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Traverse: a novel

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Traverse: A novel

by

Douglas H. Bennett

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of

MASTER OF ARTS
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Co-majors: English (Creative Writing); Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies

Major Professors: Mary Swander and Lee Anne Willson

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Douglas H. Bennett

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

For the Co-major Program

For the Graduate College
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ABSTRACT

Traverse is a Master's thesis in the form of a novel about an engineer traveling back in time as a result of an experimental accident, the efforts to return him to the present, and the trials which the main character goes through in the past. The novel is intended to explore the dynamic interaction and interdependence between society, technology, and the natural world. The thesis consists of approximately 100 pages of completed writing with the rest of the novel in outline form. The form of the thesis is intended to act as a submission to a professional book agent.
“You’re an aberration of nature. You know that?” Those words were the last thing I remember him saying to me. I remember those words clearly because it was a strange thing to say.

I can’t even really say those were his last words because I know he said other things. I’m sure when we got back to the lab we talked about assembling the Traverse Device. Traverse is what we always talked about. Those were just the last words I remember him saying. He did yell at me towards the end, right when Traverse was spun up and the experiment went bad. Or, maybe it was more of a scream. He knew he was about to die. I remember very clearly the look on his face.

But I really don’t consider what he said to me to be his last words. I guess from one perspective he really didn’t have any last words. A scream can’t be considered someone’s last words. The accident happened a long time ago now, and my memory is hazy.

I do remember him calling me an aberration of nature. You don’t think of someone saying you’re an aberration when they talk about sports. It was odd. It was nothing major though. We were just joking around about football. We were in Atlanta heading back to the lab. It was just before the accident. I ate at a Mexican place over in midtown with the lead project integration engineer. He was the one in charge of building the Traverse Device.

It was a long time ago now, but I remember it was Mexican food because he had to stop by the drug store on the way back for some antacid or something. He thumped his chest with his fist and complained about not being able to handle spices anymore. Said he was getting old.
When we got back to the lab I remember he was ribbing me for not liking the Atlanta football team. I told him I liked Dallas, had liked Dallas since I was a little kid. He smirked, looked a little confused at why I wouldn’t follow the home team. Shit, I didn’t really care for the local team. It didn’t matter to me. I was a college football person myself. That was right before we entered the Chamber. That’s what we called it, the Chamber. That was the clean room where the machine itself was housed. When I walked inside the Chamber it felt like I was entering a church.

The accident didn’t happen right after we got back to the lab. No, it was an hour or so later. It was an hour or so later when I turned around and saw Traverse levitated and spinning. It was big; a smooth polished sphere as big as three horses side by side. I can’t believe we actually got the thing to work. But it was working too good, too early. That’s when the main power systems engaged and flooded the sphere with enough power to light the city of Atlanta for two months. The system had its own energy grid that supplied most of the power, but it still put enough of a drain on the power grid to make all the lights in a hundred mile radius around the city of Atlanta go off for a couple of seconds. I don’t know how the military explained that one. But I’m sure they took care of it.

When I saw that ball of white energy spinning at thousands of revolutions a minute and floating in the air in the middle of the Chamber, it felt like my world dropped from underneath me. It was really the most amazing thing you could ever imagine seeing. The patterns in Traverse were swirling and flying, like an electric vapor on the surface of this sphere. The shades of white and gray formed and vanished so fast they looked like spirits whirling around inside. They looked like angels. It was really beautiful in a morbid way. Now when I think of it, maybe they were demons dancing in that electric fire. Who knows?
I was standing there just staring, riveted in place. Then I heard someone yell at me, “Laz, move it!” I don’t know who called my name. Maybe it was the lead engineer or the other engineer who happened to be unlucky enough to be in the chamber. It doesn’t matter. I turned to run and saw the other two men on the inside of the Chamber doors pounding their fists on the steel trying to get out. But they weren’t going anywhere. The control circuits for the magnetic bolts in the doors were fried, so the doors were locked in place. Those doors weren’t about to budge until Traverse finished its cycle. We designed the system not to let anyone or anything inside the Chamber once the system activated. We never considered the problem of anyone trying to get out. Those men knew what was about to happen. We all knew the instant we saw Traverse spinning.

I ran of course. No, that’s not true. I tried to run, but it was too late. The system charged faster than any of us expected. Traverse allowed me to move two steps before that ball of energy expanded. All it needed was organic contact to complete the cycle. I was it. Traverse sucked me in and immersed me in something that felt like petroleum jelly, a super thick liquid I couldn’t move in. It froze me in place and protected me for transport. I became the precious cargo and it locked everything and everyone else out. If only they had designed the system to handle multiple organic elements. Organic Elements. I can’t believe I’m still referring to people as organic elements. But as far as the system was concerned, those men weren’t even there. I mean, a flame doesn’t know the moth is there, right? The technology is only as good as the people who design it.

But that would be a pretty weak argument to tell those men. I’ve never seen such fear in the face of anyone knowing they are about to die. Of course, I’ve seen it far too many times since then. So, you want the short version? Well, let’s just say bolts of lightning from
the Traverse Device blew right through them. Like I said, it was like they weren’t even there.

I still think about those men in the Chamber and the look of terror on their faces. I would never have been able to describe terror before then. I mean, what terror really looked like. I expected them to just be scared, you know, wide eyes, hands thrown in the air. I expected them to look generally helpless. But, there was something more. Those men were stripped of everything they were. There was nothing masculine about them. But they weren’t feminine either. They were like children. They were like pure, innocent children, helpless in the face of a power so unimaginable. It was like they saw something alive in that sphere coming to get them. The things we create have no consciousness, you know. I like to believe there is no will behind the technology. I like to believe we control the technology we create. Sometimes, though, I wonder.

Of course the system wasn’t *designed* to kill. Some might call it a cruel twist of fate the way the accident happened. Maybe they might call it Physics? But, whatever those men saw in that sphere was very alive to them. And, whatever killed those men, took me. I mean, it took me. It took my life. It took everything I am.

But there was a catch to the whole process. Before it transported me I was held in place, like a pause button had been pressed on my timeline. I saw what happened to those men. I saw it reach out and kill those men. Traverse made me watch the killing. It was like the system needed the blood from their deaths to finish my transport.

I mean, I know the system didn’t really get some kind of satisfaction from killing those men. Based on physics and electrical properties, the accident just happened. I know the blood of those men couldn’t add any power to the system. But I do wonder sometimes
how much the technology controls us, versus how much we control the technology. I’ve had a lot to think about over the past years and that is a question I have not been able to answer yet.

I’m glad I’m telling my story even if it’s hard for me to go through this. I try to forget. It’s easier to simply forget. But I think I should record my story now before I completely forget. But then no one may ever find this recording, they may take it and destroy it before the truth ever gets out. This might be a waste of time, but it’s worth the effort. You should know about the danger. Perhaps you will make better decisions than the people that came before you did.

It does hurt though, reliving the past to tell this story. A lot of good people were killed. I miss them. I probably should have told them how I felt when I had the chance, but it’s too late now. The pain is still there, still strong. Those memories still feel so strong to me, so alive. But those people are so far away. I’ve found that to look to my new future it’s easier to just forget the past.

I’m feeling tired now. I think I need to stop. I’ll probably start recording again tomorrow if they don’t get to me first and make me stop. I’ll try to record as much as I can because you do need to know. There are things you should pay attention to.

But, you know the lead engineer I told you about, the one that died in the chamber? I don’t even remember his name.
CHAPTER 1

Laz opened his eyes into a noonday sun and closed them quickly against the glare. The soft red glow of veins formed a spider-web on the inside of his eyelids. Laz rolled his head to the side and blinked his bleary eyes. A small cricket stared at him from a perch on a stalk of short grass. Laz didn’t remember falling asleep in a field. In fact, he didn’t remember falling asleep at all.

He was lying in a meadow of short matted grass in a clearing on top of a rounded hill. From his vantage point the soft green lawn seemed to roll off into the blue sky. The hill, like a lone wave rolling across a flat green ocean, grew out of a forest that appeared to have no end.

It was a perfect day. Green grass all around, a blue sky overhead, and a few yellow and red flowers on thin delicate stems, accented with the occasional butterfly, balanced perfectly under a warm sun.

Laz stretched, closed his eyes again, and rolled onto his side. His view returned to the red veined comfort on the inside of his eyelids. He breathed the breezy scents of flowers and forest deep into his lungs and released the air slowly. He didn’t recognize the fragrance, something between a rose and wisteria. And the trees held more of a subtle earthy tone to the fragrance, not like the pungent pine forests of the Southeastern States.

He moved his hand and felt the soft textured plastic of the angelic white, clean-room suit everyone entering the Chamber wore to keep dust and contamination out of the working area. He would have to pick up a new disposable suit from the supply room before he returned to work. After staying outside for so long, the one he wore would be useless.
Laz stretched again, and curled up on his side. The red inside his eyelids faded quickly to black and he slipped into the warmth of the moment. The sun continued across the sky. The cricket left for other business and Laz slept soundly.

A dark cloud line appeared on the horizon and spread out over the sky. The sun moved towards the horizon and the air began to cool. Wind started whipping the short grass on the hill.

Laz gasped awake and lurched upright.

“Oh Jesus! Oh God! What happened?” He sputtered. “Where am I?”

Laz spun around frantically onto his knees. His skin crawled in the cold wind twisting over the hill. There was no sign of the warm noon afternoon. Everything blurred in Laz’s dilated pupils. He stumbled to his feet and looked out over the forest stretching as far as he could see. The sunset’s last colors bled across the sky like a knife had been plunged into the Earth where the sun sank below the horizon. There were no buildings or power lines in sight, only a uniform layer of dark green treetops. The darkness quickly descended on the forest while the bleeding sky faded to a bruised purple. Laz looked down at the dark forest. There was something familiar there. In that blackness Laz found his memories.

They were suddenly there, those memories, speaking to him all at once, screaming at him. The dying men in the Chamber looked back at him from darkness and screamed for him to move. Laz remembered his sprint for the door in leading out of the Chamber. He remembered the panic adrenaline pulsing through his veins. But his legs couldn’t move fast enough. His legs felt like they were stuck in deep sand. He had been powerless to move them any faster. Death, he knew, was waiting behind him in the Chamber and the doors ahead of him were stuck.
The Traverse Device had been elevated and brought up to speed. He and the two other men were on the wrong side of those doors. The men were banging their fists against the steel doors. Again, they turned and screamed for Laz to run. Laz had surged towards the door but he didn’t make it.

The last memory Laz had of the Chamber was the lead engineer’s face. The man was screaming. Screaming like a child, screaming like he saw the devil himself standing over Laz’s shoulder. He screamed for Laz to run.

Then, in the Chamber, there had been a flash of white surrounding Laz. Darkness arrived next with the cold. The cold was like a dead womb. The cold put an icy grip on his heart making it feel like his blood was being forced from his veins. He was frozen in embryonic fluid, waiting, waiting for something, anything to happen. The next thing he remembered was waking on the hill.

The wind blew again, rolling over the top of the forest. The cold wind reminded Laz what it felt like to be dead. The cold reminded him of the screaming men. The wind shouted that he should run. He wasn’t dead, so he should run. He was alive and shivering on top of a hill in the middle of a forest. He should run.

Laz quickly looked around the hill. He jumped when he saw a shadow, broad and squat, that seemed to come out of the dimming light. Then there was another figure, a darker smudge in the evening gloom. He spun around and the shadows surrounded him, ringing the hill. Broad shouldered men, he thought, squatting in a menacing circle.

“Oh, shit! Oh, shit!” He muttered quickly. Laz spun around twice. The shadows looked closer. They were there to get him. No more flowers on the breeze or warm sun. He should run. No more perfect day. He should run. They were here to get him.
Laz bolted down the side of the hill, his pumping legs guided only by adrenaline. He dodged one of the dark shadows only to get clipped at the waist by another smudge in the dark he hadn’t seen. There was a second row of shadows.

He fell down the side of the hill, rolled twice, and got back to his feet. A calm, quiet voice at the back of his mind, the small part of his brain not claimed by the instinctive panic coursing through his system, calmly told him, “They are rocks. They are stones placed in a circle. They are only stones. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

But Laz kept running. His white clean-room suit he still wore from the lab flashed like a white warning beacon in the dimming light. Laz reached the forest and ran into the black woods. He didn't understand why he was running. The calm voice in his head kept telling him to relax, “They were rocks. They were only rocks.”

But the voice was a murmur compared to the screaming fear that pushed him to keep moving. He should run. He should keep running. He had to get away from something, or to get somewhere. He needed to move. He needed to run, to escape.

Laz plunged through the trees. A wild, damp, decaying odor overwhelmed his senses. Surreal, looming shapes ripped at his face and clothes, shapes that looked like large rotating spheres, electric cables, and power switch boxes. The lead engineer’s pale, dead face flashed by in the trees. He should run. The woods became a maze of superconducting power cables in large tangled knots that blocked his way. The bare ends of shredded wire cut and scratched as he burst through the snarl. Laz knew there should be sparks somewhere from the electrical current seeking a path to ground through his skin. He was going to be electrocuted, he knew. The equipment was in shambles. The experiment had gone wrong. Something bad had happened. He knew it.
His calm voice kept whispering like an absolving priest in a confessional, “There are no sparks from those cables. There are no cables. You are in a forest, Laz. Relax. Just walk.” Laz didn’t listen. He ignored the voice. He ignored his straining lungs and legs. The calm murmuring voice told him that he was in no shape to run.

“You never exercise. You’ll hurt yourself. Where do you think you are going?” But he kept moving towards his unknown destination. Laz only knew with all the clarity he could muster that he had to move to prove that he was alive. He was alive. The cold told him he was alive. His burning legs and arms told him that he was alive.

Suddenly a knotty tree limb, slung low from years of supporting its own weight, connected with Laz’s forehead. The force of the impact flung his unconscious body onto a mat of wet leaves. Not realizing yet that the run was finished, his left leg twitched once before settling down.

“Relax. Rest easy.”

**Day 1**

**Friday, 8:01 AM**

“What the hell do you mean he is missing!?” General Macmillan demanded.

Professor Martin fidgeted with a pen hidden in the pocket of his white lab coat. Being called on by the military brass was an annoyance. He usually managed to push most interactions with the military sponsor onto the Colonel. The Colonel was the on-site officer so he was usually able to answer any questions that the people from Washington might have. Actually having the General come to Atlanta in person just interfered with the Professor’s
work. He had to figure out exactly what went wrong. Something was left out of the equations.

"I am waiting for an answer, Professor. I did not fly all the way from Washington this morning to stand here and wait for you to think of answers. You should already have them for me," the General said evenly. He waited for the Professor to speak.

The Professor decided to try to explain the situation even though he knew the General wouldn't understand it.

"After the Traverse Device deactivated, his body was not found. This logically means that the only place he could have gone was through the threshold generated." The Professor absently rubbed at his left eye, aggravating a twitching muscle in his lower eyelid. The muscle had started twitching around four that morning. At that point he had already gone 22 hours without sleep. He had a hard time sleeping when there was a problem to be solved, especially a problem this tantalizing.

The General was not saying anything.

"This means that he is most likely safe," the Professor said absentmindedly. The meeting was taking up his valuable time and he was hoping the General would see that things were under control. It was only a matter of figuring out the correct theory.

"First of all, Doctor Martin," the General, a large man with crows feet at the corner of his eyes, drew himself up to his full height of a little over six feet, and practically hissed, "I am not about to gloss over the fact that this man is missing. Safe or not, we need to confirm exactly where he is, and exactly what happened. Secondly, the Colonel may have not made this clear to you, but this project is dead."
The General pointed his index finger at the Professor like it was a six shooter he pulled from his pocket. “I want to make sure we are very clear on that point. There is no plausible deniability, no confusion here for anyone in this room.” The General waved his gun barrel finger around the room to include everyone. “I was against Project Traverse from the beginning and because of that very skepticism I was assigned to be the watchdog.”

“Now Professor,” the General returned his aim at the Professor, “I know you are a smart man. So I know you do not think this project will continue in its present form. And if you can bring the project to a safe ending from this point on, you might be lucky enough to escape criminal prosecution for homicide resulting from gross neglect of duty--”

“--General,” the Professor cut in. “The death of those men was not a fault of the science. We knew that there would be a large electrostatic discharge when the Traverse Device activated. The science was right. The science was dead on!” The Professor shook his head back and forth as if saying no to a small child.

“If the engineers had designed those system with the proper safety protocols, then we wouldn’t be standing here now talking about two people dying.” The General started raising his voice and gesturing, but he didn’t look at anyone in particular. “What I’m worried about, and what the science hasn’t explained, is where our missing man is. There is something that the theory didn’t predict and we--”

“Professor Martin!” the General practically roared. “You can delude yourself or try to wiggle all you want when it comes to accepting responsibility for the death of those men.” The General walked over and planted his index finger directly on the Professor’s chest as if he would shoot a hole straight through his heart. “But, you are going down with everyone
else. You are the one who will blaze the trail to the bottom.” The General pulled his hand away and took a step back.

“If you’re extra lucky, you might end up teaching undergraduates at some po-dunk school so remote that the local farm animals will become strangely attractive. If things don’t settle out nicely, you’ll be helping some nice friendly federal prison inmates get their high school equivalency diploma so they don’t treat you too rough when you drop your soap in the community shower.”

The Professor studied the carpet, a closely-knit industrial brown, and nodded slowly. Now, the General was not only wasting his valuable time, he was making hollow threats. The General continued, “For you to stand there and ignore the fact that you have lost two of your men makes me want to puke.” Veins began to show at the edge of the General’s tight collar. His weather-lined face flushed red.

“But I have to talk to you,” the General continued, “So, saving the inevitable shit storm for later that will likely mean an end to your career. Right now you will help us clean up this situation.” The General clasped his hands behind his back as if he were resting during a military parade.

The Professor looked quickly over his shoulder at the five military aides arrayed behind him. The men looked like they were carved from wood and planted in rows by the walls for decoration in the plain whitewashed office. The Professor had somehow ended up standing in the middle of the room by himself. He suddenly became very self-conscious about how dark his skin was compared to the pale military array. He felt like a conspicuous piece of furniture. He told himself quickly that he was being ridiculous. But he acknowledged that it was at times like these that he was very aware of how different he
looked. But regardless of what he thought of as unfounded fears, he found that the whole affair was irritating as hell.

The intrusion into his work was annoying to say the least. He needed to get back to the lab to figure out what went wrong. There was something unexplained and unplanned that caused the man to disappear and Professor Martin wanted to get to the bottom of the cause. He didn’t have time to answer to these muscle-headed military types who didn’t understand anything he was saying.

The silence settled into the room like someone had exhaled with stale breath. Finally, the General continued.

“Let’s start from the beginning. Are you sure the missing person was in the room at all?” the General asked. “And if he was in the room, how do you know he wasn’t vaporized or something? Hell, the amount of energy in that room could have turned his body into dust! He could have blown away when someone opened a door or something.” The General waved his hand as if telling a child to scoot along.

