

The Question of Time Travel:

20/20

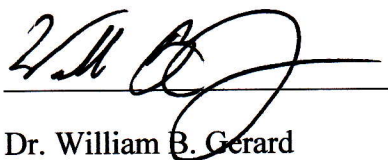
By Sabrina Anna Blaum

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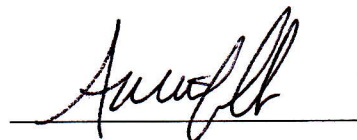
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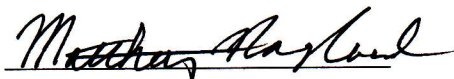
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Abstract

This thesis contemplates and discusses the logical feasibility of time travel with the intent to alter the past. After this discussion, the creative element of the thesis consists of the first part of a historical science fiction novel that depicts the attempt of a clandestine organization to prevent the Holocaust.

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Dedicated to the Memory of Barrett Alan Blake

The Question of Time Travel

Time travel is a subgenre within science fiction that has retained a consistent appeal through the decades, moving from H.G. Wells's more fantastical *Time Machine* to being able to draw from scientific theory, such as Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time*. Moreover, compared to other genres, it does not seem to be as influenced and altered by the transitory nature of modern tastes in literature and media; the basic structures and themes within science-fiction endure.¹ This study will look at causation, causal loops, and common paradoxes that arise from time travel, address the logical consistency of attempts to change the past via time travel, and finally consider the role of free will in time travel. Overall, this essay will argue that it is possible to portray the alteration of the past in a logically consistent and coherent manner.

When considering the mechanics of time travel in science fiction, different aspects arguably have to take precedence over realistic feasibility. As of now, and as far as it is known, time travel is impossible, and several scholarly disciplines focus on whether or not actual time travel is scientifically possible. However, this debate is almost irrelevant when it comes to fiction. The author of a time travel story has to create a universe where time travel is possible and where it does not violate the existing laws that govern the relevant universe. Even if science were to eventually discover that time travel is impossible, fiction writers obviously would be free to create worlds in which time travel is possible and logically sound.

Some scholarly disciplines, such as philosophy, for example, approach time travel from the perspective of logical consistency. In this field, most scholars argue that while time travel in itself does not necessarily have to create logical discrepancies, the concept

of changing the past remains problematic. This in part touches upon causation, which deals with the cause and effect of actions and events. Traditionally, people are inclined to believe that causes occur before the effects. For example, in order to be injured in an accident, the event “accident” has to transpire before the event “injury.” Placing the injury before the accident is illogical. Yet, in a universe where time travel is possible, there has to be room for backward causation.²

A universe containing time travel has to permit the possibility of the effect occurring, temporally, before the cause. Ordinarily, people think of causation as the relationship between one event which causes another event to occur, and that in this chain of events, the cause takes place before the effect. Lewis³ and other scholars argue that backward causation is impossible because it leads to either logically inconsistent situations, or it has to produce an extraordinary amount of coincidences in order to prevent paradoxes from arising (150). Much of the resistance to the idea of reversing the traditional and temporal order of causation comes from the fact that human beings live in a world that observes forward causation. We are born and grow; we continue to age and then die. In nature, we observe how events happen in temporal order as well. The idea that if ‘A’ causes ‘B,’ ‘A’ has to take place before ‘B’ occurs, seems to be an intrinsic belief that human beings share.

Most writers posit that a world in which causation runs backward would have to be a strange world indeed. In Philip K. Dick’s *Counter-Clock World*, time and causation, at some point in history, start to move backward. People leave their graves and “grow” younger.⁴ This is an instance where an author plays with the idea of backward causation and presents the audience with a world that looks unlike anything they are used to seeing

in real life. Yet, this is not a true example of time travel, and since it eliminates forward causation all together, it is not the same as the notion of backward causation existing in a universe that, for the most part, follows regular forward causation.

Since backward causation appears illogical at first, many argue against such a possibility. But logical inconsistency is not a predetermined outcome for backward causation. Much as with time travel to alter the past, it all depends on the empirical assumptions one makes in regard to the nature of time and the universe. There are empirical assumptions based on the nature of time and the structure of the universe that allow for backward causation to be logically consistent.

Any attempt to change the past can cause potential paradoxes and causal loops, and therefore most often seems logically inconsistent. The problem with changing the past comes from the suggestion that it would result in two events occurring at the same time, and both contradict each other. Lewis argues that "...events of a past moment are not sub-divisible into temporal parts and therefore cannot change" (150). For example, if Kate, on her thirtieth birthday, decides to travel back to the year when she was five years old, she would meet a temporal part of herself. The five-year-old Kate and the thirty-year-old Kate are the same person, but at different stages, at different times in their lives.

Yet, if Kate were to set out to change the past and tried, for example, to ruin the birthday party of her five-year-old self, according to Lewis, she will create a logical inconsistency. In order for Kate to succeed, there would have to be two different events taking place at the same time. In the original run of Kate's past, the birthday party has been a success. However, due to Kate's meddling with the past, there is now a scenario

where the birthday party has been ruined. Yet, the birthday party could not have been a success and a disaster at the same time.

Lewis argues that any successful attempt at changing the past additionally would create time paradoxes, which makes changing the past seem even less probable.

According to Lewis, a world that allows time travel would have to be "...different in fundamental ways from the world we think is ours" (145). Causal loops, or the predestination paradox, are an issue that arises in regard to time travel that alters the past.

In such scenarios, the effect occurs before the cause. One such example can be seen in the *Star Trek: Voyager* episode "Time and Again," in which *Voyager* arrives at a planet that had just seen a catastrophic explosion which annihilated all life. During their investigation, Captain Janeway and Lieutenant Paris are trapped in a subspace fracture and transported back in time. During the course of their investigation to the cause of the explosion, Janeway realizes that *Voyager's* attempt to rescue their crewmembers caused the planet wide disaster.⁵ Consequently, the crew of *Voyager* has seemingly caused this disaster before ever having arrived at the planet.

Lewis also mentions the grandfather paradox, where a person travels back in time to kill their grandfather, only to be stopped by a commonplace occurrence, such as slipping on a banana peel (149). This supposedly happens because it is impossible for a person to kill their grandfather since history has shown that the grandfather lived, given the fact that the grandchild exists in the first place to travel back in time with the intent to kill the grandfather. It is also argued, at this point, that in an effort to avoid such paradoxes a high number of coincidences have to play out.

A coincidence does not have a causal relationship with other events. For example, instead of slipping on a banana peel, a man trying to kill his grandfather also could have been thwarted by a flock of birds rising to flight in the exact moment he takes his shot. The birds would have disrupted his concentration or maybe startled him, so he would miss his target. Such events are not related to his ability to shoot a gun, for example. That is to say, he may have the “skill and training [necessary to complete his task, an] unobstructed line of fire, [a] locked door and the absence of any chaperone to defend the past....” Yet, while all of this means that he has the ability to shoot his grandfather, he cannot because of the “the simple fact that [g]randfather was not killed,” and moreover, lived past this day to have children of his own (151).

Therefore, in order to prevent him from killing his grandfather then, coincidences have to arise, such as the banana peel or the flock of birds. However, it is statistically unlikely that a person who possesses the ability to do something should repeatedly be thwarted by such random events. That is to say, while such a disruption might happen once or twice, if it transpires repeatedly, and each attempt to fulfill the intent is averted by coincidence, the situation violates the law of probability. Given these circumstances, time travel to change the past has to be impossible, according to Lewis and other scholars.

Yet, all of these concerns regarding causal loops and especially any paradoxes only apply if Lewis’s theory of time with no temporal parts holds true, or, if the person argues with that assumption in mind. However, Goddu, in his essay *Time Travel and Changing the Past* suggests an alternative theory where changing the past is logically sound. Goddu says that “...the exact nature of the universe and time is a matter for

empirical science to discover and so the claim that the events of temporal instants do not have temporal parts is an empirical truth, not a logical one” (20).⁶ This means the belief that affecting the past is impossible rests on the debatable empirical assumption that time has no temporal parts and therefore cannot accommodate two contradicting events. In his essay, however, he argues that such an empirical assumption is not a fact, and therefore, does not have to be correct. He introduces a theory that “...calls the temporal parts of temporal instants ‘hypertimes’” (20). These ‘hypertemporal’ instances are moments where time extends and allows for the occurrence of another event.

Goddu points out that this is similar to re-recording a movie. If a woman were to record a birthday party on her camera and later on record a wedding on the same memory card, the birthday party is overwritten by the wedding. Therefore, in Kate’s scenario, she can change the past and ruin the birthday party of her five-year-old self, but this “new” event will become the reality henceforth. That is, when Kate returns to her present, her family will only remember that the fifth birthday party of Kate was ruined. Goddu argues that the affected change will become the new reality, and one will have to live with all the consequences that follow the brought about change (23).

