

Tempus Obscurum

At precisely 6:47 a.m., the shower turned on. It takes forty-five seconds for the water to reach one hundred and three degrees Fahrenheit. At 6:47 a.m. and twenty-five seconds, Heywood Penthorpe entered the bathroom, removed his pajamas, which still showed the creases from having been fastidiously pressed, hung them on a hook next to his robe, and then stepped into the shower just as it reached his preferred temperature.

In the kitchen, twelve and a half minutes later, a Barsetto grind-and-brew coffeemaker switched on. It delivered a precise amount of freshly ground coffee to the brew basket. Heywood Penthorpe knew it was precise, because he had sent five machines back to the factory before one met his satisfaction. The water heated to 205 degrees Fahrenheit, and the coffee began to brew. A burner on the stove ignited under a small pot containing a measured amount of water. It had been set there at 10:42 p.m. the night before.

At 7:12, Heywood walked into the kitchen. He was fully dressed in a two-button, navy suit, a light blue shirt, and blue tie that was not quite monochromatic. The tie was knotted to symmetrical perfection. The suit was tailored to hang on his tall slender frame as if he had been born into it. There was not a wrinkle on the shirt, and his black shoes gleamed from the fresh coat of polish they had received while Heywood watched last night's newscast.

He put two eggs in the water, which had just reached a boil. He set a timer for five minutes. He picked up the coffee pot just as the brewing cycle finished. His first sip of coffee always elicited a sigh of satisfaction. It had taken two years of experimentation to devise the

perfect blend of new world, African, and Asian beans. That was fifteen years ago. He has made the same coffee every day since.

He had two minutes to scan the headlines of the Financial Times on his laptop. He was briefly distracted by his reflection in the screen. An incremental adjustment to his tie made everything right again. If only the headlines reported a world as orderly as the one Heywood Penthorpe had built for himself, but there was only so much one could control.

Having decided which articles he would read over breakfast, Heywood got up and dropped two pieces of whole-wheat bread into the toaster, which gently lowered them and began to heat. The timer announced perfect five-minute eggs. At the moment the shells were cracked and the contents scooped into a bowl, the toaster chimed and delivered two uniformly browned slices, which were given an even veneer of marmalade. Heywood sat down and enjoyed nineteen minutes of serenity during which he could digest the news over breakfast, the same breakfast he had had nearly every day for twenty years.

By 7:47 a.m., Heywood had eaten breakfast, read two articles in the Financial Times, washed and dried one bowl, one spoon, one knife, one coffee cup with saucer, any parts of the coffee maker that needed to be cleaned, and the pan in which he had boiled his eggs. The counter was wiped clean. All dishes and utensils were returned to their proper storage places. Heywood walked out the door of his apartment. He dropped a small bag containing the coffee grounds, egg shells, and the few other items of trash that had accumulated since yesterday morning into the garbage chute.

As he got off the elevator, he checked his watch. He would need to adjust his walking speed to account for the elevator ride—another variable he could not control. At precisely 8:00

a.m., he would arrive at Harris, Donner and Penthorpe, CPAs, LLC., where he was one of the few people who still wore a suit to work every day.

#

The next day, at 7:12 a.m., Heywood walked into the kitchen to find freshly made coffee spilling onto the floor from a flooded countertop. The coffee pot had not been properly placed under the filter. Heywood let out an involuntary gasp. A cupboard door was not shut completely, and he could see that one coffee cup was missing. He stared at the mess for thirty-nine seconds before removing his jacket and gently laying it over the back of a chair. He grabbed a mop and a cleaning sponge. It took him twelve minutes and eighteen seconds to clean the floor and counter. Another three minutes and forty-eight seconds were consumed by rinsing out the mop and sponge and wringing them dry enough so they could be returned to the broom closet without dripping on the floor.

He returned to the kitchen and contemplated his dilemma. He cocked his head a full forty-five degrees from vertical. He could make another pot of coffee, but he wouldn't have time to wash it. After thirty-six seconds of weighing various plans, Heywood returned to the bedroom to change his suit. He had not gotten a drop of coffee on himself, but the suit no longer felt crisp.

