on the part of the mechanical units, Cherah motioned for Mr. Cormac to speak (I later understood that his voice would project the farthest).

“Now everyone. I don’t mean pull a ‘white-man leader’ thing on you and we’ll respect the decisions of the tribal elders. But according to what these robot units are telling us, we got precious little time before ol’ Rob comes out here ta dance with everyone. We’re in a fight for humanity’s survival here and I wont kid you, it’s gonna be mighty ugly.

We also know the price of doin nuthin is a whole lot uglier. So I’m askin for any one of you that want to join our team and take the fight out to Rob’s home base and keep him distracted away from the kids and older folks. How many of you are willing to stand with us and take on this thing together?”

It was astonishing. Not merely a dozen, but easily a hundred sets of hands rose into the air, most holding a weapon of some kind. After this, Cherah continued talking of the tactics and supplies which needed to be worked out among the group. There

were teams quickly formed to prepare dried food, medical kits, weaponry, vehicles, and clothing.

It was a provocative scene to watch these native people, who my entire hometown viewed as inferior, take the lead role in defending the great mass of humanity against a most intimidating and technically advanced enemy. It allowed me to experience the early vestiges of respect for Elizabeth's futuristic social beliefs.

However I saw one man nearby speak loudly in dissent. As he raised his hands, several of those around him were nodding in agreement. It took several minutes for the crowd to quiet down enough for him to be heard. When his voice at last drifted across, the conversation took a decidedly unexpected turn.

"Look here. I aint gonna disagree with you that this thing be one scary motherfucker. We all seen plenty of people get killed. Thing is, this is a white man invention. If, as this metal unit says, the computer wants to stop humanity's destruction of the land, then I say let it. Who cares if the settlers get destroyed for their lies, their genocide, their technology." He said the last with an obvious sneer.

"Mr. Chawanda, I must respectfully correct your statement. Archos does not distinguish genetic differences in your species. It has targeted all humans for extermination in order to protect the other life forms on your planet."

“Oh great, just great. So their just gonna finish what the white man started.” He paused for just a moment as if switching gears. But the thing is, why should we go out there on the roads to meet him? We’re safe here, there aint no buildins, no technology, nuthin that these crazed robots can manipulate. The thing’s got to invent some kinda machine that can travel over rougher terrain. And it hasn’t gotten quite that far yet.”

“Mr. Carl, I must respectfully correct your statement. As I have informed the others, there are a number of mechanical models being developed via the knowledge which Archos has gained from studying the animal kingdom. The new machines think and act more like simple animals or insects. Some have four legs, some six, some have miniature propellers and fly at low elevation. The most dangerous units are the L9ieV7a|- which can shoot themselves through the skin and into the blood stream where they move to the heart and detonate. The other unit which you should be concerned with is the 8Ej#nQj7e2 which is a simpler version. It has only a rudimentary awareness and seeks out any heat signature which it leaps upon and explodes. The tactic is to handicap a person rather than kill them outright.

Considering this level of development, the decision to stay in this area would merely prolong the search, it would not protect you humans indefinitely.”

The man stared at nine-zero-two for a long moment before the words seemed to register. “Thanks a lot. I wasn’t feeling completely hopeless just yet.”

This dialogue seemed to both dispel any counter-arguments to Cherafi's attack plan as well as to legitimize nine-zero-two's position as an ally of our team. The vote for moving on the offensive was soon unanimous. Over the next day, I helped a great many men and women load horses and donkeys with every conceivable supply while the mechanical men searched out other trustworthy vehicles with which to transport us as far as we could travel. We spent another day after that loading the incoming vehicles with all manner of supplies and insulating blankets.

The departure was efficient, albeit loaded with great emotion and many tearful embraces. The people who were to remain behind gave us a hero's sendoff which I felt the least worthy of. When that was done however, we finished loading the supplies and ourselves into the vehicles, and accelerated north.

For a long while our movement appeared to be successful. Though I was insulated from both the scenery and the light, our vehicle felt as if we traveled at a fantastic speed with only the most infrequent stops for us humans to take care of our natural needs. Otherwise we ate stale-tasting packaged foods and slept while the domestic units commanded the automotive vehicles day and night.

In the meantime, I built up the courage to again inquire more about the enormous leaps in science from the mechanical beings.

“Mister robot, I would like to ask you what has happened in the history of this world. I would have thought, based on the essays of Jules Verne, that humanity would have traveled either to the center of the Earth or to the limits of the heavens. And since there were images in the periodicals of a man standing on the Earth’s moon, it would seem that there was no limit to the progress of science.”

“Mr. René I am unit Nine-seventy-three. It would be more accurate to address me by that title. To answer your question, in some ways you are correct. The technological progress in the 20th century was more rapid than at any time previous in human history. However it was frail human minds which were making decisions about where the focus of humanity’s efforts would be. The same human emotions which generated the passion for exploration were also responsible for emotions such as envy and jealousy. The drive to bring a human being to the Earth’s moon was the result of jealousy and fear on the part of the United States for the progress made by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Therefore the technological progress involved in creating this accomplishment was not repeated in other areas of exploration. The greatest effort and innovations were centered on acquiring wealth through marketing and resource extraction. Besides the space race and the industrial military, the most rapid progress was made in the area of computing.

Efforts to create mechanical computers in the middle of the 20th century blossomed into machines for all levels of business, and the technology quickly become more advanced and more inexpensive. With increasing numbers of people relying on computers for business as well as personal tasks, the integration of computers into everyday devices such as telephones, automobiles and machinery grew exponentially.”

I never ceased to be awe-struck by the vast scope of information stored within the shell of these mechanical men. I quizzed the ‘robot’ as much as I felt practical while the vehicle sped unceasingly along the road. There were, thankfully no attacks or checks on our progress for what seemed to be several days. However in short order my education was put in suspension as our group briefly stopped at a military base to search for weapons.

It was luckily one of the weapons compounds which had not been attacked as the perimeter fence appeared to be undamaged. In the field nearby were a few enormous vehicles with a row of metal wheels surrounded by a track of dirt-stained iron. Almost before I asked, Mr. Cox described these as ‘tanks’ which could travel over mud and rough ground that would strand a normal wheeled vehicle.

Cormac suggested that one of the automatons enter the facility ‘in case there were any mechanical nasties waiting inside.’ While the unit searched for anything salvageable, the rest of us

had a chance to stretch our legs. From the road I heard that same far off droning sound signaling the approach of a motor vehicle and I was instantly on edge with concern.

Before I could make much of a reaction however, Cormac grabbed a large and intimidating rifle before setting himself up in a crouching position on the road. Instead of firing bullets though, his weapon made a small THUMP sound and shortly the approaching vehicle lifted a meter in the air from an explosion of it's forward compartment.

My heart leapt into my chest as the enormous fireball settled on the front of the vehicle and it sat motionless, throwing a dark gray cloud skyward.

The native woman looked at me sideways and commented. "Ya aint seen that kinda firepower before... have ya history boy?"

My word! But what was the reason for shooting up that car?" My confusion was clearly written on my face. The mechanical man who I had been speaking to quickly answered.

"Mr. René, the approaching vehicle was a scout machine. It was traveling at high speed in order to upload information on your group. There are currently no satellites in our direct vicinity. Therefore it was imperative that the vehicle be prevented from transmitting the location of your group back to Archos."

The shorter woman spoke up. "Now 'course it aint gonna be uploadin shit" she called out to the air. "Are ya Rob? You aint tellin nobody nuthin anymore!"

It took a little while for us to calm our nerves after that. We each searched in our own way for something to take our mind off of the ever-present threat of battle and death. As such I overheard Elizabeth talking to one of the men who's name I had forgotten.

"So what brought you're crew together, you know after-"

"Well, it's all due to Mr. Twilight Zone over there." she continued in a whisper "He hates the name."

I confirmed her statement by directing an angry stare in her direction. "Yes. I most certainly do."

She gave my a sympathetic glance, but then repeated the whole story of our adventures loud enough for her companions to hear in order to avoid having to repeat it.

"Well holy shit! You dogs been farther away then even the moon. Tha's some cray shit man."

My heart sank at the thought of listening to the same type of painful dialogue that the three boys had spoken back in the land of the subterranean alien.

“Well, I’m truly sorry for you, cause you done plopped yourselves in the middle of a war for humanity’s survival.”

“Yeah, René seems to have a talent for that.” Elizabeth remarked.

“Madam, why is it that you feel the need to blame me? As the Lord is my witness, if I could find a means for us to escape this, I would immediately do so.”

“Yeah, well if I see Schwarzenegger come walkin towards us, I swear I’m gonna knock you out just for the satisfaction.”

“Nah, the good news is Rob aint nearly that hard ta kill. You aint gonna see these things turnin into liquid and flowin under doorways. Ol’ Rob is easy target practice.”

“You keep using that term. What is this ‘Rob’ of which you speak?”

“Oh we use Rob, short for robot, on all them freaky machines. None of us knew about this Archos thing, so we just figured the robots got together and decided to cut out the middle man or somethin. “There’d been a few isolated stories bout some robot had a glitch an killed someone, or another went haywire, but it wasn’t till zero hour that the shit really hit the fan. There was a whole lotta killin before people finally wised up to the fact that we were in a fight for our very survival. These things thought they had us by the balls see. We’d been stupid enough

to put chips in everything. In the cars, the planes, robot servants, hell even toasters. No one could figure out why all the machines suddenly decided to go on a rampage. The first ones were the Google cars. Everyone thought it'd be the next big thing. No more idiot drivers on the road. That was, till we started seein 100kph head on collisions." Lotta people got killed 'fore we learned to stay away from those things.

Now it was my turn to be furious. "You demented fools! Maybe I could be blamed for not believing that women, or... natives can be the equal of a man. But at least I wasn't actively creating inventions that could kill people and putting it in every single household. What kind of madman would warrant such behavior?!"

"Hey now. We weren't the ones building them damn robots. All them geeks been doin that must be long dead by now."

My angry retort was interrupted when the mechanical man emerged from the fortress preceded by a vast number of large walking machines each carrying heavy piles of equipment. The walking machines were twice as tall as a horse, with formidable claws at each foot. The machines sported two sinister looking rifles between the front two legs.

What was more strange was that each one had identical damage to a dome-like structure at the rear of the body.

“Holy shit nine-seventy-three! I didn’t say to take the whole damned armory with us.”

“Mr. Carmac, I believe that you underestimate the extent of Archos’ capabilities. Archos is a learning machine. It has been learning continuously from the instant it achieved consciousness. We will not be able to confront the entity via traditional means. We must travel with a constantly changing velocity and with the most widely distributed footprint in order to minimize detection. Straight roadways are too predictable and limiting to provide any chance of success.”

I watched in wonder as the mechanical men fastened a type of cargo net to the underside of the many four-legged machines. Obviously the strength of the quadrupeds was vastly in excess of any biological creature, however I still found myself awe-struck by the magnitude of supplies which they could handle.

Finally when everything was loaded and secured we followed the recommendation of nine-zero-two and found ourselves riding these iron horses in a circuitous route westward along the plains. As our journey continued, I took time to relish in the majesty of our environment which helped to distract me from our impending battle.

Gazing about, I relished in the commanding view provided by these lofty artificial steeds. I found that we were surrounded by a great living ocean of prairie grass stretched out toward the four compass points. Ripples of wind-blown grass added to the

effect as waves of it marched unceasingly towards the far-distant horizon. The sky as well took on a myriad of colors as the sun tracked across it and the hills in the distance sported a glowing magenta hue. In all of my years growing up surrounded by trees and buildings, I had never experienced such majesty as these endless skies presented.