Goddu uses the example of the thirty-year-old Paul who travels back in time to kill his three-year-old self (18). He argues that after this deed, Paul will return to a present where he never existed and no one remembers him because in the new reality he created, he died at age three (23). However, this argument is only correct if it includes the premise that Paul, as a time traveler, exists outside of linear time during his travels. If he does not, he will be affected by his own changes and cease to exist after killing his younger self. According to Goddu, his “...hypertemporal model allows changing the past,

but...” doing so, comes “...with the consequence that when one changes the past one thereby sets in motion a new future” (32). If this is correct, then his theory includes the consequences of the actions of changing the past, and therefore, if Paul remains in linear time, he would have to experience the consequences of killing himself when he was three, which is that Paul never lived to see his fourth, much less his thirtieth birthday.

Even in a scenario where Paul returns to kidnap his younger self and brings the child back to the present, he still has to be outside of linear time to be able to accomplish this. Otherwise, his deeds again should erase him from existence because the past he has lived never occurred after he kidnapped his younger self. But the premise that a time traveler exists outside of linear time during his time travels assures that he is able to remain unaffected by the changes he has brought forth. Consequently, in order to remain logically consistent, Goddu’s theory, due to its acceptance of the permanent consequences of changes to the past, has to include the principle of a time traveler existing outside of linear time during his travels. Without this principle, a person could not survive killing their younger self.

Yet, it would also be feasible to argue that the time traveler remains part of linear time whenever he affects the past, and therefore directly experiences the consequences of his deeds. This means, in Goddu’s example, Paul would have to die after killing his younger self. Since there is no factual “truth” about such circumstances, and all scenarios reside in the realm of speculation, an author may choose to create a world where the time traveler is affected by his changes and therefore will cease to exist after killing his younger self. As long as the author is consistent in creating her fictional universe, it is

possible to choose either scenario for a world in which time travel to alter the past is possible.

Besides allowing only an empirical assumption where time has no temporal parts, Lewis also fails to recognize that the act of traveling back in time to fulfill the changes that have already occurred is a form of time travel. Overall, it is popular to argue that instances of people going back in time to fulfill what has already happened are not true examples of altering the past. Yet, such arguments are wrong, for even in those situations, the characters still have free will, or better, the ability to do otherwise.

While one could argue that readers do not know this unless they see the characters act in such a manner, it is also possible to say that anything that is not explicitly stated as either possible or impossible is open to play out either way. Before looking at an example of why traveling to the past and fulfilling what has already happened is a version of changing the past, it is important to look at the concept of free will.

Free will is a topic that has been discussed for thousands of years and within many disciplines. Philosophy offers the most relevant insight into this topic in regard to its connection to time travel literature. Depending on the school of thought, there are several different definitions of free will available; the most relevant definitions grow out of two of the major perspectives on free will within philosophy.

The first view is called *Incompatibilism*, and it argues that free will and determinism, the belief that preset and fixed conditions govern the outcome of any given event, cannot coexist. This viewpoint is split again into different subsections, whereby Determinists and Libertarians hold opposing views. Determinists believe that since all possible actions are influenced by predetermined conditions, people only have the

illusion of free will; while in reality they are unable to make decisions or partake in actions that are not somehow influenced by a force that rests outside of them and their control. Libertarians, on the other hand, believe that determinism is incorrect, and that a person is free, as long as there is an "...openness of alternatives, as well as an exercise of active control by the agent" (Clarke 3).⁷ That is to say, people are free if they have the option to do otherwise.

The second perspective is called *Compatibilism*, which proposes that free will and determinism can coexist without leading to any logical discrepancies. This is the case because Compatibilists have a different definition of freedom. Their definition does not necessitate the option to do otherwise, or as Campbell posits it: Compatibilism "...does not require alternative possibilities of action" (319).⁸ Therefore, according to this viewpoint, humans are free because their actions flow from their desires. Alternative options are irrelevant here, because peoples' desires determine them to a choice. Consequently, people are free if they can do what they want, but they are constrained by overall predetermined desires. This thesis agrees with the Libertarian/incompatibilist understanding of freedom, and this is the definition of free will that is relevant for further discussions.

The notion of free will is important to any time travel narrative because the act of time travel questions the possibility of free will. There are narratives in which time travel happens by accident and within such stories characters do not actively choose to travel through time, much like in the game *Chrono Trigger*, where the characters are thrown into the past by accident, while they are testing the properties of a teleportation device.⁹ Yet, it remains that the majority of time travel tales do include moments when the

characters make active choices. They decide to travel to the past or future, and they decide whether or not they will attempt to cause changes to the time frame they are visiting. The question, though, whether their decisions to participate in time travel are acts of free will or the fulfilling of fate depends on the individual author and the universe she has created.

The author obviously can create universes where her characters lack free will and are unable to do otherwise, that is, where they are forced to fulfill what has already happened, or where they think they are unable to do otherwise because they fear a catastrophic event will occur if they dare to act contrarily. Alternatively, the author can allow her characters the freedom to make new and different decisions than they seemingly have selected before. It all depends on whether or not the author has created a deterministic universe. There are advantages and disadvantages to both scenarios, though a story without free will, without the ability for the characters to do otherwise, might be more predictable than stories in a universe where the characters enjoy free will and are able to change their mind, and actively influence the circumstances of the story outside of what the reader knows has already happened.

The common notion, held by Lewis and other scholars, that time travel to fulfill what has already happened is not a form of altering the past might be incorrect when considering free will. One example of such an event takes place in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.¹⁰ In the novel, Harry and his friend Hermione travel back in time to save the lives of his godfather and a mystical creature. At the time when Professor Dumbledore suggests that with the aid of the time turner, a magical device allowing the wearer to travel through time, they may be able to save more than just one

life, Harry and Hermione are unaware that what they are about to do has already happened.

During their trip into the past, however, they realize that they are merely fulfilling what has already happened. Lewis and others argue that examples like this are not true changes to the past. Yet, this assumes that the actors, here Harry and Hermione, had no option to do otherwise, or to fail. Harry later mentions he had originally thought his late father had somehow cast the Patronus spell that had saved him from the Dementors. Yet, once he was in the past and waited for his father to appear, he realized he has to cast the spell because it had been him all along who had cast the spell in the original time frame (412). Consequently, Harry cast the Patronus spell and fulfilled what had already happened. Yet, Harry could have realized this too late, and then he would not have been able to save his past self.

This means that Harry could have failed in fulfilling what had already happened. Not only that, but once Hermione and Harry recognized that they were in the past to fulfill what had already happened, there was nothing there to force them to comply. They could have decided otherwise. Though they chose to fulfill what has already happened, it is not implicated that they would have been unable to change their minds.

Another time travel novel, the *Plot to Save Socrates* by Levinson,¹¹ focuses greatly on the question of free will in regard to time travel. The story revolves around a group of people from different time periods and their quest to save Socrates from committing suicide. In this novel, unlike in *Harry Potter*, the audience encounters a scenario where some characters fulfill their roles in the past/future reluctantly after they have discovered what they are doing. These characters only continue to fulfill their roles

because they feel trapped in a time loop and fear what will happen if they do not do what they know they must have done before (3458). Yet Thomas O'Leary/Alcibiades, the character who sets everything in motion, reveals close to the end of the book that he chooses to "...set in motion his part of the events that would..." push the rest of the characters into their respective roles (3874). He does so, apparently, because doing otherwise would have "unraveled" his life, as well as the lives of the others (3874).

Even though O'Leary/Alcibiades chooses to follow the path he had already walked, it still means that in this particular fictional universe, the characters have the *agency* to do otherwise. O'Leary/Alcibiades knew that by fulfilling what has already happened, that is, what he has experienced thus far, all events will occur as he knows them. Yet, he obviously could do otherwise. In fact, the narrator of the *Plot to Save Socrates* even says: "No ... nothing was irrevocable when it came to time travel..." (3633).

Considering that the ability to do otherwise is one of the characteristics of the Libertarian/incompatibilist perspective of free will, offering characters the option to refuse to fulfill the past, or allowing them to fail at fulfilling the past, means they are able to bring about an altered present, if they were to choose to do so. This suggests that even instances where the actors appear to be, or believe to be, forced to play out something that has already happened have to count as examples of time travel where the past has been changed. If characters have the option to refuse to set the wheels in motion, if they are able to *not* do something that has happened before, or if they can fail, all this indicates that whatever they have done before, even if they were unaware that their actions have already happened, they still had the *option* to do otherwise. It is important to note that

there is a notable difference between a person choosing, for various reasons, to fulfill what has already happened, and a person being *unable* to do otherwise.

It also becomes clear that many authors, to a degree, choose to create situations where their characters are, or at least feel, forced to act out events as they have already happened. If O'Leary/Alcibiades had refused, at the very end of the novel, to start the chain of events that set the entire time travel scenario into motion, nothing that the reader has read thus far in Levinson's book would have ever occurred. This is an interesting idea, and it might contain intrinsic value in regard to storytelling, but since the author is basically telling a story which in the end has never "happened," it also prevents the author from writing a potential sequel. Therefore, one could argue that the decision to prevent one's characters from stopping what has already happened comes down to the author's two-fold desires, not to negate or destroy their story, and more importantly, to retain the opportunity to write more tales within the created universe.

