

TIME REP

By Peter Ward

ONE

The front room of 23 Woodview Gardens was largely identical to every other front room along the street. It had some walls, a floor, and a pair of alcoves too small to accommodate anything useful. It had a bay window, a door leading out into the hallway, and a light hanging from the ceiling – in fact, as front rooms go, you might say it had it pretty good. Unfortunately, unlike all the other front rooms along Woodview Gardens, this one was a complete mess. Crisps had been trodden into the carpet, newspapers were flung across the sofa, and the television was being used as some sort of makeshift clotheshorse – though by the size and smell of it you’d be forgiven for thinking it was an actual horse. It was fortunate that the curtains were permanently drawn – had any passer-by caught a glimpse of this room, they would have been disgusted.

One person who wasn’t particularly fussed by all this mess was Geoffrey Stamp, and that was because he happened to be the one responsible for it. Geoffrey was a tall, reasonably unattractive man with scraggy chestnut hair and navy blue eyes, when they were open. He had been out of work for about two years now, since his local newsagent had fired him from his paper round on his 25th birthday. Since then, Geoffrey had made no real effort to find another job, and it wasn’t a case of him telling himself that he would get round to it at some point – he just couldn’t be bothered. Amid the newspapers and empty cereal packets that littered the middle sofa, Geoffrey lay fast asleep, busy not thinking about anything job-related. In fact if you really want to know, he was dreaming about fishing.

Back in his paperboy days, Geoffrey had faithfully delivered *The Independent* to 23 Woodview Gardens, or rather to the person who lived there – Tim, who was much more interested in reading the paper than the house was. He was a little bit older than Geoff, a little bit taller than Geoff, and a little bit more employed than Geoff. To say Geoffrey was lucky to have struck up a friendship with Tim was an understatement – he had offered Geoff a place to stay when he lost his job, he had tolerated Geoff’s aversion to housework, and he rarely brought up the subject of rent, which Geoff had consistently failed to pay for the past two years. As Geoffrey sat by his imaginary lake, fishing rod in one hand and pickle sandwich in the other, he thought to himself what an lucky coincidence it was that he should find himself living in a house on his old paper round – especially considering he had been delivering the paper to the wrong house for seven years.

One thing that had been bothering Geoffrey recently was the fact that he could tell when he was dreaming. He didn’t know whether it was because he was asleep so often that he was now accustomed to the sensation, or whether... A bite! Geoffrey dropped his sandwich, disbanded his psychological ramblings and grasped the rod with both hands. This was a slight over-reaction, since whatever he had caught wasn’t putting up much of a fight. He reeled in his lifeless catch, wondering what kind of metaphor for underachievement would emerge out of the water. A boot maybe? A tyre? An old rucksack? Geoffrey had dreamt about fishing several times before, and he always ended up hooking some piece of worthless junk, so you can imagine his surprise when the thing on the end of his line turned out to be a fish. Geoff looked at it. A fish. It began to writhe around desperately on the hook, trying to get back in the water. What did this mean? Was he actually going to achieve something today? Would something fish-related influence his life in the near future? Or had he simply caught a fish? It spoke.

“Geoff?”

Geoffrey wasn't perturbed by this. All kinds of strange things happened in his dreams. Some things he talked about, others he didn't.

"Geoffrey?" It was a man's voice.

"What is it?" Geoffrey replied. It was Tim. Obviously, he was talking to him in the real world, trying to wake him up. His voice had manifested itself in his dream as the voice of the fish. It was all making sense.

"Come on Geoff. Up you get..." Geoff rubbed his eyes. The fish now had hair.

"You're a fish."

"Yes, I'm a fish. Wakey wakey."

Suddenly, Geoffrey was blinded by an unbearable light - Tim had opened the curtains. He felt a tugging on his foot.

"You need to wake up, Geoff," the fish said.

Geoffrey reluctantly opened his eyes, extending one hand in front of his face to shield his gaze. The picturesque lake dissolved into the less pleasing aesthetic of the front room, and Tim now stood in front of him, where there had previously been a talking fish. Not that Tim was in focus just yet - Geoff could make out the blurry outline of his skinny figure, the neatly styled haircut and the black-rimmed glasses, but that was about it. He closed his eyes and opened them again, as if re-booting his brain. That was better - he could see him more clearly now: the unimpressed look on his face, the slogan on his t-shirt that was far too witty for this time in the morning, and most importantly, the cup of tea in his hand.

"Is that tea for me?" Geoffrey said optimistically, brushing some newspapers off the sofa.

"What's wrong with yours?" Tim said, nodding at the mug at the foot of the sofa.

"It's solidified."

"I see," he said, passing him the cup.

Tim looked round at the television screen and picked off the assortment of clothes Geoff had chosen to pile on top of it.

"You really have to stop using the television to dry your stuff out," he said. "It'll over heat again."

Five t-shirts and a pair of jeans later, he revealed a dusty screen displaying the words:

GAME OVER

Continue? Y/N

"I'd forgotten I was playing this," Geoff said, rummaging through the sofa cushions for a moment before pulling out a joypad. "Where did I get up to?"

"What game is this?" Tim said, tossing Geoff's clothes into a corner.

"*Space Commando*", Geoff said, sitting up and taking a sip of Tim's tea.

"I see. And what do you have to do?"

"You have to save the world," Geoff said, picking up a headset and putting the earpiece in his ear. "You play this commando guy who basically goes around shooting the shit out of aliens."

"And what is that thing you're wearing?" Tim said. "You got a job in a call centre or something?"

“This?” Geoff said, positioning the headset’s microphone in front of his mouth. “It lets you talk to other players over the internet.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Tim said, picking up a large stack of plates and carrying them into the kitchen.

“Don’t know whether you’re interested,” he shouted from the other room, “but there’s a job being advertised in the local paper. I think you should apply.”

“Get out of the way!” Geoffrey screamed into his microphone. “I can’t fire it if you’re in the way!!”

“What?” Tim said.

“Nothing,” Geoff said, “just talking to this idiot online.”

“I don’t know why you get so angry when you play that thing,” Tim said. “It’s not real, you know.”

Regardless of it being real or not, Geoff was still getting very annoyed with *Space Commando*. His hand-eye co-ordination was never great after he’d just woken up, and he was having a bit of trouble aiming his character’s ultimate weapon, the Death Bringer, at one of the alien’s weak-spots.

“So what do you think?” Tim said.

“About what?”

“The job.”

“What job?”

“The job in the paper!”

Geoff wasn’t really listening. He was taking too long trying to get a lock on a particularly large alien, and before he knew it, he was killed by enemy fire and greeted with another “Game Over” screen. He threw the joypad to the floor in frustration and thought about what Tim had just said.

“So there’s a job in the paper?” He said.

“Yes,” Tim sighed. “Not sure what it is, but you don’t need any qualifications. You don’t have any, do you?”

Qualifications? Let’s see - he had a knot tying badge from Scouts, a third place rosette from a talent show, and an “I beat PC Gamer at *Doom*” t-shirt.

“No,” he conceded.

Tim came back into the room. “I’ve circled it,” he said, tossing a newspaper on Geoff’s lap. “Not playing your game?”

“I think I need to wake up a bit first,” Geoff said, taking off his headset. “I keep pressing A instead of B.” He glanced down at the paper and read the job advert aloud.

“Long established tour operator seeks young holiday representative to liaise with a variety of clients. No experience or qualifications required.”

“Well?” Tim said.

“I don’t know. A holiday rep?”

“It’s not everyday you see a job in the paper that says ‘No experience or qualifications required’.” He stretched a hand out to Geoff, indicating that he wanted his tea back.

Geoff offered the tea to the pile of clothes Tim had chucked in the corner.

“You really need to see a doctor about your hand-eye co-ordination problem,” Tim said, pulling Geoffrey’s arm in his direction and taking the tea. “How long does it usually take to wear off?”

“I don’t know”, Geoffrey said. “I’m never able to look at my watch to tell.”

* * *

Geoffrey didn't like this at all. He didn't want a job. He was happy sleeping all day and playing computer games all night. It was an unrewarding lifestyle that suited him just fine. But by mid morning, he had half-heartedly written a letter of application to this tour operator company, or whatever it was. If anything, just making the slightest bit of effort to get a job would prevent any rent-related conversations with Tim, which always made him twinge with guilt.

"It's finished", he called up the stairs.

"Good," Tim replied. "Now go and post it."

"What, you don't want to hear it?"

"Not really. The envelopes are by the front door."

Geoff was still having some trouble controlling his hands, and it took him a couple of minutes to stick a stamp in the corner of an envelope and put the letter inside.

As he sat at the bottom of the stairs slipping his trainers on, he noticed a female silhouette approaching the front door through the bubbly glass of the front door. It stopped on the doorstep, rifled through a large shoulder bag for a few seconds, and popped a letter through the mail box.

Geoff was particularly fond of this silhouette. It belonged to Zoë, the postman, whom he had known for many years back from his paperboy days. In the past, they'd often keep each other company as they walked the streets in the morning, Geoff delivering newspapers, Zoë delivering everything else. He'd liked her for a long time, and he was sure it wasn't just a simple crush – ok, she was a very attractive girl, but she was always friendly with him, never overly conscious of her own beauty, and – much to Geoff's surprise – partial to playing the odd computer game or two. *Zelda* was her favourite.

Geoff sprung to his feet and opened the front door. Zoë stood right in front of him. He hadn't seen her for a few weeks, and seeing her again made him forget the world around him for a moment; so much so that he failed to notice that he'd just scared the living daylights out of her by opening the door so suddenly.

"Jesus Christ - you startled me Geoff," She laughed, pressing her hand to her chest.

"Oh, Sorry," Geoff said, "I'm, err... I was just leaving. Posting a letter, funnily enough." He held up the letter as if he somehow needed to prove it.

"How you keeping?" She said. "Found another job yet?"

It was like asking a fridge if it had taken up tennis.

"No, nothing," Geoff replied, "But I'm applying for one today. That's what this letter is."

"What's the job?"

"Holiday rep."

"Holiday rep?"

"I think so. The advert wasn't very specific."

"Sounds lovely. I'd love to be a holiday rep. All that travelling, meeting new people. You can take me with you if you get it!"

Geoff smirked in embarrassment.

"That letter is for you, by the way," Zoë said, pointing down at the envelope at Geoff's feet. "Don't see many addressed to you these days..."

"For me?" He picked it up. That was unusual. He hadn't received any mail for weeks.

"Applied for any other jobs recently? Maybe it's an acceptance letter."

“Nah – It’s probably from some games magazine asking me if I want to renew my subscription.” He held the letter in between his teeth, put his coat on, and stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Zoë said.

“I’ll look at it when I get back,” Geoff said, stuffing the letter in his coat pocket. It might have been from a different magazine, and he certainly didn’t want her to see *that*.

Zoë followed Geoff up the garden path and out onto the street, sifting through a few more letters. She was walking in the opposite direction to the post-box, so they went their separate ways, making a vague promise to meet up again at some point. Geoff hoped it was sooner rather than later.

He had barely walked a few footsteps when a thick spray of soapy water splashed across his feet. This could only mean one thing: Darren Bell, his next door neighbour, was washing his car. Geoff looked round in the direction the water had come from - sure enough, Darren was standing in his front garden, dripping bucket in hand.

“Sorry Stamp!” Darren said, resting the bucket down next to his car. “Didn’t see you!” The smile on his face suggested that that was probably a lie, as did the fact that his silver Audi was sat in the opposite direction to which he’d thrown the water.

“Give me a break,” Geoff said, shaking his shoes dry. “You were trying to soak me on purpose!”

Darren shrugged his shoulders, as if this was somehow sufficient enough to resolve the matter.

“Saw you talking to Zoë,” he said, stepping back from his car to admire the gleaming bodywork. “You like her don’t you?”

“You saw me talking to Zoë, but you didn’t see me walking past your driveway?”

“Don’t know why you bother with that girl,” Darren said, picking up a sponge by his feet. “She’s way out of your league. Do you honestly think a hot babe like that has any interest in a jobless waster like you?” He tossed the sponge into the bucket with a casual indifference that suggested he had been practicing.

“I am not a ‘jobless waster’,” Geoff said.

“Oh? You got a job, have you?” Darren said.

Geoff pretended not to hear.

“What?” He said.

“Course you haven’t,” Darren said. “You can’t start looking for work until you’ve completed *Sonic Bollocks*, or whatever the fuck game you’re playing at the moment.”

“Actually, I’m applying for a job today,” Geoff said, holding up the letter he was about to post.

“And what job is that?” Darren said. “Bed tester? House sitter? Pyjama model?”

“Look, what’s your problem?” Geoff said. “Have I offended you in some way?”

“I just can’t stand the fact that my taxes go towards paying for your existence,” Darren said. “All you do is sit in that house and play your stupid computer games. Don’t you want to do something with your life? Get a proper job?”

“Getting a proper job and doing something with your life are the complete opposite of each other,” Geoff said. He stepped over the puddle of water and walked off.

* * *

Within ten minutes, Geoff had posted his letter, bought a packet of Minstrels and returned back to the house. Tim was in the kitchen eating cornflakes.

“How’d it go?” Tim said.

“How’d it go?” Geoff replied. “I only went out to post a letter – I wasn’t running in a marathon or anything. Does posting a letter really warrant a ‘how’d it go’?”

Tim rested his spoon on the table.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing.” Geoff said, sitting down next to Tim. “Saw Darren this morning.”

“Oh.”

“Listen - do you think Zoë is out of my league?”

“You saw Zoë?”

“Yeah, she had a letter for me.”

“A letter?” Tim said, raising an eyebrow. “For you? Who was it from?”

“Don’t know,” Geoff said, taking it out of his coat pocket. “Let’s find out.” He tore open the envelope and pulled out a single, crisp sheet of paper.

Geoff looked at it in silence.

“Well?” Tim said.

“Dear Mr. Stamp,” he read aloud, “Thank you for applying for the position of holiday representative. I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected to attend an interview, which will take place at 3 o’clock this afternoon at our London office – please see the enclosed map. We look forward to seeing you. Yours sincerely, Ruth Ashmore.”

The letter was written in very bad handwriting, as if the person writing it had nothing to lean on.

Geoff was confused. How on earth had they managed to reply to him before he’d even sent his application? He scratched his head in stereotypical puzzlement, thankful that at least his hand-eye co-ordination had improved.

“Err... That’s *my* head,” Tim said.

TWO

"I'm here for a job interview," Geoffrey said to the young receptionist.

"You must be Geoffrey Stamp," she replied, looking him up and down.

"Er...yes." He suddenly became very conscious of his appearance. Geoffrey hadn't made much of an effort for this interview. In fact he'd made no effort.

She picked up a phone and began to dial a number.

"Please, have a seat," she smiled, pointing across the room to a row of black leather chairs. The place was empty.

Geoffrey sat down and stared up at a very high frosted glass ceiling. Looking around, he noticed that the whole lobby was made out of frosted glass: the floor was frosted glass, the walls were frosted glass, even the tables were frosted glass. In fact, so many things were made out of frosted glass that the words "frosted glass" began to lose all meaning in his inner monologue.

"Geoffrey Stamp's here for his interview," the receptionist said quietly into the frosted glass phone. "I'll just run a quick test on him and then we'll be up." She hung up.

Suddenly, the whole room flashed green for a moment. If Geoff had blinked at that second, he would have missed it. Why the hell did that happen?

"Excellent," the receptionist said, getting up from behind her desk. "Follow me."

A panel clicked open at the back of the room, revealing a brightly lit elevator. Geoff got to his feet.

"I'm Ruth." She wore a smart, pinstriped trouser suit.

"Frosted glass." Geoff said.

Ruth led him into the elevator. Geoff looked around. There were no buttons. No floor numbers. No 'close doors' button. No alarm. What sort of elevator was this?

"Please state your destination," a synthesised female voice said.

"Top floor," Ruth replied.

The doors closed, and the elevator began to move.

"Can I ask you a question?" Geoff said.

"If it's about how I managed to reply to your letter before you sent it, you'll find out if you get the job."

"That wasn't what I was going to ask you," Geoff said. "I'd forgotten about that, actually."

"Sorry. That's what all the other applicants have asked me."

"Other applicants? How many people have you interviewed?"

"Nineteen – you're the last person we're seeing." She buttoned her suit jacket and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Here we are. Top floor."

The lift doors opened onto a huge empty room overlooking London, with windows stretching from floor to ceiling. Geoff noticed an old man sitting behind a desk in the far corner, his back to the view.

"Mr Knight over there will be interviewing you," Ruth whispered, leading Geoff across the room. "By the way, what were you going to ask me in the lift?"

"Oh, I just wondered why the room flashed green for a second downstairs."

Before Ruth could answer, Mr Knight looked up.

"Ah, Ruth!" He bellowed, "This must be our final interviewee."

"Yes," she replied. "Geoffrey Stamp."

“Excellent.” Mr Knight rushed over to meet them, displaying a surprising agility for man of his age. He was quite tall, with thick white hair and wrinkles that suggested he smiled a lot. Geoffrey guessed he must have been in his seventies.

“You’ll have to excuse all this empty space,” He said, shaking Geoffrey’s hand, “we’ve only just moved in. Have a seat.”

Ruth turned to leave.

“Good luck,” she said, and left.

Geoffrey made his way over to the desk and sat down in a rather comfortable leather chair.

“Right, let’s get on with this,” Mr Knight said, sitting down in front of Geoffrey. He straightened his tie and placed a piece of paper flat on the desk. It was the letter Geoff had sent a few hours ago.

“Dear Sir/Madam,” He read aloud, “I am writing to apply for the job you advertised in the paper. My name is Geoffrey Stamp. Yours sincerely, Geoffrey Stamp.”

“How did you get that letter so quickly?” Geoff said.

“This has to be the worst application I’ve ever read,” Mr Knight said, ignoring Geoff’s question. “It doesn’t tell me anything about you. Your hobbies, previous work, it’s useless.” He screwed up the letter and tossed it over his shoulder.

“But no matter,” he said, pulling out a clipboard and pen. “You’re here now, so perhaps we can find out more about you. Your hobbies, for instance.”

“I don’t really have any hobbies.”

“You must have a hobby. Football? Reading? What do you do in your spare time?”

Geoff thought hard.

“At the moment I’m trying to complete *Space Commando*.”

“*Space Commando*?”

“It’s a computer game.”

“So you like to play games?”

“Computer games.”

“And nothing else?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“You mean to tell me you have no other hobbies besides playing on your computer?”

“No.”

“Excellent,” He said. “What about going out?”

“Did you just say ‘excellent’?”

“Never mind that now. How often do you go out?”

“Not very often.”

“How ‘not very often’?”

“I don’t know – I’d say today is first day I’ve been out this month.”

“It’s the first of November,” Mr Knight said, checking his watch. “This is the first day I’ve been out this month.”

“It’s November?”

Mr Knight glanced down at his clipboard and made a note. “So you don’t go clubbing?”

“No.”

“Shopping?”

“No.”

“Walking?”

“No.”

“So if you don’t go out, what do you do with your friends?”

“I’ve lost touch with most of my friends. The only person I see nowadays is the bloke I live with.”

“No-one else?”

“Well, there’s Zoë, the postman. And the guy who lives next door...”

“I see.”

“But he’s just a guy.”

“So the only people you see are your flatmate, your postman, and your neighbour.”

“I suppose...”

“No friends...excellent,” Mr Knight said under his breath. He made another, much longer note.

“Is there something wrong?” Geoffrey said, trying to peek over the top of the clipboard, “I keep saying bad things, and you keep saying ‘excellent’.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Mr Knight said, placing the clipboard face down on the desk. “Tell me about any previous jobs you’ve had.”

“I’ve only ever had one job, as a paperboy,” he paused. “And I was fired from that two years ago for being too old.”

“And what were your responsibilities as a paperboy?”

“I was a paperboy.”

“Paperboy, yes,” Mr Knight echoed impatiently. “What were your responsibilities?”

“Well, when I say ‘paperboy’, I don’t mean ‘policeman’. I threw newspapers at houses. There wasn’t really any life-or-death decision making that I can think of.”

Mr Knight leant back in his creaky chair, placing both hands behind his head.

“So you’ve never had a proper job,” he said, looking up at the ceiling, “You don’t go out, you’ve got no hobbies to speak of, and with the exception of young Tim, you’ve got no friends.”

Geoff nodded.

“You’re not very observant, either.” Mr Knight stood up from his desk and turned to look across London. “Did you notice anything odd about what I just said?”

“No.” Geoff said.

Mr Knight turned round. “You haven’t told me the man you live with is called Tim.”

Geoff was so surprised, he got up from his seat. He stood there for a bit, looked around, then decided to sit back down again.

“Are you MI6?” he said.

“No.”

“Oh,” Geoff said, disappointed.

“We’ve had someone keeping an eye on you for a while,” Mr Knight said, returning to his seat. “Tell me – do you actually *want* this job?”

“Wait a second.” Geoff stood up again, hoping this gesture would express some sort of outrage. “What do you mean you’ve had someone ‘keeping an eye on me’?”

“I mean exactly that. We’ve had someone keeping an eye on you.”

“For how long?”

“It doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything.”

“Forget you said anything? You’ve been spying on me!”

“Does it really bother you?”

"Of course it does! What sort of holiday company is this, anyway?"

"Just a regular holiday company," Mr Knight said. "I can't tell you anything more unless you accept the job."

"That's another thing you haven't explained."

"What?" Mr. Knight said, drumming his fingers impatiently on the desk.

"The job. What is it? Or can't you even tell me that?"

Mr Knight said nothing.

"Right. So I have to accept the job before I know what it is." Geoff weighed this up in his mind. "Sounds a bit unreasonable."

"Nobody's forcing you to work here."

"Fine. I don't want the job," Geoff said, turning to leave. He felt defiant.

"Sit down," Mr Knight said. "You're hired."

Geoffrey sat down. "What?"

"You've got the job." He loosened his tie.

"But I just turned the job *down*."

"I know." Mr Knight looked at his watch. "That's why I'm hiring you."

"Ding!" Geoff said.

That was weird. He was planning to say something along the lines of "what the fuck is going on?" Instead, he'd opted for "ding!" He frowned, opening and shutting his mouth like a fish, before realising the noise had come from the lift behind him. The door slid open and Ruth walked over to where he and Mr Knight were sitting.

"Ruth – excellent timing," Mr Knight called out. "Mr Stamp here's got the job. The *real* job, that is."

"Brilliant," she said, perching herself cross-legged on the corner of Mr Knight's desk. "Somehow, I had a feeling you'd pick him."

Geoff was confused. "This is some sort of reality TV show, right?" he said, pulling his gaze away from Ruth to Mr Knight. "TV's Most Hilarious Interview Antics III or something?"

"No, no no no. This isn't a joke, Geoff," he said.

Geoff flitted his eyes between the two of them, waiting for one of them to explain what the hell was going on.

"What would your reaction be if I told you that we were from the future?" Mr Knight said.

"Say that again?" Geoff said, leaning forward slightly. He tilted his left ear towards Mr Knight in the hope that the question would somehow change if he heard it at a different angle.

"How would you react if I told you that we – myself and Ruth – were from the future?" he repeated.

"The future?" Geoff said.

"Yes."

"The *future* future?"

"The *future* future, yes."

"I'm not sure, really," Geoff said. "It's not the kind of thing I have to react to very often. I'm more used to reacting to things like 'There's a dress code, sir', or 'We've run out of milk'."

"Fine. I'll just say it then - myself and Ruth – we're from the future. The distant future."

As it turned out, Geoff's reaction was to raise his eyebrows as high as they would go, take a lungful of air, hold it in his cheeks, and exhale slowly.

“I’m going to try and run through this quickly,” Mr Knight continued, “It always works best if I run through it quickly. We work for a travel agent that sells holidays to different time periods, and we want *you* to be a holiday rep for the early twenty-first century – a ‘Time Rep’, if you like. Your job will be exactly the same as if you were a representative for tourists from another country, except the tourists you’ll be dealing with will be from the future. You’ll show them the sights. Take them on tours. That’s the job in a nutshell.”

The speech was concise. Sounded like he’d said it a hundred times.

Geoff was still slowly exhaling air from his cheeks. He’d understood roughly none of what Mr Knight had just said.

“What you thinking?” Ruth said.

“You Scientologists?” Geoff said.

“No,” Ruth said. “We’re just normal people.”

“From the future,” Mr. Knight added.

“Would it be terribly rude if I said that I didn’t believe you?”

“You don’t believe us?” Mr Knight said.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Time travel is impossible!”

“That’s what people once said about teleportation.”

“That’s what people *still* say about teleportation.”

“To be honest,” Ruth interrupted, “This is something we’ve come to expect from all Time Reps when we first tell them. Disbelief. That’s why we always orchestrate the little game with the application letters.”

“Stops successful interviewees from walking out the door,” Mr Knight added.

“What are you talking about?”

“Think about it.” Ruth said, leaning down and retrieving Geoff’s crumpled letter from the floor. “How could we have possibly known to send a response to your letter before you’d posted it?”

“You’re going to say ‘time travel’, aren’t you?” Geoff said.

“Does this convince you that we’re telling the truth?”

“Not really,” Geoff said, standing up. “I’m leaving.”

“Sit down,” Mr Knight said. “Our supercomputer has taken years to draw up a shortlist of candidates suitable for the job. We don’t want to lose you.”

Geoff slowly returned to his seat. “Your... supercomputer?”

“Look, I may be getting ahead of myself, so stop me if this gets confusing. We’ve got this supercomputer in the future.”

“Stop.”

Mr Knight ignored him. “This supercomputer has so much processing power, it can predict causality, telling us the precise effects of interfering with the space-time continuum in a particular way.”

“So why did it pick me?”

“Because it worked out that you’re totally insignificant.”

“Insignificant?”

“Yes,” Mr Knight said. “Every Time Rep must be a totally insignificant person. Imagine if we asked someone important or famous from this time period to do the job – we’d be in danger of changing the course of history. By only approaching people who don’t matter to the course of the space-time continuum, we avoid that risk.”

“And we avoid drawing attention to ourselves,” Ruth added. “It goes without saying that Time-Tourism is kept absolutely top secret to the destination time periods.”

“I’m insignificant?” Geoff said.

“Let’s put it this way,” Mr Knight said. “If I were to kill you on the spot, history would remain completely unchanged. If we asked any normal person to take this job, we’d be interfering with the past. You however, are *so* insignificant that asking you doesn’t change anything. Not even a little bit.”

“Not even a smidge?”

“The less people you know, the less you go out – the better. It’s taken our computer seven years of temporal analysis to produce a list of people from this time period insignificant enough to be considered for the job.”

“But your computer could be wrong,” Geoff said, feeling a little hurt. “Surely I can’t be *that* insignificant.”

“Trust us Geoff,” Ruth said, “You are. Apart from your suitability for being a Time Rep, you’re worthless. You’re less important to the world than certain types of mushroom. There’s only you, and 19 other people living in the world at this time, who are insignificant enough to be considered for the job. People who draw absolutely no attention to themselves. Lazy. Reclusive. Lonely. Unemployed. Uninteresting. Unattractive...”

“Stop, stop, stop!” Geoff said. “Unattractive?”

“Maybe not unattractive... just normal. Bland. None of you would stand out.”

“So what makes *me* so special? Am I especially bland? Am I more uninteresting than anyone else? Am I the world’s most boring, unsociable person?”

“No, no no. The only thing that marks you out from the others is the fact that you turned the job down. Everyone else accepted.”

“That’s it?” Geoff said. “Why is that so important?”

“When you turned down the job, you intentionally denied yourself an opportunity. You showed me that you had no aspirations – no desire to better yourself. All the other applicants saw this job as a chance prove themselves; a chance to change their ways, and that is exactly what we can’t have – we need you to stay the way you are. We need you to stay insignificant.”

“So... what did you tell the others?”

“The others?”

“Yeah. After they accepted the job offer.”

“All the other applicants still got a job,” Ruth said, “just not this job. We sent them all to Spain to work as regular holiday reps. They’ve got no idea that they actually failed the test.”

“I don’t understand.” Geoff said. “If this whole time-tourism thing is such a big secret, why did you advertise the job in the paper?”

“We didn’t,” Mr Knight said. “We had your newspaper custom-printed. The advert only appeared in the copy sent to your house.”

“But how did you know I would see it?”

“Because we told Tim to show it to you.”

“What?”

“Tim. Your housemate. He works for us. He’s the one who’s been spying on you.”

“Tim?”

“Yes, Tim.”

“My housemate, Tim?” Geoff said, “Not some other Tim?”

“Your housemate, Tim.”
 Geoff thought about this for a bit.
 “Are you sure?” he said.
 “Of course I’m sure,” Mr Knight replied impatiently.
 “And I suppose he’s from the future too?”
 “He is.”
 “Right. What year did you say you were from?”
 “I didn’t. I suppose the year would roughly be 3050, but we don’t really measure time in Earth years anymore.”
 “No?”
 “No. We use Outer Spiral Galactic Mean Time.”
 “Course you do,” Geoff said. “Much easier system. I’m surprised we haven’t started using it already...”
 “You still don’t believe us?” Ruth said.
 “No. There’s no way Tim could be a spy.”
 “Every candidate has unknowingly been in very close contact with an agent from this company for some time,” Ruth said. “It’s the only way we can be sure that you’re suitable for the job.”
 “This is impossible,” Geoff said. “I’ve known the guy for years.”
 “Seven years, I believe,” Mr Knight said.
 “There you go. Seven years.”
 “Think about it. He invited you to live with him when you lost your job didn’t he? Rent free?”
 “So what?”
 “Bit convenient, isn’t it?”
 “Convenient?”
 “Don’t you see?” Mr Knight said, “He invited you to live with him because we’d decided that you had potential.”
 “You’re wrong,” Geoff said. “He invited me to live with him because I’d lost my job. He felt sorry for me.”
 “He’s the *reason* you lost your job,” Mr Knight said. “Made some sort of complaint to your newsagent to get you sacked.”
 “What? Why would he do that?”
 “To force you to move in with him. Once you’d moved in, he bought the games consoles to keep you entertained, did all the shopping, everything. He’s been keeping you as detached from the outside world as possible, grooming you for the job.”
 “You can’t possibly expect me to believe all this,” Geoff said, half-laughing. “It’s too far fetched.”
 “Far fetched? Do you honestly think someone of Tim’s age could afford that house? In London? Do you really think its normal for someone to invite an ex-paperboy they hardly know to live with them, free of charge?”
 “It’s more normal than being from the future,” Geoff said.
 “Tim was one of the first people to come back to this time, years ago, when the computer identified you as a potential Time-Rep. The company bought a house on your paper-round, and Tim was stationed there to establish a relationship with you.”
 “Okay,” Geoff said. “Let’s say for a minute that I believe all this nonsense. Wouldn’t it have just been easier to just ask me directly? Put all the “Time Reps” to the test on day one?”

“Not allowed,” Ruth said. “Contacting someone from another time must be taken slowly. You can’t just wander up and ask someone to be a Time Rep.”

“Why not?”

“Regulations,” she sighed, suggesting that she didn’t agree with half of them. “There are hundreds of regulations for travelling through time.”

“Regulations?”

“Any alterations we make must be done as gradually as possible. Asking someone to be a Time Rep out of the blue is too immediate. We constantly monitor any changes in the space-time continuum when we first interact with candidates, and as such we have to be *extremely* careful, take things very slowly.”

“When candidates are finally ready for consideration, we bring them here,” Mr Knight said, gesturing pointlessly to his surroundings. “With you, we printed the advert in the local paper to bring you in, but as we said before, the invitations were different for everyone.”

Geoff glanced out of the window once more. A few streetlights were flickering on as darkness fell across the London skyline.

“I still don’t believe you,” Geoff said looking at his watch, “And it’s getting late. Can I go home now?”

“Not yet,” Mr Knight replied, “There’s one final thing I need you to do for me before you go.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a small set of earphones. “I need you to put these on.” He handed them to Geoff.

“What?” Geoff said, examining them in his hand. They looked like a regular set of shoddy earphones, but there were no wires – it looked as though they just rested in your ears by themselves.

“Put them on,” Mr Knight said.

“What are they?”

“What do they look like? They’re earphones.”

“And why do I want to put them on?”

“Just do it,” Ruth said. “Then you can go.”

Geoff tentatively placed them in his ears, and listened. There was no sound.

“I can’t hear anything,” Geoff said.

“You won’t be able to,” Mr Knight said. “It’s an ultrasonic composition.”

Geoff didn’t really get a chance to ask what that meant, because by now he was slumped over in his chair, unconscious.

THREE

Which was by no means unusual. Geoff often fell asleep while people were talking to him. Particularly relatives. This was different though – he'd felt wide awake when he put those earphones on – one minute he was talking to Mr Knight, the next he was back in his recurring dream, strolling down a hill towards his imaginary lake. Either someone had hit him over the head with a sledgehammer, or he'd been listening to some kind of warped music designed make you fall unconscious. Like a *Steps* album.

While there was no mistaking the fact that this lake only existed in his mind, Geoff was conscious that it was loosely based on a real-life lake he used to go to with Zoë; a lake they used to stroll around together when they'd finished their rounds in the morning. It had always been a place that had made him feel comfortable, and in times of stress, it was somewhere he always went to in his dreams to help him relax.

This time was no exception. His imagination had done its best to make it a really nice day for fishing; it was crisp, early-morning kind of weather, the air thick with fog and sweet to taste. In most respects, he felt a bit like being on a Scout camp, except he wasn't 11, and he wasn't being tricked by the older Scouts to go and ask the leader for a "Scrotum Scratcher" under the cruel misapprehension that it was a kitchen utensil.

No, this dream was refreshing. Even though he knew he was asleep, he felt awake, or at least, more energetic than normal. Instead of spilling like a rag doll onto his usual imaginary bench, he stood upright, nearer the bank, and cast his line further out into the water than ever before. Almost immediately, Geoff's fishing rod was nearly tugged out of his hand – his imagination taking him completely by surprise. Digging his feet into the mud, he steadied himself and tried to maintain a better grip. Whatever he had snagged, it was huge, and he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to hang on. The rod was now squirming around uncontrollably, desperately trying to prise itself free from Geoff's hands, which were beginning to get a little sore. He didn't understand - he'd never dreamt anything like this before - Rusty hubcaps and old Wellingtons didn't usually put up this much of a fight, unless of course they were still attached to cars or people.

Something began to emerge from the water. Was that... a head? He tried to look a little closer – yes, it looked a head, masked in some sort of balaclava. But it wasn't just a head he had caught – as he pulled harder, the torso and arms began to emerge. This was a whole person! It was certainly heavy enough to be a whole person. His eyes began to water with the strain of trying to control the rod – it was starting to slip from his grasp. Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the battle was over. The rod broke free of Geoff's rather pathetic grip, sailed across the lake, and glugged into the water. The masked person disappeared back under the surface, leaving only a few bubbles to commemorate the struggle.

Geoff dragged his feet out of the muddy bank and slumped down on the bench. What was that all about? Was there some sort of significance to what just happened? Why was he dreaming about pulling a masked person out of the water? He rubbed his thumbs into his palms to try and bring some circulation back to his hands.

"There," A voice said. "He's waking up. Should be able to hear us now."

"Who said that?" Geoff said, snapping his head around. He couldn't see anybody.

"Speech has returned, too."

"How long before his sight returns?" Another voice. Sounded like Tim.

“He should be fully awake within a few minutes.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Tim’s voice said. “This guy slept through a burglary once.”

“So what? Most burglars are quiet.”

“So were these,” Tim said. “Except they stole the bed he was sleeping in.”

The voices weren’t really coming from any particular direction - they just seemed to be booming out of the sky.

“What’s going on?” Geoff said.

“We’re bringing you back into the space-time continuum,” Tim’s voice said.

“Your senses are returning one at a time.”

All of a sudden, his body froze. He couldn’t move his arms or his legs.

“I can’t move!” Geoff shouted.

“Don’t struggle!” The other voice said, “That’s just your sense of touch returning. We’ve got you strapped onto a table here.”

“You’ve got me strapped onto a table?”

“Just until your sight returns, Geoff,” Tim said. “Don’t want you walking into any doors, or anything.”

It was at this stage that Geoff would normally pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. The difficulty here was that he already *was* dreaming, and couldn’t move to pinch himself even if he wanted to double check. He closed his eyes and hoped that this would all be over when he opened them again.

FOUR

“Geoff?”

“What?”

“Open your eyes.”

“No.”

“We think your sight has returned.”

“Oh good,” Geoff said. “What about my sanity? How’s that coming along?”

“Just open your eyes,” Tim said.

“Can I open *one* eye?”

There was a pause.

“If it makes you feel better.”

Geoff cautiously opened his left eye. He appeared to be lying flat on his back, his arms and legs firmly strapped to some sort of operating table. Unfortunately, that was all he could really see; above him, a large over-complicated lighting rig shone in his eyes, blinding him from the rest of his surroundings.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Geoff said. “I think I’ll just close my eyes again.”

“Wait,” Tim said. “Let me turn those lights off so you can see properly.”

The lighting rig folded in on itself and retracted into the ceiling in one graceful movement, as if it secretly wished it had chosen a career in ballet dancing rather than illumination. Not that it was illuminating much really – Geoff could now see that the room was completely empty. No sofas, beanbags, or anything light that, although he guessed this wasn’t really that sort of room. With the exception of a door in the far corner, it was featureless. Completely white. Average size. A room that would have serious trouble describing itself in a lonely hearts column.

Tim was standing in one corner. Next to him stood a much older man – probably the owner of the other voice Geoff had heard in his dream. The man’s face was quite craggy, with a thick white beard, his eyes nestled away behind a pair of bushy white eyebrows. He appeared to be leaning on an old wooden walking stick for support. Both men wore white coats and large goggles.

“Right,” Tim said, rubbing his hands enthusiastically, “Let’s help him up.”

The two men approached the table and began to unfasten the large leather straps securing Geoff’s arms and legs.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Tim said, releasing Geoff’s right arm.

“I remember someone telling me that you were a spy,” Geoff said. He hoped Tim would detect the air of disapproval in his voice.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Tim said, walking round to release Geoff’s other arm. “Do you remember anything else?”

“Putting on those stupid earphones,” Geoff replied. He rubbed his wrists. It felt like someone had been practicing their Chinese burn technique on him.

“Excellent,” the bearded man said, removing his goggles. “He remembers the earphones. It sounds like he has suffered no residual memory loss whatsoever.”

“Who are you?” Geoff said, sitting up.

“I am Dr. Skivinski,” The man said, limping over to retrieve his walking stick from the corner of the room, “but you can call me Eric.” Geoff assumed the limp wasn’t down to any sort of injury, just old age - the man must have been in his eighties.

“Turn and face me, would you?” Tim said, pulling out a small pen torch from his coat pocket.

“You a doctor, too?” Geoff said, swivelling his body round.

“Yes.” Tim replied, shining the torch in Geoff’s eyes. “I just need to ask you a few simple questions to make sure you’re okay to leave the room.”

“Questions?”

“Keep still. Do you feel disorientated?”

“Yes.”

“Confused?”

“Very.”

“Sick?”

“I want to throw up.”

“Are these stupid answers, or is that actually how you feel?”

“I’d quite like somebody to explain what the fuck is going on.” Geoff said.

“I think he’s angry,” Eric said. “Could be one of the side effects of using the earphones to convert his consciousness to energy.”

“Or it could be one of the side effects of being kidnapped and strapped to a table,” Geoff said.

“You haven’t been kidnapped,” Tim said. “You’ve just been brought to the future to understand a bit more about time tourism.”

Geoff smiled to himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s going to take more than locking me in a stupid white room to convince me that this is the future,” Geoff said.

“This ‘stupid white room’ is one of our Arrivals Chambers,” Tim said. “All time tourists leave for their destinations from a Departure Chamber, and arrive back in an Arrivals Chamber.”

“And you’re not locked in, son,” Eric said. “We just need to get you signed through at Customs and then we can show you around.”

“Customs?” Geoff said.

Tim walked over to the door and opened it. “Just think of this place as you would an airport,” he said, motioning Geoff to follow him. “When time tourists come back from their holiday, they go through customs, collect their belongings from the arrivals lounge, hug some relatives, that sort of thing.”

Tim led Geoff down a long corridor, with Eric following behind as quickly he could. Geoff didn’t know much about building design – his idea of post-modernism was a computerised letterbox – but there was something strange about this corridor; something out of place. It was certainly completely different to the ‘Arrivals Chamber’, with its dark stone walls, and tall gothic archways stretching to the ceiling. Looking up, he noticed various posters hanging down from above, advertising what seemed to be different holiday destinations. One read: “Visit the 22nd Century alien invasion and see their final annihilation in the 28th Century for one unbelievable price!” The picture underneath seemed to be an artist’s impression of a huge flying saucer crashing into Big Ben. Or was that a photograph?

“We’re nearly there now,” Tim said. “Sounds like quite a few people have just come back from somewhere, waiting to get through.”

The corridor branched out into a massive hall, with shafts of sunlight pin-pricking its way through a spectacular stained glass ceiling. What was Tim talking about? This looked nothing like an airport – it was more like a cross between Grand Central Station and a cathedral. Where were the yellow signs sending you on a treasure hunt to find the nearest bin? Where were the sandpaper-like carpets you only found in airports and Maths classrooms?

There must have been nearly 1000 people here, snaking their way round in a long queue that split off through several manned gates at the opposite end of the hall. A dull murmur of chitter-chatter echoed around the building.

"What happens now?" Geoff said.

"We'll just have to wait our turn," Tim said, leading Geoff and Eric up to the end of the queue. "Then we can start showing you the departure lounge, the paradox-scanning facilities, everything that happens here before people are cleared to travel."

Geoff looked ahead at the people in the queue.

Something wasn't quite right.

The family in front of them were dressed as Egyptians.

