

1. The Pilot

The Memphis Belle II emerged from its return through the Tunnel as planned. It's pilot, San Marcos, had named his craft after a legendary airplane that had always gotten Her crew safely home during the Second World War. The Curator had been gracious enough to allow him to decorate his craft with its moniker in the haste filled moments before departure.

This aircraft however, the newest Time Eagle in the fleet, looked nothing like its ancestor. Whereas the original had been a clunky crate made of pistons, propellers, and steel, the Memphis Belle II was a sleek, silver, aerodynamically designed low profile craft whose titanium curves caressed any space in inhabited.

It was a perfect warm purple sky evening as it flew low upon the horizon. San Marcos shook himself out of the physically locked state that went along with Tunnel traversal. He grabbed the yoke and resumed control from the computer. The viewer window transitioned from opaque to transparent. He was over a beach. The deep blue crests crashed upon infinite sand crystals. The sun had already set, and there was still a warm glow of fire upon the horizon.

He decided to have a little fun before he landed. He climbed high, turned and then descended, imagining he was the pilot of the original Memphis Belle above the battlefields of Europe dodging Messerschmitts. He leveled off, barely above the waves and barrel rolled the Memphis Belle II. He briefly hovered Her above the sand, and let down the landing gear before touching ground. He performed final system checks, shut the Memphis Belle II completely off and made a motion with his right hand. The door of the craft opened; a small set of steps cascaded downward.

He grabbed his gear, stepped down and set foot on the beach. The hatch closed and San Marcos saw his reflection in the silver contour of his craft-albeit a slightly concave version of his olive skin, bronze hair and brown eyes looking back smiling in the glow of the sea shore.

He paused, bent over to take off his boots, then began walking barefoot upon the sand. There was a man waving at him where the forest met the beach. The stranger began trotting across the gap to meet San Marcos.

The man stopped mere meters away from San Marcos. His hair was curly dark brown and he had a unkempt beard. The stranger wore a uniform with insignia unknown to San Marcos. “Hello, Mate! Everyone calls me Sumner. Watched you hotdogging out there. Impressive. I bet you’re hungry. We have food. You’ve arrived just in time. The monthly festival is on!” He motioned to San Marcos who couldn’t quite place the accent and speech cadence of the man.

Even though the stranger’s accent was unfamiliar, it still intelligible. San Marcos smiled and replied to his new friend, “Why yes, I am hungry. Starving.”

“You’re in luck, then.” Said Sumner. “The feast is just being served.”

San Marcos followed Sumner across the beach and through the woods. They reached Sumner’s village. The savory aroma of food filled the air. It made San Marcos even hungrier.

Sumner led him to a door, “Come in! Soup is on!”

San Marcos was about to enter but paused to say “Say, could you tell me where I am?”

“Ha, knew you would ask that, mate. I’ll tell you where you are not.” Sumner turned northward and pointed, “See that little star up yonder just beginning to twinkle in the evening sky?” he asked.

San Marcos looked up and nodded.

“Well, around that medium red star, there orbits a tiny rock which its inhabitants call The Earth.”

2. The Mathematician

Meanwhile, on that insignificant planet, in a city called Brussels, sat The Curator. Her name was Helen Resnick and she was the ninth in a line of Curators who had managed the rogue black hole on the edge of the solar system. It was a galactic beast that had suddenly appeared in the heavens on April 25, 2070. Its appearance had immediately bent the stream of time and shape of space. The Curator was lead mathematician for Ministry of Science, which, long ago, had discovered a way to utilize the entity against itself, sending Time Teams into it, back to the past where deviations in space-time could be repaired and balance could be maintained in the present.

A signal blinked. She motioned. A black screen rose from the table. She looked at her reflection. She saw wide brown eyes sunken into a petite round face, with an uncontrollable mane of curly hair tied upon her head. She put her hands through it, she untied and let it down. She pulled it back and looked at the prominent Mallen streak that ran straight through her locks of otherwise black hair.

The panel illuminated. She looked to one side and swiped her left hand, reading output while her right hand calculated. The equations were finally coming into balance. It appeared that San Marcos had accomplished his mission. Darkness would not fall upon Europe; the world wouldn't succumb to starvation and anarchy. The 20th century time line had been stitched back together yet again. And this time it had been rectified with just seconds left in the equation loop.

She let out a heavy sigh and whispered silently to herself, "I'll be damned. The boy actually, did it."

Then she resolutely stated, "Screen off. Light twenty percent."

She walked to an adjacent room. It was time to perform the hardest part of the job. And she loathed it. It was why The Tunnel was only used under planetary life critical circumstances. But she had to follow protocol. She had taken an oath to uphold it. And part of that protocol stated that no evidence of a Time Team could be left on either side of The Tunnel.

“On...” she commanded.

A hologram appeared. She walked into its web as it's red, green and blue strands engulfed her.

“Tunnel close” she stated.

The hologram morphed.

“End loop.”

It dimmed.

“Confirmed.” she stated.

Stepping aside she commanded, “Off.”

The deed was done and there was a bottle of gin waiting somewhere with her name on it.

3. The Evidence

On a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri, the Memphis Belle II exploded into billions of microscopic fragments. The sudden discharge was not detected from Earth.

San Marcos and Sumner heard the explosion in the distance. San Marcos shivered. Sumner patted him on the back, guiding him into the house. “You need to eat my friend. It’ll make you feel better.”

“But...” begged San Marcos.

“Eat now, questions later,” replied Sumner.

They entered the house and saw the feast that had been awaiting their arrival.

4. The Daydream

Helen made the short walk to The Transport. The wind cut through her like a knife and she wrapped a scarf tightly around her face. She approached an available terminal at the station, pressed a button and spoke, “Antwerp 311, please.”

The identification protocol scanned her face and emitted an affirmative tone. A small turnstile clicked open and Helen walked through. She stepped onto The Transport and it whirred into action as it headed North. Unlike most members of the Ministry, who chose to live in government lofts in Brussels, Helen lived in a private Antwerp apartment, giving her a small modicum of distance between the work compression chamber and her private life.

She closed her eyes as she felt The Transport momentum taking her home. She knew the ride all too well—all seven minutes and thirty-three seconds of it. It gave her just enough time to engage her imagination and take a trip to another time and place. She breathed deeply and let her mind drift back to her youth—to that carefree summer her parents had taken her to the family farm in Georgia. She counted softly and could feel that warm summer sunset on her face. She remembered running across a green rolling pasture to a huge pecan tree, shimmering up its trunk to the top branch and then peering across the southern Georgia plains. Her twelve-year-old self giggled and laughed as even a slight smile crept over her present self.

She felt The Transport stop. The bell rang and a door opened, “Arrived Antwerp 3-1-1” said a disembodied voice drenched in reverb. Helen felt the warm air of Antwerp Central Station flood over her. She shook herself from the vision, exited The Transport and stepped down onto the platform. She turned North and headed to her flat. Her tongue and lips tingled with anticipation of that first sip of gin. The reunion was only moments away.

5. The Feast

There was a huge wooden table with elaborate hand carved chairs. Sumner motioned for San Marcos to sit down. San Marcos silently complied with a nod. There was a dozen or so others in the room-some were dressed in various military type uniforms, while others wore robust homespun garments. Many were in the process of taking their own place at the table.

Sumner sat across from San Marcos. A young boy with thick blonde hair placed a metal like thermos in front of him. Sumner filled it with a bubbly liquid from a pitcher. Another man brought San Marcos a large bowl of a steaming robust stew. San Marcos let the savory particulates permeate his senses. His hunger strengthened. But he hesitated.

Sumner chuckled and said “Ah...don’t you worry, mate!” He grinned widely at San Marcos. Sumner grabbed his own spoon, reached across the table, took a heap of stew and consumed it. He smiled and nodded at San Marcos. “Come now. Eat, mate! It’s damned good.”

San Marcos took the spoon to his right, lifted a heap from his bowl, it and delivered it to his mouth. He gave a bit of a grimace, let the mysterious concoction swirl around his tongue and swallowed. He felt the warmth and nutrition replenish the broken-down fibers of his body. He returned the gaze to Sumner, smiled and nodded.

Sumner leaned over the table, gave San Marcos a friendly chuck on the shoulder and said, “Ah...Good on ya, mate. Eat all you want. There’s always more where that came from.”

San Marcos began to devour the mystery meal before him. An older man with a bristly salt and pepper beard sitting in the corner began to play what resembled a home-made violin. It was a sad tune, but it made everyone smile.

6. The Bottle

Helen walked into her flat, removed her coat and scarf then made her way to the atrium all the while letting her hair down and shaking the day off. She plopped down into the central atrium chair and said, “Gin. Tonic. Double.”

On the table before her, a platform arose from the floor with a frosted Tom Collins cocktail glass.