"No, General," the Professor’s voice sounded annoyed. "Despite the fire in the control room, the video system picked up everything that happened. Almost the instant before the other men were,” the scientist paused, “were killed, he was absorbed by the threshold generated by the Traverse Device and simply disappeared.”

“You are sure that the experiment actually worked?”

“Yes, General, the experiment worked,” the Professor said plainly.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You mean to tell me you were that close to finishing and you didn’t call us in Washington to see if we wanted to proceed or not?”
Now a vein in the General’s temple started to pulse. The Professor wondered if it would burst. Somehow though, the Professor didn’t think a brain hemorrhage would help the situation.

The General was in the middle of his tirade. He was pacing, waving one arm in the air like he was giving orders.

“Hell, the President, the Joint Chiefs and most of all, I, ” the General turned and emphasized the point by thumping himself on the chest with a thick finger, “hadn’t decided if we wanted to go ahead with this damned thing or not!”

“Sir, if I may,” a Colonel, standing at the side of the room, stepped forward. The man wore a freshly pressed uniform and a small curl of dark hair fell over his forehead. His shoes made the Professor, even with his bleach-white lab coat, look like a thrift store shopper. The Professor swore he could see his own inverted reflection in the Colonel’s buttons.

"Up until two weeks ago we weren’t even sure if the levitation control system would work,” the Colonel said. “We wanted to progress to a point where we would be ready for you when, or if, you gave the go ahead.”

"Colonel Bradley, I am not an engineer nor a scientist, as you know. But I do understand that there is a big difference between levitating the Traverse Device and activating the power storage systems that prepare the chamber for total activation," the General replied. The General didn’t have to say that the Colonel’s career was also on the line. It was understood. The General returned to his parade stance and waited to see if anyone had anything else to say. After a few moments of pregnant silence, he started shouting suddenly.
“God damn it! I should have pulled the funding on this a long time ago.” The General turned and walked slowly to the window. He twisted the mini-blinds open, revealing a twenty-story view of downtown Atlanta. The buildings and asphalt landscape sparkled like they were on fire from the morning sun soaring on its daily ascent. The business scene below, rushing cars and people on the sidewalks, stretched out into the distance until the trees and forest looked like they swallowed everything, Interstate-75/85, the main traffic artery slashing the city in half. The room was silent waiting for the General to continue.

The Professor watched the man heave his shoulders once and exhale heavily. Barely audible, the General said, “I had a feeling we were way in over our heads.”

Turning around suddenly he asked the scientist directly, “So where is this missing person?”

“That is a bit of a problem, Sir,” Colonel Bradley said, stepping forward just in front of the scientist this time. “Project Traverse was originally planned to transport an individual to England, to an experimental Chamber identical to the one we have here. The lab in England is not too far out of London.” Professor Martin, who watched the clouds move by in the distance, let the Colonel continue.

“Our original plan was to simply throw a metal cube, well, we would have a slingshot type of device toss a metal cube, through the transport. If all went well, the cube would simply appear in our containment lab in England. It would land on some padding we have set in the room.”

“England, why the hell did it have to be England? If we had picked the desert in Nevada at least we could have kept this as a domestic issue,” the General stated.
The Professor knew that he and the Colonel had talked about this issue with the General in previous sessions. He admired the Colonel’s patience in dealing with the senior officer.

“There were two principle reasons,” the Colonel explained. “We needed to have more curvature in the Earth to see how accurate the system really is over long distance. The obvious goal of Project Traverse would involve transporting people far over the horizon.” The General nodded that he understood.

“Also, if you recall General, the Brits were key in the development of the early transport theory.”

“The problem,” the Colonel went on, “is that when this person was transported, nothing appeared in the chamber in England. We have had our people out quietly searching the area around the lab and they have not found anything. So now we are looking at the data again to find where on the planet he landed.”

“How do you know he is actually on Earth?” the General asked. “How do we know he didn’t just flash somewhere in space? The planet is moving through space after all. What if we just drop him off in Atlanta, or where Atlanta was,” the General pointed out the window at the city. “But a minute or so later, that same place, where Atlanta was, is in nearby space because we have actually moved?” the General asked. “I mean hell, we’re moving at what, fifty thousand miles per hour around the sun, or some damn number like that. The kid could be floating by some television satellite for all the hell we know!”

“The Earth moves approximately 67,000 miles per hour around the sun, General,” the Professor said suddenly. Everyone turned and looked at the Professor.
“Whatever the exact number is,” the General snapped, “just answer the question. I want to know where this man is.”

Professor Martin spoke up this time. “It doesn’t really matter,” he said simply.

“What was that, Professor?” the General asked. “How can the movement not matter?”

“It has to do with Einstein’s Relativity Theory,” the Professor kept his voice flat, like he was explaining some basic physics theory to a class of college freshman. “The momentum due to the rotation of the Earth, the Earth’s orbit around the sun, which is the speed I just gave you, as well as the solar system’s movement through space, is all conserved and is independent of the frame of reference.” The Professor decided to go on until he made sure that the General’s eyes were glazed over. The Professor was sure that the older man wouldn’t be able to follow him for long. “The trick is for the system to take the acceleration into account.”

The General set his jaw so that it popped loud in the bare room. “I don’t quite follow you, Professor. It seems to me that the planet is going at the same speed through space. The last I heard we weren’t speeding up to go anywhere.”

“Another way to look at it,” the Professor explained, “is if you are driving down the interstate at seventy miles per hour and your kid wants to go from the front seat to the back seat. In our case the front seat is Atlanta and the back seat is just outside London at our other lab.

“If your kid climbed over the seat to reach the back seat, it is equivalent to the normal way of moving here on the Earth. In our case, our missing man would have taken an airplane from here in Atlanta to England. The Earth simply rotates underneath the airplane.” The Professor paused to see if the General was following.
“Go on, Professor,” the General said plainly.

“The equivalent of Traverse, however,” the professor continued, “is when the kid in the car flashes into another dimension first, and then appears in the back seat. The speed of the car isn’t really a problem since the linear momentum is conserved. If the driver accelerated at the same time, that would be a problem. That’s when the kid would land on the pavement and the car would have already moved down the highway bouncing at 70 miles per hour.”

“I think I follow you,” the General said.

“Well, Sir, simply put, the control system takes the acceleration of our rotating Earth into account,” the Colonel interrupted. The Professor gave him a stern glance.

“So we are positive,” the Colonel emphasized, “that he landed somewhere on Earth. We just need to find him and bring him back. But the final glitch, Sir, is that the videotapes survived the transport event as Professor Martin mentioned, but the data storage did not. The transport event released an EMP…”

“An EMP?” the General asked.

“Yes, Sir, an electromagnetic pulse that erased the data tapes. The EMP was an unexpected side effect.”

“Seems like there are a large number of unexpected events with this project,” the General commented. The Colonel ignored the comment and continued.

“We have to use the printouts that the system generated prior to the transport event to understand the exact setting on the system,” the Colonel stated.

“Okay, so how long has the man been gone?”

“About fifteen hours, Sir.”
"Assuming he didn’t land in the North Sea or Antarctica, then he is still probably alive. How long will it take to figure out where he went?" the General asked.

"About a day, General," the Professor answered.

"All right then," the General said. He turned to one of his aides in the room. "Major, call up air-sea rescue and make sure they are on alert. Let them know they should expect a call for a rescue somewhere in the world within 24 hours. Don’t give them any more details than that. Also, give their emergency line phone number to the Colonel here.” He jabbed his thumb in the Colonel’s general direction.

"Yes, Sir," the aide replied promptly and left the room.

"We’ll have the information as soon as possible, Sir,” the Colonel said.

"Colonel, when you get a fix, call the rescue directly even before you contact me. That’s priority number one.

"Priority number two is that I expect everyone to keep this quiet. I remind everyone that this project is still highly classified. Anyone who leaks any word of this will be dealt with severely. We don’t need a panic on our hands with people thinking that the U.S. military is going to pop up out of thin air in their house at any moment. Does everyone clearly understand me?” General Macmillan asked. After a chorus of yes-sirs from around the room, the General said, “Very well, Colonel. Carry on.”

With that, the General and his two remaining aides walked out of the office leaving Colonel Bradley glaring at Professor Martin. The Professor was, in turn, staring intently out the window trying to visualize where in the equations something may have been left out.
Heather was pissed, plain and simple. No, she thought to herself, she was pissed-off. Completely, irrevocably and absolutely pissed-off. The warm, early fall air blowing in her car’s open windows, tried to unravel her black hair. She angrily pushed a strand out of her face and stomped on the accelerator to squeeze between two cars in the next lane over. Her car, a plain looking, dark blue sedan with a broken taillight, shifted down and leapt forward. Heather was surprised by the sudden burst of speed, but she maintained control and shot past the car she had been tailing.

Her radio was off so she could concentrate not only on her driving, but also on her anger. In their two and a half years together, and certainly within the past five months since they’d been engaged, Laz had never stood her up.

A car in front of her braked suddenly, the red taillights bright in the early evening. The driver of the other car had the interior light on with map in hand. She saw him lean forward trying to get a view of the name of a cross street. Heather, normally ever-patient, leaned on the horn. She whipped back into the right lane, and passing, yelled out the window, “Asshole!”

Over the rev of her car’s engine, she heard, “Bitch!” for a reply. She knew she deserved the label right now. Below her anger she also knew that the driver didn’t deserve to be yelled at. From a safety standpoint it probably was not a great idea to insult other drivers in the middle of Midtown Atlanta anyway. The defensive driver was a species near extinction in the town. But she was damn mad.
And of all the times he had to choose to stand her up, it was tonight. They agreed from day one of the engagement to plan the wedding together. So far Laz had been dodging the planning bullet. She spoke to him yesterday morning and he finally agreed to meet for dinner, placing all other distractions aside, and talk about the wedding details that Heather had worked up so far.

The wedding was not going to be a huge gathering. Laz’s family wasn’t that large and Heather only had a few living relatives. She had her aunt, uncle and two cousins in Savannah plus a couple of other cousins scattered around South Carolina and Florida. But even though most of the guests would be friends and coworkers, there was still a lot of work to do and only five weeks left.

Heather approached the turnoff to Laz’s street and pulled the corner hard. The tires squealed on the asphalt like children shrieking on a playground. A quick correction on the wheel allowed her to barely miss sideswiping a parked BMW.

“Oh, calm down, Heather,” she said out loud.

She was only three blocks away from Laz’s apartment and running at fifty miles per hour. Heather made the final turn onto the tree lined residential street just off Tenth Street by Atlanta’s famous Piedmont Park in Midtown.

She tried her best to breathe easy. Heather knew that nothing good would happen if she started yelling at Laz when he opened the door. But hell, she had waited over an hour at the restaurant. He hadn’t answered the phone when she had called, but he’d damned well better be there soon. She had tempting visions of flinging open the door, quoting him a cliché about a woman’s scorn and then giving him a taste of it.
Heather parked her car and stomped down the decades-old cracked sidewalks. She normally found the old sidewalks quaint, one small element that gave character to the residential streets in the heart of Midtown. She reached a smooth part of the sidewalk right in front the building, looked up, and quickly dropped her determined look. The front window of his second story apartment, one of only four apartments in what was essentially an oversized house, was dark. Heather suddenly felt deflated, empty. Her anger slowly slipped to disappointment that Laz would have forgotten their date.

She walked up the stairs and noticed that the building seemed especially quiet. Her high heels made sharp clicking noises on the old boards making up the stairs. The wood was bare in the middle from years of feet wearing the paint away. She used her key to open Laz’s apartment door and walked into the dim room.

The only light was from a string of small Christmas tree lights that trailed down the one long hallway in the apartment. The only sound was the soft refrigerator hum. Heather looked around and noticed that the electricity must have gone off at some point. The time on the VCR blinked 12:00 over and over again like something had expired. She flicked the switch on the wall and the room flooded with harsh light from a solitary incandescent bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling.

Heather took a hesitant step farther into the main room. Everything looked normal: old magazines strewn across the worn-out, secondhand couch, and an empty glass left on the coffee table in front of the couch. The small stack of entertainment system remote controls were stacked neatly on top of a brand new, fifty inch screen television. The television dwarfed the room, which was essentially no larger than a good sized closet. Heather often
thought if Laz could somehow magically have the room inside the television, rather than then
other way around, he would.

Just then she heard an inquisitive meow from the back bedroom. A large, apparently
well fed, gray tabby cat padded into the room. The cat blinked sleepily, walked up to
Heather and sat on his haunches about three feet away. The cat licked his lips once. Heather
recognized Cat’s ritual when someone first came into the apartment. All visitors were
expected to pet him, at least briefly, or he would get upset. And everyone who knew Cat,
knew that they did not want to upset Cat.

“Hey, Cat,” she said. Heather picked him up and he instantly started purring. She
always felt odd calling him “Cat” straight out. But that was the wonderfully imaginative
name Laz had chosen for his house mate. One thing was for sure, she’d be picking the name
of any future children.

Everything in the house looked fine, but there was something odd. The air was stale
like the house had been closed up for a couple of days. Heather wrinkled her nose at the odor
coming from the kitchen. She walked in the kitchen off to the right of the main room and
turned on a formal crystal table lamp sitting on the kitchen counter. It was yet another
example of Laz’s generally odd apartment lighting patterns.

“Well,” she said, looking at Cat purring softly in her arms, “you’ve got plenty of
food. And if you ran out you could always eat this crap.” Cat looked up at her and blinked.

She picked up two leftover Chinese food containers that reeked of several days’ rot
and tossed them in the garbage. Cat’s bowl, however, was full of food. She knew that with
that particular feline’s appetite, the bowl must have been filled the same day.
She put Cat on the floor and he walked over to his water bowl, settled in low to the ground, and started quietly lapping up the fresh water.

Heather walked to the kitchen window and raised it to let the warm night breeze into the room. She then walked back into the main room and down the hall towards the bathroom. She was planning on opening the window in the bathroom to get some cross air flow, but froze in the doorway of the bathroom. The smell hit her before she even stepped through the threshold. Cat litter. More specifically, cat shit. She turned on the light and just as her nose told her, the cat litter had not been changed in close to a week.

Cleaning dishes was one issue, but something Laz did not let slide was getting the cat litter changed. It wasn’t that he really cared that much about the cat litter, but Cat had serious problems with a dirty cat box. If the box wasn’t cleaned religiously every four days to the hour, Cat would take it as a personal offense.

Heather stepped back and continued down the hall to the bedroom. She turned on yet another plain incandescent bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling in the bedroom.

“Ah shit, Cat!” In the middle of Laz’s unmade bed were several large piles of cat crap. Cat walked in, licking water from his lips, looked up at her and meowed. Heather went back to the bathroom for tissue and quickly cleaned the mess off the bed. She was thankful that Cat had not sprayed on the bed. That would have meant having to buy a new mattress and their finances were tight as they were trying to save up for the wedding.

“Now that boy really owes me,” she said looking at Cat who had a rather satisfied look on his face for some reason.

After she flushed Cat’s mess down the toilet, she stood by the sink and tried to decide if it was better to open the bathroom window for a cross air current or to leave it shut. The
apartment would fill with the fragrance of excessively dirty cat litter if the wind were blowing the wrong way. At that point she suddenly realized something was wrong.

There was no way Laz would have fed Cat and not changed the litter box.

Heather immediately walked down the hall and out the front door of the apartment. She rapped loudly on the door across the hall from Laz’s apartment. As Heather expected, a loud voice like a steel drum rolling down a hill sounded from inside the apartment.

“Who is that whacking away at Geri’s door at this ungodly hour of the night?” A moment later the door sprang open and a muscular black man, a few inches shy of seven feet, with mascara and fake eyelashes completely filled the small door frame. Pretending not to see her, he pulled his knee length silk robe tight around him and looked right, then left, “Where is that exotic, muscled man that just knocked so loud on my back door?”

“Gerald, you know this is your front door and the only exotic muscled man around here within a mile is you.” Heather raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, it’s you down there.” Geri looked down and frowned. “I know it’s my front door, silly girl, but I like to pretend. But thank you for reminding me that I’m exotic, it’s always nice to reaffirm my fragile ego.” Geri pushed up a fake hairdo with one hand in a classic Betty Boop pose.

“Of course it’s always good to see you again,” he said, and leaned down to give Heather one of the gentlest hugs she thought was possible.

“It’s good to see you too.” Heather returned the hug on her tiptoes. “That color mascara looks good on you. Is it new?”

“Yes, it is new. Sarah and I are trying some on. You remember Sarah, don’t you?”
Geri stepped aside from the door to reveal a lavishly decorated interior. Heather sighed when she mentally compared Geri’s apartment to Laz’s sparse living space. In Geri’s apartment, an oriental rug on the floor led from the entrance to a small, cozy sitting area around a gas log fireplace. Next to that was a desk with a full mirror attached to the wall. There was a messy pile of cosmetics spread over the table.

An Asian girl with platinum blond hair falling over muscled shoulders, turned and paused in the midst of putting on dark red lipstick. She gave Heather a wave.

“Hey, Sarah,” Heather called out.

“It’s good to see you again,” Sarah replied. The girl’s strong Southern accent was startling in contrast to her ethnicity.

“I see you have a new hair color this time,” Heather commented.

“Yeah, I was getting tired of the red,” Sarah answered. “Everyone I knew was going with red so I thought I would try something different.”

“Well, it looks good. I wish I was that brave.”

“Oh, you are plenty brave,” Geri responded. “And you are full of compliments tonight. That’s why I love when you knock on my door. More than I can say for that fiancé of yours.” Geri waved his huge hand in the air as if saying good bye to someone.

“You know Laz likes you, Gerald,” Heather said. “He just isn’t always comfortable with your flamboyant lifestyle. It might help if you wouldn’t try to flirt with him so much.”

“Oh, look who’s jealous of Geri!” Geri smiled brightly, a sterling set of enviably perfect teeth reflected in the dim hall light.

“You know what I mean, Gerald,” Heather answered.
"Oh, I know, I know. But he squirms so nice when I flirt with him!" Geri shook his shoulders a little, an almost comical gesture for such a large man.

"Gerald," Heather said, staring him down.

"Oh, okay, Miss Priss. I'll go a little easier on him for your sake."

"Thank you," Heather said smiling, "because you're going to be at our wedding and I want everyone to get along."

"You're welcome," Geri answered. He had his arms folded and a mock pouting look on his face, "but you didn't make me a bridesmaid."

"We are not," Heather poked him in the chest with her thin finger, "going to go over that one again."

"Okay, okay, you don't have to hurt me." Geri closed his robe tighter. "I'll just have to be happy to be there."

"And I will be happy to have you there," Heather answered.

"I forgot about your wedding!" Sarah said. She had finished with her lipstick and walked up beside Geri.

Sarah and Geri had been good friends for over three years. They met at the gym when Geri needed a sparring partner for kick boxing. Sarah defeated him soundly despite her small size. Geri, however, claimed he let her win. Heather had heard Geri's defeat story in three different versions, each version with a slightly better excuse of why he lost.