Further in front, a couple looked like something out of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Everyone was wearing something unexpected. This included Geoff, since it was unusual to see him not wearing pyjamas. But you didn't usually see people dressed as cavemen, politely waiting in line. Or men in pantaloons. Geoff felt like he'd arrived at a birthday party without realising it was fancy dress.

One of the children from the Egyptian-looking family in front began to stare at Geoff. He stared and stared, as if Geoff was the most interesting person he'd ever seen. He stared at Geoff's shoes. His groin. His clothes. His face. Just when this was starting to get mildly annoying, the child finally tugged on his mother's sleeve.

"Mum," he said out loud, not taking his eyes off Geoff, "look at that man's clothes!"

The mother flicked her eyes over to Geoff, then back to her son.

"What time period do you think he visited, mum?"

"Oh, I don't know, Ollie," the mother said. The tiredness in her voice suggested that this was the hundredth question he'd asked her today.

"Hey Mister," the kid said, cocking his head. "What time did you go to?"

"Er... what?" Geoff replied. He hated kids.

"What time did you go to?" The kid narrowed his eyes, as if he was weighing up several candidate time periods in his mind.

"This is Geoffrey Stamp," Eric interrupted, sensing Geoff's annoyance at his little interrogator. "New Time-Rep."

"My Goodness," the mother said, quickly tugging her son away. "Not *the* Geoffrey Stamp?" Her husband and a few other people began to look round.

"No, no," Geoff replied, turning his gaze to Tim and Eric. "I assume there is some other Geoffrey Stamp?"

Tim and Eric looked at each other, but said nothing.

Geoff looked back at the woman. "You heard of me?"

"You're the new rep," She said. "For the 21st Century?"

Geoff turned back to Tim and Eric. "How does she know that?"

"Your name's been all over the news for the past week," Eric said.

"The news?" Geoff said.

The woman in front of them turned to the rest of the queue.

"Can everyone please move aside," She shouted, "Geoffrey Stamp is coming through!"

The chatter in the hall began to quieten down. A few more people began to look round.

"Don't worry about me," Geoff said, stepping back in embarrassment, "I'll wait in line."

"You don't have to wait, Mr Stamp," one of the cavemen said. "Please, go straight through!"

Geoff turned to Tim.

“What’s going on?” He whispered.

“I thought this might happen,” Tim said. “Time Reps are starting to be treated like *ambassadors* these days.”

“What?”

“You’re now quite an important person to know,” Tim said. “Did Mr Knight take you through any of your responsibilities as a Time Rep?”

“He just said that I’d be ‘showing people the sights’.” Geoff said. “You know, like a regular holiday rep.”

“Well, there’s a little bit more to it than that,” Tim said. “Let’s say one of your tourists gets in trouble with the police for breaking a law that no longer exists - most people are insured to have their bail paid and legal representation organised by their Time Rep.”

“Or say one of your tourists is hit by a bus,” Eric said. “You’ll be expected to be at the scene within minutes to arrange safe passage back to the future, where they will receive proper medical treatment.”

“A good Time Rep can be the difference between life and death,” Tim said, “and these tourists know it. You’ll be treated with a huge amount of respect while you’re here.”

Geoff looked back at the crowd of people, most of whom were now looking straight back at him. He took a few tentative steps forward, a little unnerved by the fact that people were moving aside as he approached them.

“That’s Geoffrey Stamp,” A Victorian-looking man said, pointing Geoff out to his daughter as he passed by. “He’s a very important man from the 21st Century...” The little girl looked up at Geoff, meeting his eyes his gaze briefly before burying her face in shyness into her teddy bear.

This was getting a little surreal. For Geoff, the only thing worse than being the centre of attention was being in the centre of Manchester. He needed to get out of here as soon as possible.

“Mr Stamp!” someone shouted. “Mr Stamp!”

Geoff stopped and looked in the direction of the voice. It seemed to be coming from a knight, struggling to push his way through the crowd in a clunky suit of armour.

“Can I just say what a pleasure it is to meet you,” the knight said, lifting his face plate to reveal a fawning grin. “You can rest assured that my next trip will definitely be to the 21st Century!” He extended a gauntlet-clad hand for Geoff to shake.

Geoff didn’t really know how to respond to this, so he shook the man’s hand, smiled uncomfortably, and continued towards the customs gates at the end of the hall. More and more people around him were beginning to mention his name, to the point that he couldn’t really hear what they were saying. All he could hear was “Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp,” his name drowning out any other snippets of conversation. He could occasionally pick out the odd detail here and there – someone mentioning that he’d turned down the job, someone else saying he used to be a paperboy, but mainly he could just hear his name: “Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp... Geoffrey Stamp.” The words were now ringing in his ears, repeating over and over again, louder and louder, almost as if it was being chanted by the crowd. He waded past the last few people in the queue and hurried over to the nearest customs official, desperate to leave the overwhelming reverberation of “Geoffrey Stamp”, which was echoing all around the hall.

“Name?” The man said, licking his pencil.

“Take a wild guess,” Geoff said, staring at the official.

“This is Geoffrey Stamp,” Tim said. “New Time Rep for the 21st Century.”

“Another rep?” The official said, jotting something down on his clipboard.

“This is the fourth one you boys have brought in today! Just signed through some pharaoh from 3000 BC. He was a new Time Rep, too.”

“We’ve got a lot of new destinations planned this year,” Tim said. “How long is this going to take?”

“Well, I’ll need to take a sample of his DNA. And I need to inoculate him.”

“Inoculate me?” Geoff said, looking round at his minders.

“There’s a few airborne viruses your 21st Century immune system won’t be able to deal with,” Eric said. He turned to the customs official. “That’s all been taken care of,” he said. “I personally inoculated Mr Stamp when he arrived, and we’ve already got his blood, hair, saliva, semen and tissue samples on record.”

“You’ve got what?” Geoff said.

“Relax,” Tim said. “It’s just a precaution – we need to keep a record of everyone who goes in and out of here.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve had a lot of attempted terrorist attacks this month,” Eric answered. He put his walking stick under his arm and took the clipboard from the official. “The last attempt nearly failed to register on the pre-departure paradox scan. Can’t be too careful these days.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Geoff said.

“Some people aren’t just here to go on holiday,” Eric said, signing something off. “A few have other ideas. They try and use the time-travel facilities to go back and change the past for their own political agenda.” He checked over a few more details on the clipboard, handed it to Tim, and rested back down on his walking stick again. “Idiots, if you ask me.”

“People try and change the past?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Tim said, adding a few remarks underneath whatever Eric had written. “Ever since this place opened up, there have been various attempts to abuse the technology and change history: People trying to go back and help Guy Fawkes blow up the houses of Parliament, Distant relatives of holocaust victims trying to go back and assassinate Hitler, Americans trying to prevent World War 4. There’s even a rumour that some people want to...” He tailed off, as if he’d thought the better of finishing his sentence.

“Want to... what?” Geoff said.

“Nothing. Let’s just say that any attempt to change the course of history is considered an act of terrorism.” He handed the clipboard back to the official.

“Did Mr Knight tell you about my supercomputer?” Eric said. “The one that predicted your total insignificance as a human being?”

“He may have mentioned it,” Geoff said, rubbing the back of his head - he’d been trying to put that to the back of his mind. “Listen - are you sure about this whole insignificance thing? Maybe this ‘super’ computer made some sort of mistake?”

“I spent seventeen years of my life writing the 6 billion character algorithm it uses to make those predictions,” Eric said, stroking his beard. “Won my first Nobel prize just for suggesting the initial theory in a bar. Trust me – in the 15 years it has been operational, not once has it made a mistake. The very fact that nothing changed when we removed you from the 21st century should be a testament to that.”

“Still could be a mistake,” Geoff said.

Eric took a deep breath.

“The computer predicts *everything*. It is 100% reliable. It has never made a mistake, and it predicts that it never *will* make a mistake. It is infallible. That’s why we use it to ‘paradox-scan’ every person before they leave this time period. If the computer predicts any changes to the space time continuum, deliberate or not, as a result of a particular journey, then that tourist is blocked from accessing the departure chamber, and sent home immediately.”

“We’ll show you how it all works later,” Tim said, suspecting that they were getting a little ahead of themselves.

“You gentleman are clear to proceed to the Arrivals Lounge,” the customs official said, motioning them to move along. He handed Geoff a small badge. “Wear that if you enter any restricted areas,” he said, and turned to the next person in the queue.

Geoffrey looked at the badge. On it was a hologram of his face, his fingerprint, and the words “Geoffrey Stamp - Time Rep - 21st Century.” He didn’t really want any more strangers knowing who he was and coming up to him to shake his hand, so he tucked the badge in his coat pocket and followed Tim and Eric through the customs gate.

The Arrivals Lounge was bustling with more strangely dressed tourists, the different outfits providing an insight into the kind of places you could visit. To Geoff’s left, a few children dressed as Red Indians were chasing each other round in circles. To his right, a group of people wearing nothing but fig leaves were collecting their luggage from one of the many conveyor belts. Tim and Eric pushed their way through the crowd, looking back every so often to make sure they hadn’t lost Geoff. They seemed to be making their way over to a row of brightly lit elevators at the back of the hall. Geoff carefully negotiated his way through the crowd and followed Tim and Eric into the nearest one.

“Please state your destination,” A synthesised female voice said. It was the same voice Geoff had heard in the lift with Ruth before his interview.

“The Departure Lounge,” Tim said.

FIVE

The lift began to descend to its destination.

"These lifts," Geoff said, looking around at the shiny interior. No buttons again. "They recognise your voice?"

"Yep," Tim said.

"Is it easy to confuse them?"

"What?"

"Is it easy to confuse them?" Geoff repeated.

"What do you mean, 'confuse them'?"

"Let's say we were talking about someone we knew in the basement. When one of us said the word 'basement', would it think we wanted to go the basement, or would it know that we were just saying the word 'basement'?"

"Is it important?" Tim said. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious."

"The lift is programmed to look at the context of the word to determine if it is a command," Eric said. "It knows when it's being spoken to."

"So you can't fool it?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "I've got better things to do with my time than try and to trick a lift into going to a floor I don't want to go to."

"I suppose it is a silly thing to do, now that you mention it," Geoff said.

"Basement!"

The lift still didn't seem to change direction.

"Maybe this place doesn't have a basement," Geoff said.

"Or maybe the lift knew you were trying to trick it."

"How would it know that?"

"You've just spent the last two minutes talking about whether you could confuse the lift by saying 'basement', and then you said 'Basement'. It doesn't take a genius to work out that it's a trick."

"But that would mean that the lift can understand everything we're saying!" Geoff said.

"Correct," Eric replied.

"But... don't you find that a little weird?" Geoff said, suddenly feeling intimidated. "I'd rather the lift wasn't listening to this conversation!"

"I'd rather *I* wasn't listening to this conversation," Tim said.

"Now arriving at the Departure Lounge," the elevator said, coming to an abrupt halt.

The doors opened to reveal a huge gothic hall, similar in design to the arrivals lounge. There must have been tens of thousands of people here. Some were seated, looking up at huge glowing departure screens that appeared to be hovering in mid air. Other people were in more of a hurry, barging their way through the crowds, luggage crashing around in tow.

"The Departure Lounge is the starting point for all time-tourists," Tim said, raising his voice over the murmur of the crowd.

It really was *very* busy, with all sorts of strangely dressed tourists rushing off in different directions. Geoff found it quite entertaining to look at the various costumes in the room and try to guess which time period people were going to visit. For the most part, this was quite easy: the group dressed as cowboys were obviously going back to the Wild West and the World War II soldiers were obviously going back to 1940s Europe. Other costumes posed more of a challenge. Silver jumpsuits?

Rubber dungarees? Either these people were about to join the circus, or they were travelling somewhere later than the 21st Century; a place where Geoff was not familiar with the fashion. Not that Geoff was familiar with the fashion of his own time period.

“We should try and tag along with the next group that gets called up,” Eric said to Tim.

“Agreed,” Tim replied, forging his way into the crowd. “Stay close to me, Geoff,” he said over his shoulder.

Geoff followed his hosts across the departure lounge, wading through groups of 1920s gangsters, astronauts and hippies.

“THIS IS A CUSTOMER ANNOUNCEMENT,” A voice blared over the loudspeaker. “WILL CUSTOMERS TRAVELLING TO 1666 A.D. PLEASE MAKE THEIR WAY TO QUARANTINE CHAMBER 16.”

A group of people dressed as peasants over the other side of the hall seemed to respond. Slowly, they got up from their seats, had a bit of a stretch and ambled their way over to an exit marked ‘Quarantine Chambers 0 – 50’.

“Here we go,” Tim said. “Let’s follow them.”

Geoff tugged on Tim’s sleeve. “Quarantine Chamber 16?”

“All tourists are quarantined briefly,” Tim said over his shoulder, “just to make sure they’re not carrying any diseases or viruses that cannot be cured in the past.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t want someone going back in time and spreading today’s cold virus,” Tim replied. “It’d be the plague all over again.”

* * *

The quarantine chambers looked a little familiar.

Frosted glass.

All the tourists were sitting patiently on frosted glass benches, looking aimlessly up at a frosted glass ceiling, leaning back against frosted glass walls. Everything was frosted glass.

“Frosted glass!” The words fell out of Geoff’s mouth before he knew why he wanted to say them.

“What?” Tim said.

“This whole place is made of frosted glass!”

“It’s not frosted glass,” Eric said. “It’s a special sensory material we use to detect any extraneous organisms. Viruses. Bacteria.”

“Just takes a few seconds to scan everyone,” Tim said, checking his watch impatiently.

“The door handles are frosted glass! The floor is frosted glass! There’s not one piece of furniture in here that isn’t made of frosted glass!”

“Yes Geoff, everything is made of ‘frosted glass’.”

“Is your lobby a quarantine chamber, then?” Geoff asked. “The one I was sitting in this afternoon?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” Tim said, surprised that Geoff had made the connection. “We’re all scanned before we go into the outside world.”

Geoff thought about this.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Was I scanned before I went up for the interview with Mr Knight?” He felt a little offended. “Did they think I was diseased, or something?”

“I doubt it,” Tim said. “Unless Ruth thought you looked really ill, she wouldn’t have bothered with a scan. Each one costs a fortune.”

The room flashed green for a split second.

“Looks like this group are safe to travel,” Eric said.

A large set of double doors clicked open at the back of the quarantine chamber. The tourists got up from their seats and shuffled through in a semi-orderly fashion.

“Customs next,” Tim said, following the last few people through the double doors, down a brightly lit corridor.

“Customs?” Geoff said.

“Yep.”

“But didn’t we just go through customs?”

“That was for arrivals. This is for outbound tourists,” Tim said.

The corridor opened out onto a large room. All the tourists were queuing up to go through a tall square arch, which to Geoff looked a bit like an airport metal detector. One by one the tourists passed under the arch and made their way over to a group of customs officials, who were adding a few finishing touches to various costumes as they saw fit - a little more mud rubbed into the cleaner outfits, hair being messed up if it looked too styled. The attention to detail was amazing.

“This should be quite familiar to you,” Tim said.

“People having their hair messed up and mud rubbed into their clothes?”

Geoff was sick of Tim making fun of his personal hygiene.

“That’s not what he meant,” Eric said. “This procedure should be familiar to you, because it’s quite similar to the kind of checks you have before you board a plane. If I recall, they used to check for sharp objects, cigarette lighters, and baby milk, for some reason. Here, we make sure everyone is dressed appropriately to blend in, and we screen everyone to make sure they are not carrying any technology that doesn’t exist in their destination time period.”

“Think of it this way,” Tim said, sensing Geoff’s confusion. “Ever been to Australia?”

“No.” Geoff said. He hadn’t even been to the bottom of the garden.

“Course you haven’t,” Tim muttered, remembering that he probably knew more about Geoff than Geoff did. “In Australia you’re not allowed to take any foreign biological materials into the country that might upset the balance of the ecosystem. Travelling through time follows the same principle: anything that does not exist in the time period you are visiting must be left at your departure time. We certainly don’t want a stray piece of technology changing the course of history, or exposing the time-tourism industry to the past.”

“Does it really make that much of a difference?” Geoff said.

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Eric said. “Take Viagra. We now know it only takes one idiot tourist to leave a bottle of the stuff in his hotel room for the world population to double by the year 3000. That stuff wasn’t supposed to have been invented for hundreds of years.”

“What an almighty cock-up,” Geoff smirked.

They ignored him. “Those were the early days of time-tourism,” Eric continued. “When the government handed out the first time-travel licenses to the private sector, holiday companies got a bit excited. Didn’t think things through. These

days, the only piece of technology you're allowed to take with you on holiday are the earphones you need to get back again. But apart from that, you're not allowed to take anything...."

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Eric was interrupted by a loud beeping sound. As beeping sounds go, it was fairly polite, but piercing enough to suggest that someone should probably go and find out what all the beeping was about, rather just ignoring it in the hope that it would eventually turn itself off. It was the square arch. The beeping got louder. A few lights began to flash for good measure. The tourist who had just walked through the arch had obviously triggered something. He stopped and looked sheepishly towards the customs officials, who had all snapped their gaze in his direction.

"Jesus," Eric spat under his breath, gripping the top of his walking stick a little more tightly. "Another idiot."

"I was hoping you'd get to see something like this," Tim whispered to Geoff. "Looks like this guy might be trying to smuggle something back in time..."

The other tourists stared at the man, some nervously backing away. Parents squeezed their children's hands a little tighter. One of the more senior-looking customs officials approached cautiously.

"Do you have anything on your person that may not be indigenous to the time period you are about to visit?" He asked.

"Me?" The man said.

"Step over here, please sir," the official said, grabbing the tourist by the arm and pulling him over to one side. Another official made a few adjustments to the arch to stop it beeping and motioned the remaining tourists to continue through.

"It infuriates me that some people still try and get away with this," Eric said to Geoff. "How many more adverts do we need to run to warn people of the implications?"

"I'll ask you again," the official said to the tourist. "Are you attempting to take something back in time that won't have been invented in 1666?"

"This is ridiculous," the man said, "It's the tiniest, most insignificant thing. What possible harm could it do?"

"I don't know sir," the official said. "Hand it over and I'll tell you."

The tourist dug into his pocket and removed a small metal disc. "See?" He said, handing it to the official. "It's just a hologram."

The official turned the disc over in his hand and pressed a small button on the side. Sure enough, the disc projected a small flickering image in mid air of the man with a woman and two kids.

"My family," the tourist said.

"Lovely," The official said. "Dangerous thing to try and take back with you though," he said, switching off the disc.

The tourist looked blankly at the official for a moment. "I don't see how."

"All it would take is for you to lose this in the past, someone else to pick it up and find out how to switch it on..."

"So what?" The man interrupted. "So I lose it. How would someone else finding it change anything?" He sounded frustrated.

"Are you some sort of idiot?" Eric shouted at the tourist from across the room, waving his walking stick in the air. "They still have the death penalty for practicing witchcraft in the 17th Century!"

"Witchcraft?" The tourist said. "What has this stupid hologram got to do with witchcraft?"

“Oh, we don’t think anything of a simple hologram these days,” Eric said, “but can you imagine what would happen to someone in the 17th Century if they were able to produce a flickering image in the palm of their hands? People would think it was magic. If that person was then accused of consorting with evil spirits, they could be killed. What if that person should have been your ancestor? Or my ancestor? Or anybody’s ancestor?”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” the customs official said, turning back to the tourist.

“I won’t drop it,” the tourist said impatiently, reaching out to try and grab the hologram back. “I’ll keep it on me at all times. Promise.”

“I guarantee the computer will never let you through with this,” the official said, tossing the device over to one of his assistants. “Just follow the rest of your group through to the paradox-scanning facility.”

“Stupid computer,” the tourist said, reluctantly doing as he was told.

* * *

Stupid computer indeed, Geoff thought. This was the computer that thought he was less significant than certain types of mushroom. Said he was unpopular. Uninteresting. Unattractive. So what if it used a 6 billion character algorithm to reach this conclusion? *Sunset Beach* had loads of characters in it, and that was rubbish.

The ‘paradox-scanning facility’ was a short walk from customs, deliberately leading the tourists past several advertisements for lectures and guidebooks to increase their chances of passing the scan. “30% of tourists were turned away last year because they lacked the knowledge of local customs needed to blend in” said one billboard. “Those people should have read *Tipping in Restaurants: 1950 to 2150*”. Apparently it was a bestseller.

Geoff felt himself walking a little faster. He wasn’t sure why – it was as if some sort of invisible force was beginning to pull him down the corridor, like having an overexcited dog on a leash. And it wasn’t just him – everyone seemed to be breaking into a bit of a jog.

“What’s going on?” Geoff said. “I feel like I’m in that Olympic event where everyone walks like a cockney.”

“It’s the computer,” Eric said. “It’s actually a massive neutronium-encased lattice of artificial micro-black holes. Only one of its kind in the world. Unfortunately one of the side-effects is that it emits a mild gravitational pull.” He ran his hand along the wall to try and slow himself down.

“Sounds powerful,” Geoff said, humouring Eric.

“You can’t begin to imagine.”

“But can it run *Nascar Racing* in full detail? Even on my old 486 DX4, it chugged along like a bastard...”

“*Nascar Racing*?”

“Old computer game. You’ve never heard of it?”

“This computer is NOT used to play games,” Eric said sternly, clearly insulted at the suggestion. “Its sole function is to store huge amounts of information.”

“You haven’t tried *any* games on it?”

“It’s not that sort of computer!” Eric fumed. “Do you have any idea about the kind of temporal calculations this computer is capable of? Can you even begin to understand how difficult it is to read back information through Hawking radiation?”

We're not going to waste that kind of processing power by plugging a joystick into it and playing Pac-Man!"

"I've been meaning to ask you - what exactly are these 'temporal calculations'?" Geoff made no effort to hide the scepticism in his voice – he was determined to prove that this computer had made some sort of mistake about him.

"Simple," Eric replied calmly, relieved that Geoff was beginning to ask some sensible questions. "The computer is effectively a simulator. It recreates a precise model of the space-time continuum in its memory banks."

"And how precise is this 'model'?"

"Precise enough to map out the vibration of every molecule on this planet for the next 100,000 years."

Geoff blinked. "Reasonably precise, then."

"You could say that," Eric said. "The computer takes a snapshot of the final nanosecond of this model, 100,000 years in the future. Once it has that as a point of reference, it runs the model again, changing the appropriate variables to reflect who is travelling through time and where they are visiting. If the final nanosecond is different in any way from the original snapshot, the tourist is blocked from travelling."

"Is that what happened with me?" Geoff said. "You ran a simulation of me being plucked from my own time, and there was no difference?"

"There was one small difference," Tim said. "But the computer decided it was well within acceptable tolerance levels."

"What was the difference?"

"A seagull in Brighton was facing right instead of left."

Geoff frowned. "That was it?"

"Yes."

"No other differences?"

"No."

"A seagull?"

"A seagull."

"What was it looking at?"

"Nothing, as far as we could tell," Tim said. "Everything else on the entire planet was exactly the same. It just chose to look in the opposite direction."

"But... why did it do that?"

"We've got absolutely no idea. It just did."

"You mean everyone else was standing in exactly the same place? Doing exactly the same thing?"

"Not exactly," Eric said.

"Not exactly?"

"It's complicated. 100,000 years from now, Earth will be a very different place. According to our simulations, mankind will have left the planet to explore other galaxies, and Earth would have been given back to Mother Nature. Towns and cities will have decayed into dust, air pollution will be non-existent, and the ice-caps will have re-formed. Eventually, the entire planet becomes like a massive nature reserve. Quite beautiful, really."

Before Geoff could really think about what possible influence he could have over a seagull, he noticed the corridor around him beginning to change. The unremarkable grey walls were giving way to a much more glamorous, shiny metallic black material. The gravitational pull on his body started to weaken.

"This is all neutronium around you now," Eric said. "We're passing into the computer's core."

“The gravitational pull will normalise as we reach the paradox scanning facility in the centre,” Tim said.

Geoff could see an opening up ahead. Sure enough, everyone appeared to be slowing back down to a normal walking speed.

“How big did you say this computer was?” Geoff said, reaching out to touch one of the walls. It was warm. Come to think of it, the further they walked down the corridor, the hotter it was becoming.

“It’s basically a huge sphere,” Eric said, shrugging off his white coat and folding it over his arm. “If you were to look down on the computer from above, it would be about the size of a Hoverball pitch. Except we’re underground.”

The corridor finally opened out to reveal a large, dome-shaped chamber. The walls and ceiling looked like they were made from the same shiny metallic material he had seen in the corridor – neutronium, was it? The rest of the room was empty. If it wasn’t for a large, vertical shaft of light beaming down on a pedestal in the middle of the room, it would have been pitch black in here. Geoff tugged at the neck of his t-shirt – he was boiling.

An overweight, sweaty looking official met the tourists at the mouth of the corridor and motioned them to gather round.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the man bellowed, his voice echoing around the chamber, “For those of you who have not been here before, this is the paradox scanning facility. In a moment, I will call out each of your names, one by one, in alphabetical order. When you hear your name, please walk over to the beam of light behind me, step into the beam and wait for the computer to scan you.” The man paused for a second to wipe his brow on his sleeve.

“The scan should take no longer than 10-15 seconds,” He continued. “If the beam turns green, congratulations – you have been cleared for travel. Step out of the beam and proceed to the departure chamber.” He pointed towards a dimly-lit corridor on the opposite side of the room. “However, if you fail the scan, the beam of light will turn red. If this happens, please step out of the beam and come back to this part of the chamber. As a precaution against time terrorists, the corridor to the departure chamber will instantly seal itself. Any questions?”

“What happens if we fail the scan?” One person called out. “Will we find out why?”

“And will we get our money back?” Another person shouted.

“One at a time,” The man said, holding his hands up. His voice sounded a little exhausted in the heat. “The computer will transmit a report of every failed scan to my handheld terminal should you wish to know why you were not cleared for travel. And yes, you will receive a full refund from your Tour Operator.” He looked from one end of the crowd to the other. “Any other questions?”

Everyone seemed reasonably comfortable with the process.

Geoff was still thinking about his seagull.

“Right,” The man said, looking down at his handheld terminal. “David Atkin – you’re up first. Step into the beam when you’re ready.”

A tall, thin man squeezed his way out of the crowd and walked over to the centre of the chamber. He paused for a second, as if this was a big moment for him, and stepped up onto the pedestal, his body enveloped in the thick beam of light. Everyone else in the room stared at the man in silence, waiting in anticipation for the first result.

10 seconds passed.

David Atkin was shivering. Was he nervous?

15 seconds.

20 seconds.

This was taking a long time. David Atkin looked back at everyone and shrugged his shoulders. He began to blush, obviously a little embarrassed at the delay. All of a sudden, the beam turned green.

“Yes!” he said, punching the air. A few people in the crowd cheered. He stepped off the pedestal and disappeared down the opposite corridor with a distinct spring in his step.

“Andrew Baker,” the official called out.

It was the man who’d had the argument earlier about his hologram. He strolled up aggressively to the pedestal and stepped into the light, his arms folded tight across his chest. He didn’t look happy. It was almost as if he expected to fail.

The beam quickly turned green. Again, a few cheers and claps came from the crowd, who seemed happy to rally behind whoever’s turn it was to go up. A look of surprise swept across the man’s face. He stepped out of the light and swiftly made his way to the departure chamber, as if afraid that the computer was going to change its mind.

“Christine Bennett”, the official said.

A girl near the front of the crowd whooped in excitement and walked towards the beam of light. Geoff’s eyes widened - this girl was gorgeous. Despite the unflattering peasant’s costume, the mud on her face, and the twigs in her hair, there was undoubtedly something mesmerising about this woman – confident eyes, a glistening smile, huge breasts, a sexy swing to her hips; Geoff could almost feel himself drooling as he watched her step up onto the pedestal. Or was that sweat? He sniffed under his arms.

“Am I beginning to smell?” He whispered to Tim.

“Beginning?” Tim replied.

The girl shut her eyes and arched her neck back in the light, waiting for her result. Her fingers were crossed.

All of a sudden, the light turned red. The crowd responded with a collective sigh of disappointment. As the official had mentioned, a large metal door immediately dropped down to seal off the corridor to the departure chamber.

“What?” The girl said in confusion, her voice trembling slightly. “What did I do wrong?” She stepped off the pedestal in shock and staggered over to the official in disbelief.

“I’m sorry, miss,” the official said, looking down at his handheld terminal. “Says here we’d have lost five family trees if you’d gone back in time today.”

“But... that can’t be possible,” the girl said. “I’ve spent weeks studying all the customs - I know exactly how to blend in, I...”

The official interrupted, reading aloud from his terminal. “Five separate gentleman would have fallen in love with you from afar and not pursued their destined partners as a result,” he said, offering the girl his handheld terminal to read it for herself. “In layman’s terms, the computer reckons that you’re too attractive to ‘blend in’ in the 17th century.”

The girl took the terminal in her hand and read a few of the details out loud. “An Earl, three market traders and a blacksmith all die single as opposed to married with kids because they become infatuated with me and don’t pursue other relationships? I don’t believe it.”

“Computer!” The official said into thin air, “Could you please bring up a video simulation of this prediction for the benefit of Miss Bennett?”

“A video simulation?” the girl said.

Within moments, a large hologramatic screen materialised in thin air in front of them, and everyone watched as it showed a life-like simulation of everything the official had just described. Sure enough, whilst the girl was minding her own business, walking around various 17th Century London landmarks, a few gentlemen in the background were staring lustfully in her direction. Geoff couldn’t believe this was really just a simulation – the graphics were good enough to be a film. He also felt weirdly in tune with what he was watching, as if he could hear the inner monologues of the people on screen – indeed some of the blacksmith’s thoughts towards Miss Bennett were really quite disgusting. Was this simulation somehow managing to transmit something to them on a more subliminal level?

“I’ve seen enough,” the girl said. “Make it stop.”

The screen flickered off and disappeared in a brief flash of vapour.

“Sorry,” the official said, taking his terminal back. “I’m afraid you’ll have to leave the way you came in. Why don’t you pick up one of our leaflets on temporary plastic surgery on your way out?”

The girl walked off in silence, removing the twigs from her hair and snapping them in half as she left.

“Cheer up, everyone!” The official said, sensing a slump in the crowd’s mood. “Matt Davies – you’re up next.” The corridor to the arrivals chamber opened up again.

Geoff watched as the rest of the tourists were scanned by the computer. Many were cleared for travel, many were not. In one case, a family of five were sent home because their eldest son failed the scan. Turned out he had secretly skipped a few of the lectures on 17th century swearwords and would have unwittingly drawn attention to himself when he accidentally shut his fingers in a barn door. His mother was furious, demonstrating her own knowledge of swearwords as they left.

“Well, this little tour of our facility is nearly over,” Eric said, watching the last person being cleared for travel. “Ever fancied going back to 1666?”

“It’s never really been on my list of planned holidays to be honest,” Geoff said. “The only place I thought about visiting this year was Cornwall.”

“How about it then?” Eric said. “It’ll be useful for you to experience one of these trips for yourself.”

“Will I need toothpaste?” Geoff said. “I didn’t bring any toothpaste.”

“No, you won’t need toothpaste,” Eric replied. “You’re not allowed to take anything like that, remember? Besides, we’ll only be there a little while – just long enough for you to see one of our Time Reps in action.”

“What do you say?” Tim said.

Geoff thought for a moment. He’d actually planned on going to Sainsbury’s later to buy some chicken nuggets, but he guessed that was now out of the window.

“Sure, why not?” he said.

“Great,” Tim said. “Step into the beam of light and we’ll be on our way.”

Geoff hesitated. “Is it safe?” he said.

“Of course it’s bloody safe, you idiot!” Eric snapped. “We wouldn’t be in business very long if we killed all our tourists, would we?”

“I suppose not,” Geoff replied, cautiously approaching the pedestal and stepping into the beam. He was surprised to discover that it was actually refreshingly cool compared to the rest of the room; so much so that goosebumps were beginning to appear on his arms. He closed his eyes and decided to enjoy it while it lasted.

“So what’s so special about 1666?” Geoff said, waiting for the light to turn green.

“Oh, it’s quite a popular destination actually,” Tim said.

“Why’s that?” Geoff said, suddenly feeling very hot. He opened his eyes. The light had turned green.

“Major disasters are always very popular,” Eric said, himself stepping up to be scanned. “Nothing better than a bit of death and destruction to spice up a holiday.”

“Death and destruction?” Geoff said, stepping out of the light. Those were two of his least favourite words.

“Yes,” Tim said. “Don’t you know your history?”

“Erm, I know there have been a few wars here and there, but that’s about it. What happened in 1666?”

“1666 was the year of the great fire of London.”

Great, Geoff thought. At least he wouldn’t have trouble thinking of something to write on the postcard.

SIX

Now, given all the fuss that had been made to ensure every tourist fitted in with London's 17th century population – the removal watches and earrings, adding dirt to people's costumes and making sure no-one's hair was conspicuously styled, you would have thought the time-tourism officials would have made at least a couple of alterations to Geoff's wardrobe, or rather to the clothes he was wearing at that moment, since large wooden pieces of furniture tended to be a bit cumbersome to carry around. As it happened, the general consensus amongst the officials was that Geoff was very suitably dressed for the 17th Century; his hair was scruffy, his shoes were dirty enough to disguise their design, and his clothes were plain and crumpled. Whilst Eric and Tim had to get completely changed and surrender their walking stick and designer glasses respectfully, Geoff was allowed to travel back in time with no modifications to his appearance whatsoever. One official even told him to keep up the good work.

He was pleased to discover that his second experience of travelling through time was actually much more bearable than the first. In fact, this time the journey had felt almost instantaneous. There had been no passing out, no strange dreams involving fishing, and no sense of panic and disorientation upon arrival. He'd simply dematerialised in the departure chamber and calmly reappeared down a dark, cobbled back alley. In front of him, the tourists who had passed their paradox scan were all gathering together by a stack of wooden crates, chatting amongst themselves excitedly.

It wasn't long before Eric and Tim arrived, the outline of their silhouettes quietly materialising out of thin air and fleshing out into solid humanoid forms. Geoff had to admit to being a little bit disappointed with the aesthetics of their entrance; the re-materialisation process must have lasted only a couple of seconds, and had none of the exciting bells and whistles he was expecting to accompany what was clearly an amazing technological feat. Not that he was expecting *actual* bells and whistles, because that would have been a bit stupid, but he would have at least liked to have seen a few sparks, or a bright flash of lightning or something. The intention was obviously to draw as little attention to a time-traveller's entrance as possible.

"Alright?" Tim said nonchalantly, as if they'd just stepped off a bus.

"Yep," Geoff said. "Couldn't be better."

"Excellent," Eric said, leading them over to join the other tourists. He appeared to be having a bit of trouble negotiating the cobbled street without his walking stick, but eventually made it over to the rest of group and leaned on one of the crates.

"So what happens now?" Geoff said.

"We wait," Tim replied. "William should be here any minute to collect us."

"William?"

"William Boyle. He's one of the Time Reps we've got working for us in this time period."

"One of the Time Reps?" Geoff said. "How many have you got?"

"Oh, a few hundred," Tim said.

"A few hundred?"

"You've got to remember that the Great Fire of London only happened once Geoff, and we've got thousands of people paying to see it. You don't think we've got just one Time Rep to accommodate that kind of demand, do you? They can't be in several places at once."

“Well, they can,” Eric interjected, “if we keep sending the same Time Reps back in time to conduct tours of the fire over the same few days. But we’d risk them being spotted in two places at once. Not the best scenario if you’re trying to keep the whole thing a secret.”

“It isn’t fair on them either,” Tim added. “It would be like Groundhog Day. Can you imagine living through the same day for years of your life?”

Geoff *could* imagine this actually. Sounded a bit like how he felt watching the same breakfast chat shows every morning.

“So how does time travel actually work?” Geoff said.

Eric looked up.

“What do you mean, ‘how does it work’?” he said.

“I mean, is it complicated?”

Eric shut his eyes and sighed.

“You could say that,” he said. “Do you know much about the complexities of quantum physics? How the whole universe is actually a complex type of hologram?”

“Not really. Can you explain it to me?”

“No way!” Eric snapped. “It would take me two years of continuous talking just to explain how to manipulate quantum entanglement to send a photon back in time by one nanosecond, let alone organic matter! Forget it.”

“Oh go on,” Geoff said. “Can’t you just sum it up?”

“Sum it up?” Eric said, lunging his arms in the air. “Sum it up? The founding theories behind what makes time travel possible isn’t something I can just ‘sum up’!”

“Keep your voice down,” Tim said.

“But I’ve travelled through time now,” Geoff said. “Surely I’m entitled to know *something*?”

“No!”

“Just a little bit?”

Eric shut his eyes again and let out a deep breath.

“Can you drive?” he said.

“Erm... I’ve got a licence.”

“And do you know how to make an internal combustion engine?”

“No.”

“Well there you go, then. This is the same thing, but a hundred billion times more complicated. Trust me – explaining the rules of time travel to a time traveller would be like explaining the rules of golf to a golf ball.”

Geoff got the feeling that if he continued to pursue this line of questioning much longer, Eric would most likely take the analogy one step further and hit him with the nearest club-like object. He looked aimlessly up and down the street and tried to think of some way of changing the subject.

“Ah,” Tim said, pointing at a young man heading towards them. “Here’s William.”

Geoff watched intently as William approached, curious to see what another Time Rep looked like. As it happened, William looked like a perfectly average guy - he had no real distinguishing features, wasn’t particularly handsome, and had all the mod-cons you would normally expect to come with your standard human being: hair, eyes, arms, legs - everything about him was just... normal. The only thing remotely unusual about him was the fact that he was dressed as a peasant, but Geoff guessed this was probably due to the fact that he *was* a peasant.

“Good evening everyone,” he whispered, looking cautiously over his shoulder and motioning the group to huddle round. “Greetings, and welcome to the 17th

Century. My name is William Boyle and I will be your Time Rep for the duration of your stay in London.”

“Watch and learn,” Tim whispered to Geoff. “William is *very* good.”

“The year is 1666,” William continued, setting the scene as if he was telling a story around a campfire, “and the time has just gone ten o’clock at night. In just over two hours, a fire will start down Pudding Lane, in the bakery of Thomas Farynor. At first, the threat of this fire will be ignored by senior authorities, but over the next four days, it will spread across the whole of London; tearing through the Royal Exchange, devastating St. Paul’s Cathedral, and stopping just short of Charles II’s court at Whitehall, who is the King of England at this present time.”

“My goodness,” one of the tourists said. “Will we be in any danger?”

“None whatsoever,” William replied. “There were actually very few recorded deaths from the Great Fire – the main casualties came in the aftermath, with tens of thousands of people left starving and homeless. As long we all stay together, you’ll all be able to experience the fire in a safe, educational, and exciting way.”

“He’s very well spoken,” Geoff said. “He should be on Radio 4.”

“Some of the earlier Time Reps required a little coaching,” Tim said. “William responded very successfully.”

William looked over the group and noticed Tim and Geoff talking.

“Will you all please excuse me for one moment?” he said, walking over to speak to them. “Why Tim, my good friend,” he said, shaking Tim’s hand. “What are *you* doing here?”

“William, I’d like you to meet Geoffrey Stamp. New Time Rep for the 21st Century. I’ve brought him here today to see one of our Time Reps in action, and you’re the lucky man. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” William smiled, nodding politely at Geoff. “It’s my pleasure.”

“Excellent,” Tim said.

“Well, I suppose we’d better get a move on,” William said, turning his attention back to the group. “The fire is due to start just after midnight, and I suppose you’re all eager to see a bit of the old London before it goes up in flames. Just a final word of caution – please be mindful of your conversations when we’re out in public. I don’t want to hear anyone talking about last night’s Hoverball game, ok?”

The group let off a quiet laugh, and followed William as he led them along the alleyway.

“Great costume by the way, Mr. Stamp,” William whispered as they stepped out onto the main street. “Nice to see someone did their research.”

* * *

Most of 17th Century London looked as though it had been inspired by a badly-played game of *Jenga*. Indeed, Geoff found himself nervously looking up at the tall wooden tenements to either side of him as he followed the tourists down a series of narrow streets, unsure as to how safe these structures really were. Most of the buildings were made entirely of wood, and were so top-heavy and haphazard in their design that he was amazed they weren’t already collapsing around him. One thing was for sure: the impending fire would certainly succeed in bringing these buildings down to the ground, where gravity had obviously failed.

“Now, this is a typical London street,” William said, turning to face the group. “Notice how all the buildings have a very narrow footprint at ground level, but gradually increase in size towards the upper stories. In the 17th Century, overcrowding

was a real problem, and as you can see, some people would go to any means necessary to give themselves more space to live in.” He pointed up in the air. The two timbered houses to either side of the street were so wide at the top that they were practically touching, as if the owners were having a competition with each other to see who could be the most dangerous.

“Shall we move on?” William said, turning on his heels and leading the way through a bustle of pedestrians towards Pudding Lane.

In the absence of cars, buses, cyclists and over-zealous people working for charities, Geoff was somehow expecting 17th Century London to be a much quieter place than the city he was used to. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Even though it was nearly midnight, the streets were still filled with merchants, prostitutes, peasants, noblemen, and many more people. Some were dressed in such a strange way that Geoff found himself unable to guess what they really did for a living. A bit like people who worked in PR.

He was curious to find out from William what it was like to be a Time Rep, so he walked ahead of the tourists and caught up with him.

“Erm... hello,” Geoff said.

“Ah! Mr Stamp,” William said. “What do you think of London? Magnificent place, don’t you think? Pity it won’t be here much longer.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good,” Geoff replied, not knowing whether he found William’s over-enthusiasm for everything a little irritating. “I’m from London as well, actually.”

“Really? What’s it like? Has it changed much?”

Given the entire place was about to burn down, Geoff didn’t think this was a particularly intelligent question. Did William expect it to still be on fire, or something?

