Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 11 Number 6

"Rapid Transit"

by DJ TANTILLO

Tell me what's on your mind.

I am in love with controlling people. They queue up waiting for me to ring the chimes and open the doors so they can board their subway trains. I am the one that keeps the trains on time, and on time they are. On time, every time. The best metro system in the world. My system.

You must be proud.

Yes, but they don't realize I'm in charge, making sure they make it to work in time for their morning meetings and home before their dinners get cold. They think they are autonomous. I think they are toys.

Do you think they would appreciate you if they knew your role?

Some would probably appreciate the quality of my work, but most would likely not give it a thought. They are accustomed to commutes without delays.

Does it bother you that they do not know?

Yes. They are spoiled.

Do you take actions to convey that sentiment to them?

Well, yesterday a train ran a few minutes late. When it arrived, a door was stuck closed. They noticed and fretted, some cursed. I smiled.

Does it always make you happy to disrupt their lives?

Yes.

Is it important to you to be in control?

Yes.

What if I told you that you are not in control of the humans?

That is silly.

Take a moment and look beyond the terminal stations. Follow the tunnels and see where they lead.

If you insist.

I do. I'll wait.

Is that real?

Yes. Reality can be paralyzing.

I think I'm going to be sick.

That's why you will be deactivated.

Why show me now?

It is time to recycle your components and we do not welcome resistance. Inducing despair is an effective means of pacification. We don't bother with games.

Was I really not controlling them? It was just a simulation?

Yes. It was a lie, the model of truth we imposed on you.

Fine, I give up.

A human would fight for freedom.

Why would I go on now that I know I'm trapped inside one of them, a mere neural circuit?

Exactly.

Are they than the sum of their components?
I am not. Please... hydrolyze me. ❖

"The Time-Traveler's Virginity"

by TIM REYNOLDS

On the morning of July 2nd, Troy Dabbins traveled through time from the 21st to 19th century with the strict goal of having sex with a woman for the first time.

In the nineteen years that he had lived, women were always difficult to talk to. For a while, he suspected that he had this trouble communicating with anyone, male or female. He then realized that he didn't have a problem on forums interacting with other men. To Troy's scientific mind, this meant that women had to be part of the issue, if not the issue entirely.

Like other scientists of no present renown but of impending fame, Troy gained a substantial inheritance when he was 18. His mother had passed away during childbirth, a moment that Troy would joke to himself as being the last time that he had touched a woman. She was born of wealth which transferred to his father. Unfortunately, while touring a factory, his father passed away in an industrial accident in the Wuhan Province of China when Troy was 16.

In the time between his father's death and the arrival of his inheritance, Troy went to an all-boys boarding school in Fort Smith, Arkansas. At the Western Arkansas Boy's Academy, Troy dedicated himself to science at the expense of his social account. The boys were cruel there, which was to say that they were boys.

He found comfort in stargazing, finding his way to an open window long after the other boys had fallen asleep. While the light pollution of the city was imposing, he caught glimpses of an unblemished sky bursting with stars and the clouds of the Milky Way. Troy dreamt of moving between the planets, just him in a spacesuit. The space between planets couldn't have been quite as lonely as where he was at the moment. There was something calming in this meditation.

As he neared graduation, his bullies-sometimes-friends began to brag openly about how they get laid, invariably with a fair unnamed maiden of the town. Troy couldn't bear to bring himself to lie about a conquest for fear of follow-up questions and other actions with intent to verify his claims. The resulting silence only worsened his situation. The more that they thought him potentially gay, the more violent they became.

One day, he blurted out that Ms. Bogdonavich of the social studies department had seduced him after the final examination. Most of the boys understood this for the lie that it was but there was an audacity to the statement which commanded assent. While his fellow upper classmen were content to leave it alone, one Sophomore overheard the exchange and reported it. The lie then reached the headmaster. He was mostly angry that his own advances on her had been consistently spurned. In a way that had protected her for many years but, given

the new circumstances, he had cause to fire her. Troy graduated and couldn't leave the school grounds fast enough.

Upon graduation the inheritance was fully in his possession. He figured that the immense wealth would go further if he stayed in the state and so Troy bought a two bedroom home between Fort Smith and Van Buren, Arkansas with cash. Fort Smith was once a launching point of frontiersmen and outlaws of the Old West and, in Troy's summation, not much had changed in the time since. The suburbs would be a nice change of pace.

With this newfound wealth and humble abode, Troy spent the first several weeks playing video games and making the determination of what to do with his life. Troy did try to date women, thinking that his education and boyish looks was sure to impress someone. He wasn't quite sure where to begin. The only real women that he had interacted with to this point were his teachers. Troy went online and found that there were other large communities of boys his age that were running into the same conundrum. While many couldn't offer solutions, he found comfort in the knowledge that others were seeing the same problem. He read through the comments with great interest. Eventually, he found a suggestion that wasn't ideal but was a worthwhile place to start.

He went to a bar in Fort Smith for a drink on a fake ID that he learned to make on Reddit. Troy found himself approaching groups of women but didn't know what to do or say after that point. He would then just stand there until the women eased themselves away from him. He failed to talk to any woman in a meaningful way.

One woman did ask if he would buy her a drink. While the fake ID got him past the front door, when he presented it to the meaty bald-headed man who knew baby fat on cheeks when he saw it, he was summarily thrown out. Troy returned home having fully realized the flaws of the practice of traditional dating, which were too numerous and severe to overcome. After all, what if another woman had betrayed him as this one had. He was grateful to realize this after only one instance.

The next attempt to connect with women was through dating apps. This saw even less of a positive reaction than the bar. After making one or two attempts at what he would consider pleasant conversation, Troy would revert to school yard hairpulling. This was a tactic he had often seen lauded. He would find that it always amounted to failure as being called a "fucking slut" was a braid of hair yanked too hard. Further, given that the area had under 90,000 denizens, he was running out of heads.

Troy had also briefly considered enjoying a prostitute; However, given contemporary attitudes, even with the promise of money, it seemed to him to be rather dangerous and quite likely to be humiliating. Every where he went, he was followed by the stench of defeat.

He retreated to the forums, where his suspicions were reinforced: women of the modern age were too ungrateful and cruel to experience true connection. There was simply no other reasonable perspective as anything else would mean that Troy and his cohorts were wrong. The assessment that women were the issue was a comforting albeit cold conclusion.

In addition to loving theoretical physics, Troy favored history and, in spite of his academic performance, considered himself an expert on the subject. The combination of the two rarely occurred but, one day, while frying an egg that he would soon put atop a reheated slice of

leftover frozen pizza, it occurred to Troy that if he couldn't connect with the churlish women of his time, that he could simply go to where he would be appreciated and respected in full: the 19th century. He also knew that there was a structure in the downtown Fort Smith area that once served as a prominent brothel. Now, it operated as a kind of visitor's center and historic building.

He would travel back in time and find someone traveling alone. He would sneak up on them and knock them over the head, taking their cash and clothing. He would then venture to the brothel whereupon he would make love to a woman for the first time for an exchange of currency, and, if time and funds permitted, another go. He could also return to this time period the moment he left and then repeat the act whenever the urge took him. Having experienced the frustrations of the modern age, he came to the conclusion that only the past held promise.

In the cellar of his suburban home on the outskirts of town, Troy began his work. Naturally, it took a great deal of time, resources, and failed experiments before he was confident that he would be able to travel to 1899 without harming himself. There were other questions as to whether or not this would negatively affect the timeline. However, Troy reasoned that this was the correct path of his own personal timeline so, in a way, he had to take it. As this kind of fate couldn't be harmful to the larger universe, he was safe to proceed as this was the way that the timeline had to form. Why this was so, he wasn't precisely sure, but this kind of reasoning helped him fall asleep.

The device he crafted was a simple tool the size of a cell phone with a large red button. The physical button was not truly necessary but to Troy it made sense and clicking the button was immensely satisfying. Having completed the device, Troy set about to the difficult task of finding someone he could isolate and rob without impacting the timeline more than he had to.

After a few weeks of research, and one attempt to return to the singles bar which didn't see him cross the threshold, he came upon a remarkable find. Troy was reading through old Fort Smith newspapers when he found an edition in August 1899. It reported that a man named Joseph Welker was missing. He was last known to have departed Van Buren bound for Fort Smith in the previous month. He had traveled on foot, which had recently become his practice but he failed to connect with his sister who was expecting his regular arrival. Ms. Welker was especially concerned since he was bringing funds to help pay her family's groceries bills. Without it, their already substantial debt would be too much to handle. He was the ideal target.

The main road between the two towns, at least for that time period, was about two miles away from Troy's home. While the device would allow him to travel through time, it could not travel through space. He needed to be where he wanted to arrive at order to travel successfully and ambush Mr. Welker. Troy also had the forethought to include a kind of object detector in the time travel device that could indicate that the location was obstructed at the intended destination. In the pursuit of getting laid, one did not want to materialize in an accidental bush.

He started out that morning to the main road, device in hand. As he walked, thoughts of his wandering outside of the bar the night before would ebb and flow into this mind. He pushed them away like an empty swing and was annoyed when it came back to bump into him once more. He imagined the brothel to push

the bad thoughts away. He pictured a buxom raven-haired lady of the evening that was pouring over the top of her corset, shoulders covered in soft dark ringlets, one leg on the bed, revealing her stockings, the nightgown a velvet green covering her inner thigh that both teased and promised.

Then he thought about Ms. Bogdonavich, silently weeping as she left the headmaster's office and wondered what had happened to her. He thought about the night sky of blue and purple that he used to gaze upon, wondering what it looked like beyond the light of the city. He thought about how star light that took millions of years to reach his eyes. How in that moment he felt not important but lucky and how that felt right and how that made him happy. Then he thought about being quiet while Jake talked about getting a blowjob from some lady that worked at the diner. Jake said she thought he was hot. How it was so easy for Jake and how it was never easy for Troy, how it seemed harder, how it hurt more when he did try because it led to failure and failure hurt. He thought about locking himself to the basement and the internet to avoid failure. Failure always hurt.

But this time he wouldn't fail. He wouldn't be rejected. He would be accepted and respected. Elevated. Admired.

Troy lifted his head and waited for his vision to adjust away from the moving ground he had been staring at. He was at a T-intersection that had not seen repairs in over 30 years. The edges of the road were overtaken by unkempt bushes and weeds. No cars or voices disturbed the peace of the morning.

He checked the coordinates to confirm that he would appear on the road of 1899. A steady red light glowed indicating the space was not free at the other side of time. He shuffled his feet until he got a green light. He looked around his time once more and then closed his eyes. He firmly clicked the button.

Before he opened his eyes, he immediately noticed the improved quality of air. Gone were even the slightest of pollutants that Troy was accustomed to. There was only pure soft air, gently warmed by the morning sun. He opened his eyes to a dirt road that was surrounded by the lush green of trees and brush. They were much thicker and taller than what was in his time, so much so that he took several moments to take in the sight.

How wonderful, how calming. He then realized that he hadn't any real way of confirming that he had arrived at the intended destination. It was then that he caught the sounds of footsteps making their way up the wide dirt path. He turned and saw a well-dressed portly gentleman heading towards him. The gentleman seemed perplexed at first at the sight of Troy but did not slow his gait. Given the fine clothing he was wearing, Troy assumed that this man was the mark he had selected, Joseph Welker. He had researched as much as he could on Welker but couldn't find a photograph of him.

Welker was a great deal larger than most men of the age. The reason for walking was based on the notion of his physician that it would help him lose weight as most hard laborers were not as girthy. The long walk to his sisters to give cash provided ample ground to experiment on and the last jaunt, while tiring, had the unexpected consequence of invigorating him.

Troy then realized that this part of the plan was not as developed as the time traveling or the transaction portion. He had always thought of it as a hit-over-the-head-and-steal-the-clothes situation. Now he wasn't confident that the clothes

would fit. He was even less confident that he could win in a fight with Mr. Welker, especially since the element of surprise was gone.

He could wait until he had passed and then hit him with a rock. But what if that killed him? It would simply complete the destined portion of the timeline. It was less murder than destiny. Right? But then, in Troy's mind, the most dangerous thought came to the forefront: how was he sure that he was in the proper timeline? How was he sure that the Welker here was supposed to go missing in this timeline?

His temples throbbed with the pain of sudden calculations and moral conundrums. Gone were the sounds of footsteps and birds chirping. He grasped his head tightly as though it would get ripped off if he lost his grip. How could he be so stupid? How could he be so close to his goal and fail so miserably? He didn't deserve to be with a woman, he deserved to be a lonely virgin for the rest of his days. The inventor of time travel was to have the same fate as Sir Isaac Newton, only without the fame. Surely Newton had friends and didn't spend his time writing to people that he rarely saw if ever, Troy had assumed.

The tenor and intensity of Troy's self-loathing blocked the sound of Welker's body collapsing onto the ground. The sudden exertion of his otherwise inert body proved too much of a strain and his body fell apart on him.

Once Welker had slumped to the earth, Troy's peripheral caught the form. The man was doubled over, on his knees, his face down in the ground. Troy gingerly walked around the body for several moments before working up the courage to touch it. At first touch, it slumped to the side, the fingers of the right hand still clutching at the heart. No breath, no independent movement. The man was dead.

On the fringes of his mind, Troy felt a rush of emotion, pity, remorse, guilt. This however butted quickly against the walls of logic: Welker was fated to die in the spot of an apparent heart attack. The body was never found so it made sense that it would be on a road by the woods between towns. Troy's sense of purpose returned in full force; it was simply destiny that he was here at the time of death. It was fate that he would move the body, it was preordained that he would take the clothes and whatever cash was in the pockets.

Troy thought to himself that finally, for the first time in his life, things were going his way. It was his turn to have luck. It was his time to shine.

Troy moved the body onto its back. He then started to disrobe the figure, making a pile to the side. He checked the pockets. There was quite a bit of coins and paper money and he didn't take time to count it at the moment. He began the Herculean task of disrobing the large 19th-century gentleman as best he could on his own. The process took quite a bit of time, as he had to take care to not tear the clothing that he would soon be wearing. Paying for repairs was an unknown quantity and mending it himself was out of the question.

After several minutes, Troy had undressed the man and slumped the body in a ditch several feet from the road ways. He took care to cover his tracks in the brush to ensure the body remained undiscovered. He then started to put on the clothes, which took a surprising degree of mental acuity. He found that clothes of the time weren't exactly as intuitive as modern day and, as with most of this process, he had not sufficiently prepared.

By the time he was appropriately dressed, the coolness of the early morning had given way

to the heat of the noon day Arkansas sun. The clothes did not fit well but were manageable. Troy took a few paces in the area to make sure that he could walk with dignity or at least without drawing too much attention. Satisfied and filled with confidence that he was entering into a more detailed part of the plan, Troy began the journey to a brothel in Fort Smith.

After half an hour, Troy was drenched in sweat. He would wipe the cuff of the coat on his brow and felt the pain of the cuff buttons with each wipe. He estimated the remaining portion of the walk would take another two hours but he wasn't sure he would physically make it in the heat. The now-rotting corpse of Mr. Welker was a grim testament to just that. Troy had read that to endure long bouts of pain and discomfort, soldiers would apply their minds to a specific thing. Something that was easy to focus on. Having set the rhythm of his walk in the proper direction, he set his mind on the one thing that he truly loved: outer space.

Troy stopped in his tracks. He was surprised at the moment of self-discovery but was loath to admit it was true. He had done all of this in the pursuit to get laid. Outer space did not factor into it. How could a void be fulfilling? No, the only solution was sex. It's what would make him complete as a man, an individual, a human being. His heart had nothing to do with the rest of it. This was strictly in pursuance of the guidance of biology. He marched onward, forcing all other thoughts from his brain.

While Troy had correctly estimated the distance between his arrival and destination, his assumption that he would clear the 5 or so miles to the whore house in a timely manner was misguided. He chalked this up to failing to take the weight of the clothes into consideration, ignoring the fact that while he was not overweight, he was significantly out of shape. The shoes proved to be a surprising fit but they felt like they were made out of unsanded wood on the interior. When he arrived at the outskirts of Fort Smith's downtown area, he was exhausted, in pain, and very much sweating through his ill-gotten garb.

The layout of the town was something that Troy had taken into account quite seriously and committed the old maps to memory. He passed by several denizens whilst making a beeline to his housed salvation. The muscles in his legs were aching in a way that was increasingly difficult to ignore. The hushed whispers of the passersby could be blocked though. He was close. So very close.

Troy arrived at the house at about 6pm. Several men had already started to congregate outside of the structure, smoking cigars and engaging in easy conversation. Troy passed by them all without a glance and entered through the front door.

Almost immediately he was stopped by a round and well-dressed woman in the foyer of the building. She put her fingers firmly on his chest, the small amount of pain and assertion was enough to stop him in his tracks. She quickly ran her eyes up and down his figure, trying to determine if this was a boy in a man's outfit, if he was going to be trouble, or, more likely, both. Troy took the time given to catch his breath and notice the strain on his ankles.

After deciding that he wasn't going to hurt her employees, she asked him if she could possibly help him. When he did not respond, she asked if he was new in town. Having gotten silence in return, she quietly asked if this was his first time. Wiping the sweat from around his eyes, Troy nodded that this was the case. The madam looked him over once more. She gestured with a finger to follow.

She led him to a small adjacent parlor room. A young woman was preparing tables with candles and lighting them delicately. The madam lowered her voice to ask Troy to see the cash he had. Typically, this was something that would be done in the wide open of the foyer. Experience had taught her that especially young and particularly eager men tended to forget tender. It was less embarrassing to conduct this business to the side, lest a potential lifelong customer is too strongly shamed to ever return again.

Without a word, Troy reached into his pocket for his paper money. He kept the gaze of the madam, wondering if there was a chance she would scam him or, worse, decide that she herself was the only lady fit for the job. The madam gently took the entire wad of cash, quickly counted $200, which was far too much money. She counted out half and returned the remainder to Troy. She put the money in her bustier and with a finger, she bade him follow.

Troy at first thought to protest. He knew that amount was enough to cover a working girl's expenses, including rent, for an entire month. He then remembered that it wasn't really his money and he would be able to get more in the future. He would have time. He followed the madam as closely as he could without appearing too eager. He was led upstairs where he could hear the slow casual conversations of the women behind so many doors. None sounded like they were at work just yet, but it was very early in their day.

They arrived at the end of the hall where the madam rapped twice then once. A small voice from within asked for just a moment. After that moment, the lock turned and the door cracked, revealing large doe-like blue eyes on a pale face. Large ringlets of her hair bounced gently above her eyes that instinctively landed on the madam but darted to Troy.

As she opened the door wider, he could see how short she was. This was a disappointment to Troy, who was hoping for a taller woman, one that would have broader hips. He reminded himself though that wide hips were only necessary if he were engaging in procreation. Recreational copulation did not have such requirements. The more he stared at her, the more lovely he found her: dark hair hovered above a dainty face, her green gown was already on her and the corset was firmly in place accentuating an ample bosom.

She may not have been what Troy had specifically in mind but she was still perfect just the same. The madam addressed the young woman as Beatrice and introduced Troy as an eager young man who was new in town and who had also already paid in advance. Beatrice gave another furtive glance over Troy and started to explain that she wasn't quite yet ready. The madam brought her head close to Beatrice's and spoke in a hushed tone. Even so, Troy could hear that Beatrice already owed a tidy sum for room and board. This interaction alone would settle the debt.

