



# AND SO IT GOES

**DERRICK HERBERT**

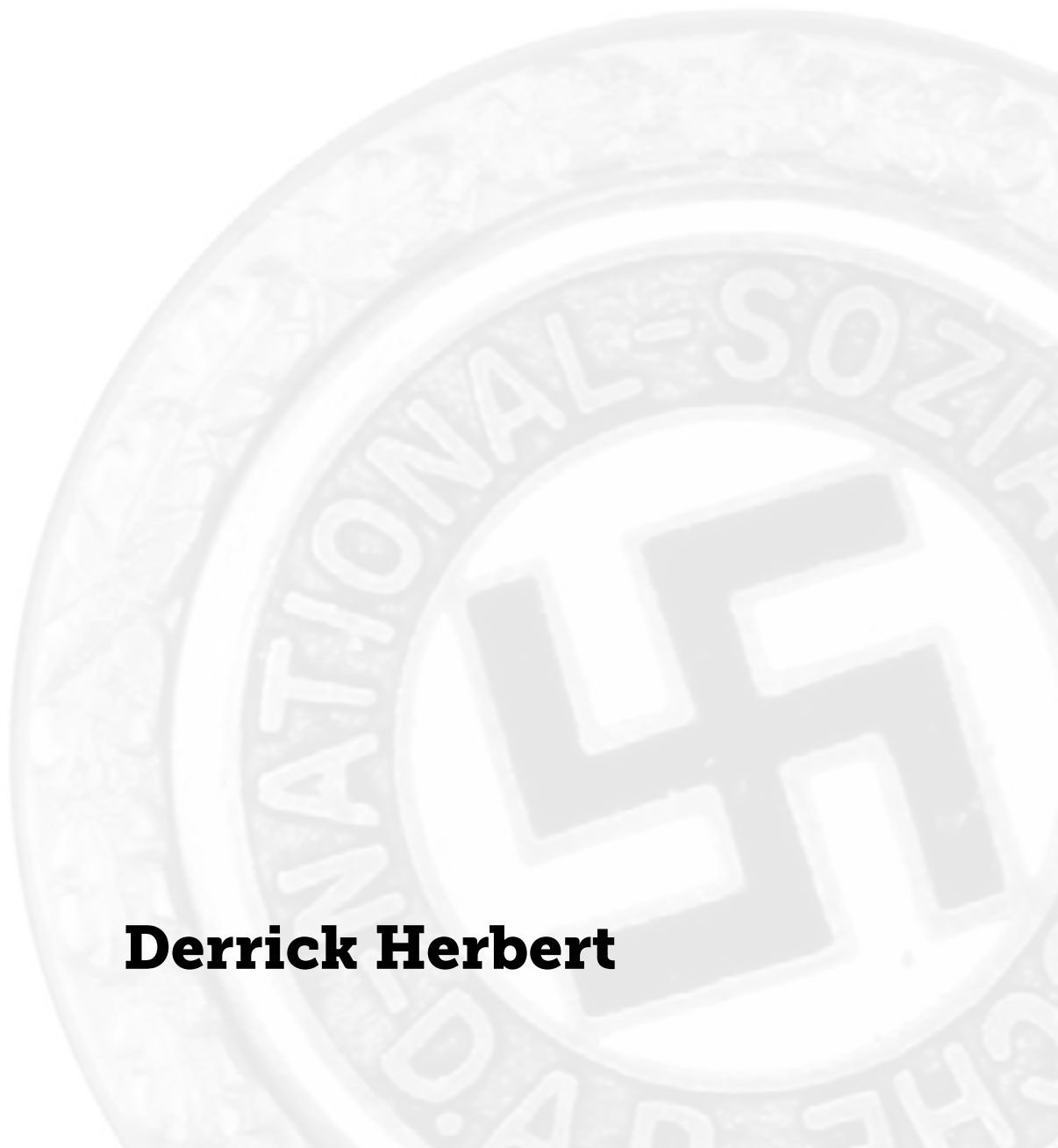
*A Katherine 'Kat' Marriott story*

a story of the Temporal defence corps

# AND SO IT GOES

A Temporal Defence Corps Story

**Derrick Herbert**



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## Broken

**TIME :** *TDC Mission Clock : -00hrs 09 mins 45 secs*

If you could imagine being ‘that’ aware. ‘That’ conscious of every single piece of stimuli that greeted you upon being drawn from the womb. It was just like being born. It was the only way that ‘Kat’ Marriott could describe the sensation of ‘touchdown’, the first few moments of arrival after jumping through time. The onslaught on her senses was shocking in its intensity. Just like being born —the need to scream was compelling. Only the proficiency of her training stopped her. Jennifer Tilman had once told her that it took exactly 1.624 seconds for the ‘Gravitational Time Dilation’ to collapse around her after ‘touchdown’. Jesus, but it felt like so much longer. Time could be a slippery beast!

Just as she had been taught, she stayed rooted to the spot. The first of her senses to be returned to her was that of touch. She could suddenly feel

the cold, hard floor beneath her. Pressing against the knee and ten fingertips that were in immediate contact with it, were what felt like smooth polished marbled tiles. Next was her sense of hearing. She flinched very slightly but otherwise remained still as the sound of tumultuous cheering and clapping assaulted her eardrums. Her sense of sight followed. Slowly at first but with a growing rapidity her vision snapped from grey muted nothingness, to bright amorphous shapelessness and finally crystal sharp clarity. Her senses of smell and taste returned last of all but initially had very little to do.

She waited a few seconds more to ensure herself that everything was as it should be, then looked around. She seemed to be right where Webster had said she would be. An unoccupied private box overlooking the main auditorium of the building. The weight of the Negative Energy Displacement rifle nestled comfortably against the length of her spine, grounding her like nothing else could. This, was not a sight-seeing excursion. She stood up in the shadows of the private box that overlooked the floor of the chamber, and moved to the side of the balcony, peering out and down.

The chamber below her was packed to overflowing with a huge thronging mass, who focused their full attention on the podium at the head of the room. The regalia of the National Socialist National Party was everywhere. Huge red, white and black banners were draped from every wall and the almost Roman Empiric eagles stood on tall Standards at its four corners. According to records there were just over three thousand people present, but from the sound that they were making it could well have been thirty thousand.

Kat ran a hand over the black Trimex body suit she was wearing. Slung over her shoulders were a pair of ribbed, Gallatex, multipocketed accessory belts which crossed over her front and her back. Inside one of the numerous pockets was a small pill-shaped capsule and inside of the tiny black box were two purple coloured contact lenses. She quickly lifted them from the

box and slipped them one at a time into place, blinking her eyes as she did, in order to properly seat them. She then lifted her left arm and thumbed a stud on the side of the ceramic bracelet she wore on her left wrist, powering up the chameleon suit. Almost instantly the optronics that were built into the body suit rendered her all but invisible. The newly updated software for the chameleon suit's adaptive camouflage system now meant that she wasn't limited to standing still or moving very slowly. Webster had promised her that even if she ran as fast as she could, nobody would be able to detect her with the naked eye.

The contact lenses she wore, were linked into the suits' Control and Active Countermeasures System. Amongst other things it allowed her to scan the area in various spectra. They also projected an Optical See-Through Display which presented the suits GUI in mid air just in front of her face. As the system booted, the TDC emblem was gradually replaced by the drop down menuing system that gave her access to all of the suits various functionality. Daniel was bound to be camouflaged as well — Farber would have paid for the very best without a doubt — and in the end it would come down to who's 'tech' was the more clever. Webster's, or Daniel's benefactor, Thomas Joshua Farber...who they now knew was a far more clever man than anybody had ever given him credit for. Just to be on the safe side, she selected and powered up the suit's strength enhancing exoskeleton. She had little intention of engaging Daniel hand to hand again, but you just never knew.

She gave the area a cursory sweep assuring herself that he hadn't yet arrived, then glanced at the countdown watch embedded in the right wrist of her suit. 7 minutes 46 seconds and counting. She swung the rifle off of her back and snapped the attached snipers' scope into position tightening the screw and locking it in place. She knelt at the balcony and lined the rifle up with the top end of the aisle that ran down the middle of the chamber.

Daniel was going to have to get close to do whatever it was he had planned and the end of the aisle was as close as he could get without actually going up onto the podium itself. She selected a few more options on the OSD being projected into mid air just beyond her. Dialling the volume up on the ear plugs she was wearing and simultaneously setting them to filter out the clapping, the cheering as well as any other noise that she or the multitude below her might make. It was an eerie sensation, a little disorienting at first, seeing all of the activity but not hearing the sound to go with it. She could though hear the noises being made by all of the insects and vermin which were scattered about the huge room. She smiled, peered through the telescopic sight and waited.