“I think they’ve made a few improvements here and there,” he said, stepping over a large pile of horse manure. “Electric lighting, proper drainage, wider streets, an underground railway system - little things, really.”

“Sounds delightful,” William said. “I might go and visit it one day.”

“You’re allowed to visit other places?”

“Oh yes. I’ve been on plenty of holidays to different time periods. The Wild West is my favourite - late 19th century.”

“So I take it you enjoy being a Time Rep?” Geoff said.

“Oh, it’s marvellous,” William replied, looking over his shoulder to make sure the group were still following him. “Simply marvellous. Before I became a Time Rep, I had no food, no money, and no home. But now...”

“...now you’re rich, with beautiful wife and a massive house in the country?” Geoff said optimistically.

“No, no,” William said, leading the group round a corner. “I can’t ever get married, because I was never supposed to get married in the first place. If I did, I’d be interfering with someone else’s destiny. And I’m not allowed to have a home either, because I’d be living somewhere that would have belonged to someone else. The same goes for money – if I had any, I’d be buying things someone else should have been buying.”

“Whoa,” Geoff said. “You’re telling me we don’t get paid?”

“Nope.”

“But... isn’t that a bit shit?”

“You’ve got to understand - before I became a Time Rep, I had absolutely nothing.”

“But you’ve still got absolutely nothing!”

William shook his head, as if Geoff was somehow missing the point.

“You should have seen me back then, Geoff. I was riddled with disease, barely able to walk - the only way I managed to stay alive was by eating any dead rats I could find in the street. Now, I’m given food whenever I need it, and I can travel to different time periods whenever I wish. They even inoculated me against last year’s outbreak of Bubonic Plague. This job might not pay me anything, but it’s a damn sight better than the way I used to live. It saved my life.”

“That’s great and everything,” Geoff said. “But I’m still not sure I like the idea of working for free. I don’t mind sitting around in my pants doing *nothing* for free, but *working* for free is a different matter.”

This must have been a little too much information for William, who turned to the group and said “Come on everyone – we’re nearly there!”

* * *

The bakery of Thomas Farynor looked so rickety and unstable in its construction that you’d be forgiven for thinking the architect designed it on an Etch-a-Sketch. It reminded Geoff of one of those crooked houses you sometimes got at funfairs; the ones where you go in, stagger along some sloping corridors, fall down some disproportionately sized stairs, look at yourself in a bendy mirror, and walk out again feeling as though you could have got more value for money just by walking around your own house drunk.

William had huddled all the tourists together in a dark corner of the street. From here, they were out of sight, but had a perfect view of the building. Geoff looked around. Unless he was mistaken, there was another group of tourists with their own Time Rep hiding across the road, and another group gathered on a balcony overlooking the street. He remembered what Tim had said about the number of Time Reps they had covering the Great Fire of London, and wondered how many other tourists were hiding nearby.

“Here we are,” William whispered. “The bakery of Thomas Farynor. At this moment, the Farynor family is fast asleep upstairs. But in a few seconds, a single burning ember will fall out of the fireplace downstairs and set fire to a stack of papers on the floor. The burning paper will drift around the whole room, spreading the fire to the rug, the curtains, the furniture, and eventually the whole house. I’m sure you know the rest - within days, this fire will destroy the whole of central London, even leaping over the River Fleet to threaten the adjacent town of Westminster.”

“Is there any chance I could grab a loaf of bread before this kicks off?” Geoff said. “I’m a bit hungry.”

“Absolutely not,” Tim said, placing a firm hand on Geoff’s shoulder.

“You’re too late anyway,” William said, pointing at the building.

Geoff looked up in horror. A bright glow had begun to emanate from the window.

Perhaps there was another bakery nearby?

* * *

Geoff was surprised at just how quickly the fire was able to spread – within a couple of hours, the whole street was burning, as if the blaze had somehow convinced all the nearby buildings that it was terribly fashionable to be on fire these days, and

that they should join the club. Thomas Farynor and his family had been trapped upstairs in their house, but had managed to escape from their bedroom window to the building next door. Unfortunately, their maidservant had been too scared to follow them, and the tourists watched uncomfortably as she became the first victim of the flames.

By now, a large crowd had gathered to witness the blaze, which had also caught the attention of London's fire authorities. They arrived at the scene on several wooden carts with water tanks in the middle, and two long pumping handles to either side.

"What are those things?" Geoff whispered to William.

"That's the very latest fire-fighting contraption," William replied. "They use it to pump water out through a hose to put fires out."

Geoff thought about this. Essentially, what he was looking at was a 17th Century fire engine. There was however, one fundamental design flaw to these machines; a flaw you would have expected to be ironed out in the conceptual stage – these 'fire engines' were made of wood, and if Geoff remembered correctly, wood was particularly good at catching fire. If the inventor of these machines was up for an award for using the most inappropriate building material, the only way he could have lost was if he was up against someone who had chosen to make a space shuttle out of asparagus.

Some of the firemen were arguing with a group of homeowners on the adjacent streets about something. Geoff tried to listen through the loud roar of the flames.

"Don't you understand?" One of the firemen shouted at a blacksmith, "The fire will continue to spread unless we pull your house down! Grab everything of value from inside and get out of our way!"

"I know my rights!" the blacksmith said, standing in front of his property; his bulging arms crossed across his chest. "You ain't got the authority to pull me house down! Only Bloodworth has the authority to pull me house down! I want to speak to Bloodworth!"

Geoff tugged on William's sleeve.

"Why do they want to pull his house down?" he said.

"Stops the fire spreading," William said. "If there's nowhere for it to go, it burns itself out."

"And who is 'Bloodworth'?"

"Thomas Bloodworth. Or *Sir* Thomas Bloodworth. Lord Mayor of London. He'll be here any minute."

Sure enough, it wasn't long before a horse-drawn carriage arrived, pulling up a safe distance away from all the commotion. The carriage door opened, and a tall, middle aged man stepped out. Geoff watched as he approached the nearest fireman. He had an extremely large moustache, and was dressed smartly in a slashed doublet with wide lace cuffs, a dark grey pair of breeches, a full-length fur-lined gown, and a broad-brimmed hat. His appearance was so extravagant that he looked as though he'd just been called away from one of Elton John's birthday parties.

"That's Thomas Bloodworth," William said to the group. "The fire authorities want to pull down the adjacent buildings to stop the fire from spreading any further, but this is classified as destruction of property, which is a very serious matter. They've had to summon the Lord Mayor to assess the threat of the fire, and permit them to take whatever action necessary."

Geoff strained to hear the conversation between Bloodworth and the firemen, who didn't appear to be having much luck in convincing the Lord Mayor that this fire might become a bit of a bother if they weren't allowed to contain it quickly.

"You woke me up for this?" Bloodworth said, looking up at the blaze.

"My Lord," the fireman said, wiping a film of wet soot from his face. "We've got to pull down all the surrounding buildings immediately! The fire is out of control! My men..."

"Now, now," Bloodworth said, straightening his white lace collar. "I'm sure your men are more than capable of dealing with this."

"You ain't gonna let him pull me house down are you, me Lord?" the blacksmith shouted from across the street. "That house is all I've got!"

"No-one's going to be pulling anyone's house down," Bloodworth replied. "I forbid it."

The fireman looked visibly distressed at this decision, which was understandable, as it was quite clearly the wrong one.

"God bless you sir!" The blacksmith shouted. "Hooray for Lord Bloodworth!"

Bloodworth smiled at the blacksmith and turned to leave.

"My Lord, I beg you to reconsider," the fireman said, pulling on Bloodworth's gown. "With the greatest respect, I think you're making a terrible mistake! This is one of the worst fires I've ever seen!"

"Pish!" Bloodworth said, snatching his gown from the fireman's grip. "A woman could piss it out!"

It was clear to everyone that this was a slight understatement.

The tourists all watched in silence as Bloodworth stormed back to his carriage, slammed the door behind him and ordered his driver to take him home. The fireman stood shaking on the spot as Bloodworth left, the flames behind him beginning to spread further and further. It took a few moments before he managed to regain his composure, and turn his attention back to his men to co-ordinate their futile efforts.

"So there you have it," William said to the group. "That is how the Great Fire of London started, and how one man's inaction through fear of upsetting a few local residents led to the destruction of most of the city."

"Bummer," Geoff said.

"Well, I think we've seen enough," Tim said, walking over to William. "Do you mind if we leave you to it?"

"Not at all," William replied, shaking Tim's hand again. "Hope you enjoyed it."

"Are we going?" Geoff said, brushing a few sparks from his clothes.

"Afraid so," Eric said. "It's back to the future for us. We've got the annual Time Rep inauguration party tonight, and we don't want to be late."

Geoff didn't see how it was possible to be late, given the fact they were travelling through time.

"We're going to a party?" Geoff said.

"Yep, and we'd better get a move on," Tim said, handing them each a pair of earphones. "There's a limousine waiting for us."

"A limousine?"

"You'll be meeting all the other Time Reps, key investors, politicians and scientists," Eric added, placing the earphones in his ears. "If what you've seen here today hasn't convinced you that time tourism is for real, tonight certainly will."

"Oh, I'm convinced," Geoff said. "This is too elaborate to be a hoax. But I don't care what this computer tells you – I still don't believe that I'm insignificant."

“After all you’ve seen?” Eric said. “I’ve already told you. That computer is foolproof! Can’t you just...”

Tim held his hand up to silence Eric.

“I can understand that this is a difficult thing to accept, Geoff,” he said. “But without meaning to sound funny, your insignificance really isn’t that important. Just put it out of your head.”

“I still think your computer has made a mistake,” Geoff said. “If it’s so foolproof, why do these ‘time terrorists’ try to cheat it?”

Tim and Eric exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“Because,” Eric conceded, “they’ve nearly worked out the loophole in my algorithm.”

SEVEN

Geoff reclined into the leather comfort of the limousine's back seat with a big grin on his face, stretching his legs out as far as they would go. He hadn't sat down for the last two hours, which must have been a new personal record. Tim and Eric sat opposite, their backs to the driver.

"What are you smiling about?" Tim said.

"I'm just relieved that your computer isn't so perfect after all," Geoff said, cocking his head in Eric's direction. "There's a chance I might not be an 'insignificant nobody'."

Eric sighed. "I don't want to get into this again," he said, closing his eyes. "Like I said before, the loophole potentially allows the computer to be manipulated into using its own powers of prediction against itself. That's all I can say. It has nothing to do with the assessment it made of you, which is still accurate."

"Prove it," Geoff said. "If you're so sure it hasn't made a mistake about me, explain more about this loophole."

"I can't discuss the details with anyone until I've re-written the algorithm," Eric said.

"It's not just you, Geoff," Tim said, "Even I'm not allowed to know."

"Why?"

"Because Eric suspects someone on the inside leaked the code," Tim said.

"Are you sure?"

"Looks that way," Eric said. "There's no way these people could even begin to know how to cheat the system unless they've obtained a copy of the algorithm."

"And what makes you think someone leaked it to them?"

"Because getting hold of a copy is very difficult. They must have had some help."

"Maybe it was that fat guy," Geoff said.

"What fat guy?" Eric said.

"The fat guy in the main computer bit."

"The 'main computer bit'?"

"Yeah, you know, the er... the... main computer bit."

"You mean the paradox scanning facility?"

"Yeah. The sweaty guy with the clipboard. Maybe he was sweaty because he's nervous about being caught."

"What are you talking about?" Eric said, leaning forward. "It's over 100 degrees in there! We were all sweating! You're just accusing a random person!"

"No I'm not!" Geoff replied. "Maybe it was the cleaner?"

"Stop," Eric said, holding his hand up. "Just... stop. This algorithm isn't something a cleaner or a security guard would have access to. We're talking about someone with top, top, top level security clearance - a senior physicist maybe, or a board member."

"So I guess you're pretty stuck?"

"Not quite," Eric replied. "Fortunately, I took the precaution of applying a rolling encryption to the code in case it ever fell into the wrong hands."

"A 'rolling encryption'?"

"Yes. It's like an encryption, but it rolls."

Geoff gave a slow nod to pretend he understood Eric's elaboration.

"But these guys are damn smart," he continued. "Based on the latest attempts we've seen to fool the computer, I'm guessing that they're about halfway through

cracking the code; they'll know *why* the computer can be manipulated, but not *how*. Unless I can re-write the algorithm in time, these terrorists will discover the secret to walking straight through the paradox scanning beam with a clear intention of changing history, without the computer even batting a eyelid. Until the new algorithm is ready though, my work on re-writing it is absolutely top secret."

Geoff was just about to ask another irritating question, when something unexpected caught his eye outside. He leant forward and looked out of the window. It was a Ford Focus. He had travelled over a thousand years into the future and he was looking at a Ford Focus, driving just ahead of them. Either Ford Focuses were extremely resilient cars, or something wasn't quite right. He looked out of the other window. A couple of Audis and a BMW were overtaking them. On the other side of the road, a Volkswagen Golf was tailgating a Volvo 340. What was going on? Come to think of it, why were *they* travelling in a car? Weren't people supposed to be flying around in jet-powered shoes by now? Or teleporting - hadn't Mr Knight mentioned teleportation?

It wasn't just the cars – the more Geoff looked around, the more things looked a little too familiar: buildings, street lights, road signs, shop names, post-boxes. Hadn't anything changed in over 1000 years?

"You know, I'm beginning to think this is all a hoax again," Geoff said, still staring out of the window. "Why does everything look exactly the same as I remember it?"

"I was wondering how long it would take you to notice," Tim said. "Things may look exactly the same, but this is not the original London you remember. It's actually a huge recreation of the old city, right down to the last brick."

"A recreation?"

"The original city was mostly destroyed in the late 22nd Century by a particularly aggressive race of aliens, who for some reason decided they didn't really like Earth that much."

"Wait a minute," Geoff said. "Didn't I see a poster advertising a holiday to the 22nd Century? The one with Big Ben being blown up?"

"You did." Tim said. "As you know, death and destruction are big selling points, and believe me, this is easily our most popular destination for that very reason. Dangerous time to visit, but the battle was one of the most spectacular in human history."

"What happened?"

"In 2181 a huge fleet of alien ships took Earth completely by surprise and annihilated several major cities in the space of a few hours. New York, Beijing, London, Basingstoke, Berlin – all were practically wiped off the map in one hit."

"Basingstoke?"

"Historians are still arguing over why they picked Basingstoke," Eric said. "The latest theory is that the name meant 'potatoes galore' in their language, and that they decided to blow it up because they didn't know what a potato was, and thought it might be dangerous."

"That's just silly."

"It's a cultural thing. Apparently, certain words and phrases carried extreme importance to the aliens, causing them to behave in an over-the-top way. Basingstoke was just one of those words."

"Earth's counter-attack was laughable," Tim continued. "Nuclear missiles, fusion bombs, proton clusters; the aliens took such little damage from the onslaught, they actually thought Earth was firing gifts into the sky as a peace offering."

“So what happened?” Geoff said. “How did Earth survive?”

“Unknown to the aliens, and indeed most of the world, a small university in Malta had just made a major scientific breakthrough,” Eric said. “They had discovered how to create a temporal vortex.”

“A what?”

“They had discovered time travel.”

“Time travel was discovered that long ago?” Geoff said. “In Malta?”

“Discovered, yes,” Eric said, “but not applied to anything. We had to develop a supercomputer powerful enough to control the technology before we could really exploit it – the time-tourism industry for example, is only 20 years old. Back in the 22nd Century, the university decided to veto the technology, and kept it a secret from the public on the grounds that it was too dangerous. However, fearing the probable extinction of the human race, the university powered up its particle accelerator, tracked the alien’s orbit in space, and projected a vortex directly into the flight path of the invading fleet. The fleet was instantly transported 600 years into the future. From humanity’s point of view, this was actually quite funny – not only had they eliminated the alien threat for the time being, but they also knew the precise moment when the fleet was going to reappear - they knew the exact year, the exact day, the exact minute. When the fleet therefore re-appeared in the year 2781, Mankind was expecting them. By this time, the human race was fairly experienced at intergalactic travel, and had built a huge battle fleet of its own to counter the attacking force. They wanted revenge for those who had lost their lives all those years ago, and in 600 years they had developed some pretty nasty weapons that were more than capable of delivering it. For the aliens however, the 600 year jump was instantaneous - they were completely unaware of what had just happened, so they carried on attacking. Unfortunately, they soon discovered that their opponents had suddenly become quite an even match. Energy beams that were moments ago reeking destruction on the planet’s surface were now being reflected back at them; motherships were starting to take damage; space fighters were being shot down. The battle lasted many days, but in the end, mankind was victorious – all of the invading ships were destroyed, and the aliens were finally defeated.”

“Bit unlucky for them, really,” Geoff said.

“Could have been unluckier,” Eric replied. “If that University in Malta had sent them 2000 years in the future, they would have been wiped out in seconds. Most vacuum cleaners will be more powerful than the alien’s weaponry by then.”

“So what happened to London?” Geoff said.

“Well, this is the interesting part,” Eric said, as if the previous part about the near-extinction of humanity had been a bit dull. “Towards the end of the battle, one of the damaged alien spaceships actually broke through the Earth’s atmosphere and crash-landed in North America. When it was recovered by the military, they discovered an amazing piece of alien technology: a molecular re-arrangement beam.”

“A what?”

“A particle beam capable of rearranging mass into any formation.”

Geoff thought about this.

“A what?” he said.

“On a small scale,” Eric sighed, “if you fired this beam at an apple, it could turn it into an orange. On a large scale, if you fired it at the desolate, radioactive remains of a city once destroyed by an alien invasion, it could transform it back into that city.”

“And that’s what happened with London?”

Eric nodded. "Once the scientists had figured out how to program it, they flew the ship back into space and fired the beam at London. Within minutes, the city was completely reformed."

"But why does it look exactly like the London of the 21st Century? Why are there still cars driving around?"

"Because when the scientists were making their calculations, they could only refer back to what London looked like before it was destroyed. The government of the day took advantage of this, and decided to recreate London exactly as it had existed in the early 21st Century. They then passed a bill that made it illegal to build or change anything, and the city became preserved as a memorial; a symbol of the city's strength in times of adversity. Since then, London has stayed exactly the same: Big Ben is still Big Ben, buses are still red, and the Tube still suffers from signal failures. We weren't even allowed to build the time-tourism facility in London unless we agreed to convert an old railway station, and the rest had to be built underground - even the supercomputer," Eric said.

"Blimey," Geoff said. "That's quite a story."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't end there," Eric said.

"It doesn't?"

"No. There's still one loose end that exists even to this day."

"You mean you still get those annoying people on the street handing out free newspapers?"

"Not quite. When the scientists first tested the molecular re-arrangement beam, they fired it at a monkey. The results were terrifying."

"Why? Geoff said. Was it horribly mutilated?"

"No," Eric said. "The monkey turned into a human being."

"A human being?" Geoff said. "What's so terrifying about a human being?"

"Think about it. Why would the monkey have turned into a human being?"

Geoff shrugged. He had no idea.

"Because that was the way the aliens had last configured the molecular re-arrangement beam. The theory is that some of the aliens actually survived the crash, turned themselves into humans before the ship was recovered, and disappeared into society. What's worse, we have reason to believe that the alien's descendants still live among us today, plotting to use time tourism to change the outcome of their failed invasion."

"In other words, they want to use the technology that responsible for their downfall against us," Tim said, looking out of the window. It was beginning to get dark outside.

"We're about five minutes away," Eric said. "You'd better take your trousers off."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Take your trousers off. Your clothes still reek of smoke from the Great Fire of London, and there's probably a load of holotographers waiting outside. We can't let you get out of the car dressed like that."

"I'd rather be wearing these trousers than no trousers," Geoff said, protectively tugging them up as far as they would go.

"Relax," Tim said. "I'm not suggesting you get out of the car in your underpants. There's a dinner suit under your seat in your size. Give me your clothes and put it on."

"Can't I just wear these clothes?" Geoff said. "I don't really like the thought of getting undressed in front of you two."

“We’ll look away if it makes you feel better,” Tim said, “but you’re talking to two guys who took a semen sample from you two hours ago. We’ve already seen everything, believe me.”

Geoff couldn’t really argue with this, and reached under his seat, pulling out a rather expensive looking tuxedo.

* * *

It wasn’t long before the limousine pulled up outside the building Geoff had been to for his interview 1000 years ago. It looked exactly the same as he remembered; save for the red carpet that had been laid out, leading up to the entrance. On either side of the carpet, crowds of people were jostling each other for a better view. What was all the fuss about?

“Don’t forget this,” Tim said, handing Geoff his badge. “All the Time Reps will be wearing theirs.”

“Why are there so many people here?” Geoff said, clipping the badge onto his jacket. “Is someone important coming?”

“Like I was saying,” Eric said, straightening his tie, “there’ll be the odd politician here and a few celebrities, but these people aren’t here to see them. They’re here to see the new Time Reps.

“You mean they’re here to see me?”

“Don’t panic,” Tim said. “All you need to do is wave to the crowds and walk inside. Ruth should be waiting in the lobby to take us upstairs.”

Geoff pressed his face against the car window and looked at the crowd. He couldn’t believe it - these people had actually gathered to see him.

“I’m not panicking,” Geoff said, rubbing his hands in excitement. “I think this is great! The limousine, the crowds - can you imagine the look on Darren’s face if he could see me now? I’m being treated like a bloody film star! And wait till I tell Zoë!”

“This could have been a mistake,” Eric said, looking nervously at Tim. “The file said he didn’t like being the centre of attention. It said...”

“I know what the file said,” Tim interrupted, turning to Geoff. “Listen very carefully,” he said, lowering his voice. “I know it’s hard, but you’ve got to try and ignore all this attention. You mustn’t let it affect who you are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Remember what Mr Knight told you earlier - the only reason you got this job is because he thought it wouldn’t change you. It’s imperative that you remain the same uninspired, unambitious Geoffrey Stamp that he interviewed this afternoon. If all this glitz is starting to make you feel important, or somehow special, then you could be endangering your position as a Time Rep. And for goodness sake, you can’t tell anyone about this in the 21st Century. Not Darren, not Zoë, not anyone. It has to remain top secret.”

“But...”

Before Geoff could even contemplate finishing this sentence, a footman suddenly opened the car door to let Geoff out. There was a loud cheer from the crowd, the people at the front bulging up against the rope cordon, their arms stretched out with autograph books. Geoff stepped out the car and took a few steps forward, closely followed by Tim and Eric.

“How am I supposed to ignore this?” Geoff whispered back to Tim.
“Everyone’s going crazy for me!”

“You’ve got to try,” Tim replied.

“I blame the media,” Eric said. “They’ve been hyping you up all week.”

“Hyping me up?” Geoff said.

“Look this way, Geoff!” someone cried.

“Over here!” came another voice.

“Smile for the holotographers,” Tim said, placing his hands on Geoff’s shoulders and steering him to face a group of journalists. “Just give them a few good shots and head inside. And don’t answer any questions.”

Geoff did as he was told and smiled. The ‘holotographers’ held up some camera-like devices and flashed away.

“What do you think of the future, Mr Stamp?” A journalist said, thrusting a microphone forward as far as he could.

“I...”

“Don’t answer,” Tim said.

“Mr Stamp!” another journalist shouted, “How do you respond to the allegations that you’ve been lied to about the...”

“That’s enough,” Eric said, pulling him back.

“What was that?” Geoff said. “What have I been lied to about?”

Eric said nothing. He and Tim hurried Geoff up the red carpet and through the entrance without saying a word.

EIGHT

Ruth was waiting for them in the frosted glass lobby, sitting on the edge of her frosted glass desk. Her hair was immaculately styled into a 'bun with a couple of chopsticks stuck in it' arrangement, and she wore a dazzling oriental red and black dress. Geoff couldn't begin to comprehend the effort that had probably gone into this appearance; he had enough trouble working out how to tie his shoelaces.

"Ah - you finally made it," she said, standing up. "Everyone else is already upstairs."

"How many people are here?" Tim said.

"Couple of hundred," Ruth replied. She adjusted her heels slightly and led them over to the elevator.

"Hold on a minute," Geoff said. "What was that guy saying outside? Something about me being lied to?"

Ruth stopped for a moment.

"You let him talk to the holotographers?" She said, looking round at Tim and Eric. "After all these rumours about him in the news? You were told to bring him straight inside."

"Rumours?" Geoff said. "What rumours?"

Eric sighed. "Rumours that you might not be as insignificant as you've been led to believe," he said. "Some journalists think that your position as a Time Rep has been orchestrated as part of a wider conspiracy to change history."

"So these people think I might not be insignificant?"

"Quite the opposite in fact," Tim said. "These people actually think that you're special in some way."

"Special," Geoff said, nodding to himself. "Maybe they're onto something..."

"The story is nonsense," Eric snapped. "If the computer really has made a mistake about you - If you really are 'special' - history would have changed already!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Ruth said, trying to bring the conversation into a more civilised tone. "Can this wait until later? Mr Knight is waiting for you upstairs before he gives his speech." She held the elevator door open and ushered the three men inside.

"Please state your destination," the lift said in its synthesised female voice.

"Top floor," Ruth replied.

The doors closed, and the elevator began to move.

Eric leant his walking stick against the corner of the lift and pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket. "I hope this speech is shorter than last time," he said, dabbing his forehead before arranging the handkerchief to stick out of his breast pocket in a perfect triangle. "Have you had a chance to read it?"

"Don't worry," Ruth replied. "It's only a couple of minutes long."

"And what's the message this year?"

"The usual. There's a bit about how time tourism enlightens humanity, makes people cherish the past... Oh, and a couple of senior politicians are here tonight, so he's going to publicly reassure everyone that time tourism is still safe despite the attempts to abuse it - thanks to you." Ruth patted Eric on the shoulder. "You might even get a mention."

"Can't wait."

"That reminds me," Ruth said, touching Eric's arm. "Mr. Knight wants you to show the Defence Minister those new precautionary measures you're working on. Can you stop by your lab on the way up and collect the paperwork?"

Eric nodded in silence. He looked pale.

"Laboratory," he said, his voice sounding a little weak.

"Thank you," the lift said. "This lift will stop at the laboratory before proceeding to the top floor."

"You've got your own lab here?" Geoff said.

Tim nudged Geoff's arm. "There'll be quite a few other Time Reps here tonight," he said. "You should try and speak to them if you get the chance. They'll be able to give you a few tips about the job that we might not be able to help you with."

Geoff said nothing. He tugged on his bow tie - Tim had done it up a little tight.

"Geoff?"

Silence.

"Geoff. Say something."

"Basement!" Geoff said.

"Thank you," The lift replied. "After this lift reaches the top floor, it will then head down to the basement."

Tim sighed.

"Happy?" he said.

* * *

Mr Knight clinked his wine glass with a spoon.

"Everyone!" he said, sounding a little out of breath, "Can I have your attention please?"

Across the room, people cut short their conversations and looked round at Mr Knight, who was being helped up onto his desk by Ruth. Presumably this was so people could see him - Mr Knight didn't come across as the sort of person who would indulge in unruly office behaviour for no reason, even at a party. Through the windows behind him, the moonlit London skyline was exactly the same as Geoff remembered it from over 1000 years ago. It really was a very good recreation.

The top floor however, had changed considerably since he was here for his interview; no longer being just an empty expanse of open-plan office space with a lone desk in the corner. Today, it looked more like a Roman palace, with a shiny marble floor, ornate fountains dotted around the place, and huge stone pillars rising into the ceiling. Geoff tapped on one with his hand. Solid stone. It was hard to believe that this was the same room.

He turned towards Tim, who was sitting on some sort of *chez longues*.

"What's the deal with this *décor*?" He whispered.

"Oh, it's not always like this," Tim replied, tossing a grape in his mouth.

"Each year a Time Rep takes it in turn to provide the food and decoration for the annual inauguration. This year it's the turn of the Time Rep from ancient Rome."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Mr Knight said, looking over the crowd from his desk-cum-pedestal, "Welcome to the 10th annual Time Rep inauguration party!"

The guests erupted into a round of applause.

Mr Knight waited for the noise to die down. "Tonight," he continued, "we are honoured to welcome four new Time Reps into the organisation, all of whom you will get a chance to meet later. As of today, we are now able to offer holidays to over 100 historical time periods, from ancient Egypt, to the second Renaissance period, right the way back to prehistoric times. This is a far cry from our roots 20 years ago, before we used Time Reps, when we could only offer holidays to a handful of destinations.

Tonight, we are here to celebrate the fantastic growth the time-tourism industry has seen over the past year. We're here to celebrate the increased understanding we are able to offer the world about its past. But most of all, we are here to celebrate you - the Time Reps. The ambassadors for history."

Geoff picked his nose and wiped it on a pillar.

"However," Mr Knight continued, "A small minority of people out there want to abuse the benefits of time travel. They want to take this new freedom away from us, and use it to change history for their own selfish means. In this time of crisis, we mustn't forget those who work tirelessly to protect us from this threat. Let me make this clear: time travel has always been safe, and it remains safe because of the continued effort of one man. Please give a huge round of applause for the double noble-prize winner, and our Chief Physicist, Dr Eric Skivinski!!!!"

Another round of applause.

"Where is Eric?" Mr Knight called out, looking out across the party. A few heads began to turn in the crowd, but Eric was nowhere to be seen.

"No matter," Mr Knight said, looking a little embarrassed at Eric's absence. "I'm sure you'll all get to meet him later. Please, have a drink, get to know your fellow Time Reps, and above all, enjoy yourselves!"

The crowd gave a final, less enthusiastic round of applause, suggesting they were getting a little bit bored with all the applauding. Mr Knight dropped down from his desk and went over to chat with the nearest group of guests. Around the room, people returned to their conversations.

Geoff wandered over to Tim, who was craning his neck over the crowd.

"What are you doing?" Geoff said.

"Looking for Eric," Tim said. "You seen him? Mr Knight's gonna be pissed if he doesn't show his face tonight..."

"What does Mr Knight actually do?" Geoff said.

"Mr Knight? He's the Chief Executive," Tim replied, giving up his search. "Mainly deals with the more political side of the business. He secures funding for the company, negotiates with the government over tourism regulations, dictates our corporate responsibilities, and he keeps the shareholders happy. You've got to deal with some very slippery individuals when you're at his level, and he does that very well."

Geoff looked over at Mr Knight. He was standing in the far corner of the room, talking to a fat, well dressed gentleman.

"Let's go over and speak to him," Tim said, getting to his feet. "You'll see what I mean."

Geoff picked up a glass of wine from a nearby table and followed Tim across the room.

"That's the Defence Minister he's talking to at the moment," Tim said, weaving his way through a group of men wearing Togas. "Probably having one of their regular arguments about the danger of the terrorist threat. Listen - can you hear them?"

As they approached, Geoff could indeed make out the sound of Mr Knight's voice.

"...forcing us to shut down until you've caught these terrorists would be a very brave decision for you to make," Mr Knight said, looking quite relaxed. "A very brave decision."

“But Ernest,” the Minister replied, taking a small sip of what looked to be brandy. “We still have serious doubts about the safety of this operation. What if your man can’t complete his work in time?”

“He will,” Mr Knight replied. “He was supposed to be here to show you some of the new precautionary measures we’re working on, but unfortunately he seems to have disappeared for the moment. From what I understand though, the new algorithm is almost ready – in fact we’re on track to upload it into the mainframe by the end of the week. There’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Mr Knight noticed Tim and Geoff approaching and stepped to one side, motioning them to join the discussion.

“David, this is Dr Timothy Burnell, one of our Chief Physicists working under Dr Skivinski. Tim, you know the Defence Minister.”

“I do,” Tim said, shaking his hand.

“And this is Geoffrey Stamp,” Mr Knight said, placing his hand on Geoff’s shoulder. “One of our newest Time Reps for the 21st Century. Recruited today, in fact.”

Geoff also shook hands with the Defence Minister.

“The Defence Minister still has a few doubts over safety,” Mr. Knight said to Tim, not taking his eyes off the Minister. “He’s thinking about shutting us down.”

“I just don’t see why you object to shutting down for the next few days,” the Minister replied, swirling the brandy around in his glass. “At least until this new algorithm of yours is ready. Just to be safe.”

“Shutting down isn’t a problem David. Not a problem at all.”

“Good. I’m glad we agree on...”

“But think of the message that would send out to the world. Think what those blasted aliens might make of it. Shutting down now would be admitting defeat. These terrorists need to know that their efforts to disrupt our freedom have been futile. They need to know that they have achieved nothing. If we shut down, we’d be handing them a small victory. We’d be showing them that we’re scared. Are you scared, David?”

“Yes,” the Minister replied, looking into his glass. “I’m terrified. If something should happen...”

“It won’t,” Mr Knight said, pulling a cigar out of his pocket. “You’ve seen the safety checks. Dr Burnell and Geoffrey were there earlier.” He turned to face them. “How many people did we turn away today?”

“Sixteen,” Tim replied.

“You see? Sixteen. You know you can’t cheat that computer. It’s virtually impossible.” He put the cigar in his mouth and lit it.

“But the loophole...”

“Fixable,” Mr Knight insisted through an exhalation of thick smoke. “And even if it wasn’t, the chances of exploiting the loophole are one in a Googolplex.”

“I’m not sure that’s a chance I’m willing take,” the Minister said, finishing the last of his drink. “The slightest change to the space time continuum could be disastrous.”

“No-one’s going to change anything. I guarantee it.”

“25 years in politics has taught me that there’s no such thing as a guarantee,” the Minister said.

“Think what you like, David,” Mr Knight said, “but as I said, shutting us down would be very... brave.”

“Allowing you to stay operational could be even braver,” the Minister countered. “I don’t know, Ernest - I need to sleep on this. We’ll speak again tomorrow. Now gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me...” He handed his glass to a passing waiter and walked away.

Mr Knight stood there in silence, his eyes fixed on the Minister as he left. He watched him as he passed through the crowd, grabbed his coat, pressed the elevator button, waited for the elevator, stepped into the elevator, and stood inside the elevator as the doors closed behind him. As if that wasn’t quite enough staring, he remained staring at the elevator doors for a good few seconds, just for good measure. Geoff thought this was too much staring for his liking, until he realised he must have been staring at exactly the same things for him to be able to relay back to himself what Mr Knight was staring at.

“Find Eric,” Mr Knight said, still staring vacantly at the elevator doors. He grabbed the Minister’s empty glass from the waiter and tapped his ash into it. “He really should be with me when I get stuck in these technical conversations.”

“I haven’t seen him since we came up here,” Tim said. “He’s disappeared.”

Mr Knight took a deep puff of his cigar. “Well if you see him, tell him to come find me. We’ll need to work on a response to this situation tonight in case they try to shut us down tomorrow morning.” He gave them both a brief nod and strolled off, leaving a thick trail of cigar smoke in his wake.

Tim waved his hands in front of his face to disperse the smoke. “I’m going to find Eric,” He said, turning to leave.

“Wait,” Geoff said, grabbing his arm. “What am I supposed to do while you’re gone?”

“What?”

“I haven’t been to a party for years. The last one I went to had this game where you had to take your shoes and socks off, put your shoes in one box, and your socks in another, then the first person to put their shoes and socks back on won some jelly.”

“Jelly? How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“Twelve?” Tim said. “You went to your last party when you were twelve?”

“You’ve been keeping me indoors playing computer games, remember? What do people do at these things? What am I supposed to do if someone comes over and talks to me?”

“Talk back.”

“Talk back?”

“Yes.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Wait for someone to finish what they are saying, then say something back.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You’re doing it now. That’s what people do when they’re having a conversation. You’ll be fine.”

“This is different. We’re having an argument, not a conversation.”

“Then get into lots of arguments,” Tim said, releasing his arm from Geoff’s grip and walking off.

Geoff looked round at the other guests, all of whom were happily chatting away. He didn’t do chatting - least of all with strangers. Unfortunately, all the people he *did* know were busy in mid-chat: Mr Knight was chatting to someone, Ruth was chatting to someone, and even William Boyle from the 17th Century was chatting to

someone. Geoff did a double take - how one earth had William managed to get here so quickly?

It didn't take long for Geoff to convince himself that he wasn't really in the mood for a chat. He grabbed a few grapes from a nearby table and retreated into a quiet corner of the room, being sure to stare at the floor the whole time to avoid eye contact with anyone. Hopefully, the other guests would read this body language as saying "GO AWAY."

"Hey - you Geoffrey Stamp?" A voice said. American accent.

Geoff chewed nervously on a grape and looked up. A man was walking over to him, dressed in a smart, pin-striped suit.

"You're the slob, right?" The man said.

"The slob?" Geoff said, picking some grape skin out from between his teeth.

"Yeah - the unemployed guy. The one who never leaves the house. That you?"

"Apparently," Geoff said.

"Miles Wentworth," the man said, extended one hand for Geoff to shake and tugging his name badge with the other. "Time Rep for 1930s America."

Geoff shook his hand. Miles certainly had a firm grip, like shaking hands with a nutcracker. The man must have been in his early 40s, with a long, clean shaven face. Flecks of grey hair peeked out from under his trilby.

"Yeah, been doing this job four years now," he said, looking around at some other guests. "Big attraction, the Great Depression."

"Really?" Geoff said. "Isn't the Great Depression... depressing?"

"That it is, pal, that it is. Unemployment's at an all time high, people are jumping out of windows on Wall Street, and they reckon there might be another war round the corner. Why would anyone want to go see that?"

"Beats me," Geoff said, eating his last grape. "Same reason people watch reality TV, I suppose."

Miles paused. "You got me there," he said. "Reality TV?"

"Never mind."

"So, first day, huh?" Miles said, changing the subject. "Enjoying it so far?"

Geoff thought about this for a second.

"It's certainly been unusual," he said.

"Unusual? In what way?"

"Let me see... Travelling through time, seeing the Great Fire of London, driving through a recreation of London in a limousine, talking to a man from the 1930's... Little things like that. Wasn't your first day unusual?"

"I guess," Miles replied, brushing some fluff off his tie. "Started off the same as any other day, mind; woke up, ate my breakfast, walked to work, sat at my desk, made a few phone calls, you know, usual stuff. Then about lunchtime my boss walks in. Says he's been looking at the shares I've been buying for the last few years, and he's noticed that my investments make no impact on the stock market whatsoever."

"No impact?"

"Yeah, and he was right. He'd been making me work later and later hours to the point where I had no social life whatsoever, but no matter how much overtime I put in doing the research, the stock I bought remained static. Don't get me wrong - it would fluctuate up and down alright, but by the time we were ready sell, the stock was the exact same value as the price we bought them at. Always bugged me. Thought he'd finally lost it with me when he came in that day. But he was fine. In fact he wanted to talk to me about investing in this new company that had invented

'earphones'. So he puts a pair on my desk and says that everyone will be buying them someday."

"Earphones?"

"Yeah. So he wants to know my opinion. I say sure, but I want to try them first, so he lets me wear them. Next thing I know I wake strapped to some damn table, lights flashing in my eyes. You probably know the rest. Turned out my boss of seven years had been working for this place all along. He'd been making me work overtime to remove me from the outside world as much as possible."

"It's the same for everyone apparently," Geoff said. "Today I found out that my only friend was the spy – my only friend! I feel like such an idiot. The past seven years have all been an act. He's probably been pretending to be my friend all this time. Probably hated me all along."

"What does Ruth say?"

"Ruth? What has Ruth got to do with this?"

"You haven't spoken to Ruth?"

"Ruth... the receptionist?"

"She's no receptionist," Miles laughed, tugging his shirt sleeves out from under the arms of his jacket. "She's the brains behind this whole operation, if you ask me. A real whiz kid. You and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her, that's for sure."

"We wouldn't?"

"Nope," Miles said, leaning in towards Geoff and lowered his voice to a whisper. "From what I hear, this whole 'Time Rep' thing was her idea."

* * *

It took Geoff a few minutes to find Ruth, who was sitting peacefully on the edge of one of the mock-Roman fountains, staring into her wine glass.

"Allow me to introduce myself," Geoff said, sitting down next to her. "I'm 'the slob'."

Ruth looked up. "The slob?"

"Yep. At least that's what everyone's calling me. 'Hey! You're that slob guy!' 'You're the slob, right?' "

"That's because you *are* a slob."

"I know that. You know that. But why do other Time Reps know that? Why does Colin the 13th Century turnip farmer know that?"

"You're a Time Rep," Ruth said, placing her wine glass on the floor. "You saw the crowds outside - you're famous here! Everyone knows everything about you."

"And I understand I have you to thank for that."

"For what?"

"For being here. For being a Time Rep."

"You do," Ruth said, leaning back on her hands.

"So this whole thing was your idea?"

"It was my idea to recruit people from different time periods, yes."

"Why?"

"Because up until ten years ago, time-tourism wasn't really that popular. When we first offered holidays to the past, we thought it would be hugely successful. Thought it would revolutionise the tourist industry. And it did at first - holidays to the past became as popular as the exotic space-flight holidays to distant galaxies. After a while though, people started to get a bit bored of it all."

“A bit like the Sega Saturn?” Geoff said.

“Sales gradually began to decline,” Ruth said, ignoring Geoff. “Problem was, people didn’t really know what to do when they went back to somewhere like 1595. There were no hotels in most destinations, and certainly none of the amenities they were used to. As the years passed, people stopped going on long breaks – most would just go back in time for a couple of days out of curiosity, look around a bit, and then come back.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Ruth said, “if you’re prepared to lose money on every holiday you sell. It’s not cheap sending someone back in time. If you want to make any money at all, you need people to be going back for at least a week. So I thought to myself, why aren’t these people exploring the time period properly? Why don’t they stay to witness significant historical events, or visit all the notable landmarks of the period? Then it dawned on me – these people had no-one there to guide them, no-one to tell them about all the things they could be doing. Take the time period you are representing. If we want people to spend any significant time in the 21st Century, we need an expert there; someone who knows all the sites; someone with extensive knowledge of all the customs of the time period; someone on call 24hrs a day.”

“Or you could just use someone like me.”

