

New-timer

Chapter 1.

Dave Premont is a very quiet man – he has no family, no future and now, no job. When his boss called him in this afternoon, he said "Dave, sorry, but we have to let you go." And then he handed Dave his final check.

Dave looked at it and said "Sam! This isn't right. I was supposed to get paid through the end of the month."

Sam de Mertha shook his head. "Sorry Dave. You know how it is. Business is down."

Dave pushed up his heavy black glasses, wiped his nose on his coat sleeve, hung his head and left with misty eyes. His rent was 32 days overdue, and this check wasn't going to cover it. He hadn't eaten a full meal in over a week; his clothes needed cleaning and pressing; his nose was dripping from the late-December wind. He tried to get his sleeve up to cover his nose and mouth and HAAA...CHOOO! He bumped into a man who almost fell over. Dave apologized. The man looked strangely at him, brushed himself off, brushed Dave off, and ran off. Then Dave felt a huge sneeze building – and suddenly, Haaa-haaa... HAAAA.....

Dave suddenly dropped into a different world. He felt something funny happen in the instant that his sinuses prepared to explode...he wasn't at all himself...he was feeling weird, like someone had just walked right through him. No, that wasn't quite right – it was like someone had merged with him: that was it – "I've been merged." He felt serious vertigo and his stomach flipped up and down a couple of times; disorientation overtook him and he wanted to vomit, but the lack of sufficient food kept him from doing that. "Merged? What did I just do? Where did that idea come from?" Dave was falling into a pit – a deep, black pit from which there would be no escape. He fell 10, then 20, and then 30 feet and hit the bottom of a black, stinky burn-pit. He almost passed out from the shock to his body – almost, but not quite... there was a higher-priority interrupt scheduled to take place in his body, and it was the case of an irresistible force vs. an immovable object... and Dave's primal function won.

CHOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Dave's sinuses exploded, which caused his body to curl up in fetal repose, which saved him from cracking his head open on the bottom of the black concrete pit; which caused a long-unused audio sensor to detect something that it had waited years and years to sense, but of course it had never heard a noise like that before. The sensor activated an obscure signal line in the mainframe computer in NASA's launch control center in Florida, and a red light and claxon were activated. The launch director hit the SCRUB button and swore at the faulty sensor. "Houston, this is Launch Control. What the heck is wrong with the audio sensor in pit 51? Countdown status is hold at T minus 3 seconds."

In grave pain, Dave looked up. He remembered when he was a kid – a bully from sixth-grade knocked him unconscious on the playground – that was what this was like, except he was not looking up at Joe Engels, he was looking up at a cluster of 12 huge rocket nozzles, which were lit by a large sparkler. He looked around and sat up – his body had never felt such gross pain before – he freaked out: he was in

the bottom of a large pit which was obviously the business end of a whole bunch of rocket motors that were about to be ignited. "Good God! I'm in the blast pit – that's a freakin' rocket ship up there! He tried to stand up, but he realized that he had a dislocated hip, and probably a broken rib, too. He knew that in a second or two, he would be cooked way, way past well-done. A thousand thoughts raced through his head, first of which was "What the heck am I doing in a rocket pit?" Next of course was "What merged with me?" Last was "Why me? Why am I going to die?"

Some of those questions would be answered pretty soon, and some, in the distant future. But in the right-now, he suddenly became aware that the sparkler stopped sparking, and a voice with a bright flashlight stabbed at his night-darkened eyes and shouted "Get out of there now!" The voice threw down a knotted rope and Dave reached for it. But the cracked rib hurt too badly, and his hip was in need of medical attention.

"Help me," he croaked.

"Get out of there now! Don't you know that this is a rocket launch area? Are you crazy? Sergeant, climb down there and bring that man out."

An Air Force sergeant shimmied down the rope and saw Dave lying there in a heap. He shouted up "Corpsman! I need a Corpsman!" The sergeant put handcuffs on Dave, which caused him to black out from the pain of the rough handling.

Soon it would get better for Dave, just as it began to get worse – much worse.

Chapter 2.

Dave awoke in a hospital. He looked at the cast on his leg, and then he saw the cast on his right-chest. Finally he saw that he was handcuffed to the bed. He looked around the room and noticed that he was alone, and that there were no windows, so he quickly dismissed the fleeting thought of escape. And then a doctor came in, followed by a line of soldiers with weapons at port-arms.

"Here is the homeless person – he was sleeping in the fire-pit on launch pad eight," the doctor began. "He's received some injuries that we'll attend to – see there, dislocation and fracture. Other than that, he just looks like a bum to me."

An Air Force Captain spoke up "He sure screwed up the launch – we missed the window, and had to scrub the launch till next Tuesday. I hope they put him in the brig."

"He's a civilian, Captain. He'll be transferred to County lockup when he's better. Now let him sleep." The doctor pressed a button somewhere over Dave's head and Dave felt warmth and comfort flow into his right arm as he passed out for 18 hours of uninterrupted sleep.

When he woke up, a Marine guard was standing at the foot of his bed and the doctor was adjusting something on a panel of switches. "There now: I'm Doctor Scubálo. What's your name?"

"Dave. Dave Premont," he whispered.

"Sorry, we had to intubate you. Your voice will come back soon – drink plenty of fluids. Well, Mr. Premont, you're in Cape Canaveral Hospital. You've suffered some injuries from a fall. What were you doing in that rocket fire-pit?"

"I don't know. I was walking home from work, and then I felt dizzy. I sneezed, and then I was in that pit. I can't begin to tell you how scared I was." Dave quivered all over. "What was I doing there? What do you mean? I've never been to Florida in my life. I'm from Huntsville Alabama."

"Well, Dave. Your blood workup hasn't come back yet, but maybe you have a history of alcohol or drug abuse, hmmm? In any case, you caused the rocket launch to be scrubbed. One of the sensors heard you messing around in the fire-pit, and stopped the launch. Now the police are going to have to find out what you were doing there. You might as well come clean."

"What are you talking about, doctor? I live in Huntsville Alabama. I've never been to Florida in my life. I just lost my job and now I'm here. You say that this is a hospital in Florida, but I don't see any palm trees – in fact, I don't even know that you're a real doctor. You need to tell me what's going on here – and then you need to let me go home." It was the first time that Dave had raised his voice in years.

"Mr. Premont, I am a real Doctor, and you're in a real hospital in Florida. I'm going to arrange a consult with Doctor Friend. He can help you sort all this out. Do you have some kind of I.D.?"

"Who's he – a shrink? Look – I want a lawyer and I want out of here!" Dave started bucking and yanking at the dressings.

"Corporal, secure the patient," Doctor Scubálo said as he fiddled with a knob. Dave felt the warm rush of pharmaceuticals, just before he passed out.

When he came to, he felt groggy. Two doctors with clipboards were standing by his bed. "Doctor Friend, this is the patient that I'd like you to evaluate. He seems delusional. He may harm himself or others. Psych isn't my specialty, so I'll wait for your prognosis."

"Mr. Premont, I'm Doctor Friend. I'm going to try to help you sort all this out. Now it says here that you were sleeping in a fire-pit, under an active rocket over at the Cape. Can you tell me about that?"

"Doctor, other than some trips to Tennessee, I've never been out of Alabama. Where am I now?"

"You're in the hospital in Cape Canaveral, Florida."

"Doctor that simply isn't so. I've never been to Florida."

They argued for 30 more minutes before Dave got so upset that Doctor Friend pushed a button that put Dave under.

When Dave woke up, he looked at the nurse that was cleaning him up. She was being rough, and it hurt. "Ouch – can you kinda take it easy?"

"Hmmpf," she said. "They always have me cleanin' up the crazies. Clean yo' self up, boy. If I'm too rough, do it yo' sef." She tossed the cleaning rag to Dave and left the room.

He looked around – the Marine guard was gone, and the room was empty. He looked around and decided that something was definitely wrong. He hadn't been to a hospital in years, but this one was wrong. "Let's see, what is it?" As soon as he said it, he looked up where the TV would be, and instead he saw a 3-D holographic image. The stereo sound from the program was all around his head – some kind of holographic audio projector that went with the advanced video projector. He focused on the 3-D image. "It's a daytime soap opera," he realized. Then he looked seriously and saw the differences – his eyes almost popped out of his head: clothes were optional on some of the actors; the women wore body paint instead of a blouse, and the main male actors wore long hair, a jock strap and a smile. "I'm in a crazy hospital," Dave realized. "They're trying to trick me. I don't know where that TV comes from, but I know that topless actresses aren't allowed on TV."

"HEY! What's going on? Where am I?" he shouted. Nobody came. He watched the commercials, and he realized that something was very, very wrong. Tide, then McDonald's, and then Ford commercials whizzed by at an awesome pace. "Hey, they're using subliminal advertising on TV – they can't do that!"

"HEY! Let me out of here!" Dave tugged at his left arm, which was handcuffed to the bedrail. Suddenly he realized that he was in big trouble. "The merge caused something to happen to me. I'm not in Alabama, and this isn't Thursday afternoon." He pondered the handcuff and the bed.

"I've absolutely got to get out of here," he realized. "I don't belong here, now. I don't even know where 'here' is, or 'when' it is." He began jerking the handcuff against the bedrail, but suddenly realized what a clatter it was making. "That'll get the guard," he muttered. Then he pulled and pulled until his wrist ached from the handcuff. He settled down and pondered for a while.

Then he realized that the nurse had left a soapy rag on his chest – he reached for it and squeezed it carefully on his cuffed hand. Slowly he started twisting and turning his hand and wrist as he dripped the soapy solution on the arm. Slowly he pulled, and dripped, and finally, his hand came free. He pulled the cords and tubes out of his body and stood up. He could barely catch his breath, but he realized that he probably only had seconds to escape before the machines realized that he wasn't in bed. He rose

quickly, pushed the door open a crack and he looked out. Off to the left, a Marine corporal was flirting with a pretty nurse. He opened the door more and looked to the right. The hall was empty. He snuck out as quietly as he could and went into the first room.

A patient with a horrible body odor was sleeping as Dave entered the room. He went right to the closet and donned the man's clothes, as he held his breath. Then he peeked out the door, and saw the empty hallway. He darted to the elevator, pressed the button and waited for an eternity. Finally, the elevator dinged and the door opened slowly. As he headed for the opening, the Marine turned around and looked. The door started closing slowly, as the Marine shouted "HALT!"

The door closed, and Dave heard the Marine slam the door with his fist. He heard the Marine pounding on the door – so instead of riding the elevator all the way to the ground floor, he hit the "3" button, and then "2" and then "L", but he bailed out on the third-floor, ran to the stairs, and up to the 5th floor, where he sat in the stairwell, coughing and in great pain. The Marine went sailing past him, without a glance. Dave's cough probably sounded too infectious for the Marine to want to stop.

In a few minutes, Dave went back out into the hall and pressed the "UP" button. When the elevator arrived, he hit "12" and waited as the elevator rose to the top floor. He finally got out, went to the stairwell and headed for the roof.

A sign on the door cautioned him about roof access, and warned about the helipad. "Helipad!" he shouted, and flung the door open. There was a nice jet-powered helicopter, just waiting for the command to launch. Dave got real brave – he ran to the helicopter and shouted at the pilot "Quick, there's a traffic accident on the freeway – we need to take off right now! Right now, son!"

"Okay, doc. Just let me get this thing wound up and we're outta' here."

Dave sat down, closed and latched the door and shouted above the rotor noise "Come on, son! We got to go!"

The pilot adjusted his helmet and gave a thumbs-up sign, which Dave returned. The helicopter lifted off and headed west. In ten minutes, the pilot asked "Doc, where's the accident?"

Dave pointed to the freeway, below and said "Set it down right there. I need to get help. Quick now, set it down right there."

The pilot complied and the chopper settled down right next to the whizzing traffic. Dave jumped out and ran right towards the stream of cars. One of the drivers swerved to avoid him, and the next one slammed on the brakes – and that was enough as far as Dave was concerned.

He grabbed the door handle and jumped into the front seat. "Quick! Get out of here – that helicopter is about to explode!"

The driver jammed on the gas and squealed tires for half a mile, as Dave finally settled down.

"Where did ya' come from, mister?"

"Say, I'm not feeling well, can you bring me to that gas station there, son? I think I'm going to puke."

"Sure, but just hold on a minute – this is my dad's car – he won't believe me if I tell him what just happened."

Dave made retching noises, and the driver sped up. He squealed into the gas station and almost pushed Dave out, before burning rubber and merging back onto the freeway.

"At least I'm free," said Dave. But a topless gal with red body paint, pumping gas reminded him that something was definitely wrong. "Positively and definitely wrong," he muttered, but he couldn't help staring at the red-head, filling her Toyota's tank. Actually, her face looked like, what – a cat? Huh? Then he glanced at the numbers on the pump and realized that topless gals didn't pump gas that cost \$83.99 a gallon...at least back in Huntsville Alabama, anyhow.

Chapter 3.

Dave wandered around and found a nearby park, where he sat on a bench as the sun slipped towards the horizon. "What a day! Bunch of crazy people at a hospital; 3-D TV; topless cat-women pumping gas; whoa! \$83.99 for gas! This place can't be real...this time can't be real," he realized as soon as he said it, he knew it was true. "I'm in a different time – and a different place."