"Is Laz excited about the wedding?" Sarah asked.

"I'd like to know that myself," Heather answered. "Have you seen him around? Someone fed Cat but didn't clean the litter box?"

"Oh, Cat crapped on the bed again, did he?" Geri asked. Heather nodded yes.
“I don’t know why that boy keeps that cat. All I know is if Cat ever soiled my silk sheets he’d be horse food,” Geri stated flatly.

“That’s horse that gets turned into cat food, not the other way around,” Sarah corrected.

“No, I am sure it’s cat that is made into something,” Geri countered.

They settled the argument after Heather chimed in, “It’s horse that is made into cat food.” Geri rolled his eyes at the correction.

“So, do you know who fed him or for that matter where Laz is? ” Heather asked.

“I haven’t seen Laz, but there were some military guys in his apartment today, so I guess they fed Cat. They were here around 3:30 or so this afternoon.”

“Military?” Heather frowned. “Did you talk to them?” Heather asked.

“Of course I talked to them. I put my best flirting foot forward,” Geri said extending one thickly muscled leg into the hallway.

“Well? What did they say?” Sarah continued.

“Well, unfortunately,” Geri pulled his leg back in, “they weren’t interested. They were straight.”

“No!” Heather yelled. She smacked her flat palm on his chest. The impact made a deep resounding thud. “About Laz!”

Geri threw a hand to his forehead as if taking his own temperature. “Help, I do believe I’m being abused by the women in the house!”
“I’m serious, Gerald,” Heather said evenly. Heather told them how Laz had not arrived at the restaurant.

“Oh, I’m sorry Honey, I just got caught up there for a minute. They said Laz had to head out of town on a short-notice assignment. Laz had asked them to feed Cat. But I thought it was a little odd because, you know, when I got them in a little conversation,” Geri winked at Heather and she rolled her eyes at him, “well, they said Laz was a friend of theirs but they didn’t know Cat’s name.”

“How could you tell?”

“Well, you’ve got to admit, that bed-shittin’ animal has a pretty stupid name,” Geri stated.

“Yeah, I’ll give you that one,” Heather agreed.

“You mean your fiancee’s cat’s name is Cat? As in C-A-T?” Sarah asked. Heather nodded in response. “That is pretty stupid.” Sarah ran her fingers through her blond hair.

“Well, those military guys didn’t know that.” Geri took on a aristocratic sounding British accent, “When I referred to Cat without the usage of the proper article ‘the,’” Geri double quoted with his fingers in the air, “they looked confused like I did not speak proper English.”

“So I had to tell them that the cat’s name was just ‘Cat’ and then they said, ‘Oh yeah, that’s right, Laz told us that.’ Well, Heather girl,” Geri returned to his normally glitzy voice, “let me tell you something. Big Geri knows when a man is lying, and that man was lying. There ain’t no way he would have forgotten that cat’s stupid name.”

“Yeah,” Sarah said in her north-Georgia twang, “that is one name you won’t forget.”
Heather was silent a minute, absently staring at the red and purple paisley print pattern on Geri’s robe. She couldn’t think of any military people whom Laz knew well enough to ask to take care of Cat. The project was funded by the military, but there weren’t any military people working side by side with Laz, none that she knew of anyway. And besides, why wouldn’t Laz just call her to take care of the cat.

“Hope that boy hasn’t gotten into some kind of trouble,” Geri said.

“Well, I’ll give one of his friends a call,” Heather said, as if talking to herself. She suddenly looked up and smiled, “Thanks for the help, Gerald.”

“You’re welcome, Honey,” Geri leaned down for another dainty hug.

“It was good seeing you again, Heather.” Sarah leaned in and also gave Heather a hug.

Geri finished, “And you come by sometime for a drink and we’ll talk men.”

“Okay, I’ll try to do that soon,” Heather answered. “First I need to track my man down.”

“Don’t we all, Heather Girl! Don’t we all,” Geri said, closing his door.

Heather returned to Laz’s apartment and thought about what Geri had said. If the military people were at the apartment, then presumably Laz was all right. They would have said something if Laz were hurt, wouldn’t they? She was glad Geri had at least gotten to talk to them, otherwise she would be on the phone to the police by midnight.

Heather had to smile at the thought of Geri, all six feet, seven inches and two hundred and eighty pounds of muscle, flirting with army guys. They must have been as uncomfortable as fire hydrants at a dog show. But despite Geri’s flamboyant and frivolous nature, he was a true friend when you were in need. And contrary to homosexual
stereotypes, he wasn’t at all as promiscuous as his flamboyance suggested. When he told Heather to stop by and talk about men, she knew he meant it. He had just broken up two months ago with a partner of eight years. It had been pretty rough, essentially the equivalent of a divorce. She and Geri had become quite close when that happened. Geri had also become much closer to Sarah.

Laz tended to stay away from the conversations, but he didn’t seem to mind Heather and Geri’s friendship, even though Laz was a little uncomfortable around gay men in general. “Now to track down my slightly homophobic boyfriend,” Heather said aloud, and picked up the phone.

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A pale man inside the back of an off-white, plain paneled van on the street outside of Laz’s apartment passed his hand through his close cropped hair. He reached out slowly and pressed a single button on a control panel. He paused and spoke into a headset microphone. The microphone bounced slightly on his bottom lip when he talked.

“Hello, sir. As you requested, I wanted to let you know that she is trying to make contact with Santiago. She’s calling him now.” He sat back and reflexively fingered the mole under his left eye.

The voice he heard said a few words. The man answered, “Yes, sir, Santiago is on the original team. He is apparently a friend of the missing Mr. Stevens.” He paused again.

“No, sir, it looks like Santiago is not answering the phone.” He listened again for a brief moment.
“One moment, sir,” the man reached out again and pressed a few more buttons just under a video display on the control panel.

“Team 2, is the subject still in residence?”

“Roger that, thank you.” Reaching out again slowly, like he was adjusting the volume on a radio playing classical music, the pale man switched back to the other phone line.

“Yes, sir, Santiago is home, but he’s not answering the phone.” He listened to more instructions and nodded understandingly.

“Yes, sir, I’ll keep track of her.” The pale man again reached out slowly and flipped a disconnect switch. He checked his watch and marked the time on a notepad.

“We need to tail her when she leaves,” he called out. “Be sure to have backup ready if we need it. She was driving pretty crazy earlier.”

The driver held binoculars up studying Laz’s apartment. He answered without turning around. “Will do. It looks like she is settling in though. Has the TV turned on.”

“Just stay awake, and call me in a couple of hours to switch off with you.” The pale man nestled back into his chair and was asleep in two minutes.
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CHAPTER 2

The sun started its slow arc across the sky and Laz blinked to consciousness. He slowly sat up and concentrated on steadying a pounding headache. Each pulse of blood through his veins felt like someone was trying to inflate his head with a bicycle tire pump.

"Damn, that hurt," Laz said aloud, fingering the lump on his forehead. Looking around, he tried to remember why he was in the woods. He remembered running in the dark. And, he remembered the Chamber again, but this time with a clarity that sober early morning light brings. Laz remembered the Traverse Device spinning up, the look of terror on the lead engineer's face. Then there was the cold. Laz shivered again at the thought of the cold. The cold he had experienced was like a syrupy, viscous liquid metal was running through his body. Laz quickly realized that the shivering was not only from his memory. A cold, motionless air rested heavy in the dim woods despite the sun being well on its climb.

Laz wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed tight, shivering. When he squeezed his arms around his loose fitting clean-room suit, a puff of odor came out of his clothes at the neckline. The smell was not body odor, but the dank, rotting odor of leaves that he had slept on, or more correctly, passed out on, the night before. It was the same smell, Laz imagined, that he would have if he had dug his way out of a dirty grave.

He checked his watch and saw that it read 2:42 PM, on Friday. He was surprised to see how long he had slept. Laz pulled his clean-room suit, no longer very clean, tighter around his body and stood up. He was careful not to hit his head on the same tree limb that halted his run the night before. The heavy sag on the old limb made the tree look like it was smiling sarcastically.
Laz looked around the forest and tried to find some sign or path that could lead him to a road. Densely packed underbrush between tall, green trees prevented him from seeing very far. He decided to find a way back to the hill. At least the view the hill offered would have to be signs of people somewhere. It was dark last night and he was sure that with a calm view from the hill he would find some sign of civilization to follow.

He took a few steps and realized he didn't know which direction the hill was. So Laz started walking in the general direction where he thought the hill might be. But hunger was more of an immediate problem than finding the hill or a road.

He searched the pockets of the cotton slacks he wore under the clean-room suit and pulled out a movie ticket stub, fifty-seven cents in change, and a pack of peppermint chewing gum with four sticks left.

"Better than nothing," he said. Popping a stick of gum in his mouth, he let the aluminum foil wrapper flutter to the ground. The gum's sharp peppermint flavor helped clear his head. He started moving again but paused unsteadily, his head swimming in pain.

"Damn, that really hurt."

He leaned against a tree and groaned again from the throbbing knot on his head. His head pounded like the tire pump pressure had just doubled. It was definitely worse than any hangover he'd ever experienced. And this time, unfortunately, the headache wasn't from a night on the town with Dave and the other guys from the office. At least during those times he could stay in a warm bed and sleep it off.

Concentrating on deep breathing and the chewing gum's peppermint bite, Laz tried to clear the swimming colors in his head. He moved forward and pushed his way wearily through the brush. He couldn't see anything resembling a path. The trees were spread apart
from each other, but the underbrush choked the spaces in between. He pushed the branches back and forced his way through. But every now and then, he would miss a twig and the rough wooden stems raked down the side of his face or neck.

He didn’t know which direction to go so he just kept pushing forward in the hope that he would find a trail leading to civilization and a stack of maple covered pancakes. The sugar from the chewing gum didn’t take the edge off his hunger and actually made his hunger more acute. He quickly went through all four pieces of gum, swallowing each piece to make sure he got all the sugar he could.

Laz plodded through the brush for an hour, but no trail appeared. He knew he had missed the hill he was searching for. All he needed was a sign of something, anything, to lead him out. A road, a house, or even a power line could point him in the right direction. A cell tower rising up over the old, knotty trees in the middle of the woods would be fine. Maintenance crews had to follow some kind of road to get to the tower. He wished that he had stayed on the hill. At least then he could have spotted a tower and headed in its general direction.

He just needed something that he could follow to a phone where he could call his fiancée. If Heather wasn’t around, he could call Dave. Calling Dave, however, was a definite plan B. Dave Santiago, while a good friend, was not known for being the most reliable person in the world. Laz could only hope that Dave would come through in this situation. But Heather, he knew, would come through. She always did. Laz could see himself trying to explain to Heather how he ended up in the woods in the middle of nowhere and still not break any of the security agreements he signed with the military regarding the Traverse Project.
“Hey, Honey, yeah, the guys played a prank on me, dropped me off in the woods to find my way out. Yeah, I know that sounds kind of mean spirited, but they thought it was an early bachelor party. You know the guys.” He would give her the you-believe-me-don’t-you? smile. Heather in turn would cross her arms and give him the raised eyebrow stare that stated quite clearly with no words spoken, “You can’t think I’m that gullible.”

He remembered the last time she gave him that smile. It was when he bought her engagement ring in, of all places, one of the popular malls just north of Atlanta.

Laz had been looking for several months for just the right ring. He finally concluded that it was impossible for him to guess the type of ring she would be happy with in the end.

He and Heather took the Metropolitan Atlanta Rail Transit Authority subway, or ‘MARTA’ for short, to the mall station and walked the short distance to the mall. They entered with the usual assortment of teenagers sporting the latest fashion and young Atlanta professionals looking for sales.

When they started to pass a jewelry store Laz had been to before, he mentioned casually, “Um, hey, you want to look at some of the jewelry?”

Heather turned to him but didn’t say anything.

“What?” Laz asked, holding his hands up as if trying to prepare for the line she was about to toss him.

“Since when did you become interested in jewelry?” She asked.

“I like jewelry,” Laz said confidently.

“You don’t own any jewelry aside from your college ring,” Heather responded.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t like jewelry,” Laz answered. His voice didn’t hold quite the conviction it did before.
“Laz, if you want to ask me to try on engagement rings, then just ask.”

“I didn’t say anything about an engagement ring,” Laz answered. At that comment Heather gave her patient smile.

“I mean engagement rings,” Laz stammered out. “Just rings in general.”

Heather didn’t answer, but just stood there and smiled with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh come on,” Laz said in frustration. He took her by the arm and practically dragged her into the store.

After he got her to tell him which ring she liked the best, the buying part was easier. He had already given the store clerk his credit card number in advance. All he had to do after that was drive by after work the next day to pick the ring up. At least then he didn’t have to lie to Heather in the process, even if it was a little white lie. Laz wasn’t very good at lying.

But Laz was good at cursing.

“Shit!” he yelled and grabbed the side of his neck. In the middle of this daydream, a large twig scratched hard down the side of his neck.

“I am sick and tired of this crap!”

If only he had stayed on the hill to look for a tower, for something. Laz snapped off the dead twig that he walked into. He broke the twig into consecutively smaller pieces until he had small nubs left in his palm. He ground the small bits of wood between his thumb and fingers until they turned into dust that scattered across the dead leaf mat in the forest.

He really wished he had stayed on that hill. Laz admitted he had panicked. He liked to think he had a cool head, but when push came to shove he failed the test. If only he had stayed a little longer on the hill and calmed down.
The stones circling the clearing the night before really did look like men about to jump at him, he told himself. From the half-dream of the night before, he remembered the large stone he fell over. That is, he had an instant mental image of the rock right before he somersaulted over the top.

The stone was hewn roughly into a rectangular slab. The stones were obviously put there on purpose. All he needed was a road, he told himself as he pushed through branch after branch in the choked woods.

Laz was getting tired. He checked his watch and noted that it read 5:47 PM. He had already been pushing his way through the forest for three hours. A chilled sweat settled in under his clean-room jumpsuit and he still didn't feel any closer to finding his way out of the forest.

Laz's usual exercise regime was walking to and from his second floor apartment in Midtown Atlanta. The beginning of a beer gut pushing out the stomach on his clean-room jump suit was proof of how much he exercised.

Plodding on, Laz started thinking about where he might be. He knew Project Traverse had worked. It was obvious that he had been transported from the Chamber in Atlanta. He would wait until later to ponder the extreme implications of the project actually working. For now he just wanted to know where he was and find his way back to the city. The obvious conclusion was that the experiment worked, but the delivery position was off. This was not the lab in England where the exit portal was supposed to be. He had not actually been to the lab in England, but had heard enough about it to know it did not contain a forest that had no end. That meant he could be anywhere on the planet.
The forest didn’t look like a forest from the southern United States. Maybe he was around Maine or in some remote area of California. Laz admitted, however, that he didn’t spend enough time in the woods to know the difference between forests in different parts of the world. In fact he spent no time in the woods at all.

There had to be a sign, a clue, something among the twisted trees that could lead him out. But the dense brush never let up, rising overhead in areas so high that Laz ended up pushing blindly through wall after wall of scratchy branches barren of any leaves.

There had to be a trail somewhere. A path that he could follow. Laz kept looking for straight lines, linear moments in a maze of chaotic growth. Occasionally he would find what he thought was a trail and his spirits would lighten. Even in random disorder there were elements of straight lines and the paths always dead ended in less than fifty feet. But he kept surging forward, pushing branches back when he could, breaking through the brambles when he couldn’t get them out if the way.

As the day wore on, Laz occasionally succumbed to brief, panicky claustrophobia. The need to run was almost overwhelming. Calmer than he was the night before, he forced himself to sit and steady his breathing before moving on.

The sun was the only marker he had to go by, so he blindly followed it. And there was something not quite right about the sun. It should have been dark earlier. He paused and checked his watch again. It was 8:14PM and the sun was only now showing any hint of heading towards the horizon. Laz figured that his watch must have been reset during some electrostatic discharge when he was transported. He decided that when the sun set he would reset his watch to match.
His stomach growled and the hunger came back with a vengeance. Laz had managed to ignore the pain in his stomach up until then. But now it was becoming unbearable. He visualized his stomach shrinking so that the empty space felt smaller and somehow less empty. His stomach suddenly cramped and he bent over with his arms wrapped around his midriff. As he breathed slowly, the pain eased off until he could stand upright again. Determined even more to find his way out of the forest, Laz started moving again.

The woods thinned out occasionally where he could actually take several full strides before having to touch the brush or a tree limb. But no matter how hard he tried to stay in the less choked areas of the woods, he always ended back in the middle of the choking underbrush.

He walked through the brush, passing under the bare trees until his hunger passed, returned, and passed again. The sun started its slide to the day’s end. At some point Laz thought about marking trees to remember the path he took, but reasoned there was nothing to go back to. The trail he left behind didn’t matter. The trail ahead, the one he was searching for, would lead him out of the woods. He knew it. He was sure that there was a trail nearby. It might only be around the next tree, through the next thicket. If only he could find one damned trail. How the hell did the animals manage to move through this thick growth, he wondered. He hadn’t seen any animals, but he assumed that there had to be animals somewhere in the unending forest.

On a break just before the sun set, Laz squatted by a pool of undrinkable, muddy water. He thought again of how he arrived in the forest. He squinted at his turbid reflection, eyeing the egg-sized lump on his head, when the white clean-room suit reflected in the water.
“A little overdressed for the occasion?” he half whispered. Then he thought about the Chamber again. The Chamber. The Traverse Device activated in the Chamber. Laz had already remembered in broad terms what had happened during the accident, but now the memories became more vivid with bits and pieces filling in that he was just then remembering.

The most vivid memory was of the Traverse Device itself. God it had looked like it was alive. Alive. The Traverse Device, a metallic sphere the size of a large SUV, had spun up to thousands of revolutions per minute before transforming into a white orb of expanding energy.

It expanded at an unbelievable rate. The sphere looked like a living thing reaching out to consume him, a brilliant multicolored beast with fantastic swirling designs: hints of faces -- angels and devils -- rushing on him. That's when he turned back to run. That's when he remembered seeing the lead engineer's face. What had that man seen in those twisted forms? Certainly not the angels.

His head throbbed at the memory. The memories were quickly replaced by the forest. Tree after tree, identical to each other as far as Laz could tell, passed behind him.

Laz willed himself to breathe quietly and focus on what he was going to do when he got back, how he would explain everything to Heather. There is no way she could be kept in the dark after this one. Classified project or not, disbelieving smile or not, this was going to be a tough one. He tried to put the thoughts of spending another night in the forest out of his mind. And he tried to put the thoughts about the face of the dead man out of his mind.

Yes, that man was dead. The lead engineer and other engineer working in the Chamber were both dead. Intellectually, Laz felt sad about the two men, but he was more
concerned with his own fate at the moment, a fate that seemed to be guided by the Traverse Device that seemed so alive. But the technology wasn’t alive, was it? Laz told himself that there was no essence to the technology or device, no matter how complicated it was. He knew it was only mass and energy working in ways that they didn’t fully anticipate. But still, it felt like they had unleashed something terrible that killed those men. Traverse seemed to reach out and take hold of him and kill those men. Traverse appeared to be very alive.