Helen gently took the tumbler, put it to her lips and took a deep gulp of the elixir. She fell further into the chair, held her drink glass out in front of her face and said, “Oh darling, you don’t know how glad I am to see you tonight.” She took another sip, put the glass down, looked up toward the ceiling through the transparent sky roof, grabbed the drink one last time and downed the remainder. She felt her medication propagate through her body, giving her micro bursts of electrical shock and as a feeling of victory washed over her.

“Damn right, “she muttered to herself, “Just what the doctor ordered. And just what the patient needed.”

She stood up and slowly moved towards the counter. She stopped and said “Lighting five percent.”

The lights dimmed.

“Dome one-eighty degrees. “She commanded.

The ceiling dome retracted to display the entirety of the moonless night sky high above Antwerp.

She squinted her eyes and focused on the dim pinpoint haze of the Alpha Centauri star system; an insignificant star undistinguishable from any other star in the night sky. Barely there to the naked eye. One really had to know what the hell you were looking for to find it.

And around that star orbited an earth clone planet, Proxima Beta. It was the planet, that just tonight, she had banished yet another would be hero too. A hero that she had groomed unknowingly for years to take one for the “team” as it were when the need arose. And when the time came, she had thrust another one through The Tunnel on a one-way trip from which there would never be a return to Mother Earth.

As the years passed and as the years turned into decades, Helen had lost count of how many she had personally marooned there-perhaps twenty, perhaps two dozen just as each of her predecessors had themselves over the past two hundred years.

Each mission had grown more complex and more prone to failure. But that went with the territory of being The Curator. That’s why they paid her the big bucks-to make the hard decisions, keep the universe from falling apart and control the cosmological menace swirling out there upon outskirts of the solar system. It never got easier though. Her job satisfaction had hit it’s point of diminishing returns long ago, and more and more in the recent years, she spent her quiet hours brooding over that outreach of Earth’s humanity that dwelt light years across the galaxy because of her actions..

“Hit me with another one, will ya?” she commanded.

Another gin and tonic rose from the table.

She took it and sipped pensively.

She raised her glass high towards the space dome and spoke, “San Marcos, dear boy, I hope there’s no hard feelings and one day you’ll forgive me.”

She finished her glass, put it down moved over to her work desk and said “Attention.”

A small screen appeared where a blank stainless-steel surface had been seconds earlier.

She made some quick actions with her right hand. Photon tendril command strings reached out to her hands and she manipulated them like a child playing with a cat’s cradle.

“Where are you, tonight, you bitch, “she asked the nothingness of the night, looking for her nemesis in the heavens.”

She continued tweaking the photon tendrils until a map appeared on the flat desk surface.

“Oh....” Said Helen nodding, “there you are.” She smiled with satisfaction.

She released the tendrils and said, “End subroutine. Execute.”

The controls disappeared and the screen became opaque again. Helen was left in the darkness alone with her thoughts.

She walked back to the atrium and passed through the opposing quadrant of the space dome. There was a small swath of darkness eating all light and energy where once there had been asteroids, space dust and gas clouds.

She stared and sneered at the blankness. She fell back into her chair.

“Damn it, “she said, “Give me the bottle.”

An icy frosted clear bottle of gin rose with the platform.

She took the bottle, caressed it in her hands. She put it to her mouth and let the gin trickle through her lips, over her tongue, fall down her throat and propagate her system. It stung and burned but left an after-warmth that overcame her every muscle.

She tilted the top of the bottle to the blackness above the dome and let out a short hiss and cackle. She smiled and nodded. “You haven’t beaten me yet, babe. I’m smarter than you are and you know it.”

She took another belt of booze and added, “And you never will. I’m always going to be one step ahead of you. The equations never lie. They never let me down.”

Helen slumped into her chair, her eyes grew heavy and her brain became cloudy. She whispered one last time, “Never...”

She fell in to a deep sleep cradling her empty gin bottle. A bottle that had never let her down.

7. The Beach

San Marcos finished his meal. The others at the table ate just as voraciously as he had. He pushed the bowl away, looked at Sumner and said, “Thank you. That was quite delicious if not a little foreign to me. My compliments to the chef.”

Sumner, still devouring his own meal smiled and gave a short put polite grunt.

San Marcos got up from the table, walked outside then looked up at the night sky. Sumner followed just a few minutes later. He put his left hand on the shoulder of San Marcos. “Now...mate, about all those questions that I’m sure you have up there in your brain.”

“Yes...” nodded San Marcos.

“Well, go ahead,” stated Sumner. “We have plenty of time-all the time in the universe you might even say.”

“Alcohol.” Stated San Marcos flatly and simply.

“Say again mate?” said Sumner.

“Yes. Do you have it here? In this place...this planet, or wherever the hell I happen to be standing.”

Sumner let out a belly laugh. “Oh yeah, mate. We got it. We got ourselves some good hootch here.”

San Marcos peered deeply at his new friend. He raised his eyebrows, bulged his eyes and smirked, “Well, what’s a man got to do around here to get a drink then?”

Sumner chuckled, slapped San Marcos on the back and said, “Now you’re talking, mate. Now you’re talking! I’ll be right back. You wait right here.”

Sumner walked into the house and returned moments later with a dark blue jar and handed it to San Marcos.

San Marcos took the jar and put it to his mouth and allowed himself to have a long gulp of the contents. He put the jar down, took in a breath and quickly let the air out. He nodded his head, turned to Sumner and acknowledged, "That's some good home brew, friend."

Sumner nodded and laughed.

San Marcos looked up at the night sky and finally said, "OK then, I'm game. Now tell me just where the hell we are."

Sumner took the jar back from his new friend and replied, "Petra."

"Hmmm...." Said San Marcos, "The Rock. Makes perfect sense." He took the jar back, had another swig and continued, "But what would I know it as?"

Sumner tensed and pursed his lips together before speaking, "Proxima Beta."

San Marcos choked on his drink, regained his composure, let out the longest sigh of his life and said, "Well, then. Fuck me," without the slightest hint of emotion. "Alpha Centauri System. Four light years from Earth."

"I'm afraid so," replied Sumner.

"It's gonna take some time for me to get my head wrapped around that!"

Sumner nodded, "It does most people, mate. But it's time that you got now. You got all that you want or will ever need. There's no hurry."

"That beach I landed on?" questioned San Marcos, "Right through the wooded area we came through?"

“Yes, “agreed Sumner, “Just about 1.5 klicks that way.”

“I think I want to be alone a bit to process this. “said San Marcos.

“Yes, yes. Understood, mate.”

“And can I take this with me?” asked San Marcos pointing at the jar of bootleg.

Sumner handed it to him. San Marcos took the jar and began to walk through the woods back to the beach.

“Take all the time you need, “said Sumner as San Marcos began walking away. “We’ll be here at The Village when you get back. There’s a house and a bed ready for you.”

San Marcos walked through the woods. It was only fifteen minutes back to the beach. He took his boots off, tied them together and strapped them across his shoulders. He drank from his jar. He reached down, grabbed a handful of sand then let it trickle through his fingers to the ground.

He sat down, wriggled his toes and looked into the night sky upon the horizon. He couldn’t really remember which star in the sky happened to be his. The one, that just hours ago he had been standing beneath, loading up his gear and strapping himself into The Memphis Belle II.

He picked out a random star and imagined a third planet revolving about it. He knew that he’d never see anything or anyone of that little bluish-green marble again. But much to his surprise, he quickly realized that there actually wasn’t much he’d miss about it anyway. The Curator had played him perfectly. It all made sense now. After his parents had died, The State had moved him to the Orphanage where they had administered test after test on him. And then one day, a woman arrived and said there was a place for him in the Ministry of Science. They

provided him a place to live, a top-notch university education then sent him to flight school. There had never been any time for a social life. All he had known was his life as a pilot.

And then, what was only three days ago in his mind, The Curator had called him up for the mission they had been training him for all his life. Now here he was, Petra, Proxima Beta, lost in space, lost in time.

Matter of fact, the only thing he missed about home that was his dog, Molly. He had just left her in his flat the night before assuming he would be back in less than twenty-four hours. He hoped someone from the Ministry would have searched and found her. But there was not a damn thing he could do about it now. Not a damn thing.

Other than that, he had no overwhelming sense of loss or loneliness. It was all too obvious that The Curator had a plan all along-he just hadn't realized it until now. But to be sure, he wasn't totally certain yet, that he wasn't in fact, in his apartment, caught up in a dream.

San Marcos slowly stood up and brushed the sand off his uniform.

“So be it.” He said out loud to the night air. “So be it.” He repeated as he swept his hand over an imaginary slate in the night with only the ocean's roar behind it.

He methodically sat back down and let himself soak into the beach. He fell asleep upon the soft bed of a sand dune to the soothing white noise of waves gently falling upon the shoreline.