**PLACE:** Temporal Defence Corps. Einstein-Rosen Institute, Grand Haven, Lake Michigan, MI

**TIME :** *August 17, 2094 AD. 02:16.58 GMT — TDC Mission Clock : -44:36.16*

Kathryn stopped midway down the corridor and stared down its length at the brown tinted glass doors. Her armed escorts trailing by a few feet either side of her also stopped, but didn't query her action. In truth, she had almost forgotten that they were there. Her heart was pounding so hard she found she was having trouble concentrating. The resultant increase in blood flow around her head was causing a mild headache. She took a deep shuddering breath and started forward again.

She hadn't realised just how much returning to the base would affect her after nearly a year away. Jennifer Tilman's call had caught her indulging in some much needed exercise before bed. A lengthy Tai Chi Chuan session followed by a hot cup of Jasmine tea was the only thing she'd found that worked for her of late. The Tai Chi allowed her to relax and centre herself



and the tea calmed her just enough to be able to sleep soundly for a few hours before the dreams took hold and woke her up in a cold sweat again. Fifteen minutes after that call, an Air Force staff car with two Nevada State troopers on electrocycles screeched to a halt outside of her house, sirens blaring. The noise was certain to have awoken the entire neighbourhood if not the whole town. The drive from her parents old home in Austin to NAS Fallon had taken twenty minutes. Another ten minutes saw her suited and belted into the REOs seat of an F-42 WarShrike. It was without doubt the most expensive taxi she had ever been in. Flight time: forty-five minutes to the 110th Fighter Wing at ANGB Battle Creek, Michigan. The last leg of the journey upstate to Grand Haven took twenty five minutes by car — this one a Humvee VI detailed in USCG colours —although it was obvious her two escorts were either Army or Marines Special Forces.

At 2am in the morning, all of the tourists were long gone for the day, which was probably for the best. She would have drawn quite a bit of attention striding down the length of the Grand Haven pier dressed in the battle green flightsuit she had donned in Nevada. The entire trip — from almost one end of the country to the other, had taken less than ninety minutes and as exhilarating as it had been, it had left her somewhat ragged!

Two more armed guards stood to attention either side of the brown glass doors as she approached. One of them, moved forward to meet her, stopping her with an outstretched arm. Kat, lifted her ID pass over her head, and handed it to the guard. He looked at it, then looked at her.

“This is an old card,” he said matter-of-factly.

Kat looked up at him. “I’ve been away for a while,” she told him.

The guard lifted a card reader from the belt at his side. He slipped the card into the slot on the reader, and the reader emitted a single beep. He pulled the card back out of the reader and handed it back to her.

“Thanks, ‘Gunny’,” he said, looking past her to one of her escorts.



“No problem, ‘el-tee’,” the man to her left replied.

With that the two of them turned and walked away back down the corridor in the direction they had come. The guard holding the reader turned and walked back toward the doors. Kat followed. He motioned at the second guard who had remained at the doorway, twirling a finger around in mid-air. The second guard lifted an arm, speaking into the communit embedded in the wrist of his uniform. The sound of servo’s and motors powering up filled the air, as the brown tinted glass doors began to slide ponderously apart.

“I’ll see about getting you some new ID,” the young officer said to her.

“Thankyou, Lieutenant,” Kat replied.

She stopped at the threshold to the TDC Mission Centre and stared into the huge room. It was in semi-darkness, the majority of what little light there was coming from the main viewscreen. The viewscreen spanned pretty much the entire wall forward of where she was standing and was filled with thousands of horizontal criss-crossing and intersecting lines of different lengths and colours. A vertical line ran from the top of the screen to the bottom and was scrolling slowly from left to right as she stood watching.

“Welcome back, Major,” the Lieutenant said.

She looked around at him, but didn’t respond other than by giving him a very slight smile. She turned her attention back to the darkened room, trying to force herself to calm down as she started forward again.

There was an air of seeming chaos, with people running back and forth between various consoles and banks of equipment. On reflection she decided that it was more an atmosphere of hushed but focused urgency. As she stood there, scanning the room, all of the activity ground to a slow but noticeable halt. Within moments the room was in silence, and without exception, everybody was staring directly at her. She almost checked herself to make sure she wasn’t standing there naked! They were looking at her as if

she were quite the spectacle. It sent a shiver down her spine.

She finally made eye contact with Webster Cooke, the TDC's Head of Operations, watching as he leaned closer to the tech he had been talking to and telling the young woman something. The young woman glanced up at him and then turned in her seat to look briefly at her. Webster patted the woman gently on the shoulder and she turned her attention back to the console she was manning. Webster straightened up slowly, his eyes hadn't left her since he had first noticed her standing there.

He clapped his hands together loudly. "O.K everybody, back to work."

The room gradually whispered back to life and Kat turned to watch him as he crossed the room toward her. She had long ago honed her brain into sucking in details that would otherwise have gone unnoticed by utilising her peripheral vision to its fullest. So whilst watching his approach, she was simultaneously feeding her subconscious with what was going on just outside of her immediate field of vision. What her brain registered, left her with a deep sense of unease. She glanced up at him as he rolled to a stop in front of her.

"Welcome back, 'Kat'," he began by way of greeting.

"This looks serious?" she said simply, her eyes flashed briefly back to the viewscreen then flicked back to lock on Webster's pale green eyes.

"As a heart-attack," he replied. "You wouldn't believe what's been going on here the last two days. Even if you'd been here to see it yourself."

She glanced around at him. "That bad, eh?"

He nodded.

She turned her head looking back and up to her right at the three digital clocks that resided on the wall above the main entrance. The first showed the current time GMT. The second the elapsed mission time, it currently read 57 hrs 23 mins 16 seconds. The third was the Mission Countdown, and showed how much time the current mission had left

before it failed. It read 42 hrs 16 mins 52 secs and was counting backward.

“What gives?” she asked.

“Damned good question, Katherine,” was his response. “Believe me when I say, ‘It’s hit the fan’,” he glanced out across the darkened room, then looked around at her again. “They’re waiting for us,” he said, and with that started off across the control centre heading for the Secure Briefing Room.

Kat shook her head in dismay. Deep down inside she knew she wasn’t ready for whatever was going on here. Her last incursion into the time stream — her second, and only the fifth in the TDC’s short history at that point, relatively speaking — didn’t go well. It was perhaps fair to say that it had gone disastrously. She glanced up and found Webster standing some ten feet away, staring hard at her.

“You OK?” he asked.

“I suspect I’ll have to be” She started forward after him, adding, “I also suspect that I don’t really have a choice in the matter,” as she passed him.

Webster Cooke fell into step just behind her as they crossed the remainder of the room, fending off several requests for assistance from flustered looking members of his staff as they did.

The Temporal Defence Corps Secure Briefing Room was perhaps the only structure anywhere on the planet that could rightly claim to be just that. The complex’s cover and its siting had been so elaborately crafted that in the eight years of its operation, nobody who was not supposed to, had come anywhere near finding out about it. In an age where conspiracy theorists, professional journalists and an over-judicious Intelligence Oversight body had uncovered details about some of the government’s most clandestine operations, the TDC had remained inviolable. Helped only by the fact that four Presidents, excluding the most recent two, had in effect colluded to shield the construction and operation of The Corp from all but the most

trusted eyes. The number of people outside of the staff who ran the complex on a daily basis who knew of its existence remained resolutely at 26. The funny thing was that over 50,000 people a year, hundreds of people a day came within metres of the base entrance, but none of them were aware of what lay beneath their feet.

The Grand Haven Pier was one of the few remaining active lighthouse stations still under the control of the USCG. With the advent of general usage millimetre accurate, real-time kinematic GPS and the IDUP (Instantaneous Downloading and Updating Packet-Data) System, maritime navigation had evolved well beyond the point of anybody actually needing to see where they were going. At any one point in time, 99.8% of the planets coastlines were mapped and charted to within four milimetres. 97% of maritime navigation was completely automated, with only a small percentage of vintage, or racing sailships which still relied on the old-fashioned manual methods of navigation. The Grand Haven Lighthouse was still under the jurisdiction of the USCG and its primary purpose was supposedly historical and educational. The real reason that the USCG had been asked to maintain the station, was that through it, the NSA and through them, the TDC, could retain a very covert hand on the property that surrounded it.