He concentrated on breathing calmly for a second that day and tried to let the last of his fears fall away into the mud under his feet. The system wasn’t alive, of course. But it was managed badly. Something bad had gone wrong, but that was not his concern at the moment. Laz sat for a few more minutes, exhaled heavily, and got up. He plodded his way out of the mud and looked up to see the sun dip below the trees and disappear in the dark forest. At the sun set he set his watch for 7:30 PM on Friday, which is roughly the time the sun was setting in Atlanta when he left. He remembered the time, because that was when he tended to head home, just after happy hour had ended at his and Dave’s favorite bar in the Virginia Highlands part of Midtown. In the middle of summer, he could drive all the way back to his house down Ponce de Leon Avenue without having to turn his car headlights on. But as the fall approached in Atlanta, the days had started to grow shorter. He had noticed only two days before that the days were growing shorter. Laz noted the time when he turned onto his street from Ponce after leaving happy hour because he had had to turn on his car headlights. While Ponce was generally open to the sky, the sprawling trees lining Atlanta’s Midtown residential streets created a shadowed evening.

Laz had never longed for those crowded streets and highways of Atlanta so much. Atlanta, his home. Peachtree Street and spicy Mexican food. And all he needed was one
damned trail to return to rush hour traffic, the continual noise of I-85 running through the heart of the city, and bar crawling in Buckhead.

He and Dave spent many a night with some of the other guys from the Traverse crew, talking about the highly classified project over their beers in the bars of Atlanta. They used vague terms that no one but an insider with knowledge of the Traverse Project would understand. The “main unit” referred to the Traverse Device, while “the grid” was the highly classified main power system that rivaled the power rating of the entire city of Atlanta. Whenever they talked about the transport event itself, they would just refer to it as “the T.”

There was plenty to talk about. The grid stored enough energy in the chamber to theoretically tear open a small hole in what some would call the space-time fabric of the universe. And if the device actually worked, which Laz now knew that it did, the implications of instantly transporting anyone to any location on the Earth were astounding.

Those implications scared Dave Santiago, and he talked about it often enough. Laz, on the other hand, took the optimistic route. After the others from the Traverse crew had headed off to their wives and children, he and Dave would stay at the bar and keep the soft beer buzz going. Dave would argue the doomsday effects of an instantaneous transport device. Laz would talk about how humankind could have complete freedom of movement.

“Think of it, Dave,” Laz would say. “A guy can live in rural Kansas or Alaska and commute instantly to his office in New York, Paris or even on future colonies on Mars. No one said this thing had to be limited for use just here on Earth. Once the passage is open, they can go anywhere. Can’t you see that?”

“But the power consumption…” Dave started.
“Well, of course the power consumption is an issue,” Laz interrupted. “Sure the current grid sucks down way more than we can use for everyone to use it. I’m talking about in the future when they have some kind of new power systems. Maybe they’ll have it set up so that a Traverse Device could be set up at the end of every city block. They’d have transport stations instead of subway stations. Pollution would disappear because cars would disappear and the Earth would unite as one community since distance would mean nothing.”

“And what kind of power systems could provide that kind of power?” Dave asked.

“I don’t know,” Laz answered. He gestured to the server for another beer.

“Hell, maybe it will be portable nuclear systems or something.”

Dave, slurring his speech slightly, said “Oh, yeah! Now that’s some brilliant rocket science. Let’s put a miniature nuclear reactor on every city corner.” Dave rolled his eyes.

“Stranger things have happened,” Laz commented. Dave almost choked on his beer when he sputtered, “What?”

Laz and Dave both started laughing.

Coming out of the beer-induced laughter, Dave said, “Wait! Now seriously, Laz. Wait.”

Laz leaned in with an expression of grave solemnity. “Go ahead, Dave.”

At that they both burst into a new round of laughing. They stopped only when the server brought Laz his beer.

“Seriously though,” Dave said. “There are some serious negative implications of this project.”

“Serious negative what?” Laz asked.

“Implications,” Dave said, slurring the word badly.
“Oh, I see,” Laz said. “You are about to tell me how the project implies something.”

“Exactly!” Dave blinked his heavy eyes once. “A military, as easy as a business guy from Kansas, could appear instantly anywhere in the world. Why, my friend, would the military be funding this thing?”

“Well, I guess that’s true…” Laz started.

“But,” Dave waved a warning finger, “if used by the wrong people, terrorists could pop up in the middle of the Oval Office. Or, wait a minute!” Dave slapped his forehead in a moment of discovery.

“They could drop a bomb with three seconds left on the timer in the Oval Office. Laz, mano, the implications go on and on!”

Laz laughed. He measured Dave’s level of intoxication by the amount of Spanish slang he used as the night progressed. On particularly heavy nights of partying, Dave lapsed into incomprehensible Spanish. That was the sign he needed someone not only to drive him home, but to make sure he actually got inside his house. Dave had awakened on the lawn more than a few times in his college days.

“But we have complete control of the main unit. Why are you worrying so much?” Laz answered. He always found Dave’s gloom and doom predictions funny.

Laz couldn’t remember what Dave answered to that. But now Laz was finding out the dangers of the technology the hard way. Now, in the forest with no paths and no food, Laz was paying the price for his blind faith.

“Wait ‘till I meet the General in charge of this fiasco,” Laz said out loud to the forest. “After I put my foot up his ass, I’ll tell them how fun the ride was and suggest he take the wife and kids.”
Laz walked in silence with no particular thoughts occupying his mind. The sun finished traveling over the horizon and with it went his hopes for finding a house or road. A damp, cool fog moved in, making the trees seem like ghosts drifting in the fading light. The cold mist condensed on his skin. Laz hugged his arms tight to conserve what little warmth his clean-room suit could give. There was no moon to guide him, and, as the light faded, visibility went to zero. Laz finally conceded that he was not getting out of the forest that night. So, he lay down and covered himself with leaves for insulation against the cold.

Laz closed his eyes and considered the thermal insulation properties of the leaves. The air trapped between the leaves and his clean-room suit would help keep him warm, just like the air gap between double paned windows. The train of thought brought him back to Atlanta, his own private forest of tall, double paned glass buildings throwing shade on the streets and concrete sidewalks. The images started to move in a dreamscape of Laz dodging cars in Virginia Highlands. With images of chocolate pecan pie from his favorite desert shop, sleep took hold of him and the dank smelling leaf blanket was surprisingly warm.

Day 2
Saturday, 9:07 AM

On the third approach to her apartment window, Heather realized that she was pacing. She paused in front of the picture window, reflectively playing with an old button in the pocket of her bathrobe. The scene in front of her apartment was one she knew all too well. Heather woke to the same view every morning and came home to the same view every evening. Her apartment landscape consisted of a parking lot with a few non-native trees
providing minimal shade over rows of well maintained cars. The cars were arranged around yet another square of identical apartment units that looked like toy blocks stacked and covered in vinyl siding. But today, the scene felt distant, like the world outside wasn’t the same as it was yesterday morning.

Her eyes instinctively focused on sudden motion by the pool. Even though fall was approaching, the weather was still warm enough for the pool complex to stay open. Morning swimmers flashed bits of flesh and bathing suits when they walked past the gaps in the privacy fence surrounding the chlorine blue pool. The pool, of course, was not really meant for swimming, but for sunbathing and socializing with drink in hand. It looked like some of the drinkers had started early, or had never gone to bed the night before.

Heather whirled away from the window and took four strides into her apartment. She sat at the counter that separated the main room from the small, closet-like kitchen.

She told herself to calm down, that she was overreacting. Heather tightened her robe and walked back to the window, pacing again. Laz hated when she paced. She had found this out on their third date.

“It makes me feel nervous, like we’re in a hurry or something. Cool your jets and sit down,” Laz had said. He reclined with one arm thrown lazily up on the back edge of the bench he sat on in the small lobby of the restaurant. He had put his hand down and patted the seat next to him.

Heather had raised her eyebrows at him, “If you want a child or a dog to sit next to you, you have the right method. I think I’ll stand, thanks. And I don’t want my jets cooled down. I want a table. I haven’t eaten all day.”
They hadn't talked for half the meal, eating in silence. After a while, she had reached out, took his hand and forced a smile.

"Sorry," she had said quietly, "I overreacted a little."

"No, I should have asked you earlier about getting something to eat," Laz had smiled back. He had squeezed her hand lightly.

"And I learned my lesson early about calling you by patting the seat," he had smiled.

"Yeah, I guess that's one of my buttons." Heather had toyed with one his fingers by rubbing her thumb in circles over his index finger.

Laz, she knew, had learned how to feel her out well over the time they had been together. He especially learned to watch out for her other buttons as he happened across them. Even though Laz had never done it before, he would know disappearing without calling her would be a major button.

No, she thought to herself, Laz wouldn't just leave her with no explanation, no reason. She concentrated her thoughts and tried to lay out the facts.

She and Laz had talked Thursday morning around 10 AM and agreed to meet Friday at 6 PM at one of their favorite restaurants. Laz didn’t show and some military guys had been by his apartment claiming to be friends, yet she had never heard of them, and they didn’t know about Cat and his bad manners.

And even if Laz had been sent off on some top-secret project as the military guys had told Geri, which she seriously doubted, she was sure Laz would have called. She loved Laz and thought the world of him, but she did not pretend to believe that he was that high on the military funded food chain to be swept off on some top secret mission with zero notice. But where the hell could he be?
Heather had left Laz a third message on his answering machine. She figured three was enough. He would get the general idea after the first message that she was worried sick and that he’d better have one damn good excuse for not calling.

She walked back into the kitchen for the sixth time and thought about her next move. She opened the refrigerator for some orange juice. The orange juice carton was the only item in the refrigerator except for two pieces of week-old pizza, a bottle of beer and a bottle of ketchup. Heather glanced quickly at the expiration date on the orange juice and found a clean glass in a cabinet.

She poured the juice, downed the entire glass in one long drink and decided to try Dave’s number again. She had left him a message last night and he hadn’t called. That really wasn’t that unusual for Dave. She knew he wasn’t the most dependable person.

She walked back into the front room and picked up her cordless phone.

Heather and Laz had known Dave Santiago for about two years. That’s how long Laz had been working on “The Project,” as they liked to call it. Heather rolled her eyes at the memory of how Laz and Dave always got a kick out of sitting in a crowded bar talking about the classified information in the open. But they would always phrase it in a way that only the two of them knew what was being said. Dave and Laz would smile knowingly at each other while, whatever date Dave happened to have along with them would blush and bite her bottom lip. Heather, on the other hand, would give Laz an eat-shit grin for teasing them with hints that meant nothing. Then there were Laz’s continual jokes of, “can’t tell you or I’d have to shoot you.” After two hours of all that, Heather often wished someone would shoot her.
From the hints that Dave and Laz dropped, she was able to put a few facts together. She knew that the project was funded by the military, and that it was very high priority. Also, since the project had such “incredible implications” -- none of which Dave or Laz would ever tell her, -- the project was very hush-hush. Some general was ultimately in charge of the project, it was that important.

The phone rang for the third time. Just before Heather expected the answering machine to pick up, Dave answered the phone. She forgot for a second who she had been dialing. Remembering, she shot out quickly in response to his groggy hello, “Damn Dave, don’t you ever return phone calls?”

“Oh hey, Heather. Yeah, I was going to call you a little later this afternoon. I just hadn’t got around to it. Sorry.”

In his apartment in the suburbs north of Atlanta’s interstate 285 perimeter, Dave cursed himself silently for picking up the phone. The shrill ring pulled him out of a deep sleep and he answered it automatically. He pulled the clock over to see that it was 9:08 AM.

“Yeah, I really did mean to call you,” Dave said over his standard, wired phone. He refused to use a cordless phone in case someone wanted to listen in. At least he would make them go to the trouble of tapping into the actual phone line. If he used a cordless phone, all they would have to use was a portable scanner from a local electronics store.

Heather was saying, “I haven’t heard from Laz and these military guys have been at his apartment feeding Cat...”

“Oh,” Dave cut in, “that’s really nice of them.” He quickly rolled out of bed and walked into the main room and over to the front window facing the street. He bent the mini-
blinds down with two fingers. He quickly verified that the plain, dark, government style sedan was still parked down the street.

“I didn’t know they were doing that,” Dave continued, “but you know with Laz going out of town so suddenly and all.”

“What do you mean he went out of town?” Heather asked.

“Oh, I’m surprised he didn’t call you. But, hey, you know Laz!” Dave said a little too eagerly.

“I do know Laz, and he would have called by now,” Heather asserted.

“Well, it must have been a little too security heavy for him to call you. You know with caller ID and all. It could easily point to where he is. But I’m sure he’ll call you when he gets a chance.”

“Dave! You and I both know there’s nothing so secret he can’t at least call someone. I mean...”

“Oh, Heather!” Dave cut in. “There’s someone at the front door. I have to run. But don’t you worry. I know he’ll call you as soon as he gets a chance. Why don’t you give the office a call on Monday and talk to them? Gotta run!”

After the quick parting words he hung up.

In his apartment, Dave sank into an overstuffed chair that showed multiple beer stains. He let his head drop into the palms of his hands, arms resting on his knees.

“Shit! I told her to call the office! I must be out of my mind.”
Not spiritual by nature, Dave seriously considered praying, even though he hadn’t thought about it in years. He did know that it would take a miracle for things to work out in this case.

~ ~ ~

In the surveillance van parked down the road from Heather’s apartment, the pale man flipped a switch to make a phone call. After a moment he said, “She’s made contact as you expected.”

To a question from the other end he answered, “No, Santiago has not said anything. He’s sticking to the party line, but he sounds shaken. We’ll monitor the situation and let you know. Team 2 has their eye on him. And you might be interested to know that Ms. Alexander will most likely be calling the office on Monday.” After a pause, he continued, “Yes, I thought you would be expecting that.”

Day 2
Saturday, 2:38 PM

“Dr. Martin, I’m surprised to see you in on a Saturday.”

Professor David Martin jumped at the voice that rumbled like a small avalanche into his cramped office. He looked up from the reams of paper scattered over his desk to see a man in an efficient looking suit and steel rim glasses filling the doorway.
"Hello, Phil," the Professor addressed the man indifferently. Phil DeVenue responded quickly.

"Do you have the report yet, Professor?" DeVenue was speaking louder than usual and his voice hurt the Professor’s ears.

"What?" the Professor asked. "No ‘how are you, David’? No, ‘how are the families of the two dead men?’"

The Professor wasn’t surprised by DeVenue’s demand for the technical report on the accident, but he didn’t want to make it easier for the corporate face-man either.

"Oh, well, excuse me, Professor," DeVenue said. He clasped his hands in front of him like a funeral parlor director greeting the mourners. "How are the families of the men involved in the tragedy?"

"They’re sad," the Professor answered tersely. "Now what can I do for you?"

"I see we’re getting to the point after all," DeVenue said.

"David," DeVenue said in a soothing tone, "I want you to know that I was not the one who decided that the cutbacks should take place. And I certainly don’t want you to think there were any personal feelings going against you when the company filed the formal request."

"Oh, no, Phil," the Professor answered. "I never take it personally when someone tries to pull the project rug out from under me. How could I possibly take it personally at the wording in the request?"

"David,—" DeVenue started.

"—Yes, how was that phrased again? Something like Matrix Energy Systems strongly recommends that the remaining project scientist, Dr. David Martin, be released from the
project and that final integration proceed under the management of Matrix Energy Systems. How could I ever take that personally?"

"Professor," DeVenue said a little more formally. "I know you do not agree with the proposal for obvious reasons, but I was hoping we could put that behind us."

"Perhaps after some time," the Professor said. "Right now, why don’t you just tell me what I can do for you."

"I was wondering if you have the technical report on the accident finished."

"Report?" The Professor’s left eye twitched. "How did you even know I was working on a report?"

DeVenue smiled. "Why, doctor, I get paid to keep track of this project."

"Well, Phil, when the report is done you will have to get a copy from Colonel Bradley. He is the on-scene military officer in charge of all dissemination. And suddenly the project information distribution has become strictly need-to-know."

The Professor wondered how the man from Matrix Energy Systems had been told about the accident, but he decided he had other issues to worry about. Granted, Matrix Systems was the company that the government funding for Project Traverse was actually contracted through. As a result, Matrix was technically the company that was developing Project Traverse, but aside from skimming some money off for “administrative processing,” they really weren’t in the decision making loop. In fact, when Phil visited, he tended to get in everyone’s way.

"Our board has been made aware of the accident," DeVenue was saying, "and they are anxious to know what went wrong and how you intend to fix it."
Professor Martin leaned back and rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. He could feel the muscle in his left eye twitch against the palm of his hand.

"Phil, you can get the report from the Colonel when it is done. And that is if he decides to give it to you. Now if you'll excuse me." The Professor waved a tired hand like a magic wand over the paper on his desk. DeVenue stiffened visibly and his clasped funeral parlor hands tightened into a muscled knot.

"Dr. Martin, I must remind you that you work for Matrix Energy Systems and the contract states --"

"-- No, Phil," Martin said, cutting him off, "I work for the University and you're not about to start giving me orders. I have zero time for you. I suggest you make any requests through Colonel Bradley who oversees the day-to-day military side of things. Please close the door on your way out."

DeVenue stood in the doorway as if thinking of something else to say. But when the Professor looked up to tell him again to leave, DeVenue was gone.

A

Brother John Tone was enjoying himself. He had worked a hard day with the villagers, but the stiffness in his muscles felt satisfying, as if he had given something to the world that day. He now felt particularly good after eating his fill at supper.

The brothers now sat at the same table talking over their empty bowls. The other meals during the day were observed in silence, but supper was reserved for a time of
community and discussions about the day’s events or intellectual topics regarding their religious studies.

On that particular evening, John was talking with three of the monks sitting closest to him at the long, rough-hewn wooden table. The talk was light and cheerful despite the cold night rolling across the British countryside.

John was telling of his time with the villagers that day. He generally spent a portion of every day visiting with the villagers, or helping with their crop planting. The few brothers involved in the conversation were leaning in towards John. Their eyes were wide, like children listening to stories while sitting around a fire. None of the other monks ever worked with the villagers. And John had to get special permission from the Abbott to travel outside the monastery each day.

He was just winding up to the climax of the story.

“You wouldn’t believe what the man said right after they were done pulling the plow through that soil. You have to understand that that soil is as hard as the knotted muscle on a horse’s leg,” John said.

“What did he say?” a monk sitting across from John asked. The man ran his finger back and forth under his nose as if not quite able to satisfy an itch. John always noticed that particular monk did that when he got excited about hearing something. John was about to answer when a high pitched voice from the other end of the table cut off all discussion.

“But what the man said, Brother Tone, is not really relevant to what we are looking to accomplish here at the monastery. Now is it?”