A young couple was walking their ugly, naked dog. As they approached, the dog growled at him. The topless gal in cerulean blue body paint glanced over at him, and her boyfriend's posture straightened up. Dave saw the nearly-nude, oiled and muscled body, ready to pounce, so he looked down at the ground and pretended to tie his shoes.

"Damn heathens," the young man muttered. "Yeah, they give me the creeps," his girlfriend said.

The dog kept barking, yapping and jumping up and down. Dave rolled off the bench to the right, and walked away as fast as he could, without raising suspicion. He saw the gal reach for her lipstick, and then wondered where she kept it, since she had no visible purse. She started talking into it, and he realized that it was a cell phone. Then she pointed it in his direction and he realized that it had a camera, too.

"Crap," was all he could say as he broke into a jog, towards the center of the park. "If she called the cops, I'll be taken back into custody." He ran as good as his dislocated hip allowed – fortunately it was casted and bandaged with very flexible material, which he realized, was pretty weird for a cast. He ran about 1,000 yards and then he had to collapse on the ground. From under the canopy of palm trees, he heard a helicopter approach from the west. He buried himself in some palm fronds on the ground and waited. The helicopter left after ten minutes. "Little stool pigeon," he muttered towards the gal. But he stayed put for another hour, until the sun was down.

When the evening cooled off, he realized that he was hungry and tired. He had to leave the park, because he didn't feel safe. "The cops will be looking for me, and they'll put 2 and 2 together." Finally he walked to a nearby highway and stuck his thumb out. It took an hour, but finally a red car came to a halt. Inside was a good-looking woman who pushed a button near the radio, and the passenger door popped open. "Come on," she said. Dave climbed in. "Well," she whistled, "look what the cat just drug in," she said.

"How're y'all" was all Dave could say, as he tried to avoid staring at her light-green body paint.

"You...you're ..."

"Indeed," she replied. "Y'all 'r from Alabama, aren't ya? I'm from Alabama, too. Here, want a smoke?" as she offered him a plastic cigarette, with a glowing electric tip.

"No thanks, I never picked up that habit. But I don't mind if you smoke."

"My name's Nancy," she said. "Nancy Marchare. Y'all 'r a mess. In the hospital, were ya?"

Dave thought about it – no sense in lying, but no sense in giving out too much information either.

"Yeah, I hurt my leg when I fell – clumsy." He glanced over at Nancy to see if she believed that, and saw her giving him the once-over.

"Y'all 'r not from here at all, are ya?" she asked. "Y'all 'r really from Alabama, aren't ya? I know the gals there don't go topless, and I can see it makes you uncomfortable."

"Sorry, Miss. er, Nancy. I'm not used to it, for sure."

"Southern Baptists," she chuckled. "Well then, let me cover up, and y'all will feel better." She pulled the car off the road, popped the small trunk and donned a shawl. "There, all better," she said as she got back in and merged into traffic. "Lots of different styles, I guess. I know the folks in Alabama are just more, ah, conservative."

"Yes ma'am. I guess so. But..."

"Oh, you're looking at my makeup," she said.

"Eer...well."

"Oh! I got my cat-face makeup on. See it's the latest thing. We girls use electroluminescent botox injections, and the little nano-machines reform the face into just about anything or anyone. What'da' ya think?" as the simulated cat whiskers on her cheeks twitched slightly.

"I...I've never seen a cat-woman before. Let alone a half-naked one."

"Yeah, the climate's so warm that clothes are optional here in Florida. And if you're within an hour's drive from the beach, nobody cares anymore. You know the saying: 'Global warming means hot is hot'. You look like you could use a bite. Let's pick up something, okay?"

"Sure, but I managed to lose my wallet today."

"s okay. I'll buy, and you can bring me the news about Sweet Home Alabama, okay?"

"Sure," was all he could say.

After a nice meal, Nancy said "If y'all want to stay the night, there's the couch – make yourself ta home."

"Thanks, Nancy. You've been very nice to me."

"Well Dave, sleep well. I'll see you in the morning," as she disappeared up the stairway.

Dave yawned a mighty yawn, pulled up the light blanket, and he was sound asleep in less than a minute.

The sun suddenly blazed into Dave's eyeballs very early in the morning. He laid there, pondering what happened to him. "Merging...it all started with merging. I need to figure that out," he said.

"Merging?" Nancy asked.

Dave sat up quickly. "Er, nothing. I was probably just talking in my sleep."

"Well Dave, I wasn't born yesterday. I've heard that word once before."

"Well Nancy, I'm not ready to talk about it. Something's wrong – mighty wrong, but I don't know what."

"Dave, you're safe here. Let me get a cuppa Joe and then we'll talk."

After breakfast, Dave was feeling comfortable with Nancy. "I'll drive us to the beach," she said. "It's going to be a nice day. Top of the stairs, first room on the right – grab swim trunks if you need them, and grab a towel. I'll meet you at the car." Her face was looking more like a normal girl's face, but probably too young for a woman her age.

"What do you mean if I need them?"

"Well, in Florida, most men swim nude, or with just a jock strap. But since y'all 'r recently from Alabama, you might feel uncomfortable."

"Okay, thanks for explaining. Yeah, I'll get the trunks."

At the beach, everyone stared at them – or mostly at Dave. "Was my picture on the news last night, or what? Why do they all stare like that?"

"That's a question with a long answer," Nancy replied. "Got time for a long answer?"

"Sure, what else am I going to do? Look at that couple staring at me. Do I have leprosy, or what?"

"Well, sorta, kinda," Nancy said. "Here, sit down and I'll tell y'all a story. You might not like it, but we'll try."

"Dave, you're different. You're what's called a *New-timer*. Really, most folks don't like *New-timers*, and there aren't a lot of y'all around. See, it isn't supposed to work that way."

"No, I don't see. What in the world does *New-timer* mean?"

"Well, let's see where to start? I guess it started about a couple hundred years ago: when the SotM Tribe bought that patent. That's right – it was Reverend Tumar who started it all."

"Sorry, I'm not getting that, at all."

"Sorry. Okay then – in the beginning, some guy named Nowaski invented a way to do time travel. All of a sudden, everyone and his brother wanted to go back and see Jesus. In fact, if I remember right, everyone wanted to hear the '*Sermon on the Mount*', which is where Jesus talked about stuff that's real important to Christians, see. So this preacher named Reverend Tumar realized what a goldmine it would be if he could control access to the old-time; so he bought the time machine patents. That was the beginning of the SotM Tribe, named for Sermon on the Mount. Our history books tell us that it started with a few people going to hear that sermon, but then more and more folks wanted to go, but there was a problem with the machine: in order for someone to go back to old-time, someone had to come forward into new-time. I don't know about physics, but that just makes sense. Well, you can imagine the problem with bringing someone from the deep past into today – it just doesn't work out very well – our rules and customs take some gettin' used to, as you probably figured out. We do lots of stuff that people from Jesus' time objected to. After a few of them went nuts and started killing folks for blasphemy, the SotM Tribe programmed it so that when the *Old-timer* who came forward in time, as a *New-timer*, he would wind up dying almost instantly. Now it started out as an accident, if you take my meaning, but after a while, the police stopped investigating – there was just no reason to, and there was nobody to complain."

"Say what?"

"Like some of them *New-timers* wound up in the middle of the ocean, or on top of Mount Everest, stuff like that. The SotM Tribe could get away with it because it was so popular for Christians to go back in time, and it made the Tribe so rich that nobody could complain much. Anyway, only a few *New-timers* ever survived the trip, get it?"

"So I woke up in a fire-pit under a rocket that was almost ready to launch – I would have been cooked to a cinder in 3 seconds flat. Is that what you mean?"

"Yup: y'all *New-timers* are just a problem, 's'all. See, the church folks got a bunch of laws passed that essentially created a lower-class of folks, and then quietly offered a bounty for anyone that escaped their wrath, and was later killed. So, *New-timers* were hunted and harassed for a long time. Finally some civil liberty lawyers got the laws changed, but now the old ways are pretty engrained in folks, and *New-timers* are still considered 'fair-game' by most folks."

"You mean like in hunting terms? Are you going to turn me in?"

"Nah, I think you're cute. It's mostly the folks from the olden times that were such a pain to deal with."

Dave absorbed it all and then asked "Nancy, didn't the disappearance of people from some olden time bother the people of that time? The people must know that something fishy is going on when someone just vanishes from the middle of the town."

"Nah, the SotM Tribe figured that out, too: only people who don't make a difference are targeted to be swapped out as *New-timers*. People without a family, or friends, never made a dent in time, like they say, stuff like that. That's where the saying 'Nobody misses nobody' comes from – get it?"

Dave pondered his situation and realized that he fit the profile exactly. "I guess I'm a nowhere man, alright. I have no wife, no kids, and now, no job. But I want to go home. You mean that I'm here because someone wanted to hear the Sermon on the Mount?"

"Nah, Dave, someone wanted to be in your time, that's why y'all 'r here. The machine only swaps folks from the same time."

"Oh, I get it. But wait just a minute – time travel is totally impossible, according to the laws of physics."

"Dave, let me tell y'all the problem with physics: it gets re-invented all the time. Before Newton said there was gravity, was there gravity? Of course, but nobody knew how it worked, so it didn't matter. Same with time travel – until it was invented, it wasn't available. Now it's common. A bunch of folks go back as *Old-timers*, all the time. A bunch of *New-timers* replace them."

Dave stared at Nancy – he had no reason to doubt her, and it all made sense. "What's the deal then? How can I go home?"

"Y'all 'r not listening to me – you can't go back, because you'd have to find someone even less important than you, and that'd be hard ta do. Besides, it's awful expensive to buy a ticket. The SotM Tribe's machine isn't free."

"How come you stopped and picked me up? Everyone else just drove by."

"Well, they can tell that you're a *New-timer*, and they just don't want to get involved. You're lucky one of the drivers didn't decide to take a pot-shot when they drove past you. No cop would have arrested them."

"What do you mean, they can tell?"

"The machine leaves a halo or some energy-something around *New-timers*. We can all see it, especially at night."

Dave was getting more disturbed by the minute. "So what's a fella to do? And why're y'all telling me all this?"

"Well Dave, y'all 'r kinda cute, and I like bald guys, but that's not why I stopped. I had a *New-timer* boyfriend once, and he was mighty nice to me – most men nowadays are pretty, well, nasty to most women. I liked being treated like an *Old-timer* woman, and I thought I'd take a chance."

Dave looked at Nancy and considered the proposition for a couple of minutes. "Y'all 'r pretty fair ta look at," he finally said. "What have ya got in mind?"

"Well, ya can't get a job, that's for sure, but I got enough money ta take care of us, so all I'm askin' is ta be treated nice – like a lady, that's all. Think y'all can manage that, Dave?"

"Don't *New-timers* ever escape into the past? Hasn't anyone ever done it?"

"Sure Dave, a few have. My ex was one. There's a group of *New-timers* called a 'Rebellion' by most, but they just want ta go back home somehow. Is that what y'all want, Dave?" Nancy put her hand on Dave's knee – he felt the connection with this strange, but somehow nice gal, and he wanted to stay and have a good time. But he really wanted to go home – and he was mad that someone could just reach out from the future and decide that his life was without value, so he could somehow be time-traveled and killed, all in one fell swoop.

"Nancy, I'd like to stay, and if I do, I'd like to be with you, for sure. But what gives someone in the SotM Tribe the right to declare me unfit for life and send me here to die? That's what I'd like ta know. That needs to be stopped."

"Okay, Dave – y'all 'r good ta try it, if ya want. When y'all 'r done with that, come back to me, okay?"

"I will. Is it okay if I stay here till I make up my mind?"

"Sure," she winked, "I'll be upstairs tonight if you need any help deciding."

Chapter 4.

Dave found the Rebellion alright – and it wasn't far away. He visited the library, where he jacked into the web and read about Reverend Tumar and the Sermon on the Mount Tribe. A quick 'Gobble' search revealed that *"...a football coach named Nowaski, from the University of Tennessee, actually invented the time-travel machine – he wanted something to change the outcome of a football game with the University of Alabama in 2235. He was betting pretty heavy and didn't want to lose all his money that weekend – it caused quite a stir when people figured it out. Then Reverend Tumar bought the patents, and started selling tickets to the past. He sold lots of tickets to paleontologists, who wanted to see dinosaurs first-hand, but mostly, people wanted to see and hear Jesus. Originally there were about 20 people at the Sermon, but after Reverend Tumar started sending people, the crowd swelled to thousands. Each person wound up bringing a basket of food with them, else the few morsels of the original group would run out."*

"It all makes sense, somehow," thought Dave. "I guess people want to see interesting stuff, and visiting Jesus or Mohammad or a dinosaur is the ultimate vacation for sure." But then he saw a footnote that asked for validation and attribution for the information. *"Warning: this information was submitted anonymously and may not be correct. If you have personal knowledge of this aspect of history, Click here to provide an authenticated update."* Dave realized that most of the famous search engine's entries were non-authenticated. "Uh-oh, I guess that's all B.S. Well, I'll find more in a minute."

Suddenly, Dave saw a reflection on the computer screen, and he swiveled his chair quickly.

"What's up, friend?" asked a tall, scantily-clad man. Dave could see that the guy was in very good physical shape, and was wavering on whether to run or fight when the stranger said "Don't worry, I'm not here to hurt you – I may be who you're looking for."

Dave sat quietly, pondering his next move.