8. The Old Man

Consciousness came to Helen, but it was a long and difficult boot up process for her brain. At first, there was a tiny glimmer of morning sun coming through a pinhole fracture in the blackout curtain. She moved left then right but quickly fell back into her alcohol induced slumber.

The empty gin bottle fell to the floor and made a loud thud on the thin carpet. Helen popped up and tried to meet feet to floor. Her legs collapsed and her limp body took its place back on the central atrium chair.

So, she slept.

And she slept even more.

But then a faint signaling tone went off. It remained constant and wouldn't relent. At first, she thought she was dreaming and paid it no attention. But eventually, some small part of her brain communicated to her body the reality of the situation. There was, in fact, somebody at her door indicating their arrival.

Helen tossed and turned. She opened her eyes and looked at the sky dome. A microcosm of alertness crept over her brain. There was only one person in the universe with enough gall to personally come wake her up at her flat on a Saturday morning.

She rolled to the floor, pulled herself upright and shuffled to the kitchen counter. She touched the security panel and managed to find a graveling whisper, "Not the best time, can in possibly wait?" She moaned into the panel.

"Apologies, Madame. It's of the utmost importance."

"So important, that the only way you could tell me was in person."

The voice on the other end breathed and paused, “I’m afraid so, Madame.”

The voice belonged to none other than Declan Moon, her predecessor, but she knew that before she answered the signal. He was, at times, an insufferable worrywart and nag. He had been retired by The Ministry at the mandatory age of seventy but had remained on the advisory panel as was custom.

“Very well then,” said Helen. “Can you give me a few minutes; you’re not exactly catching me at my best.”

The old gentlemen chuckled through the security speaker and said “I’ll stand by.”

Helen released her hand from the panel, moved back to the atrium and disposed of the empty bottle. “Lighting, fifty percent,” she commanded. The environment controls complied with her wishes.

She disappeared into the bedroom and did everything she could do on such short notice to make herself look presentable and professional. She made her way back into the atrium, leaned into the security panel, swiped a code and her front door quietly whooshed open.

Declan walked in. He was tall, thin, perhaps in his mid-eighties now. He was dressed in a simple charcoal colored tunic. “Good morning Madame.” He spoke. He had a thin line of grey hair around the back of his head. A faint warm smile crept over his face from beneath his prominent nose.

“Please sit.” Said Helen to her predecessor.

Declan sat in one of the atrium chairs. Helen sat down in the central chair she had just spent the previous night in.

“And how are you this morning, Madame?” asked Declan.

“You’re certainly not catching me at my best, I’m afraid, “She began stroking her hands through her wild mane of hair. “The equations are getting harder and harder to balance. More variables, less constants with each mission. We’re having to send more technicians through The Tunnel than ever before. Probability of success is decreasing each time we open The Portal. We damn near lost it on the current mission, but somehow San Marcos pulled it off for us.”

“Yes, I was monitoring the operation last night. Very close call, indeed, “agreed Declan.

“We barely balanced the equations before The Tunnel collapsed.” Said Helen.

Declan paused and then said “Scotch...straight.” He commanded to the musty morning air of Helen’s flat.

Helen raised her eyebrows and said, “Must be pretty awful news, then?”

“Couldn’t be much worse, “flatly stated Declan.

“I don’t know if it could be much worse than this hangover I’m dealing with right now.”

“Well, you know what they say is the only way to cure a hangover then...”

Helen rolled her eyes and nodded.

Declan sipped his scotch. They sat in silence. He put his drink down and spoke to the home service system. “Gin and tonic, please for Madame.”

The glass appeared on the side table next to Helen. She shrugged her shoulders, grabbed the morning cure, took a drink, held the back of her left hand up to her forehead as if nursing the throbbing headache. She looked at Declan, took another sip and said, “Alright then, Father, what’s this news that just couldn’t wait another few hours for me to hear?”

9. The Truth Be Told

San Marcos slept the entire night on the beach. The morning tide had awoken him. He stood up, brushed off the sand and picked up the empty jar. He had no idea how many hours he had slept. He didn't know how long a day or night was on this planet. He had no idea if hours and minutes even existed here or how time cycles were measured.

He walked in a zig-zag pattern across the sand towards the woods. By the time he reached the line of trees, he had found better footing and momentum. When he got to The Village, he found Sumner tending what appeared to be rows of grain in a pasture. Several younger helpers darted back and forth carrying tools, baskets and pottery. San Marcos paused on the road, stopped and then shuffled over to the wooden fence that separated the road from the field.

Sumner walked over to the fence, nodded to San Marcos and said, "Morning, mate!"

San Marcos gave him a slight smile, put his hand up in a brief greeting, leaned over the fence and said in a whisper "It was a one-way trip the whole time? They never had a return plan?"

Sumner nodded and said, "You catch on quickly, mate! Now you're thinking straight."

"All of you here..." said San Marcos motioning his hand from far left to far right pointing at the villagers in the process, "All of you here...were once Pilots too? Stranded?"

Sumner gave him a painful grimace, "Aye." He said in agreement, "Did their dirty work for them and then sent us here to hide the dirty little secret."

"Secret?" asked San Marcos.

“That they’re manipulating Reality itself, mate! Can you imagine what the masses would do if they found out that the powers that be were sitting there in their little ivory tower playing God. There’d be riots, heads would roll.”

San Marcos looked down at the red dirt pathway, “Swept under the galactic rug.”

“Hear no evil, say no evil, speak no evil.” Agreed Sumner.

“And how long has this been going on?” asked San Marcos.

“In Petra years or Earth years?”

“Keep track of both, do you?”

“Aye. That we do, mate.”

“Well, give it to me in Earth years then.”

“Right about two hundred, give or take a decade,” stated Sumner. “The first-generation technicians are long gone now. Many here are their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.”

“And just how many of you are there...here...on Petra.”

“Somewhere in the range of five thousand. We have three villages. This is The Boulder Bank. There’s another one about five clicks down the beach line we call The Castle Rock and a third on the east side of the mountain called The Cathedral Cove.”

“And how long have you been here?”

“Ten Earth years, thirty-five Petra.”

“Your assignment?” asked San Marcos.

Sumner paused as if he didn't understand the question at first but then nodded his head as his head came to clarity, "Ah, yes. Sent me through The Tunnel to prevent the assassination of George Washington by King George's Loyalists."

"Not familiar with that one." Said San Marcos gently shaking his head.

"Exactly!" exclaimed Sumner, pointing his finger into San Marcos' chest. "Never heard of it because it never happened. I stopped it. I stopped it and time went on as it should. And here I am-the only proof that it could have happened. Stranded on the other side of the galaxy."

Sumner adjusted his tunic and said, "What about you, mate? What did She have you do on the other side of The Tunnel?"

"World War II. Germany. Mission was to disable a bridge across the Rhine River. Supposedly to slow the Russian advance into Berlin so Hitler would die in his bunker as history recorded. The Ministry's equations showed a probability of The Red Army arriving in Berlin sooner and a risk of Hitler being taken alive by The Soviets."

Sumner grinned, nodded and smiled. "Aye. Think of what might have occurred had they caught him alive..."

San Marcos threw Sumner a question-like gaze and said, "Now that you mention it. I didn't think of it at the time as I was so busy preparing for the mission. But, would it even had made a difference had he been taken alive? Wouldn't the Russian's have executed him on the spot?"

Sumner continued. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Imagine if you will, the Red Army getting to Berlin earlier than history records and preventing the Allies movement into the city. No Allied German occupation post war. No West Germany. Only Soviet controlled Germany. Maybe, Hitler, or someone like him, becomes a puppet dictator for the Soviet Union across all of western

Europe. No more England, no more France and Spain. Cold War standoff violently disintegrates into World War 3. Nuclear destruction. Goodbye inhabitable Earth, we hardly knew ye.”

“I see, “agreed San Marcos. “Dominoes tumble.”

“The Butterfly Effect.” Nodded Sumner.

San Marcos walked away from the fence and wandered around the road in circles for a bit. He looked at the sky, took in a deep breath and walked back to the fence line where Sumner was still waiting on him. “Three suns...” muttered San Marcos to his new friend. “That will take some getting used to.”

“Aye, it does, “agreed Sumner. “Hardly ever gets dark, most of the time it’s just daylight and dusk. Only gets truly dark once every forty cycles. We throw a feast for each Day of Darkness.”

“Ah....” Said San Marcos with a look of enlightenment, “Then last night then was your ...uh, Monthly Feast?”

“You’re a sharp one, mate. Nothing gets by you. You’ll go far here, “said Sumner with a hint of friendly sarcasm in his tone.

San Marcos peered at the two settings suns on the eastern horizon and said, “Well, whatever the case here I am Sumner. Put me to work. Find where I fit into this four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.”