The earlier example of the *Star Trek: Voyager* episode "Time and Again" is not only an example of a causal loop; it is also an example of a character's ability to change what has already happened. When Janeway realizes that they are the cause of the disaster, she manages to prevent it by shooting her phaser at the temporal rift her crew is trying to open. Once she has prevented the disaster, everyone disappears and the episode returns to the moment when the crew first encounters the planet whose population previously had been wiped out by the explosion. This time, the planet and its inhabitants are alive and well, and no one on board *Voyager* remembers what has happened immediately before or after the time travel incident; in fact, they do not even remember that there ever was a time travel incident. Consequently, not only does this story show a predestination

paradox, but it also depicts an alteration of the past by letting the characters act differently than they had before, when the causal loop was created in the first place.

The creative writing portion of the thesis follows more closely Goddu's theory. The characters are able to change the past, and their changes have consequences that follow them through time and affect their present. In the created universe, characters will remain outside of linear time during their time travel, and therefore they will be able to remember the past as it had once occurred, even when they return to their present. Yet, no one else will retain dual memories. All other people, that is, anyone who did not travel into the past to affect any changes, will only remember life as it has unfolded in the newly created version.

Moreover, given Goddu's model, once the characters have changed the past, the only remaining past left to access through time travel is the new past they have created. This is true for everything that has been affected by the changes that were made. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that by changing an event or circumstances, not everything changes. In fact, depending on the scope of the changes, and the amount of people that are affected in this manner, more or less of the original past is retained.

Goddu, in a personal communication, explains this with the example of someone painting over a section of wallpaper:

Paul starts painting over the bottom layer when he travels back and kills his younger self (of course anything prior to his arrival is untouched.) Some events after his arrival are pretty much the same as before, but others are changed. He jumps forward into the future

and arrives at how things are according to the second layer of paint (and the bottom layer is no longer accessible).¹²

This means that the rest of the room remains as it was before, only the section that was painted over is changed, and from there consequences of the actions spread through time. Yet, time travelers could still go back to either the situation they have created, or to the sections of time that were left unchanged by their deeds. The only section that remains inaccessible to the time travelers is the aspect they have changed, or as per Goddu's example, the section of the wall that received a layer of paint. Nevertheless, it is still possible for time travelers to effect changes to a moment in the past that has already seen change from a previous time travel event; the only moments truly inaccessible are those that have already been changed, as if they never existed in this already altered timeline.

Fiction allows the writer to ignore common scientific knowledge as well as create a universe that works in completely different ways than the one in which we all live. Therefore, one could argue that the fiction author is able to bend, and at times even break, common rules and laws of the shared reality we all live in, but she should not break the rules and laws of the universe she has created. Given that she is able to create a universe that allows her to tell any story, it should be unnecessary to break any established fictional rules, since she invented them in the first place. Thorough planning is necessary, and a complete outline of the laws and rules of a creative universe might be helpful, considering that as a story unfolds, unforeseen scenarios might challenge already established rules. In order to tell a believable story that an audience will accept as logically feasible, the author also has to commit to the necessary research in her field.

Overall, when dealing with scientific concepts or ideas to which there are no current universally accepted answers, the most important step is to create a logically consistent universe. Most scholars believe time travel to alter the past is impossible based on the premise they use to approach this topic. Yet as this discussion has shown, if one changes the premise from which to consider time travel and its impact on the past, the situation becomes vastly different.

As long as the created universe is consistent, a fiction writer may choose to use any premise upon which she builds her story. In the end, people allow commonly held assumptions to turn into conventional facts, even though they are merely expectations based on a specific set of empirical beliefs. If one approaches the situation from a different set of empirical beliefs, it is possible to draw different conclusions. As long as nothing is proven, one should be able to suggest different arguments, based on diverging empirical beliefs.

Finally, even if one day scientific facts will prove one set of beliefs correct, the fiction writer may still embrace her artistic liberties and create a universe where these facts are incorrect or irrelevant. As long as her universe and narrative is coherent and consistent in the application of its laws, the readers will most likely consider the events in her story to be believable or realistic, according to the relevant universe the author has set out to create, enabling the audience to successfully suspend their disbelief.

Notes

1. Examples of time travel fiction include: Ray Bradbury, *A Sound Of Thunder And Other Stories* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005); Michael Caldon, and

Roald Dahl, *Taste And Other Tales* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1999); Stephen Fry, *Making History* (New York: Random House, 1997); David Gerrold, *The Man Who Folded Himself* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2003); Robert A. Heinlein, and Andrew Wheeler, *Off The Main Sequence* (New York: Science Fiction Book Club, 2005); Dean R. Koontz, *Lightning* (New York: Putnam, 1988); Michael Moorcock, *Behold The Man* (London: Allison & Busby, 1969); Tim Powers, *The Anubis Gates* (New York: Ace Books, 1997); Timur Vermes, *Er Ist Wieder Da* (Eichhorn-Verlag: 2012); and Joss Whedon, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. "Time Of Your Life" (Dark Horse Comics, 2009).

2. For further and more detailed information regarding this topic see: Joseph Berkovitz, "On Chance In Causal Loops" *Mind* 110.437 (2001): 1-23; John Earman, "Causation: A Matter Of Life And Death" *The Journal of Philosophy* 73.1 (1976): 5-25; D. H. Mellor, "Causation And The Direction Of Time" *Erkenntnis* 5.1/3 (1991): 191-203; Ulrich Meyer, "Explaining Causal Loops" *Analysis* 72.2 (2012): 259-264; and Bradley Monton, "Time Travel Without Causal Loops" *Philosophical Quarterly* 59.234 (2009): 54-67.
3. Lewis, David. "The Paradoxes Of Time Travel." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13.2 (1976): 145-152. Hereafter cited parenthetically. For additional reading on time travel paradoxes see: Marie-Laure Ryan, "Temporal Paradoxes In Narrative" *Style* 43.2 (2009): 142-164; Peter B. M. Vranas, "Can I Kill My Younger Self? Time Travel And The Retrosuicide Paradox" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 90.4 (2009): 520-534; and Kayla

- McKinney Wiggins, "Epic Heroes, Ethical Issues, And Time Paradoxes In Quantum Leap" *Journal Of Popular Film And Television* 3 (1993): 111-120.
4. Dick, Philip K. *Counter-Clock World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002.
 5. Kemper, David, and Michael Piller. "Time And Again." *Star Trek: Voyager*. Dir. Les Landau. UPN. 30 Jan. 1995. Television. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
 6. Goddu, G.C. "Time Travel And Changing The Past: (Or How To Kill Yourself And Live To Tell The Tale)." *Ratio* 16.1 (2003): 16-32. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
 7. Clarke, Randolph K. "Libertarian Accounts Of Free Will." *Oxford: OUP Premium*, 2003. eBook Collection.
 8. Campbell, Joseph Keim. "A Compatibilist Theory Of Alternative Possibilities." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*. 88.3 (1997): 319-330.
 9. *Chrono Trigger*. Square Company, Limited. Japan. 1995. Video Game.
 10. Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 1999. Pages of interest: 392-415. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
 11. Levinson, Paul. *The Plot To Save Socrates*. New York: Tor, 2006. Kindle. Instead of page numbers, references to this book will offer location numbers as found in the Kindle edition. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
 12. Goddu, G.C. "Re: Time Travel And Changing The Past." Message to the author. 10 April 2015. E-mail.

20/20

Chapter I

It'll Be Fine

Elise Benton's fingers drummed on her folded legs. Her eyes trailed over the mahogany door in front of her and settled on the black embossed letters spelling *Oversight Committee*. She glanced at her partner Daniel Hahn sitting next to her before her eyes drifted to the door leading back into a hallway.

"How much longer, do you think?" Elise muttered to Daniel.

"Dunno." He glanced at his watch. "We're supposed to leave at noon, so there's still time."

Elise groaned, closing her eyes. "I hate these meetings. Not like anything's going to change."

"Procedures, and didn't you want to ask about—"

The door flung open.

Clearing his throat, Daniel nudged Elise and they rose and entered the conference room.

"Good morning, Ms. Benton, Mr. Hahn. Please take your seats so we may begin."

The distinct alto of Petra Wills, head of the OC, rang out. "Do you have any final questions or concerns regarding the *Titanic* mission brief?" Petra asked while typing on her tablet.

"Yes. The particulars of the current mission are not ideal for an official field test for the Personal Displacement Guards. I'm aware all preliminary tests were promising and the previous time jump with the Temporal Displacement Aggregator did not interfere

with the functioning of the PDG. Nevertheless, I wonder if a different mission might serve as a better field test.” Elise’s voice faltered.

Petra motioned for Elise to continue.

“Once on the ship, we will be surrounded by over two thousand passengers. It will be difficult to avoid physical contact. Collisions with the unseen could create panic among the passengers, making the mission more complicated.” Elise didn’t want to upset the Committee, she already had several reprimands in her file that proved doing so was ill-advised, but her face at times betrayed her. Her father often said her facial expressions read like an open book. To this day she sometimes wondered how one can read a closed book. Wasn’t it a given that to read a book it had to be open?

“We have considered this concern, Ms. Benton, but we feel both of you are trained well enough to handle this situation. The PDG needs to be tested on a real mission as soon as possible, and we have the utmost confidence in you.”