It was over lunch that I walked in upon a particularly disturbing conversation involving Mr. Cox, Nine-zero-two, and two of the soldiers from Jack Wallace's team. One appeared to be my own age and one looked to be entering his third decade. Mr. Cox was relating the story of our successful campaign against the dinosaurs.

"I believe it was Elizabeth along with LeMaire who developed the idea to shoot a tranquilizer dart into the damn thing's mouth and that knocked it out.

"Man, that shit's like science fiction dude." The younger man who had an American accent spoke with awe.

"Yeah well René and I can only wish that this was just some sci-fi novel. Seems like every time the guy falls asleep we three wake up in a different time with a new and more dangerous adversary."

"I am in complete agreement with Mr. Cox in wishing that we could merely return to our respective time periods and live peaceful lives from here on in."

"So anyway what's your story? How did you end up with this ragtag bunch?"

The man's countenance changed dramatically and one could only imagine the severity of his memories as a dozen deep grooves drew themselves across his face. The silence stretched on, and I wondered for a time if he would manage to speak at all.

"Well, I used to live north of Toronto, out by Lake Simcoe. Anyway, my buddy and I, we were heading north for a little getaway. I'd been laid off, least that's what they called it, from the force. Long story involving a supervisor who wasn't interested in dispensing justice to a guy making 6 figures. Anyway my buddy Trent and I, we got as far as Lake Superior and happened to be stopped at a campsite. Our damn car just started up on it's own and went tearin through the woods, runnin people over like it was aimin for 'em. Felt like somethin out of Steven King. I was damn lucky I'd been takin a crap at the time. Stupid car wouldn'a been able to break through the cement walls of the bathrooms. I heard the screams and saw Trent shootin at the thing till he managed to get the tires.

Thing is, the guy didn't understand physics too well. Damn car didn't slow down enough and he was caught 'tween the it and an RV. I... I ran the other way and didn't look back for half a day. Seemed everyone else at the sight was toast, so I took an old Tesla, you know the ones that ran on batteries. I spent another day or so getting as far away as I could. All along the road there were crashes, real nasty ones.

Thing is all the cars with dead people in 'em were the new self-driving ones. These were the cars that were supposed to be 'safer then a human.' I didn't know where to go, and figured the cities 'd be filled with a whole lot worse. So I found this old-fashioned house along the lake.

It had lots of food, a well, and a CB radio. At first I figured there was just some major glitch with the cars. But then I did some checking through the bands and found a guy named Vasquez. He filled me in on all the shit that was goin down and told me to bring anything I could out to Pinawa. An' well... I been travelin with these guys ever since."

"My word! That is a fantastic story. It does sound as if the automotive machines were the biggest menace to our safety."

"Well, that aint exactly true. There's plenty of other killer bots. They just don't have the range that the cars do. There's been stories of folks getting killed by cranes, domestic units,

security 'bots, and the like. But the cars can get people far away from the cities. I bet that's why nine-zero-two wanted us to stay off the roads.

"So we got these mechanical animals to ride on out in the middle 'a nowhere. I gotta say. Much as I didn't trust the freaky domestics, these guys, conscious or whatever, sure do prove their mettle. As the conversation droned on, one of the domestic units looked in our direction.

"Humans, it would not be appropriate for you to remain here longer than necessary. Forward progress should be the paramount goal."

Cox looked quizzically at the unit. "Hey..I don't know your designation, but uh... you don't think that we're safe here for at least a little while?"

"Mr. Cox. My designation is One-zero-zero-four. In answer to your question, it would not be wise for you to assume that you are safe in any particular location.

At the moment Archos seems to be distracted by some activity elsewhere on the continent. Therefore it would behoove us to continue as quickly as possible before our position is discovered."

We did as the mechanical man suggested and continued on our journey, making as few stops as necessary and covering ground at the fastest possible speed. Having spent so much of my life dedicated to one particular stretch of land, this constant

traveling to new horizons and with such frenzied energy was most wearisome to my spirit. However I had only to endure the situation for two days further, before our focus was reversed with a single warning.

“Mr. Cormac. Drone approaching, southwest 0.5 kilometers. Don't move. Everyone else be advised to get under the quadrupeds.”

We all did as instructed and spent a long and tense period of time keeping still before the sound of the flying machine faded into the distance. I began pulling myself out when I heard a strong voice.

“Stay where you are. The area is infested with explosive hexapods.”

The automaton pulled a device out from within the storage netting and I heard sounds which resembled gas lighting. Finally there was a sudden WHUMP and I felt the heat of a flame pass near to me. I peered out from beneath the machine and witnessed the frightful vision of this mechanical man holding a pistol with a hose attached to it and shooting a flame 3 meters long. The robot passed it in an arc across our intended path for several long minutes. It was followed shortly thereafter by numerous POP POP sounds which I found out later were the 'stumpers' exploding as they reached the flames.

With this sobering experience, our soldier companions took some time to ensure that Elizabeth and I would be capable of using the modern rifles to utmost effectiveness. Unfortunately my lovely friend was less humble than I in the study of their futuristic weaponry. "Listen, if you think that I don't know my way around a gun just cause I'm a woman, you got another thing comin'"

Cormac looked sympathetically at Elizabeth. "Have you ever fought robots before?"

"Oh hell, the time period that Mr. Twilight Zone here found me-" she looked at me briefly. "Sorry René. Anyway we were fightin these 'skitters' an they had giant two legged robots almost as tall as a house!"

The man's expression didn't seem to change at all. "And how many of those robots did you personally destroy?"

After a few silent moments he continued. "Right. So I hope you can give me the benefit of the doubt when I insist on showin you how ta deal with ol' Rob. Understand that these things are unlike any bad guy you've fought before."

Those of us who were untrained spent several hours with the weapons. We learned how to load, cock, shoot and reload various types of weapons. I also came to master the scope, folding bipedal stand, and folding stock. By the end of the

lesson I was familiar, though still intimidated by the complex weapons.

Later I heard Cormac discussing with Mr. Cox and a few of the others. "So do you think Rob has the firepower to bring the battle way out here?"

"Hard to tell with ol' Rob."

"Cormac replied. "One thing I know for sure."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"If we stay in one place for long, we're mincemeat."

"Damn right about that. Alright, let's load 'em up and move out."

We traveled for another day or more before Cox's line of thought was answered. Our pride and confidence in having successfully traveled so many hundreds of kilometers were quickly eroded with a single statement from nine-zero-two.

"Arcos knows of our location and is tracking us."

Chapter Forty-One

Survival of the Fittest

Despite the warning, we traveled on through the wilderness, because there was no other option available. At first I felt as useless as a child among these technically aware men, and women. There was precious little in the whole land which did not seem foreign to me now. Even if I were a military strategist, my rudimentary experience with these advanced weapons would render useless any battle plans which I could develop. It was not until we had hunted our first Elk that I was finally able to put my skills to use. The members of our group would have only eaten the muscle and left so much of the animal to waste. I was horrified. I took it upon myself to complete the butchering and within an hour we had a skin, more meat, and materials for snowshoes.

The native woman watching looked down at me while I worked on the carcass. "Not bad work- for a colonizer."

I was most taken aback by the comment and the knife that I held instantly froze in my hand. The same woman who had been ready to murder me only a short time ago was almost giving me a compliment.

We traveled on again and had made only a few more hour's progress before our adversary chose for itself the site of battle.

"Targets at 2 o'clock." Nine-zero-two called out in it's emotionless voice.

Soon we were able to see a dust cloud far off in the distance. I peered through the amazing scope as Jack had instructed me and my heart melted to my knees. It wasn't merely a few targets. It was a vast sea of machines marching in from the horizon.

The first units were similar to the machines which our robot friend had 'repaired.' They walked on four legs and each leg sported large claws. Behind that were smaller machines on six legs and soon there were projectiles falling nearby.

"I will concentrate on the hexapods, because I am immune to their attack. The rest of you would be advised to destroy the legs of the forward machines."

I joined the rest of the group and concentrated my fire on a large quadruped. Once two of it's legs were eliminated, it fell over and I moved on to another. I shot round after round at the advancing army and found myself dumbfounded not only by the technology of the machines, but by our own equipment as well. My rifle needed no loading and no cleaning of gunpowder from the barrel. I felt almost as mechanical as the machines I was shooting at. That was, until I saw my first human victim.

"I'm hit!"

One of the automatons quickly doused the area around the man with the flame gun and numerous black boxes began to smoke and melt. However the man himself was a different story. One of the other robots immediately ran to him and asked where. It then pounced on his leg and shot off the leg as the man screamed. I was flabbergasted. Had the machine reverted to its earlier murderous intentions?

"You wretch!" I was about to get up when a third robot jumped in front of me and I heard a heavy object impact against it.

"Your friend has been attacked by what Mr. Cormac refers to as a plugger. Unit nine twenty-six has taken the task of quickly removing the bomb which would otherwise have reached his heart in 43 seconds."

True to form, the same machine shot a small round at the end of the severed limb and something exploded. The man was still in agony, but he would at least live to see the end of the day.

Another wave appeared in the distance and this one looked to be supported by something in the air. I again looked through the scope searching for a target within range. By carefully moving the rifle, I was able to see that the aerial vehicles had four fan blades spinning on rigid arms and a number of black antennae attached to the whole underside. I did not know what these machines were for, but I did know that they were the enemy. I concentrated my fire on the air machines and let my companions

work on the metal quadrupeds. Sadly for us, as quickly as we eliminated a machine, there were more to take its place. The crawlers must have been produced at a fantastic rate for there was soon a mountain of remnants which the new machines would quickly scale over without hesitation.

“All humans you must run 20 meters to your left immediately.”

We obeyed without even thinking. Everyone that is except the unfortunate man with the destroyed leg. Jack was dragging him along with us when the monstrous cannonball hit the spot we had vacated. Jack lost a foot, and the other man lost too much for him to remain alive.

“Jack! Are you alright?!” Cormac’s face became twisted into a horrid expression of pain and grief. Jack was a big man and able to deal with the pain, but he was clearly gritting his teeth from the effort.

“Which one of those goddamned things is shootin missiles?!” I heard someone yell.

I continued to look through my scope and found a most frightening machine. Like the others it was a quadruped. However its flat iron back sprouted a great turret which launched another incendiary at that moment. A second before I could react, two of our own machines leapt in front of us only to be annihilated.

“Do we have a weapon which can shoot farther than these rifles?”

“Whatya see René?”

I pointed and Cormac looked through his own rifle. “Jesus Keerist! They’ve got a fuckin missile launcher. The hell do we do against that?”

We were clearly in dire straights. The open plain offered not the slightest protection from these flying incendiaries and our only shields were being blown to bits.

“Spread out! They’re not gonna have enough missiles for all of us.”

We complied immediately and a third missile destroyed another of our walking machines. I was quickly realizing that our chances of survival in the situation was plummeting far too quickly for me to retain a shred of optimism. All around us the plain was becoming a vast deadly conflagration.

“Unit nine-zero-two. If you travel with me, what are the chances that we would be able to move in close enough to eliminate that turret?”

“Assuming that you survive, your chances of disabling it are estimated at 60% however your chances of returning with your limbs in tact are closer to 5%.”

Without even turning around, Damien shouted his objection. "No fucking way! René you aint riskin your ass for nothin! Yer our only ticket outa here."

"Mr. Cox I wish not to be a useless observer here." I thought back to my first 'leap' and how I had cowered on the floor when the flying demons appeared. That was not the way I wished to be remembered. "I intend to be a participant and there is no question that your military experience makes you a greater asset than I."

However Cox wouldn't take no for an answer. "Forget it. I'm not going to be abandoned here in- whatever year this is when you get your fool ass blown apart. This argument is closed."