"It's my job to watch places like this and find *New-timers*. I'm a member of the Rebellion. I can tell you the truth."

Dave's blood pressure rose, and he could feel sweat running down his neck. "How do I know?"

"Look at my halo, and you'll know."

Dave glanced at the big man, and didn't see anything, but then he used averted-vision, and saw it – there really was some kind of energy-halo surrounding the man. "Okay, but you could be faking that."

"No, it's a *New-timer* thing – we're like branded cattle. Now let's go where we can talk. Follow me out the door and stay well-behind me until I signal you that it's safe."

Dave nodded.

After a few blocks of random-walk, the man signaled to Dave. They sat on a bench in a nice park and talked quietly. "First, my name is Carlo. I'm from 2014. I lived in Habana, Cuba."

"I'm Dave. Glad to meet you, I guess."

"You will be. First, you got to ditch those squirrely clothes, Dave – it makes you a target, for sure. There's still folks around who kill *New-timers* for sport."

Dave shuddered and looked around. Then he took off his shirt and wadded it up, and left it on the bench next to him.

"Good, Dave – you listen. Let me tell you the truth: you're not safe here. We have the facilities and the means to protect our own. If you want to join the Rebellion, it's up to you, but you'll find that it's going to be very hard to survive if you're on your own."

"Carlo, I still don't understand it all – how can someone from this time just reach out and snatch a body from the past, and kill the person and get away with it?"

"Power, Dave, power. The Sermon on the Mount Tribe is the most powerful and richest religious organization in the world. Leaders of the world are terrified to go against them, because – look, think about it – if I don't like you, I can snatch your great-great-grandmother out of her kitchen before your great-grandfather is born. You're dead and gone before you ever had a chance at a life-line. That's the power that SotM Tribe has – the ultimate power of life and death."

Dave felt a deep cold in his heart. Sitting in the hot sun, he shivered. "How can you help then? If we're all targets of a bunch of religious fanatics, and nobody in power can help, then what good is a Rebellion?"

"We have our ways, Dave. If you join us, I'll tell you more."

"Carlo, give me a chance to think about it, okay?"

"I know it's a lot to digest, so yes, I'll meet you tomorrow for an answer."

Then they both got up and went their separate ways. As Dave was leaving the park, he glanced at the end of the sidewalk and saw a pair of policemen with a huge canine, waiting, just waiting. They were dressed in black and darker black. The dog was a huge breed that he'd never seen before. He knew he couldn't outrun the dog, for sure. "It must be as big as a car," he thought. "I bet it is as fast as a car, for sure." So he just stood still and waited for them to approach him.

The dog spoke first: "Halt. Grrrrr. You are under arrest," he coughed.

One of the policemen motioned to the dog, who sat down quietly. "Go ahead, run," he sneered at Dave. "It's less paperwork that way."

Dave stood there, shivering, almost in tears. When the dog growled, Dave lost control of his bladder.

A few minutes later, a police van pulled up and a robotic wheel-chair trundled towards him, then skirted around him, and finally, parked right behind him. "Sit," spoke the dog.

Dave complied.

Chapter 5.

When the clamps came down across his arms, and the chest restraint snaked around his upper body, and then tightened, Dave was ready to cry. He knew that the police were going to eliminate him; the only question was how? The two officers sat in front of the van quietly, while the dog sat, slobbering, right next to Dave. "What's your name?" he asked.

The dog just panted.

Dave looked deep into the dog's face and saw intelligence that was far beyond any dog he'd ever encountered. "I guess they must have enhanced you," he said.

"Rrrright," snapped the dog, who then just sat quietly for the rest of the ride to the Precinct.

The robotic wheel chair brought Dave inside, and the steel door clanged shut behind him. The dog was at his side every second. The two policemen checked in their guns in, and then walked behind Dave – he could hear the cleats in their boots, in perfect unison, as they went down the hall. "I want a lawyer," Dave said.

Both cops laughed out loud, and the dog barked and coughed in what seemed like a laugh, too.

A cell door was flung open, and the wheel chair rolled slowly into the middle of a large cell. Dozens of detainees circled around, but stayed out of reach of the dog.

Then the restraints disappeared, the wheel chair tilted forward and dumped Dave on the concrete, and then it backed out of the cell. The dog trotted quietly after the wheel chair, and the cops turned and left as the lock clicked on the solid door.

"It's a *New-timer*" was all Dave heard before half-a-dozen prisoners jumped him and beat him senseless.

In the dark of morning, a burly guard came into the cell and dragged Dave out by his heels – Dave was barely conscious. "Where'you takin' me?"

"Shut up or this is going to hurt a lot," replied the guard, as he dragged Dave down a long corridor and kicked him into a cell with another prisoner. The lock went click, just before Dave passed out from pain.

"They worked you over pretty good, eh, *New-timer*?" asked the other prisoner when Dave came to. "They like to make an impression right up-front. My names Bo."

"Dave," replied Dave through swollen lips.

"Okay Dave, welcome to the first stop on a real bad journey."

"What'da ya mean?" muttered Dave.

Bo kicked him in the head, and then in the stomach. Dave's day got much worse.

When his head finally cleared, Dave realized that he was hearing things. He looked around and saw Bo sleeping on the only cot in the cell. Dave was too weak to stand up, and too nauseous, too. His ears were ringing, probably from the beatings, he realized. "No, wait...what's that?" He heard someone talking to him. "Where are you?" he asked. "Run now," said the voice. "Don't hesitate, run now." Dave

snapped to – he realized that it was one of those focused acoustic beams, like on the TV set in the hospital – someone was talking to him. A blue light appeared and blasted a hole in the back of the cell, cutting Bo in half with a mighty bolt of lightning. Dave didn't wait to be reminded – he dove through the hole and ran as fast as he could. He dodged and weaved through walls and doors, and hallways – it was like a path had been cut for him. He didn't need any coaxing – his strength recovered, minute by minute.

Within two or three minutes, he was in an alley behind a large building, and he looked back for a second and saw a gaping hole that had been blown in the wall. "What the ..." was all he got out before the voice said "Get in that car right now."

He looked around, saw a long black car, and dove for the open door. The driver snapped on the accelerator, and the door slammed shut, and the almost silent engine slammed Dave back and forth as it followed an erratic course around the block, then around the city, and then down a long expressway.

Dave finally crawled up onto the back seat and buckled himself in. There was no driver, so he felt a second of panic, and then he realized that the car was robotically-controlled. When he calmed down, the projected voice said "Dave, welcome to the Rebellion."

Dave shook his head up and down. "Welcome, indeed," he said. "But you could have gotten here eight hours earlier."

"No," said the voice, "we couldn't," and that was it – the car sped along, the city changed to country, and the hot day outside was chilled by the air conditioning system in the auto.

"Where're we going?"

The car was silent on the subject.

Chapter 6.

Close to noon, the car pulled into a small service station and an attendant came out – he was wiping his greasy hands on a greasy towel. "What can I do for y'all?"

Dave wasn't exactly sure how to respond, so he just sat quietly.

The attendant stuck a narrow hose into a small opening in the side of the car, and then he pushed a button on the gas pump. Just for curiosity sake, Dave looked at the pump, and sure enough, the gas was \$83.99 per gallon. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Where am I?"

"Well, son, y'all 'r about 100 klicks north of the Cape – Cape Canaveral, that is. St. Augustine Beach, we call it, but with the erosion 'n all, that's a joke. Jacksonville's just north 'a here."

"Sorry, I'm not familiar with Florida. I'm from northern Alabama."

"Well I guess y'all 'r one of them *New-timers*, eh? Ya look like one, that's fer sure. Nice wheels, son – where'd ya get 'em?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. Just lucky, I guess."

"Well, son, it's lunch time in these here parts – care for some chow?"

Dave's stomach suddenly realized that it hadn't been fed for a couple of days. "Sure would appreciate it, mister." Then he froze up – he remembered that this guy might want to shoot him, or turn him in for a reward, or worse. "Well, maybe I'll just be on my way," he said quietly.

"No, son, let's go on inside and have some lunch and talk. Sounds like you need a friend and a meal, am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, son, let's come on in, then. Chow's on."

When Dave went into the tiny service station, there was Nancy, in blue body paint down to her waist, and she raced to him and hugged him and wept as he hugged her back. They watched the service station manager flip a switch, and the windows all polarized and went black, and in an instant, the lights came on, and the locks on the door clicked. "Y'all 'll be safe in here," he said to Dave. "Sis, take care of him." And then he disappeared into the service bay and left them alone.

"Dave, I didn't think I'd ever see you again – the news was full of stories of your demise."

"Yeah, they roughed me up in jail, but here I am. And I'm sure glad to see you."

"Did ya miss me?"

"I did, Nancy. Let's look at you – y'all 'r in a different face every time we meet. And then he scanned the rest of her, "and a different color, too."

"Well, Dave, fashion's fashion."

"Well, Nancy, I like what I see, and I'm so glad we're together again."

"How 'bout some hot food – I bet y'all 'r starved."

Dave looked at Nancy and really appreciated her kindness. "I wish I could clean up before eating," he said.

"Back there," she pointed. "The truckers had Dennis install a shower back there a few years ago. Dennis is my big brother – he takes good care of me."

Dave nodded and went to the washroom and cleaned up. He saw the blood and the bruises, and he cringed. As the hot water hit him in the shower, he began to cry. After a steaming-hot shower for 15 minutes, Nancy came in, stripped, and joined him. Then she saw Dave's tears and the bruises, and realized how badly he'd been beaten.

She held him close and cried with him. "Sorry, *New-timer*," she said quietly.

"I'm not sorry any more, Nancy dear." Then they hugged and kissed until the water ran cold.

After a good lunch of tomato soup and a ham and cheese sandwich, which Nancy called "comfort food", she and Dave sat quietly, holding hands. Dennis walked in and asked "Y'all need anything? I'm goin' ta town for some parts."

"Yeah, get me a gun," said Dave

"Here..." Dennis tossed Dave an old revolver. "Welcome to the family. Now, take care of my sister."

"Count on it," Dave replied, as he shoved the gun into his jeans. Then he reached over and touched Nancy gently on her cheek.

Sometime after midnight, Dennis rolled back into the garage and closed the door quietly. Dave and Nancy were sleeping soundly, in an embrace that was meant to last for all of time. But the dawn brought a new share of problems to the new lovers, and the day would end completely the opposite of today's bliss.

Chapter 7.

They all sat, eating breakfast in silence: Nancy, Dave and Dennis. The 3D video TV showed a good picture of Dave and explained that he was a dangerous *New-timer*. A reward was being offered for his capture. "They didn't say 'dead or alive', cautioned Dennis, so dead is preferred."

Dave shuddered, but then he sat up straight and said "They'll never take me alive. Nancy, what do you know about time travel that I can use to get away from these bullies?"

"Actually, Dennis is the better one to ask, right Dennis?"

"Yeah Dave – I was a physicist before I got crosswise with the government team that approves published research. I was working on an alternate hypothesis for time travel when I got cut off. You know how, back in your time that is, that every once in a while it would seem like people 'snapped', kinda went crazy, maybe started shooting folks?"

"Sure, that's what we called 'going postal', but that's a joke. At least I think it's a joke."

"Maybe not, Dave: my paper was research on how normal people snap. My hypothesis is that it was because of revenge of a person from now-time against another person from now-time by killing that person's ancestor. See, if you wanted to get even with someone, you could go back and kill an ancestor on either side of the family, and eliminate them from the gene pool, forever, so to speak."

"I heard of that paradox, but slightly differently. It was phrased 'what if you could go back in time and kill your own grandfather?' That was the reason that you couldn't go back in time – you might influence something that would result in you not being in the future."

"Well, that could happen, too, but it doesn't. I'd have to show you the proof, but trust me, nobody can do that."

Dave pondered deeply. "So if I go back in time, I can't return, can I?"

"Right as rain, Dave."

"But if I was going for a trip to, say, Switzerland, I'd ask for a return trip ticket, and I'd make sure that Drawing Room A in car 19 was booked for me. Don't these SotM Tribe people ask for a return ticket?"

"Oh, they pay for the return ticket, and they believe that they're going to return – but that's not what happens."

Dave thought about that for a minute and then asked "Dennis, why doesn't anyone go back in time and kill the ancestor of the person who invented time travel? That's the way to stop killing people from the past – like me, for example."

Nancy spoke up. "A *New-timer* tried that once. Somehow Coach Nowaski was tipped off, so he was prepared."

Dave groaned. "Wait a minute, how did he know? Can information flow back in time? That's what it sounds like."

"For a *New-timer*, you're pretty bright, Dave. Information leaks both ways through the time dimensions, you know: 4, 5 and 6. It's pretty hard to control information leaks. We have a team of crack government agents who patrol the time dimensions to make sure that information doesn't flow to the past. That would make things too unstable. Also, realize that information that flows from the olden times to our time doesn't cause a logic error, since whatever it was, already happened, for sure."

Dave grunted. "So Dennis, how can I get back to my own time without plucking another poor soul out of my old-time and depositing him here? I won't do that, since I know the consequences."

"Well, Dave, basically you're screwed. Either you swap with someone, or else you're stuck here. That's just the way the time dimensions work. Sorry."

"So if I want to go back and kill someone, then I'm stuck in that past as an *Old-timer*, but at least I could kill him..."

Dennis looked at Nancy. "Should I tell him, sis?"

