

The Archive

By Andrew Gilbertson

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The sacred traditions of protecting the President of the United States had long been assigned to the most dedicated and highly skilled of agents- a brotherhood to which Jason Davis could not ascribe himself, but whose duties he had undeniably taken it upon himself to shoulder; a self-appointed defender of the leader of the free world. Nor was his solitary presence as a lone escort typical procedure for a Presidential entourage. He turned and beckoned to the man he escorted through the darkened streets.

"This way, sir; it's not far now."

He hardly looked the part of a secret service escort- Davis was, in fact, strangely dressed for his surroundings, and the President had commented on it several times; but in his understandably disoriented, subdued state, the Commander-in-chief had chosen, for the moment, not to make an issue of it. His wristwatch and flashlight had drawn similar puzzlement from the groggy leader- but Davis had managed to deflect the issues and keep his uncertain charge putting one foot in front of the other thus far. Issuing commands to the President was a strange position, to be sure- but the man was in no shame to do anything other than to be led.

It was a dark, frigid April night, cold but clear, with no the light save the stars- even they incomplete in their illumination, with the great dark mass of a new moon blotting out a share of their light and giving off none of its own- and a few meager street lights, from which they were keeping well away, as the two traversed alleys and side-streets to avoid being seen or noticed. The flashlight has long since been doused to avoid attracting attention, and the going was tough over uncertain terrain in the pitch-black; more than once, Davis had to throw himself beneath the stumbling President to keep him upright. The President, for his part, followed his glib guide without knowing quite where he was going; which was good, as the knowledge would only have alarmed him unduly in his present dazed state.

Davis tried to look the part of a cool professional- it would hardly due to show anxiety or uncertainty in front of the leader of the free world- but he was sweaty-palmed, with a heart that was thundering like a galloping horse. He was in way over his head, he knew. The enormity of what he was involved in still escaped him. He could not let the President see just how terrified he was; for the moment, he needed to be the strong one, to keep his self-assigned charge focused and reassured, even if he had precious little assurance of his own to give.

Still, fearful as he was, Davis knew what he had determined to do, and he was going to do it. There was no going back.

Well, there was... but he wasn't.

Did the naively-trusting man following him, made complacent only by the stupor from which he was slowly rousing, deserve the situation he was about to be thrust into? Perhaps not. Perhaps he deserved a rest, a reward for all of his hard labors on behalf of the people that he served, rather than the fate Davis was delivering him into. But the greater good demanded yet another sacrifice, yet another duty- yet another in an endless series of weary days of struggle, from a man that had already given so much. Davis would not feel guilty at bringing the naïve and trusting man into this; he had resolved not to be. This was necessary. The greater good demanded it.

It was, in fact, fortunate that the man that followed him was so compliant, for he towered over Davis, and Davis- not a muscular man by any account- didn't doubt that the POTUS (as the military acronym went) could take him on- and take him out- in a heartbeat, should he somehow choose to do so. Davis was hardly a protector; in fact, he'd *need* one if the President decided to attack him. But regardless, Davis was tasked with the outcome of the night's events, if only self-tasked- he considered a self-made commitment as binding as any assigned him by any parent, employer, or leader. And his task was clear. But dangerous.

The affairs of a Presidential assassination were not trifled with lightly.

Ironically, the assassination *had* been planned as a kidnapping. It was thwarted, in a case of fact stranger than fiction, when the President had chosen not to visit the theater to take in a play as planned on the day appointed, but instead attended a ceremony to honor members of the military for their service... at the assassin's own hotel! All the while, the unwitting assassin- or kidnapper, as he intended to be that day- lay fruitlessly in wait at the theater. After that first thwarted attempt, the kidnapper, enraged by a speech about minority civil rights, had become a conspirator and would-be murderer. Kidnapping would no longer suffice for the vile man that stood against everything he believed in- the would-be-assassin would no longer allow his target to continue leading the nation astray with his foolish and

dangerous ideals. Tonight- in just a few minutes, in fact, at 10:15, he would remove the 'would-be' from his title.

In fact, it wouldn't even be the murderer's first opportunity. He'd been at the Inauguration for the President's second term- a slightly comic affair at which the Vice-President elect had showed up drunk- as an invited guest, the secret-but-not-yet-public fiancé of the daughter of the US Ambassador to Spain. The fiancé-turned-kidnapper-turned-murderer had the perfect opportunity before him... but thence did not yet have his murderous motive- at the time, he may not have even dreamed up the kidnapping. The intervening years had seen him slowly embittered against the leader that he'd seen sworn in that day- the indifference in his heart turning to malice, disgust... and eventually, when he could bear the President's foolish moves toward 'tolerance' and attacks on the traditional values that he himself held dear... his disgust had galvanized into a plan of action.

Now, the assassin- a bigot, a patriot, a fool- had his motive, and his opportunity.

His secret fiancé lay at home, oblivious to his intentions; he carried a picture of her in his pocket as he prepared to commit an act that would consign him to infamy. A new ambush, with no last-minute change of plans to offer the President a reprieve.

The United States' highest and most cherished leader would die within moments.

And, a few city blocks away from where he knew the assassin waited, Davis was leading the Commander-in-Chief to the spot where it would happen.

He held up a hand to stop them as they emerged from the alleyway and came to stand in front of the Peterson House, bordering 10th Street in Washington, D.C. Behind him, the President leaned against the wrought-iron railings of the semi-spiral staircase which lead up to the doorway, pausing to catch his breath; he grew more hale and hearty by the minute- soon, he would be able to shake off the stupor, Davis thought. Just in time to meet his destiny.

The street was empty, but not deserted; some cities never slept. The few passers-by were not looking at the incongruous duo, however; most had their eyes drawn to the attention-catching banner advertising 'Our American Cousin,' a stage-comedy being performed at the theater across the road.

Davis checked his watch.

The time was now.

Just a handful of ticks on the clock, and the President would die.

Tick.

The assassin fingered the picture of his beloved within his breast pocket, his last thoughts before he took this bold action of her. He wondered what she would think- if she would understand- as, in his other hand, his index finger tensed on the trigger.

"Don't know the manners of good society, eh?"

The President looked over at Davis, sensing his unease.

Tick.

A resolve, even more integral to the coming act than the firing mechanism of the Philadelphia Derringer the assassin held, tightened as well.

"Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal-"

Davis couldn't meet the President's eyes; he kept his focus on his watch.

Tick.

The trigger was slid back, awaiting just the right second to accomplish its explosive task.

"You sockdologizing old man-trap!"

Hands and forehead slick with sweat, Davis knew there was no more delay. The moment itself was here.

Tick.

The assassin stepped forward, eyes narrowed, as the muscle of a single finger twitched back, bearing death for the leader of a nation.

The audience roared with laughter.

Davis shut his eyes altogether; it seemed somehow the appropriate thing to do.

Bang.

It was different from the movies. There was no pivotal moment where the soundtrack dropped away and the gunshot echoed like cannon-fire, resounding across the landscape. In fact, Davis couldn't hear it at all. The moment had been picked by an actor, a consummate professional who knew the stage comedy well, so that the laughter of the audience- typically the biggest laugh of the show- would muffle the sound. The shot heard around the world couldn't even be heard from the street.

Davis opened his eyes.

It was over.

After a moment, there were muffled shouts, screams- and the door to the theater across the road flew open. A limping man- the assassin, no doubt- charged out, scrambling frantically, slamming a lagging accomplice- either unwitting, or having second thoughts- on the forehead with the handle of the knife that he held. Leaping on to the back of his waiting horse, the limping man lashed out with a kick from his good leg, downing the reeling accomplice who had kept watch over his steed, preventing the slower man from detaining him, and galloped off into the night as a score of angry men, just a second too late, poured out of the theater door and gave chase.

The Ford Theater was quickly becoming a scene of pandemonium.

As John Frederick Parker, the President's bodyguard (a man who would be fired for sleeping on the job three years hence; heaven only knew why he was not fired *now*; after all, he had just failed in his one and only crucial task), rushed over from the nearby tavern where he had been derelicting his duty, Davis pushed his charge back into the shadows of the steps leading down to the below-street door; looking for the best way to avoid 'Good Samaritan' Henry Safford's imminent appearance from the (upper, he hoped) doorway, and preparing to pull off history's biggest switcheroo with the dying man that would be passing through this doorway momentarily. Turning, he inspected the superficial-gunshot-wound makeup applied to his companion's forehead; another unusual action that his dazed charge had put up only weak protestation to. Hopefully, the placement of the 'wound' was either accurate, or no one would notice the difference.

Davis moved to reassure his now bewildered and somewhat alarmed looking companion as the latter came fully out of his stupor, bright eyes brimming with a dozen questions.

"Stay here in the shadows for a moment, Mr. Lincoln. In just a moment, you'll be home."

Ever since a successful method of time travel had been invented (*no use trying to say when or by whom; the last time that the Temporal Police had successfully thwarted an attempt by a time traveling male thief to murder the true inventor, abscond with the technology that she'd pioneered, take it farther back in time, and claim to have invented it himself, they had arrived just in time to witness a confession from the terrified inventor that she was, in fact, not the true inventor herself, but a con-woman who had successfully accomplished the same plagiarism plot 5 years in the future, stealing the time travel technology from an inventor that, she later confessed, she suspected was also not its true inventor, but*

another ne'er-do-well kindred spirit)- protocols, procedures, plans, and police had been instigated to prevent an incident of temporal tampering from turning into a calamitous, civilization-altering catastrophe.

With the exception of the apparent natural shielding existent within the flow of time itself that prevented any time traveler from materializing from approximately 5 B.C. to 30 A.D. (or at least none that had attempted to do so had ever returned to tell the tale, and with so many explorers and drones lost, no one was especially eager to probe the zone's boundaries in greater detail), there was no known way to protect a time period or prevent time travel; only to regulate it within the law, and take measures to deal with the consequences of those who chose to break it.