Brother Tone looked across the table and found all eyes cast down. All eyes, that is, except for the small blue piercing eyes set in Brother Damian’s pale, watery face. Damian
sat at the right hand of Abbott Caecus. Even the Abbot was intently studying the grain pattern in the wooden table.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," Brother Damian said again. "What they may or may not have said in the village does not really have much to do with what we are trying to accomplish here in the monastery."

Tone responded quietly, "I thought the conversation I had in the field today with the villager did have something to do with our mission here."

"What is it that the peasant said that had such a bearing on our situation here?" Brother Damian asked. He leaned forward and rested his folded hands on the table in front of him awaiting the young monk's answer.

"When the man finished plowing a particularly tough section of field, he said that he didn't mind the labor all that much. He said that the strain in his legs reminded him he was alive. He also said that he felt that whatever labor he gave today, and whatever pain he suffered today to feed his family, would be rewarded to him in the afterlife," John finished.

"Are we taking our religious teachings from the peasant of the field now?" Brother Damian asked.

"I think that God's light appears in strange places," Tone replied.

"The only place God's light appears," Damian said, "is in the holy books here in this monastery." The man's voice sounded like it tightened into a coil ready to spring. "The peasants of the field are meant to supply us with the staples of life so that we may continue God's work."
“Brother Damian,” John answered, “you are exactly right. We do owe our daily existence to the toil of the villagers. This meal we just finished came from their labor. We often eat better than the villagers themselves…”

“As we should!” Brother Damian practically shrieked. The man’s pale face began to tinge with a slight pink. “They are there to serve us and nothing more.”

“As you say, Brother Damian,” John replied. “I did not intend to insult you. I was simply relating my day to my fellow brothers.”

Brother Damian settled back into his chair. “Of course you didn’t intend any insult. But perhaps your brothers would be more interested in what you read today of the holy books than your stories of the peasants. So what did you read today, Brother Tone?”

John paused before responding. “I didn’t read anything today. I did not arrive at the monastery until just before supper call. Since this is planting season, the village has been very busy. I was planning on reading before I retired for the evening.”

“Ah, yes,” Brother Damian replied. “I’m sure you were. Perhaps you will talk to us tomorrow night of your readings and the lessons derived from the Holy Scripture, not the world of toil and sin outside of these walls.”

Brother Damian stood and walked quickly out of the dining hall. One of the other monks picked up the man’s used food bowls and took them to the kitchen. The tight silence was replaced by chairs scraping back on the rough stone floor.

A couple of brothers gave John helpless shrugs.

The head cook sidled up to John while cleaning away the table and said quietly, “When there are serpents nearby, it is best to tread carefully.”

John looked at him, puzzled.
The monk, with an afterthought, stepped back over and whispered, "Or at least carry a large stick to beat them with."

Before John could reply the monk scurried off to the kitchen.
When the sun was high overhead, Laz woke and wondered why he was looking at a thick canopy of trees where his bedroom ceiling should be. After a few seconds he recalled the forest, the leaf bed, and the tender lump still standing out on his head. He sighed once, thankful that the pounding headache from the day before was gone. He resolved to get up and find his way out of the woods and back to Atlanta. He stood, like a turtle crawling carefully out of his shell, and stretched his sore body.

The forest was even dimmer than the previous day. The sun paled behind an overcast sky, intensifying the dim and gloom of the woods and choking brush. His body steamed faintly in the chill air.

The hunger was still there, a small animal gnawing at him from the inside. But this time he didn’t even have a stick of gum to chew on. He decided to move quickly to keep his mind off the pain. He moved in what he thought was generally the same direction as he had walked the day before.

After a couple of steps Laz froze.

“Oh, Shit!” he cried as he frantically grabbed at his clean-room suit, pulling it off as quickly as possible. What felt like an eternity only took a few seconds. He pulled the suit down around his waist to find several ants latched onto his arms. Yelling in pain, Laz slapped at his arms and pinched the biting insects firmly between two fingers. Next he dropped his suit to his ankles and whipped his tee-shirt off. Two more ants were holding on firmly to his beer-belly stomach. The bites felt like someone was holding two burning matches against his skin.
“Shit! Get the hell off me!” he cried. Fighting through the searing pain, he backed away from the ants. He backed into a bush whose branches cracked under his weight. When one branch stuck Laz hard in the back, he whirled away from it and smacked face first into the trunk of a tree. Off balance he tried to take a step back but the suit around his ankles tangled his feet. Laz toppled backwards and tried to whirl around like a cat landing on all four feet. Instead of landing on his hands, he flopped face down on the ground making a noise like a falling sack of flour.

He rolled slowly to a sitting position. The pain from his bruised nose competed with the ant bites. Laz ground the small bits of ants left on his fingers into a fine dust that he brushed off on his synthetic clean-room suit.

He stood again, let his jeans fall to join his clean-room suit around his ankles. Like a surrender flag in the dark forest, Laz stood in white boxers and checked over his body one more time to make certain he was ant free.

“At least they missed my dick. Gotta be grateful for that.” He commented quietly. Without further comment, he paused for a morning piss. He aimed in the area he thought the ant bed might be located under the leaf mat and said a small prayer that all ants have a drowning piss death.

Once he was dressed again, Laz started off through the forest for another day of trudging through the dense brush. The sun, a dim light bulb in a smoky room, moved slowly behind overcast skies.

The hunger pangs subsided but his thirst was intensifying. His dry throat felt ragged and he knew he had to get something to drink soon. If it meant he had to filter the muddy water through his tee-shirt, then so be it.
The cool air became colder and the forest even dimmer as the day wore on. The dead leaves dragged at his feet like the soft dirt of a newly covered grave and brush continued to slap at his legs. The thicker branches and brambles occasionally tore slits in his clean-room suit. Most of the tears occurred when he felt too tired to disentangle himself from the briars. He would simply push his way through regardless of the consequences. He forced his way though more and more branches that grazed his arms like a stranger's unwelcome touch.

About half way through the day his exhaustion became palpable. It enveloped him as he consciously willed one leg to move, then the other. The continual forest twilight settled on his soul, and the padded forest silence was the nail that drove the gloom home. Laz had not heard a single noise other than the soft shuffle of his own feet. The thick leaf carpeting dampened out all other sounds.

He found himself analyzing the sound-dampening properties of the decaying leaves, comparing it with foam walls in sound rooms.

“That's right,” he said out loud just to hear something. “Not a sound out here! Would love to see a fucking squirrel right about now. I don’t care if they say they’re rats with fluffy tails, I'd eat its ass right now!”

Laz was starting to become scared. So far, this endless forest had no water, no food, and in almost two days of walking, not one damned sign of civilization. Not one damned power line.

“Not one damn road! Not even a dirt road!” Laz shouted.

He was beginning to think that he would die in these stinking woods. Here he was, Lazarus A. Stevens, a successful mechanical engineer, and he could die not even knowing
where the hell he was. His flesh would decay, his bones rot, and no one would know where he was except the infuriating trees that blocked the sun's heat.

He had struggled all his life to be a success and he didn't deserve to go like this. Granted, he had come from a wealthy family that could enjoy the leisure life. But, he had to work through school, beating his brains out over lecture after lecture of theoretical problems that had no direct application in his daily life. Not until he worked on Project Traverse did the technical theory even come close to applying to something that would impact his life. And in this case, it had impacted his life in a way he hadn't thought of in his wildest dreams.

He pushed himself for the sheer knowledge and promise of what the future held despite the amount of work it took. He had heard knowledge was power. In some strange, most likely misdirected way, he thought that by gaining knowledge he was gaining power. But it was power after a fashion. He didn't have power in the direct sense. He wouldn't be the one to build the next atomic device or find a cure for cancer. For good or bad, that was real power in the traditional way -- the power to affect people's lives. And although Traverse was something that could alter the face of humanity on a global scale, he was only a cog in the wheel when getting the device built. But as an engineer he did gain power in and over his own life. He was able to create things using his mind and abilities, to affect the material world around him. Wasn't that power?

And why was all that effort coming to nothing? The tools were there to save him. If only he had a Global Positioning System receiver, or even a compass. Those were tools of his trade in a way. They could help him out of the forest. He didn't even have a knife, not that he would find it very useful, he admitted.
But what good would all his training and tools do him now? He had fought for and won a good job after graduation. And, that was while most of his friends had scrambled for whatever job they could find. Society used to respect the engineering profession, Laz lamented. People he met on the street who weren’t engineers just thought it was hard, so engineers must be smart. But generally, people really had no true understanding of what engineering was.

The view from a corporate perspective was worse. The managers saw engineers as a crop of intellectual laborers moving 'en masse' from the engineering schools. That’s how the trade magazines even dealt with them.

“There will be a bumper crop of top notch engineers graduating this year, so it will be an employers market.” In Laz’ book that meant low wages because of too much competition.

But he had jumped into the market fray hell-bent-for-glory anyway. He did pretty well for himself after he landed the Project Traverse work. Plenty of spending money, no real responsibilities aside from his job and his cat, and free weekends to go out and have a good time. In fact, he thought Heather and he were both lucky since they were able to walk away from their jobs on weekends and have time only to themselves.

Right now none of that mattered. He was going to die here, and the trees -- and it seemed like no one else -- wouldn’t give a good-God-damn about him. Laz was no survival expert, but he knew that if he didn’t find water soon, he couldn’t last much longer.

As if in answer to his silent pleading, it started to rain. The drops made loud spattering noises on his dirt smudged, nylon, clean-room suit. Laz lifted his head and felt the rain's cold sting on his face. Standing in one spot face up and mouth opened wide, he tried to
catch as much water as possible. After only a couple of drops hit his mouth he looked around in awe at all the water going to waste soaking the trees and ground.

Quickly he pulled his clean-room suit off, knelt in the soggy leaves, and held the suit stretched at arm's length to form a catch basin. He awkwardly clamped one end of the nylon in his teeth. After a minute a slow trickle of dirt cleaned from the nylon and water started flowing around his clenched teeth and into his mouth. He gulped at the small stream needlessly as if the sound of his parched throat were a prayer that would call the water into his mouth faster.

The rainfall increased and the water flowed faster off the nylon jump-suit. He gurgled when he tried to breath and drink at the same time. Laz finally settled on catching a mouthful of water, taking a deep breath in through his nose, and then swallowing the water. He watched as bits of leaves and dirt flowed down the suit and into his mouth, but he didn’t care. He was drinking water. The sweetest water he had ever tasted in his life. He kept drinking even after he started shivering in the cold rain.

Finally, after ten minutes, Laz dropped his arms and started shivering uncontrollably. He quickly put his soaked jumpsuit back on and sat down in the wet leaves with his hood pulled over his head. He wracked himself trying to think of a way to collect and save more of the water that was running into the ground. But, despite his best efforts, all he could do was sit and watch the rain fall.

He lowered his head and inhaled the dark, dank smell that rose up from the wet, decaying leaves. The last thing he wanted was to rot away as part of that disgusting, smelly mulch. No, Laz thought, he would find a way to get home soon. He felt better now.
Laz felt genuinely sad watching the sun set yet again. It was the first time he consciously thought of the sun as a friend, a companion on his daily travels. The forest had gone almost pitch dark when the sun’s last light shot underneath the edge of the clouds on the horizon. A sign from a friend that he would see him again in the morning. A promise of return that he was glad to accept.

He didn’t want to accept the fact that he would spend another night in the forest, but it was obvious at this point. Hunger's dull ache was now a constant companion that did not say good-bye for the evening. To add the final injury, a dense cold settled in that was much worse than the night before. Laz’s clothes were still damp from the rain earlier in the day, so the chill settled deep into his bones. He found a sheltered spot under a large tree, pulled his now familiar leaf blanket over him and fell immediately into a deep sleep.

Laz woke in a parched-mouth, semi-conscious daze. Leaning against a tree, he slowly managed to get his clothes off. He stripped to his boxers as before and with his body steaming in the frigid air, casually brushed off ants that weren’t there. He thought it odd that the ant bites didn’t hurt this time.

When he tried to take a piss, he couldn’t make a puddle big enough to drown a single ant. With nothing else to do, he pulled his clothes back on and started walking. When he noticed the steam rising from his body, he thought it was funny that the chill air felt good. Vaguely he wondered if he might have a fever. He dismissed the thought and started forward again into the woods.

He felt different this morning. His coordination didn’t seem quite right. Immediately he bumped into several trees and stumbled to his knees. He looked up and saw the sun
overhead as he had expected his friend to return. Beams of cold light broke through the overhead canopy forming a patchwork of spotlights in the dim forest. These light circles, illuminating the floor of the woods, made the rest of the forest look even darker. But at least Laz had found his sign. The light was from the heavens, he told himself, and they'll lead home.

He stood again and stumbled from one warm ray of light to another. He unzipped his clean-room suit because it was hot, then immediately zipped it up again because he was cold.

“No, it’s not a fever,” he mumbled out loud, “Just find some good house with good people who’ll take care of you and you’ll be okay. Just find a house, with a hot bath and good food. I’m sure they’ll give me some food. Then I can get home.”

That quiet, calculated voice in the back of his mind told him that he was rambling, that he was talking gibberish. But Laz liked the idea of a warm house and nice family. He liked the idea of a warm fire he could soak up. A fire.

“No there’s a thought,” he said to the nearest pine tree. “Too bad I don’t know how to make one.” Laz slapped his hand on the trunk of the tree like he was giving a friend a hearty slap on the back, as if to say it was nice seeing you. “I’d burn your ass to the ground if I could.”

Laz stopped occasionally to gaze up at the sun, the one companion he trusted to always return. But when he looked back down into the forest with contracted pupils, the darkness was thicker and even more oppressive.

When the beams of light started bending and weaving forms that moved through and around tree trunks, the soft, objective voice in his mind told him that he was hallucinating. The shafts of light no longer came down on his head as before. They still found his face
every so often, but they moved while he stood in one spot. At times he was surprised to see that his legs were actually moving when he would have bet money that he was standing still. Or, he reasoned, maybe that was someone else he watched.

"I'd like a glass of water, please!" he shouted out loud. "Why can't I have a glass of water?" Surely the other person would have a glass of water.

"I bet there's a sink up here with a nice tall glass of water that I can have. They may even have a Coca-Cola waiting for me. Hell, people! It's not like I'm asking for free beer!"

Laz laughed at his own joke and stumbled once to the ground. He picked up a still-green fallen tree branch that he swung in the air.

"I'm in a parade to find the water," he laughed. He followed the light, a parade of light that would lead him out of this God-forsaken land. The forest he reasoned was just evil at heart. The trees would starve him to death and let his body decay with the rest of the stench and then suck him up as tree food. Death to him, nutrients to them.

"The light will lead the way," he cried aloud. It was concrete.

"There," he said mentally to his disapproving voice. "You should be happy. There won't be anymore babbling from me. I have a plan. Follow the light. It's a solid, logical thought."

"Of course it is," his voice replied. "Whatever you say."

So, like an exit sign in a burning building, the lights led Laz forward.

Time condensed to a measure of stumbling from one tree to the next. Eventually the lights began to dim. Laz kept stumbling along with the branch on his shoulder in the direction he thought the last light beam lead. He fell a second time and groaned back up to his feet, still carrying the wood. No, it felt like the wood carried him. Laz saw himself
hoisted on the back of the green leaves and carried through the woods, following the light. The light that disappeared leading to the path home.

Laz found himself bouncing off one tree and then another. Stumbling forward with the branch still on his shoulder, he kept moving. Plodding through the leaf carpet under the gaze of the silent towering trees now arrayed like sentinels in the pitch dark. He fell a third time and used the lower limb of a nearby tree to pull himself and his ceremonial tree branch back up. He kept moving.

With no sunlight to guide him, Laz started following the splashes of colored light sparkling in front of one tree and then another. His calm voice came back and told him that he shouldn’t be seeing colors.

“White light is composed of all the colors of the spectrum,” he replied, in the most academic tone he could muster. “It makes sense to see a few of the colors now and then.”

“That might be true in a few select cases of natural prisms occurring in nature,” the voice responded. “But in this case there’s isn’t any light to work with. Or haven’t you noticed? The lights are coming from your own head.”

“That might be a problem.” Laz thought.

Brilliant flashes of reds, greens, and blues swam across his eyes and fluttered off into the trees. He stood and marveled at the angelic forms twisting and rising into the sky. Then his vision faded to tunnel vision where the only thing he saw were those miraculous images, the swirling forms soaring to the sky. The shapes finally faded and Laz saw nothing.

The quiet voice informed him that he was falling to the ground, collapsing onto the leaf mat with his tree branch on top of him. But, he didn’t believe what he was told. He didn’t feel any weight. And furthermore, he didn’t care.
Brother Damian wrapped the cloak tighter around him and worked his way down the path toward the river. It would take him half the morning prayer time to reach the river. That would allow him only a short time to talk. Damian would need to remaining time to make it back to the monastery so that he wasn’t missed.

The morning presented an unusual cold spell for the newly arrived spring. He knew the villagers were worried about the frost damaging the newly planted crops, but that was not his concern. The villagers would provide the same amount of crops to the monastery in the fall regardless of how good or bad the crop was. He would see to it personally.

Brother Tone, Damian realized, would probably have a different opinion. The young monk was far too interested in the concerns of the local peasants, the rabble that worked the fields.

He had come down hard on Tone the other night at dinner. Damian smiled at how uncomfortable he could make people if he exerted his full power. In this case, the young monk needed to be brought in line. Damian had watched Tone scurrying up the hill from the village right before the meal. The young monk was obviously trying to make it to the meal on time.

It was then that Damian realized Tone was spending far too much time outside the monastery. Damian should never have allowed the Abbott to grant Tone his daily work
leave. Brother Damian was the only person at the monastery allowed, or that should be allowed, he corrected himself, to have outside contact.

When he heard of Tone’s request, he thought nothing of it at the time. But soon after he started helping the villagers in the daily chores, Tone started talking of the peasants as the “the monastery’s flock” which should be guided and cared for. Those were dangerous words from a man whose very bread came from that “flock.” What, Damian wondered, would Tone do if the village flock suddenly decided that they didn’t have to give the monastery food, or pay taxes for their immortal souls.

The young monk had to be brought into line. Damian could not allow him to plant any nonsense about the importance of peasants in the minds of other brothers. Ideas such as caring for the rabble were like weeds that quickly took root in idle minds. Damian had too many things on his mind to worry about, and Tone was becoming a nuisance that needed to be nipped in the bud. He would have to speak to the Abbott about that shortly.

But today Brother Damian had more important things on his mind. The man, this Calder, was supposed to be waiting for him by the river. A local lord who made use of the man’s services, recommended him.

Damian quickened his pace. It was important that no one noticed him returning to the monastery. If made it quick enough, all the brothers would still be in morning prayer.

Damian rounded the last bend in the path and found a small, shallow river. The water in the river was flowing slowly over smooth stones like it was in no hurry to reach a final destination. There was a man wrapped in a heavy, dark traveler’s cloak standing by the river. The man didn’t move. He seemed to be transfixed by the motion of the water.

Damian cleared his throat and the man turned slowly around but didn’t say anything.
“Are you Calder?” Damian asked.