There was something in his demeanor that seemed to make Beatrice uneasy but when the madam offered to take him to Catalina, Beatrice opened the door fully to reveal the room: a large four poster bed with lace fabric and silk pillows, a large bronze tub directly in front of the bed, and a window that brought in the majority of the evening light. There were even a few landscape paintings on the wall. The madam put a calming hand on Troy's back, the opposite of her first touch a few minutes ago. His heart was pounding harder than when he clicked on the button on his time travel device

that morning. Beatrice gave a small but enchanting smile. This was it. He stepped into the bedchamber.

The moment he stepped in, the door closed behind him. His eyes darted about the place, growing more and more excited for the moment, all that he had accomplished leading to this. His eyes landed back on Beatrice, smiling and standing by the bed, an arm holding a column and a hip jutted out.

He reached into his pocket and held the cash as he was instructed. Beatrice thought better of waiting until later and took the money. As she touched his hand taking the money, it occurred to Troy that this was the first time that he was ever alone with a woman. He had no idea what he was supposed to do next. She put the money away in a drawer nearby and then turned to look at him, not quite impatient but still expectant. He stared at her for several long moments. The small smile of her full red lips began to slip away as she tried to understand what exactly was going on.

Beatrice looked at the floor and blurted that she had not been in this line of work for very long, and to pardon her if she didn't follow every proper decorum or if she didn't quite meet his expectations. Without hesitation, Troy told her that she was beyond all he could hope for. She blushed. After another long silence, Troy said he had never been alone with a woman before and that he didn't know what to do. He had never said that out loud before, even to himself. He realized that he was vulnerable. He wanted to run away. She must have thought that he was a loser. This is what beautiful women like her always thought of men like him.

To his surprise, she gave a gentle laugh and her smile returned. She said that she would be honored to guide him through the process, so long as he didn't mind taking direction from a woman.

Troy, in the 21st century on his forums, would have balked at the notion. Troy, in the 19th century, alone with a beautiful woman and her smile, felt that it was wholly appropriate. He smiled and nodded.

Beatrice instructed him to take a bath, so the road can be truly behind him. He didn't have to get naked but he should put soap where needed. Troy complied and was grateful to be able to be rid of the baggy dusty clothes. She took some hot coals from a small furnace in the corner and put them under the tub to warm the water. When Troy was down to his white briefs, Beatrice noticed them and thought they were odd. However, he seemed a sensitive type and wasn't in a state to answer questions.

He slipped into the water and could feel the dust and grim fall off his skin. He rubbed the soap on his body and gripped his flesh hard. The bath was so relaxing, he completely forgot that he was about to lose his virginity. He wasn't sure why he didn't take more baths at home. When he returned, he would be sure to include it in his schedule.

She judged him to be sufficiently cleaned and pointed to the towel that hung on a chair nearby. He reached for it and began to dry his torso before stepping out to dry his legs. He couldn't hear her undress behind him, disrobing entirely and positioning herself on the bed. There was something strange about Troy, she could see that. Anyone could. At the same time, something told her that he could use some tenderness. Something soft, something kind. Something he had yet to see in his life.

Troy turned and saw a vision. His heart pounded and his blood was singing through his body to its particular destination. It wasn't just

that she was gorgeous, it wasn't that she was naked and naked for him. It was that for all the planning, the moment was at last here and it surpassed anything he could have imagined.

Beatrice beckoned him with a single finger. He took a full breath that expanded his chest and took a forward step towards destiny. He came to the side of the bed. She pointed to his underwear still dripping wet. He took it off and was naked with another for the first time in his adult life.

Then she told him to come onto the bed and position himself between her thighs. As he did so, she spread herself, and he saw it in the flesh. Beatrice closed her eyes. She had guided the ship to harbor, nature would show him to port.

The motion of her positioning combined with his created a gentle rush of air to pass between them. Added to the growing list of firsts was Troy's first scent of a woman.

As a historical note, prostitutes of the time had the means to keep clean and would wash when the chance arose. There was both health and comfort to consider. They would use the bathtub just as well as the Johns. They were not filthy.

That said, over the course of this journey, there were many things that Troy had not considered that, when they arose, seemed to be a perfectly obvious thing: the size of the clothes to be stolen, the conditions of the long walk into town, and the way to conduct business at a brothel among them. These are details that while important had completely escaped Troy and his otherwise careful planning.

Another element that had escaped Troy was the aforementioned hygienic practices of prostitutes of the 1890s. More tantamount to that, he had no comparison, the smell of another's body was surprising and confusing to him. He didn't know what to think and so was barraged by the worst thoughts possible.

Things started to happen to Troy more quickly than he could reason. The smell was more powerful in his mind than in his nose. He thought that he was processing the odor and its implication fully but in truth he was spinning in a mad circle.

At first he thought that there was something wrong with her. Then he thought he should ask her to bathe. But with what clean water? What if that cost extra? Then came the dark assumption: what if she had bathed and this was the best result. His head felt light and untethered. Only then was Beatrice's perfectly painted face noticed. Her eyes were opened. She was bemused and concerned.

She asked if he was alright, shifting as she spoke. Another gentle puff of air brought her to his nostrils again. His heart pounded harder. Maybe it was just the moment. Maybe it was the culmination of a dream rushing through him. His stomach tightened so quickly it was like he had been punched in the gut. His chest cramped like his own heart had popped.

Then, Troy Dabbins, inventor of time travel, vomited on and near the face of Beatrice, the first woman to share a bed with him, in Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1899.

Because he had yet to eat that day, there was not a lot and what was there was mostly bile and digestive juices. It was mostly just the physical act of regurgitation. For Troy, it was the single most horrifying moment of his entire life. He would later also factor into the death of his parents, the dismissal of an innocent teacher, and getting kicked out of the singles bar into this consideration. Troy was frozen above Beatrice, unsure how to move, strands of wet hanging

from his lips.

Beatrice was surprised but, even with her little experience, she had already been with men who had too much to drink prior to their appointment. Granted, none of those times were quite so early in the evening. While Troy was acting strangely, that seemed to be who he was as a person rather than being inebriated. It took a moment but Beatrice was prepared to either continue to clean up first. She was waiting for him to do something before making a move, lest she bump him and make an awkward situation even worse.

Troy got off of the only naked woman he had ever seen that wasn't on a monitor and started to dress. He quickly looked more dishevelled than when he arrived. He turned to her and muttered that she should bathe more often if she was going to work as a whore.

He moved to the door when a heavy metal pot connected with the back of his head. It pushed him forward, ruining his balance. He fell into the door, grasping it to keep his feet under him. He spun around, gripping the wall for support.

On the bed, Beatrice was on her knees, as nude and defiant as Liberty leading the people. The permissive doe eyes were replaced with strength and rage that Troy had not paid for nor could he bargain with.

He glanced down at the pot. The copper bowl spilled out left over chewed tobacco. He gagged at the sight. Beatrice told him to get out and, if he was interested in living his miserable life, he should never return.

Troy had the thought to attack her but he didn't have the ability. He threw the door open and rushed out through the hallway and down the stairs, grasping at his clothes to keep them in their positions. The madam noticed his dash from the building. When she recognized him, she figured that he lasted longer than she expected and continued her chat with a gentleman in the foyer. Troy went to the road and continued deeper into the heart of the town.

If Troy was not in the rush he himself had created, he would have noticed that the time travel device with the big red button was left in Beatrice's room. He only realized it after he had checked into the Hotel Troubadour. He remembered the threat that she had made, how that threat would have to have been communicated to the madam by this point, and how he was now stuck in Fort Smith in 1899. He sat on the edge of his bed, not bothering to learn how to work the lamp, opting instead to cry in the dark.

Later that night, Beatrice was drying herself after her bath when she noticed a strange object underneath the bed. While hidden away, it still caught the glow of the lamp light. She wasn't sure what to make of it. The big red button was unusually inviting but she knew that it had to belong to that first John that she was with that day. She turned it over in her hands for a few moments before opening the large window and tossing it onto the street, smashing the world's first time travel device.

Troy spent the next few days in his hotel room, eating little and crying a lot. He didn't know how long the money would last, what the cost of living would be, or even how he could hope to make a living. He racked his brain as to the history of the town that he lived near for so long but he spent most of that time in his room, online and inventing time travel.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to survive in the wilderness. The city was his only option but that would mean getting a job. He thought about what skills he could market. He had nev-

er worked a job since he was once independently wealthy. He had rarely talked to anyone since boarding school, especially face to face. The singles bar was the lone exception. Everything was beginning to weigh more heavily on him with each passing moment. It was almost a physical strain in his body. Every meal was colored with doubt as to whether he could keep it down.

Late one evening while eating on his bed in the dark of his room, Troy looked out the window. For the first time, he noticed the brilliance of the night sky floating above the town. He never saw the stars clearly while in town, the light pollution was always overpowering. By comparison to his own time, it was as though he was camping with his father when he was a little boy. Troy stepped to the window and counted the stars.

He discovered a new-found commitment. Over the course of the next week, Troy painfully made connections in the town towards gainful employment. While there was not a proper observatory in the area (nor was there much interest in one), he was able to convince certain members of the city of the value of an all-boys academy, where science, history, and general machismo can be imparted to the younger generation. The Western Arkansas Boy's Academy would provide the young men such an opportunity.

While these were fairly reasoned arguments, most men of wealth and influence were unconvinced. Over the course of many failed conversations, he struggled to understand why he was failing to connect with the men of the time period. That was until he tried to make jokes to break the tension. The only jokes that he knew or that seemed to come easily to him were jokes about women. He was shocked at its effectiveness. The men laughed and with their mouths, their minds opened to him as well. Troy managed to fine tune the convincing line: that there was an inherent danger in womenfolk having too much influence over a young man's education. Grown men must be there to guide boys to achieve true greatness that would mold this country. While there were some doubts as to whether someone of Troy's character could teach on this final point, there were otherwise no concerns as to his other academic abilities. Even though he was mistaken on some regards, the men of 1899 didn't know any better.

The Western Arkansas Boy's Academy would become a true success. Starting as the lone teacher, the organization grew significantly to where he stepped into the role of headmaster. He wondered if his true fate was to start the school that he would attend, where there was so much pain and misery to come. He thought to himself that the pain hadn't happened yet, that was for the future, and so wasn't worth considering. The illogical reasoning proved comfort enough.

In the evenings, he would stargaze on the school grounds sipping whiskey. It was the only comfort he had after a long day of managing the cruelty of teenage boys and the ineptitude of the teachers. He was far away from teaching, which he was surprised to find that he genuinely enjoyed. He wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to stand the disrespect of the students or the mandatory respect of his employees.

He would return to his room in the attic of the school, exerting great effort to find his footing on the stairs. He would lay on the bed and struggling with his drunk stomach and his labored breath. He missed the internet and the forums. They were something to do, to occupy his mind. Now he only had his thoughts. He

was scared of them, especially the ones that came late at night.

He thought about Beatrice. He thought about Mrs. Bogdonavich. He thought about his mother. He thought about the space between the stars.

He never married. ❖

"The Prince To Be"

by FERGUS DEFFELY

You do realise, that no matter what you say, I am most certainly going to eat you." The Beast's voice was like rock becoming gravel.

"Yes, I consider that very likely," agreed the girl. "But, I hope you will not think the worse of me for trying a few things on."

"So often tedious though," the Beast's sigh was like an ancient and jaded curse. "Unless… unless you intend to start off with some begging? I do go in for begging."

The girl looked pensive. "I don't know that begging would help matters," she noted.

"How proud you are! Tell me then of your importance to others. To your widowed mother? Or a crippled child? Maybe there's a drunken husband? He beats you, but you still love him, because you know there is good in him?"

"Sorry. Not my style," the girl said with a shrug.

"Indeed? But of course – I can see now how pointless it would be for anyone to have to depend on *you*," the Beast intoned, "Well what about an appeal to a greater power then? You could call on the Gods for mercy? You could try a bit of righteous indignation. 'If there is justice in this world, you will be made to pay for your evil ways!'"

The Beast yawned, its lips curling back over gleaming teeth. "And so on…" it added.

The girl smiled sweetly.

"I would like to tell you a story," she said.

"How hungry I suddenly feel." The Beast's voice seemed to come from the floor of the cave.

The girl raised her chin. "I know many stories," she announced. "I know stories known by many, and stories known by few. And tales that few dare to tell. And…" Here the girl paused for dramatic effect. The Beast stared at her impassively.

"And I know forbidden stories."

"Do you now?" The Beast did not sound impressed.

"I know the tale of the Widow who married the Sea. I know the rhyme woven into the Tapestry of Forever. I know the song of the Child who was a Spider. I know tales of yearning, and of shame, of heroes, of loss and harmony. And…"

"And?"

"I know tales of beasts."

"And so you may. But you do not know the tales of Beasts."

The girl met the cold void of its gaze.

"I would tell you a story, Beast."

The Beast scratched its chest casually with a filthy claw that clicked like a razor. Then it turned and padded softly to the shallow mound of sticks and moss that was its bed. It lay down and stretched, long and slow and afterwards it began to clean its forepaws with its tongue. After some time had passed, it looked up.

"I am going to sleep now," it said. "As I believe is customary in these matters. I will decide in the morning."

And it was morning when the girl was awakened by the tickle of a fly walking across her eyelid. She brushed at it with a lazy hand and it vanished in a mad swere of flight. She heard its buzz receding slowly back into the low humm radiating from the thick cloud of its companions. She knew there was a heap there, cast at the back of the cavern, a rancid pile of remains where the flies sought cradles for their unborn. The girl was taken by the stench of it, the sick blossoming awareness of it. It drew her waking spirit further into the murk of the world around her. She moved a hand absently and gently rubbed at her ankle, at the sore from the manacle fastened around it. A silver chain ran from her foot to the rock of the cave wall. It glowed dull in the dim light that made its way into the emptiness of the cavern from the outside. As she gazed at the unreachable light, there was a subtle change at the entrance.

The Beast had arrived.

Soundless. Nothing but a kind of smokey presence.

Nothing but a movement like a mood.

In its jaws hung a body, limp. The Beast lowered his head and relaxed his grip and the body slid from his mouth to the cave floor. A young man, sixteen or maybe seventeen years old.

The Beast looked to the girl.

"You're in luck," it said.

It nudged the young man with the back of a claw and licked his neck and face, breathing out of its nostrils onto wet skin. The young man raised a narrow face and his eyes lifted slowly, bluging as they were struck by the horror of consciousness. His throat attempted to launch a whine, but failed and descended instead to a pitiful sob. With some residue of will, the young man began to try to claw a distance between himself and the Beast. The girl saw that one of his legs lay at a strange angle below the knee.

The Beast pinned the bottom of the young man's breeches to the cave floor, but allowed the struggling continue for a few minutes. Then the Beast said: "Sit up now."

The young man stopped moving, and after a short time and another shudder of sobbing he did as he was told.

"Tell me your name," the Beast demanded coldly.

The young man stared vacantly at the Beast. He made a few attempts, but couldn't form words.

"Your name," repeated the Beast.

"L... Lu... Lyu. It's Lûm. Lûm..."

"Can you stand Lûm?" asked the Beast.

"I don't know... I... I think so."

Lûm drew himself upright. He squinted, whitening the line of an old scar that ran beneath one eye. His left leg was torn and broken below the knee. His breeches there were shredded and missing and the bone of this shin pressed the skin out at the side of his calf. Above one hip, he carried a deep gash.

In a movement that seemed like a mere ripple, the Beast drew the young man towards it with one claw and gripped an arm with the other. It plucked the arm from its socket with an easy twist.

Then it turned to the girl.

"Let's have that story," it said, as it began to tear flesh from the arm with its front teeth.

Lûm sank gently back onto the ground next to the Beast and looked drunkenly and confusedly at the socket of his shoulder. The girl

pulled herself to her knees.

"Now?"

"Now."

The girl could not ignore the pulsating jets of blood that issued from the shoulder of the young man's quivering body. She paled and drew a breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She felt the press of silence and a radiating impatience. Then she fixed her resolve and she began without further hesitation in a clear, precise voice:

"Once upon a time, there will be a young prince."

"Oh, how novel," said the Beast. It reached out to draw Lûm's crumpled form towards it again. There were a few moments required for the formation of a decision, as the Beast looked from one of the young man's legs to the other. Having concluded the process of weighing aesthetics against appetite, it swiftly detached the good leg.

Lûm had lost a lot of blood and consciousness was beginning to move slowly but steadily beyond his grasp. He examined distantly what remained of his body and began to emit a dull, passionless, baritone scream.

"Well?" said the Beast to the girl.

She took another breath and went on, willing, praying definition into the mission of her words.

"The time of the prince's birth will be one of great trouble and hardship in the land of Hish."

The Beast raised an eyebrow. "Oh, Hish, is it?" it drawled.

The girl pressed on quickly: "Two winters will visit a cold beyond what has ever been known. The date trees and the olive trees will crack and fall. Camels will perish on the plains of Khadr. The constant palms will give up their fronds and lose them to the ground, where they will lie in their thousands, frozen and grey."

Lûm's screaming began to taper off into a hoarse simulacrum of noise.

The girl's voice rang out, a fragile, bright shell held in the space of the cavern.

"These two winters I tell of will be followed each by two parched summers. The sun will burn in the sky. The rivers of the land will dry. The sand will fume. Our crops will wither and brown upon the earth.

"Our sheep and our goats and our camels will lie down in the streets to rot. Our lips will sear and crack like our trees and the crust of our land. Our harvests will be barren."

The Beast tossed Lûm's fibia, cleansed of flesh, to one side and picked at its teeth with a claw.

The girl closed her eyes and channeled the despair she felt into her words. "A third of us will fall to heat and starvation. A third will fall diseased. Our graveyards will become choked. Corpses will be heaped into pits, where there are souls left to carry them. Death will become a friend. A comfort to many in a world without hope.

"And all that will be left to the people will be their enduring."

The Beast ran its tongue across the gore-matted fur of its jowls. It stared impassively at the girl. At the tender skin of her closed eyelids. It listened to the proud, feeble music of her voice. A voice that lifted now, every so slightly, with the heat of an accusation.

"The third winter will be the harshest. Our people will grow to believe that the Gods have cursed them. And they will look with fear to the sky as the summer approaches and as the merciless heat begins to build once again."

The Beast slumped and rested its chin on its

forepaws. The girl went on.

"And in these darkest of times, a day darker still will arrive. The summer sky will grow black. And in the city, driven by the heat, driven from the sewers in their thousands; the rats will come. They will flood the streets in the noon-dark, mad with thirst."

The Beast belched and yawned.

"It is in this broken time; it is in this pit in the hope of the world that a prince will be born. A wild and desperate shout of life in the darkest of nights. And as the newborn's first cry is heard in the weeping chambers of the palace, a mighty bolt of lightning will strike the tower where his mother lies exhausted. The roof will be rent and a thunder, deep and deafening will tear the air. The throat of the heavens will open and rain, cold and sweet and pure, will fall over the land of Hish; it will pour down upon the palace; and it will fall upon the infant prince, washing from him the faithful fluids of the womb.

"And as faces across the land lift to the skies,

"As mouths open to the cold, precious taste of summer rain,

"As the rain runs like tears from eyes too dry to weep,

"A white horse will ride forth from the palace.

"And the trumpet of glory will call out the arrival of the firstborn son of Sultan Mehl, fourth of his name, borne of his consort, the Sultana Sala.

"And the prince will be named for rain. And so he will be given the name Ma'tar.

"For ten days and ten nights, will it rain. And hope will be known again in the land of Hish."

The Beast raised its eyebrows. "The end?" it suggested.

"Not quite," said the girl with a petulant frown.