Spy games of assassination and counter-assassination (protected historical records databases that were designed not to change when the timeline changed, showing a 'true' view of unaltered history, showed a nearly 400% increase in historically recorded infant mortality from the original timeline before temporal law enforcement began to step in to curtail it- though sadly, this meant that some unlucky squad from the Temporal Police was given the unenviable task of actually protecting 'Priority Target 1,' the infant Hitler- the assassination-in-the-crib of whom was eventually dubbed a capital offense with accompanying instant death penalty in an attempt to discourage the repeated attempts so numerous, they were beginning to fray the fabric of time in that particular year... irony had a wicked sense of humor sometimes), information-gathering missions from the future (Why steal a technology, spy on a battle plan, or try and design a new technology when you could simply travel forward to a time where the desired information was declassified and taught in schoolchildren's history books?), attempts to shape new empires or civilizations (turns out the old hypothetical question was meaningless- Napoleon simply couldn't understand what a stealth bomber was, and left his generously donated squadron rusting in a field while he went off to Waterloo- after which the temporal police had needed to rescue Napoleon from attempted strangulation by his infuriated benefactor, who promptly used his eventual parole to begin an illegal campaign of backing Alexander the Great instead), counterfeit antiquing (go back in time, buy a chair for a dime, jump forward, and sell it for a fortune), and numerous other insanities associated with the introduction of temporal incursions could fray the fabric of the world in an instant.

They needed to be policed.

But even though the Temporal Police really *could* be everywhere- and everywhen- at once, given enough time (and yes, pun *definitely* intended), they were not omniscient. There needed to be backups. Redundancy in case of a change in time so sudden or catastrophic, it erased the police from the timeline before they could travel back to correct it. Preservation was needed for elements of history so unique that their loss could not easily be repaired. Protection for the irreplaceable.

That led to the creation of the Archive.

Original attempts to establish a protected facility by landing a team in 7 B.C. and slipping 'under the radar' of the blocked zone of time by 'living their way in'- simply wait around for three years and you'd have reached 4 B.C. and be within the definite limits of the inaccessible protected zone- had simply resulted in a loss of contact with the team, pronounced missing in action. Likewise, attempts to duplicate this natural confluence and created a modern 'protected time period' met with inevitable failure.

These dead ends led to Plan B; the priority research and development (including plenty of future-help 'cheating'- government-sanctioned, of course) in adapting the transmission-through-time technology used to maintain the protected historical record databases into a viable Temporal Shielding technology. A time period could not be locked or blocked to prevent it's being travel-able, nor an event made un-alterable... but the technology did now exist to shield the contents of a specially constructed facility from the alterations in reality that resulted from changes in history.

The Archive was a bubble of 'correct history' sitting safely protected from any changes in history that could alter the world around it.

Staff turnaround was incredible; as the most secure facility on Earth, employees of the Archive were rigorously screened to the point of insanity, including firsthand observations of any events of childhood trauma, and deathbed interviews with the dying candidate far in the future. Every moment of a potential candidates life, past and future, were scrutinized- every psychological detail and motivation and deeply rooted bias and belief from one's formative years analyzed to ensure stable and absolutely trustworthy candidates that would have no temptation to abuse their position of safety and change history from 'within the system.'

The Archive facility even included comfortable lodgings for employees to stay at on those days when a scan of the outside world uncovered a world in which they were never born- a situation that was usually cleared up within a day or two by the police.

Sometimes, however, the change happened when an employee was at home for the night, resulting in a short-staffed facility the next day; employees returning from having been erased from history and later restored would not be re-admitted without a complete re-screening, in case the new timeline had resulted in a psychological change to the individual- in case they were a different person than they were in this new timeline. Everyone had seen *Back to the Future*; no one wanted a harmless, car-repair Biff Tannen coming to work one day as a sinister pleasure palace Biff, or a wimpy and predictable 'safe' George McFly suddenly showing up as a confident and *unpredictable*- possibly dangerous- new man because someone had tinkered with their formative years.

And sometimes, a confused gaggle of workers would be milling around in the front waiting area, seeking admittance that would be denied them- in their timeline, they'd been hired as Archive employees, but Archive records had no indication of their existence. These 'hopefuls,' as they were known by the staff, would usually stop showing up for attempted admittance within a day or two as well, when the alternate timeline in which they'd been hired ceased to be.

Through all of this, the hardest working, most underappreciated, highest-turnover field was the Archive's massive staff of researchers and interviewers; it was hardly unheard of for one candidate to devote their entire life's career to interviewing, re-interviewing, checking, and re-checking the same individual, over and over and over again every time the timeline change, to repeatedly re-ensure that the employee remained the same person that they were in the same timeline. These unfortunates were mercurial and short lived, flashing in and out of the lives of Archive employees like fruit flies; with so much time spent in the past, in the future, in alternate timelines- an hour spent in the past here, a day spent in the future there- all of which added up- the average researcher would reach old age and retirement within five years, their entire lifespan having been nickel-and-dimed away in the past and future. After all, as every Temporal Policemen knew (and their turnover rate was nearly as high as the researchers), spend a day in the past, and you return to the present a day older- spend an entire year of traveling to the past and the future, and then return home to the day you left- and that evening, you'll be a year older, a year closer to your death- than when you left for work that morning. That a man could join the force at the age of 21, and 5 years later retire at the age of 70, having spent most of his intervening life in the past or future, was one of the great peculiarities of a world with time travel; government regulation was in motion (and, according to time travelers from the future, would soon pass) to mandate that a worker spending a 12-hour work day in the past must be returned to the present 12 hours from when they'd left, to keep them aging in 'real time'- but at present, it was cheaper and more efficient to retrieve someone back to the moment that they'd left- and without a government mandate to spend the extra money and energy, people's lives were being burned up in a heartbeat by underfunded precincts, young men and women growing old in a matter of months or years; the already overburdened Social Security and 401k systems, long since thrown into chaos by the sudden influx of instantly old people with only a few scant years of 'contributions' to their name, were in extreme crisis- there was mounting pressure in congress to travel into the future and find out exactly how they would manage to resolve the situation, because no one in the present had any ideas about how to handle it.

Amid this absurd, ever-changing, sanity-testing ballyhoo that life had become since time travel had become a reality, Arnold Perry strolled past the janitor's closet, coffee in hand, to check on the monitor room- two extra cups steaming in a tray held in his other hand, to help keep the monitor on duty from falling asleep during the admittedly tedious hour-shift of watching video camera feeds that never changed. During the early morning hours, even the most dedicated watchman could find his attention waning- as supervisor, it was the kind of thing that Arnold- Arnie, to his subordinates- should have cracked down on; what with the fate of the world resting on the Archives, and the like. But he found that a certain informality (*hence his subordinates being allowed to address him not only by first name, but by nickname*), a friendly interest in helping them with their problems, and a few little personal touches like this one, served to foster better employees- ones that *wanted* to try harder, because they cared. Caring was key.

Opening the door to the small, warm, darkened room (pretty much an invitation for somnolence), he strolled with barely a sound across the thin carpet, coming up behind the two high-backed chairs facing the monitor wall (which someone had clearly wanted to make a little more like 'in the movies,' with what

could have been a simple stack of video monitors and DVRs sitting on top of each other instead contained and distributed behind a molded plastic faux-metal wall of futuristic design, the play controls located in a high-tech control console angling down from the base of the monitors at a 45-degree angle)- a science fiction 'wall of monitors' and control console when a simple table full of TVs hooked into a central server could have sufficed.

Lawrence Butler, obviously the low-pri of the shift (*whoever was designated high priority for the hour was literally banned by company policy from intentionally looking away from the monitors during his assigned hour, and discouraged from blinking by both specialized training and some eyedrops 'borrowed' from Johnson&Johnson's laboratories in 2358*), turned in his chair, blanching slightly at the sight of the boss bearing down on him (*a reaction which appeared to be hard-wired into humanity, no matter the individual's constitution or the nature of the supervisor*). Arnie greeted him with a warm smile.

"Hello, boys. Keeping busy?" he asked, jokingly.

At least the external security room- a separate facility from which he had just come- saw some action every now and then; they had the monitors for the outside cameras. He had just watched as security did its best to politely turn away a pair of errant tourists; use of time-travel for tourism (or any personal means, for that matter) was, of course, completely prohibited... now. But clearly, at some point in the future, when time travel was revealed to the public (*Arnie could only imagine the kind of pandemonium that would reign on that day- the Temporal Police had their hands full just dealing with the government agents, spies, and future-assassins that knew about it now, much less those crazy, careless nutjobs from some future era when time travel was taken for granted- 90% of problems came from their careless screw-ups, and it made him want to throttle whomever- or whomever's modern-day ancestor- thought it was a bright idea to give civilians access to time travel technology!*), time-traveling tourism was a norm.

From what future visitors has told them, limits on time travel tourism had, of course, been clearly established, limiting travel back to no earlier than the public announcement itself. Arnie could only imagine in his minds eye the spectacle of what future travelers had called 'The Great Revelation Riots' or 'Tourist Insanity,' less formally- the first moment which people were allowed to travel to had, in fact, been the public announcement itself- meaning that humanity's inauguration to the concept of time travel was a public announcement by the President of the United Democracies, which, as he spoke the phrase "We have had for some time, if you'll forgive the pun, the capability to travel through ti-" heralded the sudden, instantaneous arrival of hundreds of thousands of tourists on every street in every major city in the world (*and some in the countryside*), suddenly overpopulating the world threefold. This resulted in an instant swamping of overtaxed foodstuff supplies, public utilities (*A nationwide sewer backup was a VERY unpleasant prospect*), lodgings, and numerous other fields in which the sudden demand from million of suddenly-appearing tourists far outstripped the supply; generally, it became a complete economic crash, famine, and general overcrowding disaster- not to mention the near sinking of Venice from the sudden mass and weight increase- that eventually required disaster relief from 50 years in the future to prevent the extinction of humanity.