“Who else would I be?” Calder answered. “Did you expect to find some stranger standing here at the exact location that you arranged to meet Calder?”

Damian didn’t respond. He walked closer and stood about ten feet from the man. Calder’s face was broad and dark, with a muscled jaw line that gave the impression of great strength. Damian was suddenly very self conscious of his own frail frame. But, he reminded himself, true power did not come through physical strength. Damian was sure the man carried a sword under the traveler’s cloak. For his part, Damian only had a small dagger sheathed in his waistband. Damian knew he would be no match for the more powerful traveler. No matter, he told himself. He was here for other purposes.

“I understand you offer services for compensation,” Brother Damian stated as firmly as he could.

“I occasionally provide useful information for my benefactors,” Calder answered.

“Are you looking for other potential benefactors?”

“I am always interested in helping to serve.”

“What I have need of may require some effort,” Damian said.

“I can devote all of my effort to the benefactor of the proper standing,” Calder responded. Brother Damian folded his hands in front of him. He was pleased that the discussions were going so well so quickly.

“Very well, then. As I am sure you know, the monastery can be very generous to those souls who aid in the true calling,” Damian said. “We offer plenary indulgences that will still allow you to pass through to the heavenly life beyond, despite some minor infractions that we mortals of weak flesh may incur.”
Calder didn’t respond.

“Or, not so minor infractions,” Damian added. “God’s forgiveness is with his chosen, after all.”

“I have no need for forgiveness now.” Calder had a small, amused smile on his face.

“I tend to work with benefactors for more worldly support.”

Calder withdrew a small leather pouch that he bounced in his hand once. Damian heard the distinct rattle of coins. The pouch was the standard size to exchange gold coins for rather high priced services. The pouch that Calder flashed was the same size as the pouch that held a local village taxes for one year. Fortunately for Damian, the monastery collected taxes and food from many such villages.

“I see that your other benefactors are quite generous,” Brother Damian commented.

“They seem to value my services, yes.”

Brother Damian didn’t say anything. Instead he listened to the water falling over the stones in the river behind Calder. The sound made him thirsty.

“Very well,” Damian said suddenly. “I have an assignment for you.”

“As you wish,” Calder replied.
“Come then,” Damian stated. “I do not wish to be seen here and we have much to discuss.”

Damian turned towards the woods and, as he expected, Calder fell in behind him.

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Laz heard death approaching. It seemed strange that death should have multiple voices. A garbled language he thought he recognized, but couldn’t place. He pondered the meaning of the voices while he floated in a dark limbo that he knew was death’s waiting room. Perhaps it was death with his patients that he heard? The singsong voices of dying men and women pleading for life. The muffled wailing of souls that knew they were lost, straining desperately to return to the world, to the people they loved. The people were crying over caskets and dirt-mound graves.

No pleading would come from him, he swore. Laz would welcome death in this dark forest. He would then say “Fuck you!” to the world that had swallowed up the most difficult and yet productive years of his life. Sad thoughts seeped in through his blurred thoughts. He realized he had left nothing behind to be remembered by. And, it was too late now.

Images of Atlanta, his fiancée, and the Chamber with the Traverse Device swirled through his mind. These were interspersed with flashes of a wraith white sky and brown forest with speckles of green.

Then there were faces, dirty, smeared with black soot, peering down at him. He willed his eyes to open, to prove that he was awake, or to stare death in the eye, he wasn’t
sure which. He heard the language of death he’d listened to minutes before. Or, was it hours before? It didn’t matter.

Darkness came again. He was vaguely aware of red spider line veins in the inside of his eyelids. After what felt like only a few minutes the voices returned. This time they were deeper, more resonant, with the occasional raspy voice floating above the others. Death had returned. Maybe he would finish the job this time, Laz thought.

Laz knew he was right. Death was indeed taking him. He felt rough hands lifting him and the delirium started to release him to total darkness.

Right before he returned to the comfortable, painless black void he had recently come to know, he heard one word that he understood. One word that caused him to pause on his journey to life beyond. Death’s hoarse voice said distinctly in his ear.

“American.”

Day 2
Saturday, 4:12 PM

“The system wasn’t supposed to be operational,” Colonel Bradley said irritably.

“Colonel, why do you think the damn thing was allowed to spin up? Tell me that,” Phil DeVenue demanded. “Have you ever heard of a military system that didn’t have a fully functioning back up control system? Of course there’s a back up system that could have easily shut down the Traverse Device once it cranked up.”

Both men were standing. The Colonel moved from behind his desk and moved to the entrance of this office. He glanced in the hall to make sure no one was standing nearby. He
then quietly closed the door to his office. He turned, and in a viper whisper that could wilt flowers said, “What are you trying to say, Phil?”

“Colonel, you’re a smart man,” DeVenue whispered back. “The potential for profit is just too damn big here. Can’t you see that? The board was getting anxious and they needed some proof that the fucking thing worked.”

The Colonel planted his hands on his hips and repeated, “What are you saying, Phil.”

DeVenue ignored the man and continued. “Do you think all the funding for this thing comes strictly from the government? Sure the taxpayer picked up about half the bill. But Matrix footed the other half. The board is not happy about footing a couple of billion dollars while they sit on their ass waiting for a turn around in profit.” DeVenue leaned in so that he was only a few inches from the Colonel’s face. “They wanted to see some tangible proof that the system actually works. Otherwise, they would have pulled the plug and cut their losses within two weeks.”

“What are you saying --” The Colonel started to ask the question a third time.

“--You know exactly what I am saying, Colonel, and you’d better get on board quick,” DeVenue rasped. The businessman’s face started to flush red.

“This system is for military purposes only,” the Colonel answered.

“Colonel, should I tell you again the amount of money Matrix has put into this project?” DeVenue raised his eyebrows like he was talking to a child. “This system, when fully developed, will be privatized and marketed by Matrix Energy Systems. You didn’t think that after all that money, we would only use the Traverse Device to send troops and bombs around the world, did you? Colonel, to start with, we will replace all the airlines in
the world. And that is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Do you know how many people travel every day on the airlines in the United States alone?” The Colonel didn’t answer.

“Millions of people, Colonel. Think of those millions and the money they represent on a yearly basis. Then there is the freight business to keep track of. We’re not only talking about shipments from Atlanta to California. I am talking about putting satellites in orbit around Jupiter in the blink of an eye. I am talking about Matrix Energy Systems, building, owning and providing transport to vacation colonies on Mars and the moon. The opportunities are endless, Colonel. The profit is endless.” DeVenue’s eyes glazed over as if the dollar signs were floating in front of him. He focused in on Bradley and continued.

“Of course there are power issues that still need to be addressed. The Traverse Device as it is requires too much power. But we expect the power requirements to come down. And Matrix Systems is already working on small, high power supplies. It’s amazing what a little profit motive will do.” Phil DeVenue smiled broadly.

“And you know, Colonel Bradley,” DeVenue rested a hand on the Colonel’s shoulder. “We will need someone to run and organize that transportation system. Naturally that man would need to be familiar with the very origins of the Traverse system. And that man would receive compensation beyond his wildest dreams.” Bradley didn’t say anything in return.

“But of course,” DeVenue continued, “that person also has to know how to play ball. Are you a team player, Colonel Bradley?”
CHAPTER 4

Laz woke in a dark room with flickering light coming through a window with metal bars set in a rough hewn wooden door. The light flickered against one wall and lit the room just enough so Laz could see that he lay on a dirt floor sloping from an outer wall to the inner door. There were no other windows or doors in the room and he was alone.

He tried to stand and immediately discovered the height of the ceiling by cracking his head onto cold stone. Laz fell back to the dirt and felt warm blood seeping down one side of his face.

He lay in a fetal position willing, praying for his head to stop pounding and the blood to subside. He realized after a minute that most of the warmth he suddenly felt was the flush on his face. The blood was luckily only a small trickle. After a few minutes he tried to stand again.

He kept low this time with his knees bent and walked to the door. He first looked for a door handle, but as he had suspected, there was none. Judging by what he could feel with his hands, the door had no other feature than the rusted iron bars set into the wood. There weren't even any hinges to work with to attempt an escape.

Laz saw a passageway through the barred window. The walls of the passageway were rough stone and the floor was dirt, packed hard from foot traffic. The only other feature he could see was a torch set in the wall a few feet down the hall. Stench was the one thing that did impress Laz in a very negative way.
His cell smelled like freshly turned dirt, an earthy smell like worms that he intensely disliked. But the odor was at least tolerable. The stench from the passageway, however, was unbearable. The smell of raw sewage wanted to make him puke. If he hadn't seen for himself that the floors of the passageway were dry, Laz would have swore that there were pools of sewage just outside the door.

Laz held his breath and pressed his face to the side of the door so that he could see down the passageway. Because of the angle and narrowness of the passage, he was only able to see about ten feet in either direction.

He stepped back into his cell and took several deep breaths. He checked the time on his watch. It was almost noon outside. It looked like midnight in his cell.

Laz held his breath again and moved back to the door. Again, he couldn't see anything and the only sound was the faint hiss of the oil-soaked torch burning.

"Hello!" Laz shouted, and almost threw up from the smell that hit his face when he inhaled. He pulled his shirt up over his mouth and tried to breathe shallowly.

The sudden sound of his voice startled him. But he noted that the sound did not echo, so he guessed that the passage didn't extend much further into the darkness.

He uncovered his mouth briefly and shouted again, "Hello!" He couldn't think of anything else to say so he yelled, "I demand to see my lawyer!"

There was no response. There weren't even any complaints from any nearby cells. With the stench in the passageway as it was, he was sure there were other prisoners. And, the smell was just too much to bear. Laz retreated to the back of his cell.

He checked the time on his watch again. It was only two minutes later, still not quite noon outside.
He inspected his clothing and found that he still wore the clean-room suit zipped all the way up. He couldn’t tell if the odor at the back of the cell was his own body odor, or some residual that crept in from the passageway. He guessed it was a mix of both.

The pain in his head was subsiding, apparently the cut from the ceiling hadn’t been that bad. He was about to finger the cut on his forehead, and decided it was probably better to let the cut heal without probing the wound with dirty fingers.

Suddenly Laz heard a scraping noise. The sound was like someone dragging a sack along the passageway’s dirt floor. A metal latch was thrown open and a small slot Laz had not noticed in the bottom of the door appeared. The slot was backlit by the torch light. Two clay bowls were shoved in roughly. Laz scrambled over on his knees to the opening.

“When are you going to let me out? Where the hell am I?” Laz demanded immediately. The dirty, smeared hand withdrew from the cell quickly and the hatch covering the slot was slammed into place. Laz heard what sounded like a metal latch being thrown into place.

“I want to talk to someone in charge!” Laz flung himself at the door in time to see the back of a small man with a head covered in sores. Small pockets of puss and scabs riddled the partially bald scalp. For a second time Laz had to repress an urge to vomit.

“I want to talk to someone now!” He tried to rattle the door by shaking the metal bars in the window, but to little effect.

The small man only shuffled his feet faster in response and retreated back up the passageway.
After Laz convinced himself the man wasn’t going to return, he picked up the clay bowl to inspect it. The food in the bowl was something like stale oatmeal. There was a bone with small bits of meat still attached lying on the top.

“What the hell!” Laz said out loud. He turned the bone so the torch light from the window reflected off of it. There were clearly teeth marks on the bone where someone had already chewed on it. He tossed the bone through the bars in the window with a “Crazy assholes!” to support his move. Yes, he told himself, he was almost starving from at least three days of not eating, but like hell if he would eat someone’s leftovers like some dog at the foot of a table.

His hunger getting the best of him, he tried not too look to closely at the stale oatmeal when he scooped two fingers worth and shoved it in his mouth. The small bowl of gruel only took the edge off his hunger. It didn’t make it disappear. The food also made him thirsty. When he finished cleaning the bowl as best he could, Laz turned to the other bowl that held water in it. The water bowl was dirty, but the water appeared relatively clean, at least as far as he could tell in the dim light. He drank it down as fast as he could just to get it into his stomach.

The strong taste of green algae almost made him gag, but he forced the water down. He put the bowls down by the door, duck walked to the back of his cell and huddled into his clean-room suit as best he could.

He hoped he didn’t have a concussion from when he hit his head on the ceiling, but he fell asleep before he could continue the thought much further.
Laz woke up eight hours and twelve minutes later in total darkness. He reached out and tried to fumble for the light switch on the bedside table, but only grasped at stone walls. His breathing became rapid and panicky. He scrambled onto his knees and wondered where his blankets were.

He called out, “Hello?” and realized then that the dream he was having was not just a nightmare. He was in a dungeon of some sorts, somewhere on the planet and it was pitch dark. The darkness was like nothing he had ever experienced. He held his hand in front of his face and could not see a thing. The torch had obviously burnt out and the man with the sores on his head had not replaced it.

He pressed the light button on his watch and a very faint, soft green glow filled the room. He was surprised at how well he could see with that small amount of light. The cell was roughly rectangular in shape with a low, flat ceiling that looked to be made of stones held together with some type of concrete. There were no windows and the cell was only about four feet tall.

The light on his watch timed out after a few seconds and he pressed the light button again. He had to do that two more times before he decided there was nothing really to look at in the cell.

Instead, he pressed the button and looked at the watch itself. Laz watched the digital seconds tick off. The soft green glow became his small world. He tried not turning it on for a while, but he darkness closed in with unbearable weight. He turned the watch light on several times to reassure himself that the ceiling was not getting any closer to the ground.

Laz eventually came to realize the dreaded inevitable, he had to shit. He considered using one of the bowls and passing it back into the hallway. He figured, however, that
regardless of what he put into the bowl, his next serving would be placed in it as well. So, like a dog, he picked a corner and dug a whole in the pitch black. His only consolation was that it was so dark, he didn’t have to watch himself or look at his own waste.

Laz woke again seventeen hours and seventeen minutes after he first arrived in the cell, or at least when he estimated he first arrived. The cell was still dark and he used the light on the watch to keep him company. But his second fear came true too soon for his thinking. The light on his watch started to dim and the numbers on the digital display started to fade out.

He argued with himself about what was more important, to tell the time, or to have light in the darkness. He reasoned back and forth that the small light would help him keep his sanity, but keeping track of the time was also important. Naturally, he needed to the light to even see what time it was. In the end, his arguments were pointless. He used the watch light only four more times to see what time it was before the battery went completely dead.

Laz woke to the sound of scraping feet coming down the passageway. He had no idea how long it had been since he fell asleep. He felt numb and disoriented. He instinctively looked at his watch, but only saw the dull gray face with no numeric display on it. His disorientation passed when he saw that a light was moving down the passageway. Laz heard the sweet sound of a smoky, sizzling, oil-soaked torch. He jumped up from the floor and headed to the door as fast as he could without hitting his head on the ceiling.

“I want to get the hell out of here!” He yelled. “I want you to tell me where the hell I am!”
The man was already under the door, so all Laz could see was the scab-ridden head below the bars on the door.

Without fanfare, the slot on the bottom of the door was opened and two bowls shoved in. The dirty hand gestured as if telling Laz to crawl through the slot. Laz realized that the man wanted his old bowls. Laz considered not giving them to the man, but he figured that would only make things worse. So he dutifully shoved the two other bowls out the door.

“And I want more food!” Laz shouted to the retreating man.

Suddenly he thought of how his watch could still be useful. He took off his wrist watch and held it just outside the bars of the door. Careful not to drop the watch, he angled the flattest part of the metal band to reflect the passageway.

On the blurry metal surface he was able to see a small man with a bad leg moving as quickly as he could up the passageway. When the man reached the stairs, in order to get his bad leg to the next step, he braced his outstretched arm against one wall like he was fending off a football tackler. After a couple of steps the man disappeared from view.

Laz was thankful that the man had left the torch in the holder on the wall of the passageway. He was able to angle his watch around so that he could barely make out other doors, presumably other cells identical to his, in either direction. Laz saw that his cell was perhaps four cells down from the set of stairs that the man had just ascended. In the other direction, the passageway vanished into blackness.

This time, Laz did not check to see if the bone had been gnawed on first. He just ate it. He didn’t stay awake very long after he ate. He fell asleep and again woke in darkness and the unbearable sensation that the ceiling was getting closer and closer. Even when he
reached up to touch the ceiling, he was sure it had sunken down a little. But this time he had no way to see if it was falling or not.

Day 3

Sunday, 7:35 AM

In Reston, Virginia, Major General Macmillan’s housekeeper, Rachel, knocked gently on the General’s bedroom door.

“Yes, come in,” he said sharply. She walked in and saw he was sitting on the edge of his double bed trying to get his left foot into a stubborn loafer. The loafers, the color of varnished wood, were new and his shoehorn didn’t seem to be up to the task of getting his heel into the stiff leather. Rachel knew that he was about to be late for church and late was something the General never was, at least when it came to meeting people in positions higher than his own.

“Rachel, you really didn’t have to come in today. The work could have waited until tomorrow.” The General softened his tone a bit.

“Oh, that’s quite all right, General. You did give me Friday off to visit with the grands and I wanted to make sure not to get behind in my work.”

“So how are your grandchildren these days?” The General sat up and faced her squarely.

“They’re doing very well. Tommy is just twelve and already wants to start driving, and Jessy, well, she’s nine going on twenty-five. Already talking about boys and such.”
“Yes, that is a little young, isn’t it?” the General smiled. He took off the one shoe that had gone on easily, walked over to the closet and placed both shoes side-by-side on the floor. He stood up and looked at her again.

“But you know when that grandson of yours gets older, if he’s interested in any of the military academies, you just let me know.”

“I will General, and I do appreciate you thinking of him that way.”

The General bent down and took out an older pair of brown loafers from the closet. They were worn but still polished to a high shine. Rachel watched as he slid both shoes on easily, like two old friends into a conversation. That’s when the phone rang.

The General instinctively checked his watch and exhaled a quiet, “Damn.”

It was 7:37 AM. Rachel knew that a phone call this early on a Sunday could only mean some kind of military business.

The General strode over and grabbed the phone off the bedside table, careful not to knock over the two pictures standing next to it.

“Yes?” he asked gruffly. After only fifteen seconds of listening to the other end, he said simply, “All right, I’ll be waiting.”

“Change of wardrobe I imagine,” Rachel said with a kind smile. “It seems like you never have any free time to yourself.”

“There’s always retirement, Rachel,” the General answered. “And I imagine at the pace I’m going that it’s not far away.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll run out of steam any time soon. You’ve been saying that for ten years now, since I started working for you, and I haven’t seen you slack off yet. But I’ll give you some room to change.” With that she left the bedroom and closed the door behind
her. She paused with her hand on the door because she suddenly couldn’t remember why she had wanted to go to his bedroom in the first place.

Twenty minutes later the General, dressed in his fully pressed uniform, headed out the door to a car waiting for him. Rachel watched as they drove down the street and she returned to the General’s bedroom, remembering at last that she wanted to dust before she returned to her own home fifteen minutes drive away.