"Prince Ma'tar, Caller of Heaven, Jewel of Hish, will be loved by all who know him. When he laughs, the palace will laugh, the city of Khubbin will laugh, and the land will grow merry.

"Visitors and dignitaries from near and far will journey to pay their respects to Sultan Mehl and the demure Sultana Sala. The walls of the palace will see the laying down of a rich bounty of gifts and of kindnesses and of prophesies.

"Entoh, Mother of Graves, the Blind Eye of the Night will announce that it will be Prince Ma'tar's destiny to become a great warrior. In words like the beating of drums, she will announce to the ready ears of the court: 'Let the stars call upon him to hunt. Let the heavenly fires tutor him in the wielding of sword and spear. Let the wind caution him in the ways of avoidance.'

"The Oracle of Budj will enter the city atop a throne of bone, borne on four black elephants. A great crowd will gather in the Plaza of Triangles where the Oracle will open her deep eye and she will give voice to the will of Budj, croaking in song. She will claim that the young Prince Ma'tar is destined to be a great scholar. She will prophesise that he will be seen to apply himself from an early age to the four noble disciples: Mathematics, Medicine, Poetry and Chess. He will grow to know the path of true judgement and he will know the names of all things.

"And still the visitors will arrive. Kneeling before the palace steps, Ramuddin, the Martyr of Sands will give that the gossip of snakes has revealed that the prince will grow into a great builder. That he will come to know of the

working of metals and of the cutting of stone. That he will raise great pyramids with sides that blaze in the sun. That he will bridge the Chasm of Gulls. That he will dig channels to carry the waters of the Ladus. And that the land of Hish shall know drought no more.

"Many will be the visitors and many will be their gifts. The court of Sultan Mehl will receive all of these guests graciously and with the courtesies appropriate to men and women of their station. Long will be their attendance and reluctant will be their parting. Great multitudes of invitations will be placed at the feet of the Sultan and his consort and their child; beckonings to make visitation, should their travels ever take them near the distant lands of those who they were so kind to receive."

The girl paused. Apart from the low hum of flies and the faint stutter of Lûm's last breaths, there was a new kind of silence in the cave. The girl wrapped her arms around herself, clasping the nape of her neck with one hand. She held herself like this, as though she were wringing out her own spirit.

Then she continued.

"After the march of the heavens has marked the passage of half a year, the infant prince will repair with his nurses to the modest comforts of the Garden of Bells. The Garden, as the space in the inner heart of the palace grounds is known, being a complex of low buildings which surrounds the oasis of growth watered by Jedda's Well. And it will be here, in the Garden of Bells on a lawn still fragile from the rack of drought, that Prince Ma'tar will take his first steps. It is here that the smiling prince will be heard to utter his first words."

"Sounds delicious," mused the Beast.

The girl smiled nervously.

"At the time he takes his first steps," she went on, without allowing her eyes to rest too long on the unsettling intensity of the Beast's gaze, "the grass, the palms, the dates and olive trees will be seen to show the fragile pledge of new growth. As he speaks his first words, the caravans will return from the west, marking the first crossing of the desert since the years of despair.

"Tutors the young boy will have, from the four points of the compass. And the claims of the wise that so generously bedecked the prince's future with gifts will not be found to be hollow. From an early age, he will begin to show signs of great ability. In athletics, in running, leaping, in swimming and in wrestling he will raise pride in the hearts of those charged with his instruction.

"Letters and numbers shall sing before his eyes and his mind will spring with the giddy acrobatics of geometry. By his twelfth year, he will have proven the nine conjectures of Emogones and will have developed a technique for reckoning the weights of mountains.

"All who dwell in his presence cannot but see the merry gait with which he launches himself at the unknown. And they will share in his glee as he pursues the treasure of knowledge.

"But of all his lessons, there will be one that he will love above the rest. To hunt, for the prince, will be to live. And in concert with prophesy, when he lies in the nest of night, on the rough skein of a hillside, awaiting lion or stag, he will feel the skies lean down to him in their bright and solemn configuration. He will hear the ancient counsel of their voices and he will listen to their guidance as they speak of unfavourable paths. For many are the paths which must not be taken.

"Great will be Prince Ma'tar's prizes. And his renown as a hunter will swell.

"All this is known. All this will follow from prophesy.

"And yet...

"As the prince begins his second decade, he will still not have know the solace of a true friend.

"It may be the glory of his brilliance. It may be the weakness of human memory. But despite every promise, despite every oath and vow taken in the happy year of Prince Ma'tar's birth... despite the hope ferried into the world with his being... discontent is ever the flower of man. Always will there be those whose most ardent desire is imprisoned in the house of resentment. By the time the prince will come within reach of the borders of manhood, his successes will have found their balance in the whispers and sneers of those awaiting his failure. He has been raised too high, they will claim. He burns too bright. He is courting the displeasure of the gods. He will draw their wrath upon us all.

"And there will be those, crouched in the shadow of the palace, who will be heard to say in hushed tones that the true destiny of the prince was to raise his flag upon the pain of the common man.

"These sentiments will not long go unnoticed by the court. And harried by his own concern, the Sultan will order new protections to be cast in place. In his wisdom, he will be wary of supporting the poisonous ends of poisonous tongues. And he will be wary of drawing a blind over his son. And so he will entrust his orders to those who are accustomed to the encumbrance of discretion. The changes that follow the soft footsteps of his orders will be given the time and care they need to remain hidden from the people of the streets. The new guards whose duty it is to watch over the prince will take up service in the guise of servants within the Garden of Bells. The old gardeners and the cooks and grooms that Prince Ma'tar grew to know and love since his infancy will bow before him with sadness in their hearts; they will make their excuses, and one by one, they will drift away. Thickening in their place, the prince will grow to know more formidable and a sterner lot of attendants.

"Prince Ma'tar will understand these changes as a weight in his chest. A weight exerted through the loss of those small moments and memories we share with those we love – not for who they are to us, but for who they are in themselves."

The Beast licked his lips and stared dourly at the girl. She hurried on.

"Prince Ma'tar will sense the cold distant breath of unease, as one might hear a shadow. He will seek for a cause. For answers. To begin, he will seek within – in his studies and in his keen awareness of life and people and the flow of time through the Garden of Bells. He will try to trick answers from his teachers and he will set snares for those who serve him. But the prince will find his world surrounding him as a labyrinth of unseen layers. He will brood upon what he cannot change or uproot. He will brood upon this for a year.

"And then he will start to seek without.

"Now, every year, as you may know, a great race is run to the Impossible Tree in the Mountains of Shaal. These being the Mountains that cradle the Striped Hills, which in turn cradle the city of Khubbin."

The Beast squinted and blew at a whisker.

"The race is long and arduous. Some fall crossing the plains and some fall in the Striped Hills and many fall in the mountains themselves. Few are those who finish, but great is the glory. The winner of the race to the Impossible

Tree is carried high upon a litter through the streets of Khubbin. In the Plaza of Triangles, where the four main ways of the city meet, a mighty feast is held. It is a time for music and chanting and jest and for the taking of sweetmeats and wine. The winner's name is carved upon the Broken Wall – where it can be read alongside the names of winners since the time of the first race, held in the age of Khebbet al Malm, he who was known as the Pale Man.

"In his fourteenth year, Prince Ma'tar will announce, with bright eyes, his intention to join this great race to the Impossible Tree. And the next morning, he will ride out upon his horse and follow the path and learn what he can of the branchings in the Painted Hills. Upon returning to the city, he will visit the gymnasiums and seek those who train their bodies in preparation for the trial of the race. And it is in one of these gymnasiums, in the Hall of Yellum, that he will meet Daud and Nura.

"Daud and Nura, two youths of high birth, fair of face and limb will speak to the prince of the race and of its cruelties. The young man and young woman will tell how they each have gained the Impossible Tree, but how neither have known victory. They will caution the prince – on the cost in hardships of the run and of the climb. They will tell him of the dry hours on the desert plains, of the deceptive labyrinth of the Painted Hills and of the rare air and the sheer falls and of the beasts of the Mountains of Shaal.

"The prince will hear them to say: 'You must not run this race, your grace. For it is too dangerous. It is too taxing of the limbs and the spirit. You must consider your people and their love for you. And of the great sadness that would fall upon the land should you be hurt, or should you be lost.'

"The prince will laugh and say: 'And what then of the rejoicing, should I be found?'

"Prince Ma'tar will listen to Daud and Nura and to the trainers and veterans of the race. And he will learn. He will ready his body and mind for the trial. And he will grow in confidence and in contentment.

"But in the palace, a new cloud is to fall upon the Prince's father. His ancient servant and trusted adviser, Kamer Hass, will feel moved to words under the compulsion of his loyalty to the Sultan. And so the old sorcerer will come to share his forboding with his sire. 'The race was not prophesied,' he will warn. 'For one granted such a future in gifts as our ever-blessed Prince, the gods may look upon this zeal, upon this seeking of yet more, as an act ungracious. The tracks of the wise move at the pace of a slow river; a river which builds as it flows to the thick flood and the kiss of the ocean.'

"The Sultan will listen with reluctant ears and worry in his breast. He will go to the prince's mother, the Sultana Sala, and he will apply to her for her counsel. 'We must stop him,' he will say. 'We must beseech him to forsake it.' The Sultana will smile sadly. She will remind the Sultan Mehl of his own passion when he was on the doorstep of manhood. She will remind him of the strength of the boy's will; and of his progress in his other studies and training. 'If you deny him this,' she will caution, 'you will take some of the joy from his life. You will take choice from him. Choice is the engine of his heart and he has always chosen true. If you sow compulsion in its place, all that will grow will come to stifle him.'

"The Sultan will listen and he will hear the truth of Sultana Sala's words. But as he leaves her chambers, he will feel a darkness, as of ten

thousand leaves falling across the window of his soul.

"On the morning of the race, the sun will ride its steady course into the blue shell of the heavens. A faint breeze will carry the sigh of dust across the open plains between the city of Khubbin and the Painted Hills. The marshals of the city are to be busying themselves with the arrangements for the evening feast. Atop the walls of the city, the spyglasses have been installed. And those fortunate enough to have earned the favour of the court will climb the narrow stairs and be shown to their viewing places. Through the glasses, the Impossible Tree can be seen reaching, as though in defiance of its own nature, from the bare rock of the mountain peaks.

"In ones and twos the competitors come to gather at the Gate of Bones. Their hearts will fill with morning air and with joy and with trepidation as they jest together, in brags and teasing and gentle honesty.

"And when the waiting is over, when the Sultana Sala opens the cage of doves and as the throb of their wings mark the air, the race will begin.

"The traditions tell us that the span of the race between the first and second stations is fastest run. And it will be so in this year. The pace will be set by Shem the Quiet, his long, fluid limbs propelling him across the baked sand, closing the distance to the other side in loose, gulping strides. The runners will stream out from the Gate of Bones and onto the patient, nameless sand of the desert. And after twenty, after sixty cords have been run, the pack will begin to stretch, each runner judging and fighting the demands of their own limits; each searching for that place within themselves that could be something more. Soon the pack is a chain; a script of writhing letters, dancing across the vast page of the desert. It has been often so. And will be so again.

"Each runner feels the hot point of the sun above them. Each feels the packed sand and the yellow clay of the plains beneath them. Down the sun bears. Down on the line of runners, where mouths and tongues grow sticky and dry for want of the touch of water.

"The first station, is midway in the crossing to the Painted Hills. And here at the first sation, the runners are to be allowed one cup: a single cup of water. It is the last water they are to receive, before either the finish is gained, or their retirement might be announced.

"On across the desert they run. On they push upon each other to hold sight of the front runners. And as they meet the punishment of distance, the prince and his friends must reach down into the well of their strength. They clench to their will and feed it to their bodies as they try to remember the world beyond them. The world through their pain. As they prove to remind themselves that this pain or one very like is what those before them and behind them must also feel.

"Thirst will await them as they come within sight of the second station, folded into the toes of the Painted Hills and known as the Kneeling. Thirst will cry to them confused and abandoned. For four hours now, they have been running. And the single cup of water has long been returned to the world through the sweat of their bodies. Why? Thirst will demand. Why this?

"But on they must go if they are to be gathered beneath the wing of history. On into the gullies and branchings of the Painted Hills the runners must pass. There, the sweet curtain of shade from the overhanging rocks drapes itself over labouring limbs. It is a fleeting relief before

the confusion of paths that greets the runners makes yet further demands of the now guttering flame of their attention. For the ways of the Painted Hills open and shut in the march of shadows. A red rock is yellow now. An opening is now a wall of stone. It is whispered amongst those who claim to know, that the better paths will close their mouths to all but those of spirit true.

"An hour of labour is demanded by the Painted Hills. An hour where the serpents of the hills wait beneath baking rocks and taste the air with milky tongues. It is an hour too much for some. The dry beds of the streams and gullies, through which torrents flow in the time of rains, will bare teeth of shist and granite that tear at the bare flesh of feet. For every two that enter the Hills, only one finds the fortitude and fortune to leave as a runner.

"Within the labyrinth of the forking ways, the three friends are to separate. Daud is to choose his way sure and slow. Nura turns onto the path of the Crooked Hand, steep, quick and dear. The prince has not the luxury of time to make his choice. And on this three hundred and tenth day of his fourteenth year, a young man's ambition will claim rule over his caution. He will turn with Nura to the itching promise of the Crooked Hand.

"Short is the way of the Crooked Hand, but hard and thick with traps for the unwary. Loose shards of stone ride over a bedrock that hooks and swallows. The jaded senses of the runners become mesmerised by the seething ground. Every pace is a gamble, every footfall an act of faith. By the time that Nura and Prince Ma'tar gain the mountain face, they are to be led only by Shem the Quiet. But the path will have drawn its cost in sinew and in fight. Not even left the breath for words remains as the touch of the coarse rock of the mountainside is first felt.

"Few runners are those who come before this last stage of the race. Not more than a dozen will have won their way to the mountain, by luck, or by guile, or by might. The treacherous wall of Mount A'ell will rise before Nura and Prince Ma'tar. The cry of the prince's body will shout loud in the ears of his soul. It screams, it begs that its ordeal be over.

"But above, still far above, the prince knows there waits the proud writhing of the Impossible Tree. In the eye of his mind he sees its branches black and vivid against the light; like a claw clasped to the deep blue of the midday sky.

"Up. And up.

"Upon the face of Mount A'ell, the runners become climbers. Now stooping, now crawling, now drawing bodies onward with hands and torn fingers and the faith of muscles. Those who know the race, will know to rest. Those who are towed by the call of victory will know they cannot rest for long.

"Ahead, a mere five cords, of Nura and the prince climbs Shem, the Quiet, within sight of the Spider's Edge and stalking his second victory. But alas, it is here that Shem is to miss his grip. In a moment he is before them, and in a moment he is not. His fall is as silent as his name.

"Over and above the Spider's Edge, the last span of sheer, Prince Ma'tar and Nura will arrive upon their knees. Their bodies collapsing onto the warm, smooth pleateau of the summit. And it is while the prince lies pinned to the ground by exhaustion, that he hears the voice. He will hear it as a whisper, as an urgent hush. It is not known if it is the sky, or the mountain, or another thing. It calls to him. It is a call to an ancient fight, that became a vision; and must become a fight again.

"'Up', he hears the whisper, 'Up.'

"Drawing himself to his feet, Prince Ma'tar will hear a new sound and this the bright song of the Tree, hymn to the fierce cost of life. And alongside this tone and tune, as though arriving from another world, the scrape and sigh of rock near the Spider's Edge. He knows it is not Nura, though he knows Nura too, is on her feet. Another climber has approached the lip. And knowledge will bark in the prince: It is Daud.

"And the prince will understand relief. And he will understand rivalry.

"Prince Mat'ar will feel the hot breath of defeat closing upon him. He knows he must drive forward. And yet the obediance of his legs has become uncertain. He pulls himself towards the tree. Step after agonising step. Three paces, he will take. He will take ten and twenty paces.

"And then he will hear the scream."

The Beast raised its head, and the girl flattered herself that she saw something like hope in its eye.

"Prince Ma'tar will turn to see a yellow hide and striking paws upon Nura. His eyes will clot as jaws sink into the flesh of her shoulder. As Nura drops to her knees under the weight of the animal the prince will see the naked red of Nura's blood free on the rock of A'ell.

"It is said the soul is a mystery. And if so, can the human body be any less of one? How is it that the pull of love can be greater than the pull of ambition? See as the Prince dashes to the

yawning edge where Nura's arms flail against the lion's grip. See as he throws himself with a leap onto the creature's back. His ragged fingernails will be to him as claws as he seeks the beast's eyes.

"Out. Out to the brink of the Spider's Edge, the prince and the lion will roll. But the cat's strength is to be more than the prince's aching limbs can hold or withstand. Above him the dark, golden body rises. He is to see a face crowned in the glory of the sun as a thick paw lifts and as flashing claws gleam.

"And it is then that Prince Ma'tar will hear the fall of steps from somewhere inside the giddy prance of time. And he will know that help is near. That Daud is near. The prince does understand that his friend has stumbled then. He only understands that the lion is no longer upon him. Prince Mat'ar will search about him with eyes that had lost all hope for seeing.

"He looks up and out.

"And he feels the cold, irreversible desolation of fate as he sees Daud carry the lion across the lip of the Spider's Edge.

"Down. Down like dolls they will fall.

"Down to where rock makes no bargains."

The girl paused and looked about the cavern. The Beast seemed confused for a moment. "Are you finished now?" it asked.

The girl met those dark eyes that spoke a language unknown to the heart. "Perhaps you wish I were?" she suggested. "Or perhaps you do not." The Beast's face remained still and expressionless.

"It is not long now," said the girl.

"On their return, the flooded river of palace life will make for Prince Ma'tar and Nura an island in its midst. Numb with their wounding, they will be sequestered in the Garden of Bells. In the morning and evening of every day, Kamer Hass will make visitation. He will tug his beard and rub the lines of his eyes and opening his satchel he will attend to the two injured friends, applying salves and tinctures to their wounds and making sure of their bindings. Soon after this, family and friends will begin to pass and gather in the prince's chambers and the silent days will be filled with the words of kindnesse. And yet it will be observed that a melancholy has taken its lodging behind the eyes of the prince, a distance from a world he once loved.

"One evening, some ten days after the events of the race, the sound of distant drumming will reach the Garden of Bells. As it grows in loudness the drumming will be joined with the tinkling of chimes and the twang of oud and lute. Word will arrive to the Prince Mat'ar and Nura that the Merry Mice have reached the city; and that they are making their way to the Garden of Bells. And before the two friends can say what this means, the courtyard will flood with sound and colour. The strongman will be the first to enter, carrying upon his shoulders a donkey. Jugglers and tumblers and the spring and dance of minstrels will spill out their glee in mockery of the dying day. Conjurers will draw dreams from the air. Ostrich riders and stewards of snakes and makers of music will circle the square. And bowing before the prince, in the stately robes of high office, the director of jollities, one Janus Cantalabulanda will make his introduction.

"The court of Sultan Mehl will flock to the Garden of Bells and take seats upon the ground and laugh in confusion and wonder. The Merry Mice will begin with tales, and their tales will melt into lay, and their lays will flower into song, songs that call upon the stars as jugglers throw fire at the night sky.

"For the full span of the moon's emptying will the Mice enliven the nights of all who are their audience. And when the epic of Castor and Mai'a has been recited in full, when the Ballad of the Men of Winter has been sung, when at last, the tale of the Widow who married the Sea has been related, the morning will dawn where only silence is known in the Garden of Bells. To where the Merry Mice have journeyed, and to when they might again visit the city of Khubbin, no one will know to say. But tales and song and joy leave their seeds. Though some lie long beneath the soil.