Nancy nodded and reached out for Dave's hand. "You may not like what Dennis has to say, but just listen, that's all."

Dave nodded.

In a minute Dennis said "You know we checked you out before we busted you out of jail. It's easy to do, since you're history, and it's easily researched."

"Yeah, I remember you said about information flowing forward – it's okay."

"Shhhh, Dave. Hold on a minute," interrupted Nancy.

Dennis said "Do you remember your last few minutes in the olden time? Well, the police made an arrest right after you were merged into New-time. It seems like a vice squad officer watched you get your pocket picked, and then you disappeared, just as the thief took off running."

Dave's skin turned cold, but he kept silent.

"You're missing your wallet because of a pick pocket – a guy named Dudley Alan Jeffs got it, and he was sent to jail for a third offense. Dave, you might want to consider bringing him here as a *New-timer*, if you want to go home."

Dave's pulse quickened and he grasped Nancy's hand tighter. "So I CAN go back in time – I just have to burn the pick pocket who swiped my wallet – what poetic justice!"

Nancy looked down at her lap. "If you go, I'll miss you, Dave."

Dave snapped back "I'm not supposed to be here. You know that. I was just walking along when I was snatched up and half-killed – should have been killed – and now it's time for revenge. Ha!"

They all sat quietly for a few seconds. "Oh, then you'd be gone – all this would be gone." He looked at Nancy, who was still looking down. "I'm sorry, Nancy. That was mean of me. I really love you and I don't want to ever leave you. After all, I was a nowhere man, until I met you. Now I'm someone. Nancy, look at me: I love you, and I want to be with you forever. And if you're brother is half the

physicist as he is a mechanic, then I don't have any doubt that those time dimensions will act in our favor."

Nancy looked up quietly and she was sobbing. "I love you too, Dave."

Dave said "Then what's the point of it all – I could take revenge on someone who swapped me down-time, but I'd be stuck up-time – sheesh!"

"Trust me Dave," replied Dennis, "they've figured that out."

"Whaa..."

"It works like this: you hire a hit man to go up-time and kill whomever you want to kill. You pay for his or her travel, and give them a fat bonus, to boot. You'll know if they do their job, since your target's date of demise is easy to find in with a Gobble search. It's shady, but there's a flourishing underground that does that. I bet that's what happened to you Dave. Somewhere up-time, someone got their brains blown out while you were having fun in that rocket fire pit. The culprit of course is scot-free."

Nancy held onto Dave's hand and put her head on his shoulder.

"Sounds like a person could do a lot of damage by traveling up-time," concluded Dave.

"You don't have the slightest clue, Dave, my boy. Time is a flexible fabric in 3-dimensions, and a push or a pull here causes a force somewhere else that can make you lose your mind, trying to figure out what's happening. Put quite simply: if you mess with time, you get what you deserve."

Then Dennis got up, stood behind them both, and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Okay, kids, sounds like y'all have made up your minds to stay together, and I think that would be wonderful. But historical information is what it is, and there's more that you have to know."

Dave and Nancy clutched each other's hands. "Whaaa?" they both uttered at the same time.

"Dave, it turns out you're very important, and Nancy, you drop completely out of history."

Dave and Nancy sat, frozen in place and contemplated that.

"But..." A glow formed in the room – it turned every color of the rainbow and a deep hum emanated from it. Then, out stepped a man and a woman, both in silver space suits.

"Howdy Dave," said the man.

"Howdy Nancy," said the woman.

"Howdy yourself," said Dennis.

"Whaaa..." blinked Dave and Nancy.

Chapter 8.

Dennis started: "See, I never exactly stopped working on my paper, or my invention. This service station is a cover for my lab. The Fed's used to monitor me for years, after I wrote my thesis, but now they think I'm just a grease monkey, so they don't have time for me, get it? Ha! No time for me."

The silver-suited man said "Yeah, Dennis kept working on the information-exchange theory that he had. It turns out he's right – about information leakage from past to future, and, more importantly, from future to past. He knew that you would make the decision you made, because I told him."

"We told him," interrupted the silver-clad woman.

Then they both popped their helmets off and the bubble collapsed. There were Dave and Nancy of the future, looking fit and trim. "So you see, a little information goes a long way."

Dave and Nancy held hands, looked at each other, and then Dave gulped. "You're me?"

"Yup. And Nancy: meet Nancy."

They all got caught up on the past, and the future, and then they all turned to Dennis.

Dave started "I know you've talked about up-time and down-time, but I still don't get it."

"Okay, here's how it works: all of y'all 'r goin' to the future – I call that down-time, since old-time and new-time are ambiguous terms. Down-time is like with the flow of time – like going down a stream. Up-time is like going against the flow of time – like going up-river, got it?"

Dave and Dave and Nancy and Nancy all nodded. "So y'all 'r goin' down-time, and you'll do something wonderful."

"How do you know that?" asked *New-timer* Dave.

"Trust me, I know...brother-in-law."

Then all five of them laughed until it hurt.

When Dave and Nancy joined their down-time selves in the closing bubble, Dennis stood back and waved. "I'll miss you sis."

"Bye, Dennis. I love you," and then the bubble was gone, and when they stepped out, there was only Dave and Nancy, holding hands and smiling.

"I love you too," said Dave, as they both laughed while the bubble disappeared in the middle of a large room that looked like a giant warehouse. "Life is about to change, my dear."

"Right back at ya, Dave," winked Nancy as he stripped off the silver time suit and shook back her long brown hair. They both embraced for several minutes, and then they went to the large desk, flipped the switch on the lamp, and read the notes that they left themselves, just a little while before, it seemed.

"Dear Dave and Nancy, welcome home. Boy have we got a lot to tell you!" The information crystal in the top drawer will tell you the whole story. In order to make sure that nobody else finds it accidentally, it is encrypted. You'll know the code if you think about it. Sincerely, D&N"

They looked at each other, wondering. And then Dave opened the desk drawer: it was full of quartz crystals. "These must be our future information. Now what do you think we're supposed to do with these things?" as he grabbed a handful of them. "And what the heck is the key?"

"I don't have a clue, but right now, it's 11 P.M. on a day that we don't know, in a year that we don't know. I vote for a shower and bed," as she poked him in the ribs.

"Nancy – I didn't know you cared," joked Dave as he swept her off her feet, and carried her into the spacious bathroom. They stripped off the rest of their *new-old-timer* clothes and headed for the powerful, hot shower. Too bad they were both sound asleep five seconds after hitting the warm bed.

Chapter 9.

The bright sun scalded them awake, and they heard a bird chirping, somewhere in the cavernous bedroom.

"Look Dave, there's a bird cage there," Nancy pointed.

She got out of bed, went across the room and lifted a cloth off of a bird cage. "Look, it's a parakeet! I always wanted one. *Pretty bird.*"

"Pretty bird," the bird responded.

Nancy squealed with glee, just as Dave snuck up behind her and grabbed her from behind. "We have some unfinished business, my love," he said.

Nancy turned around, gave him a big kiss and melted into his arms, as he picked her up and returned her to the still-warm bed.

Breakfast was late that morning.

"Well Dave, we have some research to do – first, what to do with those crystals, and then what is the code?"

Dave was finishing up some scrambled eggs and toast. "That's the first order of business, for sure – ah, now that we have the first order of business out of the way."

They both had a good laugh and took turns pouring coffee. Nancy said "Let's see, there must be a reader for those crystals – what would it look like?"

"Let's go get one and see," replied Dave.

They cleaned up the dishes and saw that the silver box below the sink housed a modern dish washer, which cycled in less than a minute, and then dinged contentedly. "Done," it said, in a soft voice. "Should I hold the cycle for more dishes?"

"No," said Dave. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," replied the dish washer.

"You're welcome," echoed the parakeet.

Nancy laughed and went to the cage. "Let's get you out of there. What's your name, little bird?"

"Bert," said the parakeet.

"Bert the Bird – I like it," said Nancy. "*Bert want some seeds?*"

"I'm a bird. Of course I want some seeds," was Bert's quick reply.

Nancy just about dropped the cage on the floor. "Dave, did you hear that?"

"I did. Sounds like we raised a pretty cool bird."

"Cool Bert," said Bert.

Nancy laughed so hard she had to sit down. Bert flew from the open cage to her shoulder. "Bert want a cracker," he said.

Dave reached over and gave him one. Tears flowed from Nancy's eyes. "This is just perfect, Dave – just perfect."

"I guess I'm not a nowhere man at all – at least in this world."

"I guess not. Here help me up. I'm too weak from laughing."

Nancy and Bert joined Dave at the desk. "Let's look at these crystals for a second, he said."

"XYXY4343. XYXY4343," said Bert.

"COOL BIRD!" said Dave.

"Cool Bert," said Bert.

Nancy's head was still trying to twist around to see the parakeet on her shoulder, but she decided that her neck didn't work that way. "Good Bert," she said.

"Cool Bert," replied Bert.

Dave stuffed a crystal into a device that looked like a pencil sharpener. A holo-image of a keypad formed and he pressed XYXY4343. The keypad went away and the room filled with a gigantic full-color 3-D holo-vid. It was down-time Dave and Nancy. "Welcome you two. Hope you're enjoying yourselves," said Dave.

Nancy poked him in the ribs with her elbow. "You know darn well they're enjoying themselves."

"Cool Bert," said Bert to the hologram.

Nancy and Dave couldn't help staring at themselves in the mirror of future-past.

"We're here to answer your questions," said holo-Dave. Now that Dennis got the information transfer thing working, we can send you whatever information you need."

Dave pondered that for a moment. "Ok, Dave, old pal, old buddy: how do I go back in time and kill the dirt dog that made this time travel stuff so miserable for people from up-time, er, old-time, er..."

"Yeah, our original time," replied holo-Dave. "Yeah, you can do that if you want, but then none of this would exist. Sure that's what y'all want?"

Nancy and Dave looked at each other.

"Cool Bert," said Bert as he pooped on the computer keyboard.

"Nah," said Nancy.

"Nah," agreed Dave. "This is a good time. I'm with the woman I love, in a time that's obviously much better than any time I've been in before. I guess we'll stay."

"Smart move, Dave," replied holo-Dave. "She's really our type."

Dave turned towards Nancy and said quietly. "I know. I know."

Nancy reached over and grabbed Dave's hand. "Let's forget the past – up-time is too hard anyway. Let's stop fighting it. Let's make the best of now, what 'd ya say there, big boy?" as she poked Dave just a bit.

"I'm happy with that, Nancy. The past's past, and the future is now. Let's make the best of now and take all the down-time we can get."

"*Cool Bert*," said Bert.

Nancy and Dave and Nancy and Dave all laughed at that – and it all worked out pretty well, after all.

Chapter 10.

Later that week, Dave started reading the memory crystals, and he was totally amazed. "Nancy, Dennis figured out a curious way of bypassing the worst part of time travel – killing a *New-timer* every time an *Old-timer* wanted to visit the past. That's why we met ourselves coming and going."

Nancy looked up from her morning coffee and asked "Does that mean we have unlimited possibilities to travel to whenever we want?"

"I guess so, but I've still got a lot to read. So far, I see that your brother has been real busy – making us all rich."

Nancy's eyebrows arched. "Do tell."

"He asks questions and then we send him back information. He invests accordingly."

"Well that's not right..."

"Hang on, dear. It's not taking money from anybody, or anything like that. Think about it – we're meant to have it, therefore we do."

Nancy pondered for a moment. "What's he getting out of it?"

"He's gets enough to keep his lab running full-blast. I read that he hired a couple of college kids to help him out. That's the kind of stuff he's doing with his bread. We'll all be comfortable, because we're supposed to be. It's kinda quirky, but okay, I guess."

"Well, it's a gift-horse, so I'll leave it alone. If it lets us stay together and live happily ever after, then it's good enough for me."

Dave winked at Nancy. "I'll make an honest woman out of you yet."

Nancy picked up the toast and threw it at Dave. "Next crack like that and the plate will join the toast, get it?"

Dave licked the jelly off the back of his hand and had a hard time controlling his laughter. "So, what about that really? Wanna get married or something?"

"Thought y'all would never ask."

He didn't show her the printout from the crystal that said that next Saturday they'd get married in the church on Third Avenue.

Dave kept reading and studying the crystals. He finally decided that Dennis never intended to share the research with anyone, so he carefully shredded the notes that he had been taking. In a couple of weeks he got to the 50th crystal and sighed. "Nancy, come here, dear."

"What's up, bub?"

"I don't want to make you feel bad, but I can't withhold this from you, either."

"Shoot."

"Your brother died on January 3, 2214. He was in a car accident – he died instantly."

Nancy's face turned white. "That's terrible. Wait! Does he know that? If we tell him, he can stay home that day!"

"I didn't think of that. But I don't know what that would do the timeline. It might really mess everything up."

"Well, he's alive right now, right? Just ask him if you can tell him something like that. He'll know what to do."

"Okay, next time he asks a question, I'll tack on that question with our answer. But if he asks me not to send the information back, then you know what'll happen and when."

Nancy stared at the ceiling, and a tear fell from her eye.

It wasn't long afterwards that things started to change. First, Nancy asked "Dave, I hate to ask, but wasn't the kitchen white? It's yellow now, and I don't like yellow."

"I don't know, dear. I don't mind white."

"No, that's not what I mean. Can something like that just change overnight?"

"Are you sure it's not your memory, or a dream?"