He left his apartment at 7:41 a.m., that would leave enough time to buy a croissant from the bakery next to his office building. He'd have to eat it at his desk—extenuating circumstances. On his brisk walk to the office, he called his assistant Lance to tell him to brew a pot of coffee at once.

“You are correct. I don't usually require coffee until after the staff meeting. Something unexpected arose. We will have to make two pots this morning.” He hung up before Lance could

probe the departure from a schedule that had not altered the entire time that Lance had worked at Harris, Donner and Penthorpe, CPAs, LLC.

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The morning after that, the shower went on at 6:44 a.m. Three minutes early! Heywood found the shower door not properly closed allowing water to spill onto the floor. His towel was not hanging evenly over the towel rack. He saw a shadow move past him toward the bedroom. When he checked, there was nothing there. *Nerves*, he thought.

#

The morning after that, coffee again spilled onto the counter. There were crumbs scattered around the still-warm toaster, a banana peel was left on the counter, and most disturbingly, a dirty plate and coffee cup were in the sink. For a fleeting second, Heywood thought he saw someone sitting at the breakfast table, but the image evaporated as soon as he focused on it.

He considered that he might be having a nervous breakdown but rejected that idea. It wasn't something that Penthorpes do. But obviously he had become careless. Work was, after all, particularly stressful as they neared the end of the fiscal year. Again, being careless was not something that Penthorpes do.

Since he was obviously in his right mind, and he wouldn't consider that he had become negligent and forgetful, the only explanation had to be somnambulance. He could deal with that. He could correct it.

That night, Heywood locked the bathroom door and placed the key in a drawer far from his bed. He wedged the bedroom door shut. He was certain that these obstacles would wake him from his peregrinations.

Brad Goldberg

He slipped into bed without disturbing its neatness any more than absolutely required. His last thought before fading into sleep was that he had successfully dealt with a problem that had gotten seriously out of hand. *Well done, Heywood*, he congratulated himself.

The next morning, he was awakened by the sound of the shower at 6:32 a.m., fifteen minutes before the timer was set to turn it on. The bathroom door was open with the key still in the lock. The tile was wet. There were damp footsteps leading to the sink. And the cap was off the toothpaste! He felt his toothbrush. The bristles were damp. Heywood's shoulders sagged briefly. It was such a good plan. He'd need a better one. He needed to think about it—over coffee.

He felt absolutely slovenly pouring his coffee while he was still in his pajamas. At least there was no mess on the kitchen counter.

“If you add ten percent Sulawesi to the blend, you'll find it just a tad smoother.”

Heywood spilled coffee on his pajama top as he stared in the direction of the voice. He had been so preoccupied that he had failed to notice the tall, thin man with graying hair drinking coffee at his kitchen table.

“It's a discovery you made—I mean will make—on your own in two and a half years,” the man continued.

“Who are you? How did you...?” Heywood stopped mid-stammer. “Wait. You've been trying to live here! It's trespassing, and if you don't leave, it's a matter we shall take up with the police.” Heywood paused. He felt overwhelmingly disoriented. The man seemed very familiar. “Father?” He blurted with the shock of someone who absolutely did not believe in ghosts.

“No. But you're on the right track.”

“What's your name? Who are you?” Heywood demanded.

Brad Goldberg

“There’s so little humor in our lives, Heywood. Indulge me. Do try to guess. I wish I could tell you how much time we’ve wasted keeping everything just so.” He cocked his head forty-five degrees from vertical while awaiting Heywood’s response.

The man had a lopsided smile, but everything else about him was perfectly tasteful, fastidious, and correct. Strangely, Heywood did not recognize the make or style of the man’s suit. And the tie, though muted, was made from a shiny fabric that didn’t seem quite correct.

“Both of Father’s brothers have passed, so I doubt you’re an as yet unknown uncle. My only sibling is a sister who no longer speaks to me. You must be a second cousin or great-uncle from grandfather’s side,” Heywood said quietly, almost to himself. “I demand to know who you are and how you got into my apartment.”