Elise’s eyes narrowed but she remained silent.

“Any other questions?” Petra asked.

“On page sixty-five of the brief, within section three, it states we should return the moment of the *Titanic*’s collision. How can we learn everything about this event if we leave so soon, given it took the ship over two and a half hours to sink? Would it not be helpful to stay longer and observe?” Daniel was asking a question Elise had rejected earlier.

Clenching her jaw, Elise tried to catch Daniel’s eye, but his eyes remained on Petra.

Yes, staying on the *Titanic* longer meant more data, but it also led to watching the panic and misery of over two-thousand people. Watching most of them die. Working as an Observer was hard because one could never intervene. However, this time they'd also be invisible, isolated, thanks to the PDGs they would be wearing.

Their missions seldom involved high casualty rates, and if they did, the Observers were never at the forefront of those events, or in such close quarters. Trained to resist the urge to interfere with history, Observers underwent rigorous psychological preparation to remain as emotionally detached as possible during missions. Still, the mere idea of staying on board after the impact made Elise sweat and her stomach drop.

“Yes, we did consider this, Mr. Hahn, but we’re not convinced the data you’d be collecting if you stayed longer is worth the risk to your safety.”

“You aren’t concerned with our safety when it comes to the use of the PDG.” Elise couldn’t fathom why she had said this, since she did *not* want to stay on board the ship past the impact. *Being annoyed with someone isn't a reason to argue for a case.* Elise dropped her eyes at Daniel’s raised eyebrows and pursed lips.

“We’re always concerned about the safety of our Observers,” William Ciane turned and took off his glasses. “Let me be clear, we neither understand nor appreciate your insinuations, Ms. Benton.” His pale face reddened.

“I’m sure you don’t.”

Daniel kicked her leg.

“At the most, we’d be willing to let you use your own judgments as to whether or not you think it’d be beneficial for you to stay longer.” Petra suggested, glowering at Elise and William.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Daniel smiled at Petra.

Elise shifted in her seat.

“Are there any other questions or concerns?” Petra raised her eyebrows at Daniel and Elise.

Both shook their heads.

Sighing, Petra entered more notes into her tablet before looking up. “It seems you’re set to go. Please remember the mission debriefing is scheduled for tomorrow at two pm.” Petra nodded at the two Observers and dismissed everyone.



“Must you always antagonize the OC? I don’t understand you sometimes, your aggravation with Ciane made you argue *for* my suggestion when you almost tore my head off yesterday for raising the issue,” Daniel hissed at Elise while they strode toward the elevators.

“Not here,” Elise replied, eyeing the janitor passing by and whistling a familiar tune. She repeatedly punched the button for the elevator, and once inside Elise slid her keycard to activate the retinal scanner. A red light beam activated, scanning both Elise and Daniel.

“Retina scans accepted,” a female voice said. A panel opened, revealing a pad of buttons on the elevator wall. Daniel keyed in the code to send the elevator to the basement, the actual home of Chronos, and the Temporal Displacement Aggregator.

Elise marched down the corridor and sidestepped several co-workers. “You’re right, and I don’t understand why the OC drives me up the wall. You’d think after dealing

with them for eight years I'd have learned to play nice. It's just... they make all the decisions but they don't understand what it's like," she sighed.

"Yes, it's not like we're having this conversation for the first time. Anyone ever tell you that you got a problem with authority?"

"What? No! I mean, I don't. You know, I was a police officer before joining Chronos, and what about Dr. Lake?"

"Sure, there are always exceptions to every rule, one example, Dr. Lake." Daniel waved off before scoffing, "The police? Please! You left them when? Eleven years ago? You were twenty-four, right? It's not like you gave them a real chance and given time, I'm sure you'd have had problems with authority there, too."

"Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence. I'm not a trouble-maker!"

"I never said you were, Elise, but you don't do something because some higher ranking person tells you to, you know?"

"I follow orders! Come on, that's all we Observers *ever* do." Elise furrowed her brow.

"Yes, you follow them because you agree with the missions and procedures. Even if the OC drives you mad, you overall approve of our job. Whenever you don't, you end up ignoring the guidelines from the briefings." Daniel scratched his head. "It's remarkable they haven't fired you yet."

"It's not like I disregard procedures on purpose. Sometimes stuff happens and you need to adjust."

"Yeah sure. Don't forget, I'm usually right there with you. Have you ever noticed these situations often occur whenever you have an issue with some of our orders?"

“Coincidences, nothing more. It’s not my goal to break rules.”

“I never said so, but I’m telling you, they don’t like you and it’s not the best idea to make enemies of people who have the power to fire you.”

“Dr. Lake—”

“Dr. Lake won’t be able to save you if you go overboard.”

“Not what I was going to say. I meant Dr. Lake is responsible for hiring and firing Observers.”

“Sure, sure, but who oversees Lake?”

Elise froze. “What are you talking about? Overseeing Dr. Lake? The inventor of the Temporal Displacement Aggregator *and* founder of Chronos?” Elise laughed, but a smidgen of fear flickered in her russet brown eyes. The soft planes of her face scrunched up in consternation.

“Look, all I’m saying is, be more careful.”

“Yeah, I feel like I suffer a split personality whenever I’ve got to deal with the OC. I’ll try to restrain myself more in the future, I promise.” Elise smiled at her partner, who grinned back.

“So, since I’ve set your head straight, *again*, let’s get to business, huh?” Daniel pushed a button to enter the lab. After another retinal scan, the door unlocked and slid open.

“You did no such thing, my friend.”

Daniel chortled, strolling to his locker to dress for the mission.

“You just appealed to my common sense.”

“Didn’t think you had such a thing,” Daniel said, putting on his jacket with a laugh.

“Ha, ha,” Elise stepped to the cabinet holding the PDG, the conductor bracelet and the activation key for the actual time travel. She placed the items on a desk close to the blinking TDA console and slipped on her trousers before shrugging on her shirt and suit jacket.

“So you’re going as a guy again? Or better yet, a 13-year-old boy?”

Glowering at her friend Elise turned toward Daniel. “You never listen in any of our mission briefs, do you? Have you seen what women wore during the days of the *Titanic*? I can’t go on this mission wearing an Edwardian dress.” Marching back to the desk with the PDG devices, Elise glanced over her shoulder and retorted, “Maybe *you* can wear a dress this time?” before laughing at Daniel’s blank expression.

Slipping on the wristband, Elise activated the PDG for one last test run.

Daniel smirked, seeing Elise disappear in front of his eyes.

“Am I gone?” Elise waved her hands in front of Daniel's face.

“No, you're not gone. Just invisible.” Daniel felt a punch on his upper arm.

Elise turned off her PDG and reappeared. “Try yours.”

As soon as Daniel vanished, Elise put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, squinting, searching for any irregularity in the void before her. There was nothing.

“Isn’t it weird the PDG is an optical illusion?”

“What do you mean?”

“The computer in this wristband makes the atoms of your body appear to move so fast you become invisible to the naked eye. It’s amazing it can fool a video camera or a computer, too.”

“Yes, so?” Elise squinted toward Daniel’s voice.

“Think about it, would you also be invisible if no one was there to..., well, not see you? Because, your atoms aren’t moving any faster, it’s the PDG that creates that illusion, and for an illusion to work, someone’s gotta see or record it, right?”

“I guess... isn’t this along the lines of ‘if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?’”

“And that’s what makes it weird.” Reappearing, Daniel held up the PDG. “I like the facial feature and skin tone adjustment settings better than the invisibility one. It can make you look like a native in any country.”

“Yeah, I like that too.” Elise activated her PDG, and watched her golden brown skin turn pale.

“Anyway, how long before the PDGs are drained?”

“Without recharging, they last thirty-six hours. Remember the test run when Andy, invisible, walked across Trafalgar Square in 1866 to see if the TDA had messed with it? I’m aware the OC considers this a perfect test run, but all he did was take a stroll in nineteenth-century London. That’s not a real test!” Elise sighed, putting her long black hair into a bun. “Who knows what the unpredictable conditions of a real mission will do to this thing?”

“Yeah, I’m also not convinced the PDG won’t have any issues, but at least it has a self-destruct sequence. Makes me feel much better about keeping people’s hands off it in the past.”

“True. Doesn’t make this the right mission for the first real field use of the PDG, though.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” Elise said as they both turned and walked toward the Temporal Displacement Aggregator. She glanced at the screen on her right. The countdown for the *Titanic* mission had started when the OC had approved the assignment, and all that was needed was the handprint of a registered Observer to activate the trip.

“What time will we arrive on board?” Daniel asked before stepping on the gunmetal-gray platform of the TDA.

“Your memory is awful. I sometimes wonder how you ever managed to land this job,” Elise mumbled, checking to make sure the silver pendant of the activation key was touching her skin. “We’ll arrive at 11:00 pm, forty minutes before the collision. So we have time to investigate the surroundings and maybe, we can bump into a few people who will end up thinking the ship was haunted. Hey, maybe *we* are the sources of these rumors.” Elise stepped onto the platform next to Daniel, both scheduling their PDG to initiate its invisibility sequence after a thirty-second break.