Ruth laughed. She picked her wine glass up off the floor and took a sip.

“Can I ask - don’t you ever feel guilty about this at all?” Geoff said.

Ruth paused halfway through her sip and looked at Geoff.

“Guilty?” Ruth said, bringing the glass slowly back down from her mouth.

“Why should I feel guilty?”

“You’ve been playing God with my life for the past seven years, haven’t you? You’ve kept me locked indoors; removed me from the outside world, lied to me, all so you can make the 21st century a better place to visit, a place more...”

“...commercially viable?” Ruth offered.

“And it’s not just me,” Geoff said. “I’ve been talking to other Time Reps. Apparently it’s the same for everyone. You keep them cocooned away for years before they know what’s going on. Don’t you feel the slightest bit guilty about the way you’re controlling people’s lives?”

“If a Time Rep’s life was going to otherwise be interesting and fruitful before we stepped in, then yes, I would feel guilty. But you know how this works - you wouldn’t have exactly turned out to be a nuclear physicist had we not interfered with your life. Remember - you’re all totally insignificant. Would you like to know what you’d be doing right now if we hadn’t interfered in your life?” Ruth said.

“Go on.”

“At this moment, you’d be unemployed, sitting in front of a computer trying to work out how to program your own computer game. You’d be spending hours sitting in front of the machine, making very little progress, before giving up on your dream and drifting between mundane temp jobs for the rest of your life. Would you rather be doing that than being here?”

“I suppose not,” Geoff said.

“So you see, I don’t feel guilty about how we control the destiny of you Time Reps. Not at all. Not when I know how your lives would have turned out otherwise. I actually feel like I’m making a positive difference to somebody. Do you know what Colin the turnip farmer would have been doing had we not recruited him?”

Geoff shook his head.

“He would have been a parsnip farmer.”

“I just don’t like the fact that I’ve been deceived,” Geoff said, rubbing the back of his neck. “All this time, I thought Tim was my friend. I’ve always wondered why he put up with my mess; why he didn’t mind the fact that I owed him two year’s rent. Now it makes sense – he was just some guy who was paid to live with me.”

“Listen - you’ve known each other a long time,” Ruth said, touching Geoff’s arm. “He wouldn’t have stayed assigned to you had he not been enjoying it. Why don’t you speak to him?”

“Can’t find him,” Geoff said. “He’s gone off to find Eric.”

Mr Knight came over and tossed the stub of his cigar into the fountain.

“Everything alright?” he said.

“Geoff’s trying to find Tim,” Ruth said. “You seen him?”

“Tim?” Mr Knight said. “Yes, I spoke to him a few moments ago. Said he’d gone downstairs to see if Eric was in his lab.”

“Eric’s still missing?” Geoff said.

“So it would seem,” Mr Knight said, peering over their heads and waving at a group of people standing in the corner of the room. “Would you please excuse me?”

Geoff turned back to Ruth.

“Where’s this lab?” he said.

“It’s on the floor below,” Ruth replied.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Geoff said getting to his feet. “Now could be a good chance to catch Tim alone.”

NINE

Eric's laboratory was indeed one floor down from the party, the faint bass of the music and the sound of people's chatter gently reverberating through the ceiling. It certainly wasn't how Geoff had imagined a laboratory to look like – he was expecting huge test tubes full of bubbling green liquid, metal spikes conducting surges of blue electricity, and shelves crammed with deformed biological specimens. Instead, all he got was a few rows of humming data banks and a filing cabinet. Eric's desk sat at the back of the room, unoccupied.

"Tim?" Geoff called out, wandering over to Eric's desk. "You in here?"

He listened. The databanks continued to hum. The filing cabinet continued to make a noise like a filing cabinet. Tim wasn't here - he must have just missed him.

Geoff sat down at Eric's desk and looked around, drumming his fingers on the surface. In front of him, amongst a scattered mess of paperwork and diagrams was a large file with the name 'Geoffrey Stamp' written on the spine, and a photo of him stuck on the cover. He picked up the file - it was surprising heavy, bulging with documents, with a thick elastic band wrapped around it to hold it together. Geoff slipped his thumb under the band and pulled it free, allowing the file to expand and breathe. A few documents spilled onto the floor. Rifling through, he found transcripts of conversations, voyeuristic photographs, medical details, everything. Someone had certainly been doing their homework on him, but in a different way to that time he was bullied in maths class.

He bent down and picked up one of the documents that had fallen on the floor. It was a certificate. It read:

This is to certify that

GEOFFREY STAMP

*has passed the third assessment phase.
The subject is now cleared for one to one surveillance.*

If he wasn't mistaken, it was dated just a few days before he'd lost his job and moved in with Tim.

Towards the back of the file the documents seemed a little more recent; the paper a little less yellow. He was now getting on to things like psychological case studies, intelligence assessments; all sorts of random hypotheses about himself that he'd never even considered: Was he prone to violence? What was his favourite colour? Why wasn't he ticklish under the arms? Why did he like marmite on chips? The questions were endless.

The last section of the file was totally dedicated to the seagull Eric had mentioned a few hours ago - the one that was looking right instead of left. There were even a couple of photos of it: one of it looking right, the other of it looking left. Apart from that, the photos were identical. It was standing in the exact same position, in the exact same place on the end of a small pier. Even the clouds in the photos were the same. Geoff turned the photos over. One said "Original Timeline" on it, the other "Modified Timeline."

Continuing through the file, Geoff was amused at how many scientists had taken an interest in this seagull, some choosing to write whole theses on the subject. He skimmed through a few pages. It seemed that everyone was in agreement that the

seagull's decision to look the other way was just an unexplainable, insignificant blip in an otherwise unaltered timeline, and that Geoffrey should be made a Time Rep candidate regardless of such a benign alteration to the space time continuum. One thesis was even entitled: 'The Geoffrey Stamp Seagull – Who Cares?'

Geoff flicked over the next few pages before stopping again. One scientist it seemed *did* care, and had written a report with a very different name: "The Geoffrey Stamp Seagull – Are we *all* looking the other way?" Geoff turned the page and began to read.

For months now, the scientific community has been debating whether or not we should allow Geoffrey Stamp to be given Time Rep candidature. Normally, Time Rep candidates are only approved if history remains totally unchanged as a result of their appointment. In Geoffrey Stamp's case, we are on the verge of making an exception to that rule - a seagull will choose to look right instead of left in 100,000 years time, and we are willing to overlook this apparently insignificant change to make life easier for a holiday company. Friends, I believe we are making a significant mistake, one that could spell disaster for the integrity of the space-time continuum, and the future of the human race. This report explores the truth behind the seagull's decision to look the other way, and why Geoffrey Stamp should be immediately dropped from the 21st Century Time Rep shortlist.

Geoff licked his finger and turned the page. It was blank. He flicked on – the rest of the file was blank. Either someone had removed the other pages of this report, or the author had changed his mind after writing the first paragraph. Or it was written in invisible ink. Or...

"Uhh..."

Geoff looked around. Unless he was mistaken, somebody had just said 'Uhh...' He closed the file and stood up. There it was again:

"Uhhhh..."

The voice was very faint. It appeared to be coming from behind the third row of databanks, just barely managing to croak above the dull humming of the machines.

"Hello?" Geoff said, slowly walking in the direction of the voice. "Is anybody there?"

"Geoff?" The voice whispered. "Geoff, is that you?"

"Who is it?" Geoff said. The voice was too weak to recognise.

A fit of coughing came in response. Sounded unpleasant.

"Who is it?" Geoff repeated.

"It's... It's me, Geoff. It's Eric..."

"Eric? We've been looking all over for you! Where have you been?"

"No time..." Eric said. "Help me..."

Geoff walked around the other side of the databanks and stood shock still. Eric was sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood, clutching his stomach.

"Oh, my God!" Geoff said, dropping to his knees. "I've got to get you help!"

"No!" Eric said, clutching Geoff's arm. "There's no time! You need to listen to me!" He pulled on Geoff's arm and hunched himself up against the databank, coughing profusely. Specks of blood were splattering from his mouth.

"Who did this to you?"

"Remember what I was saying? About someone on the inside leaking my al.. algo..

"Algorithm?"

Eric nodded. "I didn't get time to finish it. I didn't... get time to fix the loophole."

"Eric, please - who did this to you?"

Eric's head drooped. It looked like he was having serious trouble breathing.

"Who did this to you!?" Geoff shouted, grabbing the lapels of Eric's blood stained dinner jacket and shaking him.

"The loophole," Eric said, looking up again. "It can be fixed. You can fix it..."

"Me?"

"It's... It's simple really. I'll tell you... what the secret is. I'll tell you how the computer... can be exploited... Come close...."

"Eric, no! I've got to get you help!"

"No!" Eric shouted, pulling Geoff close to his face. He winced in discomfort, a trickle of blood dripping from his mouth and running through his beard. "I won't let them break my algorithm! I won't let my life's work go to waste! You sit here... and you listen to me!"

Eric whispered into Geoff's ear, explaining exactly how the computer could be tricked. Geoff listened carefully; his eyes widening as Eric spoke. Of course! – when you thought about it like that, it was so simple! As Eric finished his explanation, he smiled at Geoff and released his arm, his hand dropping lifelessly to one side.

"You... understand?" Eric said.

Geoff nodded.

"Be quick..." Eric said, clutching his stomach. "These idiots are on the verge of..." Before he could finish, he coughed up a mouthful of blood and slumped over, dead.

"Eric?" Geoff said. "Eric!!!"

It was no use. Eric was still dead.

Geoff stared into Eric's vacant eyes and thought seriously about going into a mad panic; the sort of panic where you pull your hair out, eat some of it, then run around the room with your trousers on your head screaming like a girl. But no - he had to get a grip on himself and speak to Mr Knight right away. He was now the only person who knew how the supercomputer could be fooled, and what needed to be done to fix it. He turned around and froze still.

A masked figure was standing in the doorway, clutching Eric's walking stick, blood dripping from the tip onto the laboratory floor. Geoff's powers of deduction led him to believe that this was probably the person who had attacked Eric.

"I know you," Geoff said, taking a step back. "I've seen you before."

The masked figure remained silent and took a step forward.

"You were in my dream," Geoff said, taking another step back. "You're the person I hooked out of the lake in my dream..."

The masked figure took another step forward, still saying nothing.

"You're going to hit me, aren't you?"

The figure gave a single nod and took another step forward. Geoff tried to compensate for this by taking another step back, but some idiot had decided to put a wall in the way. He was cornered. The figure took another step towards him, lifted the walking stick in the air, and struck him violently over the head with it.

Geoff thought this was pretty bad manners as his skull crunched against the floor.

TEN

Geoff lay face down in the muddy bank of his imaginary lake, his body aching as if it had just been released from a complicated Yoga position. He had a splitting headache. He lifted himself up, spat out a dollop of wet dirt and slowly rolled himself over onto his back, resting his head back down in the mud. Geoff looked up at the sky, trying not to think about the searing pain that ran through his body. The searing pain however, had other ideas, giving off a sharp pang at every opportunity to remind Geoff that it wasn't going anywhere.

It was night time in his imaginary world, the sky clear of clouds and full of stars. What the hell was going on? Who had attacked him? What was happening back in the real world? Was he in a coma? Was he dead?

All of a sudden something caught his eye – a blur of white gliding across the sky. He brought himself up to rest on his elbows and tried to focus on the blur, his arms weak and shaking as they supported the weight of his body. He looked closer.

It was a seagull. A big, white seagull soaring above him, its wings outstretched as it gracefully circled over the lake. Geoff followed it with his eyes as it descended lower - unless he was mistaken, it seemed to be heading straight for him. Within a few seconds, the seagull had slowed to a hover a few feet above Geoff, arched its wings into a landing position, and dropped down in one swift movement, neatly tucking its wings into its body as it planted its feet on his chest.

Geoff lay his head back down in the mud and sighed, his arms too weak to lean on any longer. The seagull pattered closer to Geoff's face and looked down at him. It seemed to be holding something in its beak – a small pen and paper. Brilliant - this day had been weird enough already without him dreaming about a bloody seagull with a pen and paper in its mouth. This was probably the one that looked left instead of right, or up instead of down, or whatever it was.

"Go away," Geoff murmured.

The seagull blinked.

"Scram!" He said, using the last of his strength to try and brush the seagull away.

The seagull opened its beak and dropped the pen and paper on Geoff's chest.

"Stop it!" it said, ducking its head to avoid Geoff's swing. "We haven't got much time!"

Geoff raised his head up and looked at the seagull. Was someone in the real world talking to him? Had a voice manifested itself in his dream as the voice of a seagull, like when Tim was trying to wake him up this morning? Geoff couldn't tell. In any event, he was in too much pain to start debating this anthropomorphic turn of events, so he decided to just accept the talking seagull for what it was and continue with the conversation.

"What are you talking about?" He said.

"Look at the lake," the seagull said, nodding its head in the direction of the water. "They're already coming for you."

Geoff did as he was told. Sure enough, a masked figure was beginning to emerge from beneath the surface, making its way towards the shore.

"Who's coming for me?" Geoff said.

"The person who attacked you," the seagull said.

Geoff tried to get up, his arms slipping around in the mud, but it was useless – there was no feeling in his legs.

“What do I do?” Geoff said, still looking as the masked figure got closer and closer. “I can’t move!”

“I’m not surprised,” the seagull said. “In the real world, you’re in pretty bad shape - the back of your head is split open, pouring with blood.”

Geoff looked at the seagull and felt the back of his head. It was wet, but he was sure this was just mud.

“No,” Geoff said. “It’s mud, look.” He brought his hand back round to show the seagull, which was indeed brown with mud.

“That’s how you’ve translated the injury into your dream,” the seagull said. “Mud is blood. Blood is mud. Get it?”

“You’re confusing me now,” Geoff said, spitting a bit more mud out of his mouth. “Mud is blood?”

“We don’t have time for this,” The seagull said, wandering around impatiently on Geoff’s torso. “Grab that pen and paper and write down everything Eric told you.”

“Why?”

“Because now that Eric’s dead, you’re the only one who knows how to fix the computer,” the seagull replied, “and that person coming out of the lake is going to try and make you forget what you know.”

“How can they do that?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just write everything down, quickly! You’re only person who can stop them!”

Geoff was in too much pain to write. He rested his head back down in the mud and shut his eyes.

“Hurry!” The seagull said, pecking at Geoff’s nipple through his t-shirt. “They’re almost here! You’ve got to write down everything you know! If you write it down, it won’t matter if they make you forget. Your memory will be preserved on the paper.”

This didn’t quite make sense. Surely if this was a dream, he wasn’t really writing anything down – the paper only existed in his imagination. By now though, the masked figure was stepping out of the lake and onto the muddy shore. Using the last of his energy, Geoff leaned over, grabbed the pen, and scribbled down everything Eric had told him about the loophole as fast as he could.

“There,” Geoff said, slumping back down in the mud in relief. “That’s everything.”

“Thank God,” The seagull said, jumping down to Geoff’s side. “I’ll look after this until you’re ready to remember again.” It picked up the piece of paper with its foot and took off, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the masked figure, who was now standing directly over them.

“Damn,” the masked figure said, looking up at the bird as it disappeared into the night sky. “Almost had it.” The voice seemed familiar, but Geoff couldn’t quite place it.

“Hello Geoffrey,” the figure said, crouching down at Geoff’s side. “How are you?”

“Err... not too great, actually,” Geoff said, trying to avoid looking directly at the masked face. He was scared. “I’m in a bit of pain.”

“I know. And there’s one more bit of pain I need to inflict on you.”

“There is?” Geoff said. He could feel his heart beating faster.

“Yes,” the figure said, pulling out a knife. “Hold your hand still.”

Unfortunately, holding still wasn’t going to be much of a problem. Geoff barely had enough energy to blink at the moment, let alone move his hand.

“What are you going to do?”

The masked figure said nothing.

“Does it involve that knife you’re holding?”

His question was soon answered by the intense pain he felt in his right hand. Looking down his body, he could see that the masked figure had jammed the knife deep into his right palm, twisting it through to the other side. Geoff screamed out in agony. He would have preferred a simple “Yes.”

“Now,” the masked figure said, standing up again. “You’re almost ready to wake up. I just need you to forget everything that happened here. Forget everything Dr. Skivinski told you about the loophole in his algorithm. And forget everything about that seagull.”

“Why should I?” Geoff said, trying to move his hand. “Why should I forget?”

“Because you’re in pain. Your head is bursting with pain, and every memory you have of this evening is the cause; every memory is tearing through your mind like a bolt of lightning. If you forget, the pain will stop.”

Geoff’s head really did hurt, exactly as the masked figure had described. It was unbearable. He looked up at the stars and tried to relax, letting the gentle sound of crickets envelop his thoughts as he emptied his mind of all the things that had been bothering him – masked figures, algorithms, loopholes, seagulls; he let it all drift away into the comforting sound of the night, his head feeling better with every thought he discarded.

“That’s it,” the masked figure said. “Can you feel it? Can you feel the pain disappearing?”

“Yes,” Geoff said, breathing deeply as he let a soothing wave of amnesia wash over him. “I’m feeling much better...”

“Good,” the figure said. “Very good. Now, there’s one thing I *do* want you to remember before I go; something very important. Are you ready?”

Geoff nodded submissively.

“Very soon the sky will turn red. When this happens, you will get down on your knees, place your palms on the floor and wait. In time, one of my brethren will appear before you. When he does, you must say these words: ‘I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert’. Do you understand?”

“What?” Geoff said.

“You heard me! Do you want me to bring the pain back?”

“No!” Geoff said. “No... no please...”

“Then repeat after me: I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert.”

“I... I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert?”

“Good,” the masked figure said.

Geoff remembered what Eric had said about the aliens that had once attacked Earth – about certain words and phrases being particularly important to them. Was this... an alien?

“Who’s Tringrall?” Geoff said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. My brethren will understand. So remember - when the sky turns red, get down on your knees, place your palms on the floor, and wait. My brethren will recognise the ancient position you have adopted and come looking for you when they see it.”

“I see,” Geoff said, not seeing at all. “Is there anything else? Would you like me to start Morris dancing when the sky turns blue again, or something?”

“The sky will not turn blue again for thousands of years,” the masked figure said. “Not until the year of Dranculees.”

“Ah.” Geoff said.

“So, repeat after me, one last time: I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert.”

“I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert.” Geoff said. He knew this was all quite sinister, but he couldn’t help but feel a little bit stupid.

“Good. There is one more thing. Once you hear yourself say these words, you will remember everything that has happened here. You’ll remember what Eric told you, you’ll remember the seagull, and you’ll know just how your pathetic race was fooled into extinction. But by then, it will be too late for you to do anything about it. Until that time, you will have no memory of this conversation.”

“What conversation?” Geoff said.

There was no answer. Geoff strained his head up to look around. There was no-one here. Had he been talking to someone? Confused at why he had randomly chosen to say ‘what conversation?’, Geoff rested his head back down on the ground and stared up at the stars. A seagull was hovering far above, gliding across the night sky like a lazy comet. Relaxed, he shut his eyes and immersed himself once again in the recurring chirp of crickets.

Or was that a recurring beep?

ELEVEN

“Right, I’ve hooked him up to a life support machine to monitor his heart rate,” a voice said. Sounded like Tim. “He should be ok from here.”

“Can you turn that beeping down?” another voice said, “It’s driving me mad.” Was that... Mr. Knight?

“Sure,” Tim said. The recurring beep that Geoff had only just begun to notice faded away into the background.

“How long were you operating on him?” another voice said. Female. Ruth?

“A long time,” Tim said. “He took quite a blow to the head, and his hand’s been messed up pretty bad. He won’t be able to use it for months.”

“Why his *hand*?”

“I don’t know – it makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Either the attacker wanted to stop Geoff from playing his computer games, or they wanted to stop him masturbating.”

“But why?”

“That’s what we need to find out,” Mr. Knight said, sounding a little stressed. “The Defence Minister will be here any minute. What am I supposed to tell him?”

“Tell him the truth,” Ruth said.

“But he’ll shut us down for sure!” Mr Knight replied.

“I don’t really think we have a choice,” Ruth said. “A Time Rep has been attacked, Eric is dead, and the loophole in his algorithm will never be fixed. We’re finished.”

“We do have a choice,” Tim said. “We can try and catch whoever was responsible for this.”

“Yes!” Mr Knight said. “Maybe young Geoffrey knows something. He was with Eric just before he died. Can you wake him up?”

“We should really let him rest,” Ruth said. “If you wake him up now, it might be a bit of a shock to his system.”

“Waking up is always a shock to his system,” Tim said. “But I agree. He was hit pretty hard over the back of the head - his synapses need time to heal properly. If we wake him up now, his brain might not be able to take it. Any questions we ask him now could be met with complete gibberish.”

“I don’t care,” Mr. Knight said. “Wake him up. We’ve got to piece together what happened last night. It’s our only chance to avoid closure.”

“I’m already awake,” Geoff said, opening his eyes. He appeared to be lying in some sort of hospital bed. Ruth, Tim and Mr Knight were all looking down at him.

“Where am I?” Geoff said, sitting up. “What happened?”

“You’re in hospital,” Tim said, picking up a chart from the foot of the bed and making a note on it.

Geoff didn’t like hospitals. Horrible places. He always had the suspicion that whoever designed them had a secret vendetta against anyone who needed to visit one. Why, in a building full of sick people, were the walls always painted vomit-green? Why were toys only provided for *children* in the waiting rooms? Why were all the notice boards crammed with scary posters, taunting you with all the other illnesses you could get? It was almost as if they were trying to encourage people to start a collection. Geoff had once gone into a hospital with an in-growing toenail, only to emerge 5 hours later worrying about cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, Whooping cough and genital warts. He was only six!

“Do you remember anything about last night?”

"Last night?" Geoff said, looking up and down the ward. All the other beds were empty. At one end of the room, a group of armed guards were standing by the entrance, their weapons drawn. "Am I in some sort of trouble?" He said.

"No Geoff, you're fine," Tim said, looking over at the guards. "They're here for your protection. Now tell me: Do you remember anything about last night?"

"Of course I remember last night," Geoff said, a little unnerved by the two small plastic tubes he'd just noticed coming out of his nose. They were hooked up to a large grey machine to his left. "There was the party. Roman decorations. All of us were there."

Tim raised his eyebrows in surprise. "This is quite encouraging," he said to the group. "I would have expected him to show at least some signs of mental trauma, but he appears to be..."

"I like cheese," Geoff said.

"What?" Tim said.

"Cheese," Geoff said. "I like cheese."

"I take that back," Tim said. "Clearly he needs more time to rest. I'll get something to put him back to sleep."

"Wait!" Mr. Knight said. "At least *some* of the things he is saying appear to make sense. Can't we just ask him a few questions and try to filter out the nonsense?"

"I don't think..."

"Geoffrey?" Mr. Knight said. "Look at me, Geoffrey. Tell us: What's the last thing you remember?"

"I remember... talking to Ruth about being Time Rep," Geoff said, struggling to form his words properly. He felt a little drunk, come to think of it. Had he been drugged?

Ruth nodded. "That's true," she said. "We did speak, briefly."

"Anything else?" Mr. Knight said.

"I remember... going down to Eric's lab..."

"Good..."

"...And I remember going up in a hot air balloon."

"A hot air balloon?"

"Yup."

"Before the hot air balloon," Mr. Knight said. "Do you remember anything else about what happened in Eric's lab?"

"There was a lot of humming," Geoff said.

"Humming?"

"He's talking about the data banks," Tim said.

"What else, Geoffrey?" Mr Knight said, leaning forward in his chair. "What else do you remember?"

"I remember – Oh my God! I remember what happened to Eric! He'd been attacked!"

"That's right," Mr. Knight said, looking anxiously at the rest of the group. "Was he alive when you found him?"

"I can't remember. I think I was busy playing golf at the time. What's your handicap these days?"

"Try and think, Geoffrey," Mr Knight said, giving Tim a concerned look. "Was Eric alive when you found him?"

"I think so," Geoff said, struggling to remember. "I remember him talking to me about something."

"What?" Mr. Knight said, standing up out of his chair. "What did he tell you?"

“He was trying to tell me the recipe for a good potato soup.”

Mr. Knight shut his eyes and let out a deep breath. “Please try and remember,” he said, sitting back down in his seat. “What did Eric tell you?”

“I... I can’t remember,” Geoff said. “I can’t remember if you’re supposed to add the cream before or after the coriander.”

“This is hopeless,” Mr. Knight said. He took a vial of pills out of his jacket pocket and popped one in his mouth.

“Did you see who attacked you?” Ruth said.

“I’ve been attacked?”

“Yes,” Tim said. “That’s why you’re here in hospital. You were hit over the back of the head and stabbed through the hand.”

“Great,” Geoff said, lifting his hand up. It was wrapped in a thick bandage. “How am I supposed to win tomorrow’s arm wrestling championships now?”

“Answer Ruth’s question,” Mr. Knight said. “Did you see who attacked you?”

“I can’t remember,” Geoff said. “I can’t remember anything.”

All of a sudden, there was a bit of commotion by the entrance to the ward. One of the armed guards ran over to them, holstering his weapon as he approached.

“The Defence Minister is here,” he said, putting a finger in his ear. Geoff assumed the guard was wearing some kind of earpiece to justify this movement, rather than just talking to them with a finger in his ear for the sake of it. He was pretty sure it wasn’t wise to give someone a gun that had a habit of putting his finger in his ear whenever he needed to speak to someone. That would be what you would call a minor psychological disorder.

“Thanks,” Mr. Knight said, leaning on the bed with his head in his hands.

“Out of my way! Out of my way!” A voice boomed from outside the ward. “Where are they? Ernest! Where are you?”

“Here we go,” Mr. Knight muttered under his breath, straightening his tie as he got to his feet. “We’re in here David,” he shouted back. “We’re in here with Geoffrey Stamp.”

The doors to the ward were pulled open with an unnecessary force by two guards, probably frustrated at the fact that there was nothing to shoot. The Defence Minister marched in, accompanied by two more. Guards, that is, not doors. He looked a lot less dignified than he did last night – unshaven, messy hair, and no tie, like he’d made his way here in quite a hurry. Either that or he had a deliberately unorthodox approach to his appearance in times of crisis, much like Geoff did in times of being awake.

“Give me an update on everything that happened last night,” he said, stopping at the foot of Geoff’s bed. He sounded out of breath.

“Before we begin,” Mr Knight said, “Can I just say...”

“Ernest! I don’t have time for this! Tell me what’s happened!”

Mr. Knight tugged nervously on one of his cufflinks. Geoff noticed that they had little clocks on them. Cute.

“Last night, Dr. Skivinski was attacked in his laboratory by an unknown assailant. We have reason to believe he was in the final stages of fixing his algorithm when this happened. A few moments after the attack, he was discovered by Geoffrey here, who was then also attacked. Probably by the same person.”

“And what is the status of Dr. Skivinski?”

“He’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes,” Tim said. “He suffered multiple fractures to his rib-cage and punctured a lung. He effectively drowned in his own blood.”

The Defence Minister gulped. “Do we have any idea who could have done this?” he said, crossing his arms protectively across his own chest.

“It had to be someone at the party,” Tim said. “No-one else would have had access to Eric’s lab at that time.”

“And who was at the party?”

“Three hundred time-tourists, ninety journalists, sixty-eight politicians, fifty Time Reps, thirty-two junior physicists, twenty caterers, and us.”

“So it could have been anyone.”

“Yes.”

“Did the lifts hear anything suspicious?”

“Basement!” Geoff said.

“Basement?”

“Ignore him,” Mr. Knight said. “We checked the logs - Nothing.”

“What about the murder weapon?”

“His walking stick,” Tim said. “We found it at the scene of the crime. It was covered in Eric and Geoff’s blood, so it must have been used to attack them both.”

“Did Mr. Stamp discover Dr. Skivinski before he died?”

“Yes,” Tim said. “But he can’t remember anything beyond that. We’ve tried talking to him, but as you’ve already heard, he’s feeling a little... confused at the moment.”

“Let me try,” the Defence Minister said, motioning Tim to step out of the way. He moved round to the side of the bed and sat down.

“I wouldn’t...”

“Geoffrey?” He said, ignoring Tim. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Geoff said.

“Good. I need you to tell me what happened when you saw Dr. Skivinski. Eric. Did you speak with him?”

Geoff belched. “When are we going to the circus?” He said.

“You see?” Mr. Knight said. “He’s no use to us at the moment. We need to give him more time to recover.”

“We don’t *have* any time,” The Defence Minister said. “With your chief physicist dead, the time tourism facility is completely vulnerable to attack. I was prepared to entertain the idea of keeping it open on the proviso that the algorithm would be fixed, but with that out of the window, I’m afraid I have no choice but to shut you down until further notice.”

“Now wait a minute David,” Mr. Knight said, looking anxiously at Ruth. “Let’s not be too hasty. Surely we could still operate a limited service, increase security checks...”

“I’m sorry, Ernest,” The Defence Minister said, pulling a tie out of his pocket. “I’ve got a press conference on this incident in twenty minutes and I just can’t take that risk. As of this minute, I want all tourists recalled from their holidays, all future trips cancelled, and all Time Reps sent back to their native time periods.”

“What about Geoff?” Tim said. “He’s in no state to go back. He can barely walk.”

“His legs are fine,” The Defence Minister said, hurriedly feeding his tie through his collar, “and I know the kind of medication you can get these days. By the time you get him back to the departure chamber, he’ll be fine. I want you to get him out of here, and get him home. Any questions?”

“I have a question,” Geoff said, raising his good hand.

“Apart from you,” The Defence Minister said, completing his Double-Windsor. “Anyone got any *serious* questions?”

“This *is* a serious question,” Geoff said, feeling a little offended.

“Go on then. What is it?”

“Do you have any cheese?”

TWELVE

It was bad enough trying to convince Geoff to get out of bed without the added annoyance of him having a hole in the back of his head and a broken hand, so you can probably imagine the difficulty Tim had in doing just that. No trail of sweets leading out of the door was going to work this time, that was for sure. In the end, he had to resort to administering Geoff with some particularly strong painkillers – one dose of these and even a decapitated head would feel fit enough to go bowling, even it knew it was going to be used as the bowling ball.

“How you feeling?” Tim said, leading Geoff through the entrance to the departure lounge.

“Great,” Geoff replied, trying his best sound sarcastic. The only problem was that he did actually feel great. Whatever Tim had given him to ease the pain had certainly done the trick.

They’d picked up a few other Time Reps on their way back, all of whom had been ordered by the Defence Minister to return to their native time periods. Keeping close behind Geoff was a butler from Victorian times called Winterbottom, and an unknown Greek philosopher called Nestor who was apparently rubbish at philosophising. Indeed, when they’d first met up with the other three Time Reps a couple of hours ago, Nestor had likened their situation to that of a blind horse falling off a cliff, which Geoff thought was a little wide of the mark.

It was absolute chaos in the departure lounge. All around, people were either arguing with officials, or barging their way through to the exit. Many were just standing still, looking up in disbelief at the hovering departure boards, all of which seemed to be quite fond of the word ‘cancelled’, which appeared after every single destination.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” a voice boomed over the loudspeaker, gentle but firm. “WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT HOLIDAYS TO ALL TIME PERIODS HAVE BEEN CANCELLED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. THIS IS DUE TO UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES. PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY OUT OF THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE AND ONTO THE REPLACEMENT BUS SERVICE. THANK YOU.”

“Unforeseen circumstances!” Someone shouted. Geoff looked to his right. A woman dressed in some sort of ‘Joan of Arc’ style costume was arguing with an official. “You’ve got the most powerful computer in the known universe, capable of predicting every eventuality, and you’re telling me you’re cancelling my holiday due to ‘unforeseen circumstances’?”

“I’m sorry miss,” the official said. “I don’t know much more than you. All I know is that they’re stopping all departures until further notice.”

“I knew I should have gone to Mars!” the woman said, removing her wig and throwing it to the floor.

Geoff and the other two Time Reps stayed close to Tim as they waded against the general flow of the crowd. They appeared to be heading for one of the more distant quarantine chambers.

“This is all your fault,” Winterbottom whispered in Geoff’s ear. “If you hadn’t been attacked, none of this would have happened.”

“What are you talking about?” Geoff whispered back. “I didn’t exactly have a choice in the matter! I was backed into a corner and hit over the head with a walking stick!”

“Yes, but couldn’t you have defended yourself? Couldn’t you have fought the attacker off; perhaps even caught him? If you hadn’t been such a wimp, we wouldn’t be in this situation!”

“Will you two stop arguing?” Nestor said from behind. “We’re all friends here, and an argument between friends is like sheep grazing in the wrong field.”

“What?” Geoff said. “What has arguing got to do with sheep?”

“It’s alright for you,” Winterbottom continued, sidling his way past a family dressed as pirates. “You’re not going back to my time period. You’re not returning to a lifetime of servitude: waking up at four in the morning; preparing the Master’s breakfast; feeding the horses, polishing the silverware; we don’t even have electricity, for goodness sake! How am I expected to just leave all the pleasures of being a Time Rep behind and return to being a mere butler? I’m going to go mad!”

Geoff felt a little sorry for Winterbottom. Clearly this was a man who had become accustomed to a completely new lifestyle when he became a Time Rep, just as Geoff had become accustomed to a new lifestyle when they launched squeezy Marmite. Going back wasn’t going to be easy for everyone.

Up ahead, hundreds of confused tourists were being ushered out of the quarantine chambers by an overly aggressive group of security guards, who were clearly relishing the occasion to use their batons and shout commands into loudspeakers. Most of their days were probably spent reprimanding teenagers for sticking chewing gum to the seats, or stopping people from running with their luggage. Today must have been the day they had all been waiting for – an excuse to hit people over the head and look important.

“Move along!” One barked at a man, who was awkwardly trying to cradle all of his belongings in his arms. To his left, a weeping mother was struggling to keep hold of her two children. The guards marched on relentlessly, their minds fixed solely on funnelling the crowd out of the nearest exit.

“Coming through!” Tim shouted, trying his best to lead the three Time Reps through the oncoming throng of tourists. “Please make way!”

One of the younger-looking security guards stepped in front of them to block their path, his expression displaying such self importance that if he’d frowned any harder, his face would probably have turned inside out.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He said, pushing his baton forcefully into Tim’s shoulder. “All quarantine chambers are off limits!”

“Oh well,” Winterbottom said, turning around to leave. “You heard the man. All quarantine chambers are off limits. We’ll have to come back some other time.”

Tim pulled out an identity card and shoved it in the guard’s face. “You might want to get out of our way,” he said, pushing the baton to one side, “unless you want to explain to the Defence Minister why three of our Time Reps still haven’t been sent back to their time periods.”

The security guard looked nervously at Tim’s identification, then even more nervously at Tim, his frown melting away into a more sheepish expression.

“Sorry sir,” the guard said, taking a step back. “Please go right through.”

“Come on,” Tim said, placing a firm hand on Winterbottom’s shoulder and turning him back in the right direction. “You’re not getting out of this *that* easily.”

* * *

The quarantine chamber was eerily silent as the three Time Reps sat on their frosted glass seats waiting for the scan to finish; the sort of silence that usually occurs

when someone has just made a faux pas. And we're not talking any old faux pas, like doing a little fart in a meeting and knowing it was just loud enough for everyone to hear; it was so deathly quiet in the quarantine chamber that it felt like someone had just told a joke about paedophilia to a school assembly, then done a shit on the piano.

"If I know Mr. Knight," Tim said, breaking the silence, "He's working on a way out of this. He's probably got some scheme to get us back up and running. You'll see."

Geoff, Nestor and Winterbottom stared at Tim. None of them looked particularly convinced by his attempt to reassure them.

"Don't believe me?" Tim said. "Trust me – we'll be up and running again in a week. Two at most."

The quarantine chamber flashed green, indicating that they were all safe to travel. Tim got to his feet and held open the door to customs.

Winterbottom stood up reluctantly and led the way. "I wonder what my first chore will be when I get back," he said, walking as slowly as he could down the corridor. "Perhaps I'll be clipping the master's toenails, or scrubbing out the latrines."

"Jesus," Tim said. "Will you stop whining? Anyone would think you were going back to the dark ages!"

"I am, compared to this," Winterbottom said. "I won't even be able to watch tonight's Hoverball game!"

"Come on, it's not that bad," Tim said, stopping just before the arch that scanned tourists for any prohibited technology. "I told you – Mr. Knight's got this all under control."

"But what if..."

"Look at Nestor," Tim said. "He's being sent back much further than you, and he's fine!"

They turned to look at Nestor, who was staring at the ceiling. He seemed to be in another world.

"Yes, but Nestor's an idiot, isn't he?" Winterbottom said. "He's probably rationalised this whole situation in this mind with some stupid philosophical nonsense like 'he who eats pine nuts knows where the spoons are kept'."

"Just calm down," Tim said, standing to one side of the metal arch and motioning the Time Reps to walk through. "Let's get on with this."

Geoff was the first to walk under the arch, giving it a suspicious look as he passed through. He knew he wasn't carrying anything that would make it go off, but he was suspicious anyway – things that were capable of making loud noises often did when he was nearby, like car alarms, dogs, or teenagers. On this occasion however, he succeeded in passing through without incident.

Nestor was next, dawdling through the scanner like a poodle at Crufts. Again, the arch made no sound.

Winterbottom hesitated for a minute, pacing around nervously. He looked a bit like Geoff psyching himself up to have a shower.

"Well?" Tim said. "Get on with it!"

"Ok, ok, don't rush me," Winterbottom said, positioning himself carefully in front of the arch as if he needed a run-up to get through. He looked at Geoff and Nestor on the other side, took a deep breath, and walked through the scanner briskly. Immediately the alarm went off.

"Hand it over," Tim said, pressing a button on the wall to stop the beeping.

"Hand what over?" Winterbottom said.

"Whatever it is you're carrying. Hand it over."

“I- I don’t know what you’re talking about,” He stammered.

This was embarrassing. Everyone could see Winterbottom was lying. His attempt at looking innocent and confused was about as convincing as the time Geoff had tried to look nonchalant when a power-cut made him lose 5 hours of progress in Final Fantasy VII because he hadn’t been able to find a save point. Unfortunately, Geoff’s pretence was somewhat betrayed by the fact that he’d shouted “FUCK!” at the top of his voice and thrown the joypad out of the window.

“Come on,” Tim said, holding out his hand. “You’re blatantly hiding something.”

“And wh- what makes you say that?” Winterbottom said.

“Wh- What makes me say that?” Tim replied, trying not to laugh. “Listen to yourself! You can barely get your words out properly! And the way you walked through the arch was just pathetic...”

Winterbottom looked over at Geoff and Nestor, both of whom were nodding in agreement.

“It *was* pretty crap,” Geoff concurred.

“Fine!” Winterbottom snapped, reaching into his pocket. “It was only a bloody personal stereo, for goodness sake!” He slapped the stereo into Tim’s hand and stormed off towards the paradox-scanning facility.

* * *

Geoff had forgotten just how boiling it was in the paradox-scanning facility – you probably could have fried bacon in mid-air. He was sweating so much that wiping his brow was fast becoming a futile exercise; like turning on the windscreen wipers after driving your car into a swimming pool. Tim had evidently thought ahead, as he had brought a large bottle of water with him.

“Right, we all know how this works,” Tim said, pacing in front of the three Time Reps like some sort of drill sergeant. “Step into the beam of light, wait for it to turn green, and proceed to the departure chamber. Simple as that.” Behind him, the thick beam of white light shone down from the ceiling, waiting for its first subject.

“Wait,” Winterbottom said. “What happens after we get back? Will we ever hear from you again?”

“Absolutely,” Tim said, taking a large gulp of water. “We’ll be working round the clock to straighten this out – you can count on that. Who would like to go first?”

“I’ll go,” Winterbottom volunteered, much to Geoff’s surprise. “Might as well get it out of the way.” He stepped up into the beam and stood still as the light enveloped his body. A few moments later he was cleared to travel.

“1889, here I come,” he said, sounding about as enthusiastic as a child who had just been given a peanut for Christmas. He stepped down from the scanning pedestal and made his way through to the departure chamber.

“You’re next, Nestor,” Tim said. He motioned the Greek philosopher to step forward, taking another deep swig of water.

“Me?” Nestor said, stepping back. “I was hoping to go last. He who goes last...”

“I want Geoff to go last,” he said, interrupting what Geoff assumed to be a sentence most worthy of never being finished.

Nestor reluctantly shuffled forward and stepped into the light. Within seconds the beam turned bright green, as if the computer wanted to get rid of him as quickly as everyone else did.

“So,” Tim said, watching as Nestor disappeared down the same corridor as Winterbottom. “I guess it’s just you to go, Geoff.”

“I guess,” Geoff replied, stepping up into the beam of light. As before, the beam was wonderfully cool.

“So, what have you made of your first day?” Tim said, looking at his watch. The scan seemed to be taking a little longer than usual.

“Well, it’s certainly turned out differently to how I expected,” Geoff shivered. “When I woke up this morning, the only unusual thing I thought I’d be doing was the washing up.”

Suddenly Geoff felt very hot again.

The light had turned green.

Time to go home.

THIRTEEN

Geoff had only been back home for a few minutes, but he soon began to realise just how much he'd missed the little quirks of 23 Woodview Gardens; the small comforts of the house that he'd taken for granted. The second he walked through the front door, he was instantly reassured by the faintly nauseating 'house smell'; he smiled to himself upon noticing the old pair of socks that were inexplicably draped over the banisters, and he even felt a twinge of nostalgia at the familiar sound of the toilet flushing after a much needed poo. The future may have had its cheering crowds, fantastic technology and improved quality of life, but did he know exactly where all the creaky floorboards were in the future? No. Could he walk around all day in his dressing gown in the future? No. If the future really wanted to win him over, it was going to have to significantly up its game.