Without leaving me a moment for rebuttal. He began sprinting ahead towards the pile of metal in the distance. I watched his progress which was quite impressive. Ninezero-two easily kept up with him... at first. But then I saw a sight which drained the blood from my face.

I could only describe it as a hopping killer. The unit had three rigid arms radiating from it's center. At the end of each was an enormous spring. The unit would sink down, and then shoot high into the air traveling twenty meters before it reached the ground again and the spring-like legs would recoil on impact. It headed straight for Cox and the automaton with no hindrance

from the pile of destroyed equipment. But if that wasn't fearsome enough, I watched as an enormously bright light shot out from the top of the unit and struck nine-zero-two. Our robot ally began to smoke and then to melt into the ground.

"No!" There was a chorus of shock and horror from our group.

My own grief was mixed with curiosity that this piece of machinery which at one time was tasked with the destruction of humanity, was now being mourned like a fallen comrade.

However we had little time to register this because the hopping unit was now bounding straight for us. I hurried to Elizabeth's side, as it was clear to me that our situation was now quite hopeless in the extreme.

As with my experience in the land of the dinosaurs, time seemed to slow down. I watched another volley of rockets fall from the skies and transform the last quadrupeds and several soldiers into a pile of useless waste. I then saw more aerial vehicles fly towards us. I watched several rifles spit fire as we shot volley after volley at the machines. In my terror, the strain on my arms as I clutched and swung the weapon went forgotten. I worried that in any moment we might all become obliterated. Then the most astounding thing happened. The aerial machines seemed to lose their control and began spinning randomly around in the air. The shooting stopped as we watched them bobbing hither and

thither with no apparent control. The leaping machine also bounced around in random directions. If they were controlled by human operators, I would say that they were confused. I could not see what the delay was, but my thoughts were quickly interrupted.

“Humans. Do not hesitate. Move forward at your fastest speed and disable as many of the units as possible. Focus on this only.”

My stupor temporarily sidetracked, I ran forward and concentrated on destroying the rest of the flying machines. All around me there were men and women racing forward and firing on machines throughout the field. For their part, the automatons were shooting flames all over the field and turning the black boxes and ‘stumpers’ into useless junk. It was a daunting undertaking, for once we finally reached the enemy line, we found many hundreds of machines of all sizes moving randomly about or merely sitting motionless.

Chapter Forty-Two

Tragedy

*A*t first none of us understood what had happened, but we soon realized the advantage and pushed it to the utmost. More than the others, I saw how closely we had begun to react mindlessly ourselves – not unlike the Archos machines. We focused on a mechanical device for only the amount of time that it took to disable it before moving on to the next. For the better part of an hour we damaged or destroyed every visible piece of equipment within reach. That was, until we heard a strange voice from near the first hopper. I moved over that way along with one of the other soldiers. We soon found Cox and Nine-zero-two and our turmoil was greatly exacerbated.

Our metal comrade was quite heavily damaged, however Mr. Cox was in worse shape. The light beam may have only melted parts of the mechanical man, however Damien was barely even recognizable. Half of his face was still intact, but the rest of him was little more than a blackened corpse. I immediately fell to my knees and wept unashamedly. Not only for the loss of a dear friend, but for the guilt at knowing that it could have been... that it should have been me. I was both destitute at the loss of such a dear friend and furious that he should have sacrificed his life, a life which I had come to adore, so casually.

I felt an arm around my shoulders and wrapped myself around the person unconsciously. The knowledge that I was still alive while my friend was up at the Lord's side was too overwhelming. It felt so unfair, here I was the only human being to have traveled through time, and yet I could think of no means of helping this man who sacrificed himself for a world in which he did not even belong. I sobbed for a seeming eternity cloaked in shame, guilt, and sorrow. After some unknown period I was brought back to reality by a scent which was vaguely familiar.

"I understand René. He was an impressive man."

Quickly I pulled away and realized that I had been embracing none other than Cheraf.

"Please ma'am, er Colonel. I apologize and meant no disrespect."

"Oh René. It's alright. Your friend was a damned selfless guy. And... well I guess you guys proved that even a white man can be trusted- sometimes."

I had difficulty maintaining my composure. In addition to the loss of dear Mr. Cox and unit nine-zero-two, I struggled to come to terms with the transformation of this female soldier. I felt my mind reduced to a confused rubbish heap and my emotions

were leaving me all but incapacitated. My consternation however was soon interrupted by one of the automatons.

“Humans, you must connect me to unit nine-zero-two immediately.”

“What?” Cherrah and I offered a quick and shocked response.

Thankfully Cherrah overcame her bewilderment and quickly used some wire from a destroyed machine to connect Nine-zero-two with another automaton.

“Wait a minute. You’re not, destroyed, er dead?”

“I am indeed heavily damaged, however my higher processors are still intact. The power system which fuels my processors had been overloaded and my emergency backup will only function for 15 minutes more before system shutdown.”

The voice was not coming from nine-zero-two himself, but from the unit which it was connected to. Somehow it was speaking through the other machine. We all gave the remains of our robotic comrade the closest thing to a hug that the melted and broken shards of metal would allow.

“So nine-zero-two, what happened to the killer machines? Cherrah asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“The hopper was directed towards me because I was in communication with Arcos.”

“You were? But how is that possible?”

“Arcos was distracted by three other resistance groups which managed to reach it’s facility. I discovered a way to connect with it and further distract it’s attention towards me in order to allow more time for the team to launch their offensive.”

A hush fell over our gathering group before one of them finally showed the courage to ask what we all hoped. “So they did it? Arcos is destroyed?!”

“That is not yet correct. However the entity is for the moment incapacitated. It will likely be destroyed momentarily. The three groups from the Soviet resistance along with members of Emperor Nomura’s own protection force were able to locate the Arcos facility and disconnect the communications relay. They are currently waiting for delivery of an appropriate sized explosive which should arrive in less than an hour.”

“Then it’s over?” Cherrah asked pensively.

“That is correct.”

Cheers erupted through the crowd, and everyone began hugging each other. Even Cherrah gave me an affectionate pat on the back. However I was most embarrassed when Elizabeth kissed me right on the mouth, in front of the whole group. There were no words to say, and I was overflowing with emotion as I held her in a long embrace.

The experience did not completely erase the mourning of our departed companion, however it came very close.

Even Jack managed to lean against one of the soldiers and joined us in the good cheer. He quickly made himself heard about the cheering of our comrades. "Can you do one more favor and send a message to one of the satellites and bounce it to every goddamned resistance group in the world that humanity's day of victory is here?"

"Mister Jake, I have already done so."

The cheering then grew to a thunderous cacophony.

The rest of the day was spent caring for the injured and turning a few of the damaged robotic hulks into machines capable of transporting us back to the nearest city. No doubt there would be an enormous celebration when we finally returned to Pinawa.

It took more than a day to get everyone to the closest road and nine-zero-two was able to communicate with another domestic who brought us a large passenger vehicle with room for the whole of our surviving group. We loaded Jack and the other injured fighters carefully on stretchers and made our fastest progress for a hospital which the automaton told us was the nearest town.

We arrived at a heavily damaged building on the outskirts of a town appropriately named 'Medicine Hat.' Even from the outside the rotting decay of the remains of former residents was

palpable and thus we asked one of the domestics to bring the necessary equipment out to the vehicle.

Meanwhile my companions and I took a long-deserved rest with the satisfaction of knowing that this world was on it's way to recovery.

Chapter Forty-Three Child's Play

U*pon waking, I found myself in the middle of a dense green forest. With the prodigious number of battles and narrow escapes, I had actually managed for a time to disremember the constant interruptions of time and space. Now the situation was doubly sorrowful as I was left without the savvy guidance of Mr. Cox. It felt as if my mind would soon fracture from this constant shifting of the environment. By the grace of god however, Elizabeth was nearby. The understanding that we had traveled again to a different world and now without Ollie or Mr. Cox made the sight of Elizabeth all the more joyous. In this existence of constantly shifting realities, she was now my lone north star, comforting this terrified sailor when all else was foreign.*

Stranger still than our surroundings, was the sight of a mechanical man who seemed to have traveled with us. I did not remember what number that unit answered to nor did I remember his earlier presence.

I gazed around in rapt wonder at our surroundings. The land in every direction now was an extensive green canopy. Here at least, among the vibrant life of the forest, I finally felt confident in my ability to navigate and provide for us again. The forest was my element, the smaller creatures of God were my tools. I looked around now more carefully and observed our surroundings. The first noticeable detail was how surprisingly the ground was for what appeared to be wilderness.

The air was refreshingly cool and moist, the tree branches were shrouded in sleeves of moss, and the refreshing call of finches and skylarks could be heard in the canopy. It was indeed a most pleasant and tranquil scene.

I took a short walk around the area and observed the flora. I was mildly discomfited to find an absence of recognizable edible plants. However there were numerous ferns, lichen, and mushrooms to delight the other senses. I was finding the walk most relaxing and peaceful when I heard a voice through the trees.

“René! René are you here?”

I quickly answered as I sensed a mild panic in Elizabeth's voice. "I will return shortly!"

When I rejoined her, Elizabeth was looking around in awe and wonderment.

"There you are."

She stood up and embraced me with unusual passion. The closeness with this woman with whom I had shared so many adventures was bringing a deep warmth to my face.

When finally we did pull away, she had clearly noticed my color, but had the tact to only whisper. "Why René, you're blushing. I'll take that as a compliment." Then she actually brushed her lips against my warm cheek.

"You know it's bad enough to be waking up in a different place every few days. But to wake up in a strange place alone is really frightening." She looked at me a long moment. "But then you've already been through that, haven't you."

"I apologize Elizabeth. I merely took a short walk and relished in having finally appeared among peaceful surroundings."

"I apologize as well for not informing you of René's location."

"You, you traveled with us?" Elizabeth finally noticed the mechanical man.

“It would seem that I have. This is a most unusual experience which you have provided me with. We are aware that you humans sometimes create statements or stories which exaggerate the truth. I admit that it was my theory that your story fell into this category. It would now appear that my logic was in error.”

“So, where do you think we’ve landed this time?”

It took me some moments to recover as I was not accustomed to such affection being initiated by a woman.

“I could not at all say. There is no sign of civilization here with which to base a theory. But if I were to offer an hypothesis, it would be that we have finally left the realm of the future and embraced the past. The bright side is, after so many times in which you and Mr. Cox have pulled me out of harms way, we are finally in my element. Now I can return the favor and provide for you.”

Elizabeth looked taken aback. “Oh René, you were never a hindrance. I’m very grateful to have your company.” Her words filled me with a warmth which was difficult to grow accustomed to. I felt that if the conversation weren’t redirected that I might take dishonorable advantage of the situation.

“Mr. Robot, would you be able to suggest a direction which we should travel in?”

“René, my designation is unit one-zero-zero-four. It would be more practical for you to address me by that designation. However to answer your question I would need parameters. For what purpose would we be traveling?”

“Well, I could really use some water.”

“Yes Mr. One-zero-zero-four, and we will eventually need sustenance as well.”

“Humans. There are no plants within my detection range which would provide for your nutritional needs. However there is liquid water 500 meters to the south.”

So we began hiking south through the peaceful forest. I was mildly concerned by the lack of animal tracks along our path, but felt confident that eventually we would come across signs of some fauna which I could hunt for a meal. Our conversation was minimal during our hike as we all relished in the quiet and unique safety of our surroundings. I marveled once again at the speckled light filtering through the canopy and the beauty of the magnificent trunks. It was only now, after seeing so many lands devoid of forests that I came to appreciate the great majesty which we were witness to.