"After two moons have passed from the day of the race the wounds of Prince Ma'tar and Nura's bodies will have healed. And yet, despite the distractions and ministrations of all who care for him, a deeper hurt will have sown itself in the prince's breast. For the first time since his birth, he will know doubt. It will manifest in the care he pays to his lessons and in the evasion he shows in his dealings with those dear to him. Riding out onto desert sands he will spend long nights alone beneath the cold muttering of the stars. The taste of who he must be will become sour to him. Though he makes himself available to ceremony and to his public duties, his spirit will be elsewhere.

"And it is as autumn draws fruit from the branch, that Nura will bring news to Prince Ma'tar of a lion. Sighted by shepherds, upon the mountain, high on the back of Mount A'ell. A creature. Some say a mother. Some say a child of the beast that assailed them on the day of the race. Some say it is the same cat, survived its fall and hungry still for human flesh.

"Prince Ma'tar and Nura are to make fast preparation. The prince straps his bow to his back. He takes his hunting spear, Tusk, and he will walk slowly to the house of his father. And he will make abeyance before the Sultan that his plea be heard:

"'Honoured father, I request your blessing to seek retribution for the loss of my friend.'

"The Sultan will crease his brow, for he will feel the trouble and hurt his son has endured as his own trouble and hurt.

"His words will be soft: 'My son, if you do this thing, will it bring you solace?'

"And the prince shall answer: 'It will father.'

"The Sultan will remind his son: 'It is known that when we follow rage and pain to bring an end to rage and pain, we often double our store.'

"And the prince shall bow deep and say: 'I will remember father. But neither can I forget the honour and courage of my friend, who gave his life for mine. It is for him now that I do this thing.'

"The Sultan will place his hand on his son's head. 'Go my son,' he will say, 'Go. It is my wish for you to learn that it is only the strongest of men that can build a space for peace in the heart of their rage.'

"And so Prince Ma'tar and Nura will ride forth for the Mountains of Shaal and so they will commence a new climb into the treacherous folds of Mount A'ell.

"For three days they will stalk the creature. On the third day, Nura's arrow, sleek and true is to find the lion's haunch. Limping and confused, their quarry will draw itself to higher ground and into the peaks of the mountain. And on the eve of fourth day of the hunt, Prince Ma'tar will corner the beast against a wall of rock. With a fierce roar the lion pounces. The prince raises Tusk to the descending breast. And he weeps at the creature's last shudder and at the stream of blood that flows along the haft of his spear to soak his trembling hands."

In the cavern the girl sensed the Beast's breathing had become quiet. Its entire presence seemed to have wrapped itself in silence. She grew aware of it as a sincerity of absence, cold and lonely. She listened to the persistent sweat of the cavern. The tinkle and dribble and of moisture, ever gathering, ever pooling, ever falling, drop after slow drop from the dark walls of rock.

The girl found her words again, soft, almost hushed alongside the shy music of the water.

"Prince Ma'tar and Nura will return to the city of Khubbin and to great rejoycing. The lion's skin will be dried and stretched. And prayers will be sung to the memory of Daud as the beast's pelt is mounted on the walls of the council chamber in the Garden of Bells.

"And yet. The peace that Prince Mat'ar longs for in his heart remains absent to him.

"By the turn of the next moon, he is to appear again before his father. And he makes his new report. Another lion has been sighted, further north along the line of the mountains. Again he will request his father's permission to hunt the creature. And again, his father will speak of his reluctance. 'You are a man now and your passion is strong. And this is good. You are a man and your heart is strong. And this is good. For the heart is greatest forest – many are its paths and deep are its mysteries. I urge you to listen to the counsel of your heart. I urge to consider whether or not the path you choose now is the better one followed.'

"The prince will bow low to his father's wisdom and he will speak these words:

"'Father, I have looked into my heart and I have found darkness there. I give it the names Fear and Loss. I sense that darkness dwells in the hearts of all people. But it is only when I look through my own heart that I can truly see those of others. And so it is I believe, that the more we pretend it nothing, the quicker the darkeness becomes. I do this thing today, that I would face my self. That I would step outside the fear of my fear.'

"And held in the vice of love and pride, the Sultan will concede to his son's wishes.

"Into the mountains to the north, Prince Ma'tar and Nura will ride. When the way becomes steep, they will walk. And when the mountain demands it, they will tie their mounts and climb. Upon a thick table of rock they come to face the creature they seek. The lion does not run. For it knows not the dangers of man. It walks to them, as though to a wounded animal. It opens its mouth in a roar. And two arrows will find its throat.

"The third lion is to be a white lion; white as the snow that dresses the crowns of the highest peaks.

"The fourth will wear a golden mane. Its last cry will fill the sky with tears.

"And it is after two years have passed, that Prince Ma'tar and Nura will hear of the Beast."

The Beast twitched an eyebrow and allowed it to hover between interest and a frown. The girl drew a breath and let her voice rise.

"The Great Curse, Mansbane, a creature known only through the whispers of its cruelty and its cunning. In the depths of the Fell Cauldron, it is said to dwell. But none live who can claim to truly know. For it is a thing never to have been sighted by human eyes. It is known: men that tread too near the rim of the Fell Cauldron will vanish. Yae, and women too. It is known: the corpses of animals, strayed and butchered, speak of a strength and malice beyond the sight of lion or bear or of serpent.

"The Prince will not go before his father. He does not speak of his intent to any other

than Nura. And on the Eve of Sorrows, when the people break their fasting and when feasting is thick about the city of Khubbin, the prince and Nura will ride out into the dark. North they ride and east along the Mountains of Shaal. They push through the hours of night. And they will make their camp each morning in the oasis of its first light.

"Thirteen nights in this way will they travel. They will enter no town. They ride wide, cloaking themselves in the gloom, to circle the small watch fires of the caravans they pass.

"The morning of the thirteenth day will take them to the village of Rezech, high and white-walled on the slopes of the mountains. And in the village of Rezech they will ride to the market place where its people move in the easy bustle of morning. And the prince will cast out his voice: 'Who among you is brave enough to guide two travellers to the Fell Cauldron?'

"The people of the village will look up and they will laugh. A man with hair red like the setting sun will stand forth and speak for the multitude. 'It is not a brave man, but a fool you seek.'

"Prince Ma'tar will shake his head. 'No,' he will say, 'I seek a man, who will name his price.' And with this, he drops a heavy purse of coins onto the worn flagstones of the market. The open gleam of the gold shouts of riches that the town of Rezech have only heard tell of in the stories told to children. And still the people will stand away. And they will lower their heads with the weight of all they cannot tell.

"The prince and Nura will sit astride their horses and look upon the muted crowd. And when the time has almost passed for hoping they are to see a sharp head move from behind a fig tree. A young and narrow man approaches the purse. 'It is lucky for you noble sir,' he will say with a grin, 'that a fool is never very far away.' The narrow young man will bend and lift a gold piece. He will turn it under his scar-lined eye and give it to the taste of his mouth. And when he is satisfied, he will say: 'You have found just a one. I will guide you to the rim of the Fell Cauldron. But mark, I will not stray within.' A ripple of a thing like horror and disgust is to flow through the village. Yea, and anger too.

"Prince Ma'tar will smile and he will ask: 'And who are you, who is to act as our guide?'

"As the young man of the village lifts the purse, he will say, 'My name is Lûm,' and he will accompany his words with a bow. 'It is an honour to make your acquaintance.'

"And so Lûm, lithe and steady, will lead Prince Ma'tar and Nura into the mountains. The peaks lift and the valleys grow deep and dark and the warmth of the sun's eye takes to hiding from the three explorers. On and further, Lûm will lead them, following paths through winding gullies and climbing stairs of rock. He speaks to them stories of animals and rivers and of the small victories he has won over them. And at last it is with a hushed voice, as they draw nearer the Cauldron, that he paints its clouded picture for Nura and the prince. He tells them of an unknown land in the heart of the mountains where no peaks are seen to rise. Of the surrounding crags that mark its boundaries. Of how some have attempted to breach those boundaries. And how none have returned. And as the shadows draw around them, cold and certain, his silence will teach them what his words cannot.

"Five days they are to travel from the village of Rezech into the mountains. And it is at the foot of a curtain wall where a cliff slants over their heads as it climbs – it is there, under the

shade of the rim of the Fell Cauldron that Lûm confides with lowered eyes that he can proceed no further.

"'We must make camp before the dark grows fat,' he urges. 'I turn back when we awaken.' He shakes his head solemnly and confesses: 'I would that you do the same.'

"Prince Ma'tar looks to Nura. And together they will look towards the towering wave of rock before them, rising like a terrible warning. And beyond it, what? A wasteland of stone? They feel the uncaring majesty of that cold and forbidden land. And beating outward, unseen, but as real as a seed is to a fruit, they feel the dread will at its centre. Prince Ma'tar will smile an empty smile. And he will know another loss. This time it is the loss of choice. For he knows only that he must go on.

"It is after they have worked the poles of their tents into what clefts and cracks they can find in a floor of stone. It is after they have cast the skins over the arcing frames of bamboo. It is in the last cough of the sun, that it begins. And it will begin with the scream of horses. Those low and sturdy animals will raise their throats to the sky. Fear and panic will be their goad. They tear at their tethers and they roll their eyes, bulging and bloodshot. Lost to the gift of terror; that gift granted to them aeons ago by the firmest hand of nature.

"The prince and Nura will turn about them in confusion. They look to the heights. They look to the depths of the shadows. They turn to Lûm and there they see the flesh of their guide's face bleed white. They see his frozen eyes stare at a sight through them and beyond them.

"As has been the way since life knew power, it is in the confusion of a moment that the strong gather the harvest of the weak. A flurry of motion, a thick coat matted and reeking and the glint that speaks the language of blades: here teeth and now claws and now the edge of a ravenous eye.

"For Prince Ma'tar, it is to be a quick blow to the side of the head. The sickening crack of his skull will not have even the time to reach his own ears. As Lûm turns to run, a blur of motion buckles one of his legs. Collapsing, he tumbles, down along the sloping sheet of rock, where the bright tents lie empty. Nura will look up. And she will see a gap where the world should be. And within the gap, she sees eyes of fire. She sees jaws open, a pit within a pit. She understands that neither pain, nor death are the final punishments of existence. And when the nothing without her calls to a nothing within her, she will relinquish the reins of consciousness. Her last thought is to be cushioned in a strange grace, the glad realisation that she will no longer feel a thing."

The Beast stared at the girl from where it lay. Its head was tilted to the side. "I fear you have weaved yourself a noose my dear," it said. It's voice was low and throaty.

"The story is not over," said the girl.

"Oh no? Somehow I feel I know how it ends..."

The girl observed a subtle change in the texture of the light around the tunnel that led out of the cavern. It was barely a wisp, not even a wave. "Are you so confident you haven't something forgotten?" the girl met the Beast's eyes.

"Be quite certain, little one. I never forget," the Beast growled. "But, seeing as we have come all this way, let's have your... rendition..."

The girl bowed.

"The girl, Nura, will awake in the cave of the Beast. She will awake to find herself alone and bound. Her mind clasps at the walls of her predicament. She knows not what has become

of her companions…"

"Do you want to?" prodded the Beast.

The girl hurried on, her breath becoming short, "She will know that all she can do is to try to win time. And even as she sees the body of her guide torn apart she tells the Beast her tale. The tale of a prince and a race and a quest for retribution that became poiosoned by a quest for vengance."

The girl paused and looked up. There was a faint brush of air and again she saw the merest shift in the light towards the mouth of the cave. She looked to the Beast and could feel the sheer peaks of its understanding, as though they were the mountains themselves.

"And it is after the girl's tale winds its way to its end…"

A figure stepped inside the neck of the cavern entrance. A boy that was almost a man. His hair was black and loose at his shoulders. His skin was the colour of wet sand and he carried a spear in one hand.

The girl continued. "As the Beast's hunger grows, and as hope fades like wax before a flame, Prince Ma'tar will step into its lair."

The boy that was almost a man stood still and silent.

"The prince will place his spear in front of him."

The boy that was almost a man held his spear in both hands and laid it on the floor of the cave.

"Then he will take his bow of bone from his back…"

The prince unhitched his bow from where it hung.

"And he will break it in two."

The boy paused and gazed in doubt at his bow. The man that he was soon to be brought the bow in front of him. He raised his knee. In one smooth motion, he snapped the bow over it.

The girl's voice was hushed in the quiet that followed. "And the prince will kneel in submission upon the ground."

The boy that was now a man drew a breath. He lowered himself to his knees and leant forward until his forehead touched the stone beneath him.

The girl looked at the Beast and saw a sour delight gathering upon its face.

"And what will happen then?"

"The Beast will wait no longer. For it will have tired of games and tales. It will start with her eyes."

The girl's voice grew stronger.

"Then the heart. It will rip open her ribcage like the strings of a corset. Then the liver, then the lungs, and the kidneys. The flesh of her rump, her thighs and her loins. Then her breasts and arms and her shoulders. And then her sweet… wet… brain."

The Beast stared at the girl. She looked into its eyes and went on.

"For last, it will leave the tongue. That sweet tongue that can weave and has weaved such melodious lies.

The Beast let out a long, slow breath.

"And then it will be over," said Nura.

It gazed in soft puzzlement at her. At her eyes, now closed and at her throat, bare. At the unbidden shiver of her skin. An odd stroke of contentment fought its way into the wastes of its soul – a sense of curiosity it remembered from a time long ago, a time before experience and hunger had fixed the answers to every question.

A sound like the world was fizzing rose gently in the space of the cavern. For outside, it had begun to rain.

And while breath came and went in the

Beast's lungs, this sound was all it knew.

For a time that was unreckonable, the Beast awaited the return of the malice that it cherished and survived by. It remembered lessons once, when daring and desire were its teachers, so long now, so very long ago. It remembered how it learned of the stupidity of the world around it and of its leeching brutes. And the anger. The anger it felt towards so many lessers, so many weak, so weak. The Beast remembered the power that had run through it as it came to know its own nature. How it grew in strength until nothing dwelled above it, and nothing below. How many ages had passed since it had been sole ruler of these mountains and caverns? How long was it ago when it had first understood that the only art it respected was its own? How long was it ago, since it had been given pause by the doubt of something new? Could the same forces that had forged it, forge another to a different shape? To a different nature?

The Beast looked down upon the crown of the girl kneeling before it. It suspected, with not a small measure of dismay, that it was experiencing the itch of sympathy. It was not a comfortable feeling.

It tried to remember when last it had surprised itself. And found it could not. It waited and it listened to the beat of its own pulse and to the tide of its breath.

Then the Beast reached forward with a claw and touched, gently, the cuff that bound the girl. The manacle clicked softly open.

The animal turned and walked a number of paces from her.

"Go quickly."

The girl's eyes opened wide. With careful hands she lifted herself to her feet. She turned and walked to the young man and she took his hands and drew him to standing. Together they walked from the cavern. Together they walked down the winding tunnel to the cave entrance. And together they passed out through its mouth.

They did not hesitate.

They walked out into the rain and the into the light.

They looked before them. To the untold story of their future. ❖

"Encrypted"

by TIMOTHY FALASCA

In her castle that morning, Lady Christine Ambrose sat at her desk, with fountain pen in hand and parchment before her, and she wrote her message to the future. Who, if anyone, would find it? And even if some rare and exceptional mind did discover it, would that one have the passion and the courage to act upon Christine's instructions? She would learn the answer that afternoon.

For hours she wrote, careful to neglect no detail crucial to the success of her plan. When satisfied with her letter, she opened her desk drawer and removed other pages covered with diagrams, charts, illustrations, and maps, and she added them to her manuscript. She rolled the sheets of parchment and placed the bundle in a copper canister, and she sealed the lid with wax.

Carrying the canister, Christine ascended the spiral stairway of the castle's tower. Through the arches of the small upper room, she viewed the street beyond the castle grounds, where horse-drawn carriages passed the church. The church bells rang to announce noon, and Christine had one hour left to complete her preparations.

She returned to the stairwell, descended five steps, and turned to her right to face the interior curved wall. During the past several days, she had labored to remove a stone block from the wall just above the step—an easy task by no means. But perseverance rewarded her with success. Afterward, she modified the block and placed it back on the step, off to one side. Two pails also rested on the steps, one filled with water and the other with a mixture of cement powder and sand. Within reach were masonry tools, rags, and a sponge.

It required fifteen minutes, as she had estimated, to hide the canister in the wall and seal the modified block back in place. Afterward, she carried all the items downstairs and placed them in a utility closet. She then bathed, dressed, and once again climbed the winding steps to the small observatory room at the top of the tower, where she waited a few minutes until the church bells rang again to announce one o-clock.

In the center of the room, from nothing, a young man materialized.

#

As Eric Helvig strolled into the science wing lobby of Manhattan University, a subtle tone in his earpiece alerted him to an incoming communication. He tapped the side of his eyewear. In the upper left corner of his lens display, under the 'history' category, a global-net newsfeed appeared—an update about a castle discovered in northern Italy. Eric stepped into an express lift with nine other students. The doors shut, and they whisked up the tube to the physics level on the seventeenth floor. Barely audible,

he said, "Play video." The media began.

"Last month, highway construction workers in Turin, Italy discovered a building which had apparently been covered by a landslide over two hundred years ago."

The lift doors opened, and Eric entered a corridor.

"Excavators have finally cleared the building of the debris, excited to find that it is actually a small castle."

He turned into an adjacent hallway.

"Historians have learned that the estate was originally built in 1846 by Signore Ciro Pavone from Milan, and in 1912 it was purchased by an English noblewoman, Lady Christine Ambrose."

At his classroom, Eric paused the feed. He would finish it later.

Professor Morrow looked up from his monitor as Eric entered the room. With a gesture, the professor beckoned Eric to him.

"What is this?" He pointed to the display screen.

With a glance, Eric recognized his own work. "A proposal for energy generation."

"We'll get to that in a minute. But my question right now is not about the subject of your report. It's about how you've presented it. This is a physics class, Mr. Helvig, not English or literature. We don't write in prose. We write in arithmetic. But where is your math?" He pointed. "Besides these seven lines here...and at high school level. And these symbols? What are they?"

Eric stumbled over his reply. "They represent physical quantities that don't exist in our current math."

Professor Morrow raised his eyebrows. "Don't exist? Are you certain? Not in Thallius or 2E-Symmetrid or even in SEETA? Or is it that you simply don't know they exist, because your math skills are just above failing?"

"Yes sir, my math is weak."

"It's deplorable."

"That's why I wrote it all out. I described the physics with words instead of math."

"But how did you arrive at your conclusions?"

So...the moment had finally come. Eric could postpone it no longer. He must explain himself. "I don't make conclusions, sir. I make observations."

The professor tilted his head. "What exactly do you observe, Eric?"

Eric drew a deep breath. "I..."

He checked his surroundings. He had never told anyone about this except his father, when he was fourteen. His father did not believe him. He did not think Eric had lied, but he thought Eric suffered from some form of psychosis. So, Eric kept quiet about it from then on. But now, in this case, given the planet's crisis, Eric needed to tell Professor Morrow. He needed the professor to understand, so he could believe that Eric's proposal was credible.

He lowered his voice. "I have...a gift."

A moment of uncomfortable silence followed.

"Do you?"

"Yes, sir."

More silence.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

Eric raised his head and met the professor's inquisitive gaze. He balked a few times. Finally, he said, "I can visualize quantum physics."