"No Dave. I would never paint a kitchen yellow. Come here – look. See any yellow bowls, glasses, dishes? Anything? No – it's cause I don't like yellow. Now look around – yellow. Dave, something fishy's going on.

Dave nodded and went back to the memory crystals. "Maybe there's an answer in these. I'm reading as fast as I can."

"Okay dear."

"Nancy – come in here right now!"

Nancy came running and almost slipped by Dave's memory crystal reader. "The crystal's have changed. Look at January 3rd, 2214. The obituary doesn't mention your brother. He must have survived the car accident."

Nancy sat down hard on the floor. "Oh, thank God."

"Here's a request for information coming in now. I'm going to ask him if it's okay to tell him about his death. Then we'll see what happens. Okay now, he's asking for a couple of stock closing prices from yesterday. Let me key it in. There – now I'll tack on my question. Okay, we'll just wait and see."

Bert flew into the den and perched on Nancy's shoulder "*Gold Bert*," he said.

"Nancy – did you hear that? He didn't say 'cool Bert', he said 'gold Bert' – something else has changed.

Nancy nodded and offered her finger to Bert, who promptly bit it.

"Ouch, Bert – slack off a bit."

"*Gold Bert*," was his official reply.

The next day, the bank statement showed a big jump in the available balance. "Oh, Nancy-o, your brother is at it again. We're definitely what you'd call rich now. Check it out."

She whistled a low whistle. "Holy cow – I guess the future of Capitalism is sound."

They both laughed at that double entendre, and then Dave said "Dennis told me that it's okay to tell him about the date of his demise. He says that he worked out some equations and not to worry."

"Thank God. I'm glad some moron isn't going to run into him."

"Well, that just means that he dies some other time and some other place, 's all."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it Dave."

In the doorway stood Dennis, and when he stepped in and hugged Nancy, his two research assistants followed. "Nancy, Dave, I'd like you to meet Sam and Sally – good kids."

Nancy's hands were still covering her mouth in shock.

"Welcome, come y'all come in," said Dave. But he looked out into the hallway to make sure there weren't more time-anomalies coming for dinner.

After dinner, they all started speaking at once.

"How did..."

"Who..."

"How can..."

"Didn't y'all..."

And then they settled down and Dennis took over. "Look kids, we're here, and we're okay. The information you gave me was enough to prevent something stupid from happening. These are my research assistants who ran the formulas. And they did more than that – they actually proved that we don't ever have to die. See, we can just travel around the event, if you get my meaning: on the other side of death is life eternal."

Then they all shut up and just tried to get their heads around that idea.

Sally spoke up first: "It's kinda weird, but you're saying the bible's right?"

Dave and Nancy moved their lips, but nothing came out – it was all too confusing.

"Is that why..."

"How did you prove..."

"Are you here to..."

"Slow down, kids – we're here for a long time. Questions will be answered in the order they're received." And then he crossed his arms, winked at Nancy, and gave a mighty shrug, with his arms extended and his palms up.

"Welcome back, Dennis – we both missed you," said Dave.

"Yeah!" exclaimed Nancy in delight, and she hugged her brother's neck to hide her tears of joy.

It took a few days to settle into a new routine, but the larger family fit into the huge apartment fine, and Sam and Sally were as nice as could be. Soon they set up a holographic spreadsheet program and started to fill the cells with several hard calculus problems. "Kids," muttered Dennis, and then he high-fived Sam and left the two researchers alone.

"Dave, how ya doing on the memory crystals?"

"I'm up to 64, but lately, I keep getting interrupted, eh?"

They saw Bert flapping around, looking for Nancy to roost upon. "*Blue Bert*," he said.

"Uh-oh," said Dave.

"Uh-oh is right," echoed Dennis.

They looked around – "N-Nancy's gone!" they both shouted.

Chapter 11.

After a thorough walk through each room of the building, they agreed that she was gone. "Her air-car is in the garage, so she's not at the hyper-market," said Dave.

"Dennis," called Sam, "I need to show you something."

"Be right there, Sam."

"See this cell in the spreadsheet," as he poked a laser pointer's beam into the middle of a densely-populated section of the 3D spreadsheet. "There's something twitching there – some kind of chaotic element – it won't stabilize, and look over here." Then Sally pointed her green laser into a cell near the bottom of the spreadsheet. "Look here, Dennis. See that cell – it's not converging. Those cells are being affected by those other cells. Something's not right."

Dennis stared at the two areas of the holographic spreadsheet. It was true: the cells were changing as they spoke. "What's that area there?" as he pointed to a sparsely-populated area in column 5.

"That's the bird – Bert."

"I see what you're getting at, Dennis," said Sally. "He's the chaotic element. He was trained for one thing, but he's evolved into something else, and he's affecting the outcome of those other cells." She put her hands on her hips and said "So now what? How can a parakeet affect these calculations?"

"I don't know, Sal, but we need to get to the bottom of this before it gets worse. Dave – bring me memory crystal number 81...Dave? Sam, Sal – Dave's gone."

"*Bert brain, Bert brain,*" chirped Bert, as he flew in circles in the living room, waiting for a perch.

One by one, Dennis, Sally and Sam stared at the holographic spreadsheet. But no answers came – not a one.

"Mr. Premont, wake up Mr. Premont," said the police officer who was looking over Dave.

"I...wha..."

"Sir, you collapsed there. Should I call an ambulance for you?"

Dave looked at the black-suited policeman and said, "No, thanks anyway. My blood pressure's been screwy lately. I got some meds from my doctor this afternoon. Maybe he needs to adjust the dosage."

"Okay sir. Just be careful, that's all."

Dave waited until the policeman was gone before he stood up. "What the heck was that? I felt myself moving through time – I got older and younger and younger and older, all at the same time. I saw... what was that stuff, anyway?"

A young couple with an ugly dog and a baby carriage looked him. "He must be drunk," said the girl.

"Yeah, I wonder why the cop left him here in the park – he should have taken him in."

Dave bent over and pretended to tie his shoes. The gal pulled out her cell phone and started dialing. He rolled off the end of the bench and ran for cover. When he got to a pile of fallen leaves, he dove in, head first. "Oh, crap. Something's really changed. I remember how it was, and now it's not that way. Now what am I supposed to do? That gal had a lipstick-phone, and the guy was mostly naked – and their dog was naked, too...hey, what happened to the dog? It sure wasn't the same – it was a Shi Tsu this time, and a Chihuahua last time. Geeze, something's really hosed." A spider bit him on the hand and he shouted in pain, as he squashed the beast with his other hand. He looked over at the couple, and saw the baby carriage change into a tricycle, with a young girl on it. The mother was taking her picture with an old Polaroid camera, and the young father was pushing the girl's trike. "Oh, geeze – I killed a spider and stuff changed. I need to be real careful from now on."

Dave stood up and brushed himself off. He walked purposefully to the street, and went into a hotel. He walked to the front desk, "Is my room ready, my good man?"

"What's your name, sir?"

"Dave Premont."

"Sorry sir, no Dave Premont in our system. Let me check the office."

When the clerk went to his room, Dave swung around the computer and sent an e-mail to himself, at the address that he knew he'd be at in 240 years. "Dave, here's a reminder to myself: don't tell Dennis about his demise." And then he hit SEND, and left the hotel.

The cells converged, the spreadsheet disappeared, followed quickly by Sam, then Sally, then Dennis.

Nancy said "Whaa..."

Dave said "Sorry Nancy, but Dennis has to die."

"Whaa...he was here a second ago."

"Right, old girl, but you and I weren't. We've learned the bounds of the formula that he worked out. We know that if he doesn't die on January 3, 2214, then so much chaos will be introduced into the system that we'll be flung into the past, or worse."

"Is that what happened to me? I was in a terrible place. There were wild animals like I'd never seen before. They were snapping at me. Then we were here."

Dave scratched the back of his hand and remembered the spider bite. "Yeah, ditto."

"*Cool Bert*," said Bert.

"Right on, Bert!" they both said as the parakeet nuzzled Nancy's cheek.

"We won't try that again," Dave said. "Sorry about your brother."

"I guess that was a close to that edge as I want to get. Sorry Dennis, but some things just got ta be, I guess."

Dave rummaged in the desk for a minute. "Some of the crystals are gone. And look, the bank balance is still okay, but it's not through the roof."

"It's fine, Dave. Let's not mess around with that again."

Dave and Nancy hugged for a couple of minutes, and then Nancy went to the kitchen to make dinner. In a couple of minutes she shouted out "Dave, have you seen the pepper? I left it on the stove, but it's missing."

Dave felt a deep cold run through his body. "No, dear. Let's go out and eat, okay?"

But that wasn't going to help them out at all.

Chapter 12.

A Mohican Indian named Uncas stood in Central Park and blocked Dave's way down the 79th Street Transverse through the park.

"For many moons Mohicans came to this land. Long before white-skins came, this was our land. Now my father, Chingachgook lies dead, and I am the last Mohican. Now you die."

As the large Indian reached for his tomahawk, Dave raised his hand and said "Stop! You're not a Mohican, and you're sure not Uncas, son of Chingachgook. They were characters in a story, not real people. I'm dreaming. Wake up. Wake up!"

"Wake up, sir. Are you alright?"

Dave looked at the black-suited police officer who was gently prodding with the toe of his patent leather boot. "We've got a drunk," he said into thin air. "Send the wagon."

"I'm fine, officer. My doctor prescribed some meds, and it must have affected me. Please just let me rest for a minute."

"Do you wants me to call 'n ambulance?"

"I'll be fine in a minute. I really need to see my doctor later today. Have a nice day, officer."

A police bus rolled to a stop and a wheel chair started to deploy to an emerging ramp. "Really, officer, I'm fine."

"Okay, Squad 15, cancel the bus. Return to station. Out."

An old couple walked by, pushing a child on a bicycle – the child had Down Syndrome. "Why don't you take that man in?" demanded the old man.

"He needs to see his doctor. He'll be okay. Now move on," the policeman said brusquely.

The old woman turned and flipped Dave the bird, and stuck out her tongue at him. "Bums everywhere," she spat.

Dave looked at a pile of palm fronds on the ground, just ahead, and scratched the back of his hand.

"Not to do that..." he thought, but he didn't know where or what he was talking about.

Nancy's trip was stranger, but when they met again in the apartment, she was staring into space, and she refused all Dave's earnest queries. When they went to bed later that night, she clenched her fists, locked her arms and elbows and cried all night long. When Dave tried to hug her, she screamed and screamed.

"Nancy, we've got to talk. A couple of days ago, time went bananas, and we were both flung to somewhen's that were out of Looney-Toons cartoons. I don't know what happened to you, but I know that we don't want it to happen again."

Nancy sat, stone-still, staring at her coffee.

"Blird Blirt," squawked the parrot.

Nancy looked up and suddenly woke up from her bad dream. "Dave! We don't own a parrot. We own a parakeet. Something's so weird that I can't begin to tell you. Where's Dennis?"

"Dennis? Your brother? He's been dead for a couple of hundred years. Why do you ask?"

"No, he was here. He was with Sally and her boyfriend, ummm, Sam something."

"No, Nancy, your brother's dead."

They both whipped their heads around as a rooster crowed in the living room. "Eer-eer..." was all he got out before Dave picked up a brass candle stick and sent it flying. It found its mark, and the rooster lay dead in the middle of the oak floor.

"...Uncas, the son of Chingachgook," spoke the policeman, as his war-club descended onto Dave's head. Dave rolled to the left and fell off the bench into a pile of pomegranates. When he wiped the goop from his eyes, he saw Nancy being chased by a hundred Indian squaws, armed with pitchforks. He tried to get up and run to help her, but Uncas' club found its mark, and Dave was instantly unconscious.

"Dave? Are you awake, Dave?" shouted Dennis. "I've got the solution to the spreadsheet. I'll upload it tomorrow. Run the formula, Dave. Got it? It's about mass-balance, not about swapping humans."

Dave floated in the corner of the room and looked down to see Sam and Sally in bed together, making out. "Aren't you two supposed to solve the problem?"

"Not really, Mr. Premont. That's up to you," and they pulled the sheet over themselves and continued what they were doing. The sheet had rows and columns of numbers printed on it.

"A spreadsheet," realized Dave. "I need to figure out the spreadsheet."

"Nancy, where are you?" he shouted. All he heard were some Indians, just like in an *Old-timer* movie that he'd seen once as a boy.

He felt merged. "Wait, this has happened before. Let's see, I was in a fire-pit..." Dave jumped up and ran as fast as he could. He didn't look back as a lightning bolt hit, right where he had been – it singed his hair, but he kept running. "Run...Run the spreadsheet," kept coming into his mind.

Dave woke up under a pile of late-fall leaves. He instantly swatted his hand and crushed a spider who was just about to enpalpate him. As he sat up, he saw a highway sign, spanning the North-south New York toll road. "*Success Ahead*," it read.

Indians from the SotM Tribe attacked Fort Drum – it was on the news. "I'm glad I can read smoke signals," he said. "Or I couldn't listen to the nightly news. Hurons Attack In Morning," it says. "Solve'm Big Problem Soon."

Dave saw Nancy, running and screaming, being chased by Hurons from the SotM Tribe. She was painted blue today. He tried to wave at her, but the black-shirted police man zapped him again. "Son, this here TASER'll keep you down all day if ya keep strugglin'. Just stay down."