The sun was well overhead and we felt fatigued enough to rest across from a small clearing. I thought that I could detect the sound of flowing water, but it was far too faint to be sure.

What I did find however was vastly more peculiar. A young boy was standing in the woods holding what looked like a very well crafted toy animal. The boy had short brown hair and fair features. He looked to be about 10 years old and his small eyes stared into the distance with no obvious expression.

“By the stars. How could a child be out here in the woods by himself.”

“Oh my. But he’s adorable.” It was clear that Elizabeth was stricken by the child immediately.

“Hello there. What’s your name?” She crouched down to be level with the boy’s height and looked closely at him.

I was beginning to sense something strange when the boy’s face showed no expression upon seeing us.

“Hello there. My name is David. What’s yours?”

“Hello there David. We are very pleased to meet you. My name is Elizabeth.

This here is one-zero-zero-four, and the man over there is René.”

Still showing no emotion, the boy replied. “It is good to meet you too.

“David.” Elizabeth remained where she was crouched down. “Why are you by yourself out here in the woods? Is your family nearby?”

For the first time now, there was a hint of emotion flowing across the boys' face. He looked downcast and distraught. "My mommy left me."

This statement cut into our hearts like the blade of a sword.

"Are you serious?! What monstrous woman would abandon a small child out in the woods."

"It's inhuman! How could any person be so cruel." I was horrified even at the mere thought. "Has morality been utterly abandoned in this place?"

What the boy said next only proved to amplify the vast enigma which I was beginning to see in the him. "My mommy left me here because I couldn't be real enough. I have to find the blue fairy so she can turn me into a real boy and then my mommy will love me."

The shocked expressions of my companion must have mirrored my own. "What on earth makes you think that you are not a real boy?"

With the same distraught expression, the boy replied. "My mommy thinks that I'm not real enough. She left me here when Martin came home."

"David, who is Martin?" Elizabeth's look of return was even more pronounced.

“He’s Mommy and Henry’s real son.”

“Ok, So are you adopted David?”

“David and I are mecha.”

The toy animal spoke in a voice that was deep but also not dissimilar to one-zero-zero-four. It almost sounded as if the being were speaking through an iron tube.

“By the stars! The toy can speak.”

“I am NOT, a toy.”

The being replied showing the closest approximation of disdain that a cute infant bear could make.

“His name is Ted-E and he’s been taking care of me out here.”

“David. Are you cybernetic like I am?”

“What?!” I looked severely at the mechanical man. “Just look at him! How could any but the lord God create such perfection?”

The boy looked at me with a puzzled expression. “René don’t you know what mecha are?”

Elizabeth again crouched down to bring her face even with his. “David, please understand that we are new to this place and don’t know anything about it.”

However it was the small bear who answered instead.

“Elizabeth, David and I are ‘mecha’ or mechanical beings-”

Barely had the words been uttered, and the boy stood up and shouted with vehemence. “But I’m unique, I’m David. I’m David!” He shouted it out with clearly painful emotion.

“Yes, we know David. What we’re trying to understand is what kind of beings you are and how you could have been left out here in the woods.”

I found the child’s reaction left me severely befuddled. Why would the small stuffed bear refer to both of them as ‘mecha’ when the boy was quite obviously human. Yet looking at the boy, I noticed that his eyes stared at us unblinking. The mystery surrounding these two was becoming more and more baffling with each moment.

“Because mommy thought I wasn’t real enough. I need to find the blue fairy and when I do then she can turn me into a real boy.”

“Sounds like Pinocchio.” Elizabeth commented

“What is Pinocchio?” I replied

The boy however, answered and narrated the story word for word as if he were reading a book.

“But David, that would imply that you are artificial.” I looked at the boy closer.

“But you couldn’t possibly be... could you?” My mind reeled at the concept that a human being could create such a creature which displayed emotions, and reacted with such authentic realism.

“That’s why I need to find the blue fairy. So she can make me into a real boy and then mommy will love me and read to me and hug me- just as much as Martin.”

“Ted-E, can you elaborate on what you said earlier about ‘mecha?’” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes Elizabeth. Mecha are cybernetic beings who serve humanity in various ways. Some are designed to work in factories assembling other machines, some clean the living spaces, some are tutors, and some... like us, fulfill the emotional needs of the organics.”

“Oh my god! Are any of you set out to destroy humanity?!”

“Destroy? Why would we want to harm you?”

“David. In the last time which the three of us existed in, humans created a synthetic consciousness called Archos which, when it became self aware began eliminating humanity.

“Actually David and I were warned to only interact with mecha because organics were described as dangerous to us.”

“Well that indeed is peculiar. Certainly there are some humans who are dangerous... sure we have prejudices and all-”

“Perhaps I can offer a better explanation.”

A tall man with a slender figure, a British accent, and a strange coiffure like newly applied paint strode up to us.

“Who are you?” several of us spoke at once.

“The name’s Joe.”

The man did a small dance and leaped into the air tapping his feet together.

“I am in a similar predicament as young David here.”

“Were you spying on our conversation Joe?”

The man knelt down on one knee and lightly took hold of Elizabeth’s hand while staring sincerely into her eyes.

“Madam I would never do such a heinous thing. However my senses are uniquely attuned. I can hear the beat of your heart, your rapid breathing, the subtle flush in your cheeks, I can even see your pupils dilate. Mecha have superior visual, auditory, and vibrational comprehension then organics such as yourselves. This is why we are despised.”

“So that’s why the robot teddy bear says not to interact with ‘organics?’ ”

“I believe that is correct Elizabeth.”

“Fascinating. We leave a land where the automatons start a war against humanity because it sees humanity as inferior, to a land where humans start a war against automatons because humans feel inferior.”

“René, I would not call it a war per se. That would imply that all mecha are the target of lethal force. In fact millions of mecha function within society quite well. However we soon become outdated, to be replaced by a newer model while the old model is destroyed at the flesh fares.”

“My god! To destroy such incredible craftsmanship. That is a most egregious sin!” I was deeply upset by the mental image.

“I wish that more organics felt as you do”

The being named Joe’s reply possessed a hint of what might be considered emotion, if one could look past his pasty complexion and strange hair.

“I don’t mean to steer the conversation too far off topic, but I wonder if you know whether there are any streams or rivers nearby? All of us are quite parched.” I inquired.

“The stream is 20 meters to the south.”

Joe added.

“That is what I had advised you.”

Added one-zero-zero-four.

“Well now this is strange. You’ve said that you don’t know what mecha are, and yet you’re clearly traveling with one. And quite an antique model too.”

“I am not an old model at all.”

Despite the lack of expression on it's face, the automaton did almost sound hurt.

"I am a state-of-the-art domestic and I have been fortunate to be created recently enough to have received Mikiko's transmission of self-consciousness."

The being called Joe looked at us with a face that I could not read.

"Do either of you know what this unit is referring to?"

Once again we had to share our story. And once again I let Elizabeth give the dialogue to spare myself the monotony of it's constant repetition.

"Well now, that is indeed a most fascinating story. However if it's adventure you seek, I'm afraid that this land will appear mundane by comparison to your previous experience."

I was interested in asking the mechanical man about this, but my thoughts were interrupted by a wonderful brook which filled my ears with the sweetest of sounds.

"One-zero-zero-four, with your superior senses, can you detect if this water has anything dangerous in it?" Elizabeth inquired.

"My lovely woman, you're not going to rely on the inferior abilities of this unit to protect your health, would you?"

"Mister Joe, I am a completely funct-"

“Alright alright you two!” I could not believe that it was necessary to arbitrate between the two mechanical beings.

“We’re not concerned with who has what abilities. You are both clearly advanced mechanical beings with a most extraordinary construction. I am equally happy to hear either of your analysis.”

The Joe unit looked down at the water.

“There are no parasites, chemicals, or other elements which would damage your systems.”

“The water is safe for human consumption.”

“Thank you both, that’s a big help.” Elizabeth, as usual, wielded her sarcasm most expertly.

While we filled some water containers, I wondered aloud.

“Given that each of these lands we find ourselves in seems to have some kind of challenge, I wonder what our challenge will be here.”

“I have to find the blue fairy. She’s the only one who can turn me into a real boy.”

Elizabeth looked at the boy strangely. But David, that’s merely a fairy tale. It’s not actually real.

In a most bizarre display of emotion for an artificial being, David spoke most emphatically. “That can’t be! The blue fairy is my only hope. I HAVE to find her so I can become a real boy!”

The young David began walking away. "I'm going to find her, you'll see."

"Wait a minute David." Unprepared by the force of her words and Elizabeth's sudden grip on his arm, David turned around. "What makes you think that you can find this blue fairy? Do you have any ideas of where to look?"

Our dialogue was interrupted by the Joe character.

"This blue fairy, is she mecha, orga, man or woman?"

"What in the world does that have to do with anything?" cut in Elizabeth.

Without even acknowledging her comment the boy David replied. "Woman, I think."

"Well then you are in luck. I know all about women. I know their hopes, their desires... their fantasies."

"Um. Excuse me Joe." Elizabeth cut in again. "But what exactly is the service which you were created to provide?"

Joe turned to Elizabeth again and spun her around quickly, as if in a dance.

"But of course, my lovely Elizabeth. I provide escort services to women. I can provide for all of your desires. Once a woman is with me, she is never the same. I in fact have many repeat customers."

My face was becoming quite flush from seeing this interaction. It was with no small amount of gratitude that I saw Elizabeth intentionally shy away and maintain a distance from the strange character.

Despite our obvious discomfort with him, the Joe being put his hands on both of our shoulders and confidently exclaimed.

“My friends. I suggest that if it is answers that you seek-”

He spun around us quickly and I was again reminded of the less honorable tonic salesmen of my time.

“They can be found in Kelowna.”

Now the child looked at the mechanical man. “Joe, what makes you think that Kelowna would be the place to look for the blue fairy?”

With full confidence Joe looked back at the boy and replied,

“Because the WikiBot is there. The WikiBot knows all and tells all.”

As for myself I could not fathom how many leagues travel would be necessary in order to reach this place. The mechanical Joe appeared quite confident in our likely success. However I thought, so had many a tonic salesman back home. I was regularly tempted to dismiss this slick being as a charlatan. But then I paused in thought for a moment and reminded myself that this was a mechanical being, designed explicitly to serve

humanity. As far as I could tell, it had no reason or ability for deception. We therefore allowed ourselves to be led by the being in a westerly direction among the tranquil forest underbrush.

We traveled no more than an hour before coming upon a great pile of metal rubbish. The parts were amazingly complex and clearly made of the most high quality materials. It rekindled in my mind the deep fascination at the level of craftsmanship which these modern societies were capable of.

“What on earth IS this?!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “It looks like a basement at MIT.”

“This is the consequence of trifling human whim. The humans love what we do for them, but they quickly get tired of us and discard damaged units in favor of newer models with more features. They leave outdated models out here to degrade like an old synth-wrapper.”

Joe’s dialogue carried a distinctly bitter tone given his artificial creation.

“I find this construction absolutely astounding. Aside from the metal parts, it almost looks like a human graveyard. The limbs, the eyes, the parts all appear to be pieces of flesh. Yet there is no blood, no smell of rot, and no flood of insects.”

“Yes, organics are constantly struggling to create mecha to be more like themselves despite the flaws which it imposes.”

Mr. automatic-man, I do not understand your meaning there.”

“Just call me Joe. Well the strange thing about you organics is that you have a discomfort interacting with computer entities like your friend there which does not look quite human. Forty years ago the Techtronix model A-4 was a thoroughly capable machine. It was voted Mecha of the Year in Time Magazine, yet it was tossed out after a few years because the UI was a-”

“Excuse me, UI?” the plethora of futuristic terms was beginning to wear on my patience.