Standing next to the General’s bed, she picked up one of the photos on the bedside table. One photo, the General’s mother, was an old, black and white studio portrait of a stern looking woman with tight, thin lips in her early forties. Rachel remembered women like that growing up, and still knew a few today. They ran their house military fashion, everything in it’s place at all times, little room for anything cozy. Necessity and purpose were always the rule of the day.

Rachel finished dusting the photo and picked up the second framed picture. This one was in color, but still relatively old. Rachel had studied the photo many times, and she guessed it was around thirty years ago judging by the woman’s attire. A tight polyester shirt and similarly tight jeans that flared out to wide bell-bottoms by the ankle with rows of flowers embroidered around the edges. There were two patches sewn onto the legs, a yellow smiley face on one leg and a peace symbol on the other.

“Oh, that’s just a distant cousin of mine,” was the quick response the General gave when Rachel first asked about the woman some seven years ago. The General had quickly changed the subject. Rachel knew better than to press the topic, but she also knew that that General came from solid New England, Puritan stock. The woman in the picture was vaguely Native American, jet black hair flared out in a breeze, shone like raven wings in a
setting sun. She had high, angular cheekbones under piercing dark eyes. There was zero resemblance to the stern, pale looking woman framed next to her on the table.

Rachel often wondered who the woman really was. She was attractive and in shape judging by the tight clothing, and she had a funny smile on her face. Almost an amused smirk reinforced by her hands planted firmly on her hips, elbows thrust out. The dark haired woman stood on a beach, barefoot.

Rachel smiled, the laugh lines deepening around her eyes. The young woman obviously had spirit, something the General could use in his life.

Rachel finished wiping off the frame and carefully set it back on the table next to the General’s mother who obviously disapproved of the arrangement.

The General was too awake to sleep on his flight to Atlanta, so he did what many air travelers do: reclined his seat and read. He enjoyed the escape books allowed him. Their plots were always much simpler than his reality. The character’s problems, while small compared to his, made the world look manageable. The Major General knew better than to think that the guise of order in the world was anything more than a storybook illusion.

But on this flight, he had a hard time concentrating on the story about a detective running around town trying to uncover clues to help save some innocent person in yet another tedious courtroom drama. His problems were a little too big right now.

Colonel Bradley, the on-scene officer for Project Traverse, and the people in Atlanta obviously had news of the missing man, but it was most likely not good news, otherwise they would simply have said, “We’ve found him.” Whether or not he was dead or alive really didn’t matter.
The military jet he flew on looked to all appearances like a small, private executive jet. The small plane landed a mere two hours and fifteen minutes after takeoff at the Charlie Brown Executive Airport, a small business airport not related to the famous comic strip. The General knew that using the small airport would be less conspicuous. The infamous Hartsfield International Airport was far too busy. The General had heard several Southerners say that when you went to heaven you had to go through Atlanta Hartsfield and he was starting to believe them after taking a couple commercial flights through Atlanta.

The small jet taxied directly into a hanger and the doors closed behind the plane. Major General Macmillan took his bag with a change of clothes and headed to the nearest men’s room. The restroom was clean and well maintained, but he still did not like having to change in a public restroom. But it wasn’t possible for him to go to a deep black project in his uniform. There would be too many questions asked and the security of the project depended on questions not being asked. And in this case, the General did not even want the local base commanders to know he was in the area, which is why he chose the civilian base over the nearby Dobbins Air Force Base. Military people, especially base commanders, always took notice when a general passed through.

The General stepped out of the bathroom in civilian clothes and met a sergeant with bloodshot eyes, and a day’s growth of beard. The General frowned and followed the sergeant to the dark green rental car parked nearby. On the way to the car he noticed that the man had a large mole under his left eye that looked like a doctor should look at it. The General was much more conscious about skin cancer now than in his youth.

Fifteen minutes later, the General was riding through a deserted downtown Atlanta. Little to no traffic on the early Sunday morning and not one pedestrian walked on the
sidewalks. He was sure most of those missing people were sleeping off hangovers from the night before as was certainly the case with his driver. "Hotlanta" certainly knew how to live up to its reputation, the General thought. It's amazing anything gets done in a city like this on a Monday.

The General glanced at his watch. 11:22 AM. Colonel Bradley requested that the briefing start at 11:45 AM. The General noted with satisfaction that he would be a few minutes early as planned.

11:45 AM. The pastor at his local church back in Reston would be starting the second sermon for the day at 11:45 AM. It was an odd time for a church service and the General had asked the pastor once why he chose 11:45. The General almost immediately regretted asking. The pastor launched into a mini-sermon about time conflicts and the importance of key people being at the services. The pastor had to make house visits to the elderly at 1 PM and needed time to freshen before driving. The choir tenor had to teach Sunday school from 10 AM to 11:30 and he needed time to warm his voice up, and the list went on and on. The General knew not to ask again, so he simply noted the time as a backup in case he missed the 8 AM service.

He could see the pastor in his mind, arms swinging in grand gestures when he was fired up in the middle of a sermon. The man was surprisingly emotional during the sermons for a person with such traditional values.

He enjoyed the pastor's sermons. The man did not hesitate to draw the line between right and wrong. And here was the General, instead of listening to the Good Word, riding through a city of rather liberal, conciliatory views combined with questionable lifestyles, and moral practices. He somehow felt, unclean.
The General took to heart what some of his older colleagues living in Georgia said. That the suburbs around Atlanta, and extending beyond into the small towns, were quite conservative and reserved. As the General understood it, they didn’t have a problem with posting the Ten Commandments, as they should. He appreciated these traditional values of holding people accountable to their morals. His pastor in Virginia always emphasized these values and the need to respect authority in society. Again, something the General well understood. That is something he held onto, the order in life, especially in the face of what he was dealing with now, what the briefing he was about to receive would reveal.

General Macmillan had had men under his command die before, both in combat and even during training exercises. But rarely had men died under his command out of sheer incompetence. What he was dealing with in Project Traverse was management incompetence combined with technologies so advanced that the General only had a vague idea of how they worked.

The sergeant pulled the car up to the curb of the building where they had rented office space. The General tightened his jaw and thought that at the least he could make sure no one else got hurt, even if it meant sacrificing someone in the process.

Day 3

Sunday, 10:12 AM

The back of Dave Santiago’s neck felt like a hundred mosquitoes had just finished feeding. After Dave rubbed his skin raw the itch only came back for more. The bourbon, he
knew, would help dull the incessant urge to scratch his neck, a nervous condition he
developed two years earlier during a particularly bad breakup with a girlfriend.

The alcohol had helped dull the short-term symptoms back then, but the drug did not
help the underlying cause. Dave knew that the alcohol really wouldn’t help now either, but
the itching was unbearable. But Dave knew he shouldn’t hit the liquor. Beer. Just stick with
beer. The liquor was bad. Two years ago proved that. Just stick with the beer.

Dave clawed at his neck trying to satisfy something that was impossible to take care
of. He looked at his hands and the tips of his fingernails had small streaks of blood and tiny
bits of skin tucked under them.

He walked into the kitchen, got down on both knees and rummaged around under the
kitchen sink. He pushed aside bottles of chlorine bleach, floor wax, and a dripping dish
detergent. After the very back of the cabinet, sitting next to a roach pesticide tablet, he found
a dusty bottle that was almost exactly the same age as his nervous itch. Dave then walked
over to a cabinet that held an odd assortment of dust covered coffee cups. At the back of the
cabinet was a dull brown glass in the shape of an old wooden barrel, “Virginia is for Lovers”
was stenciled in faded letters on the side.

He quickly blew the dust out of the glass. He quickly unscrewed the bottle and
poured a pungent brown liquid into the glass. He took one quick shot of bourbon and
clenched his jaws while he absorbed the alcohol bite flowing down his throat.

His face relaxed and he breathed a little more easily. Dave waited thirty second
before taking his second shot.
The bourbon, he told himself, did the trick. Thirty minutes later he abandoned the Virginia is for Lovers glass, preferring instead to stumble around the apartment holding the bourbon bottle by the neck like a dead chicken.

He meandered through the apartment bumping into and bouncing off of tables and chairs. He occasionally held a hand out, as if he didn’t even know his hand were moving, and knocked over a framed photo or glass on a table. His apartment slowly descended into a chaotic mess with each successive round of pacing.

After a full hour, Dave walked over to a full-length mirror, tilted his head, and curled his lip like he smelled something dead.

“You fucking coward. Tu cabron,” he snarled at his reflection. Dave slapped his flat palm hard on the mirror where his face was reflected. The glass shattered, lines cracking outward from the base of his palm like they were trying to run from his anger.

“Tu Puta! You’re not even a man, you’re a fucking whore!” he snarled.

Tears flowed down his cheeks freely, unnoticed, and he leaned into the mirror placing his forehead against his splintered reflection. He let the tears fall on the floor. Dave dug his fingernails into the back of his neck again and drew dark red lines into his skin that started bleeding.

The doorbell rang.

Dave stood up straight and blinked once.

With bottle still in hand, he teetered to the front door and gave it a quick jerk open. The boy holding the screen door open gave a start. Dave blinked in the glare of the morning sun and realized that there were a total of three teenage boys standing on his doorstep. They wore black pants, black dress shoes, and white shirts. Dave thought they looked like junior
league mafia, but with name tags. The tags announced that the three were from the Church of Jesus Christ of Later Day Saints. The boy nearest Dave just stood there, like a deer in headlights with his jaw hanging open. Dave leaned in and squinted at the name tag on his chest.

"Daniel, shouldn't you be in church. Don't you know it's Sunday?" Dave slurred.

"Um," the boy hesitated, "we've already been. We were wondering if you had some time to talk to us."

"Talk to you? Talk to you about what?" Dave exhaled in their direction. The boy grimaced and stepped back half a step onto his friend's foot.

"We'd like to talk to you about faith and God," one of the other boys said confidently.

"Well, now!" Dave flourished the bottle in the air. "You want to tell me about God do you?"

"Yes, we'd like to come in and sit with you..."

"I would invite you in, but I'm Buddhist," Dave lied.

The boy's blue eyes went saucer round and he said, "You're what?"

"I'm Buddhist," Dave answered straight-faced.

"Oh, I see." The boy nursing his foot, nudged the other two and motioned to look at Dave's arm. Dave noticed the young Mormon's gesture and looked down at his own hand, the hand he shattered the mirror with.

A trickle of blood spattered on the floor by his feet. He stared at his index finger, wrinkled his brow and concentrated on how the drops slowly, yet at uniform time intervals, released themselves from the tip of his finger and entered the void of space below him. The blood droplets impacted the floor and smeared in a bright red sheen.
“Thank you, sir, but we’d better be going,” the first said. At that, the three turned as one and headed down the sidewalk towards the street.

“Wait!” Dave called after them. He stumbled down the stairs and waved his liquor bottle in the air like a flag man bringing an airplane to a stop. He called out, “You can tell me all about it. I’ll give you some cookies. I’ve got beer.”

The three boys reached the street and increased their pace down the sidewalk without looking back.

Dave held the bottle out to them and called out, “Want a drink?” Then, as if the thought just occurred to him, he took a swing from the bottle himself.

Down the street, in a plain, dark blue sedan, a man lowered a pair of binoculars from his eyes and said, “Looks like we may have a problem.”

Day 3
Sunday, 11:42 AM

“General Macmillan,” Professor Martin heard the sergeant call out to the General in his office, “Professor Martin is here.” The Professor heard some garbled speech from inside the room. The sergeant said, “Yes, General,” and turned back into the receptionist waiting area. The Professor noted that the sergeant had extremely bloodshot eyes. He wondered what adventures the man had the night before, undoubtedly enjoying Atlanta’s night life.

“Professor Martin. Colonel Bradley.” The sergeant nodded at each in turn. “The General will see you now.”
The Professor looked over to Bradley and raised his eyebrows in a silent, “Well, this
is it” gesture. Bradley didn’t respond. Instead the Colonel walked into the General’s office
with his back straight and chin set. The Professor slouched after him.

The General stood with his back to the window, hands behind his back. The city’s
skyline spread out behind him like it was his kingdom.

“Professor Martin, you do look worse for the wear,” the General commented. The
Professor automatically tried to smooth out his wrinkled lab coat.

“Yes sir,” Bradley cut in, “we’ve been pulling some long hours, General. I’ve
allowed dress protocol to slip with some of the men since they’ve been working so hard. As
I am sure you understand General, in times of national crisis we do have to relax certain
formalities. And, finding our missing person is my number one priority.”

“Of course it is, Colonel. I’m glad to see you are adapting to the situation. Now, I
expect we have some good news this fine Sunday morning. So get on with it, Professor
Martin.”

“Well General,” the Professor’s voice cracked. He quickly looked around and spied a
pitcher of water on a stand near the door. The General noticed. “Help yourself Professor.”

After he poured some water and took a sip, the Professor continued in a normal voice.

“We have found some significant clues, but there is another problem.”

“Explain,” the General said tersely. The Professor could hear the General grinding
his teeth from the other side of the room.

“If you recall,” the Professor’s hand shook slightly as he gestured, “we talked about
how Project Traverse could track a position on the Earth using a standard coordinate
system,” the Professor said.

“As I stated before, the system is very good. It can track --”

“--Professor Martin,” the Colonel interrupted softly. “Perhaps we should move quickly to the main point. I’m sure the General will understand.”

“Oh, yes,” the Professor stuttered, “of course.” The Professor took another sip of water.

“The system is very good and tracks multiple dimensional vectors. But the one thing we overlooked was a time rotation.”


“Time rotation,” the Professor repeated, more firmly this time. “We should have seen it. I am still investigating to figure out where we lost the elements of time in the equation. I really can’t understand how those equations were dropped out.

“Hold up Professor,” the General ordered with one finger raised, “back up and explain that to me again.”

The Professor took a deep breath and a step forward.

“Project Traverse was designed to take into account the movement of the Earth, its rotation on a daily basis, as well as our movement around the sun. Project Traverse algorithms take all of this movement into account along with the speed…”

“Professor!” the Professor jumped like he had been snapped by a rubber band. “Get to the point, I am not a patient man.”

“The factor of time rotation was somehow left out of the original equations.” The Professor paused with his hands in mid air. After a brief moment, the General nodded and said, “Go on.”
“When the Traverse Device activated, we not only had a jump through space, but we also had a jump through time,” the Professor finished.

“A what?” the General asked.

“Our man from the Chamber was sent through time, General Macmillan. He has ended up in a different time period,” the Colonel stated plainly.

“Wait a minute!” The General pointed his finger at the Professor like a pistol. “The man has been put into some kind of suspended animation somewhere and he’s going to pop up in the Chamber next week? Are you saying he traveled though time? Did I hear you correctly?” the General asked quietly. The Professor didn’t answer.

“Yes sir, it appears that way,” the Colonel answered.

“How far in the future did he go?” the General asked.

“Actually Sir,” the Colonel said, “he went into the past.”

“What?”

“The man is already in England as far as we can tell,” the Colonel said. “And he landed, we expect, where the lab is going to be built in his future.”

“Dear Christ.” The General whispered harshly. He sank into a chair next to the window and leaned forward on his knees.

Finally he quietly said, “Normally, I would say you are all full of shit. But I know we are dealing with technology that is obviously at the very limits of our abilities to cope with it. And it is now obvious those limits have been exceeded.”

“General, we do have a good idea of what is happening, I wouldn’t say that the technology is out of our hands,” the Professor protested.
“Professor!” The General said. He stood suddenly and walked to within inches of the Professor’s face. The Professor’s back instinctively straightened and his shoulders went back.

“At this point I had rather spit in your face than talk to you.” The General was actually spitting when talking. “You have sent someone back in time, Professor. Do you have any idea of the implications of what that means? Now before I really lose it, would someone please tell me how fucking far back in time this man went?”

“Roughly to 500 AD, Sir,” the Colonel, standing calmly to one side, answered promptly. “Approximately fifteen hundred years.”

The General’s face went visibly white. He turned slowly and walked back to the window. He extended one hand and leaned heavily on the window frame.

“What does that man do? What is his history?” the General asked.

“He’s an Electrical Engineer, General.” The Colonel stated. “He’s been on the project about two years now and was involved in the project construction.”

“My God, what have we done?” The General almost whispered to himself. “We’ve sent a man with the knowledge of the most advanced technologies and scientific theories of the twentieth century back to when they thought an eclipse was caused by God being pissed off. That man can change the course of our own history.”

“Yes Sir,” the Colonel said calmly, “we are looking at a possible time paradox.”

“So, let me guess,” the General said, turning around. “Despite our advanced theories and time traveling toys, we don’t have the faintest fucking clue as to what can, or will happen because of this event.”
The Professor cleared his throat and answered, "Umm, yes General, that is true. We
don’t really have a good feel for what can happen."

"'Good feel'?" the General was almost snarling at this point, "Professor, as far as I
can tell, we are so far from the truth of what is happening that we wouldn’t know a ‘good
feel’ if it bit us on the ass. We have developed a technology that is so far beyond us that this
Traverse Device, is in the process of swallowing us alive." The General waved his finger in
the direction where he thought the lab was.

"There is more to the story, Sir," the Colonel ventured.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Since the control system only took into account the position or location of the
delivery to be made, the time element was not controlled."

"I’m not following you, Colonel," the General answered.

"Well, Sir, the Traverse Device opened a worm hole, which I believe you know
about."

"Right," the General answered. "That is how the transport takes place."

"Try to visualize the worm hole as being a growing snake that extends back through
time," the Colonel said.

"Let me guess," the General cut in, "we were holding the snake by the tail while it
wiggled around."

"That’s exactly right, General. But there’s more, it grew back in time and it wiggled
around looking for the delivery point. The additional problem, however, is that the transport
is not exactly instantaneous. It is an extended event in time."

"Which means exactly what, Colonel?"
“It means, Sir, that there may have been other portals generated at any given time between now and 1,500 years ago. Although it’s unlikely, there is a very small chance that one of those portals may have taken someone else with our man.”

“Correct me if I am wrong, but did you just tell me that we may have shipped more than one person to five hundred years after the time of Christ and dropped them off in England?” the General asked.

“While the chances are slim, there is that possibility,” the Colonel answered. “But they wouldn’t necessarily arrive at the same time. Since the event was extended in time, any other people transported in the same transport event might arrive within ten years or two weeks of each other. We have no way of telling. Actually, we have no way of telling if anyone other than our man was transported.”

“Tell me how we bring our man back,” the General commended.

“That is also a little tricky,” the Colonel answered.

“Somehow I thought it might be.” The General frowned.

“Since the time transport was uncontrolled, our system does have the ability to maintain very high accuracy. We are certain that once the system is up and running again, and when we’ve analyzed the transport data, we will be able to open a portal again in the same location. Since our time equations were not factored into the transport, we can only estimate the time of arrival. We will naturally try to open a portal a minute or so after our man arrived, but more than likely it will be off in terms of temporal displacement.”

“How far off, Colonel?” The General locked his jaw in place as if preparing to take a blow on the chin.
“Anywhere from a few days to a few years.” The Colonel didn’t give any further details.