And the part that made it so *stupid* was that every single time-traveling idiot tourist would have *known* that this would happen from their history books. And they came *anyway*. Humans were idiots, in any time period.

However, every now and then you'd get a group or an individual who would manage to override their security lockouts and come farther back than the day of that announcement- the Archive, a future-famous facility (presumably still in use in their time) being one of the prime targets of attempted tourism (*along with a generous helping of obnoxiously condescending banter- "Oh, look, honey- they're still using badges made of plastic!" "Oh, they were so low-tech back then; I mean, now, weren't they daddy?" "He's nothing like his portrait- I expected his voice to be deeper!"- of smugly knowledgeable tourists looking back on the quaint days of the Archive's 'humble beginnings.'*)

Still, the Archive was just one popular illegal tourism site among many, and little things like the Titanic sinking (*anyone sonar in that time period having possessed SONAR would detect a veritable flotilla of underwater observation craft being constantly chased off by the Temporal Police*), the Tunguska event (*unaltered history probably recorded a few less hot air balloons with binocular-bearing occupants than a contemporary time-traveler might observe*), and pretty much any point in time during the French Revolution (*why did people want to see that so badly? It was bloody and filthy and hardly pleasant-smelling...*).

And that was just the major, easy-to-police kind of events that they knew about; Heaven knows how many tourists could be slipping back into completely innocuous times and periods, observing 'non-critical' events or events of only personal significance to them, without anyone knowing? It was a major issue, the temporal equivalent of illegal immigrants continuously jumping the border despite the best efforts to prevent it.

Many of those, trying to trace the origins of life, see dinosaurs, witness the formation of the Earth, and the like, unwittingly traveled back to beyond the beginning of time- which scientists were beginning to suspect was only thousands, and not millions, of years- and simply disappeared forever, removing a potential headache from the threat-list permanently; others who went to probe the far limits of the future and see how far it went likewise tended not to return- whether entering a zone beyond time itself, or simply being detained by some unknown lawmakers of the vast unknown future, none could say. Still, those that kept their travel targets safely within 'A.D.' and didn't try to journey too far past the year 3,000 A.D. or so were really impossible to prevent- only to regulate and, in the case of the inevitable violators, catch, arrest, and clean up after. However, since most tourists were smart enough, at least, to come back for the purposes of observation only, and weren't actively trying to change things, it remained a nuisance and not a threat.

The monitor room in which Arnie now stood was not observing any wayward tourists, however. This room's cameras were turned inward, to the Archive itself (the actual Archive within the facility known as 'The Archive'), to the precious cargo that was the facility's reason for being: thousands of small, hermetically sealed glass rooms, the internal air supply generator and a small stasis-bed comprising the sole contents of each, aside from the slumbering figures (chemically sedated) upon the beds.

Everyone knew the sleepers' names, though few could remember all of them.

Napoleon slept here, safe even should some irritated benefactor attempt to strangle him in the past over a squandered gift. Florence Nightingale slumbered beside him. Hitler (*yes, Hitler- why did time travel always have to be about Hitler?*) slept beside the Apostle Paul, John Adams, Qin Shi Huang, Albert Einstein, Virginia Dare (*just in case...*), Muhammad, Tubalcain, Louis Pasteur, Elizabeth the First, Wernher von Braun, Jason K. Blunth (*poor fellow; neither contemporaries nor historians knew that he was critical to the foundation of the industrial age; research on timeline focal points had turned him up, he and a dozen other critical to history that no-one ever knew- such as Larry Bickson, the man without whose dropped briefcase, Ronald Reagan would have stepped out into traffic and died as a teenager, Haley Lethson-Smith, the man who took an errant arrow that would have hit King John without either party ever realizing it, or Jasmine Sa-harin, the embroiderer whose sheer dress designs had given a young Jewess named Hadassah just the edge that she needed to stand out to Xerxes of Persia*), William Shakespeare, Elvis Presley, Madame Curie, Judas Iscariot, Saladin, Gene Roddenberry, Cleopatra, Yuri Gagarin, Saddam Hussein, Alexander Graham Bell, Amelia Earhart, Plato, Barack Obama, Mary (mother of Christ), Vladimir Lenin (and John Lennon, side by side with him), Clara Barton, Tutankhamun, Darius of Persia, and thousands of others.

This was a backup of history.

Each of these was here to protect history; each of these chambers housed an irreplaceable figure whose death could alter the world in catastrophic ways; even the death of Hitler or Hussein prematurely could alter the web of time in ways that no one could foresee- perhaps a soldier never went to war and never became the man that did good to the child who grew up to be a world leader. Each moment touched so many others...

So here they lay, snatched from time, sleeping, waiting for the moment when they were killed in the past, to be rushed in, to serve as a replacement and keep history on track while the perpetrator was foiled.

Each of them taken, kept here for a day, then returned to where they came from at the exact moment they left, gone for less than the blink of an eye, so that their disappearance would not be missed. One day stolen seamlessly from their natural lifespans.

And each of them still here because that one day- that 24 sedated hours during which they were here- was, through some temporal trickery, looped to repeat over and over (*renewing with a disquieting jump-cut, an instantaneous jump of position common in poorly edited films but very jarring to observe in real life*) at the exact stroke of midnight. They lived the same day over and over for eternity, never waking, and those weeks, months, years, centuries never taking more than a day for them.

Such was the chaotic process of fourth-dimensional thinking.

"You know us, boss." Lawrence Butler added with a now-reassured grin. "Hard to keep up with all the action!"

"I'll bet." Arnie answered knowingly, a wan smile on his lips. Still, a quiet day was a good day in this line of work...

"Green- 15239" Announced Butler's partner, Patrick Carvalho, in a voice approaching monotone.

"Confirmed," Answered Lawrence automatically, turning to the highest and leftmost screen in the massive bank. He glanced at the next monitor on the top row. "Confirmed" He moved on to the next. "Confirmed. Confirmed, confirmed, confirmed, confirmed..."

Arnie saw the large display screen, one of many in the archive chambers, that Patrick was reading off of. A random string of numbers in a random font color, periodically changing, matching a giant readerboard in the Archive chambers, confirmed that the images being seen on the monitors were in fact live, and not a previously-recorded video feed set to loop- like in the spy films- in an environment where, frankly, it would be absurdly easy to do otherwise since the picture never changed.

And so the process went. Repetitive, but crucial to the Earth's highest-security facility; key to protecting their past and their future were processes like these- as dull, pounding, monotonous, and regular as the running footsteps rapidly approaching in the-

Wait, what?

Arnie barely had time to register confusion at the noise when the frantic footfalls resolved into the monitor door room opening with a crash. Devin Rhodes, a visual observer who patrolled the secured catwalks doing a visual, manual version of the same monitoring conducted in this room, stood in the doorway, looking ashen.

"Mister Perry!" He gasped, clearly having run a fair distance, "We have a code 19!"

Arnie was on his feet before his brain could register the meaning of the words, reacting purely to the shock on Rhodes' face.

His brain filled in the meaning in firm declaratives.

That.

Isn't.

Possible.

Rhodes' continued.

"On subject 125!"

Arnie remembered that one without having to look it up. They all did; it was a source of mild humor that the alpha-numeric of the catalog number, if A=1, etc... it fit too perfectly. He grimaced, knowing full well what this meant, and wishing that he could stop the ridiculous-sounding words even now spilling out of his lips. Too many job-related pronouncements these days made him sound like he was a character in a bad sci-fi B-movie.

"Someone's stolen Abraham Lincoln."

The situation room was a firestorm of chaos as Arnie thundered in. Department heads clustered over the transparent walls of various status monitors, multi-colored consoles and harsh red emergency lighting serving as the only illumination- save for the giant situation monitor dominating the far wall. Arnie began to make demands of the sea of faces.

"Report; monitoring!"

"Still investigating how the cameras could have been bypassed, sir!"

"Security!"

"Redundant systems were deactivated with a maintenance code; someone feigned authorized access."

"Inside man?"

"More than one- there's no way one man could maintain the bypasses- 2 at minimum, one to keep actively deflecting security procedures while the other made a move."

"Personnel?"

"One unaccounted for- Jason Davis, anesthesia monitor, Level 3."

"One unaccounted for; that means an accomplice may still be here. Security, Priority One- and then some! Personnel, I want everything we have on Jason Davis ye-"

Arnie cut himself off from demanding everything yesterday; the old colloquialism could cause unwanted complications if used lightly in this line of work.

"-immediately. Anyone else?"

Silence, save for background chatter.

"I need answers, people! How could this *happen*?"

It was supposed to be, by all rights, impossible. If the security of the Archive could be breached, this facility, the timeline's greatest protector, became history's most vulnerable, dangerous mistake. If one of their 'guests,' snatched from time and returned to that exact moment, were to be murdered during their looped, sleeping day, then there would be nothing but a corpse to return to that same moment they were snatched from. The assassination would happen in the blink of an eye; whether they could use the looping of the day to save the intended victim or whether the murder would become part of the loop, the lethal wounds just appearing on the victim's body at the same time every day, was unknown. No one wanted to find out.

This facility was secure beyond all reason; it had to be! Heck, there were (unenviable) guards to screen what went out through the sewage pipes each day, and ensure that nothing could get in that way, down in the depths of the building. The Archive staff grew their own coffee beans to make sure that they couldn't be tainted! The history of snack shipments were investigated down to the individual ingredients' plantings before they were allowed in! They used reverse-engineered technology (*acquired in somewhat shady dealings with a broker from the next century*) to manufacture their own *air*, for Heaven's sake! They were insanely secure- how in the name of all that was good and holy could this happen?

"Sir!"

A report was shoved into his hands.

A police report?

He skimmed the contents.

The word the reporting officer kept using was *subtle*.