“My memory might be dreadful, but at least I’m not cynical,” Daniel put his left hand on the activation tower of the TDA. Elise followed suit, and the TDA platform vibrated.

“Oh, and remember, right before eleven-forty pm, stay away from the starboard side, that’s the right side of the ship. It’s where the ship will hit the iceberg, or pack ice, or whatever she’ll hit. We don’t want to be there.”

“Don’t worry, I remember. Not like I could forget with you on my case about it after every one of the four briefings. I’d have been shocked if you forgot to mention it at least one last time today.”

“Says the man with the self-proclaimed terrible memory.”

“It’s not *that* terrible, OK?”

“*Titanic* mission set up complete, hold position, countdown active. Transfer in five, four, three, two, one...” The voice of the computer fell silent and Elise felt the familiar tug in the lower pit of her stomach when the TDA pulled her back in time.



Elise materialized contorted, coughing and heaving the last droplets of stinging sea water onto the TDA platform. She kept her eyes shut and shuddered as her sodden, icy clothes clung to her slender form.

Elise was back in 2020, but it changed nothing. Daniel was dead. Her partner had died, seventy years before he was born.

They never should have used the PDG units. Without them, Elise would have seen Daniel right away after he fell off this godforsaken ship. While Observers wearing PDGs could locate one another through an integrated motion sensor, once Daniel’s PDG had been doused in ice-cold water, the sensor became useless. Without the PDG, Elise would have seen Daniel, and she could have reached him before he died of exposure.

The water had been so cold. Tensing, Elise opened her eyes, blinking away tears while she gaped at the pale face of her partner. Daniel's lips were blue and his eyes were framed by deep shadows. Transfixed, Elise watched icy droplets of salt water dripping from his ash-colored hair.

Jolting into action, Elise bit by bit rolled Daniel off of her shoulder and onto the platform. She jumped off and punched the alarm button on the control panel of the TDA, flinching at the shrill klaxon and bright, flashing red light that filled the room. Elise sunk down next to the TDA platform when the lab doors sprang open, admitting the Chronos medical team.

“What happened?” Alina Drake, Chronos’ chief physician, rushed to Daniel’s prone figure.

“He fell in. The water, it was so cold... I couldn’t reach him in time.” A gloomy shadow fell over Elise’s eyes.

“How long was he submerged?” Alina and her team placed heating blankets on Daniel while running infusions of warm saline.

Elise rose. “Four, maybe five minutes? I couldn’t find him!”

“Let’s see.”

“You think you might be able to revive him?”

Alina’s eyes never left Daniel, “Hypothermia is an issue, but I’m more worried about his heart.”

Elise trembled when a flat line ran across the attached heart monitor screen. The persistent shrill noise resonated in her ears and her eyes fell on Daniel’s pale and placid features. *There’s no chance. Dead.* Daniel. Her partner. Her friend. They'd spent so much

time together these last eight years, and besides Luca and Owen, Daniel is her closest friend. *Was*, Elise shook. Wasn't she too young to use past tense when referring to people she cared about this often? *Was*, images of Owen tortured her. Sweet, gentle and funny Owen. Her longest relationship and only engagement. He was a 'had been,' too, and not because they broke-up. How Elise wished Owen's status as a 'had been' was due to a break-up. No, her fiancé was dead. Shot and killed. Daniel's accident could have been avoided, much like Owen's death could have been prevented, had she managed to take the shot. Back then, she had been paralyzed. Her fiancé's life on the line, and instead of taking a clear shot, she had stood there, rooted to the ground, like a god damned statue.

Owen had died almost eleven years ago, several years before she joined Chronos. After his death, Elise had handed in her badge right away; any police officer unable to shoot a perpetrator when necessary was useless.

There are no do-overs for the past, Elise's pacing stilled. Changing the past. Turning around, Elise gawked at the TDA. It was right there, the past, in the palm of her hand.

As Elise stepped closer to the TDA, the beeping of the portable heart monitor, hunting for a sinus rhythm, faded away. *You can't do this! What about the non-interference policy? It's just one life, though. You can never know the consequences of your actions, it could be a disaster. How could saving one life cause a disaster? The butterfly...* Elise's mind spun, the tendrils of a headache forming behind her temples. She hurried in the direction of the computer terminal.

"Ms. Benton?" Alina called out.

Elise whirled around, her voice shrill. "Yes?"

“I’m sorry, but it appears that Mr. Hahn has suffered a cardiac arrest upon his immersion in the cold water.”

“I...uh, I understand. Thank you, Dr. Drake.”

Alina nodded and turned to follow her team, already transporting the stretcher with Daniel’s body out of the lab.

Once they were gone, Elise turned back toward the computer screen of the TDA. She reloaded the *Titanic* mission data and altered the time before adjusting the coordinates. Elise hadn’t been able to save Owen all these years ago, but maybe Daniel didn’t have to die. She could go back... back to the moment right after the collision. She’d need the PDG so she wouldn’t risk running into her past self. Once she’d reach Daniel’s position she’d drag him away from the edge. Or maybe she could knock him out and hide him somewhere? No, that wouldn’t work. Her past self would be able to use the PDG motion sensor to zone in on Daniel and if she found them... Elise wasn’t sure what would happen if past and future selves interacted, but then again, she could disappear before her past self reached them. But would she also show up on her counterpart’s motion sensor?

She entered the code and hoped Dr. Lake hadn’t changed the password. After a few seconds, she smiled at the TDA’s confirmation code blinking on the screen. Elise finalized the data for the coordinates and timeframe of her new trip, shaking her head at the illicit use of her photographic memory.

She stepped back onto the platform before gazing once more into the empty lab, envisioning all the rules she was about to break. This might end her job at Chronos. Taking a deep breath, Elise initiated the new trip by placing both hands on the towers of

the platform. The computer announced the mission and a shudder ran through Elise when the countdown initiated. A wave of grief hit Elise when she saw Vivienne Lake enter the lab just before she was thrown back in time.



For the second time in three hours, Elise materialized on the platform of the TDA in tears. Still soaked, Elise didn't heed the icy clothes sticking to her skin. She had failed. Daniel was still dead. At least she had been able to avoid an encounter with her past self, but that was no consolation. Maybe if there'd been more time to think of a better plan? Elise could have gotten to Daniel in time to prevent him from tumbling overboard. *This is a nightmare.* Elise dropped her face into the palms of her hands and sniffled. She curled up on the platform not noticing she wasn't alone.



Vivienne Lake had set the computer to alert her as soon as the TDA powered up to return Elise. According to the time frame and coordinates entered, she knew her protégée had returned to the *Titanic*. The equal passing of time in the past and present assured Vivienne wouldn't have to wait too long for Elise's return.

Is there a way to keep this from the OC? No, what even... What had Elise been thinking? She was already in serious trouble for the mission and the unanswered questions regarding her partner's death. Now she'd added an unauthorized trip with the TDA to the list. But it was more than that; Elise intended to break the principal rule of the Institute. No one had ever tried to alter history. The Institute's non-interference directive

existed for a reason. How could anyone predict the multitude of consequences that an attempt to alter the past would generate?

The computer emitted a rhythmic beeping and Vivienne scurried to the lab.

When the lab door swished open, Vivienne froze before shuffling closer. Her gaze flickered from her beloved TDA to Elise's sobbing form on the platform. *Why would she cry like this? Wait, did this mean she had failed? Would it be appropriate to offer comfort?* Vivienne knelt next to Elise and tapped her heaving shoulder.

Elise stilled before rushing to lift herself up.

Vivienne caught Elise's eyes the moment her protégée's face fell.

"Dr. Lake, I, uh, I'm so sorry." Elise stuttered before dissolving into another bout of gut-wrenching sobs.

"Yes," Vivienne patted Elise's shoulder, who needed a few moments to calm down.

"It didn't work. I tried... I tried to save him but I couldn't... I was too late. There were so many people and they were running, shoving and shouting."

"You attempted to save Mr. Hahn?"

"Yes, and it was all for nothing. Daniel is still dead."

"I see."

"That is all you have to say?" Elise's voice rose.

"I have plenty to say, but this is neither the time nor the place. We will need to come up with a plan to..." Before Vivienne could suggest retreating to her office and strategizing a report for the OC, the lab door slid open. Vivienne turned and sighed when

William Ciane joined them. The smug, immaculate man who'd love nothing more than to see her gone.

“Good evening, Dr. Lake. May I inquire why you are sitting here chatting instead of leading Ms. Benton to be debriefed about the death of Mr. Hahn? Not to mention, about her *illicit* use of the TDA?” William gave Elise a disdainful once-over.

“I was about to lead Elise to my office and question her about the events of the last several hours,” Vivienne fumed.

“I'm sure you were, but I think we better relocate the interview to the main conference room. I've taken the liberty of informing my colleagues of the circumstances and they have agreed to convene there in...” William looked at his watch, “five minutes. May I suggest a change of clothes for Ms. Benton? Don't dawdle.” He turned and left.

“It'll be fine,” Vivienne whispered, squeezing Elise's hands while pulling her up from the platform. Vivienne tilted her head to the side as fresh tears filled the younger woman's eyes.