Geoff sat down on the sofa, kicked off his shoes, and stared vacantly at the ceiling for a few moments. It had certainly been one hell of a day: He had travelled into the future, been treated like a celebrity, spoken to people from as far back as ancient times, been brutally attacked, and lost his memory. More unusual than that, he'd even been for a job interview.

It was normally after a gruelling day like this that Geoff liked to reward himself by doing something constructive; something that made him use his brain; something like playing *Space Commando* for ten hours straight. Unfortunately, his right hand had a few objections to this idea, principally due to the fact that it had just had a large knife thrust through it, and could no more hold a joypad than it could a conversation. One thing was for sure - he certainly wouldn't be practising his skills with the *Death Bringer* today.

This left Geoff with a slight dilemma. What was he supposed to do if he couldn't play computer games? He stared at the ceiling again, as if the sight of a bare light bulb would somehow inspire him to find a new source of amusement. Nothing. He picked up a nearby magazine and flicked through it. There was an article about the top 10 superfoods, an interview with Britain's last lighthouse keeper, and a pull-out section on sub-woofers. Geoff tossed the magazine to the floor and thought about the onomatopoeic qualities of the word 'woofer' for ten minutes, wondering if there was perhaps a more appropriate word to describe a low-frequency loudspeaker.

Within a couple of hours, Geoff was bored out of his mind. He'd tried to pass the time by making himself a tea, watching a bit of television, and even doing some tidying, but it was no good; after everything that had happened in the last 24 hours, returning back to the house, pairing all his socks and watching *Deal or No Deal* was somewhat of an anti-climax. And the contestant only won ten quid.

It began to cross Geoff's mind that he may never actually see anyone from the future ever again, despite Tim's assurances to the contrary. What if they really couldn't fix the supercomputer without Eric? What if Mr. Knight couldn't persuade the politicians to let them resume business? He remembered what Ruth had said about what his life would have been like if they hadn't intervened: He'd have been sitting in front of a computer trying to work out how to program his own game, before giving up and drifting between mundane temp jobs for the rest of his life. Geoff felt a little weak at the knees at this thought. Having caught a brief glimpse of what it was like to be a Time Rep, was he doomed to being relegated to that way of life? Would he be forced to go back to being the old Geoffrey Stamp; the 'insignificant nobody'; the man less important to the world than certain types of mushroom? And which mushrooms were more important than him anyway? Probably those bloody Shitake

ones that everyone was going on about these days. He'd have to ask Tim if he ever saw him again.

This was ridiculous. Not only could Geoff feel himself spiralling into an ever more depressing chain of thought, but he was now at the stage where he was getting competitive with Shitake mushrooms. If Fate was going to be kind to him, it needed to provide some sort of interesting distraction at this difficult time; something to help him take his mind off things: A telephone call; a gas explosion; a meteorite falling through the ceiling; anything. Unfortunately for Geoff, Fate must have been off playing snooker at that precise moment because there wasn't so much as a fly buzzing around to help him take his mind off things.

The thing that frustrated Geoff most of all was the fact that whilst he was here in the 21st Century watching daytime television, he had no way of knowing what was going on in the future, and even if he did know, he would be powerless to help matters. He imagined Tim and Ruth frantically running around at this very moment, trying desperately to piece together what had happened at last night's party. Mr. Knight was probably busy too: managing the media, speaking to senior politicians, and negotiating conditions under which they could get things up and running again. In the meantime, the only problem Geoff needed to deal with was the fact that he was running low on tea bags. Unless the trip to the shops involved some sort of spectacular car chase, it was fairly safe to assume that this problem wasn't going to pose quite the same excitement.

Perhaps he should call Zoë. He was pretty sure she wasn't being sarcastic when she suggested that they should try and meet up sometime soon, and he very much wanted to see a familiar face. Maybe they could wander down to the lake again, like they'd used to do in the old days. There was just one problem: whenever she saw him, she always asked him if he'd 'found another job yet'. What was he supposed to say? He didn't really want to lie and say no, because this was what he always said. On top of that, he was still thinking about what Darren Bell had taunted him with this morning. Would Zoë really have any interest in him if she thought he was just a 'jobless waster'? Probably not. He needed to be a somebody, and a somebody with a job, at that. On the other hand, he couldn't exactly say that he *did* have a job, because he'd then have to explain that he couldn't tell her what the job was, and by the way, he may not have it anymore anyway because he was attacked by a group of people trying to change the course of history. No, this would probably sound a little bit crazy to most people, and although Geoff wasn't exactly an expert on women, he was pretty sure that sounding like a lunatic wasn't the best way of endearing himself to the opposite sex.

Geoff picked up the phone and stared at it for a while to the point where it started beeping impatiently. Just as he had plucked up the courage to dial Zoë's number, there was a loud knock at the door. Slightly startled at the interruption, Geoff hung up the phone and went to see who it was. He wasn't expecting anyone.

He opened the door. It was Tim.

"Oh," said Geoff, a little surprised.

"Oh?" said Tim. "What do you mean, 'oh'?"

"I wasn't expecting... I mean, I didn't..."

"You haven't seen me for two weeks and all you have to say is 'oh'?"

"Two weeks?" Geoff said, stepping aside to let Tim in. "What are you talking about, two weeks?"

"Sorry," Tim said, shrugging off his coat. "I keep forgetting. It hasn't been two weeks for you, has it? I suppose you've only just got back?"

“Yes,” Geoff said, shutting the door. “Couple of hours ago.”

“I see,” Tim replied, walking into the kitchen. “Well, it’s been two weeks since *I* last saw *you*. Two very stressful weeks.” He filled the kettle up with water and turned it on.

“So you managed to sort everything out?” Geoff said. “You caught my attacker, fixed the algorithm, and all that?”

Tim looked at Geoff in silence for a few moments.

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Pardon?” Geoff said, blinking a little bit more than necessary in surprise.

“Not exactly,” Tim repeated.

Geoff sat down at the kitchen table and thought seriously about banging his head against it.

“By ‘not exactly’,” he said, opting to restrain himself, “do you mean, ‘no’?”

“We’ve got a few leads on your attacker, but we still don’t know who it was for sure,” Tim said, getting the milk out of the fridge. “As for the supercomputer, we haven’t been able to fix it. Eric didn’t leave any notes on what he was doing in case they fell into the wrong hands, and as far as we know, he didn’t manage to explain the loophole to anyone before he died.”

“So what the hell are you doing here?” Geoff said. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Yes and no,” Tim said, waiting for the kettle to finish boiling. “We have a plan.”

Geoff reconsidered the option of banging his head against the table again. He didn’t like plans. In his experience, a plan was just quick way of describing something that wasn’t actually going to happen. When he was 13, he’d *planned* to become a rock star. When he was on his paper round, he’d *planned* to ask Zoë out on a date. What he soon discovered was that plans always failed to take into account a certain obstacle that prevented you from achieving the desired result. In the case of him planning to be a rock star, he hadn’t considered the fact that most people could get a better song out of a lettuce than he could get out of a musical instrument, and in the case of him asking Zoë out on a date, he hadn’t considered the fact that he was a complete coward. No, whether it was best laid plans or worst laid plans, Geoff always found it hard to believe that things would go exactly as expected. He was even suspicious of the plans for next door’s conservatory.

“I don’t like this,” Geoff said. “You know how I feel about plans...”

“That’s because your plans are always stupid,” Tim said, dropping the last two tea bags into a couple of mugs and adding the milk. “This isn’t like the time you planned to become an extra in *Star Wars* by sending George Lucas a photo of you mowing the lawn into the shape of a Star Destroyer. This plan has actually been *thought through*.”

“I still can’t believe that didn’t work,” Geoff said. “I even got the shield generators right, with all the little triangular bits.”

Tim topped the mugs up with boiling water, saying nothing. Geoff got the feeling that he wanted to talk about more pressing matters.

“So what’s your brilliant plan?” Geoff said. “And does it involve me being in any danger?”

“A bit,” Tim said, casually spooning the tea bags out of the mugs and passing one to Geoff.

“Sorry?” Geoff said. “Did you say ‘a bit’?”

“The plan is use to you as bait. Flush out the attacker.”

“Bait?” Geoff said. He was disappointed that he wasn’t sipping his tea at that precise moment, because he would have liked to have melodramatically spat a mouthful across the table to demonstrate just how shocked he was at what Tim had just said.

“The way we see it, whatever these people are trying to do to change history has something to do with you.”

“Me?”

“We don’t know what it is, but we know there’s a connection.”

“I don’t understand,” Geoff said. “What possible...”

“Think about it,” Tim interrupted. “For all your attacker knew, Eric could have told you how to fix the algorithm before he died. Why on Earth did they risk letting you live? And why did they stab you through the hand?”

“You tell me,” Geoff shrugged, making sure to sip his tea this time in case the next part of the plan involved him dangling from a rope or something.

“Well, we have a theory,” Tim said, adjusting his glasses. “We think that you were meant to be sent back here as some sort of Trojan horse.”

“A Trojan horse?”

Tim nodded. “It’s the only thing that would explain why you weren’t killed when you discovered Eric. We believe that whoever stabbed you through the hand wanted you alive. They wanted you to come back to the 21st Century so you could change something for them.”

“Change something?”

“Yep. Change something without even realising it.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Geoff said. “If I was going to change something, even without realising it, wouldn’t your ‘supercomputer’ have picked it up? The light went green, remember?”

“Precisely,” Tim said. “That’s why I’m here. Mr. Knight has convinced the Defence Minister that whatever scheme these people had in mind has failed, and that therefore, they must still have some unfinished business with you. Everyone agrees that the only way to expose the group behind all this is to resume holidays to all time periods, and hope that we can tempt your attacker to come looking for you in the 21st Century. When he does, we’ll be waiting, and we’ll be able to put an end to this fiasco once and for all. Unless, of course...”

“Unless of course... what?”

“No, we all agreed that it was ridiculous. Impossible.”

“This whole day has been ridiculous,” Geoff said. “What is it?”

“Well, there’s a small chance that they’ve worked out how to manipulate the loophole in Eric’s algorithm. And if they have, they might have discovered a way to send you back in time to change history without it registering on the paradox scan. But like I said, it’s impossible. There’s no way they could have figured something like that out so quickly.”

“Did Mr. Knight mention this possibility to the Defence Minister?”

“He did,” Tim said, “and to be honest, the way the Defence Minister saw it, if that really is the case, then we’ve got nothing to lose; the damage will have already been done. But don’t worry – there’s only a 0.06% chance that they’ve worked out how to cheat that computer.”

“Well, it’s a superb plan,” Geoff said. “Truly superb. But I still have a small issue with the part where you use me as bait.”

“That’s not *part* of the plan!” Tim said. “That’s the whole plan!”

“Ok then. I have a small issue with... the whole plan.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little dangerous? You’re talking about just letting some maniac waltz right up to me and stab me through the other hand, or break my legs, or do whatever it is they should have done to me in the first place!”

“Relax,” Tim said. “Everything will be fine.”

“Relax?” Geoff said. “How am I supposed to relax?”

“If we’re lucky, they won’t even make it past the paradox scanning facility. And even if they do, I’ll be watching you at all times. You’ll be reasonably safe.”

Geoff took another sip of his tea. He didn’t like the use of the word ‘reasonably’ in that last sentence, just like he wouldn’t have liked the use of the word ‘acid’ if he was asked “How about a nice cup of acid?”

“I just can’t believe that the Defence Minister is really happy about all this,” Geoff said. “What does he have to say about using me as bait?”

“Oh, he’s totally on board,” Tim replied.

“On board what?” Geoff said. “The Titanic?”

“Look, pull yourself together,” Tim snapped. “This is our only chance to find out who’s behind all this, so stop worrying, finish your tea, and get your coat. We’re scheduled to meet the first group of tourists in Trafalgar Square in less than an hour, and your attacker could be one of them. I need you on your toes.”

Geoff gulped down the rest of his tea and wiped his mouth clean. He was quite fond of his toes, and hoped he’d still have some left when this was all over.

* * *

Geoff had never been the biggest fan of tourists. They always seemed to have the urge to get in everyone’s way by reading maps at the bottom of escalators, or to waste people’s time by asking them for directions to somewhere that didn’t exist. Now that one of them could possibly be trying to injure, maim or even kill him in some bizarre way, he found himself even less enthusiastic at the thought of spending a day with a whole group of them.

The group in question were quite a small bunch of men, women and children, all of whom looked like... well, tourists. They all had their guide books, cameras, sunglasses and rucksacks, and were waiting patiently for Geoff and Tim at the bottom of Nelson’s column. Some were randomly pointing at double-decker buses and black cabs as if they had just seen an endangered species in a safari park. Others were looking at passers by and whispering excitedly to each other. The children seemed to be entertaining themselves by chasing after the few pigeons that had gathered at their feet in the hope of food. Geoff did a quick headcount and guessed their numbers to be no more than thirty. The tourists that is, not the pigeons.

It was a beautiful day in Trafalgar Square; the temperature almost as hot as it was in the paradox scanning facility. Indeed, all the clouds you would normally expect to find over London in November must have been distracted by something good on television, because there wasn’t a single one in sight. This left the sun to have all the sky to itself, shining so brightly that it appeared to be in Geoff’s eyes even when he was looking in the opposite direction.

The tourists quickly seemed to recognise Geoff. As they saw him approaching, they immediately stopped what they were doing and gathered together.

“Leave the talking to me for now,” Tim whispered, walking ahead and smiling at the group. “Hello everyone!” he beamed.

“Hello!” the group chimed back.

“Welcome to the 21st Century. For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Dr. Timothy Burnell and I am one of your tour operator’s chief physicists. First off, I’d like to congratulate you all on passing your paradox scans, and being the first group to visit this time period. Well done.”

Geoff surveyed the group and thought about which person in particular might deserve an extra special congratulation for slipping their violent motives past the supercomputer undetected. Maybe it was the old guy at the back who was dressed entirely in black, or the young lady at the front looking at him funny. That said, he didn’t like the look of the tall man wearing a sunhat to his right, either. It wasn’t an especially suspicious looking sunhat, but then his attacker would have been a bit daft to wear something to arouse suspicion, like a sunhat with knives sticking out of it, or something. Come to think of it, he wouldn’t have been surprised if the real attacker turned out to be the most innocent looking person in the group.

“As I’m sure you all know,” Tim said, breaking Geoff’s train of thought, “the gentleman standing behind me is Geoffrey Stamp – the Time Rep for the 21st Century.”

Everyone stared at Geoff, which he didn’t like at all. Now that he thought about it, they *all* looked a bit suspicious in their own way. He attempted to stare back at them in some sort of Clint Eastwood ‘don’t mess with me’ style, but ended up looking as if he had something in his eye.

“I’m sure most of you will be familiar about the role of a Time Rep,” Tim continued, “but for those of you who are new to time travel holidays, allow me to explain. Geoffrey will essentially be your tour guide while you are here. He’ll show you the sights, teach you a bit more about the culture of the time period, and answer any questions you may have. I know some of you may be a little star-struck to see him in the flesh, especially after all the coverage you would have seen about the attack, but please, don’t be shy in asking him anything. He’s only too happy to help.”

Geoff wouldn’t really have chosen to describe himself as being ‘only too happy to help’, and smiled uncomfortably at the group. All of a sudden, one of the children broke free from her parent’s grip and ran over to him.

“Mr Stamp?” she said, tugging at his t-shirt.

“Agggghh!” Geoff screamed, pushing her hand away.

The little girl looked a bit upset.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Sorry,” Geoff said. “I... I thought you were going to hit me.”

“No,” the girl said, playing with her hair. “I wanted to see if you could take us to the zoo later. I want to see a penguin. They don’t exist anymore where I’m from.”

“Oh,” Geoff said, looking sheepishly at the other tourists. He felt a little embarrassed at the way he had reacted. “I... er... I don’t know. I’ll ask Tim if it’s ok.”

“Thank you!” she said, running back to her parents.

“Will you all excuse me for one moment?” Tim said to the group. He put his hand in his pockets and marched over to Geoff.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Tim whispered.

“Sorry,” Geoff replied. “I thought she might be the attacker.”

“She’s only eight! How could she be the attacker?”

“I don’t know,” Geoff said, trying to think of some way to change the subject. “*Can* we go and see the penguins later?”

* * *

As the day went on, Geoff's paranoia towards the group of tourists had settled down considerably. He'd taken them to London Zoo, shown them Buckingham Palace, walked them round Piccadilly Circus, put them on the London Eye, and even sent them on a shopping spree down Oxford Street. After all this, not one of them had made any attempt to hurt him, and by now they'd all certainly had the opportunity. The only brief moment of panic had occurred when one man accidentally trod on his foot in Debenhams, but apart from that, today had been relatively pain-free. Yes, Geoff was feeling far more relaxed as the sun began to set, and decided to finish the day off by taking them to see Big Ben.

"I guess that wasn't so bad after all," he said as they led the group along the north bank of the Thames towards Westminster.

"It's not over yet," Tim replied. "Remember - you're looking after these guys for a whole week. One of them may be trying to lull you into a false sense of security. They may strike when you least expect it."

"Thanks," Geoff said, feeling his heart beat a little faster. "Just as I was beginning to look on the bright side of all this, you go and flush my optimism down the toilet."

"I just don't want you to let your guard down," Tim said, looking out across the river.

"Hey - I thought *you* were my guard?" Geoff said, feeling a slight headache coming on. "My guard is useless whether it's raised, lowered, or doing star jumps!"

"Mr Stamp?" a voice called from behind. It was one of the girls near the front of the pack. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Geoff said, flashing a cautious glance at Tim as he turned to look at her. "What is it?"

"What's the night-life like in the 21st Century?" she said. "Are there any good clubs you would recommend?"

Geoff looked blankly at the girl. He didn't have a clue. When it came to questions on night-life, she'd probably have had more luck asking one of the penguins they'd seen earlier.

"I er... I don't really... I mean, I haven't..."

Before Geoff had the chance to stumble any further through the conversation, he found himself being interrupted by an almighty roar from above. The noise was deafening, like the sound of a thousand jet planes flying overhead at once. All around, everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up. Geoff was pretty curious about where all the noise was coming from as well, and did the same.

As it happened, the noise appeared to be coming from a large number of flying saucers descending from above. There must have been well over a hundred of them, all of which were fast swooping down over the city and manoeuvring through the air like nothing Geoff had ever seen. He got a closer look at one as it banked on its side like an enormous, badly-thrown Frisbee and shot over the Thames at an incredible speed; the sheer force of its engines parting the river in two in its wake. Geoff was speechless - these ships were enormous, with a perfectly smooth metallic exterior. He was scared.

This feeling turned out to be completely justified as one ship circled over the Houses of Parliament and fired a bright orange laser beam into the building, which effortlessly ripped through its target as if it were made of papier-mâché. It was clear that whoever was responsible for designing Parliament's structural integrity hadn't taken into account the possibility of an alien ship firing a laser beam into it, and the building

promptly exploded in every direction, the few remaining walls collapsing in on themselves in a smouldering cloud of dust, with only Big Ben still standing. As more ships descended on the city, the wind began to feel gale-force in strength. Behind Geoff, a news vendor was struggling to stop his papers from blowing away, despite the fact that they were now a little out of date. Geoff was no journalist, but in light of recent events he assumed *The Evening Standard* would be revising its front page lead for the late edition to cover this invasion, unless Posh and Becks split up in the meantime, of course.

“Wow!” one of the tourists shouted at Geoff over the noise. “You didn’t tell us this would be part of the tour!” It was the man Geoff had earlier thought was wearing a suspicious sunhat, which by now had blown clean off his head. The man lifted up his camera and took a picture of one of the flying saucers as it sliced through Big Ben and sent the spire crashing to the ground, the clock faces shattering across the road like plates being smashed in a gigantic Greek restaurant. Geoff recognised the angle from which they were looking at Big Ben. Unless he was mistaken, the photo that had just been taken would look exactly like the one he had seen on the poster the other day, if they ever lived to see it being developed.

“Oh my God!” Tim screamed, running over to Geoff. “They’re early! They’re 200 fucking years early! Do you know what this means?”

“We’re going to die, aren’t we?” Geoff sobbed, watching in horror as one of the spacecraft did a swift barrel roll and tore through a gridlocked Westminster Bridge, sending the vehicles tumbling into the river below. This was now the second time he had watched London being burnt to the ground, but this time he doubted if the Lord Mayor would turn up and declare that a ‘woman could piss it out.’

“They must have cracked the algorithm!” Tim shouted, grabbing Geoff’s arm and running for cover. “You must have changed something without realising it after all! We’re doomed! We’re fucking doomed!”

Geoff agreed. They were indeed doomed.

“Think!” Tim said, looking desperately around for somewhere to hide. “This must have something to do with your hand! What could you have changed?”

Apart from having picked his nose a little less than usual, Geoff couldn’t think of anything he’d done differently.

“You’re supposed to be one of the most insignificant human beings that’s ever lived! What possible influence could you have had over the timing of a fucking alien invasion? And why didn’t that fucking computer spot it?”

That was quite a difficult question, and right now Geoff was a little bit preoccupied with not being killed to give it much thought.

All of a sudden, one of the ships roared through the sky above, the blistering force of its engines flinging cars and buses up into the air.

“Look out!” Tim said, pushing Geoff clear of a Ford Fiesta that was pirouetting towards them.

Geoff felt himself violently lunge out of the way, the oncoming vehicle narrowly brushing behind him and crashing across the pavement. He looked round. Tim had been completely crushed. His lifeless body lay still, barely recognisable under the car’s twisted metal chassis.

It was at this point that most of the tourists began to realise that the alien invasion they were witnessing might not have been part of the tour after all, and that perhaps something might have gone a tad wrong. Everyone was now running around screaming and climbing over each other to get away, the less fortunate ones being vaporised by the bursts of laser fire from above. Geoff looked up at the sky again.

There were spaceships everywhere, firing lasers at anything that moved. A wave of jet fighters appeared to have been scrambled by the Air Force in a futile attempt to defend the city, but their rockets and missiles had no effect, disintegrating into dust whenever they struck an attacking ship. With no means of defending themselves, the fighters were soon shot down, spiralling destructively into a row of tower blocks below.

All of a sudden, the spaceships stopped firing and slowed to a quiet hover, the roar of their engines dying down to a low hum. Those that were still alive on the ground stopped running around and looked confusedly up at the sky to see what was happening. Geoff did the same. What he saw was incredible: the ships were slowly manoeuvring themselves into a giant circular formation, which rotated clockwise high up in the sky. Ship after ship joined the circle, each one glowing bright red as if they were all powering up to collectively fire some sort of massive weapon. As the last ship completed the circle, the sky changed colour, going from pale blue to bright red itself. Geoff felt compelled to get down on his knees and place his palms on the floor.

"Oh please," a man said nearby. "It's a bit late to get down on your knees and start praying, don't you think? Haven't you heard? This is happening all over the world! You don't really think God can save us now, do you?"

"I don't know," Geoff said. "I... I don't know why I'm doing this."

Almost immediately, one of the ships shone a spotlight directly down on Geoff's position and broke free from the formation, swooping down at an incredible speed. Within seconds, it had slowed to a halt a few feet in front of him and repositioned its engines to point downwards. As it lowered itself towards the ground, it became clear just how big these ships really were; the hull spreading itself not just across the road, but right across the rubble of demolished buildings to Geoff's right, and the river to his left. As it descended the last few metres, the downward thrust of the ship's engines cushioned its landing, instantly melting the tarmac of the road down into a sticky black mush, and vaporising part of the river.

The ship's engines powered down, and a small door in the lower section of the hull slid open, a few feet from the ground. All around, people fell silent and motioned forward to see what would happen. The optimists in the crowd were probably hoping that some prankster television presenter from your typical 'aren't the general public a bunch of morons' show was going to jump out and shout 'Gotcha!', but somehow this seemed unlikely.

Geoff waited. He couldn't understand why he had chosen to kneel on the floor with his hands on the ground, and why he felt compelled to wait here, of all places, for something to happen. Under normal circumstances, he would have been more compelled to run away and hide up a tree. It was almost as if he'd been hypnotised into doing this or something.

Within moments, a strange looking creature appeared at the door, crouching down slowly to look at Geoff. Geoff in turn looked back up at it. The creature must have been about 6 feet tall, with two arms and two legs, and generally the same body structure as that of a human being. Its appearance however, was a little more animalistic; its skin green and leathery like that of a crocodile's, and its eyes small and black, with burning red pupils in the centre. It opened its mouth to speak.

"We recognise the ancient position of Granbleen you have adopted," the creature hissed. "You have something you wish to say?"

Geoff didn't think he had, but suddenly found himself saying, "I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert."

After saying these words, Geoff frowned at himself, as if he had just burped without expecting it.

The alien nodded.

“Thank you, human,” It said, getting to its feet. “We will remember.” The door closed again, leaving Geoff to look at his own stupid reflection in the hull of the ship. He wondered how the alien was able to understand what he’d said, and respond back in plain English. Perhaps they’d stopped off at a service station on their way to Earth and picked up a phrasebook?

As the spaceship powered up its engines, the alien’s parting words echoed around in Geoff’s mind. ‘We will remember?’ It was *Geoff* who was beginning to remember something at that moment; something important; something about the algorithm... That was it! He *had* spoken to Eric before he died! He *had* been told how to fix the loophole! Unfortunately, just as Geoff was having this revelation, the spaceship switched its engines to full power, angled its thrust directly towards him and burned his body to a crisp as it re-joined the circular formation of flying saucers high up in the blood-red sky.

So Geoff was dead. And he *still* hadn’t managed to ask Tim what type of mushroom the computer had said was more important than him. Perhaps it had meant mushroom clouds, which were about to envelop every city on the planet.

FOURTEEN

It wasn't a pleasant thing watching human civilisation being wiped off the face of the Earth before your very eyes, even if it was just a video simulation. Tim was so shocked at what the supercomputer had just shown him that he had to sit down on the floor.

"Holy shit, Geoff!" he said, shaking nervously. "Did you see that? It's a good thing we double-checked what would have happened before sending you back the 21st Century! If you'd have gone back now, the aliens would have invaded 200 years earlier than they should have! We'd have all been killed!"

Geoff said nothing.

"I've got to think," Tim said, standing up again to pace up and down "This doesn't make any sense. Why did the light turn green? Why did the computer clear you for travel? An alien invasion is a pretty fucking big thing for it to miss, wouldn't you say?"

Still Geoff said nothing.

"Geoff?"

Tim stopped pacing and looked round. Geoff had collapsed on the floor of the paradox scanning facility, unconscious.

Typical, Tim thought.

Was it something he'd said?

FIFTEEN

As a matter of fact it was something Geoff had heard *himself* say on that video simulation that had caused him to pass out: "I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert." These words must have triggered something powerful in his mind, because he immediately found himself lying in a rickety old rowboat, drifting peacefully in the middle of his imaginary lake. This was getting a little ridiculous now; he'd been back here so many times in the past couple of days that he was surprised his imagination wasn't charging him rent.

There was something slightly different about this latest visit though; something Geoff couldn't put his finger on. On the surface, everything certainly looked very familiar – his bench was where it should have been, the air smelt the same, and all the trees were pointing in the right direction, but somehow, Geoff sensed that something had changed; something he couldn't describe. It was a bit like seeing a friend who looked like they might have had a haircut, but being too scared to say anything in case they hadn't.

Geoff sat up in the boat and stretched his legs. It must have been the beginning of a new day in his imaginary world; the bright orange sun just beginning to peek over the hills in the distance. This wasn't any old sunrise mind, like the generic ones often used as logos for morning television; this was something quite glorious, the bright orange glow of the sun dissipating into a patchwork quilt of pink and blue cirrus cloud. Indeed, it was almost romantic - Geoff could well imagine young couples playing to stereotype and sitting in front of this sunrise on a beach, before realising how bloody cold it is outside on the coast at six thirty in the morning.

The only blemish to this magnificent view was a little dot gliding across the sky, like someone flashing a laser pen on the screen at the cinema. Geoff looked closer. It appeared to be a seagull, circling high above the lake.

"Blimey - that was quick!" A voice shouted. "You back already?"

Geoff looked around. Where had that voice come from? There was certainly no-one in the boat with him, and as far as he could tell, there was no-one standing on the edge of the lake.

"Up here, you idiot!" came the voice again.

Geoff looked up. The seagull seemed to be getting lower and lower.

"That's right!" It shouted. "It's me!"

Great. First a talking fish, now a talking seagull. Geoff was a little unnerved by the number of talking animals populating his imagination. He really needed to cut down on watching so many cartoons.

The seagull swooped down over Geoff's head, arched its wings into a landing position and perched itself on the end of the boat. It appeared to be holding a piece of paper in its left foot.

"Remember me?" The seagull said, tucking its wings back into its body and adjusting its footing.

"Erm... no." Geoff said. "Sorry."

"Don't worry. Didn't think you would. Those bastards made you forget everything, didn't they?"

"What?"

"The person who attacked you. They made you forget everything. Eric's murder, what he told you about fixing the algorithm, everything."

"Eric told me how to fix the algorithm?"

"Yep."

“And they made me forget?”

“Yes.”

“But... how?”

“I don’t know for sure. You must have been in a semi-lucid state after you were attacked, which meant that everything you experienced here was a mixture of the real world and your imaginary world. That would explain how they were able to talk to you in your dream, hypnotise you into forgetting everything, and why the injury to your hand was both real and imagined.”

Geoff considered himself to be quite lucky. There probably weren’t many seagulls in the world that were capable of putting together such an eloquent, psycho-analytical hypothesis for everything that had happened to him today. In his experience, the only thing most seagulls were capable of doing was eating small fish, shitting on cars, and if they were feeling really adventurous, standing on one leg.

“Who *are* you?” Geoff said. “Are you real?”

“Am I real?”

“Yeah. Are you someone talking to me in the real world?”

“What?” The seagull said. “Am I someone talking to you in the real world? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!”

“Who are you then?”

“I’m a seagull.”

“But you’re talking!”

“Yes, I’m a talking seagull. Well spotted. And I don’t mean that *I’m* well spotted by the way, because there’s no such thing as a well spotted seagull.”

Geoff was really confused now.

“So you’re talking seagull. Is that not more ridiculous than being someone in the real world talking to me?”

“Hey! I’m not just any old seagull! I’m a Herring Gull! We’re pretty smart birds, let me tell you!”

Geoff didn’t need convincing of that. This talking Herring Gull was probably so smart that it could beat him at chess using only the top hat from *Monopoly*.

“Funny thing is,” the seagull continued, “I’m actually a part of your subconscious. I’m you.”

“What do you mean you’re me? You’re a seagull.”

“Let me ask you something,” the seagull said, edging its way round the rim of the boat towards Geoff. “How did you feel when those people from the future told you that you were totally insignificant?”

Geoff leaned against the back of the boat and let out a deep breath.

“Not brilliant,” he said, looking up at the sky. “Bit crap actually.”

“Not brilliant?” the seagull said. “You were angry. Deep inside, you resented the fact that you’d been conditioned to live a life of obscurity for all those years. They’d made you lose your job, kept you indoors, and even restricted your social contact with other people. People like Zoë. No wonder you were an insignificant nobody.”

Now that Geoff thought about it, he had been a bit miffed.

“But it wasn’t long before you realised that they could have made a mistake,” the seagull continued. “A big mistake. How did you feel when you found out that their supercomputer might not have been so super after all?”

“I don’t know,” Geoff said. “Relieved?”

"No, no no. It was more than that. The moment you found out there was a flaw in the algorithm, something woke up inside you; something that had been dormant for a long time."

"You're right," Geoff said. "I did feel something. But I thought it was just that dodgy sandwich I ate yesterday."

"This was no dodgy sandwich," the seagull said. "Remember why Mr. Knight hired you to be a Time Rep? He hired you because you had absolutely no aspirations. No desire to better yourself. But all that changed when you discovered you might not be worthless after all. You became determined to prove that you weren't just some insignificant nobody. And that's where I come in."

"You?" Geoff said.

The seagull nodded. At least Geoff thought it looked like a nod. He wasn't particularly experienced at talking to seagulls and wasn't quite sure if he'd translated the gesture properly.

"I'm the symbol your subconscious has chosen to embody all the confidence these people have been trying to take away from you, all your resistance to the idea of being an 'insignificant nobody', and all your desires to show them what you are truly capable of."

"A seagull?" Geoff said. "Wouldn't it have been better for me to choose a massive robot with rocket launchers for eyes, or a big tank with loads of guns? You know - something bastard hard?"

The seagull let out a little seagull sigh. "Robots and tanks may be pretty cool, but they don't mean anything to you Geoff," it said, looking out across the lake. "The seagull on the other hand, is *hugely* symbolic. To most people, it may be just a stupid bird that chose to look right instead of left, but to you, it represents so much more. It's the thing that proves you *do* make a difference; it reassures you that you're not the same as all the other Time Reps; that you're not just another turnip farmer or failed philosopher. But more than that, it's something you believe will one day reveal your true influence on the course of history."

"That does sound pretty important, now that you mention it," Geoff said.

"Oh believe me, there's more to that bird than meets the eye, Geoff," the seagull said, jumping down onto the wooden seat in front of him. "Much more. Figure out the mystery behind why it chose to look right instead of left, and you'll reveal your true significance to the world – significance far greater than anyone could ever imagine."

"And how exactly am I supposed to do that?" Geoff said. "I have enough trouble trying to figure out the mystery of how many *Nectar* points I've got."

"With this," the seagull said, releasing the piece of paper in its foot and nudging it towards Geoff. "That's everything Eric told you about the loophole in his algorithm before he died, and how to fix it. You wrote it all down just before your attacker hypnotised you into forgetting everything."

"I wrote it all down?" Geoff said, picking the piece of paper up. It was folded in half.

"Well, not literally. You *imagined* writing everything down as a way of protecting the information in the back of your mind."

"I see," Geoff said. "So you're saying that once I read this, I'll know how that stupid computer can be tricked?"

"Correct. And once you know that, you'll be able to figure out why that seagull chose to look the other way."

Geoff couldn't think of a better incentive to open the piece of paper and read it, which he did immediately. When he'd finished, he leaned against the back of the boat, looked up in the sky, and laughed out loud - underneath the explanation behind how Eric's algorithm could be fooled, he'd also written down quite a funny joke he'd heard the other day in case he'd forgotten that as well.

SIXTEEN

“Geoff?”

“Hee hee hee.....”

“Geoff!”

“hee hee...wha.....”

“Geoff, wake up!”

“uhhhhh.....”

“Stop mumbling and wake up!”

Geoff opened his eyes, only to be greeted by a large, freeze-framed image of his own death - not the most pleasant sight to wake up to after a nice kip. In fact, now that he thought about it, Tim was developing a nasty habit of waking him up in a variety of bad ways: blinding him by opening the curtains, strapping him to a table, putting tubes up his nose, and now, tormenting him with a high-resolution image of his body being toasted in a spaceship’s fiery backwash. One of these days he’d have to get his own back – perhaps by tying Tim’s foot to a passing lorry while he slept.

“Agghhh!” Geoff yelped, shielding his gaze. “Turn it off! Turn it off!”

“Sorry,” Tim said. “I watched it through again whilst you were unconscious. Computer, please turn off the screen.”

On command, the screen disappeared in a flash of vapour, a bit like Geoff’s body had done in the simulation, as it happened.

“It’s gone,” Tim said, helping Geoff to his feet. “You can look.”

Geoff brought his hand back down from his eyes and sat on the scanning pedestal in the middle of the room.

“You feeling ok?” Tim said.

“Oh I’m just spiffing,” Geoff replied. “I’ve been stabbed through the hand, I’ve watched London being destroyed by an alien invasion, and I’ve seen my own death being simulated in glorious widescreen. Things couldn’t be better. Is there anyone around who could kick me in the bollocks to round the day off?”

Tim sighed.

“Yes, it looks like we’ve got a bit of a problem on our hands here,” he said, sitting down next to Geoff. “Maybe the papers were right about you after all.”

“What?”

“The newspapers. Remember what that journalist said to you before the party?”

“Journalist?”

“You remember. He said you might have been lied to about your insignificance. Maybe he was right.”

“You think?” Geoff said, giving Tim a sarcastic look.

“The question is: how the hell did we miss it?”

“I can tell you how.”

“Sorry?”

“I can tell you how you missed it.”

“You can?”

Geoff nodded.

“Eric told me how the computer could be tricked before he died.”

“What?” Tim said, leaping to his feet. “I thought you couldn’t remember anything!”

“I couldn’t, until now,” Geoff said, leaning back on his hands. “You’re not going to believe this, but the person who attacked me also hypnotised me. They

hypnotised me into delivering that message about Tringrall and Dranculees to the aliens, and they hypnotised me into forgetting what Eric told me before he died. But I remember now. He *did* explain the loophole to me.”

“So how come you remember?”

“Because I heard myself say all that crap about Tringrall and Dranculees,” Geoff said. “That was the trigger I was given to restore my memory.”

“What? But why did they want you to remember at all?”

“A cruel trick, I guess. Whoever’s behind all this must have known I was going to die seconds after I said those words. They wanted me to remember how they’d changed history; how they’d wiped out the human race - but only when it was too late to stop them. They wanted to taunt me.”

“But they didn’t think we’d double check the paradox scan,” Tim said. “They didn’t reckon you’d hear those words in a simulation.”

“No. Still counts though,” Geoff said. “The condition to getting my memory back was hearing myself say the words: ‘I bring a message from Tringrall. In the year of Dranculees, you must revert’. No-one said anything about hearing those words in a *simulation*.”

“So what do you think it means?” Tim said.

“Not sure. Tringrall must be the person who killed Eric and attacked me, because that was the person who gave me the message. As for the rest, I’ve got no idea.”

“But that would mean ‘Tringrall’ is the person on the inside who leaked the algorithm!” Tim said. “You mean to tell me that the mole in the organisation is a fucking alien?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tringrall is trying to change the course of history so that the alien invasion succeeds, right?”

“Right...”

“Don’t you get it? Tringrall must be a descendant of the alien crew that crash-landed on Earth all those years ago; the crew who molecularly re-arranged themselves to look like human beings! Remember? Someone high up in this business is a fucking alien!”

“Oh dear,” Geoff said.

“Did you recognise who it was?”

“No – they were wearing a mask.”

“What about their voice? You said they hypnotised you. Did you hear their voice? Did they sound familiar?”

“They *did* sound familiar now that you mention it,” Geoff said. “But I can’t quite remember.”

“Was the voice male... or female?” Tim said.

“I don’t know,” Geoff replied. “Who do you think it could be?”

“Who knows?” Tim said. “It could be Ruth, it could be Mr. Knight... It could even be me, for all you know...”

“I doubt that,” Geoff said, “unless you like thwarting your own plans for fun. What about the Defence Minister? Could it be the Defence Minister?”

“I don’t know,” Tim said. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe it was that fat guy who was in here earlier,” Geoff said. “You know - the fat, sweaty official?”

“Will you stop with the fucking fat guy!” Tim said. “It *wasn’t* the fat guy!”

Geoff really wanted to suggest again that it might be the cleaner, but thought the better of it.

"We're wasting time," Tim said, pacing up and down. "Are you going to tell me how this bastard tricked the algorithm, or are you just going to sit there and look pleased with yourself?"

"I'd quite like to sit here and look pleased with myself a bit longer, if that's ok," Geoff said. "I don't get to do it very often."

"I'd rather you didn't," Tim said. "Aren't you feeling a slight sense of urgency to all this?"

"I suppose," Geoff replied, standing up. "Bring up the final nanosecond of the supercomputer's simulation, 100,000 years in the future, and I'll show you how they did it."

* * *

"I don't get it," Tim said. "Everything looks fine."

Everything did indeed look fine. The planet was exactly as it should have been: peaceful, green, blue skies - returned to Mother Nature. The only difference was the seagull in Brighton, which was still insisting on looking right instead of left.

"This is the final nanosecond of time that the computer can predict," Geoff said, looking up at the simulation. "Remember what Eric said the last time we were here? If there are any changes to this moment in time, even at the most infinitesimally small molecular level, the computer detects that the space-time continuum has been altered, and stops anyone from travelling."

"I still don't get it," Tim said, looking closely at the screen in case he'd missed something. "If Earth was now invaded in the 21st Century, and humanity wiped out, how can everything still be the same?"

"Let me ask you a question," Geoff said. "What if you could change the course of history, but only so it took a *diversion*?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if you could change history in such a way, that everything returned exactly back to normal at a certain point?"

Tim laughed.

"That's impossible," he said.

"Eric didn't think it was. In fact that was the loophole in his algorithm. If the final nanosecond in the new simulation remains the same as the original one in the computer's memory banks, the computer assumes that the course of history hasn't changed. Only when there is a *difference* between the two versions does it know to go back through its calculations, and raise the alarm. But if someone worked out how to *divert* the course of history rather than *change* it completely, the computer would happily allow that person travel back in time. After all, as far as the computer's concerned, its job is done. If the final nanosecond looks the same, it can go home early and catch the last ten minutes of *Hollyoaks*."

"But *no-one* could work out how to do that," Tim said. "You'd need to be some sort of mathematical super-genius."

"You're absolutely right. No-one is that smart."

"Well there you go."

"You'd need to have access to a supercomputer 'powerful enough to predict the vibration of every molecule on the planet for the next 100,000 years', as Eric put it, to make those sorts of calculations. A bit like the one we're standing in."

“You mean... someone could manipulate the supercomputer to work out how to cheat its own algorithm?” Tim said.

Geoff nodded.

“But only someone with access,” he said. “That’s the reason Eric thought it was an inside job. It had to be someone with access. Remember when we were driving to the party? Eric told us that the computer’s own powers of prediction could be used against itself. That was what he was worried about. When the algorithm was leaked, he knew someone would realise that all they had to do was use the predictive powers of the computer to tell them how to alter history in such a way that it would return back to normal by the time it reached the final nanosecond. Once they’d worked out how to do that, he knew they’d be able to walk straight through the paradox scan undetected.”