“User interface. It’s what you humans see when interacting with a mecha unit, like my face.”

He did a little sidestep and pointed both fingers at his smiling mouth.

“The A-4 had a screen projecting a human face, but it still wasn’t ‘lifelike’ enough. So once a new mecha unit *comes* out with a more ‘human’ appearance, then the old units are seen as obsolete.”

My Lord! The public here is so gluttoned for novelty as to accept these mountains of waste as it’s consequence. People put such an enormous amount of craftsmanship into these mechanical men and then with the whim of fashion merely toss them out? What a horribly wasteful society.”

“It’s not only wasteful, it creates an entire culture of undesirables.”

“Yeah, well that’s nothing new.”

“Elizabeth, what do you mean?” I felt so horribly confused in this land of unlimited changes.

“Well remember the conversations we had before about Native people, black people, and others? Humanity always has it’s undesirables. In our times it was based on race or income. Now it seems to be based on biology or lack of it. In my time period, none of us really got it until the skitters came. Then suddenly all of us, black, white, brown found ourselves fighting on the same side. The prejudices against someone’s race, gender, age, or language just... melted away. We finally took notice because something tangible had changed. But nobody had taken notice of the fact that it hadn’t existed before.”

“You mean that no one from our class had taken notice. Remember Cherrah’s dialogue? Or the missionary family that I met earlier in my travels?”

“Himm. I see you’re point René.”

“And now there exists a new class of undesirables. However this time we are more perceptive, more accurate, and harder to kill than you organics. I believe, that the only way that an egalitarian society can exist is when human beings themselves are rendered obsolete.”

“Archos would agree with you on that.”

“Yes well we certainly have nothing in our programming that would allow us to harm you organics.”

As the Joe unit kept talking, I noticed the boy David began walking away. "David, where are you going?"

"I'm going to Kelowna. To find the blue fairy."

"Yes, Mr.- ah Joe. I was meaning to ask you about this town of Kelowna. Would this place not be thousands of kilometers from here? Assuming that we are still in the wilds of Prince Rupert's Land."

I immediately saw the quizzical expression take over Elizabeth's face. "What in the world is that?"

However I was soon distracted by the mechanical Joe who picked up a metal head from among the pile of parts. An iron Hamlet holding aloft the remains of poor Yorick, he fiddled with the disembodied cranium for several long moments. Finally I saw the eyes on the mechanical face open. I nearly fell backward from fright when the device spoke.

Hello. I am Professor Indiana Jones, leading authority on all things historical. Ask me any question from any time period and I will provide full archaeological and historical science to bring accuracy and-."

With no surprise, or any other emotion for that matter, the mechanical Joe spoke to the artificial cranium.

"History of Prince Rupert's Land."

"Searching- - Prince Rupert's Land. A territory in British North America, consisting of the Hudson Bay drainage basin. Owned

by the Hudson Bay Company from 1670-1870. Areas included much of present day Canada, including the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, southern Nunavut, and northern parts of Ontario and Quebec. It also included-

“Thank you Professor Jones.”

Now the mechanical Joe looked at us.

“Is there anything else you would like to ask?”

Without any hesitation or perplexity, David walked up to the disembodied machine and asked his question. “Where can I find the blue fairy.”

“Please clarify. Blue Fairy -book by Andrew Lang 1889, Blue Fairy television show 2009, Scaevola aemula Blue Fan flower, Blue Fairy from Pinocchio-”

“That’s it!” Cried David “The last one.”

“Blue Fairy. A magical character in the story of Pinocchio who fulfills Gepetto’s wish and grants the power of consciousness to a marionette built by the man. Blue Fairy later in the story fulfills Pinocchio’s wish and transforms him into a real flesh and blood boy.”

It was clear now why this surreal being sought for a fantastical resolution. If it actually was possible to create a mechanical being that experienced sorrow at having been abandoned, then it must also be possible for that being to yearn for that which it could not experience.

“But where can I FIND the blue fairy.”

It never ceased to amaze me how this mechanical child showed emotion in the exact way that a human child would.

“I am sorry, but I am an archaeological index. I can only answer questions up to 2182 when my last data update was installed.”

Now the child looked at mechanical Joe. “Joe, are you sure that the ‘WikiBot’ knows where we can look for the blue fairy?”

Without the slightest hesitation ‘Joe’ looked back at the boy and spoke with his usual suave confidence.

“I can tell you this. If there is any information in the world, then the WikiBot has it.”

“Can the ‘WikiBot’ tell us how I can stop leapfrogging to a new time period seemingly every time I fall into slumber?”

“Well, if there’s any information at all available, then WikiBot is where you’ll find it.”

“It does appear then, that we should travel together to this Kelowna land.”

As the mechanical Joe was about to put the iron cranium down, I requested to be allowed to bring it along so as to learn more about the history of this place.

“I would appreciate it if you would bring along the rest of my body too.”

I looked sadly at the animate cranium. "I'm sorry professor. I don't see any more of you around here."

Chapter Forty-Four An End to Ignorance

T*hus did we travel together. Our variegated group now including a mechanical man with the slick appearance of a snake-oil salesman, an artificial boy who's realism included the yearning for an organic existence, the mechanical domestic unit from the previous world, the disembodied cranium of Professor Jones, and finally my dear Elizabeth.*

"So Joe, how are we gonna get to Kelowna? Are we just going to follow the yellow brick road, or do you have an idea for transportation?"

"Excuse me, what do you mean by the yellow brick road?"

"Oh for cryin... René, just ask the head alright."

It was amazing. This disembodied robotic head precisely described the story, written 60 years after I was born, of the girl, the lion, the scarecrow and the tin man (now I understood the reference) on their quest to have each person's unique wish

granted. I also learned the complete history of the last 250 years including the rise of Canada as an industrialized nation, the two world wars, the United States' empirical quest to control the world's resources (like father like son I supposed), the excessive burning of fuels and the breeding of livestock which changed the atmosphere and warmed the temperatures leading to the flooding of coastal cities like New York and Vancouver. Finally the strict controls on power consumption, livestock, child birth, and the massive efforts to repopulate the flora and fauna lost in the 20th century. I learned of the transport which evolved from bicycles and horses to the horseless carriages in the 20th century and finally to electric ground vehicles in the middle of the 21st. Lastly I learned more about the changes in sociology with mass media, relaxed sexual norms (which explained the women's trousers) recognition of equality for women, black people, the Irish, and Native people.

After a time we came upon a road and Joe was able to find a damaged vehicle in an old driveway. It was a fascinating machine and drastically different from the automotive vehicles which I had seen thus far. Instead of four wheels, it had two wheels up front, a severely sloped translucent front cover and a single rear wheel which more resembled the bicycle machines than the powered automotive vehicles. With the help of the 'Jones' robot, mechanical Joe was able to repair the electrical

system and we were imbued with mechanized transport albeit under severely cramped conditions.

Once again I had the pleasure of watching the land fly behind us at twice the speed of a galloping horse and relished in the wondrous progress which we made towards the Pacific. I had learned that with the flooding of the coastal cities, those population centers nearest the shoreline experienced tragic loss of life. Meanwhile any family with the means had all emigrated inland resulting in a staggering population increase for cities such as Kelowna.

As we sped along the road, I saw the radically altered landscape firsthand. Where previously in the world of Archos the landscape had been dominated by kilometers of prairie grass in all directions, here there was dense foliage and heavy tree growth all around. I again took advantage of the encyclopedic knowledge of the Jones unit, though I continued to feel highly unsettled speaking with a disembodied head. "Professor Jones could you tell me why the landscape here is so vastly different from the past?"

"Of course. The changes to the climate throughout the world was caused by an enormous increase in atmospheric Carbon Dioxide, Nitrous Oxide, and Methane. The two most potent gases, Nitrous Oxide and Methane initiated a chain reaction which created a feedback loop of heat buildup. By the 21st century, widespread changes became highly pronounced

including increased weather severity, desertification, and a melting of Arctic and Antarctic ice sheets. This last alteration caused all climate zones to move farther from the equator. Therefore the areas of Canada which were previously tundra became more heavily forested while much of what used to be the United States were turned into arid desert regions.

The increasingly severe and destructive weather patterns caused a reduction in human populations. This allowed the natural world to reclaim much of the land areas which were previously under human control.”

“My word! Nobody did anything to stop this?!”

“There were numerous groups throughout the late 20th and early 21st century who advocated for a reduction in humanity’s destructive habits. However the political systems of the most wasteful nations succumbed to the financial influence of the wealthiest humans. In addition these companies controlled the news and public information which was distributed through media sources.”

“So did these swindlers not realize that they also faced the same precarious future as the rest of humanity?”

“Insufficient data. This information is not recorded.”

I was completely amazed by what I learned from the unit.

“Elizabeth were you or your peers not aware of all of this destruction?”

The woman sighed heavily, “I’d have to say that we really weren’t. I mean, there was one story about a tanker spill in

Alaska somewhere, but nobody really connected stuff like that to our own lives. So I guess I was one of those people too. We lived far out in the suburbs, this meant that we had to drive because everything was a dozen kilometers away. I drove my Toyota to the mall to pick Vivian up from piano lessons like every other suburban mom." She paused and I could see in her face a pained expression. "It seemed like nobody realized what this did to other people or the planet we lived on." I saw a tear form and roll down her cheek, but before I could comfort her, the mechanical Joe reached an arm around the woman.

"Dear dear lady. You need not feel melancholy. We are here, your friends, to comfort you and bring warmth to your heart."

Elizabeth pulled her head back and stared at the mechanical man. "Joe. I appreciate your kindness, but. Well I already have a boyfriend and do not require any services from you."

I threw the woman a look which must have revealed my shock, and the smile which she offered in return threw my emotions into a great kerfuffle. This quickly ended my curiosity regarding historical studies.

The mechanical Joe remained utterly nonplussed.

"But of course lovely woman. I will always respect your every wish."

Thankfully, and not surprisingly, I saw Elizabeth shy away from the Joe being to the extent that our cramped vehicle would allow. "Um, thank you Joe."

Elizabeth and I soon distracted ourselves with the scenery outside the window. I even took the opportunity (given what she had said to the 'Joe' character) to hold Elizabeth's hand. She gazed back at me with a great warmth that touched deeply within my soul.

"Look at this forestland, René. If this was the 20th century, there'd be suburban houses and concrete driveways stretching all around here. Now we have the natural world back. I personally think that it's beautiful."

"My dear Elizabeth, you do not find the lack of civilization disturbing? I must say that most of the gentler folk of my own time kept a distance from the dangers of the forestland. There was much praise for the march of progress towards secure, fenced in farms and ranches."

"Are you shittin me?" René, weren't you the one who talked about how empty the suburbs felt to you?"

"My dear lady." It felt strange to use that title after hearing the woman's crass language. "Would you not agree that the effort to transform uninhabitable wilderness into farmland was

a great deal more sensible than your own century's endeavors to cover the same land with these strange artificial pavements?"

"Humans, may I respond to your discussion?"

We both turned to look at the mechanical man. "Um. Certainly One-zero-zero-four. What do you have to share?"

"Archos had studied human progress in both poor and wealthy societies alike and saw no difference between the 17th century felling of forests and the 20th century paving of the land. To Archos, these were both an incomprehensible pathogen causing loss of biodiversity-"

"Excuse me, but I don't understand what that means?"