Leaving the basement, they headed straight for the main conference room, the same room Elise had sat in with Daniel mere hours ago. She should have insisted on choosing a different assignment for the first field test of the PDGs. She knew the *Titanic* mission contained too many complex variables. She knew its parameters were harder to predict than most. They were prepared, as always, but it wasn't enough. Elise had feared the use of the PDG but none of the OC members had been willing to listen. She felt the comforting rush of anger fill her, driving away the cold despair that had been her constant companion since leaving the *Titanic*. Taking a deep breath, Elise tried to focus on her

rage. Anger was crucial. She would show them what they'd done and what their stubbornness had cost.

Steeling herself, Elise entered the OC's conference room followed by Vivienne. All members, including William, were already present and wore expressions ranging from confusion and anguish to annoyance and scorn. Petra's expression was impassive, but her eyes were weary.

"Dr. Lake, Ms. Benton, please take a seat," Petra instructed before sitting down. "We have been informed of the events occurring over the last several hours by Dr. Ciane, and while there will be a formal investigation, both into the mission and concerning the unauthorized use of the TDA by Ms. Benton, we all agree we would like to hear Ms. Benton's version of both trips. Let's start with what led to the death of Mr. Daniel Hahn." Petra leveled a glare at Elise.

"What happened on the *Titanic*? *Your* insistence on using the damn PDG on this mission killed Daniel."

Chapter II

Determined

“Maybe we should hear the full story, Ms. Benton.” Petra said, playing with the string of the tea bag dangling out of the cup in front of her. “Let’s start at the beginning.”

Elise balled her hands into tight fists. “We arrived on the *Titanic* as planned and the PDG worked adequately. There were no collisions with the passengers... uh, but there weren’t a lot of people on deck, not at first anyway.” Elise shifted in her seat. “We did our checks and everything looked acceptable. Once the accident became imminent, we moved further away from the impact site, but we remained close enough to see what was going on,” Elise paused and her eyes found Vivienne who smiled encouragingly. “The collision happened, it... uh... it was an iceberg. The noise of the ice tearing the hull apart was... deafening. Uh, the crew became agitated and ran below deck.” Elise coughed, hugging her torso with both arms.

“Please continue, Ms. Benton,” William urged.

“I... uh... I wanted to leave since we’d seen what had happened and staying longer wasn’t worth the risk. Daniel disagreed. He wanted to find out if the crew could have prevented the sinking of the ship. We argued while moving further astern and when the starboard bow section started to sink... by the time we were close to the second class staterooms, people hastened on deck and the area became crowded, fast.” Elise coughed harder.

Elle Hillshire rose from her seat to grab a bottle of water and hand it to Elise.

“Thank you,” Elise offered her a small smile before gulping down half the bottle.

“Daniel had been trailing back..., I guess he’d tried to gather as much data as possible. I

told him to hurry... No one could see us because of the PDGs, but a group of panicked passengers ran and plowed right into us. I'd managed to step aside but Daniel... he must have still been at the tighter passageway, right next to the railing. I mean, I didn't see it but they somehow must... when they ran into Daniel... He... uh, must have lost his balance, and..., he fell over the railing. He screamed, and... uh, there was a splash." Elise looked away.

"What happened next, Ms. Benton? How did you manage to reclaim Daniel's body?" William moved forward in his seat, his eyes focused on Elise's stricken form.

Elise's head snapped up. "Daniel's body?" Her mind drifted back to the shocking sound of Daniel tumbling overboard, and his scream echoing in her earpiece.

"Daniel? Can you hear me?" Elise shouted as she raced to Daniel's previous position. There was no answer, and only a dim crackling sound before silence filled her ear. The head-set didn't even emit static.

No, no, no! Elise huddled in a corner and covered her face with her hands, taking deep breaths so she wouldn't scream or cry. Elise directed her focus on the schematics of the ship she'd studied. Daniel had fallen from the deck next to the cargo cranes, which, considering the ship's height of 175 feet and her draft at around sixty feet meant he'd fallen into the ocean from about one-hundred feet high. Elise sprinted to the railing and looked down, trying to make out the water. It was a steep drop, and Daniel couldn't survive long in the freezing water. *What if he drowns?* Elise had to reach him and transport them back to Chronos.

The motion sensor on her PDG showed Daniel right below her position, but... *What the hell?* Slapping the device, Elise dipped her head. Why was there a third dot? And where did it just go? Something must have interfered with the sensors. Annoyed at having wasted precious seconds distracted by a sensor glitch, Elise flung herself off the ship.

Water splashed around her and liquid pain coursed through her, rattling her all the way to her bones. The ocean transformed into a sea of needles, making her lungs burn and her eyes fill with tears while she struggled to break through the surface. Ice-cold murky water, coated with pale foam, surrounded her. Coughing, Elise spewed mouthfuls of briny water before gathering her bearings.

She rechecked the screen, but the cold water had wreaked havoc on the motion sensor. Shuddering, Elise swam toward Daniel's last known location. After a few strokes numbness spread through Elise's body, but her legs pedaled, pushing her closer to Daniel floating nearby. She grabbed him and lifted her hands above the water, fumbling out her pendant and connected the activation key with the conductor bracelet, initiating the time transport sequence.

"I am assuming the drop in internal body temperature deactivated Mr. Hahn's PDG?" Petra's voice pulled Elise back to the present.

"Yes, uh... I didn't see him at first, right after I'd jumped. It took me a moment to reach him."

"What happened once you returned, Ms. Benton?" William asked.

“We materialized on the platform of the TDA and I triggered the alarm to notify the medical team. Dr. Drake was on call and they tried to revive Daniel, but he’d had a heart attack and there was no.... After they’d left, I... I decided to go back in time again.” Elise shoved her shaky hands into her pants pockets.

Silence filled the room.

“So, you decided to create your own mission?” William’s eyes turned darker.

“Yes, I mean, it was...” Elise trailed off, closing her eyes for a moment.

“What?” William said.

“Daniel never should have died.”

“Many people never should have died, Ms. Benton. Do you want to go back in time and attempt to save them all?” William’s unctuous voice rang out.

“Of course not.”

“What exactly happened when you returned to the *Titanic*?” Petra interrupted the glaring match between Elise and William. “I’m assuming your attempt was not successful?”

“No.”

Ten minutes before the incident, and still soaked to the bone, Elise appeared on the *Titanic* armed with a new PDG. She had cut it short, trying to avoid any potential run-ins with her past self. Consulting the motion sensor for the exact locations of Daniel and her counterpart, Elise hurried across the deck toward the cargo cranes. The collision with the iceberg was imminent.

Crouching next to the second class staterooms, she decided to wait for Daniel and her past self to arrive after the crash. Braced against the wall, Elise shuddered when she heard the thunderous screeching of the massive iceberg tearing the hull of the ship once again echo through the night. An eerie silence followed, during which Elise attempted to stifle her labored breathing. *Any moment now.*

The motion sensor depicted the tiny dots of past-Elise and Daniel closing in on her position. Her muscles coiled and her back straightened, ready to rush in and grab Daniel, when a gaggle of panicking, shouting and crying passengers engulfed her. *Where did they come from?* Elise was jostled back and forth, all the while pushing and shoving at the bodies trying to break free. She needed to... She needed to reach Daniel before... A splash below stopped Elise cold.

“Did you straightaway initiate the transport sequence to return to the Institute?”

“I think so,” Elise said, struggling to form words, before sitting up straight.

“Maybe it wasn’t a glitch. When Daniel went overboard and I checked the sensor to pinpoint his location..., there was a third dot, behind me. That... it must have been me, from when I...”

“Are you certain?”

“No, but it seems to be the most rational explanation. The dot was at the location where I ended up hiding, the second time.”

“This means you were there before you ever made the decision to attempt to alter the past...” Petra trailed off.

“When you noticed the third dot on your screen, did you experience a moment of, maybe, confusion or disorientation?” Elle asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Maybe? I’m not sure, everything happened so fast. The dot was there, I slapped the screen and the next thing, it was gone. I presume this was the moment my counterpart transported back to Chronos.”

“Still, maybe Dr. Fields’s theory is accurate, time might indeed protect itself.” Elle glowed and sat up straighter. “Did you have any physical reaction upon seeing yourself in the past?”

“No, but I didn’t *see* myself in the past, since both versions of me were invisible at the time.”

“Hmm. But this could also hint toward time protecting the past, not the intrusion from the future. You were aware of all previous events, so seeing your past self wouldn’t have been a surprise to you, but it would have alarmed your past self to see her future self.” Elle’s fingers sped over her tablet.

“I think this is a topic for later exploration,” Petra said before returning her attention to Elise. “Ms. Benton, it seems appropriate to remind you there is a reason why this Committee has voted repeatedly against attempting to change the past. It is almost impossible to predict how any minute action may influence the events one is setting out to change,” Petra said in a low, firm voice, her bronze skin flushed. “Your actions could have had catastrophic consequences.”

“Hindsight and all, right?”

“I assure you, Ms. Benton, this is a serious matter and it’d behoove you to treat it as such. Your actions today may well end your career at Chronos.”

“I’m quite aware of the seriousness of my actions.” Elise’s voice cracked.