The man tapped a thin band on his wrist, and the time and date floated in midair just above his arm. Then, apparently satisfied, he tapped the band again. The projection disappeared. “Heywood, I didn’t have to get *into* our apartment, because I was already here. I’m you.”

Heywood couldn’t deny the likeness, but this was absurd, impossible, ridiculous. “That’s preposterous. Who are you?”

“Heywood, I’m you, and your life—our life actually—is being disrupted by a very dangerous criminal from the future—your future, my present. Ah, never mind.” The man claiming to be Heywood began to write something on a piece of paper.

“What are you writing? You need to leave.” Heywood took out his phone. “If you don’t leave in twenty seconds, I’m going to call the police.”

The man calmly showed Heywood what he had written. The note read, “What are you writing? You need to leave. If you don’t leave in fifteen seconds, I’m going to call the police.”

Brad Goldberg

Heywood stared at the note. His jaw fell slack, well not exactly slack, but his usually pursed lips did part briefly. Behind him a cup of coffee that he was sure he hadn't poured fell off the counter and shattered.

The man claiming to be Heywood smiled. "I didn't get the time exactly right. You were more lenient than I thought we'd be. Other than that, I'd say I was pretty accurate. It's easy to know what someone will do when you are that someone."

#

"I don't completely believe you, and I don't even pretend to comprehend the blather about this man hiding behind me." It had taken Heywood twenty-three minutes to stop sputtering questions to trick the man in his kitchen into revealing his scam. It hadn't worked. Future Heywood knew every fact and nuance about Heywood's life. He knew the names of obscure relatives. He knew what Heywood ate for lunch—not that that was hard since Heywood had the same lunch almost every day. He knew the brand of Heywood's first bike, the name of the ski instructor he had had a crush on when he was thirteen; he even knew whether Heywood had arranged his first accordion file folder alphabetically or chronologically. It was chronological, of course, cross-tabbed to an alphabetical one in short order. He refused to answer any questions about Heywood's future life, because, he explained, that might alter the course of their life; and he was relatively happy with how things had turned out.

When Heywood had finally calmed down, he called work to say he was indisposed. He hung up before Lance could press him about another unprecedented break in routine. He also changed into a pair of khakis, a blue oxford cloth shirt, and a classic striped tie. He was going to ask the man who claimed to be him to help clean up the spilled coffee, but the enigmatic man in his kitchen had already started. He seemed to know where everything belonged.

Brad Goldberg

Heywood had *begun* to believe that he was being visited by a version of himself from thirty-two years in the future, but he was reserving final judgement. The rest of Future Heywood's story made absolutely no sense even if he could grasp it in broad strokes.

"You keep insisting that this Viktor Moldova... That's his name, correct? This Viktor Moldova is hiding behind me. But as you can see..." He made a great show turning and looking around the room. "...he's not there."

"He's not behind you in space. He's behind you in time." Heywood's future self explained patiently for the ninth time. "You have to think of time as just another dimension. So, if someone can hide behind that counter—spatially say—they can also hide behind an object temporally."

"But I can walk around that counter and see there's no one there. Isn't there another me right behind me that can walk up to Viktor Moldova and say, 'aha, I see you. The jig is up. Get out of here.'"

Future Heywood grimaced. This question teased the limits of his own understanding. He slowly shook his head "yes" while he emphatically said, "No!"

"That makes no sense," Heywood blurted. It came out like an accusation.

"I know," Future Heywood admitted. "Maybe I can show you a vizi that will help." He tapped the band again. The words, "File Not Available" floated above his wrist. Future Heywood sighed. "I was sure I had downloaded that. Obviously, this can't receive signals from the future."

"Obviously," Heywood snarked. "That would be unfathomable."

"Oh, very good, Heywood. You've found the fly in the soup. I guess I'm not actually here."

Brad Goldberg

“If you can’t actually explain all this, then why did they send, I assume you were sent, why did they send you and not someone who understood what was going on?”

“Point one: it’s our life that’s being threatened. Point two: they thought you’d believe yourself over anyone else. Point three: this could all be our fault.”

“What do you mean *our* fault? I had nothing to do with any of this. I’m not even there yet,” Heywood blurted.

“Not where?” Future Heywood pressed.