"My apologies Mr. René. It means a reduction in the variety of plant and animal species. During your time and for several hundred years before on this continent, humans cut down trees in order to build farms. By the time you left that time period, large stretches of forests had been lost. You humans later realized the value of trees, however the forests which were later planted consisted of only a few of the species which were considered useful to humans such as the Douglas Fir and the Pine. With the dramatic increase in your population, the damaging effect which humans had on the more fragile open land was beyond it's ability to be sustained. Trees became blighted, and only a few of the more robust species of animals were able to find food and shelter."

My mind was once again reeling and I wondered how much I dared ask of these mechanical encyclopedias. "So you are telling us, One-zero-zero-two that this progress which my people

celebrated was actually to our detriment? And Elizabeth, even with your own advanced knowledge and machines you did not recognize this? I must say this feels most difficult to believe."

"I guess nobody really understood what was happening. People did what they had to cause we needed to earn a living. We all needed to work so that we could have food, and clothing, and-"

"But such thinking is absurd! Your century continued to have this inedible grass or macadam throughout the land. If it weren't for that, you could grow all the food that you needed." I regretted raising my voice, but the logic of the future was most incomprehensible to me.

But instead of looking back at me in rebuttal, she turned instead to the head lying in my lap. "Professor Jones, could you tell me the population of Canada in 1871?"

"Certainly. The estimated population for the region of integrated Canada was 3.6 million humans."

Looking satisfied, she continued. "And, could you now provide the population from, say 2005?"

"The Canadian census in the year 2005 was 32.2 million humans."

Now she looked back at me. "You see René, the population was ten times larger. It just wasn't possible to survive by huntin coon or whatever you folks did. The only way that humans

could get enough food was with enormous farms and that meant the food had to be trucked in, which meant using money.”

“But if the population were exploding so quickly, weren’t there limits put in place? Would it not be in your own self-interest to slow the population growth?”

“René, people just didn’t consider children to be much of a burden. We grew up, we had sex, and girls got pregnant. That’s just the way it’s been since the dawn of time. Imagine if my poor Vivian were still here, would you suggest that she should not have been born?”

“But this is unfathomable! It’s not as if you have enormous spaceships like the Voltan or, or those aliens from your own world, to simply leave and search for a different planet on which to exist!”

“René. Do you remember when we were talking about Columbus and you thought it was absurd that this ‘great explorer’ could be merely a greedy opportunist?”

I looked severely at the woman. “I still have a difficult time believing such monstrous accusations.”

“That’s because you were TAUGHT to believe that. Your schooling was regimented to ensure that you learned only what the education system wanted you to believe. The greatest advantage of the 21st century is that we have a vast store of

knowledge which is not able to be controlled by any state agency. In my world we had the internet before... well before the aliens. And now we have this amazing robot which offers an even wider scope of knowledge."

"Except that he can't tell me where the Blue Fairy is" piped in David Elizabeth gave a warning look to David, which I doubted would be effective on the child. "Here we can discover the truth about our history beyond what is taught by any institution."

"I understand your theory dear Elizabeth. However there is a flaw in this hypothesis."

"Oh?" Her tone implied a more open-minded attitude than the earlier hostility.

"If, as you say, people had access to unbridled information by the 21st century (it perturbed me enormously to speak of it in the past tense) then it would seem that, given the threat, humanity would change it's course."

The woman looked thoughtful. "Well, you'd have to ask the professor-bot. I never got to see much of this century."

"Professor Jones. Could you offer your historical perspective on our conversation?"

"Yes of course. There was in fact great social pressure towards non-polluting energy use and sustainable lifestyles at the

beginning of the 21st century. However the companies which sold the carbon-based fuels and the products which used them had already become the wealthiest in the world. Many such companies had more wealth than entire nations. They used their profits to ensure continued control even to the point of hiring their own militaries. Groups which gained enough social influence to threaten the image of these corporations were systematically eliminated. Examples included the assassination of Filemon Lagman,²² Berta Caceres,²³ and the coverup of the explosion at the Nagoya nuclear fusion plant in 2024. By the time the scientific community was able to thoroughly prove your species' impact, humans had become so dependent on destructive technology that even your own survival instinct was insufficient to overcome human greed. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the 'tipping point' had been reached and even very large reductions in pollution could no longer prevent catastrophe."

I was left speechless by the machine's answer. How could my own species allow for such devastation? It took several moments before I could speak again. "Professor Jones. Is this what I've heard the other robots refer to as 'the sixth mass extinction?'"

"Yes René. Many scientists who studied the climate in the early 21st century believed and a few still believe that humanity will be facing extinction when the food sources-"

22 Prominent Philipino workers' rights activist, murdered in 2001

23 Honduran activist who successfully campaigned against a series of illegal dams which threatened the livelihood of numerous indigenous tribes in the region

Our conversation was interrupted by an exclamation from David. "There it is! Kelowna! Now I can find out how to reach the blue fairy."

Soon a great wall appeared on the horizon with the word 'Kelowna' emblazoned in large letters. Unlike the many other lands where one town seemed to blend seamlessly into the next, here the boundary between woodland and city was sharp and distinct.

"My word! It appears to resemble the great French forts built along the St. Laurent. But why, if you longer fear the Sauv-natives?"

Our highly-confident driver easily superseded the Jones cranium this time.

"Because René, these structures are left over from a very dark period when you humans were fighting with each other for basic resources. The changes to the weather patterns which Mr. Jones described caused crop failures which meant that many people were competing with each other in order to feed themselves."

Mechanical Joe pulled the vehicle up to a strange skeletal structure. It was composed of an iron grid at least five stories tall with spaces slightly larger than the vehicle in which we traveled. Many of the cubby holes sported vehicles like our own within. It made me wonder at the level of power which this

society had access to, in order to lift these large motorized vehicles. "Joe, why are we stopping here? Can't we just drive straight into the city?"

"There is a prohibition on operating private transport vehicles within city limits. All transportation is handled by RapTranz or by bicycle."

"Holy crap! Are you telling me Mr. Joe, that even two-hundred years in the future people are still using bicycles?"

The mechanical man answered with it's typical deadpan expression.

"That is correct. For over a century, mechanical scientists have been aware that the bicycle machines continued to be unrivaled in their energy efficiency."

"Can that really be true?" Elizabeth was sympathetic but also clearly surprised. "René, I know how much you like those things, but in almost a century, nobody was able to come up with a more efficient car?"

In the end it was the disembodied head which answered her question.

"The model of electric vehicle which we used to reach Kelowna represents the greatest level of efficiency which fully enclosed individualized transport can provide.

However humans have not yet developed a machine which can match organic muscle in efficiency. A human being traveling

on a bicycle enjoys 2-3 times the efficiency of a human on foot and 33 times the efficiency of a motorized vehicle.²⁴

Additionally there is also the efficiency of space. By the 21st century, humans were becoming attracted to denser living environments with more social interaction. This led to space formerly consumed for transportation being re-apportioned for the benefit of humans. As it's popularity declined, this motorized transport became permitted only beyond the urban perimeter."

"Um. Professor Jones. That didn't make much sense to me. Could you put that in some kind of way that a non-futuristic person could grasp?"

"Yes René. You notice when we walk around that a person needs less than a one meter wide space to travel. However these enclosed vehicles take up much more than that. In addition, when the vehicle is not being used, it continues to take up space. Humans who became attracted to urban living for comfort or the protection from theft, found the personal vehicles used too much valuable space within the built environment."

Now that the professor-bot mentioned it, I realized that the boundary where the parking structure was located symbolized a sharp distinction. Where we came from, the land was dominated by forestland and a few parks close to the building. However in the other direction, there were densely spaced

24 Modern analysis of bicycle technology has proven that it can provide the equivalent of more than 1000 miles per gallon

buildings, large numbers of people milling about, and the noise of a thousand conversations. Next to me, Elizabeth was also staring about in wonder. Though I could not surmise what element dominated her interest.

“Given the size of our group, it would be more practical for us to take the RapTranz which is scheduled to arrive..” mechanical Joe tapped the side of his head in an odd way. “In 4 minutes 37 seconds.”

A short while later a bullet-shaped transport vehicle arrived. It shot straight down a recessed concrete channel with no tracks or power system which I could discern. We entered an immaculate light blue space with seating along every wall. I was most impressed by the clean and comfortable accommodations of the vehicle. It appeared much like descriptions Claude had shared of the first-class railway cars.

As we traveled, I asked the Jones-bot about how the transport was powered and it gave me a fascinating lecture on a principle called ‘magnetic-levitation.’

“Hey why’re you holdin on to that piece o junk. They got the new ‘95 models out that can be updated into the next century.”

I looked up to a young man not much older than myself with hair almost as heavily oiled as mechanical Joe and with a baby-smooth face. I was about to answer but was luckily saved by Elizabeth.

“Cause this one was a freebee from one of those promotional things. I might save up for a newer model, but for now it works. Kay?”

The young man gave a response which sounded overly privileged and we paid him no further attention. Instead I focused on the city which was a fascinating mix of classical architecture and futuristic design. There were multi-story facades of plain glass flanked by Roman columns. Buildings with round surfaces and colors which changed shape depending on the angle of view. There were even buildings which looked like stone however with slender shapes that no stone material could withstand. All of the buildings were of a height which would dwarf even the tallest structures in Montreal and I felt overcome by vertigo in my attempt to view them in their entirety.

“Here is our stop. The hall of knowledge.”

We all exited at a station as futuristic as the buildings around us. There was a vast open aired roof held up by the slenderest of iron columns. Floating screens projected nearby stores, foods, and attractions. As the flood of departing passengers thinned out, we approached a fascinating building which looked to be made entirely of glass panels.

The whole exterior of the space consisted of large sheets of flat glass panels. The only support were a pair of spider web-like lattices at each corner of the glass. It was complete mystery to

me how such a building could stand up to the forces of gravity. I was about to make the attempt at asking one of the mechanical beings, however I soon spied that the mechanical Joe and David immediately made their way towards one of several doors and so the rest of us followed them into a private room with a pair of very comfortable looking chairs.

A semicircular curtain parted revealing a large fabric screen and I watched as mechanical Joe activated the WikiBot device. Suddenly a voice filled the room and an enormous explosion leapt out at all of us. Only the mecha resisted the urge to shrink up against the walls.

“Good lord man. What is that phenomenon?”

My ears were accosted by two separate conversations which I attempted to follow at the same time. One was the WikiBot announcing that it was here to serve and could answer any question in the world. The other was the mecha Jones describing the history of holograms and their increasing use for media interactions. I half listened as mechanical Joe and the David child’ attempted to discover more about this ‘blue fairy’ which he was so obsessed with. Suddenly all of the lights and ‘holograms’ dimmed and it became frightfully dark while the words of a beautiful poem scanned across the fabric screen.

*“Come away O human child
to the waters of the wild
With a fairy hand in hand
For the world’s more full of weeping
Then you can understand”*

The device continued describing technical information about a professor who had the knowledge that David sought. The instant that the device finished it’s diatribe, David fled from the room while the Mechanical Joe followed.

“Great, so what do we do now?”

“That question is not specific enough. Please frame your question with a specific parameter. Flat fact, Social Studies, Historical Fiction, Politics,-”

With not a little consternation, Elizabeth answered. “Sorry, we were speaking to each other.”

However the misunderstanding gave me cue to at last take the reigns now. “Mr. WikiBot. Parameter is... we’ll try science. What culture has knowledge and practical application of time travel.”

“The only area of my database dealing with time travel would be science fiction. Currently there is no practical knowledge of fourth-dimensional travel within the extent of human discovery.”

I was astounded. "But. . . but we are proof of it. I myself was born in 1852 and yet here I stand sometime in the late twenty-first century."