“We expect a complete written report to be handed in by tomorrow morning, from both Ms. Benton and Dr. Lake. This committee will convene afterward to decide punitive actions. Dismissed,” Petra said, looking down at her notes.

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“We need to vote on this,” William turned toward Petra, leaning forward in his chair.

“What is there to vote on, William?”

“Ms. Benton’s unauthorized trip to the past needs to be sealed, and both Dr. Lake and Ms. Benton need to sign confidentiality agreements regarding this matter.”

“Our work here *is* confidential, William, I do not see a reason to add another agreement for them to sign. Regarding sealing this record, now, I know you want things to change, but this is not the way.”

“Ms. Benton’s trip to change the past is irrelevant. She was neither prepared nor was the situation beforehand analyzed. Offering this episode as evidence as to why the Institute should keep the non-interference policy is ludicrous.”

“Sweeping it under the rug is appropriate and helpful?”

“There is no need to stare daggers at me, Petra. We disagree, but as luck has it, we’re not the only members of the OC. Thus, I suggest a vote.”

“Fine, but we will wait until all of us have reviewed the written reports of the incidents, and besides, it might also be wise to sleep on this.” Petra’s eyes flashed, her voice dropped a register while her gaze wandered over her fellow OC members, who nodded in return.

“All right.” William smoothed his tie, picked up his tablet and sauntered out of the room.



William glowed, entering his office, unable to contain a smile. *Good riddance, Vivienne Lake.* He hummed while sorting the papers on his desk. She had been the main obstacle left after the recent change in the makeup of the OC. It had been hard maintaining a somber expression while holding back his glee.

Elise Benton, the woman who had accused *him* of not caring about the well-being of their Observers, who had the *nerve* to mock him after her disastrous attempt to save her partner’s life, had, despite placing the final nail in Vivienne’s coffin, almost ruined everything.

When the vote to bury this incident had gone his way, Petra had schooled her features, but William had noticed the tightening of her eyes and the rigid set of her jaw. She had been furious, and William had been unable to show his delight when the majority also agreed to have both Vivienne and Elise sign confidentiality agreements, releasing them from the obligation to inform their new director of this event.

Petra and Elle had been so worried a change in direction could expose their work. *Nonsense*, William stroked his beard. Perhaps it was time? He smirked and dialed a number after checking his rolodex.

“Hello?” A melodic female voice answered.

“It's me. Remember what we talked about last time?”

“Yes.”

“Something's happened, and it looks like it's the perfect time to send in the papers, well, maybe within the next few days.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure. This opportunity is better than we could have imagined. There might not be another chance.”

“Alright. We'll talk soon then. Goodbye.”

“Bye, old friend.” William leaned back in his chair. The much-needed change in the Institute's direction might come sooner than he'd expected. All they needed now was to make sure Grayson would cast a different vote than his predecessor did, but the latest vote pointed in their favor. Times were changing, indeed.



Her vision burned; flames, smoke and ashes. Every night she found herself tormented by the same images. For as long as she could remember, these dreams visited her nightly for a few weeks at a time. Whenever another round of these gruesome images deigned to enter her mind, she downed gallons of coffee, lost all patience and snapped at everyone at work. People would avoid direct eye contact more than usual, and she would work until her body collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

Waking up drenched in cold sweat, she shivered from the tension threatening to break her at the seams. She ran a trembling hand through messy strands stuck to her face during the night. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the lamp on her nightstand, closing her eyes when light filled her sparse bedroom. Her heart slowed and she tried to focus on her breathing, hoping it would oust the images in her mind. She still smelt the

burning flesh, still tasted the acidic flavor of smoke on her tongue. *No, don't think of it,* she begged, afraid to expel her dinner again. Reaching for the water bottle on her nightstand, she took a few quick gulps, relishing the cool liquid running down her parched throat.

Trembling, she grasped her head and she wished there was a way to force these images out of her mind. On some nights she'd feel pressure on her chest and feared a heart attack was waiting for her around the next corner. Yet, the muscle in her chest continued beating, binding her to this world, refusing to relinquish a hold to a life filled with anguish.

Releasing a wry chuckle, she wondered if this made her a coward. It was true, all her life, for weeks at a time, her senses drowned her in anguish, but the nighttime visions were filled with a terror she'd never experienced in the waking world.

Chapter III

Changes

Six Weeks Later

Shaking her head, Vivienne's eyes trailed across her office, roaming over her belongings still tucked neatly in the places she had stowed them years ago. She had been in this office, and in charge of Chronos, for almost twenty years, and now this.

“Early retirement,” Vivienne mumbled under her breath. A piece of paper casting her away from her creation. Uncertainty appeared to be her new best friend. *What do you do when you're sixty-five years old and find yourself kicked out of your life's work?*

Vivienne suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

She didn't blame Elise. She'd never intended to cause any harm, and what she'd done, the impulse of it, Vivienne understood, though she no longer could recall the feeling. Elise didn't know the OC, or better, William, had been looking for a reason to oust her. She hadn't realized using the TDA in such a shortsighted manner, would provide that smug bastard with the right ammunition to move against her.

The OC had also wanted to fire Elise, but she had managed to prevent it. Elise was too talented at her job, and if they were indeed to start with this 'new direction' nonsense, they would need their best Observers. She had agreed to resign and retire without protest if Elise was allowed to remain with Chronos in her current or similar position.

Vivienne moved to the window, watching two squirrels fight over an acorn under a swaying pine tree. Where would she go? Was there a place for the inventor of a time machine? An invention she couldn't even add to her resume since there was no record of

its existence. She had held up her end of the bargain. She'd even insisted on adding a script to the TDA that would send a report to the OC and herself detailing the mission parameters and historic background so they could take action if, per chance, their Observers had damaged the past. Vivienne had done everything she was supposed to, unlike Rune. Who would have thought the sponsor of the TDA, the man who had helped her form an ethics committee to oversee the delicate practice of time travel, would end up signing off on her downfall? Sighing, Vivienne turned around and resumed packing up her belongings.



Elise trembled when she ran down the deserted hallway of the Chronos Institute. They were changing the program, but that wasn't all, the OC had made good on their threat and had fired Dr. Lake. Elise wasn't sure how this was possible. After all, Dr. Lake was the inventor of the Temporal Displacement Aggregator and founder of Chronos, the very reason this Institute and program were established. Elise was sweating and waves of nausea rumbled through her. *Why change the program?* Elise came to an abrupt halt in front of Vivienne's office door. Running a clammy hand through her hair, Elise took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a modulated voice rang out.

"Good evening." Elise closed the door and stepped into the dim office. Vivienne looked pale, lost. Her auburn hair hung unkempt across her shoulders and she was flinging her belongings into the various boxes around her.

"Oh, Elise, you're back already?" A book landed on top of a pile of loose sheets of papers and letters, crammed into colorful envelopes.

“Uh, yes. I was scheduled to be back last night, but placing the evidence for retrieval proved more, uh, delicate than anticipated and prolonged my trip until today.”

“Yes, yes, right, I remember.” Scratching her head, Vivienne looked around for a box for the picture of her husband. “I’m assuming everything panned out?”

“Yes, ma’am. We know who killed Kennedy and I’ll file the final report tonight.”

“Final report, huh? I’m assuming you’ve heard, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but, how is this possible? You *are* Chronos! Is it because of...” trailing off, Elise felt like stomping her foot on the ground.

Vivienne laughed and its artificial sound left Elise with a hollow feeling in her stomach. Her mentor’s laugh had never sounded so strained.

“Yes, well, I agree, but obviously, people up the ladder beg to differ. They feel this Institute needs new blood, a new direction, given after what happened. At least, this is how they’ve put it in the letter.” Vivienne placed her pictures on top of a box filled with what looked like cushions and fabric.

“Who did they hire and what new direction? We’re doing fine here, and you’re doing an exceptional job, besides, what happened wasn’t your fault!”

A fond smile tugged at Vivienne’s lips. “Thank you, Elise. Yes, indeed, the blame game never offers anything productive, and I also was under the impression we were doing fine, alas, it is not so. I believe a Dr. Helen Miller will be named the new head. She is a historian, taught at Cambridge for some time.”

“A historian? We need someone who understands the science behind time travel!”

Packing up her last belongings, Vivienne remained quiet for a moment. “I’m sure they have their reasons. I’m sorry, Elise. I don’t want to leave, but please keep in mind, just because I’m no longer your boss doesn’t mean we have to burn all our bridges.”

Elise looked down when tears clouded her vision. “Yes, Dr. Lake. Thank you, I, uh, appreciate it, but still, it won’t be the same...”

“No, it won’t, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“I understand, and...uh...I’m sorry.” Elise looked up into Dr. Lake’s azure eyes, which reflected her own sadness. “I won’t keep you any longer. Take care, Dr. Lake.”

Elise tried to smile but grimaced instead.

“You too, Elise. Good night.” Vivienne nodded at her protégée. Elise watched an empty shadow spread over her mentor’s face before she turned to leave.



Sunshine blasted through Elise’s blinds, waking her much earlier than the alarm clock intended. Groaning, she made her way to the bathroom, still shaken from the memory of the previous day. When Henry had told her the OC had fired Dr. Lake, she’d laughed until her laughter died and her face fell while Henry just stared at her, never joining in her mirth.