Sumner leaned over the fence, gave San Marcos a friendly chuck on his shoulder and said, “That’s the spirit, mate! Knew you’d come around to reality. It took me a lot longer!”

The two stranded time travelers shook hands on their respective side of the fence.

“Well, “began Sumner, “besides being a hot dog pilot, what’s your educational background? They don’t just let any old lackey fly through The Tunnel.”

“Civil Engineering, PhD. University of Pennsylvania.”

Sumner laughed joyfully. He laughed harder and harder until he gasped for air. When he regained his composure, he said “Oh, we can use you, mate. Oh brother, can we use you. We’ve been waiting for someone just like you. Kind of makes you think they are still pulling our strings back on Earth.”

San Marcos gave a half smile, “Well, here I am. At your service. Put me to work.”

“Oh, we will, we will.” Said Sumner as he turned his face to the gentle morning breeze and took in a huge whiff of the air, “But first we eat breakfast. I can smell it now coming from the house.

He climbed over the fence and the two men walked the short dusty pathway to their village.

10. The Demagogue

“It’s that god-damned Strax again!” exclaimed Declan as he put his drink down.

Helen waved her hand in the air as if to shoo away an invisible insect. She made a dismissive hum from her throat, “Oh that giant oaf of a man. He’s nothing but a blow hard.”

“I’m afraid not this time, Helen. He just set off a firebomb this morning with the Prime Minister and Her cabinet.”

Declan affixed his glare upon the wall panel. The panel’s identification protocol scanned him and came to life. Declan moved his eyes up down then side to side adjusting the panel’s programming.

Suddenly, a pair of frumpy sequin-laced presenters came to life in three dimensions on the far side of Helen’s flat. They talked to their audience. The woman presenter sipped from a coffee cup, her co-host adjusted a small device in his hands, looked at the camera and spoke, “...and in politics late last night, high stakes gambler, turned religious cult leader, turned media mogul, Strax, had a word or two of friendly advice to the current government, let’s bring up the video file on that, shall, we Sheila?” he said towards his cohort.

She nodded in agreement and they both peered at the panel behind them on the wall. A tall, overweight man with a monstrous black handlebar moustache appeared on the display. He had short thick hair, slightly greying around the temples. There was single huge dimple in his chin. He wore a simple olive drab robe with slight red trimming around the neckline and wrists. He stood on an austere podium in an outdoor arena in London speaking to his mass.

“...And I’ll tell you another thing...” said Strax as his nasal-like gravel laced baritone voice boomed over the stadium echoing back to him. “I’ll tell you this!, “he repeated, “I’ll tell

you this, my Fine Followers. I've had just about enough of the Prime Minister and Her nabobs trying to tell us how to run our lives and business!!!”

Strax paused for effect and gave an icy glare to the world video feed. “And now I'll tell you another truth, my Fine Followers. The Prime Minister is spending trillions of your tax credits monitoring and looking at that mundane, asinine Black Hole on the edge of the solar system. I grow so tired of her telling us how such an investment in science is improving our lives. And what do we get in return? We get no improvement or return on investment. You only get taxed even more!”

The crowd collectively booed, hissed and sneered.

Strax leaned into the microphone and added, “If that's what it even is... a black hole. Black hole...my...white ass. Here this now. There's nothing at all in the sky to fear my Fine Followers! It's just a made-up fairy tale the Prime Minister and Her Goons have concocted so they can frighten us into doing whatever it is the hell they want you to do!”

By now, the crowd was in a frenzy. Strax repeated himself, “And they are spending trillions of your tax credits. What are we getting in return?”

Strax stood back on the podium, crossed his arms, stuck his chin up in the air and awaited the crowd's response.

“Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.” Yelled the crowd in a roaring unison.

Strax leaned back into his microphone. “They are fleecing you of your money while you can't afford to put food on the table. You can't pay your rent. Your loved one's labor in pain and in sickness. Your children and your friends cannot find a job.”

The crowds' roar became louder and louder.

“So, I ask you, my Fine Followers, what are we going to do about this? What are we going to do...”?

Strax’s crowd of over a quarter million followers began to chant, “Take it back! Take it back. TAKE IT BACK!!!”

Strax crossed his arms, monkey-shined into the world video feed and then motioned for the crowd to silence.

Instantaneously, his followers became quiet. Strax leaned into the microphone and spoke, “So, to all of you here. All of my Fine Followers. And to all my Fine Followers in the world. I want you to listen carefully, my Fine Followers. I want you to get onto The Tube, get into The Transport. Hit the road. Come by boat, by rocket or by foot. Come meet me in Brussels tomorrow at The Prime Minister’s monthly forum. Let them know that scientists don’t control our lives. We control our lives. Meet me there and let’s take it back. Take back our government. Take back our money and take back our lives.”

He paused. His followers looked at him with love in their eyes.

Strax spoke, “I...will...be...there...waiting...for...you.”

He turned around, walked off stage was not seen again.

The crowd chanted, “TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK!”

And then suddenly, the images in Helen’s flat disappeared. The crowd disappeared, the stadium and the podium that Strax had straddled as he whipped the masses into a pandemonium. They all vanished as Declan commanded “End transmission, please.”

Declan and his daughter sat in silence. Finally, Helen broke the barrier and spoke, “Surely this is just bluster and braggadocio?”

“Helen, I wish it were. That broadcast is looped from five hours ago. And since then, the London rally traffic has overflowed on to all Transport systems. Travel reservations systems are maxed-out by over five thousand percent. And they are all on their way to Brussels as we speak.

“Well, then, “stated Helen, “Just what in the hell is it that these so-called Followers plan on accomplishing once they get here?”

“We know. We’ve been able to track the specifics.”

“Such as?”

“We’ve intercepted their critical communication packets. They are coming. They are coming and many of them are armed. They intend on ransacking Central Government. They are wanting to put the heads of the Prime Minister and her cabinet on a silver platter and serve them up to their Dear Leader, Strax. Just like he asked them to.”

“They’ll never make it past security, stated Helen.”

“They will. There’s more of them than the Prime Minister’s security detail can handle. And it gets worse. After they sack Central Government, they are headed to the Department of Science. They intend to bring us to the ground.”

“And if they do, that damned thing out there is going to tear up the solar system and rip the time stream into shreds for a light year radius. Goodbye sun, goodbye Earth. Those halfwits have no idea how to manage the forces that we hold at bay!”

“I know that and you know that. The Prime Minister knows that. But outside of the tight circle of knowledge, we’re nothing more than an expensive telescope that takes trillions of dollars, euros and tax credits to maintain. We’re the mob’s scapegoat of all that’s wrong in the world.”

“Well then, let’s just go public. It’s way overdue. We should have done it decades ago.”

“Too late for that. The Founders made the decision two hundred years ago to keep that forbidden knowledge from the public for the good of humanity and the planet.”

Helen searched around the room for a glass or bottle that still had some remnants of elixir in it, but she could find none. She turned to her father and said with sadness in her tone, “Well, Dad, just what in the hell are we going to do?”

“We have a contingency. I developed it when you were just a little girl, just in case this day ever arrived.

“A contingency?”

“Exactly, and the day has arrived to invoke that protocol. Now get ready as quickly as you can. Pack a small bag and come back to the Ministry with me now.”

“Father!”

“Helen, dear. Now you know it’s the only option.”

Helen quickly threw herself and her life together as they left Antwerp bound for Brussels much sooner than she had anticipated.

11. The Fresh Start

San Marcos and Sumner walked to The Village followed closely by Sumner's eager workforce. They sat beneath a large tree that resembled a live oak at a huge wooden table where breakfast awaited all.

They ate ravenously. San Marcos partook of the medley of food before him. There were rich savory potions followed by sugar sweet morsels-all of which he was sure had names but his stomach prevented him from wasting the time to ask. There would be plenty of time for the naming of names in the near future. There were more primitive instincts to be satisfied presently. "Well one thing's for sure. A man will never starve around here", exclaimed San Marcos as he finished his plate.

Sumner laughed until he coughed, paused to catch his breath and said, "There mate..." he motioned down the path with his head to a small house across the common greenspace village square.

"There...what?" questioned San Marcos.

"Yes." Replied Sumner. "That's yours. Make yourself comfortable. There's provisions, clothes, a bed and bath facilities. Go rest. Decompress. And when you're ready, we'll be here waiting for you."

San Marcos stood up and brushed his uniform off. "Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate your hospitality." He smiled and nodded his head with gratitude.

He casually walked down the dirt path and across the village green to his new house. He stepped up to the porch and shuffled to the front door. He timidly turned back and glared at Sumner and the other villagers. He gave them a polite wave and smile.

Sumner waved back grinning ear to ear.

