

THE DIDYMUS CONTINGENCY

BY

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For Hilaree and Aquila,
my two favorite gals.

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–ARRANGEMENT–

—ONE—

B.C.

1985

2:35 P.M.

Zambia, Africa

Tom Greenbaum was captivated. Herds of blue wildebeest and zebra scattered in all directions as Mpundu, the dirty, mild tempered pilot of the small Cessna rental, took Tom down for a closer look at the flora and fauna of the Zambian plains. It would have been easy for most people to lose track of time, staring at the creatures, whose lives and deaths played out on the brown tinged grass below. But Tom wasn't most people. As a quantum physicist with an IQ of 167, the calculations needed to time a quick jaunt over the African plains were as easy as clipping fingernails.

Tom had planned this distraction well. His international flight from Israel to Zambia's capitol, Lusaka, touched down at ten fifty three, ten minutes early. Megan expected his arrival at four o'clock and the flight to her mission took two hours. Tom scheduled his flight with Mpundu for twelve, giving himself an extra two hours time in the air. He was glad to be seeing his wife again, but experiencing this wild, untouched world from a bird's eye view was too much to pass up. Besides, she would never know.

Hours flew past and they were soon cruising over a lush, green canopy of jungle trees, waterfalls and rivers. The peaceful surroundings and white hum of the Cessna's engine propelled Tom to sleep, much to the relief of Mpundu, who had grown tired of Tom's wonderment. Not until they were making their final approach did Mpundu break the silence.

"Mr. Greenbaum...Mr. Greenbaum, we're almost there."

Tom sat up and wiped the drool from his cheek. As he squinted against the lowering sun he asked, "What time is it?"

"Three forty-five...Tell me, why do you come to Zambia? You have seen the animals, but where you are going now has no animals."

"Visiting my wife," Tom explained, his voice softening with the thought of her face and smile. "She's been here two weeks, but she'll be staying another two after I leave."

Mpundu's face became visibly confused. "You say your wife? Here in Zambia for two weeks without her husband?"

Tom nodded. "It's the longest we've been apart."

"And you let her come here?"

"I would have stopped her if I could," added Tom, "Trust me. Since she found religion it's been impossible for me to get through to her. I swear the whole lot of them has a death wish."

Mpundu's smile faded. "This is the worst place to come with a death wish."

Tom's forehead wrinkled with concern. "Why's that?"

"Because, Mr. Greenbaum, it usually comes true."

Tom's smile shrunk away.

"We're almost there," Mpundu assured, "try not to worry."

3:50 P.M.

Megan wasn't the type of woman to run from a fight, but this was slaughter and she knew Tom was flying into a deathtrap. She had to warn him. Megan peeked around the corner of a grass roofed hut, which served as the chapel. She knew the thatched wall of the hut was thick enough to hide her, but would do little to slow a bullet. She saw her brave co-workers, lined up, arms behind their backs. The men holding them prisoner remained out of eyeshot, but she could hear their voices, strange, demanding, broken.

"Spet on his face! You do id nah!" a man shouted.

She knew all of her new friends would never give in. She knew they would all die. Just like Charles. He had been the first to refuse; he'd been dead for ten minutes now.

Megan could see Jennifer's legs shaking. It was her turn now. She was eighteen, an eager intern from small town Kansas. She'd been on the job for two days, yet her convictions ran the deepest. She managed to say, "Forgive them, Lord," before a bullet cut her down as well.

Jennifer's body slumped to the dirt. Megan covered her mouth, terrified she would scream and alert the butchers to her presence. But she couldn't let that happen. Not while Tom was coming. This wasn't his fight. This wasn't his place to die.

Eyes wet and unblinking, Megan turned and ducked into the woods as another gunshot echoed through the forest. Branches stretched out for her, scratching at her, clawing at her. They wanted to slow her down. They wanted to kill her too. But her legs were strong from years of running and the thickets that blocked her path exploded away from her, tearing open her flesh and exposing an open path. Megan turned right and ran, ignoring the streaks of blood slipping down her legs.