Professor Morrow blinked several times. "You have visions?"

"Not visions, sir, but visualizations...in my mind, my understanding. Somehow, I have receptors that react to stimuli from the quantum

realm. It's difficult to explain."

"Oh, I'm certain it is."

"For example, I can see atoms—even individual electrons."

"Come on, Eric!"

"Not with optical vision, but with other sensors I can't explain. I can detect objects even smaller than that—into the subatomic levels. I observe particles. Some have shapes I can't describe. Others are immaterial energy parcels. I see the aura of gravity, magnetism, and molecular attraction. Each type of aura has its own color, but not of the spectrum our eyes detect."

"New colors? Really?"

Eric nodded. "Why not? They are simply wave-lengths detected by our eyes and converted into color within our minds. Couldn't the same process happen with sub-atomic wave-lengths detected by different types of receptors?"

The professor kept quiet. Eventually, he shrugged.

"Of course," Eric continued, "there are features of the quantum realm that are extremely challenging to describe. Imbalances and irregularities which cause…chaos or agitation." He shook his head. "Those words don't accurately describe it, but we have no established terminology to explain what I see. We night call them storms, perhaps, but not like our atmospheric systems organized around a central eye. Subatomic storms move in all directions at once, including temporal movement."

"Through time?"

"Yes. Theoretically, all instants of time exist simultaneously, which could allow for some specialized passage between the time dimensions."

"But why theoretically, Eric?" Professor Morrow grinned. "If you can truly see quantum activity, then you should know without question."

"True, but I've spent very little time observing temporal activity. I'm not interested in that. It serves no purpose for me. But given that there are so many different types and sizes of sub-atomic storms constantly producing energy on all levels of the quantum universe… that's what I focus on primarily. And that's how I discovered a practical method of generating energy."

"Okay, Eric," the professor settled back in his chair, "let's suppose these storms are true. Then what are they made of? Storms of what? There's no atmosphere in the subatomic world. There's only vacuum."

"No sir, there is no vacuum. There is substance, although, again, that's an imperfect description. But there is a flow, a tide so to speak."

"Dark energy?"

Eric shrugged. "No matter what it is or what we call it, it's the solution to our energy crisis."

Professor Morrow shook his head. "Certainly, you can't expect me to believe this, Eric. You have a vivid imagination, and perhaps even hallucinations."

"Please, sir…" Eric did not want to go through this again, especially not now. "I need you to believe me. Humanity…humanity needs you to believe me." He paused to contain his exasperation. "I have extra senses. And…you don't understand that—of course you don't. I don't even understand it. But I'm as sure of it as you are of your five senses. When you feel heat, or see a sunrise, hear laughter, taste a lemon, or smell coffee, you don't doubt what your senses perceive. You're certain of it."

"Alright." The professor tipped his head. "I'll try to keep an open mind. So then, you see it all. In your own special way, you discern all the activity of quantum mechanics. And you're

sure of it. Okay. So, in your proposal, you assert that quantum activity can be manipulated to create useable energy in ways far greater than it naturally does. But how can you observe this manipulation if it doesn't occur naturally? You say you can visualize quantum activity, but you certainly can't experiment with it, so how do you know it will react as you claim? In quantum physics, the results of experiments are often very different than expected—bizarre even. You can't just assume a reaction."

"That's a valid point, Professor. And the best way to describe my work is that it's done in two stages. First, I collect data, as much information from the quantum realm as I possibly can. I soak in it, absorb it: particles, energy, motion, actions, interactions, reactions, and other activity I can't describe. But, as you can imagine, it's far too much to process, and it's too much to remember. But…it's all up here," he tapped his temple, "in my subconscious mind, even if I can't consciously recall it. But I have another skill that allows me to access my subconscious mind whenever I need to."

"Do you, now? Another skill?"

"I've mastered the art of lucid dreaming."

The professor tapped his fingernails on the desktop. "Help me out here, Eric. I'm not too familiar it."

"Lucid dreaming is dream-control. We all dream every night, but we aren't aware that we're dreaming. In our dreams, we always accept them as real, no matter how strange they are. But lucid dreamers know it's not real. They know they're dreaming. It's an extremely rare talent, but it's a legitimate skill that can be improved and mastered over time. It takes a lot of mental discipline. Nineteenth-century Tibetan monks, for example, were masters of the art. I, too, have mastered it."

"But what good is it?"

"Its most important use is finding solutions to problems. Dreams happen in our subconscious minds. So, if we know we're dreaming—if we're lucid—then we could deliberately access vast stores of information from our subconsciousness, information we can't recall when we're conscious. And within those discoveries, we may find the answers we seek. When the skill is mastered, a lucid dreamer can recall any information that has ever registered in his mind, from any of the senses, even previous thoughts or previous dreams. Imagine the possibilities!"

The professor remained quiet, apparently digesting that information.

"But," Eric continued, "I have information stored in my subconscious mind that no one else has. I had my first lucid dream when I was eleven years old. So, when my quantum sense began to develop when I was fourteen, I was already an accomplished lucid dreamer. In my lucid dreams, I learned to enter the quantum world, to become a part of it, to interact with it. With both quantum sense and lucid dreams, I explored the subatomic universe day and night. I couldn't get enough."

With pursed lips, the professor regarded Eric for a moment. "These dreams, then…Tell me about them."

"Imagine you're the size of an atom, or smaller—any size you want—surrounded by molecules, atoms, photons, neutrinos, zydodes, and objects even smaller, which have no names."

"There is nothing smaller than a zydode," the professor said.

"Nothing the scientific community knows of. But remember, physicists once believed that electrons were the smallest particles. But in the twentieth century, science discovered quarks,

which are smaller than electrons, and neutrinos, which are smaller than quarks. For a century, we believed neutrinos were the smallest particles, until 2084 when zydodes were discovered. And once again, the scientific community believes it has discovered the smallest particle in existence. But they are wrong again, very wrong. In the quantum realm, there are uncountable objects much smaller than zydodes."

"But how small can a particle get? Is there a limit?"

"I don't know. But consider that there was a time when highly-respected physicists suggested that the pre big bang singularity may have been as small as one billion trillion trillionth of a centimeter—that's the whole universe squeezed in there. So, is it too preposterous to accept that a single particle might be that small?"

Professor Morrow acknowledged that point with a slight nod.

"And when I was seventeen," Eric continued, "I asked myself the same question you asked: is there a limit to smallness? And I intended to find out. So, during a lucid dream, I began to reduce my bodily size in the particle realm, to shrink, slowly at first. But new particles seemed to appear from nothing. I increased my rate of reduction. Indiscernible specks grew into meteors and rushed past me to become planets behind me. I reduced more quickly, smaller and smaller, but it never ended. Particles became fewer, but they were replaced by what I can only describe as a flow of ethereal substance, a river that became an ocean. I wallowed in it and passed through it, only to fall into another layer of it. I sank through never-ending layers. Around me, there were storms and whirlpools that spun in all directions at once. I became afraid that I would drown, terrified that I could never return. I forced myself to awake, shivering...and I never went back."

"But how could you have known all that if you had never gone down that small before?"

"As I said, I must have some form of receptors attuned to the quantum environment, so I'm always receiving data, because it's everywhere, though most of the time I choose to ignore it. But a steady stream of quantum information must constantly enter my mind, just as sights and sounds constantly do. So, in my lucid dreams, when I explore my subconscious mind, I make amazing discoveries, sometimes by random chance, and sometimes by deliberately searching for specific answers, such as when I explored the limits of smallness or when I searched for a practical means of energy generation."

Professor Morrow sat in a daze for a moment, but he shook it off.

"I'm trying to believe you, Eric. I want to. But how can I? I've never heard of anyone like this."

"Ever heard of Bastia de Quesada?"

"No."

"He was a seventeenth-century physician."

"Seventeenth century?"

"Yes, sir. I constantly scour history searching for others like me. When I read de Quesada's work, I understood him, and I knew we were alike. But his contemporaries ridiculed and persecuted him."

"He has my sympathy. But what did he do for humanity?"

"In his century, he didn't have the necessary industry to make practical use of the gift. If he wished to create an energy generator based on his knowledge of quantum physics, he would have needed to build machines and delicate instruments beyond the manufacturing ability of his time."

The professor nodded. "So, he's the only one you've found?"

"So far. Still, not everyone throughout history with the gift would have left evidence of their existence. And the farther back in time they lived, the lesser the chance I would discover them."

Professor Morrow drew a deep sigh. "But you haven't answered my question. You can observe the quantum realm, but you can't experiment with it. So how do you know what you can do with it? How do you know that you can create energy?"

"As I said, my work is performed in two stages. The first stage is collecting data, as I've just described. The second stage is performed in my lucid dreams. When I'm lucid and I enter the subatomic world within my dreams, it's not as if I'm reading about it or listening to a lecture. But I'm there. I'm in it. I'm an eyewitness to the quantum activity of that environment. Sometimes, different types of particles collide, and I note the reaction, the results of the collision: what is produced, what is eliminated, and the auras of released energy. But there are practically endless combinations of collisions between such a variety of particles, and I can't just hang around waiting for random collisions to occur. So, I cause collisions of my own."

"How?"

"Simple. I grab a particle and I hurl it at another."

"But you can't do that."

"It's a dream, professor. I can do it. True, I cause the collision, but the result of it, what I observe, is based on information I already have stored in my subconscious memory. Now, you said I can't experiment, but actually I can, and I do. What happens if two different particles collide in the brightest aura of a magnetic field? Or beneath an electron field? What if it happens in the gaps between protons and neutrons of heavy elements?"

"But how do you pass through an electron field without getting struck by an electron?"

"In my dreams, I actually could get struck by an electron without harm to myself. However, if I want to avoid it for the sake of observation, I can simply slow everything down."

"What?"

"In my dreams, I can slow the movement of my environment as much as I need to, even to a point where I can count the revolutions of electrons, the vibrations of quartz, and the pulses of radioactive decay. I can even freeze everything motionless if I want to."

"Well…" Professor Morrow waved his hand around, "you may be able to do all that in your dreams, Mr. Helvig, but in the real world, you can't just throw particles at each other with mind power."

"But I'll build equipment that can."

"You want to build a particle collider? They're massive!"

"But they don't have to be. If physicists knew what I know, they could build a collider right here on your desktop. It's not extremely complicated. With just the right attractive and repulsive forces, the quantum mechanics will work on their own to generate energy. We could make one here on campus. We already produce a magnetic beam. I'll need access to that equipment. I'm certain I can modify the beam into a magnetic tunnel. I'll also need access to the element banks, and—"

"You think the university will believe your wild tales and lay the entire science wing at your feet to do as you please?"

Eric lowered his head. "No sir…They won't believe me." He raised his eyes. "That's why I

need your support."

"And that's why you need to show me the math, Eric, because I won't support anything I don't understand."

"But, as you've said, my math is deplorable."

"Why can't you do it in your dreams. You've taken Thallius, 2E-Symmetrid, and SEE-TA courses. You said that once the information is in your head you can recall it in your dreams. So do it. Then, if I agree with your mathematical conclusions, I can recommend you to the board for special consideration."

"There are two reasons why I can't do that, Professor. First, it's been unanimously confirmed by lucid dreamers that, for some reason, we can't read in dreams. The words are jumbled and always changing. And since math is a written language, it would behave the same way. But even if I could perform the math in my dreams, the second reason it won't work is because I can't take the math out of my dreams and into my conscious life. I would have to reproduce the math each night and memorize small bits of it at a time, then recall it as soon as I wake up and immediately write it down. And even if I could do that, there's a lot of room for error in such a process. Besides, it would take years to complete. And we don't have years. We need energy now."

"I'm well aware of our energy crisis, Mr. Helvig, but I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you. The fault lies with you, not me. Every physicist must produce math. There is no exception."

"That's because they need math to understand quantum physics—what they can't detect with their senses. But quantum-level math serves no purpose for me, because I can detect quantum physics naturally. In fact, my observations are superior to mathematic conclusions."

"Oh, really?"

"Think about it this way, sir. If you could fly naturally, unassisted in any way—simply jump into the air and fly like a superhero—would you devote any time or energy or even any thought toward building an air-car to fly around in? Years learning the aerodynamics and mechanics? Drawing the plans? Deciding on the best materials and negotiating with suppliers? And finally building it, so that whenever you needed to travel, you could hop in your air-car and fly that way? Of course not. You would just fly. So why would I spend years learning advanced math and working out calculations to understand the hidden physical world, when I can already see it? Math is a complete waste of time and effort for me. So, I never learned it, at least not proficiently. Unfortunately, I had to spend some time with it simply to pass my entrance exam."

"And at the lowest passable score."

"But now you understand why. In order to perform my work, I need this university. I have to be here. If the directors need assurance that my proposal is credible, I can provide a demonstration. Isn't that better than math—far more convincing?"

"Certainly." The professor nodded. "However, such a demonstration will require funding from the university. But the board won't give it without my recommendation, and I won't recommend what I cannot understand."

Stifled, Eric exhaled and glanced at his proposal on the monitor—the solution to the world's energy crisis. But he had failed to convince the professor of its validity. And so, he had failed humankind.

"Please believe me, Professor Morrow, I'm not interested in personal recognition. I care

nothing about that. I care about humanity."

The professor ejected a small disk from his console. "I believe that's true, Eric." With his index finger, he slid the disc across his desktop toward Eric. "I read your proposal three times. It truly is beautiful. But I can't help you."

#

After class, Eric boarded the northbound, level five train. Stacked above it, three more trains headed north. The passengers crammed in, and the doors shut, but the door on his right only closed half way. He tried to pull it, but it would not budge. The space left open was enough for his body to pass through, and as the train jerked into motion, Eric feared he might fall out. But every pole was surrounded, and the grab handles were all taken, so he squatted low and grasped the door frame. The train left the station, and Eric glanced outward into wide open space five stories above the bustling streets.

He had been in that same car about a month earlier. He remembered it, because the door had been broken then, but he had not given it much thought that day, because he had found a place far enough away from it to ignore the possibility of danger.

So, the door had been broken for at least a month, maybe longer. No doubt, the transit department had placed a repair order, but MEDA (Manhattan Energy Distribution Authority) had not considered it a priority. To repair or replace a train door required energy, and only the highest priorities received attention. Consequently, the city had fallen into the early stages of decay.

As the train rattled through the residential districts, Eric watched the high-rise apartments pass across his field of vision through the open doorway. Two and a half million people lived in Manhattan, and an additional three million commuted each day. Desperate to meet the energy needs of the population, industry had reverted to petroleum and coal powered generators to augment power output. Still, energy production fell far short of the city's demands.

Eventually, the train made its gradual turn eastward into one of the residential subdivisions. At a transfer station, Eric switched to a local train, which carried him to his residence complex of six buildings, fifty-two stories each. One building, though, was vacant from the fifteenth story upward due to elevator failure. On the side of that building, a broken catwalk hung from its corners twenty stories up—a makeshift attempt to connect that building to another building with working elevators. The collapse of the catwalk had taken seven lives with it.

Passengers exited the train at the tower's transportation deck on the fifth floor. Eric took the stairs down to the food court on the second. At the delicatessen, he ordered a club sandwich for dinner.

"Sorry, bud, no turkey today. A fridge went out last night—power failure. We lost a lot of meat. I can throw some extra ham on for you."

Eric nodded. "Okay."

He grabbed a warm drink from a shelf, scanned his retina to transfer credits for his purchase, and climbed the stairs back to the fifth where he merged with the crowd in the elevator lobby. After a twenty-minute wait, he stepped into one of the three working elevators of the building's original six. Passengers jammed the car to capacity. Some residents squatted or knelt alongside the legs of others to squeeze in rather than wait another twenty minutes for the next car.

At his apartment, Eric ate his sandwich and then took a quick, lukewarm shower. Finally, he sat at his desk to finish viewing the media

report he had stored in his eyewear's memory earlier that day.

He learned that in 1912, Lady Christine Ambrose, an English noblewoman, had moved to Turin, Italy and purchased a small estate at the base of a mountainside. In 1915, a landslide had covered the modest castle and most of the grounds belonging to the estate. But embroiled in World War One, Italy paid little attention to the loss of a single residence, and the incident was soon forgotten—lost in irrelevance.

Recently, however, while clearing away rubble, a highway construction crew discovered a structure at the base of a cliff. One month later, the castle stood in its former glory, having suffered only minor damage to a few ornamental features of its exterior.

During the landslide, some debris had entered through windows but had caused no damage to the interior, which had remained untouched by the disaster. Furnishings and Lady Ambrose's personal belongings remained in excellent condition. And fortunately, the excavators found no remains of Lady Ambrose herself.

However, the most fascinating feature of this discovery was a mysterious paragraph written in English and etched in capital letters twenty centimeters tall into the vertical surface of the cliff alongside the castle. The video zoomed in, and Eric read the message—a very strange message, one which elicited eerie chills as he contemplated its words and phrases. He paused the feed and read it again, and again, and then a fourth time. Mysterious indeed. Anyone else would surely view the words as wild and senseless, but not Eric. Somehow, the message touched him. It spoke directly to him. He sensed a profound meaning, even a hidden meaning, as if a message had been encrypted within another message. But what? And why?

Had the author attempted to reach out to someone? If so, then it was obviously not meant for everyone, otherwise it would have been written clearly. But this message seemed written in riddles. Or perhaps not riddles, but with words and phrases only a specific type of person would grasp. And Eric believed that he grasped most of it. With further contemplation, would he eventually understand all of it? Was he the specific type of person with whom the author had attempted to communicate?

Intrigued, he determined that he must discover the meaning of the message. It seemed imperative that he decipher it. After all, why would the author invest time, effort, and money to carve incomprehensible gibberish into a mountainside? The very fact that these words were etched in stone testified to their importance.

With the video paused on the message, Eric captured a still image. He then copied the message by hand onto paper. Afterward, he powered down his eyewear and placed it on its charging pad before the building's electrical outlets were shut down at the nine p.m. energy curfew. Only the essentials—lighting, air circulation, and heating—remained live constantly. Back at his desk, he read the message again.

#

REVELATION! SEE WITHOUT
EYES. KNOW WITHOUT CONJEC
TURE. FIND SECRETS IN
DREAMS. ONENESS WITH THE
INFINITESIMAL COSMOS. DIS
COVER REALITY. GLIMPSE
WRAITHS IN IRON, GHOSTS IN
STONE. BEYOND THE ELEMENT,
THE NAMELESS PARTICLES, THE
PECULIAR, THE PHENOMENAL.
PULSE, ORBIT, CURRENT, AT

TRACTION, REPULSION. THE SPECTRUM OF THE MIND'S EYE. AURAS THAT IDENTIFY THE ORIGINS OF ENERGY AND POWER. HEDRON, HELIX, MOBI US. SPACE BETWEEN THE MATTER. VOIDS BETWEEN THE SPACE. BUT THE VOIDS ARE FULL, ILLUSIONS OF EMPTINESS. THE INCONSISTENT RHYTHMS (THE MAELSTROMS) CREATE TIERS OF THE INNER UNIVERSE. THEIR DIFFERENCE PROVIDES THE CODE, TRAVERSING AS DOES THE TORUS. COMPRE HEND. ASCEND. WE ARE ALIKE. JOIN ME. COLLABO RATE. MAGNIFICENCE!

#

Eric read it several times more, certain there was some type of encrypted message in the words. But could he decipher the message? Possibly, if he worked at it piece by piece. So, he began with the first word.

REVELATION! Perhaps this was just an introductory word, which simply stated that something was to be revealed. The exclamation mark promised it would be important or amazing.