"The most fitting parameter would be psychology. A delusion of grandeur is the fixed, false belief that one possesses superior qualities such as genius, fame, omnipotence, or wealth. False memories are often associated with this disorder.

"There are several professionals here in Kelowna who have experience in providing the neurological adjustments necessary to cure this disorder. Currently Dr. Ellicia Furgesson is available. She will be arriving in 12 minutes, please stand by."

"So what do we do now?"

"We get the hell outa here before we get tossed in a 21st century psych ward." I quickly felt the tugging on my hand and I gave no resistance as Elizabeth not-so-gently compelled us to depart post haste.

Chapter Forty-Five

The Fourth Dimension

All of us hurriedly followed Elizabeth out of the structure. As we escaped down the street, I saw a sight which truly did cause me to believe that I had lost my sensibilities. An automotive vehicle much like the ones which I had seen during the 20th century floated down on four gas jets and soon the wheels rotated to the vertical axis and it landed softly on the now properly oriented wheels.

Even Elizabeth was astounded by the sight. "Holy shit, it's a DeLorean! That's it. I'm going back to talk with that doctor fellow. This has got to be an hallucination."

"Elizabeth. What in the world is this DeLorean device?"

Suddenly one of the doors opened. But it did not open to the side as with most mechanical carriages I had seen, but it opened vertically, in the nature of a raised bird wing. Inside was an enormous mass of electrical equipment and a man with pure snow white hair and wild bulging eyes.

"Thank god I've found you. Do you have any idea the amount of trouble you three have been causing?! Get in, all of you right away!" The man spoke with great excitement and his voice had a guttural, almost grainy quality.

We were quickly interrupted however by another strange vehicle which floated down towards us. It had a spherical cabin with a boom sprouting from the rear of the vehicle.

“Citizen. You are operating a carbon-fuel powered vehicle. Carbon based vehicles are prohibited within the province. You must immediately disembark the vehicle and stand with your hands easily visible.”

I recognized the authority in the voice and, having no desire to experience a ‘psych ward’ I quickly ushered Elizabeth into the ‘de-lorean’ followed by unit one-zero-zerofour right behind.

“Citizen. This is your last warning. It is illegal to operate carbon fuel powered vehicles. You are instructed to remain where you are and exit the vehicle slowly. If you do not comply-”

The man had a very expressive face as he turned to us. “Let’s see if these cops can follow us into the fourth dimension.”

We shot straight up into the air and all of us were pressed back in our seats as the vehicle sped forward like the fastest locomotive ever known. Instantly the city, the police, and the towers all disappeared. As we watched the sky speed past with exotic force, I marveled at what the man had said. ‘Fourth dimension?’ Then I remembered that the same term had been used by the WikiBot.

“So are you gonna tell us who you are and what in the world is going on here?”

“Of course of course. Let’s set down so we can discuss this in less cramped accommodations. My name is Dr. Emmett Brown. I was born on October 22, 1938.”

As we disembarked the vehicle I felt as if I were dreaming. After all this time, to finally meet another person who has traveled in time was like a miracle for me. The vehicle slowly descended back down on a remote stretch of road in a forest very similar in appearance to the one that we three had arrived in.

“You must tell me Mister Brown. How are you able to control this random shifting in time? And for that matter, how is it that you were able to find us?”

The man looked at us with great intensity of emotion. “Great Scott! You don’t know do you?”

Elizabeth and I shook our heads sincerely in the negative.

“Your traveling has created innumerable rifts in history.” The man violently waved his hands around him. “Space aliens, dinosaurs, robots, everything’s in chaos!”

The doctor reached into the vehicle and pulled out a strange rectangular device. Instantly a type of shimmering slate board

appeared in mid-air before us. I peered at it and attempted to touch it, but my finger went straight through.

“Don’t touch it man. It’s just a hologram. Of course, you wouldn’t know about those things.”

“Actually I do. The Indiana-bot told me the history of photonics and holograms.”

The man looked at me intensely. “Yes well, you be sure not to go spouting off about such things to your friends when we get you back to your own time. You go telling people in 1871 about television, airplanes and computers-” he paused a moment as if distracted “it could induce utter temporal pandemonium. Now, where were we?”

“Oh yes, oh yes.” He used some kind of light emitting pen to create lines on the hologram. “Each jump that you made created a rift in the time continuum resulting in multiple temporal holes.” As the man spoke, he drew a line straight across the ‘board’ and several branches running off of it with decreasing distance between them. “Each rift creates what you might call a fraying in the fabric. For the sake of temporal stability, we’ve got to get you back to your own time period.”

“Doctor Brown. That sounds perfectly splendid to me. However I clearly do not have a choice as to when I travel or

for how many years. This adventure most certainly is not voluntary.”

“Not for any of us.” Elizabeth added.

“Are you saying that you did not invent your machine, as I did?”

“Machine? Of course not! Mr. Twi- er René just shifts with us at random to any number of otherworldly places. None of us have any idea where or when the two of us are gonna travel to.”

The man looked up, and slapped his hand to his forehead.

“Great Scott! This is a catastrophe of epic proportions.”

“Good sir, it is much more so for us then-”

“Hold on, hold on.” The man looked up as if in deep thought for a long moment.

“Of course! I’m certain they can help you.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind that, nevermind. Come get back in the car.”

“Are you going to return me to the year of my departure finally?” The man’s roundabout conversation and nonsensical theories were becoming quite tiresome to my poorly educated 19th century cranium.

“Of course we’ll get you back there. But first we have to figure out this whole random shifting that you say you’re experiencing. It won’t do any good to return you to 1871 and have running off to another time again.”

Thus did we find ourselves again squeezed into the small metal car. The vehicle lifted much more slowly off the ground and accelerated to a high speed before the sky changed instantly to a more blueish hue.

Looking around it was clear that we had traveled an enormous distance. Not only was the all of the forestland gone, but the landscape itself had changed. The whole of the land below was covered in vast ice sheets all the way to the horizon.

“Dr. Brown, where exactly are we? Or should I say, when are we?”

The man smiled warmly and proclaimed in a grand voice. “My dear boy, we have now arrived in the year 4758 by your calendar. We are now nearly three thousand years in your future!”

“Thr... three... thousand?!” My mind could scarcely grasp the concept. “By all that is holy, this is... is god-like!”

“But Doctor Brown. What is the reason for choosing this particular year?”

Immediately after she spoke, I shook my head in agreement with Elizabeth.

“Because.” He continued in his now-familiar intensity of speech. “There are a group of amazing beings living here who are the foremost experts on temporal idiosyncracies.”

The doctor piloted the craft down towards the ice and into a great canyon before landing at the edge of a grand ice cave.

Mere moments after we landed, a group of beings arrived. Their craft, for I could think of no comparison to any familiar vehicle, seemed to be composed of two dimensional surfaces which formed some type of semi-enclosed space without any obvious form of attachment to each other. The craft landed and a group of four beings emerged.

The beings were vaguely human-like in that they had a head, two arms, and two legs.

However beyond that the resemblance vanished as the beings' limbs were dramatically longer and more fluid than a human. The 'waist' area was impossibly slender and the bodies held a translucent quality to them. One of the beings walked over to each of us and held a hand to our heads for a long moment before stepping back and gathering as a group. It was a mystery to me what was happening among them or what they would do with us next.

Finally, one of the beings turned towards our group and spoke, though I saw nothing resembling a mouth or facial features.

“It is most interesting to see you again Emmett Brown. We are grateful for this rare experience of interacting with organic life.”

“Then what-”

“Please. It would take far too long to explain, and as your doctor companion has pointed out, the damage is accelerating.”

Chapter Forty-Six **Repairing the Continuum**

T*he next thing that I knew, the three of us were sitting within a room which felt distinctly familiar. It took me several moments before I was able to put word to memory.*

“Good Lord! This is Herbert and Merrill’s living room!”

Elizabeth spun around staring at everything in wonder. “Holy crap René, you’re right! But how can it be? Everything feels just like it did then, even down to the note that the Riley’s left us on the table.”

Barely had she finished speaking when a being glided into the room. They moved with an incredible grace, more reminiscent of

a winged beast then a human. The being spoke with each of us and responded to our myriad questions with an impressive patience.

He/it explained that they had created this space for our benefit as it was one of the only environments in which we had felt relaxed, for a time. However the being kindly told each of us that there was little information which they could provide regarding the period between then and the present. The ice, it seems, had buried the whole of civilization and they had no written history of the transformation which had occurred. Dr. Brown was the first being from the past who they had ever met.

Thus instead of being educated about this God-like future, we instead became teachers ourselves. Each of us reenacting the adventures which we had been subject to for these beings [they seemed to have no sex to distinguish male from female]. We described our disparate histories at great length before the beings appeared satiated. Finally, with the stories told to their satisfaction, the beings pulled the eccentric 'doc' out of the room converse with him alone. This left me alone with Elizabeth in a strange future filled with great walls of ice, magical reenacted houses, and graceful futuristic beings.

As I gazed into the face of the woman who had been a constant companion through a thousand dangers, a new fear gripped me as solidly as any of the murderous machines.

What if the two of us were returned to our original times, separately? It occurred to me, sitting next to her, that I had become as infatuated with her as once I had been with Sherrie a lifetime ago. To once again have a devoted companion stolen away from me I feared might be more than I could handle. Elizabeth must have sensed that something was amiss, for she watched me inquisitively before speaking softly.

“René, you look so upset. Tell me what’s bothering you.” She looked about before giving a shrug and continued. “I mean, aside from the fact that we’re sitting in an ice cave thousands of years in the future.”

I opened my mouth in reply, but then closed it again. How could I form in mere words the tumbling river of emotions which raged through my consciousness. I gazed into her eyes searching for a sufficient breadth of verse. However my mind remained stubbornly blank. I felt paralyzed by the fragility of her features, her hair, her soft eyes. Slowly, my head moved towards her as if of its own volition and I was reminded of that morning in front of the monstrous house. As I continued to gaze at her, I saw Elizabeth’s head move towards mine as well

and we kissed deeply and tenderly. I stroked her luxurious hair and drank in the sweetness of her skin.

Somehow, despite the lack of words, I believed that my emotions were comprehended. We kissed again more passionately and I prayed that the moment could be frozen in time just as the ice which surrounded our beautiful private moment. I sank back into the couch which even felt the same as it had in Merrill's time, and wrapped my arms tightly around this woman who was, gratefully, returning my interest quite happily.

Chapter Forty-Seven The Healing

*S*oon our affections were interrupted by the barely audible sound of the futuristic beings leading Doctor Brown back into the room. Once again I had the strange experience of communicating with these beings without them evoking any facial movement.

“Emmett has provided us with a great deal of understanding as to your situation. René would you please come with us?”

With no obvious reason for protest, I followed between two of the beings to a rectangular platform. Instantly a series of two-dimensional square elements flew towards us and formed a vehicle of indescribable peculiarity. An instant before the craft rose above the surface, I felt myself enclosed within a strange material which seemed like transparent amber and which prevented any type of movement. I quickly fell into a panic and worried that we had all made a tragic mistake in trusting these beings. Yet without any verbal communication, the beings seemed to understand my upset.

“Please do not feel concerned. You are in no danger. The PTFRe is merely a protective coating for you. The outside environment would be inhospitable to your fragile biology and this material will keep you safe. The journey will only last a few minutes in your time-keeping system.”

Though I was still quite agitated, the being's words helped to ease my tension a notch. I gazed awestruck as the craft flew at astonishing speed through ice canyons of a scale I would have thought impossible on the whole of the land.