Dave looked at a huge dog, barely under control of the policeman. "Go ahead, make my entire week, pork chop," said the dog, who licked his lips and slobbered pints of drip-slobber.

"Duh, stupid!" said Dave to nobody in particular. "The guy who invented time travel must be under pressure, or feel like he's under attack from us. He's throwing random junk into the time machine, just to destroy us..." "Where did that idea come from?" "Dennis?" "Sam?"

"Nowaski. Coach Noawaski," said a voice. The black-shirted policeman stood there, looking at Dave. "But you can call me anything but late for dinner. Here now, Blitz. Sit. Good dog.

Dave's going to be nice to me, or you're going to have him for a snack, right?"

"Ruff."

"Dave, boy-o, get up. It's time we talked: I can tell you the truth."

Dave's blood pressure rose, and he could feel sweat running down his neck. "How do I know?"

"Look at my halo, and you'll know."

Sure enough, being one, Dave knew enough about *New-timers* to know that the guy standing in front of him was one. As he got up, he pretended to wobble as he grabbed a fist-sized rock and brought it in a giant arc, right on back of the policeman's neck, which popped, and then his head was a helium-balloon that went straight up, while his body went limp and disappeared in a puff of green smoke. Without pausing a second, Dave grabbed the TASER wand and stuffed it into the huge dog's waiting jaws, just as the beast was readying his leap. Dave pushed and held the Activate button for 5 minutes, and then he collapsed into a fetal ball and cried for ten minutes. The stone dog, with a cane sticking out of his mouth looked out of his granite eyes and wondered about Dave's sanity.

High-flying planes overhead were drawing a cross-hatch pattern in the sky. He remembered that he was supposed to solve a spreadsheet problem somewhere. He crawled away from the two bodies, or what should have been bodies...and he felt an attempted merge, which nearly made him puke.

A wheel chair was washing back and forth at the curb – restraints were snapping open and shut. Dave turned tail and ran into the forest as fast as he could.

Uncas jumped out of an oak tree, swinging his war club; his 3 feathers looked like they were from a familiar parakeet. "For the last of the Mohicans, you're sure stupid," said Dave, as he stepped aside and let the Indian fall to the sidewalk at the corner of 79th street and East Drive.

He heard the Indian's leg bones crack, and then he heard a primal scream. It was Nancy, and she was being peppered with rubber arrows from the SotM Tribe. "Okay," shouted Dave. "That's enough! Stop it NOW!"

But Chingachgook was ready, and he chucked a big rock, which struck Dave right in the chest. Dave went down, and the Indian came running towards him, war club on high. Dave passed out just before he was due to get scalped.

He woke up in a hospital in Cape Canaveral, Florida. The doctor was standing there with a clipboard. "Mr. Premont, I'm Doctor Friend. I'm going to try to help you sort all this out. Now it says here that you need help with solving a spreadsheet. These nurses will help you. Samantha, Sally, please help Mr. Premont."

A large hologram formed near the foot of his bed. He reached for his laser pointer, but realized that he was handcuffed to the bed. A Marine guard was standing at the foot of his bed, just behind the holo-spreadsheet. He saw two cells in the spreadsheet twitching, as if alive. He realized that something was wrong with them.

"Nurse, why are they chaotic? You can tell me the truth. And hey! Samantha? You're supposed to be Sam."

"Sure Dave: the truth is that the Sermon on the Mount Tribe bought that time travel patent. It was Reverend Tumar who started it all, but we're going to finish it, Dave."

Dave saw the nurses reach for the button over his bed, and then he felt the warm glow of drugs knock him out.

"Reverend Tumar – he's the wild card," Dave realized in his drug-induced sleep. "Where is he now? He bought the patents from Coach Nowaski, but we've never heard from him again. He must have gone down-time – but why? To protect himself? From what? Or whom?"

He felt a sneeze coming and he tried to choke it back.

"Solve it, Dave," said Dennis.

Dave saw Nancy, wearing only bright green paint, running through Central Park, being chased by hundreds of women, who each had a Longaberger basket, loaded with loaves of unleavened bread, and stuffed with Mrs. Paul's baked fish filets. "Where are you gals going?" he shouted, but they were all in simple black and white body paint that reminded him of a row of zebras, but with parakeet feathers coming out of their nostrils.

"Sweet Mother – can Marys dress like that?" he whistled low and slow, "...and all in a row," as he watched them disappear down a jogging trail.

Chapter 13.

Dave woke up and realized what the problem was: Reverend Tumar was down-time, alright. He was a fraction of a second ahead of current-time – just enough to know what was going on and react to it. The good Reverend could develop counter-measures to anything Dave could throw at him, because he knew what just happened and could step aside, so-to-speak, and avoid it. As the smell of the hospital seeped into his nose, he let loose a sneeze that a Hi-Ho elf named Sneezzy would have been proud of.

"I hate hospitals, so what am I doing in here?" The handcuff reminded him that he was restrained on purpose – but what was the purpose?

"Why am I being restrained?" he asked the Marine guard, who just stood there like a large figure from the Nutcracker. "I bet if I put a walnut in your mouth and used your left arm, I could use you as a nutcracker," Dave said out loud. The Marine didn't flinch.

"Okay, Reverend Tumar: I'm not done with you yet. In fact, I haven't yet begun to fight. If you think that putting weird images into my head will make me back down from you, you're just flat wrong. I'm Alabama born and bred, and I love a good fight – especially with bullies like you!"

The smell of the hospital was seeping into Dave's sinuses again. Suddenly, he felt himself being snatched out of his bed, and out of his conscious body. A powerful plasma bubble formed, with him inside – it went POP! He was suddenly disconnected from the bed that held him prisoner for so long – the plasma bubble with Dave inside was confronted by what could only be a demon from Hell. It was huge and red, with black burn marks all over it. Mostly, it had a huge mouth with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. It lifted him up and prepared for a quick snack when Dave's sneeze... Haaa-haaa... HAAAA.....

Poor Dave – he really couldn't help it. The smell of burning flesh of this other-world demon slammed into his sinuses like a hurricane. The memory of the fire-pit at Cape Canaveral was etched into his brain. Dave didn't know that the creature formerly known as Reverend Tumar, couldn't anticipate a random event – like a sneeze. Dave didn't know that that's exactly how to defeat someone (or something) that lives his/hers/its life in down-time, and who thinks that he/she/it can counter every one of your moves. That fraction of a second is good enough for most circumstances, but "most" is not the same as "all," as they would both find out in a few milliseconds. Dave felt the polished stainless steel bedrail in his left hand – the creature had plucked him out of the bed for a midnight snack, no doubt, but Dave had a toothpick, about 3 feet long, and made out of type 316 stainless steel that was about to change the future. The huge sneeze cut loose, which caused Dave to clench the steel bar with great force, as the sneeze exploded right in the monster's 3-eyed face, causing him/her/it to prematurely drop Dave into the awaiting maw...

CHOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Dave's sinuses exploded so hard that it would have embarrassed a certain dwarf named Sneezzy. Dave fell the last few feet into the waiting jaws of death, but the bedrail brought him up short of the creatures' waiting throat, as the rugged stainless steel bar jammed the monster's mouth wide open, and then wedged itself into the roof of the mouth and the front of the creature's lower jaw. Reverend Tumar's creature was in mortal pain from the wound, and it whipped its head around until Dave was thrown 100 feet away, and landed with a thud. The counter-force of Dave letting go caused the pole to dislodge from the lower jaw and slip into the open throat of the monster, and then down, down into the waiting innards of him/her/it. Dave heard a scream like a tyrannosaur, as the creature tried to reach in and dislodge the steel pole – to no avail. The creature's talons were meant for ripping

flesh, not for grabbing steel poles out of its throat. After a few minutes of gagging and spurting blood, the creature keeled over and died in a pool of black sludge. It shuddered a few times, and tried to reach for Dave, who was still in shock from the fall.

A parakeet flew overhead: "Dave, you have to come home now. Wake up, Dave. Come home."

Dave wanted to sleep, but the parakeet wouldn't let him – it kept nibbling on Dave's nose until he finally stood up and took a couple of steps. He wound up in the middle of Central Park, in the middle of Wednesday afternoon. Nancy fell out of the sky and landed near his feet with a thud.

"Are you alright?" he shouted, and as he bent down, Dennis fell with a thud, right next to her.

"Something's fishy here," Dave said, as he lifted up Nancy's head and stroked her hair. Dennis started to groan and move around. "Hey kids, I'm home – Bert? Where's Bert?"

Nancy's eyes fluttered open, and when she saw Dave holding her, she reached up and gave him the biggest kiss that has ever been given by any woman in love to any man in the entire universe.

Chapter 14.

A few days later, they were all sitting around listening to each other's fantastic tales of their encounter with Reverend Tumar – and each tale was stranger than the last. When it was Dave's turn, he asked "What the heck was that creature all about, Dennis?" Dave asked. "It was like the creature from Jabberwocky – eyes of flame and all."

"Yeah, old Rev Tumar constructed an avatar worthy of an Academy Award. He/she/it sat there, a fraction of a second down-time, so he could see everything, and counter every counter-measure that could be thrown at him. Your random act was the only thing that couldn't be countered. That avatar would have had you for lunch if he hadn't plucked you out of the bed while you were still handcuffed to the bed rail. He thought that it would only take a second to scoop you up and chow down, but he found out how tough snacks from Alabama can be, eh?"

"Yeah, Roll Tide!" shouted Nancy, who was a University of Alabama graduate. "We're tough all right."

Dave finally asked the question that was bothering him: "What's the deal with the dopey bird? How did Bert just happen to know so much?"

"Simple: I was talking through the bird – it's easy to get a bird to say stuff, you just have to train them, right? I spent plenty of frozen-time in a jail cell, guarded by Rev Tumar, and every day, I heard him manipulating you and sis. I simply used my mind to reach out to Bert, and I told him what to say to you. I tried talking directly to you, but your mind was too cluttered. A bird's brain is almost blank, except for food, water, and a mate. Bert was easy to train, right Bert?"

Bert flew down from his cage. "*Cool Bert*," he squawked.

Nancy laughed so hard her tears started to wash away her crimson body paint. "My brother, a Ph.D. in physics, talking to a dopey bird," she laughed, "and I'm married to Sneezzy. Ha haa ha: married to Sneezzy, I'm the sister of Doc, who talks to Dopey."

Dave just winked at Dennis and said "I guess that makes her worshipfulness Snow White, right?"

Dennis high-fived Dave and they all rolled on the floor laughing as Bert flew overhead squawking "*Mirror, mirror on the wall.*"

"Hey brother!" said Nancy as she poked Dennis in the ribs – "leave poor Bert's brain alone. We heard you were dead – what's the deal with that?"

"I discovered that you don't need to swap humans, you must swap equivalent mass," Dennis said. I tried to tell Dave that, but he was too whizzed out. I split myself up over multiple timelines and quantum-entangled myself. I'm only dead in one timeline – that's not too bad, all things being equal. Reverend dropped a plane on my car and killed me. I tried and tried to get you to solve the spreadsheet that I sent you by telepathy. It showed all about mass-balance and how it affects the macro-entanglement vector. I even hid Nancy in one of the cells of the spreadsheet for a short time."

"That's what you were trying to tell me?" cried Dave. "Dennis, you'd better stick with your day job, because telepathy is not your field..." And then, while Dave was laughing so hard he was crying, he suddenly let loose a sneeze Haaa-haaa... HAAAA.....*CHOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

"Bless you, Sneezzy" squawked Dopey, while tears of laughter rolled down Doc's cheeks, and Snow White said "And what am I going to do with this particular 3 of 7?" just as a pillow fight broke out. "I'll take Bashful, Sleepy or Happy instead!"

"Don't be Grumpy!" squawked Dopey, as one of the pillows cut loose and let a zillion feathers fly all over the room as Snow White and Sneezzy hugged each other tightly and fell in love all over again.

Chapter 15.

On a cool day in March, Jason Tumar's mother brought him to the murky stone church an hour's ride from home. "Now look here, young man, stop fidgeting. Brother Saltzman promised to take you under his wing and make a man out of you. Since your father left, you've been getting into trouble all the time. You need a strong man in your life. Here now, settle down – here he comes."

"Hello Mrs. Tumar. Would you like some hot tea? Jason, come in and sit down – get out of the wind."

"Thanks, Brother Saltzman – cream please," Lilly replied.

Brother Saltzman raised his eyebrow and asked "Jason, would you like a Coke or something?"

Jason just rolled his eyes up and sat on the hard bench, wishing he was anywhere else but here with a dorky preacher or something like that – at least the shaved-head made him look funny.

"We'll deal with you later, son," said Brother Saltzman quietly, and then he went and fixed a pot of tea and handed a steaming cup to Mrs. Tumar.

"He's been so awful since his father disappeared last year. I can't be as strict as I want to be with him – that's why I need your help. I want you to keep him straight. He doesn't need to get into any more trouble at school, that's for sure."

"Well, I'm sure we can handle that here. You just come back in a month or two, and see what a change we've made."

"A MONTH!" bellowed Jason. "I thought I was just going to visit here for the afternoon. You lied to me!" He made a dash for the door, but it was locked. "Let me go! You can't keep me here."

Brother Saltzman said "Well, Jason, let's try to make the best of it, okay? Mrs. Tumar, please use the door over there. Call me in a month, okay?"