Movement in her periphery caught Megan's attention as she rounded a tree. She slowed and focused her vision. Four men were beating a fifth...but she didn't know him. She took in the assailants. They had rifles slung over their shoulders. Each man was dressed in half military fatigues, half tribal garb, the kind of people you'd expect to see in a National Geographic full page spread. The angriest, most savage and most passionate man wore a New York Yankees baseball cap.

Megan wasn't sure how long she had been staring at the sight, but it was long enough for her to be noticed.

"A woman escapes!" one of the men yelled, blood dripping from his knuckles.

Megan's gaze was frozen on the man who lied on the ground, covered in blood and beaten to a pulp. He looked up into Megan's eyes using only his right eye—the left was swollen shut. Oddly, she noticed his clothing. Blue, button down shirt. Polished shoes... polished shoes in the Zambian jungle? His un-swollen eye grew wide and he yelled desperately to her, "Megan! Run!"

As Megan's eyes snapped away from the man she saw that the four locals were almost upon her. She launched into the forest, praying her feet would carry her fast enough, praying for the poor man she left behind. How did he know her name? Was he a friend of Tom's?

Boom! Birds launched into the air behind her. She knew the stranger was dead. It made her run even faster.

The path was thin and winding, but Megan had run it every morning for the past two weeks. She knew every depression, every curve, every fallen tree. They would never catch her here. But the path would soon end and she would be running through an open field. She was fast, but she was no Superwoman. She couldn't outrun a bullet.

Mud splashed across her legs, mixing with blood, as she hurdled a moss covered, rotten tree. She could see the sky through the branches in front of her. The clearing and Tom lay just ahead.

3:57 P.M.

The Cessna pulled up and over a line of tall trees, emerging over a clearing where a crude runway was chiseled into the earth.

Once the Cessna had come to a stop, Tom and Mpundu began unpacking the luggage and the supplies Megan had asked him to bring. Grunting with exertion, Tom heaved a wooden crate onto the ground. After straightening back up he removed a bandana from his back pocket and dabbed away the stinging sweat that trickled into his eyes. Tom had expected help; workers from the mission, locals, whatever, at least Megan should have been there by now. It wasn't like her to be late.

"Tom!" It was Megan's voice, but from where?

Scanning the field of tall, sun tanned grass, Tom found what he was looking for. His face lit up as he saw Megan running toward him. She was yelling, but Tom couldn't make out the words. He started forward. As Megan grew nearer it wasn't her words Tom finally understood, but the tone of her voice. She was afraid.

Before Tom could launch toward Megan, Mpundu's firm grasp on Tom's shoulder held him in place. "Do not enter the grass, Mr. Greenbaum. There are predators."

Tom looked back at Mpundu, whose eyes were locked on a flock of birds bursting from the jungle on the opposite side of the field.

"Lions?" Tom asked quickly.

"Worse."

Pulling away from Mpundu, Tom plowed into the field, determined to reach his wife. "Megan! MEGAN!"

"Mr. Greenbaum! Come back! We must leave now!"

Tom ignored Mpundu's call and continued forward. Mpundu ran back to the Cessna and started the engine.

Megan grew closer and her words became distinguishable, "Get away! Go back to the plane!"

Tom ran more quickly.

Boom! A gunshot pierced the air and Tom instinctively ducked down. His chest burned with each panicked breath. What should he do? Who fired the gun and at whom? When he picked his head up again, Megan was gone. Tom's eyes grew wide. "Megan?"

Ignoring the danger, Tom ran forward. “Megan! Where are you? Megan!”

Fifty feet away, Megan stood up and looked at Tom. “Run!” she yelled as her feet carried her toward Tom.

Tom surged forward, shrinking the distance between them. As they grew closer, Tom could see Megan’s normally smooth face twisting with fear and pain. His eyes darted to her blood red shoulder. She’d been shot!