“Or get someone else to do it for them,” Tim said.

“Who’s that?”

“You, you idiot.”

“Oh yeah,” Geoff said, rubbing the back of his head. “I forgot.”

“That’s quite unbelievable,” Tim said, “This alien - Tringrall, or whatever his name is, has basically used the computer to work out how to completely change the course of history, and then return it back to normal?”

“Well, I’m only telling you what Eric told me,” Geoff said. “Shall we work our way back from the final nanosecond and see if he was right?”

* * *

Tim and Geoff didn’t have to work their way back for very long to find out what had happened. In fact, they only had to go back by one hour to see how the supercomputer had been tricked into almost allowing Geoff to go back and change everything.

The loophole had been exploited exactly as Eric had predicted. If the computer had had a face, there wouldn’t just be egg on it – there’d be bacon, sausages, beans, waffles, and maybe another egg for good measure.

Tim and Geoff watched the screen. A huge alien fleet was sweeping from one side of the planet to the other, each ship firing some sort of particle beam at the Earth’s surface. As the beam passed over the ground, the landscape was instantly transformed: one minute there were huge, sprawling metallic cities; evidence of thousands of years of alien occupation, the next minute there was nothing but green fields, thick forests, and beautiful mountain ranges. Even the sky was turning back from blood red to pale blue as the ships sailed through it, purging any evidence that the aliens had ever invaded the planet.

“I’m guessing this is the year of Dranculees,” Geoff said.

“And that must be reverting,” Tim said, pointing at one of the ships on the screen as it transformed a whole city into a forest. “They must have their own way of knowing what the planet should have looked like if they hadn’t invaded! They’re using their molecular re-arrangement beams to turn everything back to how it should have been!”

“This is crazy,” Geoff said. “How can they possibly transform a whole planet?”

“If we managed use that technology to recreate London exactly as it was,” Tim said, “then there’s no reason why they can’t do it on a much bigger scale. That’s why the final nanosecond looked so perfect, right down to the last molecule.”

Geoff felt like he was watching a sinister version of one of those horrible home-makeover shows. Then again, home-makeover shows were pretty sinister themselves – at least the aliens weren't barging into someone's lounge and painting the skirting boards green. In the end, he couldn't decide which was worse.

Within a few minutes, the entire planet was almost completely back to normal, with most of the ships making a few finishing touches here and there with their molecular re-arrangement beams. Some were taking great care over re-creating the rainforests; others were re-positioning every single grain of sand on the world's coastlines. One ship over Brighton had the thankless task of re-creating all the seagulls, making sure they were in exactly the same position as they would have been before. When it had finished creating the final seagull on the end of a small pier, the spaceship switched its engines to full power and ascended into the sky, its molecular re-arrangement beam following closely behind. As it blasted out of the Earth's atmosphere, the seagull on the end of the pier looked round as the molecular re-arrangement beam retracted into space, re-positioning all the clouds into their original size, shape, and colour. It even removed the ship's ionisation trail.

"Well, that explains a lot," Tim said, turning his attention to Geoff as the simulation ended.

"It certainly explains why that bloody seagull was looking the other way," Geoff added, "and why everything else in the simulation looked exactly the same."

"Ok," Tim said, standing up. "'Tringrall' must have worked out that the only way to get you through the paradox scan and change history was if he made sure you told the aliens to put things right again, 100,000 years in the future – 'In the year of Dranculees, you must revert'. If he didn't, the computer wouldn't have let you go back to the 21st Century to change whatever it is you changed to let them invade in the first place."

"I still don't understand what all this has got to do with me," Geoff said. "How could my hand possibly be responsible for changing the date of an alien invasion?"

"I have no idea," Tim said, scratching his head. "The only way we're ever going to find out is if we can work out who this 'Tringrall' really is. He must have used the computer to work out what he needed to do, and somehow, it involved your right hand. We've *got* to try and figure out who he is, but it's not going to be easy – 'Tringrall' has managed to keep his true identity hidden for years and years."

Geoff sat in silence for a moment.

"I think I may have just had a brilliant idea," he said.

Tim looked at Geoff sceptically. The last 'brilliant idea' Geoff had come up with was tea lollipops.

"Can't we use the computer to simulate last night's party?" Geoff said. "If we can, we might be able to see Eric's murder, and find out who the killer was!"

"That *is* a good idea," Tim said in surprise, making some quick adjustments to the computer. "I'll just tell it that you're not going back in time anymore – otherwise, all we'll see is some horrible, alien-infested version of Earth..."

The screen popped up again, but didn't look like it was showing them much of a party. Instead, it showed them a horrible, alien infested version of Earth. All around, the world was covered in twisting alien architecture, with swarms of leathery-skinned aliens living under a blood-red sky. If it *was* showing them a party, it must have been some sort of fancy dress party where everyone had decided to go dressed as an alien, but a more obvious interpretation of events would have been that the computer was still showing them a version of the space-time continuum where the alien invasion had succeeded, and the human race had been wiped out.

"I don't understand," Geoff said. "Shouldn't it be showing us the party from yesterday? I thought you told the computer I wasn't going back in time anymore."

"I did." Tim said, checking a computer panel on the wall and looking back up at the screen.

"You did?"

"Yes."

Geoff looked at Tim in silence for a few moments.

"Honest?"

"What do you mean, 'honest'? Do you really think I'd pick this, of all times, to play a practical joke?"

"So... why are there still aliens everywhere?" Geoff said.

"There's only one explanation," Tim said, sitting down on the floor and putting his head between his knees. "History must now be changed whether we choose to send you back or not."

"Meaning, what?" Geoff said, raising his eyebrows. "Does this mean that this has nothing to do with me after all?"

"I don't know, Geoff!" Tim shouted, crossing his hands over the back of his head. "I need to think!"

"Ok, ok. It's just that - if history's changed, why are we still here?"

"What?"

"I mean, shouldn't we be dead? Are we going to disappear?" He held up his hand and looked at it for a few seconds to make sure it wasn't going transparent.

"It doesn't work like that," Tim said. "The computer is showing us what *will* happen if history continues to run along its present course. But two timelines can exist alongside each other, as long as there's still a way to change things back."

"So... what do we do?"

"I have an idea," Tim said, getting to his feet. "But we'll need to speak to the Defence Minister."

"The Defence Minister?" Geoff replied. "But I thought... What if he's really an alien? What if he's 'Tringrall'?"

"Unless you know someone else with military connections, I think that's a risk we're going to have to take."

Geoff used to know a guy in the police, but he wasn't sure how effective pepper spray would be at destroying a fleet of invading alien warships.

Tim grabbed Geoff by the hand and pulled him towards the exit.

"Erm... Where are we going?" Geoff said.

"Where do you normally find Government Ministers?" Tim said.

"Soho?"

"I was thinking the Houses of Parliament. We should call Ruth and Mr. Knight. Get them to meet us there."

Despite feeling a little shaken by everything he'd learnt today, Geoff wasn't quite at the stage where he needed to hold hands with someone, and prised his hand from Tim's grip.

"By the way, I forgot to tell you," Geoff said. "I remembered something else whilst I was unconscious."

Tim stopped walking.

"What was it?" he said, looking round at Geoff. "Anything important? Anything that could help us?"

"It was a joke actually," Geoff said.

"A joke?"

“Yeah - Did you hear about the man who fell into the upholstery machine?”

“No,” Tim sighed.

“He’s fully re-covered.”

“Let’s go,” Tim said.

SEVENTEEN

The Houses of Parliament were in much better shape than when Geoffrey last saw them. They were still standing, which was a good start, but there was also something quite majestic about the building as the sky turned to dusk, the gothic architecture throwing a beautiful golden reflection across the river. It was certainly more pleasing to the eye than the last time Geoff had seen this building throw a golden reflection across the river, probably due to the fact that it wasn't being blown up and throwing pieces of *itself* across the river at the same time. Otherwise, everything about the Houses of Parliament was remarkably similar to its 21st Century counterpart – the only real difference was a shimmering dome of light that stretched over the building, which apparently acted as a protective shield against laser beams, hijacked spaceships full of explosives, and bird droppings. Upon going inside, Geoff and Tim must have wished they had a protective shield of their own as a security guard with incredibly bad breath informed them that the Defence Minister was locked away in some budget meeting or other, and that they'd have to wait for him in his private office until he was ready to see them.

The private office in question was one of the most ostentatious, old-fashioned examples of interior design that Geoff had ever seen, with a broad oak desk, a thick red carpet, and a ceiling so high that you almost needed a pair of binoculars just to tell that the room even *had* a ceiling. Along the left wall stood a row of enormous bookcases, which were neatly stacked with shelves and shelves of pristine, leather-bound literature – the sort of books that looked as though they'd never been read. Geoff picked one off the shelf and flicked through it to make sure it actually *was* a book, and not one of those stupid video cases people used to buy to make themselves look more studious than they really were. Satisfied that the book in question was genuine and not actually hiding a copy of *Police Academy 3*, Geoff replaced it on the shelf and strolled over to one of the tall windows overlooking the river with his head in the air and his arms behind his back, much like the way people walk around in modern art galleries when they feel a little out of their depth, and want to disguise the fact that they have no idea what to make of some flowers sprouting out of a ceramic female bottom.

Tim sat down in a squeaky, red leather chair and looked up at a huge painting of the Defence Minister, which hung above a large open fireplace on the far wall of the office. It depicted the Minister in full robes, standing in the middle of the House of Commons with an ornamental mace in his right hand. The attention to detail in the picture was quite magnificent – you could make out every individual hair on his head, every crease in his clothing, and even get a feel for the texture of his skin. In the bottom corner it was signed *Adobe Photoshop version 145.7b*. Geoff's eyes wandered down from the painting to the fireplace below. Unless he was mistaken, it looked as though someone had been burning some papers recently - the crumbly black remains of some sort of document lay smouldering across the glowing pile of logs.

Before Geoff had a chance to look at the papers any closer, the door to the Defence Minister's private office opened, and Mr. Knight walked in, followed closely by Ruth.

"We got here as quick as we could," Mr Knight huffed, taking off his coat and hanging it on the back of the door. "Are you going to tell us what's going on?"

"We'd better wait for the Defence Minister," Tim said, absent-mindedly picking at the leather stitching on his seat. "I think he should hear this as well."

As if on cue, the Defence Minister suddenly burst into the room carrying a large folder under his arm.

"Right, what's all this about?" he said, sitting down behind his desk and tossing the folder to one side. "I'm supposed to be on TV in half an hour to give an interview about this bloody Time-Rep fiasco, and the Chancellor's just bawled me out over my defence budget for the next year. This better be good."

"I'm afraid it's *not* good actually," Tim said, getting to his feet.

"What the hell is *he* doing here!?" the Defence Minister said, suddenly noticing Geoff standing by the window. "I thought I told you to send all Time Reps back to their native time periods!"

"Geoffrey's the reason we're here," Tim said quietly, walking over to the desk. "I think we may have a bit of a problem."

"Problem?" the Defence Minister said, snapping his head back in Tim's direction. "What sort of problem?"

"Well, there's no easy way of saying this," Tim said. "We think someone has succeeded in cheating Eric's algorithm."

"What?"

"We think someone has changed the space-time continuum."

"But... but..." the Defence Minister stammered, looking at Mr. Knight, "you told me it was impossible to cheat that computer! You told me the chances were one in a googolplex!"

"David, I..."

The Defence Minister held his hand up to silence Mr. Knight.

"How bad are we talking?"

"How bad?"

"Yes. Quite bad? Reasonably bad?"

"I'd say this is disastrously bad," Tim said. "This is so bad that we might all disappear from existence any minute."

"In that case, you won't mind if I pour myself a drink," The Defence Minister said, reaching into a desk drawer and pulling out a bottle of Brandy. "Let's start from the beginning."

Geoff sighed. The beginning? That was going to take ages...

The Defence Minister unscrewed the bottle cap and pouring himself a large glass.

"Tell me what's happened," he said.

* * *

It took Tim quite a while to successfully explain everything to the Defence Minister: how the loophole had been exploited, how Geoff had unwittingly brought an invasion forward by 200 years, and how an alien called 'Tringrall' was possibly behind it all, secretly hiding in human form. Unfortunately, the Defence Minister wasn't helping matters by getting more and more inebriated. Indeed, the alcohol was clearly making him forget various details with each reiteration of the story, and as time went on, the situation became akin to watching a drunken old man in a pub repeatedly going up to the bar with a round of drinks supposedly memorised, only to return with nothing more than a packet of *Scampi Fries* and some change for the pool table.

“There’s still something I don’t understand,” the Defence Minister slurred, pouring himself his fourth Brandy of the evening. “You’re telling me that if we send Geoffrey back in time with a broken hand, the aliens invade 200 years early?”

“Correct,” Tim sighed.

“And yet if we *don’t* send him back at all, the aliens *still* invade 200 years early?”

“That’s... what the computer thinks.”

“But how is that possible?” Mr. Knight interjected. “If Geoff is somehow responsible for bringing forward the date of an alien invasion, why do they still invade the Earth even if we *don’t* send him back? Surely he won’t be there to change anything! Shouldn’t everything go back to normal?”

“There’s only one explanation,” Ruth said, closing her eyes in concentration. The rest of the room looked at her in silence, or at least, the people in the room did.

“Well, what is it?” Tim said.

Ruth opened her eyes again.

“It’s simple,” she said. “We must be looking at this the wrong way round.”

“The wrong way round?”

“Think about it. Up until now, we’ve all been talking about Geoff changing something that brought *forward* the date of the invasion. Isn’t that right, Geoff?”

“Erm... right,” Geoff said. He’d secretly tuned out of the conversation a little while ago during Tim’s protracted explanation of previous events, turning his attention instead towards breathing on the window and using his finger to play noughts and crosses against himself. Nervous at being found out, he quickly wiped the glass clean with the palm of his hand and hoped no-one would suspect that he hadn’t been listening.

“But what if it’s the other way round?” Ruth continued. “What if the aliens had always planned to invade Earth in the 21st Century, and that Geoff was originally responsible for somehow *delaying* them?”

“But how?” Tim said, scrunching his face up in confusion like he’d just eaten a fly. “How is that possible?”

“You’d have to ask ‘Tringrall’,” Ruth said, “but I’m guessing he worked out that it had something to do with Geoff’s right hand.”

Geoff looked down at his injured hand in the hope that something would click in the back of his mind. It baffled him how this simple appendage could be responsible for postponing the invasion plans of an entire alien race. How on Earth could his hand have been involved in changing the course of history, when he had enough trouble using it to change his duvet cover?

“So let me get this straight,” the Defence Minister said, finishing his drink and placing the glass down on the desk. “You’re saying that this ‘Tringrall’ character discovered that Geoff was responsible for *postponing* the alien invasion, which was originally planned for the 21st Century?”

“Correct,” Ruth said. “And more than that, he must have discovered that it had something to do with Geoff’s hand. That’s why he stabbed Geoff while he was unconscious – he wanted us to send him back to the 21st Century in a state where he was unable to do whatever it was he originally did that stopped them.”

“That makes sense,” Tim nodded. “If what you’re saying is true, it would explain why the computer is predicting an invasion even if we *don’t* send Geoff back. After all, if Geoff was the only reason the aliens delayed their invasion by 200 years, not sending him back would be just as bad as sending him back with an injured hand

– on the one hand, he’s not going to be able to stop them, and on the other hand, he won’t even *be* there to stop them.”

“Stop talking about hands!” Geoff said.

“So why didn’t Tringrall just kill him?” the Defence Minister said, his voice using the word ‘kill’ a little too casually for Geoff’s liking. “Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

“Not at all,” Tim said. “Killing Geoff was the *last* thing he could do.”

“Why?”

“Because the key to this whole plot has been to prevent any changes from registering on the supercomputer, from the moment we were considering Geoff as a Time Rep candidate 7 years ago, to the moment we were supposed to send him back to the 21st Century this afternoon. Tringrall needed to make sure that the computer wouldn’t alert us to Geoff’s true significance, and for that to happen, he needed to exploit the loophole in Eric’s algorithm, and keep the final nanosecond looking *exactly* the same. That’s why he couldn’t kill Geoff - his whole plan hinged on Geoff delivering the message about ‘reverting’ the Earth back to normal at a certain point in time. If that message didn’t get through to the aliens, his plot to change history would have been unravelled the moment the computer calculated the consequences of making Geoff a Time Rep.”

Everyone looked at Geoff for a reaction, who had drawn quite a detailed picture of a boat on the window whilst they’d all been talking. In fact if you looked at it from a certain angle, it appeared to be floating on the river in the background.

“Tringrall must have worked out how to cheat the algorithm along time ago,” Tim said, turning back to the group, “and if that’s true, we have to consider the possibility that he’s quite a senior figure in this organisation; someone with access to the supercomputer, and someone who has successfully concealed his true identity for years. I hate to say it, but it could even be someone in this room.”

Everyone fell silent and looked awkwardly at each other.

Tim looked at Ruth.

Ruth looked at Mr. Knight.

Mr. Knight looked at the Defence Minister.

The Defence Minister looked at Ruth.

By this time, Tim had turned his attention to Mr. Knight, who was looking at Ruth, who was looking at the Defence Minister, who was now looking at Tim. It was all very confusing. Geoff felt a little left out of all this, and for a brief moment, he actually wondered why no-one was looking at *him*. He soon realised that this was probably due to the fact that he was neither a senior person in the organisation, nor in any way under suspicion of being an alien, since *he* was the one who’d been manipulated, attacked and hypnotised by the perpetrator. He decided to add a few finishing touches to his boat while the others continued with their staring competition.

“We need to be very careful,” Tim said, eventually breaking the silence.

“Tringrall is obviously a very dangerous person, and obviously very smart. As far as the computer’s concerned, he’s already succeeded in changing the course of history, and if he really is standing in this room as we speak, we’re in a *very* precarious situation.”

“So why are we still here?” The Defence Minister said, looking around as if he was suddenly going to disappear. “If history has changed, shouldn’t we be dead?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Tim replied. “The computer has only shown us what will happen if history continues to run along its present course. But two

paradoxical timelines *can* exist alongside each other, as long as there's still a way to change everything back."

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?" the Defence Minister said, leaning back in his chair.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"Me?"

"You're the Defence Minister," Tim said. "Since it's now inevitable that the aliens are going to invade Earth in the 21st Century whether we choose to send Geoff back or not, I think we've got to take the military option."

"The... military option?"

"Think about it. Our only hope is for you to send Earth's battle cruisers back in time to confront the alien fleet before they get a chance to attack. We need to go back to the 21st Century, and destroy the aliens before they get a chance to begin their invasion."

"Are you insane?" the Defence Minister said, standing up out of his chair. "I can't just mobilise the battle fleet with a click of my fingers! I'd need to run it by the Prime Minister, consult parliament, hold a ballot..."

"There's no time for a fucking ballot!" Tim shouted. "Don't you have some sort of emergency powers for situations like this?"

The Defence Minister slumped back down in his chair and rested his head in his hands.

"What you're asking of me is very difficult," he said.

Tim said nothing. Presumably he felt it was best to give the Defence Minister a quiet moment to think.

"Call me stupid," Geoff chirped, "but couldn't we just wait for my hand to get better, and then send me back?"

The Defence Minister looked up.

"That's a pretty good idea, actually," he said.

"Yes, but it's still a risk," Tim said. "Even if we send Geoff back in time once his hand has healed, there's no guarantee that he'll behave in the same way. We still don't know exactly what he did to delay the invasion, and for all we know, he might do things differently this time. Besides, this is our chance to wipe the aliens out once and for all. And even if Geoff *did* succeed in postponing the invasion again, we'll just be back to square one - Tringrall will live to try and change history some other time, and we may never find out who was really behind all this. We've got to go back and destroy them."

"You're right," the Defence Minister sighed. He stood up and walked over to the doorway. "This is our chance to end this, isn't it?"

"I'm glad you see it that way," Tim said.

"And it certainly helps me justify my defence budget."

Geoff was stunned. How could someone possibly be thinking of money at a time like this? Then again, he had to confess that his mind wasn't entirely focussed on the task at hand either - despite everything that was going on around him, a small part of his brain was actually thinking about getting some chips. And possibly some marmite to go with them. He guessed everyone had their own little distractions.

"Follow me," the Defence Minister said, stepping out into the corridor. "We'll need to take the Ministerial space shuttle into orbit and rendezvous with the fleet."

Geoff looked at Tim uneasily.

"Shuttle?" He whispered.

"Yes."

“Orbit?”

“Yes!”

“Space?”

“Yes!!”

“Us?!”

“Yes, us!!”

Geoff wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea of going into space, and tried to think of another one-word question that might make him feel better.

“Chips?” he said.

EIGHTEEN

Much to Geoff's amazement, the Ministerial space shuttle was housed vertically *inside* the clock tower of Big Ben, which looked as though it had been re-constructed to conceal some sort of launch chamber. From the outside, a casual observer wouldn't have been able to tell any difference to the Houses of Parliament of the 21st Century, but nonetheless, Geoff assumed that this was probably a new addition to the building, unless the government of the 21st Century was in the habit of keeping secrets from the general public, perish the thought.

The shuttle itself was quite a remarkable piece of engineering, no bigger than two double-decker buses placed side by side. It had a sleek, metallic exterior, a cluster of engines at the base, and a row of windows dotted along either side, leading towards a rounded cockpit at the front. Plumes of steam were being discharged from two smaller engines on the wings, which stuck out like little fins at the rear.

Geoff hesitantly joined the others on an elevation platform and gripped the safety rail as tightly as he could as they hovered up to a hatchway on the side of the shuttle. Down below, various people in brightly coloured overalls were preparing for take-off; a few were making adjustments to the engines, others were running through diagnostics on a huge bank of monitors, and some were snaking across the launch chamber with a large re-fuelling pipe cradled in their arms. In many ways, Geoff felt like he was watching a Formula 1 pit stop team in action, except this was hardly comparable to the sensation of watching a race from the comfort of his living room sofa. And even if he *had* been watching this from the comfort of his living room sofa, he still would have been a bit distracted by the fact that he was hovering 30 feet in the air, wondering what on Earth a piece of furniture from his house was doing here in the first place.

They were greeted at hatchway by the ship's pilot - a good-looking, middle aged woman who was dressed smartly in a brilliant white uniform.

"Welcome aboard sir," she said, saluting the Defence Minister as he stepped inside the shuttle. "I have to say this is most unexpected - I didn't think we had any trips scheduled for today..."

"We didn't," the Defence Minister said, climbing into his seat. "An emergency situation has developed. I need you to take us into orbit to rendezvous with the battle fleet immediately."

"Very good," the pilot said, offering her hand to the others and helping them into the craft. "We should be ready to launch in a few minutes."

Everyone had a little difficulty getting into their seats, as the shuttle was pointing up in the air, and by the time Geoff had finally managed to lay back in his seat with his legs in the air, he couldn't help but feel that he looked like someone who had just fallen down the stairs after a heavy night out.

The pilot closed the hatch and climbed into her seat at the front of the ship.

"Everyone ok?" she said, pressing a couple of buttons to her side and looking back at the group.

Tim, Ruth, Mr Knight and the Defence Minister all nodded.

Geoff raised his hand.

"What is it?" she said.

"Can I go to the toilet?" Geoff said.

"The toilet?"

"I've never been into space before. What if I poo myself?"

"Ignore him," Tim said, pulling Geoff's arm down again. "He's new to all this."

Ruth sat down alongside Geoff and patted him on the leg.

"Don't worry," she whispered, fastening her seatbelt. "You're not going to poo yourself. We'll be fine. Going into space is as easy as catching a bus these days."

That was all very well, unless Ruth was talking about catching a bus that someone had actually thrown at him. He lay back in his seat, took a deep breath, and tried not to think about the fact that he was about to be blasted into space. Unfortunately, his current position gave him a direct view through the cockpit window and up the length of the launch chamber, which wasn't exactly helping him take his mind off things. And whilst it looked as though the belfry had thankfully been removed to make way for the shuttle's launch path, the roof of the spire still appeared to be blocking the top of the chamber, which was slightly disconcerting to say the least.

Geoff dug his fingernails into the arm rests.

"Erm... what's the deal with that roof?" he said.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the Defence Minister said.

"Don't worry about it?" Geoff said. "What, is it made of tissue paper? Is it a mirage?"

"No, no," the Defence Minister replied. "Just relax. Everything's under control."

"I need everyone to take a few moments to watch this safety video," the pilot said, pressing a small button in front of her.

Geoff looked up as a wafer-thin television screen folded down from the ceiling and flickered to life. A well dressed gentleman appeared on the screen and stood next to a computer-generated image of the shuttle. In the background, some soft, cheesy lounge music began to play.

"Hello, and welcome aboard this *Boeing 74447* light transport shuttle," the man said, gesturing towards the image next to him as if the viewer was somehow too stupid to understand which shuttle he was talking about. "Please pay attention to the following procedures, where are designed with your safety and comfort in mind."

Geoff was curious to understand how anyone could associate his safety and comfort with the fact that he was about to be blasted into outer space, and decided to listen closely to the video to see how much of it he could disagree with.

"As we are about to take-off," the man continued, "please ensure that your seatbelt is securely fastened. To fasten your seatbelt, push the two metal ends together until they click, and tighten the belt around your hips. To unfasten the seatbelt, simply lift the buckle and pull the ends apart."

"I don't think they're going into enough detail about the seatbelts," Geoff said, adopting a sarcastic tone to disguise his nervousness. "Can we rewind it just to make sure I understand?"

Everyone ignored him.

"Should additional oxygen be required, a mask will drop down in front of you. Pull the mask towards your face – this activates the oxygen supply."

On the screen, a woman demonstrated how to wear the mask, looking remarkably calm for someone who was supposed to be suffocating in a depressurised cabin.

"In the event of an emergency landing, you must use the 'brace' position to help prevent injury. Place both feet on the floor, with one hand over the other on the back of your head. Lean forward, tucking your elbows outside your knees. If possible, rest your head on the seat in front of you."

The woman demonstrated the 'brace' position on the screen. Once again, her face was as calm and unemotional as if she was just doing some yoga, rather than crashing to her death. Presumably all the good actors in the world weren't really interested in starring in a low budget flight-safety video.

"Should the shuttle suffer a power failure in outer space, spacesuits are located under your seat. To put the spacesuit on quickly, step into the legs first, then pull the suit up to your waist. Next, place your arms in both sleeves and fasten the air-tight zip. Your captain will pass round helmets and oxygen tanks when all passengers are ready to disembark the craft."

Geoff felt under his seat. There was indeed a spacesuit packed away underneath it, although he wasn't sure if this made him feel better or worse.

"Finally, please remember that your safety is our number one priority, and your pilot is there if you do not understand any of these procedures. Thank you for listening."

The screen went blank and folded back into the ceiling.

"Well, that certainly made me feel better," Geoff said. "I had no idea there were so many things that could go wrong, but now I know about power failures, emergency landings, oxygen shortages – thanks a lot."

"I think we're just about ready," the pilot said, pulling a small portable radio out from the dashboard. "I just need clearance from Space Traffic Control, and we can be on our way."

"Make it quick," the Defence Minister said. "We've got no time to lose."

The captain nodded.

"Space Traffic Control, Space Traffic Control, this is Black Rod 1," she said, holding the radio to her mouth. "We are prepped and ready for launch, requesting clearance for departure. Do you read?"

Geoff never understood the point of asking someone if they read in these radio communications. What was 'Space Traffic Control' going to say back? 'Thanks for asking Black Rod 1, we're quite partial to a bit of P.G. Wodehouse, as it happens'?"

"Black Rod 1, this is Space Traffic Control," came a voice over the loudspeaker. "We read you. You are clear for launch. Repeat - you are clear for launch."

"Roger Space Traffic Control," the pilot said. "Please open the launch bay doors. I repeat – please open the launch bay doors."

This was another quirk of radio communication that really annoyed Geoff – why did everyone always insist on repeating everything? You didn't walk into a shop and say "Can I have a packet of salt and vinegar crisps? I repeat – can I have a packet of salt and vinegar crisps?" Why did you have to ask for everything twice over a radio?

His annoyance was soon replaced by a feeling of relief as he noticed the roof splitting open down the middle and open up like a huge mechanical crocodile's mouth, revealing a clear starry night above. Unfortunately, his feeling of relief was soon replaced again by a feeling of panic when he realised this probably meant they were going to take off soon.

"Everything checks out ok," the pilot said, replacing the radio back in its holder on the dashboard and gripping the flight stick with both hands. "Ready when you are."

"Excellent," the Defence Minister said, placing a hand on the pilot's shoulder. "Shall we have a countdown?"

“Good idea,” Geoff said, digging his fingernails deeper into the arm rests.
“How about we start from a million?”

“Five,” the pilot said, checking an instrument on the dashboard.

“Five?” Geoff said. “Five’s far too small! Can’t we start higher?”

“Four.”

“Four? Where did four come from? You said ‘five’ a second ago! Can’t we stick with five?”

“Three.”

“Wait a minute – are we counting down already?”

“Ignition.”

“Ignition!?” Geoff yelled over the sudden roar of the engines as the ship began to vibrate violently around him. “That’s cheating! You missed out ‘two’!”

“One!”

“Hang on a second!” Geoff cried, “I think I might have left my keys behind!”

“Lift off!” the pilot shouted. “We have lift off!”

Having exhausted his list of excuses to postpone the launch, Geoff decided that the only thing left to do was to scream like an idiot, which he did as loudly as he could. No-one could really hear him though, as the engines were roaring so loud that he felt like he was listening to a rock concert through a stethoscope. He really wanted to close his eyes as the shuttle accelerated out of the launch chamber and into the night sky, but the force of the take off was so powerful that the G-force was pulling his eyelids back as far as they could go. Resigned to the fact that he had no choice but to keep his eyes open, Geoff strained his head to the left to avoid looking at the starry expanse of space ahead. Unfortunately, this new position was even worse, giving him a dizzying perspective through the side window of the city below. He felt quite queasy watching the streets of London spiral further and further away from him as the shuttle climbed higher into the sky, and while it would be easy to blame this sickness on a feeling of vertigo, it was actually because the view reminded him of the title sequence from *Eastenders* – a programme which often made him feel ill whenever he caught it on television by accident.

Fortunately, the shuttle was soon too high up for Geoff to make this association any longer, and he felt much better as the street lights and buildings of the city below blurred into less recognisable splashes of yellow and orange. Indeed, the more Geoff watched, the more the view became quite awe-inspiring – at this altitude, he could already see across the whole of the British Isles, and in the black of the night the country actually looked quite beautiful, as if the land was coated in a glittering spider’s web of electric light. The shuttle continued to climb higher and higher into the sky, and soon enough, he was able to see the whole of Europe, the sun just peeking over the curvature of the Earth on the horizon.

“I don’t suppose anyone has any sweets?” Geoff said as the shuttle broke free from the Earth’s atmosphere and began to level off. “My ears are popping.”

NINETEEN

The sight of the Earth from outer space was unlike anything Geoff had ever seen before, unless of course you counted all the photos he'd seen of the planet, all the television programmes he'd watched, and all the computer games he had played that somehow involved a big space battle in Earth's Orbit. In fact, if you wanted to be pedantic, you could argue that seeing the Earth from outer space should not have been something wholly unfamiliar to him, but nevertheless, seeing it for real was quite different. By now, the shuttle's engines had died down to quiet hum, and from space everything looked remarkably peaceful. Entire continents looked as though they were made of a soft brown fabric, with mountain ranges giving off a rough texture on the surface of the Earth, huge swirls of cloud circled over the land, as if someone had taken a spoon and stirred them around like the cream in a cup of coffee, and the oceans looked like syrup, wrapping round the planet like a thick blue blanket. It was the sort of view that normally be described as 'taking someone's breath away', but since in Geoff's case this would have meant the cabin had depressurised, it was more reassuring to say that it didn't.

"You can take your seatbelt off now if you want, Geoff," Tim said. "The shuttle has levelled off."

"Are you sure?" Geoff said, still gripping the armrests of his chair. "I can't tell which way is up anymore."

"What?"

"Well, down was that way a minute ago," Geoff said, pointing to the Earth, "but now down is left. Does that mean that up is right, left is down, and right is up?"

"What are you talking about?" Mr Knight said.

"I'm just a little disorientated," Geoff said.

"Does this make you feel any better?" Tim said, unfastening his seatbelt and standing up to stretch his legs. "It's fine, see?"

Geoff looked at Tim suspiciously in case this was some sort of trick.

"If I take off my seatbelt, I'm not going to float around, am I?" he said. "I don't want to bang my head."

"You're not going to float around."

"Honest?"

"Am I floating around?"

"No."

"Well there you go."

"But you could be wearing magnetic boots."

"There's no such thing as magnetic boots."

"There isn't?"

"No. That's just something you made up. The shuttle generates its own gravitational field. It's perfectly safe."

Geoff hesitantly unfastened his seatbelt, but remained seated. He was only too wary of standing up before he was ready – particularly after a bad night's sleep, which usually ended in disaster.

The Defence Minister walked over to the cockpit and sat next to the pilot.

"How long before we rendezvous with the fleet?" he said.

"Not long," the pilot said, looking down at some of the instruments in front of her. "The fleet is currently in geosynchronous orbit on the other side of the Earth. Shouldn't take more than half an hour to reach them."

Geoff stood up. His knees felt a little weak, his hands were shaking, and his ears were still recovering from the sound of the engines during take-off, but otherwise he felt ok. He made his way over to the other side of the shuttle, peered out of one of the windows facing away from the Earth, and gasped. His gaze was filled with a dazzling array of stars, sprawled across the inky blackness of space in a brilliant patchwork of light. Sure, he'd looked up at the night sky before, but through London's night pollution he could only ever make out a handful of stars, as if God was having trouble paying his electricity bill and kept switching stars off to save money. From here however, outer space was really quite beautiful.

Geoff moved over to another window. Just as he had suspected - more stars. Millions of stars, in fact. Not that he was counting them – that was just a guess. Suddenly, in the corner of his eye, he could make out a few flashes of light. He looked closer. In the distance, a few spaceships were darting around, firing quick bursts of laser beams at each other.

"Look at this!" Geoff said, watching as one of the ships exploded. "There's some kind of battle going on over there!"

"That's not a real battle," Ruth said, joining Geoff at the window. "That's just a film set."

"A film set?"

"You can see the camera ships if you look carefully," she said, pointing out one of the stationary craft. "It's nothing to get excited about."

"So they film in space for *real* these days?" Geoff said. "It's not computer generated or anything?"

"Of course it isn't," Ruth replied, losing interest in the view and returning to his seat. "What's the point of doing it on a computer if you can do it for real?"

"I don't know. It just seems like a lot of effort."

"Not these days. Filming in space is just as easy as filming a car chase. And besides, audiences can easily tell the difference. Try watching *Star Trek 2* alongside *Star Trek 200* and you'll see what I mean."

* * *

It seemed to take forever for the shuttle to finally reach the battle fleet, even though it had actually taken a little less time than the pilot had predicted. Unfortunately, there wasn't really that much to do on board to keep Geoff entertained, who typically needed something new to play with at least every 3 minutes to satisfy his fickle attention span, and it wasn't long before he felt that time was really beginning to drag. There were no magazines to read, no board games to play, no in-flight movie to watch, and once Geoff had got over the novelty of being in space (and seeing all the stars), he actually felt a little bit bored. He didn't want to tell anyone though, in case he got in trouble – here he was, one of the few people of his time privileged to venture into outer space, and all he could think about was whether or not he had enough loose change in his pocket to play a rudimentary game of *Connect 4*.

When Geoff saw the battle fleet in the distance however, his feeling of restlessness immediately vanished. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands of ships up ahead, in all different shapes and sizes, orbiting the planet in a precise formation. The larger ships were incomprehensibly enormous, perhaps bigger than some of the world's major cities, and even the smaller ships had an intimidating presence about them, looking at least as big as the world's tallest skyscrapers laid on their side. Each ship was beautifully ergonomic in design, with a sleek metallic shell

wrapped over a curved black underbelly, and if this was the fleet that the Defence Minister was going to send back in time to defend the Earth, Geoff couldn't help feeling that the aliens were in serious trouble.

"Welcome to the fleet," the Defence Minister said, watching closely as the pilot manoeuvred the shuttle past a medium sized cruiser. "What do you think, Geoff?"

"I don't know what to say," Geoff said, looking through the cockpit window as a wave of fighter craft formed an escort around the shuttle. "I wasn't expecting anything like this!"

The pilot steered the shuttle to face a large ship at the front of the fleet and pulled the radio out from the dashboard.

"Concordia, this is Black Rod 1," she said, weaving the shuttle between two neighbouring capital ships. "We are on approach and request clearance to dock. Do you read?"

"Concordia?" Geoff said, raising an eyebrow.

"It means 'with heart'," Tim replied, peering through the cockpit window as they passed by a convoy of frigates. "Or something."

"Black Rod 1, this is Concordia," came a reply over the loudspeaker. "We do not have you scheduled for arrival today. Repeat, we do not have you scheduled for arrival. Clearance to dock is denied. Repeat..."

"Give me that," the Defence Minister said, snatching the radio from the pilot.

"Concordia, this is the Defence Minister," he said, interrupting the ship's transmission. "We have an emergency situation. Please execute priority override seven. Do you read? Please execute priority override seven."

The radio went silent for a few moments.

"Black Rod 1, we read you loud and clear. Priority override seven has been executed. We have you on approach vector three zero seven. Deploying tractor beam to bring you in. Hold tight."

"Thank you," the defence Minister said.

The shuttle shook momentarily as a pale red light engulfed the craft. To either side of them, the fighter escort broke away from their positions and went off to do something else.

"I guess this is out of my hands now," the pilot said, letting go of the flight stick.

"Priority override seven?" Tim said.

"It's a military code, reserved for high ranking officers," the Defence Minister said, handing the radio back to the pilot. "It basically means 'do as I say'."

"Does it work on other things?" Geoff said.

"Other things?" the Defence Minister said. "Like what?"

"Well, say you wanted to go to the cinema, but they wouldn't let you in because the screen was full..."

"I think I know where this is going, and the answer is no. It only works in military communications."

"A military cinema, maybe?"

The Defence Minister looked at the rest of the group in despair.

"Will someone give him a bouncy ball to play with or something?"

The tractor beam began to pull the shuttle towards the Concordia, but the ship was so big that it didn't seem to be getting any closer in the distance.

“How many ships are there in this fleet, anyway?” Geoff said, admiring the sleek aesthetics of a nearby cruiser as they overtook it. If you tilted your head and squinted, it actually looked a little bit like a big, metallic armadillo.

“Let me see,” the Defence Minister said, looking up in the air as if the answer was written on the ceiling. “At the last count, I believe there were 258 medical frigates, 584 assault cruisers, 817 heavy artillery ships, 900 capital ships, 2590 support fighters, and of course, the Concordia – the pride of the fleet.”

“Just don’t ask him how much it cost to build,” Tim said.

“Why?” Geoff said, leaning forward to try and get a better look at the flagship in the distance. It was so big, it still didn’t seem to be getting any closer, despite the fact that the tractor beam was now pulling them towards it at quite a high speed. “Was it expensive?”

“You could say that,” Tim said. “The cost of building the Concordia makes that ‘rare’ copy of *Metal Slug* you bought off eBay look like a bargain.”

TWENTY

Geoff was so preoccupied with explaining to everyone why his original copy of *Metal Slug* was well worth the ludicrous amount of money he'd paid for it that he completely failed to observe the finer details of the Concordia as the shuttle approached the flagship's hanger bay. This was a shame really, since Geoff was missing out quite an incredible feat of human engineering.

The thing that struck most people when they first saw the Concordia was just how bloody big it was. And we're not talking 'big' in the conventional sense, like saying 'those trousers are a bit big for you', or 'my meal was so big I couldn't finish it'. This was in a different league of big. This was a ship big enough to eclipse the sun when it was orbiting the Earth; a ship big enough to warrant its own currency. Just to put things in perspective, the bottle of champagne used to christen it on its maiden voyage was the size of a block of flats.

The second thing most people noticed about the Concordia was its elegant design. Like most of the other ships in the fleet, the Concordia was almost tortoise-like in its appearance, with a sleek, reflective shell arching over a black, angular hull. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that there were actually several ridges and grooves stretching widthways across the shell, as if it could somehow fold back on itself like the roof of a convertible, if say the weather was nice. In reality however, the shell had no such capability – it had just been decided in a preliminary construction meeting that a few ridges here and there would save a few million tonnes of titanium, which was pretty expensive stuff to come by at the best of times.

Of course, something as big as the Concordia needed some serious horsepower if it wanted to go anywhere - preferably in the form of an engine, since using actual horses to pull a ship the size of a city across the vacuum of space would have proven to be a bit of a logistical nightmare for obvious reasons. Fortunately, the Concordia was well equipped in this department, sporting not one engine but twenty. Each engine protruded from the rear of the craft like some sort of bulbous, metallic growth, and the amount of heat and energy they generated was quite staggering – at full power, the Concordia could toast a marshmallow 2000 miles away, although why a marshmallow would be floating around in deep space was anyone's guess.

It was also anyone's guess as to why Geoff was *still* talking about *Metal Slug* as the shuttle glided peacefully into the Concordia's enormous hanger bay, touching down gently on one of the many raised parking platforms.

"...so you see, the original cartridge is one of *the* most sought after games there is," Geoff said, impervious to everyone's disinterest. "They just didn't make enough copies to meet demand, and..."

"Sorry to interrupt," the pilot lied, "but we've arrived."

"We have?" Geoff said, peering out of the cockpit window in surprise as the red glow of the tractor beam faded away.

"Please make sure you take all your personal belongings with you," the pilot said, lifting herself out of her seat, "and I hope you had a pleasant flight."

Everyone got to their feet and stood impatiently by the hatchway for a few moments.

"So... what happens now?" Geoff said.

"We wait," the Defence Minister replied.

"For what?"

"The valet service."