San Marcos walked in and shut the door behind him. The house was clean and tidy. It appeared to be constructed of wood, adobe and some kind of cement/mortar like substance. The inside was adequately equipped with modest furnishings. A quick glance inside the pantry revealed supplies. The wardrobe was stocked with clothing. There were drawers in the wall that contained things such as linens, cleaning supplies and what he recognized from his history classes as several physically paper bound books.

He slowly ambled around his new home investigating each room, looking up, down and around every doorway and corner. He took time to touch metal nails that framed a perfectly square bedroom door. Inside the bedroom was a simple chest of drawers. He reached into the pocket of his uniform and pulled out a metallic emblem about the size of his palm.

He had found it on the beach the night before. It was the only physical remnant of the Memphis Belle II that remained in the space where he had landed his craft. He dropped it on the top of a simple dresser, walked over to the bed and fell into it.

Outside the window, the largest sun was setting, leaving the two smaller ones in the eastern sky. It yielded a pale yellowish hue dusk that lingered in the air. San Marcos was rocket lagged and time lagged. He was space sick and hardly knew his head from his feet at the moment. It had been what seemed like about two Earth hours since he had awakened on the beach, but forces quickly overcame him and pulled him into a deep slumber that was still tugging at his soul.

He slept and dreamt he was back in northern Pennsylvania flying his mini jet just above the tree tops, zooming in and out the curvature of the Allegheny mountains.

12. The Rampage

The mob descended upon the pristine columnated marble buildings of Brussels like a plague of locusts blocking out the sun. They overran Central Government's security detail. They came with weapons, signs and flags. All the while, they were changing "TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK! TAKE IT BACK!"

And before reinforcements could arrive to assist The Parliament Patrol, Strax's mob had invaded and scattered throughout every chamber of government. They captured the Prime Minister and Her Cabinet. They chained them to chairs and turned the World's video feed upon the beaten and sunken faces of their captives.

But the mob didn't stop there. They captured any other person who looked like he or she may have been part of Government. They set up an impromptu kangaroo court. They colored their faces with paint and wrapped themselves in the flag of their movement. They constructed makeshift gallows and hung the Ministers of Government for the world to see while other bystanders were merely beaten and left to live or die in a pool of their own blood.

Strax's Fine Followers made their way through each tier of the Brussels Central Office – Administration, Agriculture, Health, and Defense. And they kept peddling towards the inner hive where the Ministry of Science was. It was here where Helen Resnick, The Curator, controlled her Beast in the heavens that the mob was whipped into a frenzy about. She not only controlled it, but she conducted other clandestine time manipulation expeditions.

The true goals of these expeditions were known only to a handful of people. And to the rest of the citizenry of Earth, the Ministry of Science merely monitored the Black Hole through the world's largest telescope while making mathematical notations into their super computers supposedly to learn more about the nature of space and the universe itself. What seemed excess to Strax and his followers had become the scapegoat of all frustrations with Government.

They were out for revenge and they would stop at nothing less than snuffing out science and reason. Whoever stood in their way, would be thrust against the wall and executed.

Helen and Declan were alone with one another inside the central most chamber of the Science Ministry. They could hear the gradual muffled thudding of the mob making their way towards them as they laid waste to each subsequent government chamber.

“Surely they can’t get in here.” Stated Helen. “These walls are titanium reinforced”

“Helen.... Dear, they will and although it might take them hours, perhaps a few days, they will knock these walls down and lay the whole place to waste. So, we must act now, act now while there is still a scintilla of time left to act.”

“But.... Father, is that the only way?”

“Helen, you know this to be true. The protocol is two centuries old. It’s served us well. It has protected the time-space horizon throughout the decades.”

Father stared at daughter. Daughter squinted her eyes and shook her head.

“Only two Curators can exist. When one dies, the other one chooses a successor to train and trust with the Protocol. “When Volez died, I chose you.

Damn it, Father. What does that have to do with our present situation?”

“It’s why we entrust two persons with the sacred science. It’s just enough for redundancy, not enough to where the secret circle might be broken. So that means you and I have to put distance between ourselves to protect the balance. As much distance as possible and quickly. You already know these things. We are just wasting our time discussing. Please, Helen, time is of the essence!”

“But couldn’t I just transport back to the States. Wouldn’t that be enough?”

“No. You’ve seen the video feeds. This isn’t just a localized event. His minions are propagating across the entire planet. They are leaving a path of blood and bodies behind them wherever they trounce too. And you are their primary scapegoat. Now, no more questions. Get in your craft!”

Helen reached into a closet, grabbed a flight suit and hastily enshrouded it around her body as she skipped over to a desk and said “Console, please.”

A tiny flat screen panel came up from the desk.

She made some quick hand motions upon the surface of the panel. After a few seconds, the panel retracted back into her desk. A huge dome like door opened behind her and revealed a Time Eagle, so sleek and reflective that it seemed to kiss and caress the air pockets around it.

Helen ran through the dome door, walked up a few steps, sat in the cockpit and strapped herself in. She began her preliminary checks.

Declan reached down, picked up an object, leaned in the craft and handed it to his daughter. Helen took it. A look of bemusement came across her face. She struggled to find the proper words. “A Book? What for? Where did you get this? What purpose does that serve?”

“Oldest form of communication. Needs no power source, no processor interpretation, no host computer or circuitry. Guaranteed to always work.”

“Well, what is in it then?”

“It’s the Equations of Time. So, if one of us cannot pass it on verbally to a protégé, it at least assures that the equations will persist.”

“And how come I am only finding out about this book now?” barked Helen at her father.

“Does it matter?” Declan flatly asked of his daughter.

Helen nodded. She put the book in a safe compartment inside the Time Eagle.

Declan reached down again and handed her a small crate.

Helen gave the container a quick examination. “Father! “She exclaimed. “A book and now a dog? What’s the meaning of this?”

“Thought you might could use a friend until I can bring you back through The Tunnel to the Depot” Even given their extreme circumstances, the old man managed a chuckle at his daughter’s expense

“Yes, Father. But really, a dog?”

“Just take the little beast, Helen. I don’t know what to do with it. And where I’m going and with the haste I am making I can’t handle...”

“Where did you get this.... Thing?” snarled Helen at her father.

It belonged to San Marcos. It’s the only possession we found in his quarters after his departure. I was going to find a home for it. But there’s no time for that now. I can’t keep it here. Take it with you. We’ll figure out a long-term solution later when this insanity subsides.”

“Oh, alright. Put her in then.”

Declan secured the cage to the craft’s inner wall with a cinch chain. “Very well, then.” He stated flatly.

Helen nodded.

“Secure and begin checklist.”

“Affirmative,” said Helen as she set about her pre-start up activities.

Declan took several steps back to his control terminal. “Program Start. “He commanded.

The soft pastel pulsating lights of the control panel came to life.

“Attention.” He commanded

The photon strand command strings grew from the base of the flat panel and wrapped themselves around his fingers like a vine creeping up over the tree branches.

He began a series of carefully coordinated gestures with his fingers. He paused and looked at his daughter one last time. “Helen, “he said, “When you’re safely through, I’ll shut down The Tunnel. When all is clear, I’ll re-activate. The craft should signal that a comm-link has been re-established. You should be able to begin the return protocol at that time to return you back to the Depot.”

“What of you, Dad?”

“As soon as you are through The Tunnel and the portal is shut down, I have an emergency craft ready to take me back to Antwerp and then I’ll take the Terra-Port back to The States. There’s a bunker beneath the family plot in Georgia. I have a remote-control terminal there where I can access The Tunnel.” Hopefully I’ll be safe there from the madness there. But we must separate ourselves and do it now.”

Helen gave a silent farewell to her father with a loving glance.

The hatch on her Time Eagle closed. Declan frantically worked with his hands balancing the equations for the emergency trip. He stopped. He took a deep breath and spoke. “Begin loop. Execute.” The photo tendril computer jumped into action.

Helen’s Time Eagle zoomed downward through The Depot and vanished through The Portal in a subtle puff of air.

“Scotch, if you please. A double will do.” The Old Man said to the empty terminal room.

The room control systems responded as his drink appeared on the top of a side table. He took it, sipped, grimaced and sipped again. He could hear the mob growing louder and closer.

He had no intentions of returning to Antwerp or to The States. He meant to stand his ground.

13. The Star Party

It took only days for San Marcos to reach the conclusion that the past belonged in the past. And it didn't make any sense to dwell there or think about it. He adjusted rapidly to his new surroundings. And only occasionally did he think about Earth. He had been educated and prepared for this situation without even knowing it. In retrospect it was all clear. They wouldn't have sent him here if he wasn't up to the task.

He began dedicating his whole essence to his new planet, Petra. Petra was his planet and his home. The people of Petra were his people and his concern. And it took them little time to find use for him. He worked and planned around the clock. He designed and oversaw the construction of an improved road system that easily triangulated the three settlements of Petra. Not only that, his construction team built roads and utility infrastructure to where future settlements would one day be.