There were in fact two lighthouses on the 1,151 foot pier. The Outer Light, which stood at the end of the pier itself was constructed of steel and had a recently renovated timber shell. The front of the building which faced out onto Lake Michigan had a solid concrete bulwark that was shaped like the prow of a ship, the better with which to stand up to the sometimes devastating waves which smashed against it. The primary function of the 'Outer Light' was that of a fog signal and within the geriatric but well kept timber building was contained all of the equipment that operated the iconic two-tone diaphone fog signal. The Inner Light was a more traditional

looking fifty-one foot tall, cylindrical prefabricated steel tower and was situated 600 ft back along the pier from the fog signal. The two buildings, being used in unison acted as 'range lights' and helped to guide approaching ships directly into the harbour. Both buildings had a gleaming new coat of 'Fire-Engine' red paint on them and stood out for miles around.

It was inside of the Fog Building that sat on the pier 1,151 feet out into Lake Michigan that there was a hidden accessway, that very few people knew about. It led to an elevator that descended 312 ft straight down through one of the pilings which supposedly held the pier in place. The piling didn't end at the lake bed though, it continued on down for another 600ft and the elevator hidden within it, opened into the Institutes forward holding bay. Feeding off from the holding bay was another long corridor, which ran a further two kilometres out under Lake Michigan itself into the complex proper.

Back on the surface, overlooking the pier itself, sat a two storey, thirteen room house which served as the Lighthouse Keepers quarters. It was home to one of only eight remaining active lighthouse keepers in the country. What was less known was that Keeper Richard MacNeal was actually an Lieutenant in the Navy SEALs. He was the TDC's first line of defence. He guarded 'Lighthouse Acre', the area of land immediately surrounding the pier, like a mother bear protected her cubs.

The Einstein-Rosen Institute itself was buried under several hundred trillion metric tonnes of water, an additional 300ft of silt and rock which had been layered with an energy refracting mesh which shielded the powerful energy signature caused by the Time Displacement Core from any satellite-based prying eyes. The 'Institute' was as secure as it was humanly possible to make it.

The Secure Briefing Room on top of all of those defences had additional defences of its own. A refracting scrambling mesh had been embedded into

the walls themselves. The rooms floors and walls were separated from the rest of the complex by two inch gap, which in turn was filled with a special hyper absorbent silicate compound that absorbed one hundred percent of the sound generated from within the room, making it all but impossible for someone to read and decode any sound vibrations that may emanate from the room.

Webster climbed the set of stairs which led up to the door of the room, ahead of Kat, pressing a code into the simple looking key panel alongside the door. The colour of the glass door faded from black to transparent and slid open. Webster entered and she followed. The door slid shut again immediately Kat entered, turning from clear to black. A loud beep announced that the room was once more in 'secure mode'.

Already inside were the 'active' half of the Institute Executive. The group of four men and women who had to agree before any possible incursion into the timestream could occur. The two Directors of the project itself; Dr.Jennifer Tilman and Brigadier General Peter Willis. Senator John Armstrong Marshall of the Senate Special Oversight Committee on Intelligence' was the only working member of the legislature who knew of the TDC's existence. Last but not least was a woman in her early fifties who Kat was unfamiliar with. Also present was Lt.Col. Michael Norton the projects Chief Medical Officer.

Kat glanced across at Willis, who noticeably didn't smile as he caught her eye. Out of all of those present, he seemed least pleased to see her she thought.

"Welcome back, 'Kat'," Jennifer Tilman said.

Kathryn smiled back at her. The mood in the room had gone way beyond sombre and she figured was rapidly approaching somewhere south of funereal. She crossed the room to the highly polished table and sat in one

of the vacant seats whilst Webster sat in another.

“Who’s dog died?” Kat began.

“It’s worse than that, Kat,” Jennifer replied. “A lot worse.”

Kat nodded and immediately stamped hard on the urge to try and lift the atmosphere. “OK, I’m beginning to see that.” The room remained in silence. Kat looked around at them all, then leaned forward onto the table. “Is somebody going to tell me what’s going on?”

Jennifer Tilman also leaned forward onto the table. “We have a Nine Point Gravitational Wave Perturbation coming at us,” she began matter-of-factly.

Kat slumped backward. “Nine?”

Jennifer nodded. “We got the ‘spike’ over two days ago. We locked down what we thought were all of the usual specifics, the date and the actual event — which in themselves were pretty horrifying —we then sent Steven Mao and SO1 on a minijump, to stop whoever had gone into the time-stream from making the initial jump backward,” she paused. “Whoever it was....seemed to know they would be coming and booby-trapped their exact arrival point,” Kat’s heartbeat jumped a dozen beats per minute as she heard that. She knew what was coming next. “They’re all dead,” Jennifer concluded.

“SO2?” Kat inquired.

“We retargetted for a second minijump, further back along the timeline, we thought we might be able to save Steven’s team in the bargain,” General Willis took up the story. “They got there OK, caught up with whoever it was that was planning to jump backward, but whoever it was, was damned good. Took out the entire squad single-handed-”

“Jesus!” Kat hissed.

“We’re down to one squad, SO3,” Willis continued, “and they have no team leader.”



“Excuse me?” Kat snarled.

“You might be wondering who the new face is,” everybody looked across at Chief Justice Anne Charters. “Captain James Collins, SO3 team leader, was escorting Chief Justice Callaghan ‘off-base’ for a TDC Executive briefing at Fort Meade. Somehow, and we can only assume it’s linked, someone hacked the Homeland Defence Network got control of one of the laser platforms and called down a strike against the helijet they were in. Blew ‘em out of the sky.”

Kat looked across at Justice Charters, who visibly shuddered. She also had been woken up just over two hours ago by the sound of a McDonnell Douglas HG-X4 landing on the lawn of her Connecticut retreat. The leader of the USArmy Delta Force unit that it had disgorged matter-of-factly informed her that she was being made subject to NSC Regulation 199. He handed her the thick buff envelope with the red ‘Eyes Only’ stripe across it’s front and told her she had 25 minutes to read its contents before they had to leave. As polite as the *young men* had been, they had all but bundled her into the helijet 30 minutes later, giving her little more time than it had taken to change into something a little more suitable for travel.

“Lubowitz?” Kat inquired.

“It has to be, nobody else has the kind of resources and information at their fingertips than he does. He knows us and our operating procedures inside out. I wouldn’t want to countenance the thought of it being anybody else to be quite honest, Kat.” Willis replied.

“So,” Kat sighed. “That leaves me, right?”

“You’re the only other person alive who’s made a jump, Kat,” Jennifer began. “SO3 haven’t even made a training jump. They need a leader.”

Kat shook her head in dismay, and leaned forward again, burying her face in her hands and shaking it. She could sense the look that must have been exchanged between Willis and Norton, but nobody said anything. It

was that bad, that they had come to her, supposedly 'damaged' as she was. That she was the last best hope they, everybody, had was bad news indeed.

"There's been some," Jennifer paused, as if searching for the right word. "Disagreement," she finally continued, "about whether we should even have brought you in," Jennifer told her. "But we don't have anyone left, Kat. It's you and SO3....or it's nothing....or it's Lt. Ashridge and SO3 which amounts to pretty much the same thing."

"How do you feel, Katherine?" Norton asked.

Just like a shrink, Kat thought. Norton was an 'ice-cold' sonnovabitch. Totally analytical and emotionless. Odd for a southerner. Stranger still for a Texan. She was sure it was he who had 'suggested' her extended leave of absence. It was he who was probably the source of the disagreement that Jennifer had hinted at. She leaned back in the chair lacing her fingers together behind her head. "What was the disagreement?" she asked. He didn't answer. None of the others did either. "I feel fine," she continued finally replying to his question. She stared straight at Norton as she said it. "But that's not what you really want to know. Is it?"

"No," Norton replied. "It's not. We don't need to how you feel while you're sitting here in this room, Major," Norton said.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't vouch for anything else," she responded.

"Well, at least you're admitting that much of it," Norton said. She noted the way that he looked around the room before turning his attention back to her. "What happened to you eighteen months ago, Major, has left you deeply scarred and traumatized. You do accept that?"

"Take me out back and shoot me now," she joked.

"Kat!" Willis admonished. "The concerns weren't his," he told her. "They were mine. He was the one who suggested we bring you in for this."

Kat turned slowly to stare at Norton, not quite believing that it was he who believed in her, and that nobody else did.

He shrugged. "Where I come from, Major," he began by way of explanation. "If somebody falls off a horse, we put 'em straight back in the saddle. Part of the brief I was given in selecting candidates for TDC, was to find individuals who were highly resilient and who thrived in high-pressure situations. You scored highly under both of those categories, you were 'off-the-charts' in some of them. The only one who even came close to you was Col. Thomas. You are without doubt the most talented soldier I've ever met in my twenty-two years in the Armed Forces, and that's no faint praise, believe me. If it had been up to me a year ago, you would never have been allowed to 'go home' and lick your wounds. I don't think it's done you any favours, Katherine."

Silence filled the room again for a good long while after that. Kat thought they could probably hear the thudding sound that her heart was making as it banged against her ribcage in its bid for freedom.

"Well, Kat?" Jennifer queried.

The room remained silent for what seemed an eternity before they broke eye-contact.

She took a deep breath. "What was the source event?"

Everybody in the room breathed a sigh of relief and the mood seemed to lift ever so slightly.

Jennifer Tilman slid a folder across the table to her. "We're calling this one, Project Ithaca - Mission 07."

Kat slapped a hand down on the table top, stopping the folder mid-slide and picked it up off of the table. Flicking the cover open and reading the first four lines. She looked up at Tilman and then across at Webster Cooke. "This is someone's idea of a bad joke, right?"

"I'm afraid not," Jennifer replied. "It makes sense for it to have caused the kind of disturbance to the time line that it has-"

"A Nine Point wave?" Kat queried. "What would be the result of us not

being able to stop this ‘at source?’”

“The honest answer is we don’t know, Kat,” Jennifer replied. She shook her head. “Theoretically it could destroy all semblance of life as we know it, clichéd as that may sound. Whatever was done hasn’t created a separate timeline. It has a very specific resonance to our timeline, we won’t know why until the computers have finished quantifying all of the Event Effects.”

“They haven’t done that yet?” she gasped.

Jennifer tapped at a few of the keys on the light keyboard set beneath the glass table top, and turned to face the large screen that flickered to life just behind her. The screen was displaying an exact duplicate of the main screen out in the mission centre. She pointed to the the counter in the bottom right of the display. The count (the number of Event Effects) continued to rapidly mount up, even as they watched. The current total was 610, 456,985.

“My God,” Kat whispered beneath her breath.

“Excuse me,” Justice Charters began. “I’m still playing ‘catch-up’ here. I knew Bill Callaghan had an interest in this place, he mentioned it enough times to me, but I honestly had no idea what the hell the Einstein-Rosen Institute did. Quite apart from the legality of this entire operation, which I have to say makes me somewhat uncomfortable,” she glanced at the five other faces in the room and Kat could see the awe and disbelief in hers. “All of this ‘Time Travel’ business has come as a bit of a shock. Can someone please tell me what the exact sequence of events here is.”

Jennifer nodded. She stood up and turned again to the screen that dominated the wall behind her. “I know you’ve been dropped in at the ‘deep-end’ here, Chief Justice Charters. Bill Callaghan had you nominated as his replacement should anything happen to him. This isn’t the way we would have wanted to do this, but...” she shrugged. “Anyway...this is basically a smaller duplicate of the board outside,” Anne Charters nodded.

“Just over fifty-eight hours ago, our central computer registered what we call a ‘Displacement Event’. That means someone, somewhere has gone back in time and caused a change in the timeline. That change is now rippling back at us, up through the timestream and will hit the present day, us here, in forty-two hours. Once the wave reaches us it will undoubtedly cause changes in the physical world around us. A one or two point wave, might cause dozens or hundreds of individuals to suddenly disappear and slightly change the world and history as we now know it.”

“We would be unaware of that right?” Justice Charters cut in.

Jennifer nodded. “Totally,” she replied. “A nine point wave is unheard of, but hypothetically it could have catastrophic effects on our present day existence. Moreso because as I’ve said whatever was done seems to have a specific relevance to our timeline.”

“Physics 101, says that’s not supposed to be possible...right?”

“No, it’s not. But right now, we’re playing catchup as well. Our problem lies in the fact that the man who was instrumental in perfecting all of the technology that we use here, went ‘rogue’ about two months after this complex was completed. He disappeared infact the night that we did our first successful test jump. We suspect, with a high degree of certainty, that Klaus Manfred Lubowitz sold his research notes and specs on to over two dozen individuals. What we don’t know is who those individuals are. We also know he held back some of his research notes and was paid enough by those two dozen or so individuals or groups to develop his own portable version of the time displacement equipment that we use here, something we’ve been unable to do ourselves. We know he’s out there in the timestream, doing what, only god knows. We also know he has his own agenda and at some point, we know we will have to deal with him.

Twenty four sets of research notes. We’ve had six machines turn up so far. This would be the seventh. There are possibly another seventeen out

there. Plus how many other third parties the notes have been passed onto. The technology was embargoed almost as soon as it became apparent that Lubowitz had gone AWOL. That technology can't be uninvented though and anyone with enough money at his or her disposal can build their own device in secret, with the results that we are now seeing."

"So what happens now?" Justice Charters asked.

"Our first step is usually to find out what the specific event that triggered this, was. We were able to do that five or so hours after we got the initial 'spike'. Once we have that information, we make an attempt to stop the person or persons from making the jump backward, and cut the Source Event off before it has a chance to happen."

"And how exactly do we do that. Whatever was done has already been done, right, otherwise we wouldn't have this 'wave' coming at us?"

"You catch on faster than I did," Senator Marshall joked. It was the first smile Kathryn had seen since leaving Nevada.

"Once the computers have locked down the Source Event they take into account that this event has occurred in a virtual sense, and then begin to project forward. To correlate what all of the potential possible results of the source event would be to our present day existence. Once the computer has correlated the results, the Executive discusses whether or not the Event Effects justify us making an attempt to go back and stop the Source Event. In the cases where the Effects are serious enough we feel we have a mandate to act to restore the timeline in whatever way we can.

"There you go again," Anne Charters shook her head. "Talking about Mandates. This operation, this entire....'thing' is a totally illegal-

"We're not funded by the Government, ma'am," Jennifer argued.

"No....you aren't now," Anne Charters argued back. "The initial funding for this entire operation came from the US Government's coffers. It was in effect 'stolen' money. You can't deny that Ms.Tilman."

“No, Ma’am, that’s not right,” Jennifer countered. “The Funds were granted to us by a Special Commission of the Oversight Body and of the National Security Council. The fact that the purpose of the money was hidden from the Legislature is not our problem. The President, as I understand it, has the right to do that in certain unspecified circumstances. This just happened to be one of them. The two Presidents that followed President Eaton, concurred and allowed our funding to continue....”

“Ms.Tilman,” Anne Charters began in reply, “I’m a Constitutional expert. Supposedly one of the best of our time. I can tell you without fear or favour. The President has no such power-”

“Anne, this discussion can wait,” General Willis cut in. “You surely have to see how important it is for TDC to remain hidden from the world at large?”

“I’m not stupid, Peter,” she snapped back. “But the fact of the matter is, I’m already in collusion with ‘you people’.”

“We’re not going to sit here and fight with you, Anne,” Willis replied calmly. “Bill Callaghan had exactly the same doubts that you do. He was able to put them aside because he could see what we were doing here needed to be done-”

“Damn Bill Callaghan for putting me in this position!” Anne Charters snapped angrily. She then sighed deeply and tried to compose herself. “But I trusted him. More than anybody else in the world. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to put aside my concerns though—” She shrugged.

“That’s up to you, Anne, but for right now a decision needs to be made and unfortunately, whether you like it or not, you’re now part of that decision-making process.” Willis leaned forward and fixed her with an unwavering stare. “If you want to go ‘public’ after this mission, you’re completely within your rights to do that.”

She scoffed. “You’d let me too, wouldn’t you?”



Kat, knew the accusation for what it was. So did everybody else in the room.

“That’s uncalled for, Anne,” Senator Marshall admonished her.

Anne Charters nodded and looked around the room at everybody as if to apologise. She sighed deeply again. “OK, Ms.Tilman,” she began. “You were saying—”

Jennifer looked around the room, unsure of what to do. Willis nodded for her to continue, so she did. “From the six missions we’ve so far had to undertake, we’ve found that there’s usually a definitive motive for someone going into the timestream. The incursions we’ve had to make so far, have all involved someone attempting to gain financially or politically. Once we have all of our effects, it’s a case of cross-checking to see who, if anybody stands to gain most from the changes that have occurred. We usually find our main suspect among that list. We then have to find and stop the person from going back and doing whatever it was they did.”

“That basically means,” General Willis began, “Major Marriott and her unit do what we call a mini-jump; back to the point just before whoever has gone back in time originally made their jump backward and they stop that individual from doing so. They have to do that before the wave hits us of course, otherwise they in all likelihood will get stuck on a parallel timeline and we still get destroyed.”

“And we have forty hours to do all of that?” Justice Charters asked incredulously.

“Forty two hours seven minutes fifty eight seconds and counting to be exact,” the General corrected her with a quick glance at the mission clock above the screen.

“It’s possible, right?” she asked hopefully. Nobody replied. “Please somebody. Tell me it’s possible!”

“Well, yes it’s possible, Ma’am. But let me put this in perspective for

you,” Jennifer began. “Our last incursion — an alert where it was deemed necessary for someone to go back in time and stop whatever had happened was just over a year ago. The cause event was in 2092 a mere two years into the past, it was a three point wave — we had eight days to figure out what had happened and rectify it. The mission, almost failed, and we lost the SO1 team leader, Colonel Daniel Thomas during that mission. This time around, things are much, much more complicated. ”

Anne Charters, sank back into her chair, and sighed loudly. Shaking her head in what seemed to be utter dismay.

**TIME :** *TDC Mission Clock: -00hrs 16 mins 18 secs*

“Jeez, this does not look good,” Webster Cooke craned his neck to look back and up at the three men and two women standing behind him. “Her Heart Rate is up to 180 a minute, and her EEG is going crazy.”

“Her blood pressure keeps spiking. It’s dangerously high,” the tech sitting alongside him put in.

“I think that has to be expected, considering what happened the last time she came into contact with this contraption of yours Webster.” Colonel Norton’s choice of words drew a somewhat distressed look from Cooke and the dozen or so technicians who worked ‘The Core’. “She’s reliving it and quite frankly that’s as normal as you can get,” he explained.

Webster leaned forward, flicking a switch on the two-way com system. “Kat you’re going to have to try and calm down. Your vitals are going off the scale!”

They could all hear her breathing rapidly and very shallowly over the speaker system, but she seemed not to hear his request. She certainly didn’t react in any noticeable way. Webster shook his head, glancing at the man to his side, then at the bank of instrumentation on the console before him.

“Shall I cancel the jump sequence, Sir,” the tech sitting alongside him asked.

Webster looked around at Willis, who in turn looked across at Jennifer Tilman. She shook her head ever so slightly in answer to his unasked question. Webster noted the look that passed between them and turned to reface the bank of instrumentation in front of him before Willis replied to the question. “No,” he told the tech.

Colonel Norton leaned forward squeezing Webster's right shoulder comfortingly. “Give her a minute, Webster.”

General Willis looked up at the mission clock and sighed audibly. They didn't have a minute!

Webster turned his attention back to the viewscreen and the black clad figure standing inanimately in the centre of it. The figure of a woman was silhouetted completely by what could only be described as a mini sun. It was about four metres in diameter and sat directly over the gaping black maw that decorated the floor of the huge chamber.

Kat knew that time was running out. Whatever she tried to do though, her heart just would not stop racing. She was scared stiff —plain and simple. At her feet, one metre forward of where she stood was one of eight targetting discs. It was painted red, and was edged with a strip of somekind that pulsed with a soft white light.

Three and a half feet above and just forward of the targetting disc, hovering in mid air, was the Time Dilation. It looked to all intents and purposes like a tennis ball sized transparent glass sphere. It could have been solid, it was in fact liquid. That little detail only being given away by the fact, that if you looked closely enough, tiny waves and ripples could be seen gliding across its surface. The clear liquid was a ball of Quark Gluon Plasma (QGP). Four meters beyond the time dilation, was the focus of all

of her attention....the Time Displacement Core itself.

She stood staring blankly into the roiling, turbulent surface of the huge ball of energy. The Core was an even larger sphere of QGP that was spinning slowly in mid air. Like its smaller counterpart its surface was in constant motion. Ripples of light, waves and eddies of energy oscillating across its otherwise transparent surface. It thrummed loudly every so often, and when it did, the smaller sphere expanded and contracted as if taking a deep breath.

How exactly it all worked, she had never quite managed to get her head fully around. Webster Cooke had spent a day and a half with her on the subject at one point, but even now she still didn't really understand. The only thing she had taken away from that day and a half had been a dull headache that returned whenever she tried to fathom his explanation out.

As Webster explained it, the base was surrounded by a twelve kilometre doughnut ring. The Heavy Ion Collider (HIC). The HIC was used to split particles called Quarks and Gluons out of atoms of gold. The Quarks and Gluons were then harvested; something previously (and to most, still) thought physically impossible. The Quarks and Gluons were then combined to form a substance called Quark Gluon Plasma.

The Institute also boasted an array of six linked Quantum computers. Quantum computer technology was still a generation or so away for the rest of the world — but that was another story! Webster had said their six mainframes were the equivalent to having half a million Cray P9000's linked together in array. Again, that was something which she had to accept at face value. She didn't really understand just how much raw number-crunching power the latest generation of Cray Research Machines had. So contemplating half a million of them linked together was akin to trying to conceptualize the number of stars in the universe.

The Institutes computers though, could map an individual down

to the last gene and then digitize that information in the fraction of an instant. That digitized information was then attached to a single QGP molecule, and that molecule was then targeted at a specific point in the space timeline. It was the Displacement Core's job to accelerate the encoded QGP molecule up to and well beyond the speed of light, allowing it to move freely backward and forward through time in either direction. The trick, as Webster called it, was accurately pinpointing the instant in time that you wanted to travel to and indeed that had been the breakthrough which made the whole thing possible.

The time traveller wore a ceramic bracelet, that contained two things. The aforementioned single encoded molecule of QGP, and a mini quantum computer whose main function was to hold the digitized data that was the traveller. Once the individual arrived at the specific point in time, the QGP dissipated and the bracelet that the person wore redigitized them. The whole process took less than two seconds.

It was the ceramic bracelet that she was wearing on her left wrist that was causing Kat to worry. During her last foray into the timestream, the bracelet she wore had unbeknownst to her been damaged by an explosion that she had been caught up in. The fissure that had been created across its surface, was finer than could be seen with the naked eye. It had been enough though, to almost leave her stranded within the timestream on her return jump. Daniel Thomas, her partner during the mission hadn't been so lucky. *Or so she had thought.*

## Reunion

She looked down at the bracelet again, turning it around and around on her wrist as if trying to see something that in all likelihood she wouldn't be able to see, even if it had been there.

"Kat," General Willis' voice echoed in the silent chamber.

She looked back and around up at the one of the cameras spotted around the chamber, then up at the mission clock again. 10 minutes and 36 seconds remaining. Hell! she told herself. If she didn't go, she and fully one-sixth of the people alive on the planet right now, wouldn't be, in just under eleven minutes. As she had accurately predicted to Webster on arriving at the base, she didn't really have a choice. She took two deep breaths, calling on some of the T'ai Chi breathing excersises that she had learned over the last year, retaking control of her body piece by piece. When she finally felt a sense of calm take hold of her again, she lifted her head to reface the Time Dilation, focusing her attention fully, on the globe of liquid, taking in its

perfection, its calming, serene-looking pacific blue sheen. Now, she told herself. Now was the time. She stepped forward onto the targetting disc and knelt on one knee. She lifted her arm and without looking thumbed the 'Activate' stud on the surface of the bracelet. She dropped both hands back to her sides, as the Dilation shuddered, a more obvious ripple running across its surface. There was an instant where everything seemed to stop and then the Time Dilation leapt toward her. It attached itself to and surrounded the bracelet, then stretched to completely envelop her. The colour of the Displacement Core, changed from bright white to red, and sucked the dilation and her into its voracious depths.

**TIME** : *TDC Mission Clock : -39:23.04*

Kathryn was in the middle of briefing Special Operations Unit 3, the seven men and women that would be working with her on the mission, when one of the techs from the Mission Centre rushed into the room.

"You've got to come!!" he shouted frantically. "You've gotta come now!" he turned and was gone again even before the last words had left his mouth.

They all looked at each other for half a beat, before leaping from their seats, almost in unison, rushing out into the corridor and down it toward the Mission Centre. Everybody present was standing in silence and staring up at the huge screen as the Institute computers crunched the last of the data. A large bright strobing red dot filled the screen as the computers finally stopped scrolling back along the timeline. They had completed the list of 'Event Effects'. The red dot stopped strobing, was highlighted and pulled to the right hand side of the screen. A major time paradox. The name of one man, appeared below the red dot.

"Oh my god!" Jennifer whispered.

The name of the person the computer had identified was lost on



nobody present in the room. Klaus Manfred Lubowitz. The man who had first proved that time travel was technically possible. If one of the 'Event Effects' of the 'Cause Event' was that he would cease to exist. How then could they be here...now!

The briefing room overlooking the main floor of the project was silent, as the five members of Project Executive sat waiting for the two technical members of the group. Jennifer Tilman and Webster Cooke were busily narrowing leads down and trying to formulate a way forward from the mess that they now found themselves in. The potential death of Lubowitz had a devastating correlative effect on the timeline. It was the reason that the GWP had a specific relevance to their timeline. Of that there was little doubt. It also consigned their theory that Lubowitz had a hand in whatever was going on this time around to the dustbin. He was far too clever an operator for any of what he did to have the effect that he himself would cease to exist!

The one constant that they had found, was that people usually dabbled in the timestream in an attempt to benefit themselves. Therefore after an event it was usually not that difficult to see which individual or group of individuals would benefit from the changes that occurred. There had only been six operations since the group's inception. With all six, it had been relatively easy to track the perpetrator down and stop him or her from going backward and interfering. On this occasion there were so many potential beneficiaries that it was damned near impossible to see the 'wheat for the chaff'.

The door to the right of the meeting table slid open and the two doctor's walked in. Neither of them looking particularly happy.

"I hope you two are gonna give us some hope," Senator Marshall muttered.

"Some, perhaps," Webster Cooke replied "But it's a long shot," he added.

“Go on,” Willis said.

“We’ve had to look at this in a slightly unconventional manner,” Jennifer Tilman began. “There’s no way we’re gonna be able to track a single or a group of individuals through all of that,” She gestured at the screen behind them with a nod of her head. “In the time remaining to us. So we decided to look at the possibility of tracking down the machine itself.” This caused everybody in the room to sit up interestedly. It was indeed an unconventional approach. Locating the time machine was usually a secondary consideration because it was usually not that difficult to track down once they knew who its user was. She was advocating making it the primary mission. “There are two things we can attempt to track. One; technology that we ‘know’ is specific to time travel. Two; the energy source. You need lots of energy to make these things work. That kind of energy you just can’t draw from the International Power Grid. You have to have a generator capable of supplying at least 30 GeV. In order to create a stable Time Dilation you also need lots of QGP, enough of it to surround whatever it is you’re sending through time. In this case. A human. To get the QGP you need even more of the source material. Usually Gold or Cobalt. We may be able to track any unusual movements on the World Metals Exchange.”

“How long will all of that take?” Justice Charters asked.

“Two to three hours at the quickest,” Webster replied. “We might not be able to find anything. You have to realise, someone has planned this down to the last detail. The degree of planning needed for something like this is phenomenal. Whoever has done this, is not going to make tracking them down, easy.”

“Three hours,” Willis muttered. He glanced up at the mission clock which was currently at -38:59.04 and counting. “We’re eating into our mission time.”

“This is all we have, General. It’s this or nothing.” Webster put in.

“Well, when you put it like that Webster,” Willis began with a half smile. “Get going.”

The young man nodded and span on his heels, disappearing back out into the main control room. A group of techs and operators were standing just beyond the stairway and he got them all moving with a single nod of his head.

“Get your team prepped and ready, Kat,” Jennifer said. “The breakthrough, if it comes is going to come at very short notice. Your gonna have to hustle.”

“That much is obvious,” Kat replied with a smile.

She climbed out of the seat and headed back toward the doorway. She stopped once she was outside of the Secure Room looking at everybody rushing around. It was then that she realised again, just how much she missed Daniel. He had a presence about him that people found calming. If he was here, he’d probably be walking around the room. A word of encouragement here, a joke or two there. It often made a difference to the way someone worked when they were under pressure.

She started forward across the room, stopping alongside the first desk of instrumentation she came to.

“Hey, Melissa,” she began.

The young woman seated there, looked up at her and forced a smile. “Hey, Kat,” she pursed her lips. “I’m glad you’re here—”

Kat smiled at that. “What’s Webster got you doing?”

**TIME** : *TDC Mission Clock : -17:44.26*

“He’s heading for the bridge, General!” Kat yelled, hoping the throat mike of the wireless headset she was wearing would allow her to be heard above the whine of jet engines. She braced herself in the opened doorway of the CAH-8 Assault Helijet as the pilot jinked wildly to avoid a civil

communications pylon.

The chase had lasted seven minutes so far and she was pretty sure it was about to come to an end. It had started out at the Worldwide Headquarters of the SynGex Corporation in Palo Alto and had raced up US State Highway 101. They were heading toward the Golden Gate Bridge with the undeviating quality of a perfectly shot arrow. The problem was, she didn't know where were they going to end up.

Jennifer and Webster had indeed traced an unusual purchase of Cobalt-163, tracked it through over two dozen blind subsidiaries and corporations to its eventual destination. SynGex was owned and run by the world's first dollar trillionaire, the reclusive and enigmatic Thomas Joshua Farber. SO-3 had raided the SynGex building along with a hundred and fifty FBI agents and over fifty US Marshalls and had dumped the entire contents of SynGex's mainframe onto a portable Quantum disk, which was then uplinked back to the Institute.

"Why the hell would the target be doing that," Willis argued. "SynGex have nothing north of the bridge. All of their operations in California are in the south!"

"General," Kat responded. "I can see the bridge coming up, and whoever this is, they're heading straight for it," she told him. "SynGex must own something across the bridge, they must!"

"Hang on, Kat," Willis said, "Websters running a trawl on the Quantum Disk you uploaded to us-"

"Does it matter if they do or don't!" Kat yelled down the pick-up. "If we knock the bridge out, we cut him off on this side of it!"

"Kat their's no way we can authorise a Defence Platform strike against the Golden Gate Bridge. Now hang on!" he bellowed back at her.

"Shit!" Kat exclaimed. There was only one thing left now. She flicked her mike to the 'on' position. "Captain Jackson!" she yelled at the pilot. "Get

me lower!”

The pilot glanced back at her as if she were insane. They were at 80ft as it was, and he was having trouble keeping control of the helijet in the wake of the mad twists and turns that the electrocycle they were following was taking. The thing had obviously been programmed to take the rider to a specific destination. Nobody had reflexes that good! The electrocycle had left a swathe of debris in its wake and there was a steady stream of red and blue lights spread out back along US-101, as more and more law enforcement pursuit vehicles joined the chase, and were left behind. The electrocycle also had, they assumed, some kind of powerful active countermeasures that were jamming the weapons system on the gunship. It had proven impossible for the pilot to get any kind of weapons lock on it. Whoever was riding the cycle seemed to have foreknowledge of everything that was going to happen. Considering where the chase had started. That was an entirely credible conclusion to draw.

“Kat,” it was Willis.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied.

“Webster’s found something. SynGex maintain a small back-up communications sub-station in Mill Valley. That’s got to be it. It’s the only thing north of the bridge they have any connection with! Webster’s uploading the co-ordinates to the Viper you’re in, now. We’re co-ordinating with the FBI and Mill Valley PD, they should have some people on site there inside of ten minutes.”

The next voice she heard was Websters. “Kat, the substation has major security procedures, but I’ve hacked the SynGex database and mocked you up an ID. The Institute ID tags you’re wearing should get you past all of the security in the building-”

“Major,” Capt Jackson, cut into the conversation. “the target’s just put on a major burst of speed. The bike’s up to three hundred and ten mph.”

He knows we know where he's going. She told herself. "Christ!" Kat hissed. "Sir, we have to take the bridge out!" she repeated.

"The Executive won't authorise that, Major!" Willis told her again.

"If this guy gets away, we'll be in it so deep—"

"We all know what's at stake here, Kat. Just make sure he doesn't."

And with that Willis broke the link.

"You getting those co-ordinates, Cappy!" she asked.

"Coming through now, Major," he replied.

"By Jesus, Man," she told him. "If you love your wife and kids, and want to wake up to see them again in the morning, you do everything you can to get there ahead of this jerk, whoever it is," she told him.

"What the hell is this all about, Major?"

"We don't have time for goddamn questions, Captain. This time tomorrow none of us will be alive if we don't stop whoever the hell that is!"

He glared hard at her, as if to ascertain her level of sanity. The steel grey of her eyes, must have told him she was deadly serious. He finally nodded. Kat abandoned the highly dubious plan she had been about to adopt and stood up, slamming the door shut in the side of the helijet, as it rose rapidly and steeply away from the bridge that was looming at them out of the distance.

Five minutes later and the helijet slowed to a hover. The electrocycle had screamed down the two Northbound lanes of the Golden Gate Bridge, its backwash causing untold chaos and was over in Marin County inside of a minute. The Viper managed to keep up with it, but not much more than that, reaching the sub-station ten seconds or so after the rider had left the bike and dashed into the building. Kat, was already at the door of the Viper as the helijet dropped rapidly toward the ground. She leapt the last twenty feet from the helijet, bending her knees as she hit the grey asphalt, rolling

and coming to her feet again all in one smooth action.

People in the street started running for cover. From what, they didn't know. But the sight of the heavily armed military assault helijet dropping rapidly into the middle of the street was more than a little cause for concern. She could hear dozens of sirens as she darted for the doorway, and the first of half a dozen black suburban's with Government plates screeched to a stop in the middle of the street as she reached it. She didn't spare the twenty or so heavily armed men from the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team a second thought as she rushed at the tinted doorway. The codes that Webster had transferred to her tags worked first time, and the door slid open as she approached it, sliding shut again after her.

The rider of the electrocycle was frantically thumbing the CALL button on the elevator at the end of the corridor and turned to glance over his shoulder as she sprinted down the length of the corridor toward him.

A loud ping, sounded the arrival of the elevator and the man span around into the elevator hitting a button on the panel inside. Kat let out a rasping scream that resonated in her throat, and leapt at him, just clearing the doors as they slid shut. She slammed her shoulder into the man's midriff. The metal walls of the elevator resounded with the force of two bodies hitting it. The man grunted loudly through the full-head helmet he wore, but still managed to spin her around bringing a knee up into her midriff as he bounced her off of one of the walls. Instinctively, she slapped a fist away as it shot toward her face, yanking her head backward at the same time. She span around him again, swinging her left elbow back toward his head. The strike knocked him askance, but a flare of hot pain lanced up her arm as she connected with the helmet he was still wearing. Damn! She was going to have to get the helmet off of his head. As it was, he had a distinct advantage in height and weight over her and the suit he was wearing obviously had some strength enhancing abilities.



Another loud ping announced the arrival of the elevator at its destination and it was as the doors parted that he thrust a palm at her chest. The blow connected heavily and she flew backward down the corridor immediately outside the elevator. Kat landed hard on her back, the wind all but knocked out of her. The man rushed toward her, swinging a kick at her. Kat flipped from her back up onto the balls of her feet and backflipped out of the path of what would have been a deadly kick, yanking her gun from the holster velcro'd to the back of her belt she pumped a full magazine of 9.5mm slugs at him. The suit he was wearing protected him against the damage the bullets would have otherwise done, but not the impact of them and he was knocked flat to the ground.

Kat groaned, and grasped her chest where he had hit her. The pain was excruciating and she figured he must have broken a few of her ribs. It was suddenly hard to breathe and she told herself that something must be pressing into one or both of her lungs. She fell to one knee, propping herself up with the muzzle of the Colt. She could see him approaching, but for the life of her could do nothing about it. The man grasped ahold of her face in one hand tilting it up so that she was looking straight into the silver mirrored visor of the helmet. All she could see was her own face. It was contorted in sheer agony. He changed his grip so that his hand was around her throat and plucked her from the ground as if she weighed nothing.

The elevator sounded its arrival again and this time half a dozen of the FBI's HRT guys poured out of it and into the corridor. The man holding Kat, span around so that her back was toward them, effectively shielding himself with her body.

She heard one of them shout. "Hold your fire!" he was obviously talking to his own men. The next was directed to the rider. "Whoever you are you can't get out of here, so put her down!"

With her last ounce of strength, Kat reached down, and wrenched

the man's helmet free, knowing she must have almost torn the guy's head off in the process of doing so. What she saw took what remaining breath she had clean away and her mouth dropped open aghast. The man glaring back at her was Daniel Thomas. The first human being ever to travel through time, thought to have been killed on a mission less than a year ago. The man she had been engaged to marry.

“Kat,” he said simply.

He span and tossed her down the length of the corridor. Kat let her body go limp and screamed out again in pain, as she crashed into the group of FBI agents standing at the elevator. They hurriedly tried to untangle themselves and the first of them to his feet, bolted down the corridor after Daniel, who had disappeared into one of the rooms that ran off from the corridor. The agent, brought his weapon up from his side as he kicked the door open and that's when the explosion occurred. Kat watched helplessly as two of the FBI agents were sucked away into nothingness by a time dilation gone wild. They simply vanished into thin air and then a booming roar rushed out of the room and down the corridor. Kat turned her face away from the source of the explosion as flames rushed at her. Then, everything went black.

## Choices

**TIME** : *TDC Mission Clock : -14:07.36*

“I need to go!” Kat almost screamed at General Willis.

“What you need is of absolutely zero consequence to me, Major!” Willis shouted. “You had him in your grasp and you let him go for Christ’s sake!”

“Sir-” Kat winced as the strapping across her chest cinched tight for a second. Daniel had indeed broken four ribs across the front of her chest, one of the jagged ends had been resting perilously against the side of her left lung when the medic at the institute had first examined her. She had been damned lucky that it had not punctured the lung itself. She also had a nice hand shaped bruise dead centre in her chest. A memento from her lover returned from the dead. She didn’t feel very lucky. She had been preparing her defence for the last two hours, but didn’t even get the chance to utilise it. “I told you we had to take the bridge out-”

“You had your chance!” Willis thundered. Everybody turned to look. “You’re too compromised, Kat,”

“I know Daniel better than anyone else alive,” she argued.

“You’re out, Kat,” Willis turned to glare at her. “That’s the last I want to hear about it, Major!” he bellowed.

“It’s not that simple, General,” Webster Cooke interjected.

“We all agreed Kat was going. All of the equipment has been calibrated for her. It will take us another twelve hours to recalibrate. As it is it’s going to take us another ten hours or so until we have final co-ordinates for a jump. If you change now there’s absolutely no ‘squeeze time’. Ashridge is a first-timer. This is too tight a deadline, for a first-timer. If something goes wrong-”

“God Damn it!” Willis exploded.

Jennifer Tilman sighed deeply. “We’re wasting time, Peter. Time that *even we* don’t have.” She turned to look at Kat. “Go get prepped,”

Kat looked from Tilman, to the General. He didn’t even turn to look at her he was that angry. She saluted anyway and turned, sprinting away across the main control room out through the doorway and down the corridor leading away from the Mission Centre.

**TIME** : *TDC Mission Clock : -00:10.45*

A rapid bleeping in her headset, informed her that a time dilation was collapsing somewhere near her. Certainly within a one hundred metre radius. He was here. She swept her eyes around the room rapidly, and finally located him to the back of the room on the main floor of the auditorium. Now it was a matter of whether her chameleon suit’s capabilities were better or the same as his. She could clearly see him in the infra-red spectrum so that meant that his suits capabilities were no better than hers at the most.

He stood still for a minute or two. Her suits sensors registered the multi-spectrum sweep as his suit's countermeasures interrogated the area. He had to know that they were on to him and that there was a very good possibility that they had narrowed the location down to this place and time. He started to move forward down the centre of the aisle separating the two halves of the auditorium. The crowd was on its feet and in a frenzy as they waited for the main speaker to take the podium. She sighted down the rifle scope and tracked him down the aisle as he went. She locked in on his bracelet and with a glance at one of the options on the OSD, selected the smart projectile setting for the rifle.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Kat instinctively pulled the trigger on the rifle, and instantly halted the projectile in mid-air. The bullet itself was basically a miniature self-target acquiring missile. Once it had locked onto that target, the bullet would seek it out, even to the extent of following it around corners and over any obstacle that got in its path. Right now, it was hovering in mid air, just beyond the muzzle of the Negative Energy Rifle and would do so until its reserve of propellant was used up, until she released it, or until she ordered a self-destruct. With that, her head snapped around at the sound of the voice that had come out of the darkness behind her. Her right arm snatched the Colt from its holster at her hip and swept around and up locking on the man who couldn't possibly be anywhere near her. For the second time in just over twelve hours, Kat found herself staring up into the face of the last person in the world she expected to see. The gaunt-looking, bald headed man, who looked to be in his middle forties, smiled briefly at the look of utter confoundment that plastered her face. Klaus Manfred Lubowitz was indeed the last person she expected to see.

Kat's head snapped back down to the floor of the chamber. Daniel was continuing to move slowly down the aisle. He was lifting a handgun

from his side as he did. She cursed loudly.