It had been a quick and dirty job; the perp did not attempt to cover his tracks. It was just designed to do the job, and hold long enough for the perpetrator to take advantage of it. Ordinary, those would be the earmarks of 'sloppy'- but instead, this was subtle.

Jason Davis' past had been altered. Not overtly; a single childhood experience had been tweaked, somehow- a mild hypnotic command implanted, it seemed. Something Davis wouldn't even remember.

Screening didn't catch it because Jason Davis was still the same man; the change had happened while he was outside the facility, but unlike people who disappeared, or were replaced with same-body, different-mind doppelgängers, the Jason Davis of this new timeline wasn't consciously different from the Jason Davis that used to exist; just a little more pliable to suggestion when the hypnotic suggestion was triggered.

A post-script was slapped on by an unknown hand as he looked down at the report. The Temporal Police had sent a note from 30 seconds in the future; they were already in pursuit of a fleeing perpetrator, Archive employee Steven Cox.

"Cox?"

He looked up at the burly security guard in shock, catching his eye from across the room.

Cox shouted a curse and slapped something on his wrist, disappearing in a burst of light and, presumably, inaugurating the future chase about which Arnie had just read.

Every alarm in the place began wailing at the breach of temporal integrity. Cox had used an outgoing override, allowing one-way transit out of the facility; this only happened in emergencies, so the alarms were sending out their alerts all throughout the facility. They failed to convey how truly bad this situation was.

One of the other guards started forward, pistol drawn.

"Don't bother-" Arnie advised him. "The police are already chasing him."

He turned to the research staff in one swift motion.

"Find me a point of divergence!" He bellowed. "What's been changed?"

He seethed inside, still reeling from the implications. Temporal disasters with famous figures had happened before- too often to count. They'd needed to haul out duplicates before, even the baby Hitler in triplicate that they kept in a special high (well, higher) security vault. But at the hands of a government employee, with the aid of *another* government employee? It was the biggest debacle since Yi Jon Mitsubishi, a government employee denied his pension, stole a time jumper to go back and establish an automotive manufacturing empire. They were *still* trying to work that one out...

Another report was slapped into his palm.

"Kill those alarms- I can't think straight with all this noise!" He shouted, then turned to scan this new document.

April 14, 1865. Good Friday. Ford's Theater. Perhaps the most famous assassination of all time.

What kind of man had John Wilkes Booth been, that a speech by the President- focused on giving blacks the right to vote- had enraged him to the point of murder? In fact, to conspiracy to murder? Was it his hatred of the man, or his patriotism for the south, his desperation at their defeat, which he saw a means to reverse by the murder of not only the President, but the Vice-President (*who hadn't attended Ford's Theater as originally planned*) and others? Or some mingling of the two?

Whatever his reasons, as Lewis Powell absurdly botched his assassination attempt of the Secretary of State at the Seward home elsewhere in Washington (*attempting to excuse his actions as he fled in failure by claiming madness aloud to the passers-by; a much more entertaining and less grave account than it's Presidential counterpart*), and George Atzerodt chickened out of his Vice-Presidential assignment in the Kirkwood Hotel, John Wilkes Booth, architect of the conspiracy, had shot the President of the United States in a box seat in the Ford Theater before stabbing another man, executing a spectacularly poor escape (*involving a spur caught in a banner and a fall that fractured his ankle, a shout of 'Sic Semper Tyrannis'- from the stage, after landing, with a knife held overhead, not from the President's box as many re-enactments portrayed*), and soon paying for his crimes, taking paralyzing bullet to the neck and expiring hours later on the porch of the farm where he'd been hiding... but not before living to witness the nation's outraged reaction at his heinous deeds; the President, shepherded into William Peterson's boarding house by boarder Henry Safford, attended by physicians in the audience (*"Is there a doctor in the house?" indeed*), dead the morning after the fateful shot.

When Booth saw the stream of condemnation and sorrow, the curses laid upon his name and the horror with which even the south had reacted, had he regretted his actions?

Who was he at heart, John Middle-kiss Booth? John Mililux Booth? Jin Maddle... uh, what was his...?

Arnie looked down and saw, with horror, words beginning to fade from the page. (*Turned out that Back to the Future had got it right after all*). He cursed. The outgoing override Cox had used left a gap in the shield that protected the Archive from changes in history; whatever changes Cox committed might penetrate through the weakened field. Cox- or Davis- had done something, and there was no time- within seconds, Arnie wouldn't even remember that it had happened!

Before it could disappear from the page, he jotted the time index code at the bottom of the Ford Theater report into his emergency wrist bracelet and slapped the controls- he had to go before he forgot-

Before they all forgot-

Before they for...

Before...

The cacophony of alarms finally ceased as someone found the alarm override, bringing blessed silence to the control room.

Everyone in the control staff breathed a relieved sigh as the tension drained out of the room.

Then Arnold Perry's wristband beeped an acknowledgment, and he disappeared in a flash of light.

The wailing began anew.

Arnie's head was instantly clear as his feet hit the ground in 1865.

Booth. John *Wilkes* Booth.

And from the look of things, he'd already struck.

A crowd was milling about the Ford Theater. Lights blazed from within the theater, spilling out onto the street, washing the whole tableau in a pale yellow glow; the figures milling about were silhouettes of history, still phantoms of the past.

Great. He was living history; no, he was living through *legend*- he should have been awed (having never time traveled before)- but he was too determined, too angry, to do anything else but look for Davis, Cox, or Lincoln.

He found Lincoln.

Okay... presumably, he was looking for one that was still *alive*.

He scanned away from the crowd at the theater, taking in the surroundings of 10th Street.

And he spotted a hat.

It was sticking up from the basement steps of a boarding house across the way.

And clearly, it belonged to someone incredibly tall.

Gotcha.

Crossing to the stairs in three swift bounds, he squinted into the darkness- the darkened control room he'd just left was not dark enough for his eyes to be adjusted to this shadowy alcove- and bellowed.

"Davis!"

Jason Davis looked about ready to have a coronary.

"A...Arnie?" He said, disbelieving.

"That's *Mister Perry*, Davis! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Davis gulped so visibly it was almost audible- however *that* worked- and stammered what sounded like a well-rehearsed answer.

"Re-restoring a great man to... to his proper place in history, and, uh... ushering in a ne-new golden age for America, wh-where the, uh, evils of segregation were d-done away with m-much, uh, sooner-

"Davis, you idiot!" He really needed to stop bellowing soon; his throat was getting sore. "You know we don't have the right to play God with our history! Not counting the fact that every moment influences so many others- you have no idea what one little change can-"

"Bring him in here! Bring him in here!"

The shout was coming from a man- one Henry Safford, Davis could have told him, though to Arnie he was just another member of the crowd- at the top door of the boarding house. He was waving to the men carrying the stricken Lincoln from the theater.

Oh, great.

"Excuse me..." A polite voice inquired.

Arnie looked up. Although he was midway down the stairs, he was eye-to-eye with the man in Davis' company.

"I can see your agitation quite clearly, sir, and I'm loathe to interrupt, but I wonder if either of you gentlemen could explain to me exactly what is going on?" asked Abraham Lincoln.

Arnie stared at him, unsure what to say. Behind him, the men bearing a dying Lincoln swiftly approached their stairway.

"Are the Temporal Police coming?" Davis glumly inquired into the ensuing silence.

Arnie glanced at him distractedly.

"No... doesn't look like it, or they'd be here already. Some change that either you or Cox made must have pre-empted their existence... allowed Cox to escape their pursuit..."

Davis looked stricken.

"But, I haven't done anything yet..."

The crowd at the theater disappeared. The fervor of commotion, the tumult of men's shouts, died to a whisper.

Arnie's jaw dropped.

"Oh, no- Davis, grab his hand!"

The men carrying the dying Lincoln disappeared; the body they were bearing thankfully vanished mid-plummet, before it could unceremoniously drop to the street.

Arnie reached out to grab Lincoln's right hand as Davis slowly- too slowly- did the same with his left.

Like a wavefront whose periphery was rushing towards them, passersby on the street winked out, one by one in rapid succession, like a staccato machine-gun burst of sudden vanishings. With astonishing speed, the lack of people raced nearer.

For the second time in five minutes, Arnie slapped out in blind panic, grasping for the large red emergency button on his wrist-band.

Henry Safford, standing above them, disappeared. Wind whispered down the empty street. The street lamps went out. And Lincoln... Lincoln was transparent.

Arnie's belt hummed to life.

An energy field snapped into existence, making Arnie's hair stand up straight.

Like a ghost returning to the land of the living- an ironic comparison at the moment- Lincoln was suddenly solid once again, within the periphery of the field.

And then, the trio was gone in a flare of light.

Only a dead, empty street- a forgotten, obsolete, overwritten timeline devoid of life, lingering but a few moments as a phantom waiting to be devoured by time's scavengers, remained behind.

And soon, it was gone as well.

The emergency belt was a last-ditch device invented by the Time Bureau, as a sort of temporal life preserver. In case of a catastrophic temporal disaster, a stranded wearer could hit the panic button, generating a temporary protective field, insulating them from timeline changes, and immediately catapulting them back to the approximate pre-alteration point, where they could await rescue and, with any luck, perhaps even prevent the interference. As long as the field denoted an altered timeline- or as long as the belt's battery lasted, whichever came first- the wearer would be free from alteration and able to move about and affect the events leading directly up to the temporal alteration.

Appearing on a grassy surface, Arnie stumbled back, losing his grip on the President and tumbling to the ground in a heap. Davis and Lincoln landed beside him a moment later.

The President, no longer protected by contact with their fields, stayed whole and solid as ever.

Arnie checked his watch.

A large indicator still glowed red; whatever historical change they'd jumped to, it hadn't been averted. Clearly, whatever part of it would threaten Lincoln's life simply hadn't happened yet; until it did, the President was safe even when unshielded.

Arnie gasped, trying to draw moisture back into his mouth. Emergency jumps weren't pleasant.