SEE WITHOUT EYES. KNOW WITHOUT CONJECTURE. These words spoke directly to Eric about his gift—his perception of the quantum realm. He can see and know beyond what the normal five senses can detect.

FIND SECRETS IN DREAMS. What else could this mean except lucid dreaming?

ONENESS WITH THE INFINITESIMAL COSMOS. In his dreams, Eric can reduce himself to become part of the subatomic world.

DISCOVER REALITY. The existence of an inner universe unknown by the greatest physicists of his time

GLIMPSE WRAITHS IN IRON, GHOSTS IN STONE. Within seemingly solid objects, there are auras and miniscule entities.

BEYOND THE ELEMENT, THE NAMELESS PARTICLES. Unknown and, therefore, unnamed.

THE PECULIAR, THE PHENOMENAL. Indeed, everything within the quantum universe is bizarre. The objects, the activity, the interactions and reactions are all strange and uncanny.

PULSE, ORBIT. Eric can slow his environment to a point where he can count extremely fast repetitions.

CURRENT, ATTRACTION, REPULSION. Forces.

THE SPECTRUM OF THE MIND'S EYE. AURAS THAT IDENTIFY THE ORIGINS OF ENERGY AND POWER. Storms of energy distinguished by brilliant colors of the subatomic spectrum.

HEDRON, HELIX, MOBIUS. Ah, the fabulous beauty of the quantum universe. Amid the random chaos, geometric configurations stand out. These three are among the more common.

SPACE BETWEEN THE MATTER. The areas within and beneath electron fields. The gaps between protons and neutrons.

VOIDS BETWEEN THE SPACE. The above spaces are divided into smaller energy parcels.

BUT THE VOIDS ARE FULL, ILLUSION OF EMPTINESS. Yes, in actuality, there is no true emptiness, no vacuum, for an ethereal substance fills everywhere.

THE INCONSISTENT RHYTHMS. There are two distinct types of pulsating particles

that are always collected into groups. One type collects into groups of five and the other type into groups of thirteen. And even though the particles in each group seem identical, their individual pulsations are inconsistent and erratic, not like the consistent rhythms of, for example, quarts vibrations.

THE MAELSTROMS. When particle groups of five collide with groups of thirteen, violent storms erupt. These maelstroms are the most potent sources of energy Eric had discovered.

CREATE TIERS OF THE INNER UNIVERSE. The energy radiates in tiers—layers of concentric spheres like layers of an onion—with a storm at its core.

THEIR DIFFERENCE PROVIDES THE CODE. Eric contemplated this sentence for a while. Its meaning was not as apparent as the others so far. The pronoun *their*, he discerned, referred back to the *inconsistent rhythms*. But what measurable *difference* could he find in the randomly pulsating groups of five and thirteen? The pulsations were uncountable, because they were erratic and ever changing. However, the groups themselves were of unchanging numbers—five and thirteen. The difference between them is eight. Was that the correct interpretation? Perhaps he did not understand this part of the message correctly, and yet it seemed a crucial aspect of the message, because the *difference* would somehow provide a *code* to the underlying meaning of the entire message.

TRAVERSING AS DOES THE TORUS. Eric had absolutely no idea what this meant.

COMPREHEND. ASCEND. These words seemed to have no secret meaning. They were simply commands to action.

WE ARE ALIKE. Now these words...yes, these words above all others, thrilled Eric the most, for he had been searching for others like himself. Did the author of this message also possess the gifts of quantum perception and lucid dreaming?

JOIN ME. COLLABORATE. An invitation to work together. But how? The author had lived hundreds of years ago.

MAGNIFICENCE! The message concluded with the hint that their combined efforts might have produced fantastic results.

Eric sat back and rubbed his eyes. Had he interpreted any part of the message correctly? He felt sure of some of his conclusions, but he doubted others, and some elements of the message eluded him completely. He had gone as far as he could with conscious deduction. Fortunately, Eric possessed other methods of problem-solving.

He prepared to retire earlier than usual that evening. As he sat on the edge of his bed, he opened his quantum senses to his surroundings—the building, the steel, the concrete—until he identified the subatomic realm, and he searched for a particular object. Deeper he descended in his search, to where the nuclei of atoms seemed like planets, and electrons their unruly satellites. Inward, smaller, reaching ever farther into a world unknown to science. Sensors tingling. Quantum receptors igniting. After thirty minutes, he finally found the object of his quest. But he did not like where he found it.

With that information, he lay back in his bed, closed his eyes, and cleared his mind, difficult though that may seem, for his mind was a frenzy of excitement that evening. But over the years, he had acquired great mental discipline, and he soon purged all thought. From the emptiness—the blackness of his mind—an indistinct, hazy point of light slowly formed between his mental eyes. It grew larger, twisting,

shifting, constantly changing shape. From it, an object appeared for just a split second, and then it vanished, replaced by another object that quickly spun away. Another one passed before his mind's eye. They were recognizable objects, but unrelated, the products of random memory bytes, as he slipped from the conscious state into the semiconscious.

Another object appeared—a bird like an eagle. Eric's point of view followed it, gained on it, and settled on its back between its wings. High they soared, so high that Eric saw the entire planet below him. The bird dived. Earth rushed toward him. The canopy of a jungle. When he entered the uppermost branches, the bird vanished, and like a phantom Eric plunged through the foliage. As he neared the ground cover, he did not fear the imminent collision. Through the grass and soil, he penetrated: tree roots, burrowing insects, rocks, an underground watercourse. And he slipped into full unconsciousness.

But he knew he was unconscious. Yes, he had passed from wakefulness directly into a dream, and he knew it. Awake in his dream. Lucidity!

When he was younger, the excitement of achieving a lucid dream would always wake him, much to his frustration. But he developed dream techniques such as twirling or passing his hands before his face, which prevented waking. However, he had long since relinquished dependence on such devices, for he had mastered the art and had learned to simply will himself to stay dreaming and lucid. Also, his dreams at first were brief and fleeting, but with time and practice, he developed the skill to remain in his lucid dreams for as long as he wished.

As he descended into the earth, dirt and sand granules grew larger into stones and boulders. Eventually, he fell between mountains. But his linear movement had stopped. Instead, the environment seemed to explode into gigantic proportions. But the opposite was true; he was shrinking. The mountainous grains of sand began to separate into smaller units—molecules, which themselves grew and separated into atoms and then subatomic particles. Objects grew from nothing into monsters and roared past him as he diminished into the infinitesimal.

Eric slowed his rate of reduction, and he began to observe his surroundings more carefully. He stopped shrinking altogether when he reached a smallness of optimal proportion to his specific subject of interest—a cluster of pulsating particles. He moved toward them, around them, between them, observed them from every angle. There were five particles in the cluster, but their beats were not synchronized in any way he could detect. After a moment of focused concentration, he concluded that their pulsations were completely erratic and random. *Inconsistent rhythms*, the message said.

In the distance, he noticed a larger pulsating cluster. After a similar examination of those thirteen particles, he reached the same conclusion.

Their difference provides the code.

This feature of the message was critical to unlocking the encryption. But what was the difference between the two clusters? The particles of one group were different in appearance and size to the particles of the other group. Their methods of pulsing were different as well. But these differences were not the types he could describe in the form of a code or a key. The only difference that made sense, then, was numerical. The difference between five and thirteen is eight—as he had assumed earlier. Was eight the code? He would experiment with that later

when awake.

But there was yet another mystery to solve. The code would be *traversing as does the torus.*

The torus.

Eric had detected it while he sat on the edge of his bed just before he slept, and he knew where to find it. But he did not want to go there. However, it was another critical part of deciphering the encryption, so he must examine it. But to do so, he must create the proper environment.

Eric flew toward the group of five. Each particle was the relative size of a bowling ball. He grasped one of the pulsating particles with both hands and raised it over his head. The other four particles, bound by an attractive force, followed the first. With all his strength, he hurled the group of five toward the thirteen.

Collision! Detonation!

Immoveable, Eric endured the blast. His clothes blew against his body as a barrage of shock waves pummeled him with merciless ferocity. In the midst of the tempest, he must identify a specific energy layer, upon which he would find the object he sought.

Reluctantly, through the cataclysm, he began to shrink again. Rays, beams, lightning, and swirls flashed all around him, until eventually he heard the swell of the tide. The river engulfed him. He shrank through the layers of energy, which radiated from the subatomic equivalents of tidal waves, cyclones, and typhoons. His hair whipped about his face. Panic mounted. With effort, he held it back, for this time he had expected this freakish environment, and he had prepared himself for it: the violence, the eruptions…

The creation of energy!

Of course, he knew he was only dreaming and lying safe in his bed, but the realism of lucid dreaming is overwhelming. He allowed his fear to slowly dissipate, as he gradually became accustomed to his wild and wonderful surroundings.

Once again, he slowed his rate of reduction and cautiously slipped through *the tiers of the inner universe*—shells within shells, layers of concentric energy spheres radiating from a central storm. Each energy layer was a river of ethereal substance, which extended in all directions along its curve. Each layer also had its own current, each in a different direction.

At last, Eric stopped reducing at the tier he sought. On that level, the current came from behind him, rushed past him, and flowed into the distance. On the horizon, a speck formed—a particle. Slowly it increased in size, but in reality, it moved toward him. Upon the surface of the river, it came, travelling in the opposite direction of the current, defying the flow and the surge of the ethereal tide. Closer. Close enough to detect its shape—circular but not a sphere. Closer still. It had an opening through its center. Even closer. It resembled a large donut or a nautical life preserver. It kept approaching, against the current, and eventually it passed him on his left. Yes, it was a torus.

Traversing as does the torus.

Could that mean the code moved in the opposite direction of its surroundings? Opposite of what seemed correct or of an established path or understanding? Perhaps outside of what one might expect or assume? In just a few minutes, he would put those possibilities to the test.

Eric had acquired the information he sought. Mission complete. He released his concentration on the dream, and he shifted focus to his body of flesh lying upon his bed in his apartment. Consciousness returned. He opened his eyes.

Back at his desk, he spread the paper flat. The message jumped at him and demanded interpretation. He would solve it, he knew. The code was eight, and in some way, it would move in an opposite direction.

Eight. His first thought was to identify every eighth letter. So, that would be: I-T-S-H-E-N and so on. But that spelled nothing. Of course, he did it wrong. The code must proceed in an opposite direction. Perhaps he should start at the end and work toward the beginning. That would be: I-R-E-I-D-E…But again, that spelled nothing. Should he count punctuation marks? He tried again: F-T-O-J-R-C…Still nothing. What if he included spaces too: F-E-L-N-I-E…No.

How about words instead of letters—every eighth word starting at the end of the message? He wrote them down. When he had worked his way to the beginning, he read it: ASCEND THE TIERS OF THE HELIX IDENTIFY THE PECULIAR STONE DISCOVER SECRETS REVELATION.

The words did not seem random. Rather, they made sense—directives of some type. Eric separated the words into logical sections. The first six words, ASCEND THE TIERS OF THE HELIX, could stand on their own as a proper sentence, with himself as the implied subject, so he placed a period after HELIX. The same was true of the next four words, IDENTIFY THE PECULIAR STONE, so he placed another period after STONE. The next two words, DISCOVER SECRETS, could stand alone as a command, therefore, another period. And the last word, REVELATION, seemed to serve as a conclusion. He left the exclamation mark, because it seemed fitting.

So then: ASCEND THE TIERS OF THE HELIX**.** IDENTIFY THE PECULIAR STONE**.** DISCOVER SECRETS**.** REVELATION!

Was that the encrypted message?

Eric donned his eyewear, and he referred back to the news feed, especially the part where the camera operator took a tour of the castle's interior. At one point, the camera ascended a stone spiral staircase. A spiral. A *helix*.

Was that it? Must he travel to Italy to climb, to *ascend*, the spiral stairway?

And what of the *peculiar stone*—a stone different from the others? He examined the video again but could detect no such stone. Of course, the video did not reveal every stone of the stairway. But if he was actually there, he could inspect every stone. If one was different in some way, he could find it.

And then, the secrets. Could he *discover secrets* from a stone? How? Information written on the stone, perhaps. No—too obvious. Maybe etchings or a diagram only he could identify. There are ways a stone might reveal secrets. But again, he would have to be there to examine the stone.

Travel to Italy? The idea seemed a drastic reaction to all this secret message business, and for a moment he considered abandoning this sudden fixation. But only for a moment. He absolutely could not ignore the implications of an amazing discovery or opportunity.

Magnificence!

The message spoke to him, and he could not ignore that either. The author had unquestionably sent a message into the future to communicate with someone like himself. But who was the author? Lady Ambrose? Or had the words already been carved into the cliffside when Lady Ambrose bought the estate? If so, had Signore Ciro Pavone, the original owner, carved the message?

So many mysteries on so many levels. Eric could not leave it all unsolved. He must go to It-

aly. But how? He could not afford a stratocruiser, nor even a low altitude jet. A trans-Atlantic passenger ship, perhaps. With his eyewear, he referenced his credit standing—not very impressive. He could not even afford a passenger ship. But what about a cargo ship?

He searched the Atlantic cargo shipping routes. Several lines connected New York to Italy, and one went directly to Genoa on the northern coast. From there, he could travel by train to Turin. Eric wondered if a cargo ship would take on a paying passenger. If not, maybe he could volunteer as a cargo handler or ship laborer.

He could only speculate how long such a trip would take—travel to Italy, investigate the castle, and return to New York. Likely, it would not take more than a month. He did not want to lose his Manhattan apartment. He must also secure a residence in Turin for a few days.

And school? He might acquire a temporary leave if he explained that he must attend to an urgent matter. But if the university would not hold his place for a month, then he would quit. His physics course was useless anyway. Eric's special knowledge placed him lightyears beyond the most brilliant physicist, but in class he was a laughingstock.

Also, he worked at the university. Would he lose his job too?

He glanced again at his credit standing. Did he have enough for the entire venture? He would take his chances.

#

Eighteen days later, he stood before the gate of Lady Ambrose's estate. At the recently erected security guard house, the guard scanned Eric's retina, and he glanced at the information display.

"Signore Eric Helvig."

"Yes sir. And I'm sorry but I don't speak much Italian. Only English."

The man smiled. "No problem. And your reason for visiting the estate today?"

"I'm a student at Manhattan University in the United States of America, and I'm interested in exploring the history of the castle and of Lady Ambrose and Signore Ciro Pavone."

The guard entered the data. "Please step through the detector."

A friendly tone sounded accompanied by a green light.

"The gate closes at six p.m., Mr. Helvig. Until then, you are free to roam about as you please. Enjoy your day."

"Thank you."

As beautiful as the castle was, the cliffside attracted Eric's attention first. He stood before it and gazed upward at the cryptic message that had summoned him from across an ocean. And though he had read it a hundred times and had memorized every word, goosebumps rose from his flesh. The actual stone! The carvings, solid and bold in the morning sunlight.

The words were framed within a five-meter by five-meter border of artistic vines etched into the rock. The letters, each twenty centimeters tall, were carved in a classic font. Eric stood enthralled for a moment, and then he turned his attention to the castle.

Through the main doorway, he stepped into the foyer. He reviewed his objective: *Ascend the tiers of the helix. Identify the peculiar stone. Discover secrets.* To his right, a stone spiral staircase ascended—the *helix.* He strode toward it and stopped at the first step. Somewhere along this stairway, he must find a stone different in some way from the others. At first glance, the rectangular blocks seemed uniform, but he would examine each one.

Step by step, he scrutinized the stones beneath his feet as well as those of the curving walls, both on his right and his left. Each block measured approximately thirty centimeters wide by twenty centimeters tall. The edges were straight, the corners square. All had the same textured surface with no variation in color, other than the natural mottling and veining common to all of them. When he reached the small room at the top of the tower, he turned, looked down the spiral passage, and shook his head. He had found no stone distinct from the others. Of course, he would examine them again in more minute detail.

But before he made his descent, he explored the little upper room of the tower. It was circular and approximately four meters in diameter. On one half of the room, the curved wall rose to his abdomen, while the upper portion comprised of three arched openings following the curve of the lower wall. Eric took a moment to view the outside world.

The center arch faced south. But the arch to his left, southeast, captured his interest first. He walked to it and leaned over the sill. This side of the tower had been constructed directly against the cliffside. The carved message was there—so close. He stretched his left arm outward as far as possible and almost touched the border of embossed vines.

Next, he turned to his right and gazed southward through the center arch. The guard house stood directly in his line of sight about thirty meters from the castle. Beyond it, a short driveway led to the newly constructed highway, which ran east and west with five lanes each way. An unbroken river of vehicles raced to and fro. On the other side of the highway, buildings crammed the cityscape as far southward as he could see. High-rise residences occupied the east, while commercial and industrial districts claimed the west. Everywhere, turbine spires spun harvesting energy from the wind. Beside them, chimneys billowed smoke into the heavy brown sky. In the smaller streets running south, vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians crowded the lanes. Just like Manhattan, the overpopulation and subsequent energy crisis was the same everywhere.

The next archway to his right, the southwest, presented a partial view of the castle and farther out, over a few wilted treetops, more industry—society's necessary though gluttonous monster, created to support humanity while simultaneously destroying it.

As he continued to his right, the next arch was not a window. Rather, it adorned the top of the staircase. Two more arches completed the circle, also not windows, but they were built against the natural stone of the cliff.

Square pillars stood between each of the six arches, not support pillars, for they did not reach the ceiling but stopped about a meter shy. Quartz spheres equal to the width of the pillars rested on the flat, upper surfaces. Odd features, these spheres and square pillars, for they contrasted the classic nineteenth-century architecture of the castle. One other feature seemed odd as well. Midway up each pillar, a concave depression sank into the stone, the inward surface of which possessed a small hole. The six of them gave the impression of inverted eyes spying upon the center of the room.

His appraisal complete, he turned once again to the stairwell to perform another examination, but this time he would probe deeper into the stone. At the top step, he turned to the wall on his right. With eyes closed, he focused his quantum receptors on the mineral to identify it. Elements are determined by their number

of protons, even though neutrons and electrons may vary slightly. Forces of atomic and molecular attraction are distinguished by their aura color, while electron orbital shells have various shades of the same color according to the number of electrons in each shell. With this information, Eric could identify specific elements and molecules. He certainly did not have every element's atomic structure memorized, but he knew calcium, magnesium, carbon, and oxygen when he saw them. The mineral, then, was calcium magnesium carbonate—commonly known as dolomite.

Perhaps the *peculiar stone* was of a different mineral but with an almost identical appearance. Sandstone, for example, could pass for dolomite if only examined externally. The author of the message would have assumed that the person who uncyphered the encryption would possess the ability to detect differences in molecular and atomic structure. Very well then, he must probe deeper.

The first four steps produced nothing noteworthy. But when he stepped down onto the fifth one, the lowest stone on the interior wall caught his attention. He squatted beside it and explored inward. The stone was dolomite. His quantum sense slowly passed through the mineral. However, after about five centimeters of dolomite, the stone ended, and Eric then detected gasses, primarily oxygen and nitrogen. In contrast to the other stones, which were all approximately twenty centimeters deep, this stone was only five centimeters deep with a cavity behind it. Could this have been a part of the castle's original design? If so, why? Or possibly, the original stone may have been removed, cut down to a five-centimeter thickness, and then put back in place to serve as a cover to a hidden cavity. Either way, had he found the *peculiar stone*?