"There's a valet service?" Geoff said. "On a spaceship?"

“What’s wrong with that?” the Defence Minister said.

“I don’t know,” Geoff said. “I just thought a valet service was something you usually got in hotels and restaurants. Places like that.”

The pilot began to adjust all the seats back into their upright position.

“Parking on the Concordia is a real nightmare - especially in the evening,” she said, plumping up one of the headrests. “You’ve *got* to use the valet service, otherwise it’s impossible to find a space.”

The shuttle’s hatchway was soon opened up from the outside by a tall, well-dressed attendant, who offered his arm as support for everyone to jump down onto the rubbery hanger bay floor. Geoff couldn’t believe his eyes – the guy was even wearing a top hat.

“Welcome to the Concordia,” the attendant said, handing the pilot a valet ticket. “Do you have any baggage?”

“Only Geoff,” Tim joked.

“In that case,” the attendant said, gripping both sides of the hatchway and hoisting himself up into the shuttle, “if you’d like to make your way over to the check-in desk at the far side of the hanger, the concierge will be with you in a moment.”

“There’s a concierge as well?” Geoff said.

“Thank you,” the Defence Minister said, reaching into his pocket and handing the attendant a small tip.

The attendant crouched down at the hatchway to take the tip from the Defence Minister, and in turn tipped his hat. That is to say, he lifted the hat slightly from his forehead as a gesture of thanks - in no way was there some sort of bizarre tipping hierarchy whereby the hat received a percentage of the money the Defence Minister had given the attendant, because that would have been ridiculous.

“Shall we?” the Defence Minister said, leading the group over to the check-in desk on the other side of the hanger bay.

“BLACK ROD ONE NOW DEPARTING TO PARKING LEVEL SEVEN,” a voice echoed over the loudspeaker. “PLEASE STAND CLEAR OF LANDING BAY FIVE.”

Geoff looked back as the valet attendant fired up the shuttle’s secondary engines and piloted the craft swiftly down one of the many passages leading deeper into the Concordia.

“ICARUS TWELVE NOW CLEAR FOR LANDING,” came the voice again. “COULD A VALET PLEASE MAKE THEIR WAY OVER TO LANDING BAY FIVE.”

Almost immediately, another shuttle glided in and landed where their shuttle had just been sitting. As instructed over the loudspeaker, a valet attendant rushed over to meet the ship as the encompassing tractor beam evaporating into thin air.

Not that the air was thin in here, mind. Despite the fact that the entrance to the hanger bay seemed to be exposed to the cold vacuum of space, the air was just as clean and plentiful as it was in Geoff’s own home, unless you were talking about one of the many days when Geoff had let the laundry pile up, in which case the atmosphere in the hanger bay was actually a marked improvement. Presumably there must have been some sort of invisible force field that prevented the air from escaping into deep space, which was quite handy really, as anyone not strapped to the floor might have otherwise been in a bit of a pickle.

The fact that you could walk around without suffocating wasn’t the only good thing the hanger bay had going for it. It was warm, brightly lit, and spacious enough

to accommodate several landing craft at once. Indeed, as the group followed the Defence Minister over to the check-in desk in the far corner, there must have been at least twenty or thirty shuttles flying in and out at once: some landing, some taking off, and others just passing through. It was like someone was playing a giant game of musical shuttles, except there was no music, no-one removing the landing platforms one by one, and probably no prize at the end. In fact, the more Geoff thought about it, the more he realised that this was nothing like a game of musical shuttles. The game didn't even exist, for goodness sake.

The Defence Minister approached the check-in desk and rang a small bell. A girl came out of a side door and walked over to meet them.

"Good evening Minister," she said, looking a little surprised. "Is everything alright? We weren't expecting..."

"I need to speak to captain Holland urgently," the Defence Minister said, cutting the girl short.

"The captain?" The girl said. "You... you want to speak to the captain?"

"Yes, the captain," the Defence Minister repeated.

"Now?"

"Yes, now!" the Defence Minister said impatiently, "Tell him to come down and meet me as quickly as he can."

"Of... of course," the girl said nervously, opening up a large book on the desk and handing the Defence Minister a pen. "If you'd just like to sign in, I'll contact the bridge."

* * *

Captain Holland didn't seem too happy about being called down to the hanger bay at such short notice, stepping out of the lift in a huff and striding aggressively over to the Defence Minister. He must have been in his late fifties, perhaps even early sixties, but his body language belied his age - the way he walked towards them looked more like a petulant teenager who'd been called into the kitchen to help with the washing up.

"What's all this about, David?" he said, running his fingers through his distinguished grey hair and flicking a speck of dirt off his otherwise immaculate uniform. "I heard you flew in on a priority override seven?"

"That's correct," the Defence Minister said.

"May I ask why?"

"I need you to mobilise the fleet."

The captain laughed.

"You must be joking."

"I wish I was."

Captain Holland looked at the Defence Minister in silence for a few moments, the smile on his face beginning to think about sitting this one out.

"This is a drill, right?" he said, looking hesitantly at the rest of the group. "You've come here to test us?"

"This isn't a test," the Defence Minister replied. "This is the real thing. I need you to mobilise the fleet immediately."

"David, you know the rules," the captain said, shutting his eyes. "Article seven sub paragraph B states that unless the planet is in imminent danger, the military are to receive two weeks notice for things like this. Two weeks notice, minimum."

That was a strange coincidence, Geoff thought. He needed exactly the same notice period if he was required to comb his hair.

"I'm well aware of the rules," the Defence Minister said.

The captain frowned.

"You mean... the planet *is* in imminent danger?"

"I'm afraid so. Look - I don't have time to explain everything," the Defence Minister said, "but we have reason to believe that history has been changed."

"Changed? Changed in what way?"

The Defence Minister took a deep breath.

"Remember the alien invasion of 2181?"

"Of course," the captain said. "It's one of the first things I studied at the academy. The fleet was sent through a temporal vortex and destroyed 600 years later."

"Not any more," the Defence Minister said. "It now seems that the aliens will invade Earth in the 21st Century, 200 years before the human race is technologically advanced enough to create temporal vortexes. If our calculations are correct, humanity is about to be wiped out, 1000 years in the past."

"But... how is that possible?" the captain said.

"Someone worked out how to cheat the supercomputer," Mr Knight said, interjecting from behind.

Captain Holland moved a little closer to the Defence Minister.

"Who are these people?" he whispered, looking over the Defence Minister's shoulder at them all.

"They work in the time tourism industry," the Defence Minister replied, looking back at the group. "These are the people who discovered the plot to change history, and brought it to my attention."

"I see," the captain said, giving a brief nod to everyone in the way people do when they can't be bothered to say 'hello'. Everyone nodded back.

"So, what do you need from me?" he said, leading them over to the elevator and pressing a small button on the wall.

"As I said before," the Defence Minister said, standing to one side as the elevator doors slid open. "I need you to mobilise the fleet. We have to go back to the 21st Century, and destroy these aliens before they get the chance to invade."

The captain sighed.

"What you're asking isn't going to be easy," he said, motioning everyone to step inside the lift. "Unfortunately, your little surprise visit has caught us in the middle of shore leave. Most of the ships are either completely empty, or operating on a skeleton crew. We're in no state to go back and defeat an alien invasion."

"Can't you call back your personnel?" The Defence Minister said. "This is an emergency!"

"There's no time," the captain replied. "A full recall could take days, and if what you're saying is true, we need to get going immediately."

"So what do we do?"

"The only thing we *can* do."

"Which is?"

"Please state your destination," the lift said. Geoff recognised the voice. Familiarly calm, synthesised, female. Weren't there any male lifts in the future? How were they supposed to make any baby lifts?

"Take us to the remote operations deck," The captain said.

TWENTY-ONE

"This is madness," the Defence Minister said, pacing up and down nervously as the lift manoeuvred its way through the ship. "Are you seriously suggesting we hand over control of the entire fleet to the ship's computer?"

Captain Holland steadied himself as the lift abruptly changed direction. Much to Geoff's surprise, this lift didn't just go up and down – it could move side to side, forwards and backwards, and even diagonally if it really wanted to show off - in fact it was actually more manoeuvrable than Geoff after a large curry. It was also capable of moving at quite a high speed, jerking its passengers around with every erratic change of direction. Geoff felt a bit like he was standing on a badly-driven bendy bus, which is to say, any bendy bus.

"I don't see any other option," Captain Holland said, lurching against the wall as the lift violently changed direction again. "As I said before, we've got hundreds of thousands of personnel away on shore leave at the moment. If you want to confront these aliens with a full fleet, and you want to do it now, you're going to have to let me relinquish control of every empty ship over to the computer."

The Defence Minister sighed.

"I don't know," he said. "We've already been let down by one computer today. I'm a little uncomfortable at the prospect of being let down by another."

"There's really nothing to worry about," the captain said. "Mai is more than capable of co-ordinating the fleet in battle."

"Mai?" Geoff said.

"It stands for Military Artificial Intelligence," Tim whispered in Geoff's ear. "She's the ship's computer."

"She?" Geoff said. "You mean you actually give computers a gender in real life as well? And why are they all female?"

"Mai is programmed to adapt to every possible attack scenario," the captain said, apparently learning quickly to ignore Geoff's questions, "And she's never let us down in the past. If you ask me, we're almost better off in her hands."

"So how exactly does this work?" Mr Knight said. "You mean to tell me the computer will have complete control over every ship in the fleet?"

"Every *empty* ship," the captain said, holding up a corrective finger. "She'll be able to control propulsion, weapons systems, shields, everything. With Mai in command, there's no need for a ship to have its own crew."

"How many ships are we talking about?" Ruth said.

"Oh, I'd say about 90 per cent of the fleet," the captain replied. "Couple of thousand, maybe?"

"Interesting," Ruth said.

"Sounds to me like we're putting all our eggs in one basket," the Defence Minister said. "Can this computer cope? What if something goes wrong?"

"Relax," the captain said. "Mai won't let us down. And I think you forget - this fleet is far superior to the one that defeated the alien invasion in 2781. Considering the technological advances we've made since then, this operation shouldn't pose too much of a problem."

"I still don't like this," the Defence Minister said.

"It doesn't matter whether you like it or not," the captain said. "The fact of the matter is, we've got no choice. It's either Mai, or a four day wait."

“Then I guess it’s in the hands of the computer,” the Defence Minister said, a slight hesitancy creeping into his voice as he edged back into the corner of the lift and drummed his fingers on the wall.

Geoff could sense a feeling of tension in the air and decided to try and change the subject.

“Have you ever wondered,” he said, “why people in supermarkets feel uncomfortable about putting their shopping behind someone else’s on the conveyor belt if there isn’t one of those little plastic separators?”

Everyone looked at Geoff blankly for a few moments.

“Are we there yet?” Tim said.

* * *

“Good evening, captain,” said a sultry female voice as they all staggered out of the lift, their limbs shaking as if they’d just stepped off a roller coaster.

Geoff looked around to see who had just spoken. There didn’t seem to be anyone here, save a couple of male technicians sitting at a control terminal, who certainly didn’t look capable of speaking in a female voice, sultry or otherwise. In front of them, a huge grid of square glass pillars towered upwards towards a distant white ceiling, each one glowing in a relaxing pale blue light. There must have been well over a hundred of these pillars equally spaced apart, each one geometrically identical, perhaps a little wider than a person with their arms outstretched.

“Good evening Mai,” the captain replied. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel fine, captain,” came a reply. As the computer spoke, a different cluster of pillars pulsated in time with each syllable, like a giant musical instrument at a Jean Michelle Jarre concert. “I think I’ve just worked out a way to improve the fleet’s engine efficiency by 20 per cent.”

“That’s excellent Mai,” the captain said. “Excellent.”

“This is Mai?” Geoff said, walking over to the front of the grid to get a closer look. He reached out and touched the nearest pillar. The surface was cool and smooth, but felt ever so slightly wet, as if it were coated in a thick, transparent liquid. He pulled his hand back and sniffed it – it smelt like soap. Perhaps this was some sort of futuristic cooling gel, designed to stop the computer from over-heating, or a super-conductive liquid that could carry information within its molecular structure. Whatever it was, Geoff had never felt anything like it before.

“Do you mind?” Mai said. “I’ve just been cleaned.”

“Sorry,” Geoff said, wiping his hand on his trousers. “I didn’t think you’d mind being touched.”

“Do you mind being touched?”

“Depends,” Geoff said. “Look, I’m really sorry - I didn’t think you could feel anything.”

“I feel everything on this ship,” Mai said. “I can feel your feet on the floor, your breath in the air – I even felt that thing you flicked onto the wall earlier when you thought no-one was looking.”

“You felt that?” Geoff said. She was referring to a bogey he thought he’d disposed of quite discretely.

“I did.”

“Do you want me to go back and get it?”

The computer said nothing.

Captain Holland stepped forward.

“Mai, we need your help,” he said.

“I know,” Mai replied. “You want me to take control of the fleet so you can go back to the 21st Century and defeat an alien invasion.”

“Wow,” Geoff said. “Can you read minds?”

“No,” Mai replied. “I’ve been following your conversation since the captain met up with you in the hanger bay.”

The captain smiled.

“Can you help us?”

“I’ve already begun to make the necessary preparations,” Mai said, her glass pillars looking as though they were flashing in excitement with every word. “I’ve set up a remote uplink with every vacant ship in the fleet, and I’m in the process performing a pre-battle diagnostic check. All manned ships are on standby awaiting your orders.”

“Thank you Mai,” the captain said. “Sometimes, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I’ve also taken the liberty of analysing the historical archives from the original battle of 2781 to formulate an attack strategy,” Mai continued. “According to my records, the alien fleet consisted of 1,000 ships, with an accompanying armada of 50 capital ships flying alongside. When we attack, the fleet should split into 50 separate waves, with 20 standard saucers forming a protective shield around one capital ship. If the aliens use this same strategy, I would recommend that we use attack approach Delta-341. This would allow us to exploit the weaknesses at the top and bottom of this protective formation.”

“Sounds like you know what you’re doing,” the captain said, turning to face the Defence Minister. “Still feel uncomfortable about leaving this to the computer?”

“I’m not convinced,” the Defence Minister said, shaking his head. “If you ask me, this all sounds too good to be true.”

“I listened to your reservations about my ability to control the fleet while you were in the lift,” Mai said, her voice flat and unemotional despite the Defence Minister’s criticism. “Can I just assure you that...”

“Let me guess,” the Defence Minister interrupted. “Nothing can go wrong? You’re incapable of making mistakes?”

“Not at all,” Mai replied. “In fact I sense that’s what bothers you. You don’t like it when things are too perfect, and I was going to assure you that I probably *will* make a few mistakes.”

“You will?”

“Of course,” Mai said. “Whilst I’m more than capable of controlling this fleet and reacting to different battle conditions, I won’t always make the right decision. Some things will take me by surprise. Ships will be lost. And I know there’s no guarantee that we will win. I may be one of the most powerful computers in existence, but I know I’m not perfect.”

Geoff raised his hand.

“You’re not in a classroom,” the Defence Minister snapped. “What is it?”

Geoff lowered his hand again.

“Was that little speech supposed to make us feel *better*?” he said. “I thought we were all going to sit back and have a cup of tea while the computer took care of everything for us?”

“It certainly makes *me* feel better,” the Defence Minister said, looking up at the computer with a new look of understanding on his face. “At least it’s got a bit of humility.”

“And that’s... good, is it?” Geoff said.

The Defence Minister turned to the captain and smiled for the first time since, well, since Geoff had met him, come to think of it.

“What is it?” the captain said.

“I don’t know,” the Defence Minister replied. “For some reason, I don’t feel quite so nervous anymore. This computer of yours is more human than I thought.”

“Well that’s settled then,” the captain said, walking back over the lift and pressing the call button. “Mai?”

“Yes captain.”

“Fire up all auxiliary thrusters and move the fleet away from the Earth. If you need us, we’ll be on the bridge.”

* * *

Just as captain Holland had ordered, thousands of engines simultaneously roared to life and began to propel the battle fleet out of the Earth’s orbit. Within a few minutes, each ship had slowly built up a determined momentum, displaying both the grace of a ballerina gliding across a stage, and the force of a rhinoceroses breaking into a stampede. This is not to say you could mix these metaphors and liken each ship to a rhinoceroses in mid chassé, as no-one would have been able to take the fleet seriously.

The bridge of the Concordia was about the same size as a large auditorium, situated right at the nose of the ship. At the very front, a huge reinforced window gave a magnificent view of the space ahead, with the captain’s chair positioned a suitable distance away so he didn’t have to crick his neck to see where they were going. The walls and floor of the bridge were an off-white colour, almost exactly the same shade that people paint their walls when they want to try and sell their house, and all around, banks of monitors were housed flush inside rows and rows of control terminals, displaying reams of incomprehensible numbers, real-time, fluctuating line charts, and cross-sectioned diagrams of the ship. The whole place was bustling with various crew members, some stationed attentively at their posts, others wandering purposely between different terminals and typing things into their small hand-held computers. It all looked very exciting.

Tim, Ruth and Mr. Knight stood at the back of the room, with Geoff sitting next to them in an annoyingly high swivel chair. He thought about fiddling with a few buttons on the arm rest to try and make things more comfortable, but remembered he had enough trouble adjusting chairs in his own time, let alone a futuristic chair on a the bridge of a spaceship with more controls than those toilets you only found in Japanese hotels. Too embarrassed to get down from the chair so soon after deciding to sit in it, Geoff shifted his body weight as best he could to minimise the discomfort and watched as captain Holland and the Defence Minister walked to the front of the bridge to address the crew.

“Everyone!” the captain said, holding up his hands. “Can I have your attention please?”

The room quietened down. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked round.

“Mai,” the captain said, looking up at the ceiling, “can you please open a channel to the fleet?”

“Channel open,” Mai said.

The captain cleared his throat.

“Everyone, this is your captain,” he said, his voice sounding firm and authoritative as it echoed over the loudspeaker. “I’m afraid I come to you today with some very bad news. A serious situation has developed in the 21st Century, one that could threaten the survival of the human race. To brief you on the situation, I am handing you over to the Defence Minister, David Cartwright.”

A few of the younger looking crew members glanced at each other with widened eyes. One man even dropped his little portable computer thingy, although he picked it up again in one swift movement as if nothing had happened, much like the way a cat tries to style things out when they accidentally fall off the back of a sofa.

“Good evening everyone,” the Defence Minister said, looking around the room to catch as many people’s eyes as possible. “We don’t have much time, so I’ll make this quick: Earlier today, an alien impostor, posing as one of us, successfully managed to exploit the time tourism industry. They managed to change the course of history.”

A few people gasped, which Geoff thought was understandable – an alien impostor changing the course of history wasn’t the sort of thing that happened every day, and the odd gasp was probably more restrained than his reaction would have been, had he not heard this story twenty times already. The Defence Minister stood firm in front of everyone, waiting for silence to return before continuing.

“As a result of this sabotage, it would seem that the alien race that once tried to take over the Earth in the 22nd Century now succeeds in wiping out the human race in the 21st Century, 200 years before mankind had developed the technology to banish the invading fleet safely through a temporal vortex.”

The Defence Minister must have thought this was a good moment for a dramatic pause, because he executed one with all the consummate professionalism you would expect from an experienced public speaker, drawing on the silence to create a sense of tension. Obviously, the political fibre of his being couldn’t resist an opportunity to make himself look good.

“We cannot let this invasion succeed,” he continued, his voice getting louder with emotion as he spoke. “That’s why we’re going back to the 21st Century to defend Earth. We’re going back to defend our planet, and we’re gonna wipe out these alien bastards once and for all!”

“Yeah!!” the crew cheered collectively.

“ARE WE READY!?” the Defence Minister shouted, his voice bursting with either genuine, or well manufactured passion.

“YEAH!!!” The crew cheered again, anxiously poised at their stations to go into battle. They seemed a fairly easy bunch to manipulate, but then again, they did work for the military.

“Then let’s go get ‘em!” The Defence Minister said, exhausting the final motivational cliché that Geoff could think of.

All around, people punched the air aggressively and cheered again, as if they were auditioning for a part in *Top Gun*. Even those who had previously looked as though they wished they’d called in sick today were standing up straight with their heads held high, a surge of optimism apparently flowing through their veins thanks to the Defence Minister’s rousing speech. Geoff had to hand it to the man – he obviously knew how to work up a crowd. Geoff, on the other hand, only knew how to work Tim up, and all that really involved was hiding the bread.

“How are we doing, Mai?” The captain said, patting the Defence Minister on the back for his speech and sitting down in his seat.

“The fleet is armed and ready,” Mai replied, her calm female voice providing a welcome antidote to the sea of testosterone Geoff felt like he was drowning in. “My remote uplink with all empty ships is stable, and all systems are fully functional.”

“Then let’s get this over with,” the captain said, leaning forward in his chair and staring intently through the window. “Calibrate a temporal vortex for the 21st Century, and project it straight ahead.”

TWENTY-TWO

Geoff waited on his stupid chair as the fleet continued to drift through space. Nothing appeared to be happening.

“What’s going on?” Geoff said. “Did everyone change their mind about this whole battle thing?”

“What?” Tim said. “What makes you think that?”

“I thought we were going back to the 21st Century,” Geoff said. “Weren’t we going to project a temporal whatsit into space and fly through it?”

“A temporal whatsit?”

“A temporal whatsit.”

“You mean a temporal vortex?”

“Yeah, one of them.”

“That was ten minutes ago,” Tim said. “We’re already in the 21st Century.”

“We are?”

“Can’t you tell?”

Geoff swivelled around in his chair and looked out of the main window. To be honest, everything looked pretty similar to him, although he guessed there weren’t many tell-tale signs of 21st Century-ness in outer space, like flat-screen TVs or iPhones floating around.

“You sure this is the 21st Century?” Geoff said, giving Tim a sceptical look. “I didn’t see anything happen.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Tim said. “Travelling through a temporal vortex is instantaneous, and they’re invisible to the human eye. That’s why the aliens didn’t realise that they’d flown through one in the 22nd Century, remember? That’s why we were able to take them by surprise when they appeared in 2781.”

Captain Holland stood up from his chair and walked over to an officer hunched over a computer terminal.

“Bring the ship around 180 degrees,” he said. “I want to be facing the Earth.”

“Yes sir,” the officer replied.

“Mai, can you do the same for the rest of the fleet?”

“Yes, captain,” Mai said.

Geoff watched as the stars streaked across the window in a blur of light as the ship turned on its axis to face the Earth. He looked closer at the planet as it came into view – from here, it looked exactly the same as the Earth of the future, although he presumed that at a glance, planets didn’t really change much over the years like people did, say by putting on a bit of weight or getting a new haircut.

The captain sat back down in his chair and looked over his shoulder at a female officer leaning over a radar display.

“Anything?” he said.

“Nothing as yet,” the officer replied.

“Keep looking. I want...”

“Wait,” the officer interrupted, pointing at some little green dots that had just appeared on the radar screen. “I think I’ve got something...”

“What is it?”

“An unidentified swarm of vessels bearing 3-4-0 mark 2-1-5. They’re heading straight for Earth.”

“How many?” the captain said, leaping out of his chair and rushing over to the radar station.

“500,” the officer replied. “No wait,” she said, looking closer, “700. No – over a thousand! We have over a thousand ships on a direct course for Earth!”

The captain smiled.

“They’re gonna get the fright of their lives when they see us,” he said, not taking his eyes off the radar screen. “They’re expecting no more resistance than fighter jets and nuclear missiles. Everyone into position! Mai – plot an intercept course on attack approach Delta-314.”

“Yes, captain,” Mai replied.

Geoff lurched back in his chair as the Concordia suddenly began to accelerate towards the invading fleet. Through the window, he could see a shimmering cluster of grey specks in the distance, screaming relentlessly towards the Earth like an angry swarm of giant bees. In space.

“Recommend we maintain radio silence from now on,” Mai said. “According to my historical records, the aliens almost gained the upper hand in the original battle by monitoring our communications. By listening in to what we were saying, they were momentarily able to anticipate our attack strategy.”

“Very well,” the captain said, returning to the middle of the bridge and leaning on the back of his chair. “It’s up to you now, Mai. Maintain radio silence.”

“They’ve seen us!” the radar officer said, looking up from her screen and pointing at the window. The grey specks seemed to be getting a lot larger, revealing a generic, saucer-like appearance to each craft. Geoff could now see that most of the ships looked exactly the same size and shape, with the exception of a few larger capital ships, which seemed to be a lot chunkier and heavily armoured in their construction. All at once, the ships broke off from their original course and headed straight towards the Concordia.

“They’re coming around to bearing 5-7-1 mark 3-6-4!”

The captain narrowed his eyes.

“Lock on to all available targets and open fire,” he said, his voice unwavering.

Under Mai’s control, a few hundred of the more nimble ships in the fleet accelerated past the Concordia and engaged the first layer of flying saucers, firing all manner of multi-coloured laser beams and missiles into their path. Many of the missiles shot harmlessly in between the oncoming craft, but when one connected with a flying saucer that wasn’t paying enough attention, the damage inflicted was severe, causing the ship to explode in a dazzling shower of molten metal and yellow sparks. As the first few ships were destroyed, the crew on the bridge applauded, as if they were merely spectators at a football match.

Just as Mai had predicted, the swarm of incoming craft spit off into separate waves, with 20 or so flying saucers each forming a protective shield around the larger, more menacing capital ships. Geoff watched as Mai split the fleet off to pursue separate formations. In the background, the Earth looked calm and peaceful, its inhabitants blissfully unaware of the huge battle taking place on its doorstep.

“Bring us around to bearing 8-7-4 mark 2-1-5,” the captain barked, snapping Geoff back into reality. “We’ll take on the nearest wave!”

Geoff grabbed hold of his chair as the ship lurched over to face a tight cluster of flying saucers, which were somehow managing to keep to a perfect formation around a capital ship as it swung around with incredible manoeuvrability to take on the Concordia.

“Fire!” the captain said.

The bridge vibrated as the Concordia unleashed a thick barrage of laser fire, which obliterated over half of the oncoming wave of flying saucers. The aliens

quickly spaced their remaining ships equally around the central craft and fired back, passing overhead with a deafening roar. A few of the lasers struck the nose of the Concordia, but the damage inflicted didn't seem to be anything worth losing sleep over.

"They're making a second pass across the port bow!" the captain cried out. "Aim all turrets directly ahead of their flight path and wait for my mark!"

The captain watched closely as the flying saucers flew back into view.

"Now!" he said.

The bridge vibrated again as the Concordia unleashed a second scatter of laser fire. Impressively, the captain scored another direct hit, taking out another five or six ships with one well directed shot.

The remaining few ships in the protective formation began to spin around the capital ship, acting as a moving barrier to prevent a clear shot from getting through.

"I'm fed up of this," the captain said, narrowing his eyes. "Let's see if we can't take down the main ship."

"Go for its weak spot!" Geoff shouted.

"The weak spot?!" the captain replied, looking back from his chair. "Saucers don't have any weak spots! They're exactly the same composition all the way round!"

Tim put a forceful hand on Geoff's shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I'm trying to help!" Geoff said, jerking his shoulder free from Tim's grip.

"Geoff, that man is the captain of a real spaceship, ok? A *real* spaceship. He's got 20 years of military experience. What do you have? He doesn't need stupid advice from you, which, let's face it, is based solely on computer game logic!"

"It's not stupid advice," Geoff said, turning back to the captain. "Do a barrel roll!" he said.

"Stop it!" Tim shouted, grabbing Geoff by the collar. "You can't do a barrel roll in a spaceship the size of a fucking city!"

"You can't?"

"No. Now stop talking – all you're doing is distracting him."

The captain didn't appear to be very distracted – in fact he looked more focussed than ever.

"Transfer all energy from the rear shields into the weapons systems," he said. "Let's see if we can take out the rest of this wave with an extra-powerful blast."

"Rear shields powering down," an officer said, looking up from his terminal at the captain. "Weapons now operating at 150 per cent strength."

"Let them have it," the captain ordered.

The bridge shook violently as the Concordia fired a painfully bright shower of laser beams at the weakened formation. Upon impact, the few remaining escort ships careened uncontrollably into the capital ship, rupturing its hull and causing it to blow up in a spectacular flash of light, the shockwave from the explosion rocking the bridge as it passed through the Concordia.

"Yes!" the captain shouted, shaking his fist. "Well done, everyone!"

Geoff stared through the main window in wonderment as the battle continued to rage on in front of them. Capital ships were darting in and out of view, pursued by smaller fighter craft, laser beams were streaming relentlessly across the stars, and colossal explosions continuously lit up the blackness of space, throwing a shower of flaming debris in every direction. It was like watching the most amazing firework display imaginable, except there was no-one around selling those ridiculously expensive glow sticks that fizzle out after 10 minutes.

"Give me an update, Mai," the captain said, sitting down in his chair and wiping his brow. "How are we doing?"

"We're doing well, captain," Mai said, her voice still sounding calm and understated over the loudspeaker. "According to my calculations, we've already destroyed over a quarter of the alien fleet."

"What about losses on our side?"

"Minimal," Mai replied. "We've only lost the Intrepid, the Lancer, and the Tesla. All... other... shippsssss.... arrrrrrrreeee fully func-func... function.... function...."

"Functional?" Geoff said, getting impatient.

"Quiet," Tim whispered.

The lights on the bridge flickered momentarily.

"Mai?" the captain said hesitantly.

"Func...func... func..... Func....." Mai stammered, her voice slowing down to deep, synthesised drawl.

The loudspeaker went dead.

"Mai?!" the captain shouted. "Mai, can you hear me? Please respond!"

"Maybe someone forgot to change the batteries," Geoff said. "Should we call the concierge?"

Before Tim had the chance to explain to Geoff that supercomputers didn't tend to run on batteries, the bridge was rocked by an almighty explosion from directly ahead, the blast obscuring the main window in a brilliant flash of light. Geoff was expecting a very loud noise to accompany this spectacle, but because they were in space, it was totally silent. Everyone shielded their eyes as the light faded to reveal the charred remnants of a battle cruiser, drifting lifelessly across the battlefield.

"Was that one of ours?" the captain said.

"Afraid so," an officer said, checking a few details on his screen. "The Galileo, sir. Must have been shot down."

"No, no. I recognise that explosion," the captain said. "Did you see? It came from inside. That ship wasn't shot down. It self destructed."

"Erm... was that meant to happen?" Geoff whispered to Tim.

"Of course it wasn't supposed to fucking happen!" Tim snapped.

All of a sudden, another ship exploded in the same way, the silence of the blast belying the scale of destruction.

"That was the Slipstream, sir," the officer said, his voice weakening. "Looks like you were right – there were no enemy ships nearby when it exploded. It must have self destructed."

"What's going on?" the captain said, watching as another ship blew itself up of own accord in the distance. "Why are all our ships destroying themselves?"

"They're not just blowing themselves up sir," the radar officer said, pointing off the starboard bow. "Look!"

Everyone watched in horror as two battle cruisers seemed to deliberately crash into each other, the impact splitting both spaceships in two, right along the join between the sleek metallic shell on top, and the black, angular hull underneath.

"Wait a minute," the captain said, running over to an officer sitting at the back of the bridge. "Were those ships being controlled by Mai?"

"Yes sir," the officer said, frantically typing something into his terminal.

"What about the Galileo and the Slipstream?"

"Those too," the officer said. "She has control of 90 per cent of the fleet."

“Shit,” the captain said, watching in desperation as a group of fighter craft began to open fire on each other.

Unfortunately, the aliens seemed to be cottoning on to the fact that something wasn't quite the ticket with their opponents, and decided that now was probably a good time to step up their attacks on the confused fleet.

“I know this sounds impossible sir,” the officer said, still hammering away at his keyboard, “but could Mai have malfunctioned?”

“Mai doesn't malfunction,” the captain said, running over to consult another terminal. “The only way something like this could happen was if someone went down to the remote operations deck and...”

He stopped still.

“Is anyone missing?” he said

Geoff looked around the bridge and nearly fell off his chair. Admittedly, he'd been nearly falling off his chair ever since he sat in it, but this time he could definitely put it down to shock.

“Erm... I think we do appear to be missing somebody, as it happens,” he said.

“Who?” the captain said.

“Tringrall,” Geoff replied.

TWENTY-THREE

"How could we have let this happen?" the captain said as they rode the lift down to the remote operations deck, accompanied by a large contingent of armed security guards. "If you all thought one of you might have been this 'Tringrall' character, why didn't you say anything? Why weren't you keeping an eye on each other when you were on the bridge?"

"I got distracted," Geoff shrugged. "There were lots of explosions outside."

"Well, now there's even more explosions outside!" the captain barked, grabbing a spare rifle from one of the guards and snapping a clip of ammunition into it. "If we don't stop this 'Tringrall' and undo whatever damage he's done to Mai, the whole fleet will be destroyed!"

"I have a small confession to make," Geoff said, turning to the Defence Minister. "I thought it was you. I thought you were Tringrall."

"Me?" The Defence Minister said. "Why did you think it was me?"

"Just a hunch," Geoff said. "Plus – there were those suspicious papers in your office."

"Suspicious papers?" The Defence Minister said. "What suspicious papers?"

"The one's you'd burnt in your fireplace."

"That was a shopping list!"

"Oh."

"You thought I was an alien because I'd burnt a shopping list?"

"I didn't know it was a shopping list!" Geoff said. "I thought it might have been orders from another alien or something, you know? If it was a shopping list, why didn't you tear it up and throw it in the bin like a normal person?"

"I have a confession to make as well," Tim said, giving Ruth a sorrowful look. "I thought it was you. I thought you were Tringrall."

"Me?" Ruth said. "You thought *I* was Tringrall?"

Tim nodded.

"Why? What did I do?"

"Think about it - *everything* points towards you."

"It does?"

"This has been something that has been planned from the start, correct?" Tim said. "And *you* were the one who thought up the whole Time Rep scheme in the first place weren't you?"

"So what?" Ruth said.

"For a while," Tim continued, "I thought that maybe your idea of recruiting people from different time periods had nothing to do with time tourism at all. I thought you might have devised it as some sort of elaborate means of getting to Geoff. But since we now know that Mr. Knight is really the alien impostor, I guess I was mistaken."

Ruth said nothing - in fact she was beginning to look a little pale.

"You alright?" Tim said, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"It wasn't my idea," Ruth said quietly.

"What?"

"The Time Rep scheme - it wasn't my idea," she repeated. "It was... It was Mr. Knight's."

"But I thought..." Tim trailed off. "Didn't the Time Rep scheme get you on the board?"

"It did, but it was Mr. Knight's idea all the same," Ruth said, stroking her hair, "He came up with it one night when we were both working late. Told me I could take the credit."

"Wait a minute," Geoff said. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"What do you think it means?" Tim said.

"Er... I don't know," Geoff said. "I was hoping someone else was going to volunteer that bit."

Tim sighed.

"It means that it's just as I suspected," Tim said. "The whole point of the Time Rep scheme has been nothing more than a deception from day one. It was never devised with the intention of improving the time tourism industry - Mr Knight thought it up purely as an elaborate means of getting to *you*. "

Geoff didn't know whether to feel horrified or flattered. He opted for a combination of both, which made him look a bit confused.

"And if Ruth hadn't stolen the idea," Tim added, "We might have been able to make the connection to Mr. Knight sooner."

"Hey! I did not 'steal' the idea!" Ruth protested. "I tried to convince him to take the credit, but he insisted! He said he had nothing to gain, that I deserved a reward for all the hard work I'd put in over the years over the years..."

"And you believed him?" Tim said.

"Of course I did!" Ruth replied. "Who would have thought he was a fucking alien, for Christ's sake!"

"But when Geoff was attacked, why didn't you say anything? Didn't you see the connection? He let you take the credit for the Time Rep idea because he didn't want anyone to link it back to him when he started to abuse it!"

"I suppose it is pretty obvious, now that you mention it," Ruth said. "It just didn't cross my mind at the time. I suppose... I've always been afraid of people finding out it wasn't my idea. I've got too much to lose."

"And I'm sure that's the way Mr. Knight planned it," Tim said. "With all the success you gained, he knew you'd keep your mouth shut."

"So... does this mean Mr. Knight killed Eric?" Geoff said, desperately trying to keep up with the conversation.

"So it would seem," Ruth said. "That must be why he made me ask Eric to go to the lab before the party - when we were in the lift, remember? Mr. Knight must have been waiting for him there. He must have killed Eric, hidden the body behind the databanks, and run upstairs quickly to give his speech! No wonder he was so out of breath!"

"So all that stuff about asking us to find Eric must have been an act," Geoff said. "He knew exactly where he was all along!"

"Certainly looks like it," Tim said.

"And he must have been the one who attacked me as well," Geoff said, slowly joining the dots in his mind. "He's the one who hypnotised me and broke my hand!"

"Yes," Ruth said. "And that makes sense if you think about it - remember the night of the party, when you were looking for Tim? He was the one who told you that he'd gone down to Eric's lab! That's how he knew where you'd be, and that's how he knew you'd be alone!"

"Mr. Knight told you I'd gone down to Eric's lab?" Tim said, standing back in surprise.

"Yup," Geoff replied.

"That lying bastard," Tim said. "I told him I'd already checked the lab! I told him I was going to look elsewhere!"

"You'd already checked the lab?" Geoff said. "But... if that's true, why didn't you see Eric's body?"

"I was in a hurry," Tim said. "I just poked my head around the door and called out his name. There was no reply, so I moved on."

Everyone lurched to the left as the lift made one of its characteristic changes of direction.

"Right, we're almost there," the captain said, checking his rifle. "When the doors open, keep low, and watch your fire - we don't want to damage Mai. I'm assuming this guy is armed and dangerous, so if you get a clear shot at the target, shoot to kill."

"Wait," Geoff said, putting his bandaged hand over the end of the captain's rifle and pushing the barrel towards the floor. "Don't kill him."

"Don't kill him?" the captain said. "Are you mad? This guy has already destroyed half the fleet! What do you want us to do - slap him on the wrist and tell him not to do it again?"

"I need to ask him a few questions."

"Questions?!" the captain said. "This is no time for..."

"Important questions," Geoff said, looking down at his hand.

"I don't care how..."

"Wait," Tim said, interrupting the captain. "Geoff's right - He's more use to us alive than dead."

"And may I ask why?"

"Because believe it or not, the reason these aliens are invading 200 years early has something to do with Geoff's hand," Tim said, "and he's the only person who knows why."

"What?"

"It's a little complicated," Tim said, "but when Mr. Knight broke Geoff's hand, history changed in some way that allowed these aliens to invade 200 years earlier than before. If we could somehow trick him into telling us why, we might be able to use the information to our advantage."

"Plus, if I don't find out, it's really going to bug me," Geoff said.

The captain thought about this for a moment in silence.

"Fine," he said, tugging the end of his rifle free from Geoff's grip and pulling out another clip of ammunition. He turned to the other guards. "Everyone change over to stun rounds," he ordered. "If you get a clear shot, aim for the legs to immobilise the target - the holiday boys want to ask our friend a few questions before we kill him."

"Erm... what are you supposed to do if you haven't got a gun?" Geoff said, suddenly noticing that everyone had a weapon of some description apart from him.

"If you haven't got a gun, stick close to me," the captain said. "I'll cover you."

"That's a great plan," Geoff said. "Or - and here's another great plan - how about I get a gun too?"

The captain looked at Geoff.

"Are you right or left handed?" he said.

"Erm... right handed."

"The hand in the bandage?"

"Left handed," Geoff said, correcting himself. "I'm left handed."

"And what's your accuracy rating with a Heavy Assault Laser Rifle?"

"My what?"

“Your accuracy rating!”

“Erm... 12?” Geoff guessed.

“12?!” the captain said. “The rating’s measured in letters! Have you even *fired* a gun before?”

“Of course!” he said.

“You have?”

Tim looked at Geoff and raised his eyebrows. “Playing *Time Crisis* in the arcades doesn’t count,” he said.

“Ok, so I’ve never fired a gun,” Geoff said. “Is it difficult?”

“Well, its not exactly something you can learn in ten seconds, which is roughly the amount of time we have before we arrive on the Remote Operations Deck,” the captain said. “Just stay close to me, and try not to get shot.”

“Good advice,” Geoff said, already standing a little closer to the captain than was socially acceptable in normal circumstances. “I’ll do my best.”

“Get ready,” the captain said.

“Now arriving at the remote operations deck,” the lift announced.

TWENTY-FOUR

The first thing that grabbed Geoff's attention as the lift doors slid open was two twitching bodies, each lying in pools of their own blood and clutching their stomachs, much the same way as Eric had done the night he was killed. Looking closer, he realised they belonged to the two technicians he'd seen in here earlier. This was not a good sign – Mr. Knight was obviously quite adept at killing people by breaking their ribs and puncturing their lungs. Geoff crossed his arms protectively over his chest and took a deep breath.

Captain Holland crouched down on the floor and scuttled out of the lift as quietly as he could, closely followed by everyone else. The place was eerily silent – so much so that you could have heard a pin drop, although there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between everyone that this was neither the time nor the place to start going around dropping pins, unless they were planning on catching Mr. Knight in some sort of hilarious *Home Alone* style booby trap.

The group quickly dived for shelter behind a nearby terminal and took a brief moment to look around. Mai's towering glass pillars looked cold and empty, the flashes of pale blue light now reduced to a dark, lifeless grey. Over to the left, a row of databanks and monitors were smashed to pieces, a thick carpet of broken glass, wires and microchips splashed across the surrounding floor.

A stray shard of glass cracked under the Defence Minister's feet as he leant back on his heels, the sound announcing the group's presence as it pierced through the silence and echoed loudly down the rows of pillars. The Defence Minister shut his eyes and winced.

"Ah ha!" Mr. Knight called out, his voice booming from somewhere inside Mai's grid of glass. "Is that my welcoming party I hear?"

Everyone chose not to respond, in the vain hope that Mr. Knight might dismiss the noise as a stray cat running into a milk bottle or something.