Mrs. Tumar went through the side door as Brother Saltzman stood with his arms crossed, staring down at Jason. When the heavy door clicked, he said, "Well, Jason, this can be easy or it can be hard – it's all up to you."

Jason shot him a dirty look and said "You can't keep me, and you can't make me do anything. I'll escape – you'll see. You big, fat Humpty Dumpty."

"No, Jason, I don't think you'll escape. This entire wing is built for boys like you. You're a bully, but you'll find out that's not going to work here."

"You can't do anything to me. Wait till my father gets home – he'll show you."

"Well, Jason, you know your father won't be coming home. Now let me take you in to meet the other boys. For the next month, your fate is in your own hands: cooperate and you'll do well; fight and make trouble, and you'll reap what you sow."

Brother Saltzman grabbed Jason's arm with a grip of steel and pushed Jason through a bulky wooden door. Jason shot him one last, nasty look, and then entered his new life. Many of the boys were bigger, stronger and older than Jason. The next month was like living in hell for Jason.

After every beating, and after every assault, he swore that one day he'd get even. When the boys ganged up on him, he stared at each one, memorizing their faces and swearing revenge. "One day, I'll get even," he screamed one day, after a brutal assault.

"Well, look at Miss Prissy, she's going to get even with us," said one of the rough boys. Then he single-handedly beat Jason senseless and left him in a pool of blood on the floor. After that, the other boys were braver and the assaults were more vicious.

Once a week, Brother Saltzman asked him for confession, but Jason just stood and stared at him. "Looks like you got a couple of nice shiners there, Jason. Are you having fun playing with the other boys?"

"What do you know about it?" demanded Jason.

"Oh, quite a bit, son. See those cameras in the room – we monitor them all the time."

"So you saw what they did to me and you just let it happen?"

"Why yes Jason, that's what happens to bullies – they meet bigger bullies and get what's coming to them. When you're ready to be civilized, then things will work out better, but for now, I'm afraid things will stay the same." Then Brother Saltzman grabbed Jason and shoved him to the floor. "And then, when you've had enough, you'll come crawling like a worm to me, and do whatever you need to do – they all do, and you will too."

"I never will do that," Jason screamed.

"You will, Jason, or you will never go home. Boys who don't cooperate don't survive. It's a pretty simple rule."

Jason was crying when Brother Saltzman tossed him back into the roomful of boys. When the biggest ones saw him crying, they pounced on him and launched another assault. Now Jason knew that Brother Saltzman was watching the video monitors, and he hated him worst of all. "I'll get you all," he swore. But it was a long, long time before he got his revenge – not that week, or that month, or that year.

Months later, he did what Brother Saltzman told him to do, without question. He had seen two other boys beaten to death, and when they were removed from the room, they were just buried in the back of the church, in the middle of the night. During the burial service, Brother Saltzman looked directly at him, but didn't say a word. Jason was wounded in every part of his body for so long, that he couldn't think straight anymore. The next year, the beatings stopped, but Jason's nightmare with Brother Saltzman had just begun.

Mrs. Tumar called a few times, but Brother Saltzman told her "I'd like for you to see him, but he's really sick. No, he's getting along fine. Yes, Mrs. Tumar, I'm glad you called. Bye now." By the end of the second year, she stopped calling – she had a new live-in boyfriend and really wanted to move on with her life.

When Jason wasn't being assaulted, he was required to study, along with the other boys. Failing a test got a quick smack across the face, the back, the buttocks, or whatever, with a hickory stick that was designed to inflict instant pain. He made a serious attempt to learn, and found that it was easier for him than for some of the other boys. "Math isn't so hard," he told one of the younger boys. Here, I'll help you study." He became a tutor for several of the boys.

"Brother Saltzman," said Brother Russell one day, "your young friend Jason is very good with numbers. He's even tutoring the younger boys. I'd like to teach him advanced subjects, if that's okay with you."

"I'll think about that and let you know, Brother Russell. Jason is still a surly brat, who is barely under control."

A few days later Brother Saltzman went to talk to Jason and found that he had just been attacked by the boys. He was lying, unconscious in a pool of blood. "Jason, will you ever learn?" was all he could say. In the small hospital, the doctor bandaged Jason's head. "Brother Saltzman, he's been assaulted again. Why don't those boys leave him alone?"

"Brother Thomas, it's all up to Jason – when he behaves and lives by the rules, they'll leave him alone. Brother Russell thinks he's bright, but I think he's never going to get it – he's deeply troubled by his father leaving, and his mother abandoned him last year. Hopefully he'll pull through."

When Jason regained consciousness, he sat bolt upright – "Where am I?" he demanded.

"I'm Brother Thomas. I've bandaged you up before. When are you going to learn cooperation? A couple of more beatings like this one and they're won't be much left of you skull, son."

"I'm not your son!" shouted Jason.

"See, Jason, there you go. We both know what will happen when you return to your friends. Why can't you just learn to get along?"

"I'll get you too, someday," was all Jason muttered through his pounding headache.

In a few days, he was back in the room with the other boys. Within an hour, a fight started when Jason took the bait of an insult. The oldest boy sent a chair crashing into Jason's back and head, and before he hit the ground, Jason was a quadriplegic for life.

Months passed. Jason slowly learned to drink from a straw like his life depended upon it – since it did. He had splitting headaches all the time and passed out in pain, almost daily. Brother Thomas and Brother Russell nursed him back to health, but it was never a question if he was going to survive – they all knew that he would die. At least everyone knew that except Jason.

By winter, he was studying again, when the headaches weren't controlling his life. Brother Thomas read hours and hours of scripture to Jason. Brother Russell read hours and hours of inspired writings to him. As Jason drifted in and out of consciousness, he was getting the religious education of a lifetime.

A couple of the young boys whom he mentored visited him and helped turn the pages of the books and hand him his straw when he dropped it out of his mouth. "What can we do for you Jason?" one of boys asked.

"Alexis, I don't have my arms, but I could use yours. I've been thinking about a mathematical formula, and I need some help."

Alexis Nowaski was a young, bright boy who liked Jason for helping him out when the bullies had attacked him, and for teaching him some complex math, when he was totally lost. "I'll be glad to help, Jason."

"Thanks, Alexis. Bring some paper and pencils tomorrow and we'll get started. I have some ideas that I need to work out."

"Sure, but tomorrow is the big game. Can we do it Wednesday?"

"Okay, Alexis – you're so good at football, I'm going to call you 'coach' – Coach Nowaski, now how's that?"

Alexis shrugged and said "Okay. You've been learning so much religious junk I'll call you 'reverend', okay? I'll see you Wednesday, Reverend Tumar."

Chapter 16.

Every few days, Jason and Alexis worked on advanced math and physics. After a few weeks, Jason said "Alexis, you're really a lot brighter than I am. I've got some questions – maybe you can answer them?"

"I don't know about brighter," Alexis muttered, but he knew he was. "What questions do you have?"

"That stuff we read last on-line last week, about quantum entanglement and macroworld entanglement, remember? I'd like to know more about that. I've been thinking..."

"Yeah, that stuff – it's pretty easy, huh? Quantum weirdness can entangle systems that approach the scale of everyday life."

Jason took a sip of water and said "Coach, I've thought of a way to entangle something big – very big. I'm going to need your help. We're going to get even with those bullies down the hall. Would you like that?"

"Would I ever!" cried Alexis. "What do you have in mind?"

"We're going to link the vibrations of two atom pairs, and entangle them. Then you'll see what I've got in mind for payback. Okay, coach?"

"Okay Rev."

Months passed with the boys in deep study. Jason didn't need much sleep, and the headaches prevented most long periods of sleep anyway. The huge brace that held his head to his body was screwed into his skull to prevent movement. Even a slight twist would sever the last connection in his spine and it would mean almost instantaneous death.

"No Coach, that's not what I meant," shouted Jason for the hundredth time. "Listen – I need a formula to solve this entanglement problem and all you're doing is going over existing research on the web. I need new thinking, get it. We're going to entangle atoms over a distance, not bake apple pie. Think!"

"Sorry Reverend, I can't think of anything new – my head hurts from thinking. Oops, sorry, I didn't mean that."

"It's all right, Coach. Look here's what we need to do: link an atom here, right here, with an atom of, say 10 seconds ago. Let's send an old atom forward in time and a new atom back in time. We can balance the energy that way, so it doesn't violate the Second Law."

"Energy balance...hmmm...let me think about it more, I'm right on the verge of something, Reverend."

"Okay, Coach. I know you can do it."

A few weeks passed and Coach Nowaski worked on his new formulas, day after day. Jason was careful not to break his concentration, so he sat still and watched the formulas take shape. Then, in March, Alexis had it figured out. Jason stared in disbelief – here was quantum entanglement over time or distance in an easy to understand formula.

"Coach, I think you've got it," Jason shouted with glee. "We merge the two atoms, and then separate them – one stays then and one stays now. It's the merging operation right there in the formula that nobody's thought of before – see?"

Alexis looked at the formula and blinked, then swallowed. "I believe I do," he replied. "Now what?"

"Let's build a prototype. Let's see if we can swap a couple of atoms, what do you say?"

"You never told me what you were going to do with the formula, but you implied that we could get even with the bullies."

"Yes, Alexis, that we shall do – but first, let's get a prototype working, okay?"

"Translating this to hardware isn't going to be easy," Alexis said.

"Coach, if it was easy, everybody would be doing it," stated Jason Tumar, as his cold eyes squinted at the formula. "Let's just get it working."

Chapter 17.

"It's cold outside Brother Thomas," said Jason. "I can hear the wind whistling through here."

"You can't possibly feel cold," replied Brother Thomas. He wanted to say that quadriplegics couldn't possibly feel cold, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Ah, but I just felt a shiver," replied Jason. "If you'll adjust that dial there, please – it'll warm up the room." Jason looked at Brother Thomas, then Alexis, then back to Brother Thomas. "That red dial there, please, ahh – turn it right and then press the button."

The room smoked as if lightning had formed right inside of Brother Thomas. One second he was there, and the next second he was quite gone, but where he had been, stood a hairy, naked male that looked just like a comic-strip caveman. He growled. He looked at the machinery that he'd just come through. He looked at the man who was enclosed in large metal hoops. He looked at a small man who suddenly swung a broom handle at him, and he collapsed on the floor.

"Coach! We did it!" shouted Jason.

"We did indeed, Reverend. The age of time travel has just begun. Now what shall I do with Alley Oop, here? If he comes-to, he'll be dangerous."

"You know what to do, my friend."

"I guess so. Now I know what to do with those bullies down the hall, too."

Reverend Tumar and Coach Nowaski stared at each other for a minute and their eyes were on fire – they would get ultimate and total revenge for the beatings and assaults that they'd put up with. "I'll be busy for a little while, if you'll excuse me, Reverend?"

"Take your time, Coach. Then come on back – we've got lots to talk about."

Chapter 18.

"Coach," said Jason one day in late August, "Now that we've taken care of business, I've got an idea that will make us some serious money. We can swap people from the past with people from now, that's for sure, but what if we sell tickets to the past – think how much people would be willing to pay to go back in time to see, Christ, or Mohammad, or Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in person? They'd pay plenty, that's for sure. We'll have more money than any humans in history."

"I hadn't thought of it, but you're right, Rev. People would pay anything to go back and see history as it happened. But how will that affect the real timeline of history? We never figured that out. What if someone went back and ran over their grandfather with a buckboard? Wouldn't that cause a serious problem with continuity? Even if it was an accident, it would cause a rip that we could never fix."

"I thought of that: we'll tell them that it's a round-trip, see, but it's really a one-way trip for each of them, get it? They get what they want, and we get rich."

"But what about the cavemen we bring forward, we can't kill them all with a broomstick, can we?"

"I thought about that, too. We can control where they materialize, so we'll just have them materialize in a place that will guarantee they can't escape, and they'll be stone-cold dead in seconds. We won't have to do a thing, except set the blue dial. The merge operation will be seamless as far as the two subjects are concerned."

"You mean to materialize them into the ocean, is that it?" asked Alexis.

"Yup, or into a live volcano, or whatever. Be creative – make sure they don't survive, and that it only takes a second or two to kill them, and it will be fine. We'll get rich, and who cares about cavemen anyway?"

"Okay, I'm getting it, but how can we make sure that the person that we bring forward won't rip time up – here now, what if we swapped Brother Theodore for Adolph Hitler – what would happen to continuity?"

"I thought of that, too. Here's what we'll do: we'll make sure the person we bring forward doesn't make any ripples in time, and then we'll merge them and bring them through. Very few people ever make a difference in the universe, and we just need to avoid those people. We can peek back at someone, and see if their timeline has any significant accomplishments. If not, then we can swap them with someone from now. Else, we'll leave 'em alone, right?"

"I like it. One more question: how will we be able to prove that we're actually sending people back in time? Someone will want proof."

"Alexis, my friend, that's easy. We'll get an image of the transported person, as they arrive in their new time, and we'll save it. If someone needs proof, we'll have it. Of course, nobody from the past will know that some Mister Nothing is being brought to our time, so we don't need any proof the other way, get it?"

"Yup, got it. We'll send 'em back, swap 'em out with a useless 'nowhere man', and make tons of money doing it. Rev, I gotta say: you're the meanest, coldest fish in the universe."

Jason winked. "Thank you, Coach. Thank you very much."

Chapter 19.