"Why... Davis...? Why... risk... it?"

He saw Davis' eyes well with tears even as he struggled to rise. Arnie envied the moisture.

"He..." Davis glanced over at Lincoln. "He was such a great man! He didn't deserve what happened!"

Arnie nodded; that much he could agree with.

"His bodyguard was out drinking with the Footman and the Coachman, did you know that? He had no one there... no one to protect him! If only someone had protected him...!"

So, Cox had turned Davis into Lincoln's perfect protector; an admirer who'd do anything- even break the laws of time and his country- to save the man he admired. Well, it made sense. And presumably, it had been the easiest way to get at Davis' psyche; it's always easier to convince someone to do something they were prone to anyway. Davis must have had a strong protective streak; manipulating that while he was a child had been... well, child's play.

And since they were here, wherever *here* was, after fleeing the erasure of Lincoln's presence altogether from the future, Arnie could only assume that, whatever Cox had planned, he'd known that protector-Davis would try to return the Archived copy of Lincoln back to history, leaving the backup copy completely unprotected and unshielded (well, no one ever said that he was a *smart* protector-Davis) so that an attack on the past Lincoln could successfully wipe every iteration of Lincoln from the future; an irrevocable timeline change with no backup left in storage to return.

And, for that matter, where *was* here?

Arnie looked around, got his bearings.

Oh. *Here*. Of course.

It seemed that the Positional Displacement was relatively minimal- after all, with the surface of the Earth spinning by at 1000 miles an hour (at the equator, at least; rotational speeds were based on position; the poles hardly spun at all, relatively), while swinging in a 186-million mile circle at 67,000 miles an hour as it orbited the sun, itself roaring through space in an arc of who-knows-what diameter while orbiting the center of the Milky Way, even 5 minutes-worth of straight travel through time with no change in location would leave you floating in deep space, miles from where the Earth had been 5 minutes before.

So, with a hop through time also requiring a significant hop through *space* in order to stay anchored to the Earth's relative position, it was very little extra effort to nudge that relative position to travel to a time as well as a place, fulfilling the classic sci-fi cliché of jumping to important events by traveling to the year *and* place where they occurred (*as opposed to a more 'realistic' view of leaving DC in the present and traveling to 1492 to observe Columbus, only to find oneself still in 1492's Washington DC, an object of curiosity to the local Piscataway*). In this case, however, very little travel had been needed- the first jump was from D.C. to D.C., and now to the practical backyard (*both in terms of astronomical distance and of local geography*) of Pennsylvania.

At least, Arnie assumed that was where they were, considering the context. A crowd of mammoth proportions lay here, on a large, flat, grassy field. They observed a lectern at which a slightly rotund man with graying, almost Beethoven-straggled hair, was currently speaking. And behind him...

...behind him was Lincoln.

Another Lincoln.

A second Lincoln.

Actually- assuming this was, as Arnie guessed, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1863, 2 years prior to the assassination- the seated man was a *first* Lincoln; theirs, from the Archive, 2 years older, was technically the second.

Arnie hated time travel.

It was a cool fall afternoon, nearly winter. The field was dressed up in the accouterments of a ceremony; the tension of a nation in wartime hung subtly in the air like the gray clouds on the horizon. A few scraggly, skeletal saplings grew here and there, not much taller than the President himself. Reporters and

participants alike were dotted, sitting and standing, all over the countryside. The air was misty, turning the ridge of hills in the distance into indistinct, ethereal shadows in the foggy distance.

Lincoln- ArchiveLincoln- who had not yet spotted himself at the lectern- viewed the scene with a glint of recognition.

"November 19th..." He murmured.

Arnie saw the man at the lectern wrapping up his speech.

"...as we bid farewell to the dust of these martyr-heroes, that wheresoever throughout the civilized world the accounts of this great warfare are read..."

Lincoln- ...ArchiveLincoln, *their* Lincoln (*was it a sign of mental instability to regard historical figures in possessive terms?*)- had a glint in his eye as he focused on the speaker; the mischievous glint of an old sparring-partner recognized- not an opponent or an enemy, but a friendly rival or jovial obstacle to one's general good nature.

"Everett..."

"...and down to the latest period of recorded time, in the glorious annals of our common country..."

Then ArchiveLincoln's eyes went wide with shock, as he spotted himself- the Lincoln of this time- behind Edward Everett. He began breathing in great heaving gasps, his face quivering with shock and confusion; perhaps the beginnings of that deranged panic that seizes all men when they believe they are in the process of losing their mind.

"...there will be no brighter page than that which relates the Battles of Gettysburg."

The crowd burst into applause as Everett indicated the completion of his speech.

ArchiveLincoln was pale as a ghost.

Arnie winced at the poor choice of mental analogy. Or was that metaphor? Simile? ...Homonym?

ArchiveLincoln turned toward him, eyes wide and half-manic.

"I demand-" he thundered over the applause "-That you explain to me what is happening!"

Arnie saw the questions in the President's eyes, even as, over the man's shoulder, he saw the other Lincoln rising to take the pulpit.

He also saw a glint that caught his eye in the November fog.

A prone figure, in the distance, away from the crowd. A long stem emerging from the dark form- the barrel of a weapon. The shape was indistinct, but the tapering tube protruding from the vague figure certainly resembled a modern sniper-rifle more than a period weapon.

He nudged Davis with his shoulder out of instinct, pointing.

"Cox!"

Davis was up and off running like a shot before Arnie could blink twice.

It was happening again.

He couldn't let it happen twice.

A great man...

...if only...

...protected...

...that was him.

He was the protector.

He would stop it this time.

He had to.

There were only a handful of heartbeats standing between Abraham Lincoln and oblivion.

Thump-thump.

Oh, this was all so familiar.

Lincoln motioned the crowd to silence.

Davis' foot found little purchase in the muddy ground, digging into the turf with a squelch and giving him barely any leverage to push off with. His running steps were slow and arduous.

There was no question; the sniper was targeting the lectern.

Thump-thump.

The crowd quieted, save for a few shocked and annoyed utterances at the strangely-attired stranger running through their midst.

Davis could see the figure; Cox. How *could* he? How could he betray Lincoln like this?

Cox braced his elbows, getting into firing position.

Thump-thump.

The President's protectors moved to intercept this stranger, but they were hampered by the crowd.

He would reach Lincoln before they would; but would it be before Cox's bullet?

A hand went to the trigger; focused on a single figure through the telescopic sniper's sight, Cox wouldn't have seen him yet.

Thump-thump.

There were only a handful of steps between Davis and the President.

He flashed back to the last conversation he'd had with Cox. The fervor; the passion he'd seen in Cox's eyes as he'd insisted that all Lincoln needed was a protector. That longing glance at the sleeping figure as he said 'If only...'

How masterfully he'd been played, like a marionette.

Cox's finger swept back to squeeze the trigger. Davis would be too late.

Thump-thump.

Lincoln began.

"Four score..."

Cox seemed to hesitate, momentarily; whatever killing instinct that drove him unable to overcome the temptation to witness the famous words for himself.

Squelch. A spray of mud from a stumbled footstep. Davis pushed forward.

Thump-thump.

The moment passed. The finger was back to squeezing.

Thump-thump.

"...and seven years ago..."

The very fog in the air seemed to thicken, resisting Davis, slowing him like the mud through which he slogged...

Thump-thump.

Whatever Cox's game, he'd made a mistake.

The firing mechanism of the rifle, far more advanced than a Derringer, clicked into motion.

Thump-thump.

He'd groomed Lincoln a protector; the perfect protector; he hadn't counted on that.

Davis leapt.

"...our forefathers..."

With a click, the firing mechanism reached its trigger-point.

Gunpowder ignited.

Pressure built.

A bullet rocketed down the chamber, propelled by the expanding force of ignited gases.
Death rode the fiery wind in the form of a metal slug.

Thump-

"...brought-"

...protect-

Bang.

Arnie was off and running as soon as he saw Davis was out of his reach; he was headed for the President, so Arnie ran for the sniper.

He was halfway there when Davis leapt.

It wasn't like a Hollywood-bodyguard leap, a bizarre sideways trajectory that would carry the diving guard in-front-of-and-past his charge in half an instant so that only an absurdist stroke of luck would put the bullet into the exact instant when he was passing between it and the target (*which, in the movies, it always did*) before the bodyguard would fall past uselessly, presumably landing hard on his side on the ground just past his client, getting the wind knocked out of him, and lying there like a stupid, useless spud as the gunman had a clear and completely unhindered shot at his victim.

Diving past was not very useful.

This was a leap of desperation; half interposition, half tackle.

He hit Lincoln, not square on, but at an angle, twisting both as they fell so that Davis would be the one with his back to the sniper, shielding the president from the bullet that was presently tearing through flesh and bone. The figures, shot mid-twist, were lined up perfectly, a mirror image of one another as the bullet passed through Davis' right shoulder, cleaving his skin and muscle with explosive force, and passing through into Lincoln's left, just a bit too high to successfully endanger his heart. The two collapsed as the President's men fell upon them.

Arnie could hear Cox curse, loudly, and toss his head up from his viewing position, straining to understand what had just happened beyond the microscopic-focus of his sniper's tunnel vision. Arnie didn't let up for a second, surging forward with a renewed burst of speed over the sodden ground.

Cox's head snapped up at the sound of his approach.

Bearing down at full speed, Arnie didn't slow or crouch to meet him. He thrust his running leg up into an exaggerated gesture.

The force of a full-tilt run behind him, he kicked Steven Cox square in the face.

The loss of any semblance of balance- not to mention the sudden stop- involved in this maneuver pitched Arnie face-first into the muddy grass; but not before he had the satisfaction of seeing Cox's head snap back, and his prone form go rolling, tumbling uncontrolled across the field.