They constructed an improved waterworks and irrigation network of canals, cisterns and recycling that quickly improved sanitation agriculture and health.

And even though power gridding was not his forte, he was able to use his basic engineering foundation to help Petra improve its generation and transmission systems. His first year there proved to be as busy and productive as the previous ten years of his life.

His work schedule usually prevented him from letting his mind drift aimlessly to life back on Earth. But every now and again, when the Day of Darkness came around, he'd look up to give a cursory glance at the insignificant twinkle that he once called "The Sun" And even then, it would only be a quick interlude as his mind would always come back to whatever technical issue he was try to solve.

It was on one of those rare occasions when he let himself feel nostalgic for his former planet, that he walked to The Cathedral Cove settlement for the Day of Darkness Festival. It was there, at The Cathedral Cove, which was just an hour walk from his settlement, The Boulder

Bank, that one of the oldest living Time Pilots had built a telescope. It was said, that peering through his telescope, one could clearly see the orange orb of Earth's sun as well as count the tiny black dots traversing across the sun's disc that made up the planets from Mercury to Saturn.

The man, who was named Valentine, was hosting what he called a "Star Party". People from all three settlements had come there to discuss all things regarding time and space and to peer through his telescope to see Earth in its lens.

Valentine welcomed San Marcos with open arms at the front door, "Hail, San Marcos! Welcome to our humble abode. Your reputation as Prime Engineer proceeds you!"

San Marcos shook hands with Valentine and walked into the house. People were eating, drinking and happily talking to one another. Each one was taking his or her turn at the telescope which was mounted centrally in Valentine's atrium. The long refracting tube protruded through a navigation slot in the ceiling of the house.

After an hour or so of making uncomfortable chatter and merriment, San Marcos took his place at the viewing station. He closed his left eye, peered through the lens with his right eye. And there it was, just as Valentine promised-the huge orange orb of Earth's sun and six tiny black marbles traversing it's equator, the third of which was the blue green marble called "The Earth" by its inhabitants.

After a few minutes at the telescope, San Marcos yielded the seat to the next guest. He walked outside, looked up into space and briefly thought about Galileo peering through his own telescope at Jupiter centuries ago.

An odd and brief sense of melancholy overcame him, He coerced the bad thoughts from his head by trying to solve a problem he'd been working on. He began to slowly shuffle out of Valentine's Garden toward the main road back to The Boulder Bank. He heard a voice behind him.

“What do you miss?” asked a soft alto feminine voice he was not familiar with. He turned around and could not see the owner, for she was still in the shadows of the night.

San Marcos took a step toward the voice, “Pardon?” he asked, “Were you addressing me?”

A young woman stepped out from the shadow and said, “Yes, indeed I was.”

“What was your question, again?”

“I asked you what it is that you missed?”

“Missed? About what?”

“The Earth. What do you miss about it?” said the gentle alto voice that emerged evermore from the border of darkness.

San Marcos looked over the stranger. She was perhaps twenty-five years old, if she would have been on Earth, had thick shoulder length chestnut brown hair. She wore a simple violet skirt with homemade sandals.

San Marcos chuckled and took a few steps closer to the woman, “Strangely...not much.”

“Surely there must be something you miss. Something you don’t go a day without thinking about?” said his visitor.

San Marcos paused, looked up at the night sky, looked at the stranger and said, “My dog, I miss my dog. Her name was Molly.” He thought some more and let out a quick laugh, “...and tacos...haven’t found a taco yet here on Petra.” The remark about tacos was meant to be more of a joke, a joke he feared was probably lost on the stranger he was talking to.

“Taco?” asked the young woman.

San Marcos smiled and nodded, “A type of food...spicy food.”

“What about ‘dog’ what is a ‘dog’?” she asked.

San Marcos looked amazed, “You don’t know what a dog is?”

“No. I’m third generation. My grandfather was a traveler like you. I’ve only known Petra. Earth is only a fairy tale to me.”

“Well, “began San Marcos, “A dog is a small animal that comes in various sizes and colors. They serve as a sort of...friend or companion to the humans they live with. A pet.”

The woman giggled. San Marcos moved a little closer to his visitor, stuck out his hand and said, “You have me a bit of a disadvantage. My name is San Marcos, perhaps you already knew that. And your name would be...”

She reciprocated with her hand and said, “Neko. My name is Neko.”

San Marcos held on to her hand and was able to see Neko’s deep green eyes and freckled face in the dim light emanating from the house windows. “Pleasure to meet you, Neko.” He said as he put his left hand on top of his right and shook her hand vigorously.

He slowly let go of their clasp. He stepped back from her. “Got to make the walk back to The Boulder Bank.” He commented. “Lots of work to do in the morning. Nice to have met you, Neko.”

“You’ll come back soon to The Cathedral Cove then?” she asked. “I’d like to hear more about things like dogs and tacos”

San Marcos smiled, “Well, sure. Of course. Wasn’t planning on it, but if you would like me to, I surely can.”

“Yes, please that would be lovely.” Stated Neko as she shyly smiled.

San Marcos walked back to The Boulder Bank trying to think about engineering equations and projects but found his mind drifting away from math for the first time since he landed on Petra. He could only think about the mysterious woman that he had just met.

14. The Last Laugh

The instant Helen's Time Eagle departed from The Depot, Declan wasted no time in getting the equations balanced. He controlled the computer photon tendrils wrapped around his right hand performing calculations with each gesture-moving mass to one side of the scale, creating energy on the other side. He slowly sipped his scotch from his left hand.

He watched the indicator light blinking. It gave five green flashes. The equation was balanced. He manipulated the computer evermore quickly and nimbly to complete the sequence.

He took a deep breath. He looked at the equations one last time. He nodded his head. The equation matrix was balanced just as he wanted it.

"End loop." He suggested then paused.

"Close tunnel. Execute." He stated.

"Clean Wipe Routine. Scrub System. Execute." He stated.

Slowly but surely, each calculation retracted from his hand and the machinery around him died down light by light, whirl by whirl, system by system until the Ministry of Science was completely still and motionless.

Helen was safe. The Science was safe. Humanity was safe. And clear across the galaxy out of the reach of the Black Hole's gravitational waves and hidden from Strax's blood thirsty goons, they were safe. Earth's days, on the other hand, were numbered. Very finitely numbered.

And just in the nick of time too. The Fine Followers were now on the other side of Declan's door banging and beating with their battering rams.

“Lighting twenty percent, if you will.” Requested Declan. The environmental systems responded.

“Another scotch, please.” The service systems responded with another drink. Declan took it and slowly sipped.

He swiveled around in his chair and said, “Doors open”. The doors of the Ministry opened to the surprise of the mob on the other side.

The mob , momentarily silenced in surprise ,stood there.

“Hello boys and girls, “stated Declan with a slight smile, “How may I help you?”

The mob shuffled in. A bearded, bare chested and be-spectacled individual who appeared to be their chief goon approached Declan and said, “Where is she?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific, “wryly stated Declan.

“The woman. The woman who runs this place. They call her The Curator.”

Declan took another sip, put down his glass and said, “I’m afraid I haven’t the slightest idea what you are talking about. There’s nobody here but little old me.”

“Then who the hell are you, old man?”

“Me?” questioned Declan looking for the right words then finding them, “Oh, you can say I’m just The Janitor.” He chuckled a high pitch laugh as he mused at his humor.

The two men shot mutual cold stares at one another.

“Well then, old man...janitor, are you prepared to die?”

Declan raised his glass high, moved it to his mouth, threw his head back and finished his drink. He put the glass down. He motioned with his hand to the mob’s captain to give him a second. The whiskey went down through his neck and permeated his whole body. A sense of cheerfulness enshrouded his mind. He put his hand down, looked directly at his accuser and stated matter-of-factly, “I am quite ready to die now. Please feel free to proceed.”

The mass of the mob erupted in screams and howls. They raised their blunt instruments and swung them at Declan, landing blows upon his head, torso and legs. He fell upon his side, numb upon the floor, bleeding, bruised and battered. His mind separated itself from reality and drifted back over forty years to a beautiful spring day in Georgia. A time before his relationship with Helen had become merely a cold scientist-to-scientist affair.

He absorbed his last dying moments in that memory of a rare family vacation away from Brussels and away from the Ministry to the traditional land of his family ancestors. The warm southern sun was setting in the west, his little girl Helen was sitting on a homemade rope swing he had constructed and hung from an ancient pecan tree.

He pushed his daughter in the swing. She giggled and said “Higher, Daddy, higher!”

He pushed his daughter higher in the swing.

“Higher. Higher!” She giggled.

He pushed the swing again.

He moved around to the front of the swing as his daughter flew off and landed in his arms.

She laughed loudly and smiled. “I love you, Daddy.”

“Oh, I love you too, Helen.” Said Declan to his daughter.