“Wherever... whenever you come from. How can I be to blame?”

“Heywood, we are the same person. Your fate is inextricably linked to mine.”

Heywood sat for a long moment. He took a drink of his coffee and made a face like he had bitten into a rotten lemon. He hated cold coffee. “What makes Viktor Moldova so dangerous?”

Future Heywood leaned in. His face darkened. “If Viktor Moldova returns to my time, he will take control of the worldwide monetary system. He will have the power to destroy the finances of anyone and everyone including the governments of every country on earth. The entire economy of the planet and few exocolonies will be at his mercy.”

“Now, I suppose you’re going to ask me to make a small deposit in a Nigerian bank account as a show of good faith.” Heywood made a slight sniffing sound that passed for laughter.

“Yes, Heywood, I’ve traveled thirty-two years through spacetime, taxed the entire scientific community to activate the nascent technology of time travel, used enough energy to cause brownouts throughout the eastern seaboard, and watched you spit cold coffee back in the cup just to revive an old email scam.”

Brad Goldberg

“I’m sorry. How does this scheme work then?” His tone was bitterly cold. Heywood did not like to be mocked.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that you helped build Harris, Donner and Penthorpe, CPAs, LLC. into an international powerhouse. We are now, or will be, from your timestamp point of view, part of a twelve-firm consortium entrusted with the maintenance of a cybercurrency system upon which the entirety of the world’s economy depends.”

“Do you mean cryptocurrency like Bitcoin?” Heywood was suddenly intrigued.

“Yes. But this system is much more pervasive. It’s backed by all the major governments of the world. Cash no longer exists. No one carries credit cards. And until very recently—recently in thirty-two years—it was absolutely, inviolably secure. Unfortunately, two years ago—thirty years from now—you will take on a client named Viktor Moldova.”

“You’re not saying I’m... we’re... in on the scheme,” Heywood blanched.

“No, I hardly think the world’s governments would entrust me with this mission if I... you... if we... were involved. But he used his position as a client to breach our security systems and gain access to the monetary servers. It was an ugly day when I had to fire the CSO and the rest of the top-level security team. I doubt if they’ll ever find decent work again on the planet, except for Charles Clyde. He has his own show on Fox Business.”

“Why did you come here... ah come now?... ah come to this time? Why not go to thirty years from now and stop me... you... us from taking on Moldova as a client?”

“Because Moldova is here, or sort of here; he’s hiding behind you now.”

“But if I don’t take him on as a client, then none of this would happen and even if he’s hiding, he wouldn’t be a threat.” This made perfect sense to Heywood. That’s the way it always worked in the movies.

Brad Goldberg

“One would think,” Future Heywood agreed.

There was low popping sound. The air in the room swirled for a moment.

“You see, Heywood, time itself is multidimensional, so we can’t change what this Viktor Moldova has done.”

The voice came from behind Heywood. Future Heywood sighed.

Heywood spun around. “Who are you?”

He really didn’t have to ask. He looked identical to the Future Heywood sitting across from him except that he was a little grayer, he was dressed casually (very tasteful and as kempt as hell but not wearing a suit), and he had a...

“What have you done to us? Look at that gut,” Future Heywood shouted.

“The last two years with this whole Viktor Moldova thing took a lot out of us,” Future Heywood Two said defensively. “You kind of let discipline slide a tad.”

“A tad!? You look like whale that’s inhaled a blimp.” Future Heywood One accused.

“It’s not that bad.” Heywood felt he had to defend himself.

“Well, no matter how this turns out, I’m not going to let that happen.” Future Heywood One pointed to Future Heywood Two’s stomach as if it were covered in gangrene. “Why are you here anyway? Oh my god, did I fail?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know you were here. I think the government mishandled the paperwork.” He held up his wrist. “Hey, did you see the new omnibands? They came out last year. Ah, next year. In thirty-three years. They can project holos up to 64k cubic meters without losing any resolution. It’s really quite something. Want to see?”

“No! What was that about paperwork? I was very clear that they keep a detailed record in case I didn’t return. I guess I do get back.” Future Heywood One seemed relieved. “But if I got

back, why don't you remember time traveling? It was only two years ago from your point of view. I would think I would remember something like that. It's not like walking to the corner for a donut—something you've done quite frequently from the looks of it."