Grass scraping across your face, causing a rug-burn-like abrasion of burning skin, doesn't seem nearly so soft as it looks from a distance. The unpleasantness of thick, sticky mud directly up the nose does not, in fact, improve the sensation.

Rising slowly, with difficulty, as his bracing hands continued to sink ineffectually into the mud, Arnie raised his head- he couldn't see very well through the clinging ooze smeared across his face. Cox was rolling over onto his stomach, dazed, and trying to rise as well. The sniper rifle lay some feet away, equidistant between them both- a Hollywood cliché that seemingly couldn't be avoided, even in real life.

Determined to reach it first even though he was stuck on his hands and knees, Arnie shoved powerfully with both braced arms to send himself up into a kneeling position. It worked perfectly, minus the part

where one braced arm slid out from under him sideways as he tried, dumping him face-first into the mud again.

Working his tired limbs, he managed to scramble up into a temporary balance, one arm flailing in the air, long enough to see Cox push himself onto hands and knees. Then he tottered, fell, and the mud took his nose into its loving caress again.

He snarled a curse.

"Blurp!"

Forgetting his surroundings, a mouthful of mud (*much thicker, slimier, and more prevalent than before in the grassless mud-hole he was churning up with his ground-tearing flailings*) and a few bubbles was the actual result.

It did not taste good.

He was now in a perfect kow-towing position, face bowed flat to the ground while still on his knees, posterior sticking into the air.

He shoved hard with his feet, bracing his arms like hooks in front of him. He slid forward, slightly, his arms in commando-style-crawl position. They found grass, beyond the boundaries of his personal pig-wallow. He pulled himself forward with the added traction, and saw Cox scabbling along with much the same pace. He grunted with exertion as he slithered forward.

Cox was five feet from the rifle.

He was six.

Cox closed the gap to three feet.

He was four.

Two feet.

Three feet.

One.

Two.

Cox's hand closed around the barrel.

Arnie used his momentum again, plowing into the rifle and knocking it a few feet back out of both of their grasps.

Cox, halted in place to pick up the rifle, lost ground as Arnie moved past him, never stopping.

"Careful!" Cox snarled, reaching out to snag Arnie's leg.

"That's a delicate piece- glorp!"

The sudden jerk of Arnie's resisting leg against Cox's solid pull yanked them both unceremoniously into the mud. Cox got his *first* mouthful of mud, tearing free a patch of grass and digging into the mud with his own face, while Arnie, mouth-breathing and unable to seal his lips in time, savored the delicate bouquet with just a hint of manure inherent in his own face-excavated-trench's *second*.

Arnie kicked backwards with both legs, somehow managing to miss Cox entirely in his flailings. Cox was crawling past him; they were right beside each other now, both crawling one-armed while grasping with the other.

Cox, having the advantage of being already in motion, reached it first, gripping the barrel again.

Arnie kept moving, his grasping hand passing by the rifle's barrel, overshooting as Cox began to lift it. As his elbow reached its apex above the barrel, Arnie let himself drop, slamming down into the barrel with a crack.

"Hey!" Cox protested, shocked, as the barrel jarred in his grip.

Clenching his elbow in tight toward his chest, pinning the barrel between his arm and torso, Arnie strained backwards with his other arm and knees, wrenching himself backwards and taking the pinned barrel with him. The stock was angled towards him, up against his gut, while Cox maintained a tight-fisted grip on the barrel's end.

Curling onto his back, bringing his legs up as if he were going to attempt a martial-arts scissor-kick and launch himself to his feet with the momentum of his outward-kicking legs, Arnie shifted the pressure of his elbow haphazardly, slapping his free hand against the rifle's sturdy stock. He shoved downwards.

His hand held the stock at one end. Cox's gripped the barrel at the other. His knee, in the center, acted as a fulcrum.

Snap!

He staggered backwards, disengaging from Cox, and taking nearly five seconds to reach his feet. As he stood, he turned in a circle, flinging the rifle away from him with the force of his turn, and watching the stock and magazine bounce on the muddy ground a disappointing few feet away. A Olympian discus thrower, he wasn't.

Cox still held the barrel.

His turn spun him back to face Cox, and he stopped, stumbling, as his limbs attempted to keep up the motion- barely keeping his footing on the slick grass as the world continued to spin. It was the darndest thing about adulthood; as a child, he could spin in circles for an hour and barely feel anything- but just past his teenage years, even a mere full rotation or two would be enough to make him dizzy and nauseous. He wondered if future technology had found a way to give a grown man the inner-ear of his childhood. Now *that* might be worth some black marketeering...

As his head cleared, he glanced at his wrist monitor.

It still glowed amber.

The future was still in danger.

He looked up. He saw Cox already in motion, having abandoned the ruined rifle. The ex-guard charged, somewhat woozily, towards the distant lectern.

Arnie gave chase, staggering and exhausted. In other circumstances, the two might've made a comical pair, staggering exhaustedly, almost drunkenly forward.

With an act of apparent sheer desperation, he saw Cox shoulder past the President's men, currently charging out towards the field to apprehend him. They spun back towards him, reversing their course in belated shock.

By the time that Arnie, shoulder-to-shoulder with the servicemen, reached the platform, where physicians were attending to a prone Lincoln while Davis lay bleeding quietly off to the side, Cox had torn loose something from beneath the lectern; a metal cylinder that looked at least a few decades more advanced than anything Arnie had seen; clearly he had planted it here earlier.

"Stand back!" Cox raged, as the objected beeped loudly. "I have a nuclear bomb!"

The President's men stared at him uncertainly, looking back and forth at each other with puzzled glances.

Cox's face was a perfect mask of impatient irritation.

"A... a *mortar shell!* And I'll use it to kill the President if you don't drop your weapons!"

The crowd broke into a screaming pandemonium, fleeing the scene.

Reluctantly, the guards laid down their weapons. As Cox shoed the physicians away, the bomb beeped again.

Arnie, fighting his way upstream, forced his way to the front of the crowd.

"Cox! Are you *insane?*!"

Cox turned to him, matter-of-factly pulling out a pistol to point it directly at Lincoln's temple with one hand as he gently tossed the bomb onto the grass nearby with the other.

"Yes, actually. But I'm working on it..."

Arnie, stopped, gaping- he didn't really have a response to that.

The bomb beeped again; it was clear now that the pulses were a steady pattern, a very slow rhythm that was gradually accelerating.

"Why in Heaven's name go to all this trouble? What are you hoping to accomplish?"

Cox's face lit up as if he'd been waiting for the question.

"I was a cop once, you know." He said, in a still, quiet voice.

He favored his former employer with a haunted look.

"A good one, too. The best. But there was this case..."

The bomb interrupted with a chirp.

"...It was a little nothing, y'know? Just a minor counterfeiting operation. But I couldn't catch the guy. It was an embarrassment. He was humiliating me. It ate at me. He was out there, mocking me. I took down serial killers and rapists, kidnapers and murderers- but here was this punk counterfitter, a small timer working out of his basement, evading me. My supervisors were starting to doubt my competency, I just knew it. I had to catch him, you understand? It was a matter of pride..."

Arnie nodded, keeping him talking, looking for a way to grab that pistol...

"I knew where he'd been, just not where he was. He kept changing base-camps! He was always just one step ahead, clearing out before I could get there. If I could just be a day *ahead* of him, for once..."

Arnie nodded, getting a feel for where this was going.

"You cheated. You time-jumped."

Cox licked dry, nervous lips, and nodded an affirmative.

"It was *my* time-hopper; I'd saved the world using it before. I was entitled to a little unauthorized jump here and there, wasn't I?"

Beep.

"So I did it. I picked an old factory where I'd just missed him, and I went back a day. I finally caught up to the slimeball, too. He was right there. I almost had him; but he ran."

Beep.

The bomb's pulse was getting measurable. That couldn't be a good sign.

"So I hid, under one of the catwalks. I recalibrated my time-hopper and tried again. Now there were two of me running through that factory- one lost him, but the other one got the drop on him. I made a pretty good team with me, y'know?"

He smiled sardonically at his own joke, his eyes taking on a far-away look, and Arnie tensed up to lunge for the pistol.

Before he could move half an inch, Cox jabbed at Lincoln's wound with his pistol. The wounded President cried out, and Arnie relaxed back into a non-threatening stance. Cox wasn't as distracted as he looked.

"We struggled. I dropped my hopper. Suddenly, he was everywhere; there were 10, 20, 30 of him- he must have lost the fight, grabbed my hopper just before I could cuff him, and revisited the site a dozen times. He was his own army! The worst paradox you can imagine, End of the Universe 101. Lit the time scanners up like a Christmas tree!"

Cox was clearly building to something- he was growing more agitated, sweating even in the cold foggy air, steeling himself to act. Arnie shuddered; he might have to act whether Cox was distracted or not- take a chance on stopping him in time- because right now, it didn't look like he would get an opening.

"Temporal Police hit the place hard and fast. Dropped a recombomb. Recombined every doppelgänger in the factory. Popped all of those scumbags back into the original. Only... there was still another me, hiding under a catwalk, from the first time around- getting ready to jump back and become the second me. They never saw him. They didn't program the bomb for him. He just... got mashed, right into me. Two lives, two separate sets of almost-overlapping memories, just jammed together without any warning!"

Arnie stared; no wonder Cox was deranged. An unprepared combination of two separate, conflicting sets of memories into a single overlapping whole...? That would be enough to drive anyone mad. How Cox had managed to cover this from the screenings-

Another beep interrupted his shocked musings. But this one didn't come from the bomb.

Arnie spared a quick glance down. The battery warning on his emergency wristband had tripped. In about a minute, he wouldn't be protected from the change in the timeline anymore. Cox had to have one, surely- but he couldn't see it. He was- clichéd as it was to say- nearly out of time.