“Again. Again. Again!” she beckoned her father.

“Alright, but just one more time, “he said.

He placed his daughter back on the swing but then began walking away as if pulled by an invisible force away from Helen.

“Where are you going Daddy? “asked Helen.

“I have to leave now darling. But you’re safe. I’ve given you everything you need in order to survive. You’re a big girl.” He turned and didn’t look back. He heard his daughter began swinging and singing to the wind, happy in the moment.

And through the noise and furor of the mob, with his last muscle movement, Declan Moon grinned and chuckled there upon the floor lost in those sweet memories. Darkness soon washed over him and he died smiling at those who murdered him standing above with hate in their eyes.

The mob went through The Ministry of Science with clubs and other implements of destruction, beating, banging and destroying every machine they could get their grotty little hands upon. Then they lit their blow torches and set fire to Central Government. The wood burned. The plastic melted. Brick turned to dust and the Ministry began to tumble.

They screamed and ran through the halls as they left Central Government burning in a gigantic bonfire that could be seen for many kilometers around. And then they scattered

back into the streets of Brussels, looking for their leader Strax to give them their next orders. But when no orders came, the mob's furor died down, their flags were slowly lowered and their chanting ceased.

The mass of Fine Followers eventually dispersed into smaller groups. And then the smaller groups broke into an endless flux of singular lost souls roaming the streets of Europe waiting for an encore appearance by Strax that would never occur.

For Strax was on the other side of the globe in his billion dollar California mansion, sipping a mimosa, having a pedicure administered to his fungus infested digits. He chuckled as he looked at a screen that displayed his current bank account balance in large bold numbers. It was a bad day for humanity. But a good day for Strax.

15. The News

As his work schedule permitted, San Marcos made trips to The Cathedral Cove to visit Neko, even if it was just for an hour at a time. They took walks together along the beach towards The Castle Hill Settlement holding hands and talking. She would ask him to describe things on Earth like snow, owls, baseball and what living with only one star in the sky was like.

San Marcos became entranced with Neko's beauty, her unspoiled spirit, her lack of cynicism and infinite optimism. He loved listening to the soothing inflections of her voice-the way her "s" always sounded like a "z" and the way her vowel tones shifted far to the other side of Standard Earth dialect.

Their walks grew longer and more frequent. And one day, while stopping to pick up a seashell, they embraced and kissed. They shared a rare moment of silence. Their gaze at one another spoke volumes. They silently dedicated their souls and lives to one another. No words or official ceremony were needed.

They built a house in the The Castle Hill settlement. With each passing day, San Marcos felt less like a man from Earth and more like he had been on Petra his entire life. He felt like he'd known Neko since before the beginning of time when they were both just dust floating through space.

The days and years passed and each time he looked in Neko's eyes, he fell more deeply in love with her. He felt that somehow, out here on the periphery of the galaxy, on the other side of a great big hole in space among the out outcast of humanity, he'd found a perfectly balanced "universe of two" with Neko.

And then he began to lose track of Earth time altogether and became totally detached from his planet of origin. So, it affected him little the day that word came from the astronomer, Valentine, that Earth and the other three inner planets of their home solar system were no longer

there in their place where they should have been traversing the equator of the sun through his telescope.

For some had held out the hope they would still return to their home planet...their "Mother Earth" And because of this, a period of mourning was held. Some people became religious. They repented and kneeled down to pray that what the astronomer saw through the telescope was not true-that Earth was still there and one day they would return. But Valentine knew, Earth was gone, vanished into history.

For there was no way of knowing whether Earth's demise had been caused by a collision with another heavenly body or whether it had been self-inflicted by it's inhabitants. But it became immediately apparent that they, the settlers of Petra, were all that remained of the Late Great Earth's culture.

When the word reached The Castle Hill, Neko walked out into the garden to break the news to San Marcos. "Have you heard yet?" she timidly asked her husband.

"Heard what?" he replied.

"About Earth."

"What about it?"

"It's gone. Along with Mercury, Venus and Mars. Valentine said they have disappeared from his telescope."

"Hmmm..." contemplated San Marcos? And you say that Valentine said this to be true?"

Neko nodded with a hint or worry in her eyes.

San Marcos resumed his work. He split a few logs with his axe. He paused to catch his breath after a few good whacks, shrugged his shoulders and muttered, “Well, if Valentine says , then it must be so.”

She moved a little closer to San Marcos with a look of concern and said, “How does that make you feel?”

He split another log, “Serves them right. The whole lot. All twenty billion of them. They didn’t want me; I don’t want them. They don’t need us, we don’t need them.” He thrust his axe into a log, gently took his wife by her shoulders with his hands and said, “Neko, all I need is you. You are my world, my universe. All that matters is the here and now. You and Me.” He gave his wife a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Neko smiled with a sense of relief, “I wanted to make sure you heard it from me because some of the settlers are starting panic over it and aren’t taking it well.”

San Marcos chuckled, “They’ll get over it. It won’t take long.”

Neko moved in closer to San Marcos and said “Can we go down to the beach for a walk in the morning to look for shells, then? Perhaps take a paddle in the waves?”

“Sounds splendid,” said San Marcos.

They briefly embraced and released one another.

“I’ll be in shortly at first Star Set” said San Marcos smiling.

Neko walked back into the house. She turned around and waved at her husband just before she opened the door to go in.

16. The Refugee

Helen's Time Eagle emerged from The Tunnel with an extra forward thrust that forced her back in the control seat. She had momentarily blacked out. When she regained consciousness, she realized that the ship had assumed automatic control and gently oscillating back and forth over the landscape below looking for a suitable landing spot.

When a proper landing pad was finally found, an alarm went off in the cockpit.

"Touchdown. Execute." Commanded Helen.

The craft came in for a soft landing on a small clearing.

Helen performed the perfunctory shutdown procedures, disengaged her safety restraints and arose from the command chair. Slowly but surely, she retrieved the container that housed the book of Sacred Time Equations. With the text in her left hand, she picked up the small crate that contained her last-minute canine passenger almost as an afterthought.

"Open." She commanded.

The door to her craft opened and a silver set of stairs extended to the foreign soil below.

She slowly descended to the ground and took a few minutes to size up her situation. She was near a forest line at the edge of a long column of sand dunes. In the distance she could hear the roar of ocean waves crashing upon the beach.

She rapidly walked to the edge of the water with her possessions. The waves fell upon her shoes and her feet sank into the wet sand when the tide withdrew. The cold water penetrated into the bareness of her feet.

Helen gasped and nearly lost her breathe. She realized that's she'd never felt the water of the ocean upon her feet before. She picked up her possessions and took them back to the safety of dry sand. She placed them down, took her shoes off and ran back to the water as if in some kind of trance. She closed her eyes while the water ran through her toes. Over and again. It felt marvelous and miraculous to her. It made her heart flutter and butterflies filled her stomach.

From the safety of the dry sand dunes, the little dog yapped in its cage. Helen went back to its side, sat down in the sand next it, clutched the sacred book in her hands and observed the daylight of two stars in the sky as the other one was setting and tried to figure out what the hell she was supposed to do now.

Declan had told her to wait. Wait for the comm-link signal. If he had said to wait, she would. He had, at times, been stern and aloof as a Father, but always had been good on his word.

So, Helen waited.

17. The Time

It was early in the morning. San Marcos had only been awake for half an hour but was already busy with his drafting board and tools laying out the city plan for Petra's next settlement, Curio Bay, when there came loud, excited knocking sounds at his front door.

He quickly got up from his work desk to see about the commotion. He opened the door and a happy look of surprise came over his face, "Sumner!" he exclaimed, "What brings you by all the way out here, you old time-rogue!?"

Sumner was bent over trying to catch his breath, "Ship.... landed...this morning!" He pointed down the road back to The Boulder Bank. He wiped the sweat out of his mane of hair-the curly brown locks of which had been completely grey for many years now.

"A ship?" replied San Marcos looking for the right words, "You mean a boat?" he asked.

"No, mate. A Time Eagle, just like yours and just like mine before."

"But Sumner, it's been...twenty...closer to twenty-five EARTH years. We had all agreed that I had been the last one before you...know...Earth...". His voice trailed off but then he put his hands together, made an exploding sound with his mouth and said "You know, before Earth, became, well, space dust. And that was four years after I arrived."

"Don't know, mate. That damned black hole out there. They've been mucking with the mechanics too long. Who knows? Maybe some poor bastard pilot has been stuck in there for years, for decades, perhaps for an eternity and finally it shot out of The Tunnel. But it's a Time Eagle, for sure. There's no doubt about that."

"Well, have you made contact with the Pilot year?"

"No, mate. That's why I'm here. That's your honor."

“My...honor?” said San Marcos with a hint of confusion.

“T..T..Tradition,” stuttered Sumner.