"I don't know," Future Heywood Two pondered. "Maybe I left before you get back."

"How is that possible? If I didn't get back yet, you wouldn't be there to leave. I must get back."

"Probably, at least until I showed up here... ah, now," Future Heywood Two said grimly. "Now that our timelines have intersected, we don't know how anything will turn out. I can show you a vizi that explains it all. Well, maybe not. I didn't really understand it."

"What's going on?" Heywood demanded.

"Well, apparently, there was a bureaucratic mess up of some kind." Future Heywood Two thought that should have been clear to everyone.

"But why are you here at all?" Heywood was very irritated. "Does that mean Viktor Moldova succeeded and Harris, Donner and Penthorpe, CPAs, LLC. had a hand in destroying the world economy?"

"Calm down, Heywood. This isn't all about you," Future Heywood One interjected.

Heywood gestured to the other two that they were all the same person.

"Yes, well true enough," Future Heywood Two conceded. "The point is as of thirty-four years from now Viktor Moldova hasn't returned. The world economy is limping along on tenterhooks waiting for some resolution."

"Are you telling me I have to live with this man stalking me from behind for at least two years? I refuse. I won't have it. Do something!" Heywood was indignant.

Brad Goldberg

The two Future Heywoods looked at him with condescension, as if he were a child asking why he couldn't keep a pony in an apartment.

"It doesn't work like that, Heywood," Future Heywood One began. "Whenever he leaves *this* now..."

"...has no effect on when he returns to then," concluded Future Heywood Two.

Heywood became very agitated. "Neither of you are making any sense." Heywood nodded in the direction of Future Heywood One, "If stopping Moldova before he leaves your time would have no effect on the future because he's already here in the past, how are we supposed to stop him at all?"

The Future Heywoods looked at each other. "That's a very good question," Future Heywood Two conceded.

"Didn't anyone tell you what you were supposed to do when you got here?" Future Heywood One asked Future Heywood Two.

"No," Future Heywood Two answered. "Didn't they tell you anything?"

"They just said go back and stop him," Future Heywood One said. "To be honest, no one thought this would work. Time travel is very new."

"They make a lot of improvements in two years. It's actually quite pleasant. A little hard on the digestion, but..."

"I can't believe you two," Heywood interrupted. "You mean neither of you has a plan? How are we supposed to stop him? Wait a minute, why didn't you go to the moment where Moldova actually is instead of bothering me?"

"Because he's hiding!" both Future Heywoods said as one.

"But how did he get there if you can't?"

Brad Goldberg

“No one really knows,” Future Heywood Two grumbled. “They tried to explain it, but it didn’t make any sense, something about time being more like a sponge than a solid.”

“Something about discontinuities in spacetime,” Future Heywood One added. “It’s very complicated.”

“Now what?” Heywood asked.

Before either of the other two future Heywoods could respond the TV in the living room switched on.

Heywood was startled. The future Heywoods were unfazed.

“That’s very rude,” Future Heywood One shouted toward the living room.

“Are we boring you?” Future Heywood Two demanded.

“At least turn it down,” Heywood pleaded. “Can he even hear us?”

The TV got quieter.

“How about that? I guess he can,” both Future Heywood’s proclaimed.

The room popped again, and there was a brief turbulence. “Of course, he can hear you,” a much older Heywood said to the group’s amazement. He was accompanied by another Heywood who looked identical to Future Heywood One.

“Now what?” Heywood whined.

“I’m glad I caught you,” Future Old Heywood said to the other two future Heywoods. “I was afraid you would’ve already have left. Playback please.” A three-dimensional projection of the kitchen floated in front of Future Old Heywood. The last five seconds of their interactions played back in the projection. “Oh good. It’s recording. They asked me to keep a record of everything. Where were we? Oh right. I’m glad I caught you.”

Brad Goldberg

Both future Heywoods tilted their heads and pondered Future Old Heywood and New Future Heywood One. “Why would we leave? We haven’t done anything yet,” Future Heywood Two finally asked.