"I've got two brains in my head, *Mister Perry!* The first one never went back in time to become the second; instead, he just kept on living his own life, right here in me. That's a paradox, because the second me, created by a time-jumping that the first never made... he's still here too; right inside my skull. I've got two *MEs* rattling around in my skull, *Perry!* Both of whom shouldn't exist; First Me should've ended by becoming Second Me, and Second Me should never have started without First Me ending- I'm two nonexistent men in one body!"

He laughed an angry laugh.

The bomb's beep rose into sync with a normal human heartbeat- beep-beep, beep-beep, beep-beep... and, as a slower counter-point, Arnie's wrist-band began to join it. Arnie glanced over at Davis... but no help would come from that corner; he was out for the count.

"But we can both agree on one thing! The last thing we both saw..."

Cox reached into his breast pocket with his free hand and fished out a small, crumpled, ratty piece of paper. Shaking it in the wind, snapping his wrist a few times to unfurl it, he held it out with a snarl. It was a counterfeit \$5 bill. Not a particularly good forgery, actually; the color was too yellow. And it read "Five Dollars." And right there, staring somberly from its face...

"*Abraham Lincoln!* I retired after that one; they forced it on me, told me unauthorized time-jumping was too much of a risk. It wasn't too risky when I saved Stanley Livingstone from a crazed Doyle fan that thought the catchphrase "Dr. Watson, I presume" was being infringed on by a fellow time-traveler! Wasn't too much of a risk when I defused that bomb-"

He pointed to the cylinder, whose pulsing tones matched the pounding of Arnie's heart.

"-from nuking the opening of Love's Labor's Won! Or a second at Woodstock! Or a third, or a fourth- got so adept at the blasted things that they didn't even tell me where I was going- just sent me to take them out, one at a time, a thankless bomb squad man jumping all throughout history! I saved the world, so many times... and what thanks did I get?"

He held out the bill, shoving it in Arnie's face.

"A counterfeit case! *Lincoln!* And a discharge!"

He turned eerily sulky, like a petulant child.

"At least I still had *one* friend; pulled some strings to get me fast-track screened and into the Archive. I knew I'd have my moment!"

"That's crazy!" Shouted Arnie, belatedly realizing it was a little late to be establishing that fact. Cox'd already admitted that he *was* crazy, so that particular line of dissuasion was unlikely to work."You can't blame the man for being immortalized on money...!"

"Don't you see?" Cox screamed. "If he dies early, if he never does anything worth getting put on the bill, if he's just another dead president- our entire monetary system will be different! I can make sure they make the Five Dollar Bill something else! Counterfeit-proof! Then I'll be free, don't you see? I'll never have gone to that factory in the first place, and I'll be *me* again! One me! The *only* me!"

Arnie shook his head, desperate, not seeing any way between the madman and his firearm. Oh, he could interpose himself, take a bullet like Davis had done, but that wouldn't solve the problem of...

"What about the bomb, Cox? Why a nuke?"

Cox's eyes went wide. Well, *wider*.

"He's *here!*" He hissed, desperately. "Chase!"

He pulled another rumbled bill from his pocket. This forgery was much more accurate; only the fact that it hadn't been in circulation since 1946 gave it away- its 21st Century date bearing the flavor of a counterfeit. A \$10,000 bill.

"Salmon P. Chase! He's on money, too! A bill so large, almost no one's ever seen it! The highest currency ever made in the United States!"

Well, there was the \$100,000 bill featuring Woodrow Wilson, but no point in mentioning that now, Arnie thought.

"He's the Secretary of the Treasury- he *makes* money! He bloody *introduced* paper money! And he's on it! And he's a contemporary of Lincoln! Who ordered the *issue* of paper money! Don't you see?"

His faced was pinched into a questioning scowl.

"It's all connected! This is my last resort! If I can't make a surgical strike to take out Lincoln, I'll kill them all! Without them, we'll never have counterfeit money."

He waved the bills.

"Not *this* money! It was all coins!" He crowed.

Arnie was having a hard time focusing on the man's words as the ever rising double-beeps of the bombs- paced like the hammering heartbeat of a panicked man- rose to mirror his own rising terror. The man was beyond certifiable; this whole tack of reasoning with a killer only worked if the killer *possessed reason*.

Clearly, reason had fled Steven Cox.

"I could have tracked *coins!*" Cox raged.

His voice was rising to an unbalanced, fevered pitch. So was the bomb; right now, it seemed like a race to see whether an unhinged pistol-wielding Cox, a detonating Nuke, or an out-of-juice wristband would do him in first... not a one of them seemed more than about 10 seconds hence.

"And that's all there will be, if Chase dies! I won't take just the Lincoln bill out of circulation, I'll take them *all* out of circulation! *Bills begone!* That's my salvation! That's how I'll get sane again; that's how the voices in my head- MY voices in my head- will stop!"

He swung around, the gun flailing in the air.

The beeping of the bomb had eclipsed the speed at which a human's heartbeat would cause the organ to explode. Arnie's wristwatch signaled imminent failure- and now the pistol was pointed at him.

"That's why I have to *kill Lincoln!!!*"

Crack!

The fist that connected with Cox's temple would have been able to cleave through a mountainside, or drive a freight car back along its tracks. For the second time in five minutes, his head snapped back, eyes rolling up into his head, as he collapsed into a useless tangled heap on the ground.

Arnie stepped back, staring up at Cox's assailant.

Breathing heavily, face red, seething with a half-mad glare in his eyes, fists balled at his sides, ArchiveLincoln declared, "I believe I have run out of patience!"

The bomb's beep was nearly a steady tone now, a squeal of rising pitch that was nearly enough to shatter glass. Lights flashed in such a rapid sequence that it seems to strobe in brilliant, multi-colored hues.

With a ping, the warning light on Arnie's wrist band turned green, in perfect sync with Davis'. The change to history- in its full, catastrophic form- was averted. The protective field automatically dropped as the belt powered down... or perhaps that was simply the battery fading. The bomb, concealed, unknown- shielded by Cox- didn't even register. The arm band thought that history was all clear. They were all going to die.

On the ground, Davis' eyes went glassy for a second, then refocused. The bloody stain on his shoulder faded away to nothing.

"Where...?" He asked, confused.

With his wristband down, the timeline changes were now free to affect him... and one of them was the restoration of his childhood, untampered with. The Temporal Police must've managed that much- this Jason Davis was now the one who'd originally been hired. The man he used to be.

Little good would it do them.

At the same time, with a flash, an entire squad of Temporal Police appeared to swarm the now partially-deserted field. The dazed and bewildered President's men, firearms lying on the ground, made only a half-hearted effort to impede them.

But there was something wrong with them... they were half-transparent. Arnie could see the crowd through them- and as he waved his arms like a maniac, flagging them down, he realized that so was he.

The all-clear was sounded, the cavalry had arrived- and even as they moved to assist, they were progressively fading from history, victims of a timeline in which the eastern seaboard had been devastated by an 1863 nuke... which none of them realized was coming.

Arnie shouted and jumped up and down, drawing a half-dozen rifles to point right at his chest.

"Bomb! There's a bomb!" He shouted, heedless of the danger in the face of impending oblivion. "I don't know how to stop it!"

It was too late- the bomb was already detonating- a low crackle building up to critical mass with a radioactive field- nuclear fission without radioactive material, a 'miracle' of 26th century technology. A red glow surrounded the bomb; in five seconds, Arnie would be a cinder- if there were enough of his fading form to be atomized.

It was ironic. He and the police that faced him were barely-visible wraiths now, fading to nothingness- but solid as the fleeing crowd was, Gettysburg was now filled with ghosts; the running dead simply didn't know it yet.

There was another bright flash that seemed to occur in the empty air- whomever it deposited already too far gone to be visible. The wraith, briefly silhouetted in the glare of the building glow, dropped to its knees as it ran, sliding up to the bomb like a singer on a waxed floor giving a big finish. It slapped something at the cylinder- as the nuke detonated.

Gettysburg was filled with a blinding, a golden halo that roared across the countryside, like a new sun rising over the Pennsylvania countryside, a rushing brace of fire and force that surrounded every atom of the field and its occupants.

But it didn't interact with them.

Arnie stood in the heart of the firestorm as it faded from the air. He blinked against the glare, stunned, only mildly curious as to why he wasn't dead, peripherally aware that he, and the men surrounding him, were as solid as the even more bewildered crowd stopped to stare on the hill-line... and that the nuclear explosion was the fading ghost.

Standing at the epicenter of the blast was a single figure in dark S.W.A.T. Bomb Squad clothing. He chuckled, and raised a hand, squinting against the daylight that he is clearly not accustomed to. He called out to the masses that he could barely see.

"No worries, folks! Bomb squad! Catapulted that nuke back a hundred-million years into the past- either I just nuked the Cretaceous, or it's a young universe after all, eh?"

The man chuckled as he pulled off his helmet, and Arnie found his jaw dropping.

It was Steven Cox.

Cox gave a friendly smile as he squinted, trying to make out Arnie's features with his still-dilated eyes.

"No worries, pal! Catapulted it back to before the beginning of time. Harmless now. Don't worry, I'm a professional! 3rd nuke, now."

A small box at his waist beeped. Cox looked almost exasperated.

"Recalled already? But I don't even know where I *am*! They don't even give us time to sightsee anymore; just pop in, save the day, leave again- hey, buddy, what year is it?"

Cox disappeared with a flash, leaving Arnie still standing, staring slack-jawed at the place where he had just been standing.

On the ground, the semi-conscious assassin-Cox, now surrounded by a dozen temporal police, groaned.

"That was... third nuke? *That's* why... would tell me... where 'n when... just saved...?"

With an anguished groan, he threw a muddy forearm over his eyes and forehead, and dropped the back of his head against the ground.

Arnie slumped in relief, offering no resistance as the Temporal Police swarmed him, cuffed him, and read him his rights.

Minutes later, his identity and actions confirmed (by a quick check into the future for the results of his police debriefing three days hence), he was cut loose.

Cox was being hauled away in restraints.

Davis was being read his rights.

Lincoln was being attended by a field medic.

ArchiveLincoln was being attended, cautiously, by Archive personnel.

Lawrence Butler approached from the crowd, flashing his ID at the Temporal Police cordon, and stepping through the secured line to where Arnie waited.

"Hey, boss. What a mess, huh?"

Arnie nodded grimly.

"It's not over yet- we've got another conspirator; someone on the inside. We'll have to-"

"Got him, boss. One of the researchers- cleared Cox through even though he was unstable, faked the test results..."

"And you caught him? Already?"

"Course not. Two weeks of depositions from you, a fourth-month investigation, a three-week manhunt; we got him- get him eventually. Just wanted to let you know."

Arnie nodded, glumly, beginning to wonder if the nascent migraine was a warning to him that he was in the wrong line of work.

"Oh, and boss? When you get back, probably best not to mention this conversation to me until after we catch the guy, huh?"

Arnie sighed, nodded again. Then he groaned.

"One of the researchers? Really? One of them, gone bad, managed to let all this happen?"

"Yep. Covered up the changes to Cox *and* Davis. You know what this means, boss..."

He did.

"We're going to need to start hiring screeners for our screeners, aren't we?"

"Yep."

"Social Security's not gonna like this."

"What about the nuke? A researcher manage to wrangle *that* up, too?"

"Nah, that was Cox. Went back, impersonated his younger self, stole it right out of the evidence locker that the other him had just put it in. Just to be safe, the TPDD are rounding up the lot to of 'em to be Deluvianed the moment they're deposited."

That made sense. The Temporal Police Disposal Department's stopgap of hazardous waste disposal was a fairly reliable catchall; a global deluge was a pretty secure temporary disposal site.

Oh, it had been quite a shock to the scientific community when a Biblical account and timescale of history was confirmed by early temporal probings; but once this rather incredible fact had been received and accepted by the researchers at large, the global flood had become a very logical place for emergency bomb disposal. In best case scenarios, the bomb would short circuit from its instantaneous immersion; at worst, the landing spot, literally on the other side of the world from the legendary Ark, would prevent any shockwaves or other ill effects from reaching the Noah or his animals, the blast being absorbed by a confirmed-lifeless underwater continent. Either way, it would do in a pinch to get the explosive away from civilians until proper defusal teams could journey back and disarm the bomb in a proper frozen-time bubble.

It was, in fact, a sad fact of the continued classified nature of time travel that people of faith the world over could not receive the validation- and skeptics, the correction- provided by this firsthand account of history.

Just as, crucially, people could never know of this incident. History recorded no such attack on Lincoln; this entire chain of events would have to be painstakingly undone.

Lincoln.

Arnie let his gaze fall upon the shaken man- the Archive copy, cupping a hot mug of coffee, with a blanket draped around his shoulders, his prior bewildered outrage having given way to a sort of numb shock that threatened to relapse him into his prior catatonic state. The poor man had witnessed the aftermath of his own assassination, then been whisked through time and space and exposed to dozens of events that he couldn't possibly understand- it was a burden than no man deserved to bear.

"What about Lincoln?"

Lawrence held up a small electronic gizmo, its scanners already locked on to the shellshocked President.

"Already have the authorization and the hardware. We'll recombine him- properly, this time, not like the mess that Cox fell into. He Lincoln we snatched was sleeping, and he'll be re-infused with himself; the new memory engrams will fuse with his REM state and dissipate; just like the dream you can never remember, this'll all float away. Right out of his consciousness. And then, we'll have to go take another Lincoln backup."

Perhaps that was kindest; ignorance might be the surest bliss that they could offer him. Arnie studied the tall figure- a legend, but still a man. Davis was wrong- no one had a right to ask him to give even more than he already had.

Lawrence fidgeted with the box in his hand.

"All I have to do is return him to... where did he come from?"

Arnie thought back to the manifest that he'd signed several years before.

"'65. April Fools Day, I think."

"Right. All I have to do is input the time lock, send our boy back to '65-"

There was a blinding flash, and suddenly Lawrence stood before them- a second Lawrence, several days stubble on his chin, looking haggard, drawn, annoyed... and embarrassed.

"To clarify," the doppelgänger noted tiredly, "That would be 1865."

"Right," noted the first Lawrence, looking chagrined. He pressed several more buttons, and the computer beeped an acknowledgment as his double faded from existence. "All we have to do is input the time lock, send our boy back to 1865, and the RecomBureau will do the rest."

"He won't remember anything?"

"Nope."

Relieved to hear it, Arnie started forward without a word, striding toward the Commander-in-Chief, passing the prone form of his double, native to this time, just being sewn up from the impromptu field surgery. He wondered who looked more dazed- ArchiveLincoln, or the bewildered President's men trying to decide exactly *which* Lincoln they should try and protect from these strangely-dressed interlopers.

He approached the living legend.

"Mister President?" He queried gently.

Archive-Lincoln looked up at him, eyes sunken and hollow, haunted.

"...A presidential assassination. So soon..." He intoned, in shock.

Arnie could only nod mutely.

"And I shall die, irrevocably. An entry in a history book not yet written..."

He didn't seem afraid; in fact, he seemed more melancholy, downcast.

Sad.

"I'll... I'll never get to see what I've worked for, will I? I'll never see the slaves of the South become true Americans... I'll never see the North and the South rejoined in harmony, only this present shadow of peace enforced by a general's surrender. I'll never see them really *accept* it... never see them become brothers again."

He fell silent. Arnie felt wholly inadequate to say anything, but he mustered up his courage. Abraham Lincoln was not one of his employees, but...

Helping people was what he did.

So he said the only thing that came to his mind.

"No... but you'll have *caused* it."

Something lit behind the President's gaze.

Very slowly, he began to smile. He straightened, proud and tall once more. His expression was still tinged with sadness, but there was something new within it as well... hope.

"Thank you." He said.

As the junket of future personnel prepared to clear out, transporting back to their own future, returning ArchiveLincoln to his, and clearing the way for a Reboot Team to step in and start preventing any of this from actually having happened, Arnie's gaze fell on Davis. Poor kid. The innocent subject of manipulation, having been compromised he would nonetheless never work at the Archive again. Cox's manipulations had revealed a psychological flaw too easily exploitable; it was a rough fate, being forced out of a job due to something that an alternate version of yourself did in an alternate timeline, paying the price for your doppelgänger's misdeeds- but security (which would see some significant beefing up in the near future, clearly!) at the world's most secure location demanded it.

Alternate timelines were very unfair sometimes.

"Davis... how are you feeling?"

Davis looked up, morose.

"What a mess, sir." He sighed. "But they *can* fix it, right?"

Arnie nodded.

"When they get done here, none of this will have ever happened. Time will proceed as it was meant to."

Davis met his eyes with a slight flash of... what? Desperation? Regret? Guilt?

"And Lincoln? He, uh..."

"He'll live the life he was meant, for as long as he was meant to- no more, no less."

Davis nodded, numbly.

Silence fell for a beat.

"Say, Davis..." Arnie began, casually.

Davis grunted a distracted acknowledgment.

"...It seems we have a little chore that needs running on the way back home."

That caught Davis' attention.

"Now that the Archived Lincoln is contaminated, he can't go back to the Archive like this. Which leaves us..."

He trailed off, waiting for Davis to fill in the blank.

"One Lincoln short?"

Arnie nodded.

"Exactly. Now, the boys in the office have pinpointed the optimal moment for retrieval..." He held out a small pad with capture coordinates on it, awaiting final confirmation.

"And since recruiting has never been my specialty-" (Nor Davis', but no need to mention that.) "I was wondering..."

He saw light return to Davis' eyes.

"...if you'd care to do the honors?"

Preparing to carry out his last official act as an Archive employee, Jason Davis nodded and grinned.

One of the junior officers approached, seeing ArchiveLincoln- well, FormerArchiveLincoln- being readied for his imminent return.

"Hey, are they releasing that guy? I haven't had a chance to take his statement yet!"

Arnie stared at the kid- a fresh-faced Temporal Policemen straight out of the academy, no doubt.

"Don't you know who that *is*?!"

The young officer shrugged.

"No."

This was the problem with modern schools; kids weren't learning *history*!

Or... visiting the monument in their home city.

Or... looking at any modern currency.

Cold dread blossomed through Arnie's gut, he and grabbed the tablet that Lawrence had given him and scanned the brief, panicking at the thought of the Lincoln-less future that he was apt to find; If Lincoln was no longer a part of the future that this kid came from...

He found Lincoln's portrait, a history brief, scans of the memorial... nope, the kid was just an idiot.

He let the young man's ignorance hang in the air, half-forgotten, as he watched the President's transit. As the tall man disappeared in a blaze of brilliance, returning back to the mists of time from whence he'd come, he caught Arnie's eye, smiled- a man returning to a life that he already knew the outcome of, with no regrets.

"He's a man with just a little bit more to give."

And as he vanished, David thumbed the button on the touchpad, activating the process that would retrieve another copy of the man from a single moment in time, protecting him yet again until that inevitable day that his moment came.

If anyone had been watching in that darkened room, they would have seen Abraham Lincoln, asleep in his bed, seem to blink, for just a second, as if the film of his life was missing a frame. His wife, sleeping beside him, was wholly unaffected and undisturbed in her sleep. And then, before the blanket even had time to settle onto the spot where his prone form had disappeared from, they would have seen him re-appear, and wake shortly thereafter, not at all tired though it was the middle of the night, never knowing that in between those moments, he had slept for a day and an eternity.

"About ten days ago, I retired very late. I had been up waiting for important dispatches from the front. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along. I saw light in all the rooms; every object was familiar to me; but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break? I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. 'Who is

dead in the White House?' I demanded of one of the soldiers, 'The President,' was his answer; 'he was killed by an assassin.' Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which woke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since."

– Abraham Lincoln, April 11th, 1865