Years of profit later they were both billionaires. "Coach, look here, this spreadsheet shows what kind of people we're providing our service to." Jason twisted around in his office desk chair and drummed his fingers on the keyboard of the computer. He'd spent hundreds of millions of dollars getting his spinal cord re-attached, one cell at a time, and he liked having an almost fully-functional body.

"I see it, Reverend. Christians are our biggest customer – I guess they all like the Sermon on the Mount a lot. I'm glad you thought about making them bring food – imagine thousands of people showing up and trying to share a few loaves of bread – what a bummer. At least they're all getting exactly what they want."

"Yeah, but look here, Coach. Our second-biggest group is people who have revenge on their mind. And the third-biggest group is from the U.S. government – and they won't say what they're doing, poking around in the past like that."

"Why are there so many vengeful people? Ah well! Not like we haven't gotten our revenge. Say, Rev, there's still a question – got a second?"

"Shoot."

"We haven't gone back ourselves, so we really don't know what happens. I wonder what happens to them, that's all – when they find out it's a one-way trip."

"Coach, I wouldn't worry about that a lot," said Jason. "Look: we take their money and give them the trip of their lifetime. Do you think that any of those Christians would say no to a trip to see their Leader?"

Alexis chuckled. "Nah. I call them SotM Tribe – they're all going back in time to hear the Sermon on the Mount, or something like that. They want to go back and hear J.C. and the boys so bad that they'll do anything, pay anything, and sacrifice anything. Those are not bad people, they're dedicated. We were assaulted by pedophiles, disguised as Catholic priests, so we've lost our beliefs, but there are sincere people out there who would do anything to breathe the same air as He breathed, for just five seconds."

"And do you think any of those people who want to kill their wife's lover's father would say no for a chance to do that?" asked Jason.

Alexis hung his head, "Nah."

"Okay then. Let's not worry about it, okay? They're lined up 10-deep, waiting to pay us whatever we ask, for the opportunity to go back in time. Who are we to question that?"

"Yeah, Rev, you're right. Nothing's broken yet – time's still flowing, and we haven't detected any changes from sending folks back. We've merge-swapped thousands by now, and no effect, as far as we know. Never mind – I was just thinking, that's all."

"It's okay, Coach. Sometimes I wonder, too. But I wonder a slightly different question. I wonder if someone will go back in time and screw with our ancestors, yours and mine. That would make us blink out like a candle in the wind. Sometimes I wonder if we need to protect ourselves from that kind of stuff."

"I hadn't thought of that, Jason. Geeze: someone could do that, and we couldn't stop 'em. Now you've got me worried. What can we do to prevent that? Someone could say they're going back for revenge on their wife's lover, but they could kill our ancestors instead – I wish you hadn't mentioned that."

"Here's what we need to do: we need to hide ourselves. We need to hide in time when they can't find us, even if they look. I'm thinking that we can shift ourselves a fraction of a second forward in time. Then if someone tries something funny, we'll have time to react."

"I don't get it?"

"If someone tries to kill us or our ancestors, we'll wire an alarm in the computer – it can monitor for news articles of interest, and if something happens, we can send someone back in time to kill the killer before he gets to us, get it?"

"I do, indeed, Rev. And that gives me an idea for a new business venture. Wanna hear it?"

"Sure, Coach, shoot."

"There're lots of folks who want to go back for revenge, but they can't afford it. Let's find 'em, and then we make an agreement with 'em to do whatever we tell them to do, whenever we tell 'em to do it, and their trip is free. We can seed people throughout history, just waiting for us to tell them who to kill, that person being someone who is trying to harm our ancestors. We'll have some people who want revenge – we give them a free trip, and then we have embedded sleeper-agents throughout time, that we control. How cool is that?"

"Coach, I thought I was the coldest fish ever – you just topped that!"

"Thank you very much, Reverend Tumar. Thank you, indeed."

Dozens, then hundreds of new customers passed through the machine, on their way to their personal vengeance, sometime in the past. Each one solemnly swore allegiance to Coach Nowaski and Reverend Tumar, and promised faithful service for eternity, in exchange for getting even with whoever was their problem of today. And each one was given a blurred picture of the person who would kill their own ancestors if they failed to act immediately on behalf of the Coach and the Reverend. They all agreed, and they all traveled back in time for free. Reverend Tumar's army was ready for marching orders.

Chapter 20.

“Reverend Tumar!” shouted Alexis 'Coach' Nowaski. “A letter from the Vatican was just delivered by FedEx – come take a look.”

“We don't know anybody there, do we?” replied Jason.

“Well, we do now. It's from a Cardinal in the Vatican. Maybe they're going to revoke your title, Reverend. I'm going to open it.”

The letter began “Greetings from the Holy See. We are aware of your tourism business. We wish to discuss terms for our own exclusive use of your unique service. Our representative, Monsignor Tallah will be arriving at your city on the 24th, inst., for negotiations. Kind Regards, Cardinal Von Kleig, Representative of the Bishop of Rome.”

Jason and Alexis stared at each other, then at the letter, and then back at each other. “Well dang,” they both said at the same time.

“These fools don't have a clue what they're askin' for,” said Jason. “Isn't the Bishop of Rome the Pope?”

“Yup,” replied Coach Nowaski, “I guess they don't understand the cost of that request!”

“Well, we wanted to be rich, and we are, but now we can be insanely rich,” said Jason quietly. “Let's cut us a deal with these fools before they change their minds.”

A week later, Monsignor Tallah's jet touched down. “Well, he's got his own plane, so he can afford whatever we ask,” muttered Alexis.

Jason squinted into the setting sun and said “Yeah, and I'm remembering Brother Saltzman and those other miserable pedophiles where we grew up. The price for that is going into this transaction.”

Alexis' eyes narrowed and he just grunted.

When the Lear RocketJet stopped, the door swung open, two men disembarked. Both were wearing the trappings of the Catholic Church, but they were both younger than middle-aged and both were obviously in great physical shape. Jason and Alexis saw a brief flash of holstered energy-weapons, but the wind whipped the coats shut instantly.

The shorter man removed his sunglasses ungloved and presented his hand “Good afternoon gentlemen. I am Monsignor Tallah, and this is my assistant, Brother Johnson.”

They all shook hands and went into the hangar, where the noise from the jet's turbine was reduced to a whisper. “Monsignor Tallah, we know why you're here – so, the ball's in your court,” began Jason.

“Ah yes, Reverend Tumar, I believe?”

“That's what my friends call me. This is...”

“Yes, Coach Nowaski, I presume.”

“Right again,” replied Alexis.

“We've read about you two,” as Monsignor Tallah brought forth a thin sheaf of colorful plastic sheets from his thin leather briefcase. “We realize that you didn't have a very good childhood, and we know why. We're hoping you don't think all Catholics are alike.”

“Well, Monsignor, let's get down to business,” replied Jason, as he looked at Alexis.

“Well, gentlemen, the Vatican wants to buy the patents and licenses to your ah, interesting technology. We're willing to pay a fair price.”

“We really don't understand your request. Any Catholic person, or anybody can use the machine any time. Why would you want to change that?”

“We don't want to change that, we just want to control it, if you understand my meaning. There is a new group of ah, disciples...”

“Are you talking about those Sermon on the Mount people, Monsignor?” interrupted Jason.

“Why, ah, yes. Let's be frank, shall we? They have lots of money, and they're willing to pay well to see their Lord, teaching the best chapter of the Good Book, in person. We want to make sure that the Vatican gets its proper, ah, share – that's all – call it a tithe, if you will. Members of the SotM Tribe, as we call them control a great deal of wealth in the world. We, ah, don't want it to wind up in the, ah, wrong hands, shall we say?”

Jason and Alexis stood quietly, multiplying their wealth in their minds until Jason finally spoke. “Okay, we get it – you want to make a profit from the pilgrims – the SotM Tribe. That seems reasonable to me. We charge a million bucks a pop for them to go see their Lord speak his famous sermon – it's all cool. We average 10 or more, ah, pilgrims a week. You're buying all that, forever? That's a lot of bread, even for the Vatican.”

Monsignor Tallah said quietly “We're offering 100 billion dollars, U.S.”

Jason and Alexis stared at each other with poker faces for 30 seconds. Alexis nodded slightly. Jason spoke a single word: “Sold.”

“Would you like cash, gold or diamonds?” asked Monsignor Tallah.

“A Swiss bank account will be fine,” replied Jason.

“Brother Johnson, please set that up for these gentlemen. We're wheels-up at noon tomorrow.”

Chapter 21.

"Coach, who is this Dennis Marchare? He keeps challenging our patents. Our man at the patent office is sending me e-mails all the time about him. He's got some kind of mass-balance equation that's somehow related to our patents."

Alexis punched up the name on his terminal and said "Yeah, I've seen his name for years. He's a physicist at the University of Tennessee, or at least he was. We got him kicked out almost ten years ago – remember that kook who had those alternate ideas about time travel? He almost trumped us with his discoveries. We had to trash his reputation pretty bad ya know."

"Oh yeah, so that's the guy – why doesn't he leave us alone? Doesn't he know the time travel business is ours – and now the Vatican's?"

"I think it's time for Dennis to meet with a slight accident, Coach."

"I'm on it. I've got just the thing for Doctor Marchare."

Within minutes, Coach Nowaski punched an interesting sequence of buttons on his terminal. "I think I'll re-route Chicago-bound RocketJet 103 slightly farther south, and then..."

Suddenly, the main rocket motor of Flight 103 cut off. The aircraft, with 1,020 passengers and crew plummeted from the fringe of space, and it landed directly on Dennis Marchare's Honda.

Fortunately Dennis' last patent application covered the subject of multiple-simultaneous clones of a person in multiple timelines. Dennis died that day for sure. But in all the other timelines, he really was doing quite well.

"Well, that's the end of that," said Coach Nowaski. "Now, back to the business of..."

"Coach – Dennis isn't dead – I'm still getting information feeds from Gobble."

"What the hell?" demanded Alexis. "I dropped a whole frickin' RocketJet on him."

"Well, look here, Coach – he's alive and well, according to the daily news..."

Suddenly, Reverend Tumar was in a fight for his life. Dennis' unleashed an avatar that reached through the terminal and grabbed Jason by the throat with a grip of iron. "hhllllppp meeee," was all he could get out, but a different avatar stabbed Alexis Nowaski through the heart, and in an instant, he was dead. Jason saw it and wanted to criticize his friend, the Coach, for not following his suggestion of living down-time – a fraction of a second. "I told you and told you," he was thinking, but... he tried to break free of the grip, but he couldn't. "How did you find me?" he squeaked, on his last breath.

Dennis' avatar from Hell replied "I knew that you'd be down-time, Reverend. You've killed enough for a thousand lifetimes. You're the biggest butcher in history, in all the histories, and I'm going to stop it today. When you messed with my sister, you messed with me."

Jason used his last resort: he started throwing random numbers into his terminal, as fast as he could. He watched them falling on Nancy Marchare and Dave Premont, her lover. "I'll kill them both if you don't let me alone," he squeaked. "I can drive them both insane!" Suddenly he felt the grip on his throat loosen for just a second, and he took advantage of it – he dumped millions of bits of random numbers

into the computer and watched Nancy and Dave being chased by Indians, half-naked nuns and robotic police dogs. "This will teach you about my power, you fools!" he roared, as he unleashed flows of lava and the cold of outer-space on the two lovers.

Dave Premont fought back hard – he tried to protect Nancy from the insanity, but he was in it up to his neck, and Reverend Tumar was easily able to counter every one of his moves. "Stupid, stupid Dave," he said, "this will be the end of you and that stupid twit girl," as he unleashed an insane attack, based totally on random numbers – Dave and Nancy both screamed in agony.

But Dennis had spawned enough new tasks down-time that the Reverend got caught like a fly in a spider's web. "Fool? We'll see who's the fool... Time just ran out for you, Reverend Tumar..." and an avalanche of Dennis' avatars converged on the spot in time where Jason Tumar lived – a small fraction of a second ahead of everyone else, but close enough to present-time so he could still manipulate the past, all without losing control of the future. The avatars converged just as Dave Premont sneezed the biggest sneeze in the known universe – SNICK! Dennis' avatars cut Jason's head off, clean as a whistle, as he was trying to figure out what random event was making such a racket – "was that a sneeze?" His head rolled on the ground for a fraction of a second before the artificial nerves that had been re-grown, one-by-painful-one, realized that they were talking to thin-air. The life went out of his eyes, and Reverend Jason Tumar was no more – in any timeline.

Dennis let some of his avatars wind down, and then sent a few of them into Jason's computer world, where they would eventually find and disgorge all the information about the secret bank account in Switzerland. "This'll make a real difference in the world," Dennis said as he looked at the unbelievable balance sheet. "This money will all be given to charities everywhere, and no one will ever know where it came from. I bet Nancy and Dave will know how to divvy it up fairly – in every timeline."

"Oops, I've got to go – they're going to need help before they go insane." He twisted a knob on his console and dropped in on them, just as they both thought that the world was going crazy – they were both boiling in molten lava while an ice storm raged all around. But Dennis' time machine had lost sync, due to Reverend Tumar's random number generator, and suddenly he was falling from the ceiling on to the cold, hard wood floor – "oooph.... " Dennis cradled his broken left arm. "Stupid machine...Hey kids, I'm home – Bert? Where's Bert?"

"Cool Bert," said Bert, and then he flew around the apartment while the three humans acted, well, as only humans can do.