Boom! A second shot pierced the air as Tom and Megan came within ten feet of each other. Megan’s body arched back. Blood exploded from her chest, covering Tom’s body and face. Tom stopped in his tracks and the world around him moved in slow motion, as though the entire scene were happening under water. The thick ruddy liquid felt warm on his face. Roaring blood rushed through the veins in his head, making it hard to hear. Dizziness swept through Tom with each pounding heartbeat. He felt himself falling, but his feet were firmly rooted to the ground.

Megan stumbled forward, her eyes locked with Tom’s. He could see her: brimming with enthusiasm over a new job, snuggled up by the fireplace with a new book, glossy with sweat after a long run. And then she was gone. Her eyes hardened and her muscles fell limp. She fell forward and landed at Tom’s feet, flattening a section of grass with her body.

Tom looked down. His wife was dead.

Breath raspy and full of anguish, Tom fell to his knees and rolled his wife over as tears condensed on his lower eyelids. He pushed his hand against the flow of blood pumping from her body like a ruptured gallon of milk. “Megan? Megan, please...”

Had Tom been more resilient he might have noticed Mpundu streaking down the runway in the Cessna. He might have noticed the crunch of moving brush and the smell of gunpowder. He sat in the grass; cradling Megan and rocking back and forth like a caged animal.

It wasn’t until Tom felt warm metal against the back of his neck and heard the click of weaponry that his attention was thrust back into reality. He could see four sets of bare feet standing around him. His head was too heavy to look up.

Standing above Tom were Megan’s four pursuers, led by the Yankee fan.

“Do you believe ahs dis wuman deed?” asked the Yankee fan as he pressed the barrel of his rifle into Tom’s temple. “Ansah me now.”

Tom looked up toward the voice. The Yankee fan’s face was silhouetted by the bright sun behind him. “W—What?” Tom asked.

The Yankee fan walked to the side. The sun cleared and Tom could see the man's dark face, painted brightly with dry, red ink. What was most striking about his face were the expressions—twisting and contorting with confusion. The Yankee fan looked at Tom from all angles. Then he smiled and stood up straight.

“Do you balieve as dis wuman deed? Do you balieve en her God?” The man's voice seemed deeper, more demanding. “Ah you not a disciple?”

Tom's lip began to bleed as he bit down.

“Tell us! We want to know!” the man screamed.

“No, damnit! I don't believe what she did! I never will!”

The four men instantly lowered their rifles. The Yankee fan squinted his eyes skeptically, then relaxed and smiled a rotting grin, “Thun tuday es your lucky day.”

The other men laughed and patted each other on the back for a job well done. Satisfied, all four turned and walked away, disappearing back into the tall grass.

Tom was left on his knees with Megan in his arms. His muscles began to shake. His eyes twitched to a maddening rhythm and blood pumped adrenaline through his veins. He let his wife, who he clutched to his chest so fondly moments ago, fall to the ground. Tom stood to his feet and cut into the tall grass.

The four men walked away slowly. Tom caught them quickly. He pounded his fist into the head of the first man before they heard a sound. The man toppled over and dropped his rifle, which fired upon impact with the ground. The bullet split several shoots of grass and then shattered the ankle of another man who fell backwards into the grass.

The third man swung around and raised his rifle, but he was too slow. Tom was upon him. Tom's left hand held the rifle at bay while his right hand smashed the man's throat. The man fell to the ground gasping for air, leaving his rifle in Tom's shaking hand.

Tom raised the rifle toward the Yankee fan, whom had already taken aim at Tom. They paused. Breathing. Staring. Listening. A dragonfly flew between them and both men fired.

Tom was clipped in the shoulder and screamed in pain. The Yankee fan stood unmoving with a hand held to his chest. Tom quickly regained his composure and raised his rifle a second time. But the Yankee fan stood still with a look of shock frozen on his face.

“So it's true,” the Yankee fan said with a smile, “You ah not a disciple.”

The Yankee fan's hand slipped from his chest, revealing an open wound. He fell to his knees and slumped over dead.

Moans from the other three men writhing in the grass regained Tom's attention. He aimed the rifle. One man raised his hands over his head and begged in his native tongue. Tom looked away from the men, toward the area of crushed grass where Megan's body still lay. Tom took aim again and asked, "Do you believe as she did?"

"W—What?"

Tom pressed the rifle into one man's head. "Do you believe as she did?"

"No! No! We do not!"

"Then, maybe I'll see you in Hell."

The guns shots could be heard for miles away, three and then three more.

That was all twenty years ago...today.

—TWO—

Precipice

2005

7:00 A.M.

Arizona

David Goodman knew what day it was. Tom told him the story ten years ago and David had since learned how to treat his partner on this day: just like every other day. As David threw away the soggy cereal he never got around to eating, he thought about Tom and wondered how a man, who had no hope for the future, could bear the burden this day represented.

Tom had thrown himself into his work since Megan's death, but that was required of them both. David had never been married and probably never would be. He was fond of saying, "Fifteen hour days locked in a secret facility six days a week aren't exactly conducive dating conditions."

Whatever the case, they were all the other had. The only variation in the pair's schedule was that David drove forty miles every Sunday morning to attend the nearest church. Tom did not. God was often a source of heated debate.

It was a topic David would attempt to avoid today. He quickly adjusted his paisley tie, slipped into his perfectly polished black shoes, attached his LightTech Industries ID to his blazer and grabbed a 20oz. bottle of Wild Cherry Pepsi from the fridge. With the recent addition of a breakfast soda, this had been his morning routine for the past fifteen years, as boring and stale as the average person's. But it never bothered David. Particle accelerators, nuclear reactors, black hole generators, heavily armed guards and secret tunnels kept the rest of David's day a tad more interesting.

As soon as David left the front door of his smooth, adobe home the morning heat struck his head. David grumbled under his breath as his armpits instantly began to perspire. It took David ten years of Arizona heat before he found a deodorant that could keep him dry. Last year they stopped selling it. He had never been fond of heat and even lobbied to have the whole operation moved to New Hampshire's White Mountains. The official LightTech response was a hearty laugh and pat on the shoulder.

It took David ten seconds to walk from his air conditioned home to his burgundy Land Rover, which was parked as close to the front door as possible without crushing his collection of cacti. In years past he parked the vehicle in the attached garage, but it had become so full of old computers and spare parts that there was little room to walk. He had considered cleaning out the garage on several occasions, but couldn't bring himself to do it. The computers in the garage were part of his past, LightTech's past and if they succeeded, would be part of history.

David hopped into the Land Rover, slammed the door shut and looked at his reflection in the rearview. His slightly wrinkled, neatly bearded face looked as if he had just run a race through the Australian outback during the rainy season. David wiped the sweat from his pasty, white forehead and felt glad that those ten seconds represented his daily time spent in the sun. He started the engine with a surge of gas and cranked the air to full so that it blew his graying hair back and dried his skin.

It took David five minutes to navigate through the LightTech owned and operated neighborhood, which was the only visible group of buildings for twenty square miles and housed two thousand employees, from physicists to janitors. Tom was waiting by the sidewalk as usual.

Tom was dressed casually, as he tended to, in blue jeans, a white T-shirt and an open, plaid, button down shirt. Of course LightTech had a dress code, but Tom had never cared about codes, rules or outside guidance. Besides, he knew they couldn't fire him. He was too important. His eyes had narrowed over the years, his face was more carved and his cheeks were rough with stubble. David was sure Tom was going for a Clint Eastwood look, minus the gray hair; Tom's was still solid black and wavy.

Seconds after Tom entered the SUV, David cracked open his Cherry Pepsi, signifying the start of their morning banter.

Tom looked at David with amused disgust. "You're going to rot your teeth out," he said.

“What do you know?” retorted David with his thick Hebrew accent, dodging any real response.

“I know that I’m going to keep my teeth longer than you,” added Tom with a shimmering grin.

“We’ve been friends since we both came to this country, what, fifteen years ago? Don’t presume to come between me and my true love,” David replied as he took another swig.

David and Tom were both born and raised in Israel. Their homes were two miles apart, yet they had never met until LightTech had hired both and brought them to America, which they both quickly adopted as their home country. David had been sent to a prestigious private school from which he graduated top of his class, while Tom was home schooled by his father, an ex-Rabbi, who no longer held the Jewish faith. David remembered their excitement in the early days, when freedom to do groundbreaking research in a privately owned facility was somewhat of a novelty.

Tom smiled and leaned back into the plush leather interior of the Land Rover, enjoying the conversation. “And what if I do, old man? Will you cane me?”

David fumed. “Cane you? I don’t use a—old man! I’m your senior by three years and you presume to call me old man?”

“I suppose I presume too much?” asked Tom.

David nodded as he sucked down some more cherry flavored liquid sugar.

“About as much as you use that word,” added Tom.

“What word?”

“Presume.”

David shifted in his seat and said, “Don’t presume to tell me how to... Huh, I guess you’re right.”

Tom smiled, “Aren’t I usually?”

“Bah,” David blurted, “The only thing your brain is good for is quantum mechanics and attacking Chri—”

David managed to stop his sentence short, but Tom’s jagged facial expression revealed he already knew how it ended. The silence that ensued was nerve wracking. How could David forget! Of all the days.... It was Tom who finally spoke, “Better step on the gas; we have to meet the bitch in a half hour.”

David was immeasurably relieved that his transgression had done no permanent damage and gladly resumed his role in their friendship. “Language!” David shouted.

“C’mon, David. You have to admit she’s—”

“Just doing her job. I admit she’s forceful at times. I’m just saying, watch your tongue,” David said in his best patriarchal voice before taking another drag of soda.

“You know, if you had all the responsibility she does, you might not be nice all the time either,” David said.

Tom looked at David, waiting for the punch line. “You’re serious?”

David nodded and Tom laughed, relaxing and turning in his seat.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The hum of the motor and crunching of soil beneath tires rumbled for what felt like ten minutes but was closer to ten seconds.

“You’d be grouchy too if you worked for you,” David stated.

Tom raised an eyebrow and cracked a smile. David saw him.

“You know what I mean!”

Silence resumed as dust blew over the windshield, kicked up by a warm gust of wind.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked.

“You can be hard to deal with sometimes. That’s all I’m saying.” David guzzled some soda.

Tom smiled, “Yes, well, at least I won’t be sucking my food through a straw soon.”

David huffed and turned his full attention to the road.

Tom watched David drive, smiling at his friend’s wrinkled brow, knowing that David would never give up his Pepsi habit, even if it did take his teeth. All of David’s convictions ran that deep. It’s one of the things Tom liked most about David, but would never tell him. It reminded him of someone he knew once.



For miles in every direction there was nothing but red dirt, cragged rock formations and deep blue sky. Dust sprayed up behind the Land Rover and covered the vehicle as it came to a stop in front of the only landmark for miles, a rundown wooden shack with a missing wall. The wooden structure looked as though a strong breeze could blow it over, but it had stood in this very spot for twenty years, never collecting dust, never losing a nail, and never drawing attention.

David steered the Land Rover into the shack and put it in park. Tom and David unbuckled their seatbelts, leaned forward toward the windshield and continued a conversation already in progress, paying no attention to the loud *clacks* and *whirs* emanating from all around them.

“All I’m saying is that I’m not sure,” Tom explained.

“It will work. It’s our design,” David replied.

“That’s what concerns me.”

A small device, disguised to look like a knot of pine, lowered over the Land Rover’s hood from the shack’s ceiling. A shimmering green laser investigated the vehicle from top to bottom, front to back. The laser passed across the windshield and into the SUV. Tom and David looked forward, eyes wide open, allowing the laser to scan their facial features and retinas.

“You know what you need?” David asked rhetorically. “Faith. Just a little would do you some good. You always have to see it, touch it, smell it, before you believe anything.”

“It’s called science, David. It’s what we scientists are paid to do.”

“You got here through science. I got here by faith,” David said with a wink and a smile.

“Well then, should we go see what your faith has to say about the malleability of space-time?”

“Gladly.”

The laser disappeared and the knot of pine retreated back into the shack’s ceiling. Seconds later, a cloud of dust exploded up around the Land Rover and the ground beneath it lurched downward. Light poured out from under the ground in a perfect circle, as though drawn by a compass, and grew brighter as the platform, which the Land Rover rested on, moved downward.

The vehicle descended into a bright white, open cavern. The rounded walls were smooth, like the inside of a chicken egg. The round platform was held aloft by a tall, white, hydraulic pole, which was disappearing into the floor, and four support cables strung from holes in the ceiling to the platform’s edges. Two hundred feet below, every make and model of vehicle belonging to thousands of employees, filled the football stadium sized parking lot.

As they reached the first floor level, simply designated, Parking Level One, they exited the Rover and left it with Fred, the valet parking attendant.

“Any news from the future?” Fred asked.

“Not yet,” Tom replied, “We may be paddling up the quantum stream in the wrong direction.”

Fred snorted gleefully. Even the parking attendants at LightTech Industries were smart enough to understand quantum humor. “Good one, Dr. Greenbaum.”

“Not to worry, Fred,” David added, “Today is the day.”

Fred brimmed with excitement. “Really?”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Tom said, “Dr. Goodman here thinks we’ll succeed because he has faith and we all know faith is more important than science.”

Fred laughed again and found an opportunity to brownnose, “Two for two, Dr. Greenbaum. Faith more important than science? Please.”

David responded with a scowl directed toward Tom. Fred wished them well as they entered the complex through a pair of glass doors, etched with the LightTech logo—three beams of light converging to a point to form a cone. Through the doors, they entered into a bright white tunnel that continued on infinitely. Both men strolled fifty feet and stopped, seemingly for no reason.

“Think she’s here yet?” David asked.

“A snake can usually be found in its den.”

“Especially when the snake has spent two billion dollars building the den,” David said with a smile.

“She’s going to kill us if we don’t come through today.” Tom said as he shook his head. “Two billion dollars on a project we proposed... We should have been salesmen.”

David forced a grin. “We may still get our chance.”

The illusion of an infinite hall faded away as the image turned milky and then solidified to reveal a single door, which opened automatically. Tom and David entered, the door closing behind them with a clunk and the hallway reverting to its never-ending appearance.

Tom and David entered the control center, waving hello to fellow scientists bustling around the room and working at computer consoles. The day had just begun and it was already a madhouse. The control center was a masterpiece of modern engineering and electronics, the science for which wouldn’t be available to the outside world for another twenty years. The walls and ceiling were rounded like a black half-shell amphitheater. Level after level of computers and workstations were staggered down the floor like an audience, all culminating in a sheet of four foot thick glass separating the control center from Receiving Area Alpha.

Light streamed from the grated floor like glowing square waffles; illuminating faces from below in perfect ghost story telling fashion.

Descending down the center aisle, David and Tom headed for the wall of glass where Sally McField stood over the shoulder of a very nervous scientist. David thought Sally was beautiful in a power suit kind of way. He was often tempted to compliment the woman on her bunned hair or shade of lipstick, but held his tongue for fear she would have him executed. Only one man dared ruffle her feathers.

Tom scurried toward Sally from behind, a nervous David in tow.

“You watch,” Tom whispered to David, “She has eyes in the back of her head.”

“Shush!” David urged, not wanting to be berated first thing in the morning, “She’ll hear you!”

Tom replied by pointing to his eyes with his index and middle fingers and then at the back of Sally’s head, reiterating his statement in pseudo sign language. David bulged his eyes back as a final warning.

“Dr. Greenbaum. Dr. Goodman. You’re both late,” Sally said without looking back.

Tom, in his best sideways sotto whisper, said, “I told you.”

In a swift move Sally spun one hundred and eighty degrees on her high heels so she instantly faced Tom and David, who quickly morphed their expressions into sweet smiles.

“Miss McField.” David greeted her with a kind voice as he raised his hand to shake hers.

“Sally,” said Tom with a wry smile, “so good to see you again.”

Sally ignored David’s extended hand and got right down to business, “It won’t be if I don’t see some results by the end of the day. To put it mildly, doctors, impress my ass off or I pull the plug.”

Tom’s button was instantly pushed, but before he could unleash his fury, David interjected as diplomatically as he could muster, “Miss McField...today you will witness something we cannot yet explain. It will, in seconds, change the course of human history, or more accurately, human future. I assure you—”

“Tom may enjoy your speeches, David, but they don’t impress me,” Sally said. “All I care about is results. We’ve had you two bottled down here for years. It’s about time we saw something for it.”

David’s blood pressure rose to terminal levels, but he managed to contain his personal meltdown, “You will, Miss McField. Soon enough.”

“I better,” Sally said as she used the same high heel pivot maneuver to spin and strut away.

David stared at Sally, throwing imaginary grenades at her head. In his blind anger, David slipped out a simple word that instantly changed Tom's mood from rage to pure glee, "Witch."

Tom's eyes nearly launched from their sockets, "W—What did you say!"

David scrunched his face. "What?"

"You called her a bitch!" Tom said with a grin.

"I absolutely did not!"

"I heard you!"

David huffed. "I said, 'witch,' with a W."

Tom's smile faded, but not completely. "Ah, one of your religious curse replacements. Fudge, shoot, gosh darnit, Jiminy Cricket. It's all the same, you know. You still mean the curse, even if you don't say the actual word. Changing bitch to witch might alter the sound, but the emotion behind it is still the same."

David and Tom stared into each other's eyes. Tom knew his constant gaze and slight smirk would eventually wear David down.

"Bah! No one's perfect!" David said as he stormed away, "We have work to do!"

Tom laughed and followed after his friend. Maybe this wouldn't be such a bad day after all?



An hour passed before David was calm again. Tom knew Sally could get under his skin like no one else, which made him wonder why David looked at her the way he did. He'd been watching David attempt to write out some calculations for the past half hour. But every time Sally walked by it was as if she were a magnet and David's face was made of metal. His head would follow her across the room and then linger as she disappeared from view. Could he be interested in such an ice queen? Did David see something in her that Tom couldn't? Tom decided to discover the answers to these questions, but right now there were more pressing matters demanding his attention.

A slew of scientists sat behind the myriad of consoles that filled the control center, which smelled of warm computers. The excitement in the room was nearly uncontainable. Every member of the science team, led by Tom and David, had dreamed of this moment for years. Some spent their entire careers at LightTech for the slim chance they would succeed.

David, Tom and Sally stood in front of the glass wall, peering into Receiving Area Alpha. The room was smooth from top to bottom; not one ninety degree angle could be seen. The walls were brushed silver, like a giant corrugated frying pan. The massive sheet of glass separating the control center and the receiving area made the whole scene feel like an oversized children's aquarium. Tom's eyes eagerly searched for something, any anomaly that would suggest a breach in the time stream had occurred.

Sally looked at her watch, "By my time we should see something in forty-five seconds. Not that I really expect to see your entire future life's work suddenly appear."

"If we succeed within our lifetimes, we'll see something. Even if it's just a fluctuation," Tom added.

"Then I don't expect we'll see much because if my future self is anything like my present self she will have pulled the plug on this little—"

Tom interrupted, "Hey, that's not—"

"Quiet!" David yelled, "Both of you! All this talk, this bickering, it's all pointless! In ten seconds our world will change forever and all you two can do is nag each other. Please...for the love of Moses, just shut up!"

Tom pursed his lips, knowing David was right, but Sally's reaction caught both David and Tom by surprise. A smile cracked onto her face, if only for a moment, before she smothered it and began waiting patiently as David had demanded.

"Thank you," David said.

Tom glanced away from the receiving area and saw David eyeing Sally, inspecting her soft lips for any sign of the smile's return. He imagined David was even more shocked by the emergence of Sally's smile, especially at a tense time like this. But it wasn't important now and Tom certainly wouldn't let David miss a second of what they hoped would happen next.

"David," Tom whispered.

David jerked his eyes toward Tom, who motioned with his head for David to look at the receiving area.

"Right." David turned toward the wall of glass.

Tom shook his head. What was with him?

Silence consumed the room. Tom glanced at his watch. Five seconds overdue. Tom closed his eyes and lowered his head in disappointment. They were defeated.

David's fingers tapped against the thick glass, expelling his nervous energy. Sally crossed her arm and tapped her foot. Ten seconds late... This was not good.

A sound like popcorn popping began to fill the air. Something was happening. Scientists around the room began checking their equipment, recording the sound and preparing for more. The sound grew louder, crackling through the thick glass, and causing the control center to shake. A metal cabinet at the back of the room popped open and its contents crashed to the floor. There was a flash of light inside the receiving area and then everything went black.

After a moment of silence passed, the room erupted with cheering. Tom looked at David, their eyes were wide. "Not quite what I expected, but a good turnout nonetheless," David said with a tinge of disappointment.

"I expected more of us too," Tom replied.

They shook hands as Sally approached in the darkness. "Congratulations. Your funding will be doubled."

As Sally spoke she failed to notice the light level raise in the room. Blue light slowly lit up the room, glowing on Sally's face. David and Tom noticed right away. With wide eyes, they stared just beyond Sally, into the receiving area.

"But we better get a little more than a light show next time..." Sally noticed their fixed gaze.

She followed their eyes back to the receiving area, which was glowing with a dull blue light, luminescing from nowhere at all.

The control center fell silent again. Scientists frozen in mid-hug watched the receiving area with beaming eyes.

Tom lifted his head and rested his hands on the glass wall. His jaw slowly dropped open like a drawbridge. "It's happening," was all he could say.

A small, white shimmer appeared inside the receiving area. The light glowed steadily at first, but then began to fluctuate. It strobed slowly and with each burst of light came a loud, basey *Whump*.

Whump... Whump... Whump

Faster and faster. Light swirled and flashed like a rave nightclub.

Whum. Whum. Whum. Whum. Crack!

Several brilliant, vertical streaks of blue and white light ripped into the air within the receiving area, creating thunderous booms. One after another, cracks of light tore into reality and then disappeared. In the wake of each spear of light an object was left behind. A table covered in dia-

grams, charts and graphs, a cabinet full of supplies and tools that had yet to be invented, and several countertops covered in small devices. Several large chunks of electronic equipment also appeared. An odor like ozone filled the room and grew stronger with each explosion of light and materials.

The raw power unleashed by the event was fascinating and horrifying. Everyone in the room, except Tom and David, took a step back. Computers began to malfunction. Sparks exploded into the air. No one noticed. All eyes were transfixed on the tears in time-space opening up in the next room.

The show concluded with a loud boom, causing everyone in the control center to jump. As the final streak of light blinked out of existence, the control center was plunged into darkness. The receiving area still shimmered with light, like a luminous snowstorm, as thousands of blue, glowing particles fluttered down to the floor. No one moved. As the last particles extinguished, the emergency lights suddenly burst on. David yelped like a Chihuahua. The room full of normally composed professionals exploded with clapping and uproarious laughter.

Tom's hands squeaked down the glass wall. He looked at David. "We did it.... We did it!" Tom yelled as he picked David off the ground and administered a crushing hug.

"What did I tell you!" David shouted, "What did I tell you!"

Tom bounced David in the air and danced around like a child on Christmas morning.

Sally stood still, staring into the receiving area. "I don't... I can't..."

Tom put David back on his feet, strode up to Sally's face and yelled at the top of his lungs, "HA!"

After Tom had expressed his victory to Sally and moved on to shake the hands of several excited colleagues, David approached Sally with a smile. "Thank you for letting this happen. We owe you everything."

"I... You're welcome." Sally replied.

David extended his hand and Sally took it. Rather than shaking her hand, David let their hands linger together, while he looked kindly into her eyes. And then she did it again. Sally smiled.