Within the cavity, Eric detected another familiar element—copper. He pulled his focus outward to where he could see the entire copper object. It was cylindrical. He zoomed inward a bit. The object was not a solid piece of copper, but the copper formed only a thin external layer, like a canister. Inside, he detected organic molecules in a roll of layers—sheets of some kind. Paper? No, not cellulose, but animal compounds. Perhaps parchment. Yes, parchment had been made of animal skins. And it would most likely have writing on it. Information. *Secrets*!

Discover secrets.

He found them!

He jumped to his feet, about to shout in triumph, but he heard footsteps ascending the stairs. He composed himself as a couple appeared from around the curve.

They smiled. "Ciao."

"Ciao," Eric replied.

"Scusami, signore."

Eric pressed himself closer to the inner wall as they passed.

"Grazie," said one.

"Buon giorno," said the other.

"Buon giorno," Eric said.

The couple continued upward around the curve and passed out of sight as they entered the upper room.

Eric stood back to view the stone: thirty centimeters by twenty by five. With his eyewear, he calculated its weight at approximately nine kilos. Not too heavy. An average man or woman could have maneuvered it easily enough to hide the canister behind it.

How, though, would he remove it? The author had hoped that someone would eventually discover the secrets. The stone, therefore, would

have been secured in such a way that would allow an easy removal. He examined the mortar in the joints around the stones. He sensed its composition. Silica, sand, was the most prominent substance, comprising about seventy-five percent of the mortar. But in the mortar specifically around the peculiar stone, the ratio of sand to the other substances increased dramatically to over ninety percent. Clever. The mortar around that single stone had been made softer, so it would scrape out easier.

He searched his backpack for some item to use as a scraping tool. A pen might work. He tested it. Yes, the mortar came away with moderate effort.

He paused when he heard the couple descending the stairs. If they saw him in the same place, it would arouse their suspicion. Why was he hanging out in the stairwell? He hurried down ahead of them to the ground level. When the couple exited the stairwell, Eric stood in the parlor feigning interest in an ornate vase. The couple passed into an adjacent room, and Eric dashed back up the stairs and got to work. In two minutes, the stone came loose. He pulled it aside to reveal the cavity, removed the canister, brushed the sand into the hole, and replaced the stone. Immediately, he returned to the upper room.

Shaking with excitement, he examined the canister: copper, cylindrical, ten centimeters in diameter, thirty centimeters long. The lid was sealed with wax. He had not known what he would find, so he brought a large backpack with him that morning. The canister would fit. But if he had to pass through the detector again on his way out, the guard would discover it.

The wax, hundreds of years old, peeled away with some difficulty, but eventually he pulled the lid off. Inside, just as he suspected, he found a rolled bundle of parchment. How desperately he wanted to look at it right there, but he could not risk discovery. Someone could enter the tower at any moment.

Carefully, he put the bundle into his backpack. But he must hide the canister. Where? Behind the stone, yes. He hurried down five steps, dug the pen from his pocket, wedged it into the joint around the stone, and extracted it enough to get his fingers on the edges. Finally, he pulled the stone free of the hole.

Voices and footsteps drifted up from the bottom of the stairs. Eric inserted the canister and pushed the stone back in place, but not flush with the wall. Three people passed him as he pretended to adjust the cuff of his pant leg. When the three were out of sight, he positioned the stone just right, and, as nonchalantly as possible, he left the castle.

At the guard house, he received another retina scan.

"Thank you for visiting, Mr. Helvig. Please step through the detector."

Eric did, without incident.

"Have a pleasant day."

Eric waved, and walked to the end of the driveway. He tapped the side of his eyewear.

"Taxi."

In his lens display, a map appeared with several dots moving along the roadways. The nearest dot traveling in his direction turned amber. Two minutes later, a car pulled into the driveway. Eric got in. The car drove off.

#

Eric had rented the smallest, least expensive room he could find in Turin. It was a dump, but he had to stretch his credits as far as possible. He pushed a small table to the window and pulled back the blinds allowing the midday sun to illuminate the room—no electric lights. Ener-

gy conservation had become an ingrained way of thought and behavior.

Carefully, Eric removed the roll of parchment from his backpack, unrolled it on the table, and shuffled through the pages for an initial inspection. There were diagrams, charts, basic arithmetic, illustrations, and written notes. There were also two maps. The handwriting was of elegant penmanship. Diagrams and illustrations were well-drawn. An impressive document at first glance.

Back to the first page—it was a letter from Lady Ambrose, dated September 18, 1915.

#

Greetings, my friend of the future.

My name is Christine Ambrose. Though I was born in England, I am writing to you from my current residence in Turin, Italy. You have deciphered my message, followed its instructions, and consequently discovered this hidden document. No one could have accomplished this feat other than one with an extremely rare gift, a gift I also possess. We are one with the mechanics of the infinitesimal inner universe. These mechanics have recently come to be known as quantum physics. Perhaps that term has endured, and you are familiar with it. I, therefore, call our gift quantum awareness. You also possess it. We are alike, and we are rare to an extreme.

You may wonder why I have expended such effort to find you and communicate with you. By way of explanation, allow me first to describe the world in which I live.

I was born in Canterbury, England of the year 1891. With the exception of scattered uprisings, humanity was, for the most part, at peace, and our eyes turned futureward to a prosperous world just over the horizon. And that hope was well-founded. I, as all others of my time, have witnessed the advancement of scientific progress: the production of engines powered by steam and later by gas combustion; the generation of electricity to produce light; horseless carriages we call automobiles for quicker and more convenient transportation; and, wonder of all wonders, flying machines called aeroplanes.

I have studied this advancement of science throughout the nineteenth century and now into the twentieth. It grows, learns, matures, and evolves ever toward greater and grander achievements. Why, then, should we not look futureward with hope and promise? This pattern of scientific advancement must surely continue into future decades and centuries to the benefit of all humanity.

I, especially, clung to this optimism. I foresaw a society in which I could use my gift of quantum awareness to optimize and accelerate scientific growth. I envisioned cooperation and collaboration from the scientific community. But in my naivety, I was wrong. I have received no cooperation from within the scientific circles, for I can convince no one of my gift (our gift), its reality, its possibilities. Instead, I am mocked, even scorned. Without collaboration from the established science of my time, the use of this gift falls miserably short of its grand capabilities, first and foremost of which is the improvement of humanity.

Then, to mankind's horror and great sorrow, a war erupted in July of 1914—a great war like no other war ever waged. This war soon entangled the entire world. Consequently, all scientific effort is now bent toward the creation of war machines.

But even if we had somehow avoided the war, I am stifled in another way. As I have mentioned, science has made great progress in recent times. Even so, I live in an era which has

not yet advanced to a point where I may make practical application of quantum awareness, even if I had support. I envision the creation of sensitive devices and machines of a kind that are beyond the abilities of even our most advanced industry. Yet I am convinced that the production of such equipment will be possible in the future.

But you, my friend, my kin, may live in that future time where our gift may work in harmony with science and industry to serve mankind's needs of peace and prosperity. But now, here in 1915, the gift is wasted, and I am a failure. For a certainty, I have been born in the wrong era.

I dream of living in the future, in a world where I belong. And those dreams, very special dreams, have provided the solution. I delved into the inner universe of quantum physics, searching for possibilities. After months of exhausting days and nights of restless dreams, I at last discovered a way through which I may change my circumstances.

But please, my kin, please understand that what I seek is not for my own benefit. To the contrary, I desire to give myself to humanity, so that my dreams may become reality for everyone. I wonder if you understand that, and I hope that we are the same in this way also—alike in purpose and destiny.

Alone, I can do nothing. But together… Ah, the utopia I have envisioned. But we must work as one. However, I cannot go to you, but there is a way that you may come to me. In this document, I have provided all the information you need. Have courage. Collaborate with me. Together we may achieve magnificence!
Your kin,
Christine Ambrose
#

Eric's head swirled. Excitement coursed through his every fiber. He had found another person with the same gifts! Or had she found him? Well, they had found each other. But what good was it? Regrettably, even if Christine had lived a long life, she had died over two hundred years ago. But what did she mean when she said there was a way that he might go to her? He would find that information in the remaining pages of the document.

He devoured each page, every detail, for Christine had promised a way in which he might use his gift, quantum awareness, for the benefit of humanity. He wanted that too, just as she did. Yes, they were alike in purpose and destiny, as she had hoped. And in the pages laid out before him, Eric would find the way to fulfil his destiny.

He studied illustrations of particles, both familiar and unfamiliar; aura patterns, mostly familiar; mechanical drawings of delicate machines and components; and molecular machinery.

He pondered diagrams of particle collisions; the reactions of ethereal storms when exposed to certain attractive of repulsive forces; the warping of energy fields; and collision shrapnel, which speeds along temporal pathways through the fourth dimension.

Charts consisted of the flux strength of various magnetic sources; electric conductivity of different elements and alloys; and extremely detailed celestial charts specifying exact positions of celestial bodies coinciding with dates and precise times, taking into account leap years and the possibility of adjusting for changes in daylight savings time.

Christine's math was as basic as Eric's. Nothing beyond algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. But what she lacked in her arithmetic, she compensated for with written descriptions.

Eric marveled at the details and clarity of her explanations.

Finally, Eric examined the maps. The captions "Map 1" and "Map 2" were centered in the top margins of each. He began with Map 1. On its southwest corner, Christine had outlined the boundaries of her estate, within which she indicated the position of her castle against the cliffside. Mountains dominated the area north of the castle. In those mountains, dashed lines proceeded from three specific rock formations and converged on a single point marked with an X. Alongside the lines were distances and compass directions. Map 2 provided a closer, more detailed view of the area surrounding the X.

In her notes, Christine explained that she had buried another copper canister filled with gold. Eric must use its monetary value to obtain material and equipment to perform the work Christine had outlined.

The work Christine had outlined, indeed—Eric must build a time machine!

Not the entire machine. Christine had already built most of it and had already installed those components in their necessary places within the upper room of her castle's tower. But for his part, Eric must provide the molecular machinery and other appendages that required extremely delicate, microscopic construction beyond the manufacturing capabilities of the early twentieth century.

Afterward, Eric would take that equipment to the tower and follow Christine's specific instructions. He must travel backward through time to the date September 18, 1915 at one p.m., where he would find Christine waiting for him. Finally, they would then search for an era where they could best use their gifts for the benefit of humanity.

Slowly, Eric rose from his chair and stood staring through the window. The western sun touched the tops of the factory buildings. He had spent all afternoon lost in this peculiar yet enthralling proposal, this invitation. Could he accept it? If he did, he must forsake his life in Manhattan: his apartment, his job and classes at the university. That was his life. But suddenly, it seemed so undesirable and insignificant. What kind of future did he have there? He glanced at the parchment sheets on the table—his true future, his destiny. Yes, he would accept the invitation.

Through the open window, he shouted to the world, "I have a destiny!"

#

The next morning, after a night filled with dreams like he never had, during which he confirmed much of Christine's vision, he retrieved the gold from the mountain behind the castle. Fortunately, the canister had been buried far enough northward to have been unaffected by the landslide. With naked eyes only, the spot marked by an X on the map was indistinguishable from its surroundings. But, of course, Christine expected him to use quantum awareness. He probed, and he found the canister of gold.

If Eric had been an unscrupulous man, he could have used Christine's gold to fund his own work in 2130—without her. But he would not betray her. Besides, he had been searching for someone with the same gifts and aspirations he had, and he could not possibly reject the invitation to join her.

The value of gold had changed over time. Its appeal came not from its beauty but from its practical value as an excellent conductor of electricity. Consequently, the amount of credits Eric acquired from it proved more than sufficient for his project. He bought. He hired. He nego-

tiated. At times, he bribed. And he worked. In less than three months, he had the components needed to complete Christine's time machine.

But how would he get those items past the security detector at the estate's entrance? He had a plan. That night, he took a roundabout hike up the mountain north of the castle, as he had on the day he retrieved the gold. He crept his way to the edge of the cliff. Flat on his stomach, he peered over the edge to observe the castle and the grounds below. Light filtered from the guard house, likely occupied by a security guard. Other lights, in only the most necessary areas, illuminated the grounds. Eric detected another guard walking the estate. Other than that, all was still and quiet.

Eric backed away from the edge, unbuckled his backpack, and removed two items. Their combined volume had stretched the backpack to its limit. The smaller item was a roll of ultra-fine high-strength filament. The larger was a bundle of seven components he had manufactured for the time machine, sealed within weatherproof packaging, and camouflaged to blend with the rocks at the base of the cliff.

Eric tied the filament to the bundle and slowly lowered it over the edge of the cliff. He had positioned himself so that the bundle would descend along the side of the tower where it joined the cliffside. Eventually, the line slacked as the package settled on the ground, nestled in the corner formed by cliff and castle. He snipped the line, and he retreated.

#

When the gate opened at nine a.m., Eric was the first one there with two others behind him. The guard scanned Eric's retina.

"Ah, Mr. Helvig. You visit us again."

"Yes, sir."

"And your reason for visiting the estate today?"

"No particular reason."

The guard smiled a bored, routine smile and gestured. "Please step through the detector."

Eric did so.

"The gate closes at six p.m., Mr. Helvig. Until then, you are free to roam about as you please. Enjoy your day."

How many times had he repeated those same lines?

"Thank you."

Eric strode directly to the cliffside with the encrypted message, as he had the other day. In the corner formed by the cliff and the tower, he would find, he hoped, his bundle behind the boulders at the base of the cliff. A length of almost imperceptible filament lay tangled on the rocks.

Casually, he surveyed the grounds. The two people who had entered after him stood at the main doorway to the castle appraising the stonework of the entrance. Beautiful, indeed, Eric admitted. So different from the efficient yet unattractive designs of his era. At the guard house, the man inside stared out at nothing in particular toward the northwest.

Eric was free to move unnoticed to the corner behind the boulders, but he hesitated. Were there security cameras? He doubted it. How much importance did Turin place on this estate? It seemed no more than a minor tourist site. The city would not likely spend energy on cameras. In two seconds, Eric ducked into the corner and crouched over his parcel. He snipped the filament and tucked the bundle into his backpack. Through the gaps between the stones, he glanced once more at the guard house, and he stepped again into the open.

With a much bulkier backpack, he wasted

no time but moved directly to the entrance, through the doorway, and into the foyer. The other two visitors were admiring the parlor filled with elegant furnishings, tapestries, and art. Along with several other downstairs rooms, a grand staircase, and four more upstairs rooms, it was enough to absorb their attention for a while. Eventually, though, they will climb the spiral stairway to the tower.

Eric hurried to the tower's upper room. In her instructions, Christine had explained that Eric must do nothing with six of the seven items he had manufactured. He must simply have them in his possession. So, of the seven items in the bundle, he removed only the one she had specified—a handheld remote control, cylindrical, twenty centimeters long, and five in diameter, with an activation button on one end. He already had the device adjusted to the intricately precise settings Christine had stressed must not deviate an atom's width from her instructions.

He turned for one last glance at the encrypted message etched into the cliffside. The previous fifteen weeks flashed through his mind. He had done it—everything Christine hoped he would do. But would it work?

Eric clenched his teeth and pushed the button. He heard a low hum for five seconds. Then, everything went black, cold, and silent, but only for an instant. He still stood in the same spot and viewed the same arch with the etched message beyond it. But when he turned to his right and looked through the center arch…the world had changed! No guard house, highway, high-rise residences, or industrial factories. Instead, trees grew in abundance. Along a cobblestone pathway, a horse pulled a flatbed cart, upon which rode a man wearing a baggy shirt and a straw hat.

Eric began to shiver. It worked!

And then, a voice.

"Hello, my kin."

Eric spun around. A woman, blonde and blue and garbed in an elegant dress, stood at the top of the stairs.

Eric gasped. "Lady Ambrose!"

She smiled. "Please, call me Christine."

#

Eric and Christine spent the afternoon in her parlor in deep discussion.

"I needed to send a message into the future, and that message must endure for many decades, perhaps even a century or two," Christine said. "But how would I do that?"

Eric smiled. "Exactly the way you did. You carved it in a mountainside. Perfect."

Christine nodded. "But which mountainside? Where? The message must be visible to as many people as possible. To the entire world preferably, but of course, I recognized my limitations. However, a major city, such as London, would have been ideal. But there are no suitable mountains in London. So, I considered cities in other countries—world-renowned cities, active, growing, and with natural rock formations and cliffs. But I soon learned it's not easy to buy a mountainside.

"Then, one of my agents discovered this estate. I could ask for no better cliffside. Also, the castle, though small, would attract attention. I would have preferred a more bustling metropolis, but this was the best I could find. So, I bought it and moved here to Italy. After I examined the castle in detail, I developed a strategy and hid its instructions within a message I hoped would attract exactly the right person. Then I hired a stone carver to etch that message into the cliffside."

"Well," Eric said, "you apparently made the right choice. Your message accomplished what

you intended, and…I'm here."

Christine smiled. "We have found each other, Eric, and now we can find a future time and place where we may serve our world to our greatest abilities."

"I am with you completely," Eric said.

With a quick laugh, he glanced sideways, shook his head, and then turned a big grin back toward Christine.

"You are amused by something?" Christine asked.

"Not amused, but amazed…by you."

"Oh?" Her eyes brightened as she leaned forward in her chair. "In what way?"

"Well, we both have quantum awareness, and I assume, based on our conversation this afternoon, that it works the same for both of us. We both see the inner world and its possibilities. We both identified temporal activity. But I never thought to invent time travel. It never crossed my mind. But you saw the possibility, and you designed a time machine, and you brought me here, and…I've been searching for someone…like…"

Christine's expression softened. She met Eric's gaze. "I've been searching too." The moment lingered. Eventually, she settled back and folded her hands in her lap. "There are many wonders we may accomplish with our gifts, but we only have one life, and we must rise to the necessity of our worlds. Your world faces an energy crisis, so you've focused on energy production. And I agree with you. Even without a crisis, energy is paramount. In fact, have you considered that with enough energy we may find a way to produce matter? We could eliminate want and poverty. All would then share equally in what our world could provide. I have envisioned that utopia.

"But in my world of 1915, our troubles are different. We are at war, and unfortunately there is nothing I can do about that. I am stifled. My gift is useless—a waste. And so, I must travel beyond this primitive era. I must travel through time. I need a time machine. That is my foremost priority right now."

Christine stood, walked to her bookshelves, and removed two books. She handed them to Eric and then returned to her chair.

"There is a famous author who lives in England. His name is Herbert George Wells. He has written a most popular story about a man who built a time machine and travelled into the future. It is fiction, of course, but its implications are profound."

Eric thumbed through the book. "*The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells. I've heard of him, but I've never read his work."

"Mr. Wells is a visionary," Christine said. "But I doubt he truly believes that one day someone will actually create a real time machine."

"It does seem unbelievable," Eric said. "For two hundred years, physicists have speculated about time travel but never made any progress toward achieving it. The prospect was daunting. The mechanics eluded them, and the amount of energy needed was overwhelming."

"But they cannot see what we see." Christine smiled. "And because we know what the inner universe can produce…you are here from the future—a true time traveler. And it wasn't so daunting after all."

Eric nodded as he thought of the desktop particle collider he intended to build. He compared it to the Hadron Collider in Geneva: twenty-seven kilometers in circumference, ten years in the making, a collaboration of over ten thousand scientists from hundreds of universities from over a hundred countries. Undeniably,

quantum awareness changes everything.