“And why did you bring *him*?” Future Heywood One demanded pointing to the New Future Heywood One.

“You don’t have to be rude,” New Future Heywood One retorted.

“He was about to take on Viktor Moldova as a client. They sent me to stop him,” Future Old Heywood explained.

“They said that wouldn’t work,” Heywood bellowed.

“Well, they’ve changed their thinking about the interaction of timelines,” Future Old Heywood began. “Now, they believe there’s a persistence of action. Somebody crunched some numbers, and apparently by changing the coefficient of the time delta by a few millionths of a point, the universe would cease to exist without a persistence of action constant to correct for it. Good thing they discovered that or none of us would be here.” He made the same sniffing sound that Heywood made when he laughed at his own jokes.

“So, that’s it then. You’ve stopped him.” Future Heywood Two sounded relieved. “We can all go home.”

“That still doesn’t explain why *he*’s here,” Future Heywood One said, pointing to New Future Heywood One.

Future Old Heywood sighed. “No. It’s not over. It seems that Viktor Moldova managed to warn himself. He changed his identity. Now, no one knows who he is.”

“Can’t we just ask him? He’s right in the living room.”

“No,” Future Old Heywood answered emphatically.

Brad Goldberg

“Why not? He can hear us.” Heywood demanded.

“Because he’s hiding,” four Future Heywood’s said at once.

“I’m starting to remember that Moldova changed his identity,” Future Heywood Two mused.

Heywood was getting irritated again. “How come you didn’t remember that a few minutes ago?”

“Because old us just told us.” Future Heywood Two was very condescending. “Now, you know, I know, and they know,” he went on pointing to all the Future Heywoods in turn. “So, now we all share the memory, because you learned it before we came here.”

“No, I didn’t. I just learned it with all of you.” Heywood nearly spit the words.

“Yes, but this is before any of us existed in order to come here, so we now *have* the memory.” Future Old Heywood said the words very slowly hoping he could make Heywood understand.

“But he,” Heywood pointed to Future Heywood Two, “didn’t even remember time traveling.”

“Oh, that was before the new theory of timelines. I remember it very clearly now.” Future Heywood Two defended himself.

“But the physical universe didn’t change, just science’s understanding of it.” Heywood was certain that he was right.

The other Heywoods disagreed. “Hmmm,” they all demurred together.

Out of the corner of his eye, Heywood saw a shadow move in the living room.

“Time travel is very tricky, Heywood,” Future Heywood Two began.

Brad Goldberg

“It’s full of contradictions and logic pretzels,” New Future Heywood One continued. “It doesn’t really make sense when you think about it.”

“So, we have to conform to the latest theories,” Future Old Heywood jumped in. “That’s why their memories all conformed with each other once I explained the thinking from my time. We’re all just trying to keep up with consensus.”

“I think he may have left. I saw some kind shadow just now,” Heywood informed the others.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Future Old Heywood said.

A toilet flushing confirmed that Viktor Moldova was still in the apartment.

There was another popping sound and a disturbance in the air. A man dressed in a chintzy Civil War costume, obviously fake, appeared. “Oh sorry, I must have gotten off at the wrong stop. Not now-here! I don’t want to miss the reenactment.” He spoke as if to someone just out of sight and disappeared. The air rushed in to fill his space.

“Wow,” Future Old Heywood was impressed. “I guess time travel eventually becomes commonplace.”

“Well if it’s that easy, how come we haven’t been seeing people from the future all the time? How come this is the first time I’ve ever heard of it?” Heywood sniped.

“Is it?” Future Old Heywood asked.

Heywood began to remember how much of history now involved people from the future imparting their knowledge to accelerate science, prevent disasters, and generally improve the human condition. He just couldn’t remember anything specific.

“I think you’ll find the world outside is very different than the one you knew when you went to bed,” Future Heywood Two said helpfully.

Brad Goldberg

“So, you’ve all come back and assassinated Hitler, saved Kennedy, prevented slavery, cured cancer, et cetera?” Heywood actually felt relieved.

“Well, maybe,” Future Old Heywood wavered.