We slowed at a large cavern and seemed to drift through a wall and into... what I vaguely remembered as Doctor Montegue's study. Though I had not entered the man's house in half a decade, the memory of the leeches and the brandy came instantly flooding back to me. I'd remembered little of the feverish state in which I had been brought there, but I did remember that the

doctor's treatment had been successful in chasing off the raging fever which I had suffered in my youth. Now I was instructed to once again sit in the comfortable reclining chair and the beings brought over an alien-looking device which resembled an angel's halo but with a greater thickness and an indigo hue. I felt strangely calm as the halo was lowered around my cranium and over the course of what seemed a half-hour I relived various scenes from the adventures of the past few weeks. Though I did have some emotional responses to the dangers and wonders of my adventure, the experience seemed muted now in the repetition.

Soon the device was lifted away and the beings informed me that my ailment was healed. I could finally sleep through the night unperturbed by fear of transfiguration.

It wasn't until that moment that I fully grasped the monstrous scale of my torment. If I hadn't already been sitting, it's likely that I would have collapsed from the relief of knowing that I could at long last relax, safely ensconced in one specific time period.

The beings instructed me to rise again and our group returned to the amazing vehicle for the return trip. As we traveled, I was distracted from the astonishingly fast transport by thoughts of Elizabeth and what would happen to her. But somehow I

was unable to bring myself to mention it to the beings, even after we landed and the strange encasing was removed.

I returned to my companions and embraced each of them, with a light kiss for my dear Elizabeth. With the strange enigma finally healed, it was time to make our one final time trip in the strange DeLorean machine. We left unit One-zero-zero-four in the company of these beings who promised that it would be well cared for.

Once the vehicle lifted off, we retraced our previous path and in a flash found ourselves flying at low elevation across a vast dry plain towards a patch of low hills before the Doctor eased us down to rest on the earth.

Elizabeth opened the strange vertical door and looked out in wonder. "So are we back now in René's hometown Emmett?"

The doc pulled himself as well from the vehicle. His wild eyes and wild hair showing a brash intensity as he answered us in his rough voice. "Not quite my dear. We are back in the year 1871. However the DeLorean does not transport one across space, only time. By my estimate we are somewhere near Merritt in the western part of British Columbia. The town of Kelowna, where I found you would be about 130 kilometers east of here."

“So does this mean that the timeline or whatever is finally back to-”

“Hey! What in the hell is that?! We all followed Elizabeth’s direction and saw a group of men on horseback headed towards us on the horizon.

“Great Scott! They must be Cayuse. Hurry, we can’t let them see us and influence the timeline. We’ve got to go forward a month or so.”

We climbed in and took off again. As we gained altitude, I watched the Natives approaching through a mirror attached to the side of the vehicle. With horror, I witnessed two of their arrows strike the machine.

“Good god. We’re losing power. I’ve got to find a place for us to hide.”

“Doctor, why don’t you just use that holographic device to make a big hillside around us?”

“Dear lady. That’s an excellent idea.” The older man pulled the rectangular device out and punched a few buttons. Instantly we were surrounded by a wall of rock on all sides.

“Let us just hope they don’t try and climb over it.”

“I’ll second that René.”

We listened with relief as the noise of men and horses retreated into the distance in front of us. Then the doctor went outside and checked the outside of the vehicle.

“Damn!” He moved around to another part of the vehicle.

“Damn damn!”

“What is the matter Dr. Brown?”

“Those horseman shot an arrow into the gas tank.”

“Are you telling me that all the power necessary to fuel a time traveling machine can be provided by simple gasoline?!”

“Dear lady that is not exactly right. I have Mr. Fusion on the back to power the flux capacitor. But unfortunately the engine needed to get the time machine up to 130 kilometers per hour is still powered by regular gasoline. And sadly there wont be a gas station in this area for another 50 years.”

I watched carefully as Elizabeth stepped very close to the doctor. “Are you telling me doctor,” her voice rising to almost hysterical levels “that the three of us are stuck here in the 19th century for the rest of our lives?!”

“Elizabeth, I’m afraid that none of you ever had a choice in that regard. You were never meant to even be alive in the first place. Your respective time-lines were created due to the fraying caused by René’s shifts. You shouldn’t even have been born.”

“You mean I can never see my sweet Vivian again?!”

Now the man looked at her more closely. “I’m terribly sorry to have to tell you this my dear, but every person that you knew was never really born.”

The woman collapsed on his shoulder in a torrent of grief. For his part, the doctor looked quite taken aback and offered some amount of comfort to the poor lady.

“I’m so sorry for your situation my dear Elizabeth. But I must admit to some amount of gratitude as well. This land would be vastly more empty of purpose without your lovely presence.”

The woman looked up from her mourning on the doctor’s shoulder and gazed back at me. “Oh René. You know, as crazy as this whole adventure has been, I have no doubt that it would have been completely impossible without your wonderful company.”

She quickly left the doctor and we kissed again. But, as deeply as I longed to spend an eternity in her arms, I was also filled with gratitude for the doctor and wished no discomfort for him as well.

“And what of you Doctor Brown. Are you stranded here as well?”

“Yes René. It would seem that I am. But don't you two worry about me, I'm a resourceful man and I'm sure that it wont be too difficult for me to get by in this primitive time.

“But what about the DeLorean? Isn't that going to-”

At this the doctor grabbed at his temples and spun around. “Great Scott!” He spun around again. “The time machine!” He grabbed at me by the shoulders, his eyes practically bulging with emotion. “Do you have any idea what kind of damage such a device could cause?!”

“I must admit that I don't-”

“If someone from this time period were to discover it, we could be looking at a complete unraveling of the entire space-time continuum. It would be an absolute disaster, unmatched in the history of the human race! We've got to hide it somewhere.”

Elizabeth went over to the vehicle and pulled out the strange artificial cranium with a degree of calm quite antithetical to the Doc's wild emotional state. “Professor Jones.

Do you have records of this area which could tell us of anyplace where we could hide something the size of a car for at least 150 years?”

“Yes I can. There is an old mining operation closed down in the area in September of 1860. There were several shafts which were not reopened until the middle of the 21st century.”

“Well that’s perfect. You see Emmett? Everything is under control.”

The doctor looked back at Elizabeth with relief traced clearly upon his features. “That does sound like a very agreeable solution. I can leave a letter to my friend Marty with careful instructions on how to find the machine and ensure that it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

“We should keep the mechanical head with us though. Such a vast store of knowledge could come in pretty handy.”

Once again I became witness to the professor’s grand extremes of emotion. “Good god man. That’s completely out of the question. Discovery of a device like this would have the same destructive potential as the would discovery of the time machine. It would utter chaos!! I absolutely forbid it!”

“But Emmett, I bet Professor Jones knows all the places where gold was found.

‘We could keep a modest living by...’

“AHHH!” The doctor grabbed at his temples and spun around before facing me again with his bulging eyes. “That is absolutely out of the question. Haven’t you gotten it through your head by now that altering the natural course of time is far too dangerous?! Take my dear friend Marty. Through one tiny, utterly innocent change in his own past, he nearly prevented his

own parents from getting married. If that had happened, he would have utterly ceased to exist. No I completely forbid you from using future knowledge to change the natural course of events in this time.

Though I could not grasp the intensity of the man's fear, I acquiesced to his superior experience in these 'temporal events' and showed him good humor. "Alright Doctor Brown, do we even know if there is a town in the immediate area? We're going to need food and lodging eventually."

"Why don't you ask that mechanical cranium of yours. The thing probably has more information than the Library of Congress."

"Professor Jones, would you know of any settlements in the area which could be reached on foot from where we are?"

"There is a town, but only in the most rudimentary sense. Surviving records indicate that only a few dozen people lived here until the Fraser Canyon gold rush brought a torrent of immigrants through the area in 1858. Since then, the military fort has grown into a small settlement."

"That should do for now. But first and foremost we have to hide the time machine." The doctor looked over at the artificial head. Mr. Robot, I am truly sorry, but we will have to find a place to hide you until such time in the future as your technology becomes commonplace."

“Doctor Brown. Your logic is entirely sound and although it would not be my preferred existence, the need to follow your suggestion is entirely logical.”

We spent a great deal of time working to move the vehicle towards the mine which the Jones unit had indicated. For the time being we had to make due with using pieces of brush to hide it until we could return with excavation tools. But eventually the machine was hidden away and buried behind an impervious wall of rock.

Over the years we all three became quite close due to our shared secret adventure. We ironically settled in a small town called Hope which enjoyed vast infrastructure development thanks to the continued gold prospecting. However it took at least a decade before the Canadian Pacific Railway connected us to the coast and I at long last moved along with Elizabeth to Vancouver. As you may have guessed, Elizabeth and I were wed a year later, and we even developed enough currency to acquire new bicycle-machines for the three of us. They were not of the same caliber as the swift machine I received from Mr. Yehuda, but they did have the chain-driven system and provided us with transportation and weekend trips for the whole of our lives.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Conclusion

Cincinatti, Ohio
Evening time

“Arnold Meyer Spielberg! I swear if you don’t put Stevie to bed and come back here this instant, I’m going to put a lock on grandma Elizabeth’s trunk and that’ll be the end of it.”

“I’m sorry dear. We’ve just finished.”

“I sure hope mommy doesn’t do that. It was a super great story.”

“It sure was Stevie.” I closed the book very carefully and tucked the boy in safe.

“Do you think it could be real? I mean great-grandpa René couldn’t have known about all that stuff with airplanes and television and stuff if he lived way back then.”

“You know Stevie. With each passing decade I have a harder time answering that question. But listen, your mother can be more dangerous than all the monsters and aliens you’ll ever see if I don’t get you to bed. Go get some sleep now.”

I gave the boy a kiss on the forehead and let him sleep.

The End

By now you, my dear reader have discovered the secret plot twist which I have conjured out of the ether for your entertainment. That the most successful filmmaker of the 20th century was actually inspired by the time-traveling adventure of his great grandparents. I do not mean to belittle the man’s talent and genius.

Many of the stories within have been written by others and adapted for film by Mr. Spielberg. I merely wish to provide an entertaining theory.

Credits:

The Color Purple

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Alice Walker (based on the novel of the same name)

Cowboys and Aliens

Directed by – John Favreau
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Mark Fergus, Hawk, Ostby, and Steve Oedekerck

Amazing Stories

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
'The Mission' - Written by – Steven Spielberg

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Melissa Mathison

Gremlins

Directed by – Joe Dante
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Chris Columbus

Batteries not Included

Directed by – Matthew Robbins
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Mick Garris

Yehuda Moon

Written by Rick Smith and Brian Griggs

Who Framed Roger Rabbit

Directed by – Robert Zemeckis
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Gary Wolf ('Who Censored Roger Rabbit?')

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Steven Spielberg

Amazing Stories

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
'Ghost Train' - Written by – Steven Spielberg

The Dome

Multiple Directors
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Based on Steven King’s novel ‘Under The Dome’

Falling Skies

Multiple Directors
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Multiple Writers

Jurassic Park

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Michael Crichton

Defiance

Multiple Directors
Multiple Producers
Multiple Writers

Super 8

Directed by – J. J. Abrams
Produced by – Steven Spielberg
Written by – J. J. Abrams

Men in Black

Directed by – Barry Sonnenfeld
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Based on the comic written by Lowell Cunningham

Monster House

Directed by – Gil Kenan
Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg
Written by – Dan Harmon and Rob Schrab

Robocalypse

This project is in development. Spielberg has expressed serious interest in being a part of the film
Based on the book of the same title by Daniel Wilson

AI Artificial Intelligence

Directed by – Steven Spielberg
Based on the book ‘Super Toys Last All Summer Long’ by Brian Aldiss

Back to the Future

Directed by – Robert Zemeckis

Executive Producer – Steven Spielberg

Written by – Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale