

"This way, mister President."

Jason Davis was hardly typical of a secret service escort- nor was his solitary presence with the President of the United States of America typical procedure for the President's 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.

It was a dark, frigid April night, cold but clear, with no 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 the street lights, from which they were keeping well away, as the two traversed alleys and side-streets to avoid being seen or noticed. The President 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 dazed state.

Davis, for his part, 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. But he 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 continually 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 for the people, rather than the fate Davis was delivering him into. It was, in fact, fortunate that the man 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 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 was the sort that 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, by the President choosing the day appointed not to visit the theater to take in a play as planned, but instead attending a ceremony to honor the military at the assassin's own hotel while the assassin- or kidnapper, as he would 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, has become a conspirator and would-be murderer. 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 where the Vice-President elect showed up drunk- as an invited guest, the secret-but-not-yet-public fiancé of the daughter of the US Ambassador to Spain. He'd had the opportunity, but did not yet have his murderous motive- at the time, he may not have even dreamed up the kidnapping.

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

The President would die within moments.

And Davis was leading him 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.

The President leaned against the wrought-iron railings of the semi-spiral staircase leading up to the doorway to catch his breath; but he grew more hale and hearty by the minute- soon, he would be able to shake off the stupor, Davis thought.

The street was empty but not deserted; some cities never slept. The few passers-by were not looking at them, 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.

A finger tensed on the trigger finger.

"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 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 his 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.

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 drops away and the gunshot echoes 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 play 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 charged out, scrambling frantically, slamming his accomplice- either unwitting, or having second thoughts- on the forehead with the handle of the knife 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 his steed, 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), 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 sub-street door, looking for the best way to avoid Good Samaritan Henry Safford's appearance from the (upper, he hoped) door momentarily 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 charge's forehead. Hopefully, the placement was either accurate, or no one would notice the difference.

He moved to reassure his now bewildered and somewhat alarmed looking companion as the latter came out of his stupor.

"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 thief to murder the true inventor, take the technology back in time, and claim to have invented it himself, they had arrived just in time to witness a confession from the terrified woman that she was, in fact, not the true inventor herself, but a con-woman who had successfully accomplished the same thing 5 years later, taking the methodology from an inventor that, she later confessed, she suspected was also not its inventor, but another 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 in the flow of time itself preventing any time travel from approximately 5 B.C. to 30 A.D.- after 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 outside the law.

Spy games of assassination and counter-assassination (protected historical records databases showed a nearly 400% increase in historically recorded infant mortality from the original timeline before temporal enforcement began to step in- though sadly, this meant that some unlucky squad was given the unenviable task of actually protecting 'Priority Target 1,' the infant Hitler- trying to kill whom was eventually dubbed a capital offense with instant death penalty to attempt to discourage the countless attempts so numerous, they were beginning to fray the fabric of time in that particular year... irony had a wicked sense of humor sometimes), future-traveling info-gathering missions (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- temporal police had needed to rescue Napoleon from attempted strangulation by his infuriated benefactor, who promptly used his 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 so sudden or catastrophic, it wiped the police from the timeline before they could travel back to correct it. Preservation of elements so unique that their loss could not easily be repaired. Protection for the irreplaceable.

That's why they created the Archive.

Original attempts to establish a protected facility by landing a team in a 7 B.C. 'safe zone' of time and slip under the radar of the 'blocked zone' of time by 'living their way in'- simply wait three years and you'd have reached 4 B.C. and be within the definite limits of the zone- had simply resulted in a loss of contact with the team, pronounced missing in action.

This led to the priority development- and yes, some future-help cheating (government-sanctioned, of course)- in adapting the transmission-through-time technology used to maintain the historical record databases into a Temporal Shielding technology. A time could not be locked 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. The facility 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, resulting in a short-staffed facility the next day; employees returning from having been erased would not be re-admitted without a complete re-screening, in case the timeline had resulted in a psychological change to the individual- in case they were a different person in the new timeline. 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.

Amid this absurd, ever-changing, sanity-testing ballyhoo, 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 with 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 watchmen could find his attention waning- as supervisor, it was the kind of thing that Arnold- Arnie, to his charges- 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 TVs and VCRs sitting on top of each other instead contained and distributed behind a molded plastic faux-metal wall of futuristic designs, the play controls located in a high-tech control console angling down from the base of the monitors at a 45-degree angle). 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), 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 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 a security did it's 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. Limits had, of course, been clearly established, limiting travel back to no earlier than the public announcement itself (Arnie could only imagine what future travelers had called the Great Revelation Riots or Tourist Insanity, less formally- the first allowable moment had, in fact, been the 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 "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, an instant swamping of overtaxed foodstuff supplies, public utilities (A nationwide sewer backup was a VERY unpleasant prospect), lodgings, and generally, a complete economic crash, famine, and general overcrowding disaster- not to mention the near sinking of Venice from the sudden mass 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*- except for the hucksters that traveled back to that moment with the crowds, bearing pre-fabricated machines to create a travel bureau overnight, it would take nearly 20 years for a tourism infrastructure and industry to develop, and another 17 for it to be anywhere near accessible to the common-man's salary- 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- this future-famous facility (presumably still in use in their time) being one of the prime targets. That, and little things like the Titanic sinking (anyone with sonar in that time period 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 they knew about; Heaven knows how many 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 their best efforts to prevent it. 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.

This monitor room was not observing any wayward tourists, however. This room's camera's 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 supplies and a small stasis-bed being the sole contents of each, aside from the slumbering figures (chemically sedated) within.

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, Elizabeth the First, Werneher von Braun, Jason 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), William Shakespeare, Elvis Presley, Saddam Hussein, 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. Like a blanket whose thread stretches from one end to the other, appearing from the front to be a seamless line- while in the back, a loop has been pulled up, arcing up above the surface that it belongs to, briefly forming a raised area separate from the line it had known before arcing right back to what it came from and continuing on the line as if it had never left. 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 through it, 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 of the action!"

"I'll bet." Arnie answered knowingly.

"Green- 15239" Announced Butler's partner, Patrick Carvalo, 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, checked against a computer readout of what was currently being displayed and a visual check on each of the monitors, periodically changing, 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.

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.

Wasn'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 catalogue number, if A=1, etc... He grimaced. 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 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 use 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 timelines 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; if the loop pulled up from the blanket were cut, the entire thread of history could unravel. 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. They grew their own coffee beans to make sure that it 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 doppelgangers, the Jason Davis of this new timeline wasn't consciously different from the Jason Davis that was; 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 were already in pursuit of a fleeing perpetrator, Archive employee Steven Cox.

"Cox?"

He looked up at the 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 chase about which Arnie had just read.

Every alarm in the place began wailing at the breach of temporal integrity. He had used an emergency outgoing override, allowing one-way transit out of the facility; this only happened in emergencies, so the alarms were sending out their alerts. 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 found an automotive 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 in 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, attended by physicians in the audience ("Is there a doctor in the house?" indeed), shepherded into William Peterson's boarding house by boarder Henry Safford, dead the morning after the fateful shot.

When he saw the stream of condemnation and sorrow, the curses laid upon his name and the horror which even the south reacted with, 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. (Turns out Back to the Future had got it right after all). He cursed. The outgoing override left a gap in the shield to the frequency of its user; whatever changes he committed might penetrate through the weakened field. Cox- or Davis- had done something, and there was no time- within seconds, he wouldn't remember it had even happened!

Before it could disappear, 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 override-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 acknowledgement, 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, spilling out onto the street, from within the theater, 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- he should have been awed (having never travelled 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 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 observer- on 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.

Arnie's jaw dropped.

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

The men carrying Lincoln disappeared.

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

Henry Safford, standing above them, disappeared.

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

Lincoln... was transparent.

His belt hummed to life.

An energy field snapped into existence, making Arnie's hard 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.

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 a 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 changed they'd hopped 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 unshielded.

He 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..." He 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 him into Lincoln's perfect protector; an admirer who'd do anything- even break the laws of time and his country- to save him. 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 Lincoln to history, leaving the backup copy completely unprotected and unshielded (well, no one ever said 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.

And, for that matter, where was here?

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 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' traveling in 1492 to observe Columbus only to find oneself still in Washington DC, an object of curiosity to the local Piscataway. In this case, however, very little travel had been needed- the jumps were 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- it was a first Lincoln; theirs, from the archive, 2 years older, was the second.

Arnie hated time travel.

It was a cool fall afternoon, nearly winter. The field was dressed up in the accoutrements 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- Archive-Lincoln- who had not yet spotted himself- 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- ...Archive-Lincoln, *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- not an opponent or enemy, but a friendly rival or jovial obstacle to one's general good nature- recognized.

"Everett..."

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

Then Archive-Lincoln'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.

Archive-Lincoln was pale as a ghost.

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

Lincoln 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 his eyes, even as, over his 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?

The sniper braced his elbows, getting into firing position.

Thump-thump.

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

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

A hand went to the trigger; focused on a single figure through the telescopic sniper's site, Cox's 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...'

The 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 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 its chamber, propelled by the expanding force of ignited gasses.

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 covered 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 so soft as it looks. The unpleasant thick, sticky mud directly up the nose does not, in fact, improve the sensation.

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

Determined to reach it first though stuck on his hands and knees, Arnie shoved powerfully with both braced arms to send himself up into a kneeling position. Minus the part where one braced arm slid out from under him sideways as he tried, dumping him face-first into the mud again, it worked perfectly.

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 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 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 scrabbling 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, stopped to pick it up, 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 as Cox began to lift it. As his elbow reached its apex above the barrel, he let himself drop, slamming 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, 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 on 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 disappointingly 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, 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.

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.

By the time that Arnie, shoulder-to-shoulder with the servicemen, reached the platform, where physicians were attending to a prone Lincoln, as 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 object 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 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 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 with at Lincoln's temple with one hand as he gently tossed the bomb onto the grass nearby with his other.

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

Arnie 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. 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 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 measureable. 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.

We struggled. I dropped my hopper. Suddenly, he was everywhere; there were 10, 20, 30 of him- he 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, 101. Lit the time scanners up like a Christmas tree.

Temporal Police hit the place hard and fast. Dropped a recombomb. Recombined every doppelganger in the factory. Popped all of those scumbags back into the original. Only... there was still another me, hiding under a catwalk, getting ready to jump back and catch the guy. 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.

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 live, right here in me. That's a paradox, because the second me, created by a the time-jumping first that never happened, he's still here too; right inside my skull. I've got two me's rattling around in my skull, Perry! Both of whom shouldn't exist; first me should've ended 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...

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

He reached into his breast pocket with a 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 Dolars." And right there, staring somberly from it's face...

"Abraham Lincoln. I retired after that one; they forced it on me, told me unauthorized time-jumping was too much of a risk. 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! 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! I saved the world, so many times... and what thanks did I get?"

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

"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. He'd already admitted 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 \$5 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."

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. Er.

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

He pulled another rumped 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 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 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.

"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! 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 bomb's beep was the hammering heartbeat of a panicked man.

"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, almost seething, fists balled at his sides, Archive-Lincoln declared, "I believe I have run out of patience."

The beeping of the bomb had eclipsed the speed at which a human's heartbeat would cause the organ to explode.

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.

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

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

The timeline changes were now free to affect him outside of his protective sphere, and one of them was the restoration of his childhood, untampered with. This Jason Davis was the one who'd originally been hired.

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

Arnie waved his arms like a maniac, drawing multiple weapons pointed right at his chest.

"Bomb! There's a bomb! I don't know how to stop it!"

As he gestured at the small cylinder, one of the officers jogged forwards, pulling a triangular antenna attached to a misshapen box from the equipment pack at his back.

The beeping was so fast that it was almost a steady tone.

The officer dropped to his knees as he ran, sliding up to the bomb like a singer on a waxed floor giving a big finish. He slapped the box onto the cylinder.

"Emergency code 3!" He shouted over the din.

The bomb's tone became a rising whine that would crescendo in less than a second.

The antenna flashed, pulses running from its tips toward its center, as if draining light from the air around into the lumpy box.

The antenna, the box, and the bomb disappeared.

Arnie slumped in relief, offering no resistance as they swarmed him, cuffed him, and scanned his I.D., doing the same to Cox and Davis. He'd observed the police in action before, and knew code 3; emergency instant transfer of hazardous material to the date of the global flood.

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; at least one disbelieving time had struck out in an exploratory craft bound for 3.5 million years past, intent on proving the classical evolutionary account of history and, apparently, being lost into the oblivion that existed past the beginning of time.

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.

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.

Minutes later, his identity and actions confirmed (by a quick check into the future for the results of his police debriefing three days hence from his upcoming return to the present), 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.

Archive Lincoln was...

What the-...?

That idiot!

The thought was directed not at the President, who was now taking a stumbling step back, but at the enforcement officer he was speaking with. The bumbling moron had clearly identified from scans that Lincoln was one of the displaced parties relevant to this case, but not intuited *who he was*. As Arine ran up, the President stumbled away, looking distressed.

Arnie whirled on the officer.

"What did you show him?" He demanded.

The officer shrugged.

"Case brief, pertinent facts and figures; just finished compiling it. Want to view the corrected timeline?"

He held out the display pad, still paused on the last image it had displayed; the corrected timeline- a Presidential funeral.

Arnie snarled, his lip curling in disgust.

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

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.

Arnie scanned the brief, panicking at the thought of the Lincoln-less future he was apt to find; If Lincoln was no longer a part of the future this kid came from...

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

Slapping the brief back against the officer's chest one-handed as the kid's hands instinctively curled around it, Arnie stocked off towards the President, wondering who looked more dazed- Archive-Lincoln, 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 a 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.

"Well said, young man. And I know it... how many other men are given a vision of their legacy as certain as a classroom-book's account?"

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

As he strode off, 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. It was a rough fate, being forced out of a job due to being coerced into someone's pawn- but security (which would see some significant beefing up in the near future, clearly!) at the world's most secure location demanded it. It wasn't even this Davis that had committed the actions of the past day, but he would pay the price for his doppelganger's choices.

Alternate timelines were very unfair sometimes.

Still... he bent protocol with his employees all the time, didn't he? Warping the rules where people mattered more than procedure?

He looked at the dazed, downcast young man- clearly being filled in by police using a future brief on his actions- and smiled slowly. He approached the young man.

"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 won't remember a thing once he's re-integrated. If anything, it will seem like a daydream or an imagining to him, quickly dismissed."

Davis nodded, numbly.

Silence fell for a beat.

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

Davis grunted a distracted acknowledgement.

"...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'll need to be processed, re-integrated with himself- 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, I think I've 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.

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 lay, 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