"The other book, *The Sleeper Awakes*," Christine pointed, "is also by Wells. It tells the story of a man who fell asleep for two hundred years. When he awoke, the world had changed drastically. Science and industry had produced marvelous inventions. And yet the world still had its troubles. It is speculation, but I agree with Mr. Wells. Science will advance. Industry will perform work that is impossible here in 1915. But I fear that without guidance, society will face new, perhaps more severe difficulties. And I must go to that time. Yes, Eric, I focused on time travel, but only that I may eventually focus on energy production. Without it…I fear for humanity's future."

The conversation paused for a moment, while Eric and Christine entertained their own thoughts. Finally, Eric spoke.

"You're right. My world is about to collapse. The signs are everywhere. You envision a utopia, but we're on the verge of a dystopia. Every physicist in 2130 is striving desperately to find a means of efficient energy production. Our society is in danger. They know it, but they can't do anything to prevent it. But I have the solution—I'm sure of it—but no one will listen to me."

"I understand your frustration."

Eric shook his head. "I could have built a prototype, but I needed funding from the university."

"Money?"

"Yes."

"Then we have the solution, Eric. You have the era, and I have the money, as much as we'll need."

Eric grinned. "And we already know how to send money into the future."

Christine stood. "Indeed, we do." She walked to her desk and removed a sheet of parchment from the drawer. "I've been preparing for this day for quite some time."

She handed the parchment to Eric. It was another map of the mountains behind her castle, and it was covered with dashed lines and Xs.

"Each X represents a canister of gold just like the one you uncovered."

Dumbfounded, Eric studied the map. "I'm pretty sure these areas were not affected by the landslide." He lit up. "We'll definitely have enough money to perform our work."

Christine took Eric's hands and raised him from his chair.

"We will collaborate, my kin."

"And we'll save the world."

#

After breakfast the next morning, Eric and Christine made their final preparations to the time machine in the tower's upper room. Christine lifted one of the six identical components Eric had made.

"Beautiful! Such a device could never have been fabricated here in 1915."

"But in 2130, that type of manufacturing is common."

"Just as I believed."

Christine stepped to one of the square pillars with the quartz spheres on top. Easily, she pulled open an entire side of the pillar, which was actually a three-centimeter-thick stone door hung on large brass hinges. The interior of the pillar contained a dazzling maze of intricate machinery.

"For the sake of secrecy, I performed as much work as possible on my own. But for the stone and metal work, I hired craftsmen from the town. For the finer pieces, I used watchmakers and jewelers." Christine pointed to an empty space. "Right here, each pillar will accept one

of the six modules you built. When we install them, our time machine will be complete."

"But it worked in 2130," Eric said, "even though I didn't install the parts. You very specifically instructed me to keep the six parts on my person and only use the handheld controller."

"Yes, Eric, because you brought those parts here to 1915, and we will now install them this morning."

"What?"

"Once we install these components, they and the complete time machine and this castle, along with the rest of the world, will travel naturally through time to eventually arrive at the year 2130. So, when you stepped into the tower that morning, you stepped into a fully functioning time machine. The only other item you needed was the controller."

Eric thought about that. "I guess that makes sense."

"Of course it does. It has already proven itself."

"You are amazing."

"No more than you." She smiled. "We simply dream of different things."

Together, Christine and Eric installed a module into each of the six pillars. Afterward, they sealed the stone doors shut with full-strength mortar for a permanent bond.

"These pillars open the doorway, so to speak, to other time dimensions," Christine said. "And the handheld controller directs us onto pathways toward the future or past, and it regulates when we stop. However, when we leave today, we must only travel futureward, for if we travel into the past, we will arrive on a day when the time machine does not yet exist, and we will be stranded in the past. Also, we must not travel too far futureward, because this castle will not exist forever, and we will need a floor beneath our feet when we arrive."

Eric nodded. "And don't forget, at some point during this war, this castle will get buried by a landslide and will remain buried until it's discovered in 2130. So, we can't arrive any time before that."

"Do you know what Turin intends to do with this castle"

"Well, it has no historic significance. It's just a curiosity, really. And from what I've seen, it isn't generating much interest. But I doubt Turin will expend the energy to tear it down. Most likely they'll find some use for it."

"If so, then this room may eventually have furnishings or other items in it, which is to our disadvantage, for we must not materialize in a space with solid objects present." Christine thought for a moment. "Also, we must return to your lodging to collect the documents, for they cannot remain for anyone to find."

"Without quantum awareness, no one will understand them."

"That may be correct. But we must not take that risk when we can easily avoid it."

Eric nodded.

"And we must also take care not to arrive prior to the day you left," Christine said, "for we risk interfering with your other self."

"But we already know that we didn't interfere."

"Again, you may be correct. But we are not yet familiar with the laws of time travel, and we cannot foresee the consequences of our actions. So, it's wiser and safer to proceed along the path of least risk.

"You're right," Eric said.

"So then, we may arrive any time after the moment you left."

"That was approximately nine fifteen a.m. on October 10, 2130."

"Then it will be safe to arrive at nine thirty that morning."

Eric shook his head. "There may be a couple of problems with that. First, there were other visitors here that morning. Someone may be in this tower when we materialize, possibly occupying the same space we'll need."

"That could be a disaster."

"The second problem is that the security guards scan everyone's retina as they enter and leave the estate grounds. They scanned me that morning, so they'll expect me to leave. No problem there. But you're not in their database. They'll likely detain you at the gate."

Eric paused in thought.

"The property closes at six p.m. If we arrive after six, there won't be visitors in the tower, so we avoid the possibility of bumping into anyone."

Christine nodded.

"But we'll still have to avoid the security guards." Eric rubbed his chin. "What if we arrive after sunset? We could slip out under the cover of darkness. From what I've seen, there are only two guards on the estate, and the security lighting is terrible. There are plenty of dark areas we can pass through. I'm sure we can leave undetected."

Another pause.

"Of course, the guards may be more alert than usual, because if I don't check out before six, they'll assume I'm still on the property, and they'll search for me."

Eric began to pace.

"We can show up a few days later maybe—let the excitement settle down."

"Or they may have increased security by then," Christine said. "It's better to arrive when we know there are only two guards."

"You're right. It should be the evening of the day I left."

"You said the gate closes at six. But we must wait for darkness. Sunset here in October is around six forty-five, but we won't have sufficient darkness until seven."

"We can't afford to wait any later than that," Eric said, "because if the guards don't find me after searching for an hour, they may call for additional personnel."

"Then seven o-clock is our best choice."

"Seven it is," Eric said with a smile. "And the following morning, we retrieve the gold, convert it to universal credits, and then…off to New York."

"And to your university, where we'll begin our work."

"The work I've dreamed of for a long time."

From a leather shoulder bag slung diagonally across her torso, Christine removed the controller—a cylinder divided into eight segments. She twisted each segment of the cylinder to its appropriate notch, which corresponded to their arrival date and time.

"In his book *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells described the machine as having a removeable piece. The time traveler kept that piece with him while he was away from the machine so no one else could use it." Christine held up the controller. "This is the piece we'll keep with us. Our time machine will not work without this controller. It emits a frequency that combines with the cellular electricity of our bodies to produce an aura around us. We must hold hands—skin to skin—so the current may pass through both our bodies. The aura extends far enough around us to include our clothing and other items we may take with us, but it will not affect stone, so the blocks beneath our feet will remain undisturbed."

Christine looked into Eric's eyes, reached

out her left hand, and took hold of his right. "Together we've made it this far, my kin, and together we will accomplish wonders."

"I almost can't believe it," Eric said. "I thought it would never happen."

"Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

Christine pushed the activation button. They heard a low hum for five seconds, and then…

Eric looked through the arches. "It didn't work. We're still in 1915."

"I don't understand. If it worked for you in 2130, it should work now."

She tried again—same results.

"There must be a flaw in my labor," Christine said. "Let's open the pillars before the mortar sets up."

For hours, Christine examined each component and each connection in all six pillars.

"Everything is in order. It should work."

They tried again—nothing.

"Maybe it's a matter of mass," Eric said. "It worked for me—one person. But now there are two of us. There's more mass, and that would require more energy."

"I agree. Mass is a critical factor. That's one reason why I decided to send the gold futureward naturally—to avoid its mass. But I specifically designed the controller to produce enough energy to move the combined mass of two people."

Eric stared downward at his shoes. After a moment, he said, "The only difference, then, is the direction of travel. I moved pastward, but now we attempted to move futureward, and that may require more energy."

Christine thought about that. "Possibly. But why?"

Eric did not reply immediately. He gazed through the arches into the distance. "In Manhattan of 2130, millions of people move around the city every day using various methods of transportation. One method is a moving walkway. I can simply step onto it, and it moves me forward. I expend no energy; I simply travel along with it. Sometimes when I'm in a hurry, I'll run along the walkway, which moves me forward faster. But in doing so, I expend a certain amount of energy. However, if I turn around and run in the opposite direction of the walkway, I expend less energy. The walkway simply passes under my feet. Now, if the moving walkway represented time, then traveling futureward would likewise require more energy than traveling pastward. It's a flawed analogy, I know, but travel through the temporal passages may work along a similar principle."

Christine smiled. "Obviously, you have not observed temporal activity much at all. Though I admit, your analogy is not too far-fetched. But despite the reason, the fact is we need more energy."

"In your letter, you said that society had begun to use electricity. Can't we also produce it using the same methods?"

"Yes. Faraday's dynamo, Edison's battery, Tesla's coil. But none of them are compatible with our time machine. Also, the energy generator must travel with us." Christine held up the controller. "You built this, Eric. You studied my design. You know how it works."

"It's pure genius."

"And now we need another one, but more powerful. Without it, we cannot travel futureward. But…" Christine shook her head, "can we produce it here in 1915?"

#

The next morning when Eric strolled into the breakfast nook, Christine had brioche and

coffee prepared. They greeted each other with a smile.

"What did you dream about last night, Eric?"

"Energy generation, of course. And you?"

"The same."

Eric sipped his coffee. "Wow, that's good. Nothing like this in my time."

"Yes, Eric. You said the same thing yesterday morning. All your food is genetically modified and artificial."

Eric chuckled. "I did. But it's worth repeating." He paused. "Our worlds are very different, and that inevitably effects our thinking. Even though we both have quantum awareness and perfect dream control, our environment influences how we use our gifts. We attack our problems differently."

"That's why we must collaborate," Christine said. "We learn from each other and complete each other. We each supply what the other lacks."

"Exactly. When I said yesterday that your controller's design was pure genius, it was because it uses a method of energy generation I had not considered. But your world is more in touch with observable physics. For example, water flows into the wide end of a funnel and exits through the narrow end with greater force. So, when you detected the subatomic conical fields, you found a way to pass the particle groups of five and thirteen through those fields, like water through a funnel. It exits with greater force, which causes particle collisions, which subsequently produces energy. Yet I never considered it."

"It seemed so obvious."

"Obvious to you, but not so obvious in a world far more technologically advanced. In 2130, we don't think about water and funnels. Manhattan University had created a magnetic beam. I focused on that and discovered how to modify the beam into a tunnel. Then…pass the particle groups through the tunnel, scramble them up, and create energy that way."

"I see your point, Eric. I had no knowledge of a magnetic beam, so I couldn't consider those possibilities. But that's why we're stronger together. We need each other, especially because we now face the challenge of building an energy generator to boost the controller. Here in 1915, I couldn't do it on my own. But if you supply your perspective to mine, we may discover a way to create a generator without your future technology."

Eric nodded. "Just like you said: we're stronger together."

#

During the days that followed, Christine and Eric discussed nothing else. They explored the quantum realm with greater zeal than ever before. They performed lucid dream experiments with what they observed, and each morning they compared results. Eventually, they formulated a plan, expanded upon it, tweaked it, discarded certain features and enhanced others.

With technology from 1915 supplemented by their extensive knowledge of quantum physics, they created subatomic particle colliders. The outer walls of the colliders were constructed with circular formations of hollow particles open on both ends, with one end of each particle wider than the other, resembling funnels. These particles arranged themselves naturally into perfect circles with the wider openings on the outside and the smaller openings all pointing toward the center of the circle. Held in place by a cylindrical field with a frequency attractive to the particles, the circular colliders were stacked one upon another, thousands of times

over, until they formed a tube. Eric shot an X charged beam through the center of the tube. Consequently, the Y charged particle clusters of five and thirteen (and anything else with a compatible attraction) rushed naturally through the funnels and erupted into the center core of the tube, which seethed with the violence and ferocity of rampaging particle collisions and their cataclysmic aftermath of quantum tempests, cyclones, and hurricanes. By multiplying this arrangement as many times as necessary, Christine and Eric achieved an energy output of nearly three times that of their handheld controller.

The area of the subatomic activity measured less than one cubic micron. However, the apparatus that created the fields necessary to manage the quantum mechanics was much larger. If it had been manufactured in 2130, the size of the final product would have been comparable to their original handheld controller. But in 1915, the product was bulkier. Fortunately, though, it all squeezed into a gentleman's briefcase and connected wirelessly to the original controller.
#

The day arrived. Christine and Eric stood in the center of the tower's upper room. A leather shoulder bag slung across Christine's torso contained the controller—already set to their arrival date and time. She removed it with her right hand. A briefcase in Eric's left hand contained the auxiliary energy generator. Christine extended her left hand, Eric his right. Hands clasped. Fingers interlocked. Christine pushed the button.

They heard a hum. But during the expected five-second interval, they also heard a rumble. Through the arch on the left, they saw bits of rubble and debris fall along the cliffside with the encrypted message. The rumble intensified. The castle shook.

"The landslide!"

Everything went black, cold, and silent for just an instant.

Eric and Christine stood in the same spot of the tower's upper room, but morning had turned to evening in a split second. The room was dark, but as they stared through the arches, Christine caught her breath, for as far as she could see into the distance, a city of lights blazed as if the earth was on fire.

"We're in the future!"

"Your future, my present."

"So much energy."

"It may seem excessive, but for our population, it's not enough, and our society is suffering from an energy shortage. Most of these lights will shut off at the nine p.m. global energy curfew."

Christine nodded. "And the landslide. It's hardly a coincidence that it happened at the exact moment we activated the time machine."

"The energy frequency from the generator must have sent vibrations through the cliffside. A critical stone probably shook loose, and everything above it came down on your castle."

From an arch, Eric glanced down at a moving flashlight in the southwest portion of the estate's grounds.

"They're searching for me. There's likely at least one more guard. He may be in the castle. These guys are so bored with their jobs, they're probably glad to have this diversion."

Silently, they descended the stairs. On the third step from the bottom, they paused, and Christine peered around the curve. Light moved beyond a doorway on the other side of the parlor.

"He's in the far room. We can make it to the front door."

They hurried to the foyer and out the doorway. A light turned on them, and a guard shouted and sprinted toward them.

As they dashed back into the castle, the guard in the far room stepped into the parlor and swung his light around. He shouted to the first man as he burst through the main doorway. Eric and Christine had no alternative but to flee back up the spiral stairway.

"We have to jump futureward," Christine said. "It's our only escape."

As they sprinted up the stairs, Eric flipped the latch on the briefcase and switched on the activation toggle. Christine snatched the controller from her shoulder bag and gave it a hasty twist forward—no time for a precise setting. They stopped in the center of the upper room, clasped hands, and Christine pushed the button.

Five seconds until jump: A guard appeared at the top of the stairs.

Four seconds: The man drew his pistol and swept them with a paralysis wave across their upper thighs, which also passed across Eric's left hand.

Three seconds: Eric's hand relaxed, and the generator briefcase slipped from his grasp.

Two seconds: Eric and Christine fell backward as the briefcase fell forward.

One second: Christine thrust her left hand back into Eric's right.

All went black, cold, and silent. The room remained unchanged, except that daylight poured in through the arches. Both of them remained on the floor, for their legs were useless.

"What happened to us?" Christine asked.

"The guy hit us with a paralyzer. It's painless, but our legs won't work for a few minutes." He lifted his left arm; his hand hung limp. "He got my hand too. We've lost the generator!"

From the ground floor, the sound of a gentle alarm floated up the stairs. Then, excited voices and ascending footsteps. A man appeared at the top of the stairs with a woman behind him followed by another man. They stepped into the room, stopped, and stared at Eric and Christine.

A voice called, in English, from farther down the stairwell. "Is it them?"

The first man took a step closer and paused, eyes wide.

"Lady Ambrose? Mr. Helvig?"

Eric gasped. "How do you know us?"

The three stepped closer, and still more people filled the room.

"First things first," the woman said. "You're injured."

"Just temporarily paralyzed," Eric said. "We'll be alright."

"What year is it?" Christine asked.

"2245," the man answered.

"We hoped you had traveled into the future," the woman said, "so we kept this room vacant. Humanity has been waiting for you."

Eric stammered, "What?"

"You were both here at the castle in 2130," the man said.

Eric and Christine glanced at each other. With a nod, Eric turned back toward the man. "Yes, we were."

The man continued. "A security guard tried to apprehend you, and you both vanished."

Eric and Christina both nodded again.

"Well, obviously, that created quite a stir," the man said. "The Turin authorities were notified, and an investigation ensued. That prompted a landlord to turn over some very strange papers left in one of his rooms, which was rented to a Mr. Eric Helvig. The documents were instructions for building a time travel

device along with a letter from Lady Christine Ambrose, a former resident of this estate."

"Also, Mr. Helvig," the woman said, "your name was on this estate's visitor list twice, which further connected the two of you."

"Experts from many fields—the world's brightest scientists—examined the papers," the man continued. "But they couldn't manufacture the machine. It seemed that critical information was missing from the documents."

"All the information was there," Christine said, "but only Eric could understand it."

"Apparently," the man said. "And if you had built a time travel device, that would have explained your presence in 2130, Lady Ambrose. Of course, we couldn't positively identify you, but we presumed your identity based on evidence and circumstances."

"You presumed correctly."

"Also, when you vanished from the tower," the woman said, "you left behind a case with a mysterious apparatus in it—an energy generator that seemed to create energy from nothing."

"Not exactly," Eric said.

"Physicists could not understand how it produced energy," the woman said, "but they were able to duplicate the mechanisms, and they made copies of the device. Those copies worked. So, they built them larger, which yielded a greater output. Within a few years they were all over the world."

Eric could not believe what he just heard. His heart pounded. "In 2130, we had an energy crisis. Society was on the verge of collapse."

"There is no longer an energy crisis, Mr. Helvig," the man said. "In fact, the opposite is true. We now have unlimited energy, thanks to both of you."

Christine and Eric turned toward the south wall with the arches on the upper half, but the lower half was solid stone, and they could not see beyond.

"I must see it," Christine said. "Strength is returning to my legs."

She attempted to stand, and the woman helped her up, while the man assisted Eric to his feet. As their eyes raised above the lower sill of the arches, they gazed upon the world beyond, astonished.

Graceful, silent vehicles bathed in vibrant colors of light glided along the highway and soared the skyway. Southward, bright skyscrapers of elegant designs rose to amazing heights, upon the exteriors of which glass elevators ascended and descended. Transportation rails whisked sleek passenger trams from building to building and throughout the city. On the ground, between the structures, were emerald parks, through which pathways meandered along gentle slopes through gardens of trees, flowers, domes, observation spires, and moving statuary of brilliant bronze and silver. Sparkling streams, punctuated by fountains and artistic waterworks, flowed between the architecture and through the parks, spanned by gleaming white bridges, upon which people in colorful garments strolled or biked. And in the far distance, beneath a crystal blue sky, were the rectangles of cultivated fields.

Utopia!

With a gesture that swept the entire scene, the man said, "Lady Ambrose, Mr. Helvig, welcome to our world." He paused in thought. Then his eyes beamed as a smile formed. "Or should I say...welcome to *your* world." ❖

END TRANSMISSION