“If you want to destroy your timeline, you go right ahead and release that projectile,” Lubowitz said.

She stopped short. The option on the drop down menu, highlighted but not selected.

“What are you playing at here, Lubowitz?” she asked.

“I’m not playing at all, Major,” was his reply. “As I have it, you’ve got six and a half minutes left before the time catches up with you — am I right?”

The mission clock was in the lower right hand corner of the OSD. She did indeed have six and a half minutes.”So what if I do?”

“Give me two minutes of that,” he said simply.

She didn’t know why she hadn’t pulled the trigger already. This man had caused more chaos and anarchy than any other man in the history of the planet. The jury was still out on what the future held for them all, regarding his recent actions. When she didn’t answer he continued.

“You’re wrong about what you think is happening here, Major—”

“Crap!” Kat snapped back at him.

“If you release that projectile, you will cause the very thing you are here to prevent,” he explained.

The short, black haired man finally came to the podium, and stood, drinking in the frenzied atmosphere that pervaded the ‘Kulturveinhaus’. Daniel stopped at the end of the aisle. She could see him releasing the safety on the side of the weapon he held.

“Look at the podium, Major,” Lubowitz requested. “The man you think is the target is now centre stage. Just take a few seconds to look at the man seated to the left of him. Four seats to the left.

Kat didn’t know why she was doing what she was doing, but she followed his instructions. Swinging the scope on the rifle to the left, past the short, black haired man with the ice cold blue eyes, two....three....four seats

to the left. The man standing on his feet, clapping as effusively as everyone else around him was somehow familiar. She couldn't quite place the face, though. With a sudden snap of focus, the man's face clarified and she knew who she was looking at. What in the name of Good God was going on here!

"Yeah, that's right," Lubowitz said. "You know who it is don't you?"

"Farber," she hissed.

"You have no idea what's happening here, Katherine. The paradox that has everybody in such a flap back at the Institute," he continued conversationally. "You're the cause of it!"

Her head snapped around at him again. "What?"

"Daniel's here to take Farber out," Lubowitz explained. "He was never ever supposed to have gotten his hands on my technology, but rich men can and do tend to get there way in most things eventually. I intend to make sure he doesn't get to complete his ascendancy.

You see, there are two ways for this to go. In the first, you believe what I am about to tell you, you don't release the hold on the projectile, Daniel shoots Farber with a tranq pellet that contains a modified gene-specific poison — of which more in a few moments — and we all live to fight again another day. In the second scenario you do release the safety's on that dart. It doesn't strike where it's supposed to though. A man in the auditorium stands up and salutes the madman on the dais. The man in the auditorium is wearing an unusual bracelet on his left wrist. It has an extremely rare Methistone mounted in the bracelet. Your projectile flies past his wrist by millimetres, but the electromagnetic energy being given out by the stone, crashes the projectile's internal computer. It takes less than two milliseconds to reboot, but those two milliseconds are enough for it not to be able to correct it's trajectory. The projectile strikes Daniel on the shoulder instead of his ceramic call bracelet. Daniel's shot misses Farber, and hits the madman.

Remember I said the pellet contained a gene-specific poison. The poison would have killed Farber deadlier than a dormouse inside of thirty-six hours. It takes a lot longer to kill the madman. It does help tip a man who is already, undoubtedly, a certifiable lunatic over the edge into complete mania before the end of the War to come. Farber sees what's happening before long, and just stands back and waits for nature to take its course. He then steps in and takes control. A young German rocket scientist who is supposed to be repatriated by the OSS's Project Paperclip eighteen years from now....never ends up in America. The woman he was supposed to meet....my grandmother, he never meets. I....as a consequence am never born. The Time Displacement Core is never created, we can never be here. There you have your paradox."

Kat shook her head in disbelief. "I don't believe you." The mission clock was down to 2 minutes and change.

"Go ahead, Major," Lubowitz said calmly. "Release your projectile. But before you do, shall I tell you how this all ends, in the second scenario?" Kat's throat had locked up by this point. Instead of croaking a response, she decided to say nothing. He continued. "Farber is here for precisely the reason I outlined for you just now. In that scenario you do his work for him. He guides the madman to victory. His skill with electronics and computers putting them far in advance of anything that the British, French or Americans can muster. The war lasts a year and a half instead of four. After they've crushed every army that comes up against them, they turn on their allies the Italians, and then the Japanese. In March 1943 the Nazi's are in complete control of every single human being on the planet. They then set about, exterminating every Jew on the planet, then they turn their attentions to Africa and the Caribbean. A year after that, the Madman's most trusted aide de camp Joshua Farber, watches him slip into dementia and then insanity. The madman dies of a suspected brain haemorrhage and



Farber steps into his shoes. That's when things really start to go downhill for this planet,"he paused. "Do you want me to go on, Major?"

The mission clock was down to fifty seconds."How the hell am I supposed to believe you, Lubowitz. How do you even know all of this?"

He shrugged. "We have less than a minute by my reckoning, Katherine," he said. "I can't 'prove' anything to you in less than a minute."

Kat's heart was thundering in her chest. There must be some way of quickly proving or disproving his version of events. But if there was a way, she didn't know of it. "I once told Daniel — this was long before his first jump, just after we got the Displacement Core up and going for the first time, that there would come a time, when he would have to trust me and trust me implicitly. His life was going to depend on the outcome of the decision he made when that time came. That time came and I was able to save his life," Lubowitz gestured down at the man in the black suit down below them. "I'm saying the same thing to you now, Major. You're going to have to trust me."

Kat didn't know what to do. So she did nothing. She closed her eyes, and lowered the Colt back to her side. A command to her suits ACAS system destroyed the projectile hovering in mid-air just the other side of the balcony. She leaned back against the balcony of the private box and stared hard at him, as the seconds ticked down to zero.

"What happens if I just made the biggest mistake that the planet has ever known?" she asked.

A corner of his mouth curled upward so that his mouth formed a wry grin. "You won't even know about it."

She shook her head and turned to look at Daniel, as he aimed the Tranq pistol up at the dais. He fired and the tiny, microscopic pellet shot through the air. Her suits sensors locked onto it the moment it left the pistol and the computer plotted the trajectory. Straight toward...Farber. The

man stopped clapping for a brief moment to scratch his neck almost as if he'd been bitten by an insect of some sort and then he continued clapping.

Kathryn sighed. Down in the auditorium, Daniel Thomas depressed a button on the ceramic bracelet he wore and a Time Dilation bubble rapidly surrounded him, sucking him away back into the timestream. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she turned to look at the bald headed man who was standing just behind her.

"He was supposed to have died during the mission then?" she asked.

"Yes," Lubowitz responded. "He was."

"What the hell do I tell, Jennifer and Webster and General Willis?"

Lubowitz shrugged. "Tell them whatever you want. If you tell them the truth, tell Peter I send my regards and tell Webster he's going to have to do much better if he ever wants to catch up with me."

"My suit sensors didn't even register your arrival," she said. "You could have simply walked up behind me and put a bullet in my head. You didn't have to try and persuade me....did you?"

He showed her the weapon he had holstered at his hip and smiled thoughtfully. "No I didn't."

"Then why didn't you?"

"There's a very good reason I didn't, Katherine," he said simply.

"Which is?" she pressed.

"You'll see," he smiled and winked at her, then in a blink of an eye....was gone.

"Shit!" Kat whispered to herself.

She knelt and picked the Negative Energy Displacement rifle up from the floor where she had set it and stood, swinging the rifle around and onto her back. She watched with a growing sense of dismay as the crowd continued to scream and shout and chant frenziedly.

She stood and watched as history continued to unfold. The rapturous

applause continued for a good five or six minutes before the small dark haired man, began to speak. His hawklike bright blue eyes radiated an intensity all of there own even from where she stood three hundred feet away. The three thousand plus delegates quietened to hear his words and within a few moments the Kultureveinhaus was in total silence.

Kathryn shook her head in dismay. There was no need to stay and listen, in the hour or two before the jump, she had done some research into this man who was to have such a lasting and profound effect on her world. She knew what was coming by heart and had no desire to stay and listen. She lifted her arm, thumbing the recall button on her bracelet. The warm tingle rushed across her body, she felt all of her extremities throb, everything went grey, and an instant later she was gone.

The small, somewhat unassuming looking man continued....

“Our fellow party member Rosenberg began his speech by saying that it is critical for a nation that its territory correspond to its population. As he put it so well: ‘The nation needs space.’.....”

**TIME** : *Saturday August 20, 1927. Nuremburg.*

**END**