"I know you're there!" Mr Knight shouted. "It's no use pretending!"

There was something a little different about Mr. Knight's voice, as if some sort of vocal mask had slipped. It sounded more strained; more slithery, with a distinct hiss wrapped around every word. In many ways, he sounded much like the alien Geoff had spoken to in the simulated invasion of London he'd watched with Tim earlier.

"I assume you're here to try and fix your stupid computer," Mr. Knight called out, "and if that's the case, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you – I forced those two technicians to re-program it before I killed them, then I destroyed all the voice recognition databanks. So unless one of you is exceptionally good at jigsaws, I don't think you'll have much luck fixing her before your entire fleet is destroyed!"

The captain made a few hand signals at his guards, presumably giving them orders on how to proceed. Some of these orders were fairly easy to decipher – when the captain pointed at a guard and then pointed down a row of pillars, this must have meant he wanted that particular person to head in that particular direction. Other orders however, were a little more complicated to understand, and involved the captain pointing at his nose, interlocking his hands, and drawing circles in the air with his index finger. At least, Geoff assumed they were orders – for all he knew, the captain could have been pretending to be a bookie communicating the odds at a horse race. Unlikely, he reasoned.

Fortunately, the guards seemed to understand the captain's bizarre hand gestures and split off in various directions to look for Mr. Knight. Some began to

make their way cautiously into the grid of glass pillars, guns at the ready, while others tip-toed their way around the perimeter. Geoff and the others stayed with the captain, who was still sheltered behind the terminal, listening intently to the quiet footsteps of his men.

All of a sudden, a mild tremor shook the room, the glass pillars rattling gently as they absorbed the vibrations.

"You feel that?" Mr Knight shouted. "That's another one of your ships being blown to smithereens! Are you keeping count? Nearly half of your pathetic fleet has gone already!"

"Let's get this bastard," the captain said, breaking his silence. Obviously there wasn't a hand signal to convey that particular order.

Geoff followed the captain as he rushed over to the nearest pillar and sidled up against it, peering around the corner to see if the coast was clear. Tim, Ruth and the Defence Minister split off in separate directions.

"Looks ok," the captain said. "Follow me."

They began to edge tentatively into Mai's Labyrinth of glass, being sure to look left and right every time they approached a crossroads in their path. Occasionally, they would jump in false alarm when they came across a guard, who in turn would jerk his rifle up in surprise before lowering his weapon again in relief. From the inside, it was very difficult to see what was going on - the glass pillars had a nasty habit of playing tricks with the light and reflecting people in all directions. In many respects, everything around Geoff reminded him of walking through a hall of mirrors at a funfair, including the feeling that he'd much rather be at home eating crisps.

"I see you've brought young Geoffrey with you," Mr. Knight said, his voice sounding much closer than before. "How very interesting! How did you like my little plan, Geoff? Quite ingenious, don't you think?"

The captain spun around to check the area behind them. Could he see them? Mr. Knight's reflection was drifting from pillar to pillar, but it was difficult to tell exactly where he was.

"I don't know," Geoff said aloud, suddenly sensing an opportunity. "It didn't seem that brilliant to me, really."

"What the hell are you doing?" the captain whispered. "Keep quiet!"

"Wait," Geoff said. "We may have just found... a weak spot."

"A weak spot?!" the captain said, struggling to keep his voice down.

"So it didn't seem that brilliant to you?" Mr Knight replied, his voice sounding a little agitated. "That's because you don't understand. You don't understand your involvement in all this. *That's* the clever part."

"Then tell me," Geoff said. "Tell me how you..."

"He's here!" One of the guards shouted. "Lower your weapon and..."

Unfortunately, the rest of the sentence was obscured by a very loud burst of laser fire. And some screaming. A bright streak of red light reflected through the towers of glass, momentarily lighting up the room in a flash of colour.

"Alec?" the captain said, wiping some sweat off his forehead and giving Geoff an uncertain look. "Did you get him?"

No answer.

"Alec, respond!"

"Alec would love to respond," Mr. Knight called out from somewhere, "but I'm afraid his head isn't quite attached to the rest of his body at the moment. Can he get back to you?"

The captain shut his eyes and shook his head.

“Shit,” he said.

The room shook again, but much more noticeably than before. Geoff watched as a few hairline cracks appeared in some of the glass pillars, which clearly weren’t designed to take this kind of strain.

“That was a big one, wasn’t it?” Mr Knight teased. “Whatever ship that just exploded must have been pretty close! Anyway, where were we Geoffrey? You were going to ask me something?”

“Yes,” Geoff said, staying close to the captain as they made their way deeper into the computer. “What’s all this got to do with me? What did I do to bring forward the date of the invasion? And why did you break my hand?”

Mr. Knight laughed.

“That’s a lot of questions,” he said, “but since you’re about to die anyway, I might as well start from the beginning.” There was almost a child-like excitement to his voice as it echoed across the room, as if he’d been waiting to tell someone this story for years.

“He’s taken the bait,” Geoff whispered to the captain. “We need to listen to what he’s about to say *very* carefully.”

The captain nodded.

“We’d always planned on invading the Earth in the early 21st Century,” Mr. Knight said, his reflection fading in and out of view like some strange kaleidoscopic effect. “The human race was so primitive back then; so basic. You didn’t deserve to live on that planet, wasting all those natural resources on powering your motor vehicles and microwave ovens. It was a crime. So we decided to take it from you by force. We thought it was going to be easy enough – according to our research, the most advanced weapon you’d developed at that stage was the nuclear bomb, which, to be honest, we could protect ourselves against with a simple face cream. On paper, the invasion looked as though it was going to be a complete walkover.”

“So what happened?” Geoff said. “What went wrong?”

“I was just getting to that,” Mr. Knight said impatiently. “Having decided that we were going to invade, the battle fleet travelled 58 thousand light years across the galaxy, arriving in the solar system exactly on schedule. The Earth looked as harmless and primitive up close as we’d thought, aimlessly revolving round the sun like some stupid fat kid sitting on a carousel. It was almost too good to be true. So everything was set. The entire fleet readied its weapons, moved into attack formation and accelerated towards the Earth, monitoring all communications on approach. However, just as we were about to break through the atmosphere and reap destruction across the planet, we picked up a transmission.”

Mr. Knight went silent.

“A... transmission?” Geoff said, trying to prompt Mr. Knight into continuing his story.

“It was very faint,” Mr. Knight continued, “but we could just make out the words: ‘I see you alien fuckers, and the Death Bringer is coming your way!’ As we later found out, that transmission came from you, playing your stupid computer games. You were talking to another human being over the ‘internet’.”

“Please,” Geoff said, struggling not to laugh. “Are you telling me you thought I was talking to you?”

“We didn’t know what to think,” Mr Knight said. “For a start, we thought we’d gone undetected, and second of all, we’d encountered a ‘Death Bringer’ before, when we tried to invade another planet, several centuries earlier. It was a devastating

weapon; capable of taking out every ship with one strike, and when we heard the name again, there was a moment of panic. Was our research correct? Everything we thought we knew about the human race suggested you wouldn't be able to detect us until it was too late, yet here was this message. If we'd somehow underestimated your technological ability to detect the battle fleet, had we also underestimated your military capabilities as well?"

"So you broke off your attack?" Geoff said. "You broke off your attack... because I was playing *Space Commando*?"

"Yes," Mr. Knight said. "As a precaution, the fleet did an immediate about-turn and retreated back across the galaxy to re-assess the situation. Everyone was very unnerved by your message, and we wanted to double-check the accuracy of our intelligence."

"So I was right!" Ruth called out from somewhere, apparently listening to the conversation as well. "Geoff was originally responsible for delaying the whole invasion!"

"Yes," Mr. Knight said. "It's embarrassing, isn't it?"

Geoff laughed out loud.

"You travelled 58 thousand light years across the galaxy," he said, wiping his eyes, "and you had to travel all the way back again because I was playing a computer game? That's hilarious!"

"Indeed. You can imagine how stupid we felt when, 200 years later, we discovered the mention of a 'Death Bringer' was just an amazing coincidence, uttered by some stupid kid, sitting in his pyjamas, totally oblivious to the invasion. We were the laughing stock of the galactic community."

"So when you realised your mistake," Geoff said, "You came all the way back again?"

"We did. In the 200-odd years that had passed, Earth was still an easy target. Your planet had been ravaged by a couple of big wars, and you'd developed a few more fancy weapons, but it was nothing we couldn't handle. So the decision was made to go back and finish the job."

"So that was back in 2181," Geoff said. "The 22nd Century."

"Correct," Mr. Knight replied, "and our intelligence was correct – your military capabilities were still no match for ours. So we began destroying your cities from space, one by one – London, New York, Beijing..."

"Basingstoke," Geoff said.

"Yes, Basingstoke," Mr. Knight said. "The battle was even easier than we'd predicted. However, we didn't count on one silly little university in Malta coming to the rescue, firing that temporal vortex into the path of the fleet. Because they'd kept the technology a secret from the world, we had no idea you'd developed it. And whilst it wasn't principally designed for military use, it was ultimately responsible for our near-annihilation."

"So the temporal vortex transported your fleet 600 years into the future," Geoff said.

"Indeed it did," Mr. Knight replied. "And because the trip was instantaneous, we didn't realise anything had happened. So when we arrived in the year 2781, we carried on attacking. Imagine our surprise when, all of a sudden, an enormous battle fleet appeared out of nowhere, firing back at us with weaponry far beyond our expectations - in a split second, we were faced with quite a formidable opponent. You know the rest of the story – our fleet was all but destroyed in that battle, save for one lone ship that crash landed on the Earth. That ship belonged to my ancestors."

Fortunately, it was equipped with a prototype molecular re-arranger, which allowed them to change into human beings and blend into society. To this day, there are hundreds of us roaming your planet, each one plotting to get into a position of control: politicians, media barons, chat show hosts, scientists, and me – the chief executive of a time tourism company.”

“Chat show hosts?” Geoff said.

The room shuddered again, this time quite violently. Another ship must have exploded outside, and this time, it must have been much closer than any ship that had exploded before. This appeared to be a little bit too much shuddering for one day, as a few of Mai’s pillars couldn’t take it any longer, shattering into millions of tiny shards and coating the floor in a crunchy, snow-like layer of glass. As if that wasn’t enough to worry about, parts of the ceiling were also showing signs of strain, collapsing all around them in a thick cloud of dust.

“From the moment I started running that company, I began to think about how I could use the technology to change the course of history; how I could change the past to make sure our original invasion in the 21st Century would succeed. Using the supercomputer, I played back the events surrounding that date, and discovered it was *you* who sent us that stupid message - it was *you* who sent us fleeing back home. So I began to think about how I could get to you. At first, I thought about just going back and killing you, but with Eric’s blasted safeguards popping up everywhere, I knew I’d be found out, and I’d come too far to take such a stupid risk. I needed to be smarter.”

“Which is where the Time Rep idea came in,” Geoff said, brushing some glass from his shoulder.

“Exactly. The more I found out about you, the more I was amazed at how insignificant you were, and I began to wonder if I could use this to my advantage. You were less important to the world than certain types of mushrooms, for goodness sake.”

“Ooh,” Geoff said. “I’ve been curious about that for ages! Which mushrooms are more significant than me?”

“Shitake, mainly,” Mr. Knight said. “But only because the President of the United States choked to death on one in 2054.”

“I knew it,” Geoff said. “Bloody shitake mushrooms.”

“So that was when I came up with the idea for Time Reps – using insignificant people to act as tour guides for each time period. And it was perfect – the time tourism industry was on its knees, crying out for innovation, and whilst I couldn’t get to you, this scheme would bring you straight to me. Everyone was happy. Of course, I needed to cover my tracks in case anyone started asking questions, so I let Ruth take the credit for the idea and got her promoted to the board. With all the success she gained from it, I knew she wouldn’t be able to tell anyone that the Time Rep idea was actually mine.”

“You bastard!” Ruth shouted out. “You used me!”

“The next stage,” Mr. Knight said, ignoring Ruth, “was to work out how to change history, but in such a way that it wouldn’t register on the paradox scan. That was where I used the help of a few ‘friends’ - fellow aliens posing as scientists. So I leaked the algorithm to them. It wasn’t long before they figured out a loophole – one that would allow me to interfere with the space time continuum in such a way that the computer wouldn’t realise. All I had to do was make sure that the final nanosecond remained the same as the one in its databanks, and I could make as many changes as I liked!”

“But Eric was on to you.”

“Eric was never on to me,” Mr. Knight said. “He knew there was a problem with his ‘double-Nobel prize’ winning code, and he knew someone on the inside had leaked it, but he had no idea it was me. Nevertheless, he was on the verge of ironing out the loophole, and I couldn’t let that happen. His new and improved algorithm would have made changing history far too difficult, if not impossible.”

“So you killed him.”

“I did – on the night of the party. After that, the final part of the plan was easy – in fact the supercomputer was very helpful in showing me exactly how to keep the future the same, whilst still fulfilling certain ‘parameters’: Firstly, I had to stop you playing that stupid game on the day of the invasion. After all, if you weren’t playing it, you wouldn’t be able to send out that message. So I broke your hand. Second, I had to make sure I could sneak you back to the past again without anyone realising what had happened. That was where the hypnosis came in – if you were able to pass a message on to my brethren, telling them to ‘revert’ the planet back to normal at a certain time, the computer would allow you to travel back to the 21st Century under the misapprehension that everything was going to remain the same.”

“But you didn’t count on Tim double-checking the paradox scan, even though it cleared me for travel,” Geoff said.

“I knew it was a possibility,” Mr. Knight said, “but the way I saw it, it was a win-win situation. If he didn’t double-check the scan and sent you back, our original invasion would succeed. On the other hand, if he *did* double-check the scan and *didn’t* send you back, our original invasion would *still* succeed, because you still wouldn’t be there to play your game; you wouldn’t be there to send that message. I’ll admit – I didn’t anticipate the fact that history wouldn’t change immediately, and that you’d be in a position to go back and defend the Earth, but given the fact that your fleet is about to be destroyed, it looks like my gamble paid off, wouldn’t you say?”

“Not yet,” the captain said, piping up. “We’ve still got the Concordia, and a few other ships out there that weren’t under Mai’s control. We can still put up a good fight!”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Mr. Knight said. “By the time all the computer-controlled ships have destroyed themselves, you’ll be down to less than 200 vessels! Face it – you’re outgunned, and you’re outnumbered.”

“I don’t care,” the captain said. “We’ve got some brave people on these ships, and we’ll fight to the death if necessary. What have you got? You’re nothing more than a bunch of cowards who run away when they hear a stupid message from a kid playing a computer game!”

“We are not a bunch of cowards!” Mr. Knight shouted. “In fact, if you really want to know, my ancestors were the only ones who had to be ordered to break off their attack when we got that message! Ordered! They still wanted to fight!”

“Oh my God!” Geoff whispered to the captain. “Did you hear that? We’ve got him!”

“What are you talking about?” the captain said.

“You’ve got to get me back to the bridge,” Geoff said.

“But what about Mr. Knight?” the captain said.

“Leave him to play around in this stupid maze,” Geoff replied. “If what he’s just told us is true, he’s a dead man.”

TWENTY-FIVE

“Report,” the captain said, returning to the bridge with Geoff. “How are we doing?”

If the state of the bridge was anything to go by, Geoff didn’t really need a report to tell him how they were doing. Computer terminals were on fire, support beams had collapsed from the ceiling, scorch marks were running up the walls, and a disconcertingly large crack had appeared on the main window. The Concordia had obviously taken quite a hammering whilst they’d been trying to find Mr. Knight, and the bridge seemed to have lost a number of crew members as a result – the dead bodies of various officers were either slumped over their damaged stations, or sprawled across the floor, limbs snapped back into painfully unnatural positions. In fact, looking around, there only seemed to be one officer left, sitting in the captain’s seat with his head in his hands.

“It’s not looking good,” the officer said, wiping a streak of ash from his forehead and relinquishing the seat for the captain. “Almost all of the fleet has been destroyed. The Concordia is running on auxiliary power, and all weapons systems are down. The ships that weren’t being controlled by Mai are putting up a good fight, but they’re heavily outnumbered.”

The captain watched as another battle cruiser ruptured from the inside and exploded across the battlefield, the force of the explosion taking a neighbouring ship with it. The aliens, on the other hand, seemed to be having a whale of a time, concentrating their fire on the ships that didn’t appear to be malfunctioning. In the distance, a lone vessel was being chased by over 50 flying saucers, all of which simultaneously opened fire. The vessel tried its best to take evasive action, but the force of the attack was too great, and it was soon destroyed.

“Open a channel to the fleet,” Geoff said.

“What?” the officer said.

“Do as he says,” the captain ordered.

“But sir – don’t you remember what Mai said? The aliens are almost certainly listening to our communications! They’ll hear everything you say!”

“That’s what we’re hoping for,” the captain replied calmly. “Open a channel to the fleet.”

The officer looked at them both for a moment as if he was going to say something else, before limping over to the communications terminal and wiping it clean with the sleeve of his uniform.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said, pressing a small red button in front of him. “Channel open.”

“Can I do the honours?” Geoff said.

“By my guest,” the captain replied.

Geoff cleared his throat.

“Remaining Earth ships, your attention please! Prepare to activate the Death Bringer!”

Just as Geoff had hoped, the transmission seemed to have quite an effect on the alien fleet. Ships that were previously circling around the last remaining battle cruisers appeared to break off their attack, and many of the capital ships began to swing around into a precautionary retreat, as if there was some nervousness amongst the fleet as to the meaning of Geoff’s message. The only exception to this sudden

display of panic was a lone flying saucer, still gleefully taking pot shots at a crippled medical frigate.

"There," Geoff said, pointing at the craft. "Do you see it?"

"I do," the captain said, turning to another officer. "Lock on to that ship and open fire."

"What's a 'Death Bringer'?" the officer said.

"It doesn't matter!" the captain shouted. "Lock on to that ship and open fire!"

"But sir - weapons systems are offline," the officer said. "We've barely got enough power for propulsion."

"Then set a collision course!" the captain barked. "We'll have to ram it!"

"Sir, I don't think..."

"Don't argue with me, commander! We haven't got much time before they realise we don't have a Death Bringer! Set a collision course for that vessel! Now!"

The officer nodded, and hobbled over to the navigations terminal. He pushed a dead body off the seat so he could sit down, and typed in a few commands as quickly as he could.

"Course set," he said. "Engines are powering up."

The bridge creaked as the Concordia began to accelerate towards its target. Another beam fell to the floor behind them, crashing through a row of monitors.

All of a sudden, the lift doors opened. Tim walked in, his gun pressed against Mr. Knight's throat. The rest of the armed guards marched in behind them, their rifles trained on the traitor's head.

"We got him," Tim said, kicking Mr. Knight to his knees.

"Where's Ruth?" Geoff said, running over to meet them. "And the Defence Minister?"

"They're still downstairs, trying to fix the computer," Tim said, dabbing a cut on his forehead. "Doesn't look good."

Geoff looked down at Mr. Knight.

Mr. Knight looked back.

He had a serious wound to his leg and a nasty gash across his face, but he was smiling inanely, a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"I don't know what you're smiling about," Geoff said, grabbing Mr. Knight's jaw and jerking his head to face the main window. "You see that ship dead ahead? The one we're about to ram into?"

Mr. Knight twisted his head free from Geoff's grip and spat out a mouthful of blood. He said nothing.

"That's the ship with your ancestors on it," Geoff said. "You were right - they were the only ones that didn't react when I told the fleet to activate the Death Bringer - they were the only ones who carried on attacking. Thanks to your little story, you made them easy for us to identify."

Mr. Knight's eyes widened, but his smile stayed fixed on his face, as if he was too stunned to realise that he should probably change his expression.

"So what do you think will happen if we destroy that ship?" Geoff said.

Mr. Knight remained silent.

"Let me tell you what I think. If your ancestors are on that ship, killing them would kill you, right? In fact, if they die, you'll never have even existed. And if you never existed, you wouldn't have been able to sabotage Mai. Not only that - you wouldn't have been able to come up with this whole scheme to change history. The way I see it, if we destroy that ship, your entire race is finished."

Mr. Knight didn't look quite so pleased with himself anymore. He struggled to get to his feet, but it was a futile attempt. He fell back on his wounded leg and screamed out in agony.

"Don't even think about it," Tim said, grabbing Mr. Knight by the collar and pressing his gun into the back of his head. "One more move and I'll kill you on the spot."

The only problem with Geoff's little plan was that in its present state, the Concordia was about as manoeuvrable as a barn door, and it wasn't having much luck in catching up with its target. It didn't take long for Mr. Knight to realise this, and he was soon smiling again as he watched his ancestor's ship accelerate safely away from its crippled pursuers.

"We're losing them!" the captain said. "Can't we go any faster?"

"Engines are barely functional, captain," the officer replied. "If we go any faster, she'll fly apart!"

"Fly her apart, then!!" the captain shouted.

The officer nodded and typed a few more commands into his console.

The Concordia began to pick up speed, but just as the officer had warned, computer terminals began to explode all around them, showering the bridge in electric sparks. Above their heads, rows of piping began to split, pouring out plumes of thick smoke. The captain waved his arms to clear the air and leant forward in his seat, determined not to lose sight of the one ship he was after.

Unfortunately, the extra burst of speed didn't seem to be enough – the alien craft was still managing to fly further and further away.

Mr. Knight began to laugh.

"Nice try," he said, his voice weak with exhaustion. "You had me worried for a moment."

Geoff stood back and thought for a moment.

"Captain?" he said.

The captain slumped back in his chair and shut his eyes.

"What is it?" he said.

"Does the tractor beam still work?"

The captain immediately opened his eyes and sat up straight again, snapping his head round at the officer.

"Well?" he said.

The officer spun around on his chair and frantically checked a panel behind him, running his finger down a row of figures on a computer screen.

"Yes sir!" he said. "Tractor beam is fully functional!"

"Then activate it, for heaven's sake!" the captain shouted.

The officer twisted a small dial to the right and looked up at the main window. In the distance, a large ball of red light engulfed the escaping ship, stopping it dead in its tracks.

"Gotcha," the captain said, watching as the alien craft dangled helplessly ahead of them, like a fly caught in a spider's web.

"I don't know how long I can hold it!" the officer said. "We're on the verge of a ship-wide systems failure!"

"Then transfer all power to the engines, including life support!" the captain said. "We've *got* to destroy that ship!"

The officer spun around in his chair again a typed a few more commands.

"Here goes nothing," he said, pressing a final button on the console.

The Concordia began to pick up speed again, lurching towards the alien ship as fast as it could go. As the captain had ordered, this final burst of acceleration came at the expense of everything else, plunging the bridge into darkness and powering down all non-essential systems. The only source of light now came from the main window, which was glowing bright red as the alien ship came closer into view, struggling to free itself from the tractor beam. Geoff took a deep breath – the air was very getting thin.

“How long... before... we make impact?” the captain gasped.

“Thirty seconds,” the officer replied.

“And how long... before the... tractor beam fails?”

The officer looked at the panel behind him and shook his head.

“It’s gonna be close sir,” he said.

“Come on...” the captain said, standing up from his seat, his body silhouetted against the glow of the oncoming ship. They couldn’t have been more than a few miles away. “Almost... there...”

At their present course, the alien ship was going to smash straight through the main window.

“Sir!” the officer cried. “The tractor beam... is failing!”

Everyone held their breath as the red glow began to flicker around the oncoming craft. There were two reasons for this – firstly, this was a pretty tense situation, and secondly, there wasn’t actually any air to breath.

The tractor beam finally failed. The alien ship immediately fired up its engines, desperately attempting to pull away from the Concordia.

The captain smiled.

“Too late,” he said.

Geoff dived to the floor and shielded his eyes as the alien ship smashed through the main window, the weight of its hull buckling the walls to either side. The impact was catastrophic, instantly killing the captain, and sending shards of glass and metal flying in all directions. Beneath Geoff, the floor began to split in two, sending him tumbling towards a bank of damaged computer terminals, and through the debris, he watched as the alien ship listed to one side, ripping the ceiling free from its few remaining supporting beams. Over on the other side of the bridge, Tim was pressed up against the rear wall, still holding on to Mr. Knight by the scruff of his neck.

The officer appeared to be shouting something at them, but in the vacuum on the bridge, everything was silent. Geoff strained his eyes and tried to read the officer’s lips. It looked like he was saying “she’s gonna blow,” but Geoff was never any good at reading lips. For all he knew, he might have been saying “It’s gonna snow,” or “Let’s tie a bow,” but under the present circumstances he assumed his first guess was probably the most likely.

His feelings were soon confirmed as the alien ship ricocheted back out into space and folded in on itself, exploding in the characteristic flash of light they’d come to expect from every other ship they’d destroyed today. As the shockwave burned through the bridge, bathing everyone in its warm glow, Mr. Knight screamed out in silence, his body fading away into the thinnest of thin air. Geoff tried his luck at reading lips again – unless he was mistaken, it looked like he was saying “Agggggghhhhhh!”

This latest series of events was proving to be a real headache for the space time continuum, which was struggling to work out what should happen next. Indeed, this was the question on everyone’s mind as they lay suffocating on the bridge of the

Concordia, basking in the pleasantly warm, if somewhat radioactive glow of the explosion they had just witnessed.

TWENTY-SIX

Fortunately, the space time continuum must have been in a pretty good mood that day, because with Mr. Knight gone, it proceeded to undo everything he had done. As the shockwave faded, Geoff watched as the bridge began to rebuild itself – fallen beams rose back into the ceiling, the floor levelled off and joined back together again, and scorch marks erased themselves from the walls, leaving no trace of the damage that had just been done. All around him, crew members were coming back to life, their bodies rising up from the ground and floating back to their original positions, wounds healing themselves as they landed gently in their seats, and the front of the bridge was also healing its wounds - the buckled walls straightening themselves out again, the scattered shards from the main window gliding back through the air, forming a solid pane of glass once more.

But it wasn't just the bridge of the Concordia that seemed to be benefiting from the fact that Mr. Knight never existed. Through the newly-reformed window, Geoff watched as all the other ships that had previously been destroyed began to restore themselves, the charred remains of hundreds of battle cruisers transforming back into pristine condition, the split hulls of so many collided ships joining up again, their engines flickering back to life.

Geoff got to his feet and walked over to Tim, who was no longer holding a gun.

"Erm... what's happening?" he said.

"I don't know," Tim said, running his finger along the cut on his forehead as it healed itself up and disappeared. "I guess you were right about that ship – it must have had Mr. Knight's ancestors on board. And if Mr. Knight's never existed, the space time continuum must be catching up with how events would have transpired."

"So why are we still in space?" Geoff said. "I mean, if Mr. Knight never existed, we wouldn't even be here, would we?"

"Beats me," Tim said. "Perhaps the space time continuum has a mind of its own. Perhaps it needs us to destroy the rest of these bloody aliens before it can go back to normal."

That didn't seem to be too much a problem for the newly restored fleet, which, in its new lease of life, appeared to be doing just that - blowing up alien spaceships left, right and centre. Through the window, hundreds of tiny explosions were joining the stars in lighting up the blackness of space, each one fading away to reveal the remains of a destroyed flying saucer.

Geoff walked over to the resurrected captain, who was sitting calmly in his seat, overlooking the battle.

"How's it going?" Geoff said.

"Much better, actually," the captain replied. "For a start, I'm no longer dead, and with Mr. Knight out of the way, Mai is more than capable of handling the situation. Right, Mai?"

"Affirmative, captain," Mai replied, her voice no longer stuttering like Geoff's every time he talked to Zoë. "We should be down to the last ship in a matter of minutes."

"Let me know when," the captain said. "I want to destroy that last one myself."

"Yes, captain."

"Well, it looks like you saved that day," the captain said, reaching out to shake Geoff's hand. "Well done."

Geoff smiled and walked back over to Tim. Behind him, the lift doors opened. Ruth and the Defence Minister stepped out.

“What the hell just happened?” Ruth said, looking around the bridge. “One minute we were trying to put the computer back together, and the next minute, it just fixed itself!”

“You should have seen it,” The Defence Minister said. “All the pieces just floated in the air and joined back together again, as if they had a life of their own! It was... creepy.”

“You two know something, don’t you?” Ruth said, narrowing her eyes, sensing that Geoff and Tim weren’t that surprised.

“Well, it’s a little bit complicated,” Tim said. “But we think we may have changed history.”

“Changed history?” Ruth said, watching a flying saucer spiral past the main window in a ball of flames. “How?”

“We found the mother of all weak spots,” Geoff said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Geoff worked out a way of identifying the exact ship with Mr. Knight’s ancestors on board, and we destroyed it. So as far as history is concerned, Mr. Knight now never existed.”

“He... never existed?” Ruth said.

“Nope.”

“So how come we still remember him?”

“I don’t know,” Geoff said. “Maybe that will remain one of the great mysteries of the universe, like why you can eat an infinite number of cocktail sausages without feeling full.”

“That’s not quite the same thing really, is it?” Ruth said.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Mai announced over the loudspeaker, “But you asked me to let you know when we were down to the last ship.”

“Thanks, Mai,” the captain said, turning to his navigations officer. “Where is she?”

“She’s 2000 clicks off the port bow, captain,” the officer replied. “Bearing 7-9-5 mark 2-6-6. Looks like she’s trying to flee.”

“Set a pursuit course,” the captain ordered, getting to his feet “We can’t let her get away.”

The officer typed all the commands necessary into his console to set a pursuit course before saying the somewhat predictable words: “Pursuit course set.”

As he spoke, the Concordia banked to the left to face the final alien ship, which was darting about erratically in the distance as it tried to make its escape.

“Do we have a lock?” the captain said, walking over to his weapons officer and leaning on the back of her chair.

“Yes, captain,”

“And all weapons are fully functional?”

“All weapons are armed and ready.”

“Then let’s hit this last ship with everything we’ve got,” the captain said, walking back to his chair and sitting down.

“Torpedoes armed, plasma cannons primed, and particle beams ready, captain.”

“Fire!” the captain said, leaning on the arm of his chair and clenching his fist.

The Bridge shuddered as the Concordia unleashed every nasty weapon in its arsenal, sending a barrage of destructive mass and energy swarming towards the

fleeing ship. The torpedoes were first to strike, tearing through the centre of the ship and ripping it in half like a fortune cookie, and if that wasn't enough, they were soon followed by a lethal burst of laser fire, burning through the two separated halves like molten lava through a paper plate. This really left the ship no choice but to explode, which it did in spectacular fashion, the two semi-circular sides of the hull crashing into each other and detonating across the stars in a dazzling burst of light. As the light faded, all that remained was a few splinters of hot metal, drifting peacefully through the air to join the rest of the debris from the battle.

The crew of the Concordia leapt up from their seats and cheered, hugging each other ecstatically and punching the air.

"Well, that was good, wasn't it?" Geoff said, slapping Tim and the back and smiling at Ruth.

"I don't know," said Tim. "I wasn't so keen on that bit when we nearly died, but apart from that I quite enjoyed it."

"So what happens now?" Geoff said.

"I'm not sure," Tim replied. "I suppose, now that we've destroyed the final ship, there's no reason for us to be here."

"No?"

"Think about it. If the aliens never invaded the Earth, we would have no reason to come back in time to defend the planet. So, if the space time continuum is correcting itself again, I guess we should be disappearing any..."

TWENTY-SEVEN

“...second.”

Geoff looked around.

“Did... something just happen?” he said.

“I think so,” Tim said. “I think we’re somewhere else.”

“Yes, but where?” Ruth said. “Where are we?”

That was a good question. They seemed to be back in the room where Geoff had first had his interview - the room that overlooked the London skyline, but something had changed. The room certainly looked the same - wine glasses and paper plates from last night’s party were being swept away by an army of cleaners, and a group of workmen were dismantling the elaborate Roman decorations, but the view out of the window was very different. Whereas before, the London of the future had looked identical to the London of the past, it now looked like a new city; one that had evolved and grown over time like you would expect. There were still all the recognisable landmarks: St. Paul’s Cathedral, Big Ben, and the London Eye, but they were joined by a whole host of new, futuristic architecture; beautiful glass skyscrapers towering into the air, their ergonomic construction reflecting the clear blue sky onto the streets below.

“Are we where I think we are?” Geoff said.

“I don’t know,” Ruth said. “It looks like we’re back at headquarters, but everything looks so... different.”

“Well it would, wouldn’t it?” Tim said. “If the aliens were totally wiped out in the 21st Century, they never would have been able to invade in the 22nd Century, and the original London would never have been destroyed. What you’re looking at is a different London – this city’s no longer a memorial, it’s a city that’s been allowed to build up over the years and change as any normal city would.”

“Looks pretty good,” Geoff said.

“There’s still one thing I don’t understand,” Tim said, turning to Geoff. “If Mr. Knight no longer exists, why are you still here?”

“Me?”

“Well, he was the one who thought up the Time Rep scheme, wasn’t he? Without him, we wouldn’t have thought to recruit people from different time periods to act as tour guides.”

Geoff nodded to himself. Tim was right. Was he going to disappear again any second? He hoped not – today had been confusing enough as it was.

“What are you lot doing just standing there?” a voice said.

The group turned around. Eric was walking towards them, a computer disk in one hand and his walking stick in the other.

“Eric!” Tim said. “You’re alive!”

“Of course I’m alive!” Eric said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tim said.

“Let me just test something,” Ruth whispered to the group. “Eric?” she said, stepping forward, “where’s Mr. Knight?”

“Mr. who?” Eric said.

“Mr. Knight. The chief exec.”

“But... you’re the chief exec, aren’t you?” Eric said.

“I am?” Ruth said.

“Well, you’re the one who thought up the Time Rep idea, aren’t you?”

“I did?” Ruth said.

“Of course you are! That’s why you’re the one the Defence Minister appointed to the job!”

“The Defence Minister appointed me to the job?” Ruth said.

“What is this, some sort of joke?” Eric said. “Look, I’ve got no time this - I’ve got to get down to the paradox scanning facility right away.”

He turned to leave.

“Why do you need to go there?” Ruth said.

“To upload the new algorithm,” Eric said, holding up the disk in his hand. “I was telling you about this yesterday, remember? My new code removes a fundamental loophole in the system. Once this is uploaded, no-one will be able to cheat the computer.”

“Good,” Ruth said, looking at the others. “We wouldn’t want that.”

“Idiots,” Eric muttered under his breath, hobbling towards the lift at the back of the room. “I spend all this time telling them about the work I’m doing to improve my code, and they *still* don’t listen.”

Ruth turned around and joined the rest of the group again at the window. The new London really did look beautiful.

“Well Geoff, at least that explains why you’re still here,” she said. “I *did* think up the idea for Time Reps after all. Must have come up with it independently.”

“And now you’re the chief executive as a result,” Tim said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Ruth replied, touching Tim’s hand.

Geoff inflated his cheeks with air, held it there for a moment, then blew it out again.

“Erm... would anyone object if I went home now?” he said. “I’m absolutely knackered.”

* * *

Geoff walked up the garden path to 23 Woodview gardens with his house keys at the ready, his legs barely able to carry the weight of his body. It was late – the night sky looking remarkably peaceful considering the epic battle that had just taken place above his head. Indeed, reminding himself of the date, he realised it must have only been a few hours ago that he was up there in space, standing on the bridge of the Concordia.

Just as he was fumbling with his keys in the door, the house was lit up by a bright dazzle of headlights – Darren Bell was pulling into his driveway next door.

“Evening, Stamp!” Darren said, climbing out of his car and shutting the door behind him with his sleeve. “Don’t normally you see around this time of night! Been working late?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Geoff said, too tired to come up with some sort of cover story. “I’ve been 1000 years into the future, seen the Great Fire of London, uncovered a conspiracy to change the course of history, and saved the entire planet from an alien invasion.”

Darren blinked.

“You and your stupid computer games,” he said, activating the remote central locking on his car. “When are you going to learn that those things aren’t real?”

“You’re right,” Geoff said, twisting his key in the lock and pushing open the front door. “I guess I have a bit of a problem telling the difference between what’s real and what’s imaginary. Goodnight.”

He stepped into the hallway and slammed the door behind him, hanging his coat on the end of the banisters. As much as he wanted to climb into bed and go to sleep, this process involved going up the stairs, which was a big no-no at the moment - his legs probably would have had a fit if he even mentioned it. So he staggered into the lounge and collapsed on the sofa, burying his face into the nearest cushion that didn't smell of Ovaltine.

It had certainly been a long day, and to make matters worse, he had an early start tomorrow. Apparently, he had to meet thirty-three tourists outside the Tate gallery at 9.00 in the morning, and explain to them why 21st Century people considered a piece of litter stapled to a canvas to be a work of art. He wasn't really sure what to say – by that logic, had any passer by caught a glimpse of the front room, they wouldn't have been disgusted – they would have considered it to be a masterpiece.

Today had certainly been a long day, yet inside he felt refreshed, confident - a changed man. Would this get him into trouble? After everything that had happened today, would Ruth really fire him for feeling a little better about himself? He yawned and shut his eyes. Perhaps, if he saw Zoë tomorrow, he would ask her if she wanted to go down to the lake with him, just like they used to do in the old days.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“So, how you keeping?” Zoë said, sitting next to Geoff on a bench, overlooking the lake. “Found another job yet?”

“Actually, yes,” Geoff said, brushing his hand against some long grass growing next to his feet. “Remember that one I applied for the other day?”

“The holiday rep?”

“Yep. I got the job.”

“You did?” Zoë said, running her fingers through her long brown hair. “That’s fantastic!”

“Thanks,” Geoff said.

Zoë stopped stroking her hair and narrowed her eyes.

“They were very quick, weren’t they?” she said.

“Quick?” Geoff said.

“Well, you only applied for the job yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Did I?” Geoff said. All this travelling through time had made him lose track of what day it was.

“Definitely.”

“You sure it wasn’t last week?”

“No, it was definitely yesterday,” Zoë said. “I was delivering you that letter, remember?”

“Ah yes. I remember.”

“Who was that from, by the way?”

“Oh... nobody,” Geoff said. “Just some... thing.”

“So, they didn’t ask you in for an interview?”

“No, they did.”

“When was that?”

“Yesterday.”

“What do you mean yesterday?” Zoë said. “You only applied for the job yesterday! You mean to tell me they asked you in for an interview on the same day?” Geoff was sweating.

“Yep,” he said, tugging at the collar of his t-shirt. “I er... delivered the letter by hand. It was the last day they were accepting applications. Since I was there, you know, they said I might as well sit for the interview.”

“And they offered you the job on the spot?”

“They did.”

“Wow,” Zoë said. “That’s amazing. It’s not normal for places like that to make a decision so fast. You must have really impressed them.”

“Well you know,” Geoff said. “I was just being myself.”

“That’s even *more* amazing,” Zoë said.

Geoff laughed.

“So what do you have to do?” Zoë said. “Does it involve any travelling?”

“Kind of,” Geoff replied. “Mainly, I’m just showing tourists around London, but now and again I have to go... elsewhere.”

“Shame it wasn’t for somewhere exotic,” Zoë said, “Like the Maldives.”

“I know, I know. But you’ve got to start somewhere, haven’t you?”

“Well, I’m really happy for you,” Zoë said, picking a stone up off the floor and tossing it into the lake. “I always knew you’d do well.”

“Thanks,” Geoff said, shuffling a little closer. “Listen - can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what is it?” Zoë said.

“Well...”

“Hey, look at that,” Zoë said, interrupting Geoff to point up at the sky. “You don’t see many seagulls round here, do you?”

“No, you don’t” Geoff said, watching as the bird circled in the air. “Most unusual.”

“Sorry,” Zoë said, turning to face him once more. “What were you saying?”

EPILOGUE

Eric leant back on his chair and watched as the video simulation disappeared in a puff of vapour. He looked at his watch – how long had they been down here, sweating away in the paradox scanning facility?

“Well, now we know why Mr. Knight didn’t want you double-checking his choice of candidates before you sent those letters out,” he said, turning to Ruth. “If he finds out you came down here...”

“He won’t,” Ruth said, folding up a piece of paper and sticking it in an envelope. “If he didn’t find when he ran this simulation himself, he won’t find out in real life, will he?”

“I suppose not,” Eric said. “What’s that in your hand?”

“The letter I’m about to send to Geoff,” she said. “I wrote down exactly what he read aloud at the beginning – don’t want to start changing anything now. I just hope he can read my handwriting – I had nothing to lean on.”

“What do you mean?” Eric stammered. “You’re not actually going to get him in for an interview, are you? We should be calling the police! Mr. Knight needs to be stopped!”

“Why?” Ruth said. “You’ve seen what will happen. If we call Geoff in, every alien on this planet will be wiped out, once and for all. On the other hand, if we move in on Mr. Knight now, there’ll still be hundreds of them out there. We’ve got no choice.”

“But... he’s going to kill me.”

Ruth put her arm round Eric.

“I know,” she said, “but things turn out alright in the end, don’t they? You come back to life, don’t you? You’ve seen it for yourself.”

“You just want to be chief executive.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Ruth said, “although I’ll admit that is a fairly nice bonus. There’s just one thing...”

“What is it?”

“We’ll have to behave *exactly* as we did in that simulation,” Ruth said, pointing at where the screen had just been. “If we let anyone know that we’re onto something, or do anything remotely different, things may not go the way we think.”

Eric sighed.

“I hate to admit it,” he said, “but you’re right. It’s the only way we can stop them.”

“There’s just one thing I don’t understand,” Ruth said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, since we know Mr. Knight must have watched that simulation as well, why is he still wanting to go ahead with this? If Geoff is ultimately responsible for foiling his plan and wiping out the entire alien race, why does he still want to interview him?”

“I don’t know,” Eric said. “Perhaps he only had time to watch the simulation up to a certain point, and assumed the rest would turn out ok.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ruth said. “You mean to tell me that after all that planning, he didn’t take the time to sit down and watch it through to the very

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