“And maybe not,” Future Heywood One intervened.

New Future Heywood One picked up the thread. “We’re not sure if we can change history. It seems like sometimes we can. Sometimes we can’t.”

“Sometimes there might be an ironic twist that makes all of our efforts futile,” Future Heywood Two added with a wry smile.

Before Heywood could absorb all of this, three men and two women in military uniforms appeared in the room. The popping was considerably louder than before, and the rush of air being displaced blew some papers off the counter. The military group was holding weapons that looked like guns but were covered in dials and meters. They looked from one Heywood to the other. “Which one of you is Heywood Penthorpe?” the leader asked.

“I am,” the Heywoods answered.

A man and woman in uniforms made of metallic fabric appeared. A small drone hovered above them. It pointed lasers at all of the Heywoods. The man and woman looked confused when they saw the first group of soldiers.

“We’ve got this,” the leader of the first group called out.

One of the women in his group smiled. Her teeth glowed a threatening red from the micro implants in the crowns of each tooth. A tattooed snake coiled around her forearm then rose up and hissed at the two newcomers.

“Nice ani-ink,” the soldier standing next to her whispered.

“Oh, I don’t think you’ve got this at all,” the man in the silvery micro body armor said.

Brad Goldberg

“It’s in all the textbooks at the academy,” the woman began, “You guys blow it completely.”

“Which one of you is Heywood Penthorpe?” the man in silver asked.

“I am,” all the Heywoods said emphatically.

“Heywood Penthorpe, you are under arrest.”

The lasers from the drone projected a dot on the forehead of each Heywood.

“For what?” Heywood demanded indignantly. “I assume we still have rights in your time. And yours,” he added including the future soldiers with a gesture.

“Of course, you have a right to know the charges,” the woman said. “Economic terrorism, blackmail, grand larceny, and murder.”

“Murder!” all of the Heywoods, present and future, gasped.

“Of whom?” Future Old Heywood wanted to know.

“Someone named Viktor Moldova,” the leader of the soldier group said. “Know him?”

“Actually, I don’t,” Heywood said smugly.

The TV switched off. “I think they’ve piqued his interest,” Future Old Heywood said quietly to New Future Heywood One.

“Careful,” the man in silvery suit said, “let’s not add lying to an officer of the law to your crimes.

“I’ve never met him,” Heywood protested.

“What about the rest of you?” the man asked.

All the future Heywoods looked at the floor.

“That’s what I thought,” the man said.

“But they don’t meet him for thirty years. How can I be responsible?”

Brad Goldberg

“You are Heywood Penthorpe, correct?” the woman asked.

“Yes, but...”

“All one and the same. Should we take them all?” she asked her partner.

“We really only need one,” the man said after a moment.

“Take him,” all of the Heywoods said pointing to one of the other ones.

“Wait. If Viktor Moldova is dead, my work is done,” Future Heywood Two declared.

There was a pop and a sucking sound. Future Heywood Two disappeared.

“I guess we’re no longer needed.” Future Old Heywood and New Future Heywood One left with a pop.

“No point in my staying.” Future Heywood One seemed stuck. He kept shifting his weight as if trying to move a chair with his momentum. “I told you, beta testing.” Then he was gone.

Heywood was left staring at five future soldiers and two even more future police officers.

“What now?” Heywood wondered aloud.

The soldiers and the police officers stared at Heywood.

“Things have changed,” the leader of the soldiers began. “It seems Moldova wasn’t murdered because he never returned.”

“Yes, I’m starting to remember that,” the man in silver said.

“Me too,” his companion officer said.

“Wait. Do you mean he just stays here?” Heywood was desperate.

“Don’t know,” the woman answered.

“Guess we didn’t blow it,” the leader of the soldiers sniped. “Better check those textbooks when you get back.”

Brad Goldberg

The lights implanted in the female soldier's teeth flashed multiple colors before she dimmed them.

There was a pop that seemed to suck all of the air out of the room for a moment and Heywood was alone. He looked around, desperate for help.

The TV switched back on and the volume was turned up very loud.

"If you're going to stay here, we need to make some rules!" he shouted to the living room.

The End