The General stood straighter and stared at both the Colonel and the Professor, shifting his gaze from one to the other every few seconds. After almost a full minute of silence and shifting eyes, he said bluntly,

“If we can’t bring him back we can only hope that our man, and whoever else may have been transported back with him, has a quick death.”

“We have given that some thought,” the Colonel added slowly. “If this man had ended up in the Americas at that same time, he would almost certainly have died quickly in the wilderness.”

“But, England,” the General interrupted, “no matter how primitive at the time, had the beginnings, the seed of the American civilization along with the seeds of the industrial revolution, and consequently the seeds of the world as we know it today. Do the two of you have any idea of what the consequences could be if that man interjects any of his knowledge into the society and causes the industrial revolution to come about any earlier?”

No one in the room spoke.

“This does not leave this room, even for those people cleared to know.” The Colonel and Professor nodded that they understood. “We can only hope, and perhaps it is now time to pray, Gentlemen, that this be taken care of quickly.

“This is of course to be kept quiet. We don’t want people running around panicking that they might disappear because they were never born. I’ll inform the Joint Chiefs and the President. For now Professor, I want your people working on this 24 hours a day and we will have more people shipped in. We will try our best to make sure that we can bring him back.
And if not alive, at least bring his body back so that there are no artifacts left in the time period. What did you say this man’s name was again?"

“Stevens. Lazarus Stevens,” the Colonel answered.

“‘Lazarus’ hey? An appropriate name. Contrary to popular belief, even generals appreciate irony in life,” the General finished.

A few minutes later, Colonel Bradley and Professor Martin rode the elevator in silence down to the first floor on their way back to the laboratory a few miles away across Interstate 85.

“That actually didn’t go all that badly,” the Professor tried a half-hearted laugh. The Colonel whirled on the man and jabbed a thick index finger in the Professor’s chest.

“Listen up! And I want to make this crystal clear for those academic ambitions of yours to understand fully.” He increased the pressure on the Professor’s chest and the man took a step back up against the elevator wall.

“The program is being shut down. I am shutting the program down regardless of what the Joint Chiefs say.” The Colonels lip turned up in a sneer. “I will not, Professor, lose my career over this colossal fuck up. Do you understand me completely, Professor?”

“Understood,” the Professor said quietly. He tried to study the floor but couldn’t see it for the large man in front of him.

The Colonel stepped back quickly and the elevator bell sounded that they had reached the bottom floor. The Colonel turned abruptly and walked quickly across the office building lobby.

From the elevator, Professor Martin watched the man walk off and noticed the officer had a scuff of shoe polish on one pant leg.
Chapter 4 (continued)

C

Brother John Tone is called before Abbott Caecus. The Abbott tells him he must stop going to the village and concentrate on religious studies inside monastery walls.

Chapter 5

Laz is still in the dungeon. He loses the watch to the dungeon keeper. The darkness hits him hard. He tries to track time with his breathing.

The character Thomas, an American from the 1800s, is introduced. He has been hinted at until this point, but has not actually appeared. Thomas saves Laz from the dungeon. Laz wakes in comfort and finally realizes that he is in England in the sixth century.

D

Brother Damian speaks with Abbott Caecus about the Americans and the impending conflict with the Saxons invading Britain at that time. Damian recommends that Brother Tone be the liaison to the Americans.

Chapter 6

Laz and Thomas travel to Thomas’ host’s castle. On the way, Thomas explains more of the situation they are in. The Saxons are invading and Thomas has agreed to help the
Britains – specifically his host, Lord Balfer – to defend themselves. However, when they arrive at their host’s castle, they find it in an uproar because Balfer has been killed in battle.

Day 4 -- Monday, 9:32 AM

Heather visits the Colonel at work. The Colonel tells her that Laz is in no danger.

Chapter 7

Laz and Thomas are staying at Balfer’s while Laz recovers. 6 weeks have passed since they arrived at Balfer’s. The time shift becomes more and more apparent as the story moves on. Eventually, the ancient timeline characters will experience months while the modern characters experience hours. This time shift is not due to relativistic time dilation or anything very complicated, rather the fact that later in the story the system will not pick Laz up until much later in Laz’s ancient timeline life.

In this chapter, Thomas gives Laz a watch as a gift. In later sections Laz will realize that he really does not need a watch. Soon after presenting the watch as a gift, Thomas asks Laz to help build a better black powder musket. Laz is not able to do this and Thomas can not understand why a future technologist can not accomplish something so easy. Laz tries to explain that he has a narrow set of technical skills.

Day 4 -- Monday, 11:46 AM

Heather is driving back to her office and thinks about the meeting with the Colonel. She arrives at her office and thinks about some of the times she had with Laz in the Georgia mountains. This flashback gives insight into Heather’s character and her history, especially
when she lost her parents at a young age. Heather starts to get very worried about Laz so she takes the rest of the day off.

E

Brother Tone is leaving the monastery but is very uneasy. He heads out blind, not knowing where to find the Americans.

Chapter 8

Thomas and his men engage the Saxons in a fight. Thomas and his men are using Civil War era black powder rifles. He gets overrun and many of his men killed when the technology proves to be ineffective.

In the middle of the battle, right before he has to run, Thomas sees Calder standing nearby watching the battle.

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Some of Thomas' men have made it back to the castle and now Balfer's castle is in an uproar. Everyone is preparing to leave. The character, Seth, is introduced. He is the person who has taken over command after Balfer's death. He tells Laz that everyone is going to Haven. Laz does not know what this place is. He has never heard of it before.
Calder, Brother Damian’s spy, heads to the monastery and gives the information about the Americans’ defeat to Damian. He also presents Damian with a black powder pistol that he took from the scene of the battle. Calder also keeps one for himself.

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The trip to Haven takes 10 days. Thomas is missing and is assumed dead. Laz starts the trip thinking that the travel would be an incredible hardship. But everyone around him acts as if they are living their normal routine. Laz finds along the way that he has a talent for living in the woods. It is as if something instinctual is awakening in him. And, with others around to show him how to do things, he finds that the hardships are not as bad as he thought they would be.

They arrive in Haven and Laz finds the beginnings of an 1800s industrial town. Thomas had started a medium scale manufacturing site for weapons and other items that he thought would be useful.

**Day 5 — Tuesday, 5:28 AM**

Heather calls and then drives over to Dave’s house. He does not let her in, but passes her a note to meet him the next night (Wednesday).
Chapter 9

A month has passed in Haven. Seth, the leader of the community, turns to Laz for guidance on using the futuristic, 1800s, technology. At this point, Laz decides to fix the problems that Thomas had created when using the wrong technology and not thinking the problem through. He moves the town upstream of the toxic site and starts over trying to take the worker and the workers’ needs into account.

Thomas is alive, but has been lost for weeks. He sought refuge with various villages he came across, but all were abandoned because of the Saxons invading.

G

Tone is still traveling, but he finally knows where to find the Americans.

Day 6 – Wednesday, 7:08 PM

Heather and Dave meet at a bar. Dave tells her about project Traverse but he only knows about the transport event itself, not the time travel issue. He and the other technicians have been kept away from the project while some other scientists from overseas have been brought in.

Dave and Heather are watched by the people in the van who follow them into the bar.
Chapter 10

Laz is working on some design issues that he can't quite solve. The industrial community he designed with a modern understanding of the ramifications of technology is shaping up as he planned, but it is not quite working. Tone arrives in Haven at this point and presents himself as the emissary from the monastery to the American Clan.

H

Damian and Calder meet again. Damian tells Calder that he wants Calder to make contact with the Saxons to make an offer to them regarding the Americans. The reader does not know what the proposal is. Calder asks if he should warn the monk that is the emissary to the Americans. Damian replies that sacrifices need to be made sometimes.

Day 7 -- Thursday, 4:56 PM

Heather has not heard from Dave all day. She calls Dave's place and there is no answer. She then calls his work to find out that he has been killed in a car accident on the way to work.

Heather panics and drives to Geri's. She has to take time to convince Geri that something bad has happened. As the evening goes on, she finally convinces him that there is a problem. Geri says that they need to get out of there and away from Laz's apartment.

Geri and Heather go to an Atlanta club to find Sarah, the friend of Geri's from earlier in the novel. On the way, Geri notices that someone is following them. He drives fast enough to loose them.
During this time Heather dwells on death and flashes back to her Aunt in Savannah and how her Aunt handled it when Heather’s parents died.

Geri and Heather find Sarah at the club. They head over to Sarah’s place where Geri can use Sarah’s computer. This is the time when the other part of Geri’s character emerges: a computer expert who has the ability to hack into high security systems. Geri obtains a list of the names of people working on the project.

Sarah and Heather make plans to see the Professor.

Chapter 11

Thomas returns and brings refugees along with him. Laz complains that they have too many mouths to feed as it is, while still trying to run the small factories. Thomas states that there is always a need for more people to become an important part of the industrial machine. Laz questions if Thomas didn’t mean that the machines are an extension of the humans, not a part of machines. Thomas states that it is really the same thing. It is only a matter of perspective.

The next day, Laz and John Tone are sent by Seth, who is still the community leader, to make contact with other local lords. There are rumors out that the Saxons are on the move again and Seth wants to consolidate support in case more battles break out. Laz and Tone take 10 men, all heavily armed with industrial era weapons.

The first night Laz and Tone sit around the fire and talk about keeping time. Laz realizes that he no longer winds the watch Thomas gave him. But he does wish that he could tell the time at night. Tone tells him to just use the Big Dipper as it rotates around the North
star. Laz seems amazed that he has been there all this time and hasn’t figured that out yet.

Laz admits that he and the American Clan relate to time a little differently than Tone.

Tone changes the topic and tries to get Laz to tell him more about his mysterious past. Laz seems to know things about mysteries of the universe, but then Laz doesn’t know things that any child would know.

Day 8 — Friday, 6:17 PM

Heather and Sarah act on their plan. They track the Professor from his work to his home (although they have to wait until 7:30 until he leaves work). They break into his house and confront him.

Once he figures out what they already know about Traverse, he confides in them. He does not tell them about the time travel issue, but acknowledges that Laz was transported. He discusses how they use the 3K background radiation to track movement, but they didn’t take into account certain dimension rotations. He doesn’t elaborate on what dimension he is referring to and says he needs one more day. The Professor agrees to contact them by tomorrow afternoon at 2:30.

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Laz and Tone are on the way to their third local lord. The first two meetings did not go well. The other local lords are scared of the Saxons and plan to just run. That day, their group is ambushed by a group of Saxons. One of the Saxons points to Laz and shouts that he
is an American. Tone saves him from being killed. But the fact that the Saxons recognized Laz as an American and tried to kill him raises concerns that there are larger forces at work.

**Day 8 -- Friday, 9:46 PM**

Heather and Sarah are back at Sarah’s place where Geri has tapped into the DoD computers. He finds secret communications about Project Traverse. They find out about the time travel issue.

Heather calls her aunt in Savannah to check in. The call is traced by the surveillance crew.

I

It’s been a month since Tone and Laz returned on their trip to talk to the other local lords and nothing has happened. Seth is proceeding with weapons development and plans to fight on his own without the aid of the other local lords.

Tone is out hunting when Calder surprises him. Calder warns him that he should watch his back. This is somewhat out of character for Calder, but he decides to warn Tone anyway. Tone doesn’t know what to make of it.

**Chapter 12**

Thomas and Laz have continue their work but the results are not that great. Despite Laz trying to fix the industrial revolution problems, he hasn’t succeeded. The people are still not very happy and the rumors abound that the Saxons are still coming.
Thomas notes that Laz is no longer wearing the watch he gave him. Thomas tells Laz of when he was young. He used to tell time by the sun. Then, when he moved to the city, there was a factory whistle that sounded across town to mark the time. That is how Thomas learned to live by clock time. Thomas tells Laz how he can sometimes see a little second hand in his head ticking – visualizing his internal clock.

Laz meets the same villager he talked to on arriving and Laz expects the man to be happy. Instead, the villager says he still isn’t very happy, but understands they need to work in the factories to prepare for the Saxon fight.

J

Damian meets with the Abbot and convinces him that the monastery must make a pact with the Saxons in order to survive. The Saxons have agreed to convert to Christianity and abide by the monastery’s moral laws. In fact, the lead Saxon has already converted to show his faith. Damian has already recalled Tone to get details of the Americans.

Day 8 – Friday, 10:16 PM

The surveillance van crew calls their boss and tells him that they have reestablished surveillance over Heather, Sarah, and Geri. They tell their boss that they will keep him informed.

Chapter 13

Laz tells Thomas that they need to leave for America. There is something deeply disturbing about Laz not being able to solve some of these technology problems and that
technology has not improved the life as he expected. Laz says they need to leave and start over. His plan is to head to the coast and build boats to take them overseas. Thomas agrees, but for different reasons. He does not feel Seth has been as responsive to industrialization as Thomas had hoped.

At that moment, Tone walks in and tells them that he has been recalled to the monastery. Laz tells him of their plans and Tone says he would like to go. Laz says they will wait for him.

Day 9 — Saturday, 9:57 AM

The businessman asks the Professor if he has been visited by anyone. His company is concerned about some security issues. The Professor lies and says that no one has contacted him.

K

Brother Damian is handling the gun that Calder gave him. He is sure his plan will work and thinks about the plan. This section is provided to create a pause in the modern timeline and to give more insight into Brother Damian’s character, since he is the antagonist in the ancient timeline.

Day 9 — Saturday, 3:41 PM

Heather, Sarah, and Geri go to the Professor’s house and find him dead. All of the Professor’s notes are missing. The surveillance van crew call the police when the three are
inside the house. The police arrive on the scene and Heather, Sarah, and Geri think they get away before anyone sees them. However, the surveillance van is near and they are followed.

**Day 9-- Saturday, 5:50 PM**

The Colonel tells the General that the Professor has been murdered.

**Chapter 14**

Laz and Thomas are finishing preparations to leave when the Saxons attack Haven. The factories are burned and most of their weapons are destroyed. However, they use the weapons that Laz developed to drive the Saxons off and kill many of them.

Laz and Thomas decide they need to leave sooner than planned and they can’t wait on Tone. They trust, however, that he catch up with them on the coast. Seth decides to take his people and go with the Americans.

L

Brother Damian, Abbott Caecus, and Brother Tone meet. Brother Damian demands to know where the Americans plan on going. Tone tells him that the Americans gave the information to him in confidence. Brother Damian demands to know the information. The Abbott hesitates, but tells Tone that he should divulge the information. Tone gives them the information.
**Day 9--Saturday, 6:15 PM**

The surveillance van gets the call to eliminate Heather, Sarah, and Geri. But the boss says he will be there to supervise. Surveillance van agrees to wait.

**Chapter 15**

Laz and Thomas depart with Seth and his people. They head for the coast and Tone catches up on the way.

**Day 10 -- Sunday, 1:02 AM**

Assassins attack Sarah’s apartment. Geri, Sarah, and Heather all escape, but they are chased.

M

Brother Damian and Calder are talking. Brother Damian promises Calder a large tract of land and the title of a local lord if he personally sees to it that the Americans are killed.

**Chapter 16**

Laz, Thomas, John Tone, Seth and his people have been traveling for a week on the way to the coast. They are ambushed by a very large Saxon force. The ambush was obviously a set up because there are so many Saxons.
On the first wave of the attack, Calder makes his way towards Thomas and shoots him with the black powder pistol. Laz returns fire and kills Calder. The group retreats in the face of overwhelming Saxon army.

Day 10 -- Sunday, 4:21 AM

Heather, Geri, and Sarah are being chased on foot by the assassins. They think they have escaped so they head down behind a grocery store.

The assassins see where they go and know the path the three took is a dead-end surrounded by a high wall.

The single, pale looking assassin radios the he is waiting to finish the job until their boss, Phil DeVenue, the businessman, shows up. The two will go in together to kill Heather, Sarah, and Geri.

Chapter 17

Laz and the rest of the group heads to higher ground as they retreat. The Saxons keep pursuing, which is a sign that this battle is not meant as a simple skirmish. They know the Saxons are out to kill all of them.

They make it up to the same hill that Laz arrived on and form a circular defense. They survive yet another attack. Thomas dies from his wound.

Day 10 -- Sunday, 4:45 AM
Phil DeVenue approaches the back of the store where the pale surveillance man is waiting. He finds the surveillance man dead. Colonel Bradley steps out from the side and confronts him. The Colonel kills the businessman and leaves.

A few minutes later, Heather, Sarah, and Geri leave the area behind the store and see the two dead men. They run out of the area.

N

The main Saxon leaders arrive at the monastery. Brother Damian greets them and introduces them to Abbott Caecus. They immediately kill the Abbott. Brother Damian pulls the black powder pistol from his cloak and tries to kill the lead Saxon, but the pistol is not loaded. The Saxons take the other monks into the monastery court area where they execute them. Brother Damian dies watching the monastery burn.

Chapter 18

The Saxons are still fighting. The fighting has lasted two days and the Saxons are not letting Laz, John Tone, Seth and his people go. The sun is setting again and they post centuries for the night to make sure the Saxons are not planning on attacking again.

Day 10-- Sunday, 8:14 AM

Heather, Geri, and Sarah storm the lab with a gun that Heather picked up from the dead businessman. They find the General and make him listen to what has been happening to them. The General says that they can’t help because the notes from the Professor’s house are missing. They have everything ready to go to make an effort to bring Laz to the present,
but they need the critical equations that the Professor was working on. Also, although it was a breach of security, the Professor took original testing material home. This material is also missing and there are no duplicates of the original testing data. The General believes some foreign power is involved.

The Colonel arrives and says he found the notes in Phil DeVenue’s office. The Colonel says that he believes the businessman must somehow be involved in the Professor’s murder. This gives them the final equations they need to plug into the Traverse Device.

Chapter 19

Two more days have passed and the Saxons are about to charge again. Laz and his companions are out of the modern weaponry. They will have to resort to sword fighting at this point. The Saxons start the charge.

Day 10— Sunday, 2:19 PM

They are finalizing the setup to make an attempt to bring Laz to the future. The General does not think it will work, but they will try.

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John Tone is in the middle of fighting, this time with a sword. He watches Seth get killed and then John himself is killed. The Saxons charge is repelled. Everyone turns to Laz for commands.
Day 10-- Sunday, 3:52 PM

The General orders the system activated. Heather, Geri, and Sarah watch.

~ ~ ~

There are only 27 men, women, and children left to fight. The Saxons charge for a final time with over 400 men. Laz surveys the Saxons charge from the top of the hill and is yelling commands in what he knows is a hopeless defense. The portal opens overhead and takes him. He watches bolts of lightening strike out down the hill, as it did in the Chamber, and kill several Saxons. The rest of the Saxons turn and run.

Chapter 20: Day 10 -- Sunday, 4:00 PM

The Traverse system spins down and there is a man in full battle standing in the Chamber.

Epilogue

Laz, now in the modern time, finishes the prologue. The file is stamped top secret, with a file archive number.

The End