“Sumner, you’re not making sense, friend. If you’ve got something to say, just spit it out, man.”

Sumner regained his composure and spoke, “The task of welcoming a new Pilot to Petra has always fallen to his or her immediate predecessor. I was the last Pilot to arrive before you arrived.”

“Sumner, nobody’s ever mentioned that to me the whole time I’ve been here.”

“Never thought another Pilot was coming.” Stated Sumner, “The whole, late great Earth syndrome, you know mate?” Sumner motioned to the sky with his eyes.

“So, you’re saying I’m supposed to walk down there to The Beach and say ‘Hi there... hello, uh...welcome to Petra, your ass ain’t never going back to Earth, oh wait, there’s no Earth to even go back to?’”

Sumner shrugged his shoulders and nodded, “Well, I’d be a little more tactful than that, but sure, that’s the whole vibe of the matter.”

“Just like you were with me?”

“Exactly.”

The two men stood on the porch for a minute in silence.

“Well hell, then, man. Let me go grab my kit and bottle and I’ll be on my way.”

“That’s the spirit, mate!” shouted Sumner, “Knew you’d come around.”

San Marcos packed his kit and grabbed his best bottle of hootch, tucked it in a knapsack and set out on the road to The Boulder Bank.

He was there within the hour, standing hidden in the forest line looking at the beach. He could see the pilot next to the Time Eagle about one klick down the shoreline. He carefully made his way through the trees, as not to reveal himself until he could get a better view of the newest visitor to Petra. As he got closer, he could see the pilot was dressed in the same uniform configuration that he himself had arrived in almost a quarter a century ago.

When he arrived at a nominal vantage point directly behind the Pilot, but still hidden in the woods, he very gingerly stepped onto the beach. He walked slowly, considering each step. The pilot, who was sitting in front of a portable furnace with her possessions detected his presence. She slowly got up, and met San Marcos toe to toe, face to face.

They took a few steps back from one another. The pilot looked up at San Marcos and said, "I suppose you are the welcoming committee of some sorts? Well, you don't need to worry about that, I won't be here that long. You can just go back to whatever you were doing and leave me here."

And just as he was about to introduce himself, San Marcos stopped short. His heart came into his throat and a feeling of nausea overcame him. He felt like he was about to faint.

"Good God, man! You look like you've just seen a ghost!" exclaimed the pilot.

San Marcos steadied himself and took a deep breath of air. "Yes I have and you are the Ghost! Don't you remember me...Madame?"

Helen Resnick looked deep in the man's eyes who stood before here and said, "San Marcos, is that you? You've changed, dear boy. What's happened? You aren't a boy any more, are you?"

San Marcos smiled, “Twenty Fire Earth Years, give or take a few. That’s what’s happened to me.”

Helen’s jaw dropped as she asked, “Give or take a few?”

“Give or take a few because I haven’t thought in standard Earth time for many cycles now.”

Helen looked up at the sky, she looked at the horizon upon the sea. She picked up two handfuls of sand and let the grains trickle through the gaps in her fingers. “Astonishing!” she said, “Simply astonishing!”

“Astonishing?” questioned San Marcos.

“Astonishing because it was only five days ago that we sent you through The Tunnel. Granted, much has happened in those five days though. Many things of which, I am still trying to comprehend.” She looked up at her former protege’ and said, “Yet here you are, much older and I, still the same age. Damn Einstein’s Ghost! “ she blurted out into the salty air

San Marcos reached over and slapped himself on the knees and began laughing uncontrollably.

“San, Marcos?” questioned Helen.

He looked up and smiled.

“Do you have a stiff drink here? A very stiff drink. Something preferably about one eighty proof or more? I’m just barely getting over a hangover and I think I would prefer just to start feeding the beast again.”

San Marcos chuckled, “Oh, have I got a bottle for you!” he answered. With a smile that extended ear to ear, he retrieved a sanded blue bottle from the knapsack and extended it to her, “Here, have a belt of this! Guaranteed to kill ya or cure ya, whichever comes first.”

Helen took the bottle, very slowly, put it to her lips, gave San Marcos one more wry look of amusement and tilted her head back to swig down the potion. She retracted the bottle, held in her breathe and let it all out with a quick puff, “That damned bitch out there, “she commented as she pointed the bottle toward the heavens, “Seems she doesn’t want to play by my rules anymore, does she?”

“No, suppose she doesn’t,” said San Marcos.

“Well, don’t know what you call this concoction , but it’s a mighty fine drink.”

“Starshine, it’s called Old Starshine.”

“Whatever it is, do you mind if I finish the whole lot off?”

“Please do, “said San Marcos, “It’s yours to keep. Apparently, it’s a tradition.”

“Tradition. Very well.“ recited Helen smiling coyly at San Marcos. “I’m just going to shuffle on over to that dune there, get good and drunk while I try to figure out the mathematics of this debacle.”

San Marcos smiled and said, “I understand. Believe you me, I understand. Let me know when you are ready to go back to the settlement and meet The Others.”

“Oh yes, I suppose there’s that. Really not necessary though, like I said.” stated Helen.

“No hurry, “said San Marcos, we have all the time in the universe, Madame.”

Helen took a few steps towards the dunes and looked back, “Oh, San Marcos. Over there by the Eagle, there’s something....eh.... someone who might want to see you.” She turned back and walked to the dunes, fell into the sand and began nursing her Starshine.

San Marcos peered at the Time Eagle parked right at the edge of the shore. He began walking towards it. He noticed there was a creature inside a cage begging to get out. He could hardly believe his eyes and ears when he realized the truth. It was little Molly, his beagle he had left on earth all those years ago. The only true fiend he had all those years ago.

He ran towards the cage. Molly was pawing and clawing at the cage door while she frantically whined. He opened the latch and let her out. And though it had only been a week to Molly, she greeted San Marcos like it had been a lifetime since she had seen him. For San Marcos, it had been a lifetime indeed. Tears filled the wells of his eyes, “Hey, little Molly, little Beagle pup, how are you? I missed you so much! I thought you were long gone and I’d never see you again, that’s for sure!”

Molly licked San Marcos all over the face and pawed San Marcos’ shoulder begging for his attention.

And as for Helen Resnick, try as she might, she could not reconcile the severe time shift of her trip through The Tunnel. The only possible explanation is that Declan, in his haste to balance the equations, had made a small miscalculation. But she had never known the man to make even the slightest of errors in his math.

She shrugged her shoulders. It was a minor detail that wouldn’t affect the return trip. She peered at the two from the distant sand dune and raised her bottle to their reunion.

San Marcos happily waved back at Helen. He could hardly wait to get home to Neko to introduce her to Molly.

18. The Celebration

Helen Resnick slept off the time lag. She slept off the most wonderful hangover she had ever had. She gathered herself together and made her way across the Common Garden of the Boulder Bank to their community center. The locals were preparing a feast in her honor. She tried to explain to them that such festivities were not needed and that she was not a pilot in that sense, while hiding from them the fact that she had return plans as soon as Declan sent the safe signal comm-link to her Eagle from the other side of The Tunnel. San Marcos and his intrepid sidekick, Sumner would hear nothing of it. They had insisted on their silly little ritual.

She found herself at a huge banquet table with enough food to feed an army of hungry soldiers. Her appetite was voracious so she happily sampled exotic vegetables, fruits and dishes, the names of which she did not know nor could she place the taste of any of them with Earth equivalents.

The settlers were smiling, laughing and even singing to her health. She had never met a merrier group of people. And then suddenly, while chewing on a tasty citrus-like succulent, in the middle of this clamorous merry-making session, a huge explosion was heard to the south in the direction of the beach.

Helen dropped her utensils onto the floor and exclaimed, “Bloody Hell!!!”

Sumner glanced at San Marcos and motioned with his eyes toward Helen.

Helen gave an icy glare to San Marcos and said, “There was supposed to be a signal. That wasn’t supposed to happen!”

The room remained silent except for the sound of a few clinking forks upon ceramic plates.

Sumner, who was sitting next to Helen, let out a beaming smile from behind his now fully grey wooly beard and broke the tension in the room, “Ha, Mate! It never does. It’s never supposed to happen. But it always does, mate, it always does. Happened to me, happened to San Marcos, and now it’s happened to you.” He laughed, took a long gulp of beer from his tankard, and chucked Helen on the shoulder like he had known her all his life.

Helen’s gaze remained affixed upon San Marcos, all color flushed from her face.

San Marcos said, “Welcome of Petra, Helen. Better drink up. It’s gonna be a long stay, might as well make the best of it.” He raised his glass and said to the room, “To Helen Resnick!”

The crowd seconded his motion, raised their mugs, glasses and cups and chanted “To Helen!”

Helen raised her eyebrows, shrugged her shoulders and took another slug of Old Starshine.

And the raucous revelry resumed.