Clearing the condensation off her mirror, Elise scowled at her reflection; her dark eyes were framed by darker circles while black curls dangled across her shoulders. She needed a break and a haircut, but had time for neither.

Elise also needed to talk to Luca, since he often offered a more objective perspective than her own gloomy prognosis of the future. Helen Miller. She had researched her online last night, and so far, wasn’t impressed. They didn’t need new

leadership, things were fine, at least, if one ignored Elise's unauthorized excursion to the past. Rubbing her cheek, Elise muttered a soft curse. *Never brush your teeth when you're angry.*

After some desultory pacing, she darted upstairs to visit Luca.

“Gosh, you’re totally exaggerating. Not like you’ve met her yet and you don’t know what this ‘change in direction’ means,” Luca said, while Elise marched up and down his living room floor. She had the habit of showing up at her friend’s doorstep at odd hours, keyed up and ready to jump out of her skin.

“I’m not exaggerating, I mean, they fired Dr. Lake!”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice. Might I add, you look a lot like a petulant 13-year old I once knew?”

“Whatever.”

“You gonna have to adjust.”

“I don't want to adjust! It’s unfair, you know?”

“No, I don't, but here's the thing, your only other option is to quit. You gonna do that?”

Elise stilled. “I'm not quitting, I love this job.”

“Yeah, you do, so, go with it. Maybe it won't be so awful.”

“Famous last words. You said the same thing when you dragged me to this party with the scary huge spiders, and where the giant dogs almost gave me a heart attack. Oh man, do you remember? Their living room was freezing, and I’m still convinced it was colder inside than it was outside. In December.”

“They had just moved in, and their heat wasn't on yet,” Luca mumbled.

“You’re not convinced of your own argument.”

“Maybe the party was a disaster, but man, you should’ve seen your face when they offered you a joint.”

Scoffing, Elise sat down on the couch next to Luca. The sun shining through the blinds of the window across from them painted little triangles of light on Luca's plush carpet. “I haven’t seen this one in a while.” She stroked over the colorful blanket draped over the back of the couch.

“Yes. I dreamed about her the other night, and I just... I needed something tangible.”

“I miss her, too.”

“We should visit her together again. We haven’t done that in years. But seriously, you cannot be so down over Grandma Cathy?”

“What? No, my head is still stuck at this new mission. I have a horrible feeling, Luca. I cannot decide if it stems from my anger over what happened to Dr. Lake or if it's real.”

“Maybe it's a mixture,” Luca said.

“There were times in my life when you were actually helpful.” Elise punched his shoulder, while Luca grinned.

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“Henry, hey. Why are you in such a hurry?” Elise smiled, slipping her ID card back into her purse.

“No time, there’s a meeting in less than five and you’ll be in big trouble if you don’t show up, so hurry,” Henry Pierre, Head of Chronos’ IT department, rushed out in one breath.

“Wait, a meeting? What meeting and where is it? The main conference room?” Henry nodded while they sped down the corridor.

“Not like it’s my fault,” Elise muttered, blanching at the horrible impression they’d make if they’d stumble late into the meeting. “Never received a memo.”

“Huh? Did you say something?” Henry ran a hand over his short cropped, dark hair.

“No, it’s fine, let’s go.”

“Good morning. I am Dr. Helen Miller and by now, I am sure, the grapevine has informed you that starting today, I will be the new Head of Operations at Chronos Institute.” She raised an eyebrow at Elise and Henry rushing to find their seats. “I’m sure you are all wondering what this change in leadership means for Chronos and for you individually.” Helen walked to the head of the conference table and switched on the projector. “Almost everything will change. So far, it has been your mission to observe the past, to find answers to historical mysteries. You were looking for answers to questions which for decades have been the topic of debate, and moreover, questions responsible for fueling many conspiracy theories.” Helen continued, gazing at the people around the conference table who twitched in their seats. “You have also had the rule to never interfere with the past, correct?”

“Yes, we have this rule because it’s not our job to change the past,” Elise said, shifting in her seat.

“Maybe we *should* change the past,” Helen ventured on, her slate gray eyes trained on Elise. “Besides, does not your mere presence in the past already influence it in some way? Your actions in the past surely change the future once your discovered information is released.”

“But that’s not the same.” Elise interjected.

“Are you sure? Have you ever asked yourselves *who* decides *what* mysteries need solving? Who do *you* think makes the decisions on how to release the information and thereby, influences the present and future?” Helen put her hands on top of the backrest of her chair. “Chronos has, from its foundation, been in the business of changing the past, granted, it was done subtly, but the end result is the same. I think we can accomplish more, in fact, I believe we are obligated to do more. Currently, the Institute’s use of the Temporal Displacement Aggregator is wasteful.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh? We are doing important work here!” Sam Root, one of the most experienced Observers, spoke up.

“Observing is not enough,” Helen said.

“What did you have in mind? Are we supposed to go back and prevent, what? The assassination of JFK? Do you have any idea what far-reaching consequences such actions could have?”

“You are thinking too small, Ms. Benton,” Helen smiled before typing something on her tablet. The hour-glass shaped logo of the Institute which had adorned the screen disappeared and in its stead the screen lit up with the picture of a man in uniform. He was

in his mid-forties and wore a sullen expression. The man's neat black hair was combed along the crown of one side of his head, and his mustache a speck of dirt right below his nose.

"This is a joke, right?" Elise, like the rest of her co-workers, stared transfixed at the projected image.

"Once you become acquainted with me you will realize I seldom joke, Ms. Benton. This is our new objective, people. Our next mission will be to prevent the Holocaust from ever occurring," Helen said, scrutinizing her personnel. "Any questions?"

After a few seconds of eerie silence, the assembled employees of Chronos Institute found their voices and started to talk all at once.

"How are we supposed to...?"

"With all due respect, this will never work, do you...?"

"Ma'am, have you thought of..."

Helen raised her hands. "One at a time, I presume this idea has been taught to you in kindergarten?" Helen frowned before turning to Sam. "Let's start with you, Mr. Root."

"Yes, ma'am. I was wondering, how are we supposed to accomplish a mission of this scope? None of us have ever attempted to change the past. Shouldn't we start with something, uh, less significant? We could try to change something small and evaluate the consequences before attempting something as complex as preventing the Holocaust."

"There will be concrete plans and simulations regarding this mission and we will train the appropriate personnel accordingly. I am not suggesting you will leave on this mission tomorrow, Mr. Root." Helen answered with a small smile tugging at her mouth.

The moment this ghost of a smile left her face, Helen turned toward Elise. “Ms. Benton, you were saying?”

“Yes, with all due respect, Dr. Miller, but are you aware of the almost infinite amounts of variables which influenced and shaped an event like the Holocaust? How could we *ever* be certain we’ve considered all potential contingencies? What if we end up causing more death and destruction?”

“I assure you, Ms. Benton, I am aware of the vast scope such a mission will entail. I am positive that with meticulous planning, we will be able to prepare ourselves for most contingencies, and for the rest, I am counting on our competent staff of Observers. You are good at what you do. Am I correct, Ms. Benton?”

Tightening her jaw, Elise nodded, not trusting herself to open her mouth.

“Ms. Jones, your thoughts?” Helen addressed Ava Jones, another Observer.

“Yes, Dr. Miller. I was considering the global impact of such an intervention. Changing the Holocaust is a laudable mission, but the worldwide consequences of such an action, especially should we fail, could be devastating.”

“I am unsure why so many here assume Chronos would ever attempt a mission without much consideration, and without the support of an experienced and trained team? The OC, which, along with its oversight function, also works as an ethics committee to evaluate the impact and viability of potential missions, has vetted and approved this mission already.” Helen’s eyes glinted while her gaze swept over her employees. “I want to assure you, regardless of your impression to the contrary, this change in direction did not come out of nowhere. I guarantee you the planning for this has been in place for quite a while. The OC and other renowned ethicists, who used to serve on the OC as well, have

been weighing in on the moral questions and potential political and humanitarian consequences of this change in direction, in general, and regarding the Holocaust mission, in particular. Believe me, much more academic minds than yours have found this mission to be worth the risk, and moreover, morally correct and important.”

“These academic minds have no practical experience regarding time travel, nor have they dealt with time travel that intends to change the past,” Elise interjected.

“This might be the case, Ms. Benton, but neither has anyone else. No one has ever attempted to change the past, and if we have the ability to prevent great human suffering and death, is it not our moral obligation to do so?” Helen raised her eyebrows.

Dr. Miller doesn't know? Elise swallowed the bile rising from her stomach before forcing herself to answer. “It is easy to sit here and theorize, but what if we do this and it causes more people to suffer and die? Will the mission still have been morally right?”

“We will have to ensure such a circumstance does not occur, and this will in part, also depend on the Observers. You will be involved in major reconnaissance work and you will establish the parameters for the assignments of our Special Agents.”

“Special Agents?” Sam queried.

“You are all trained as Observers, and while you are trained in security and some of you even have a police background, there will be aspects of these missions that will require certain experience and the use of force that lies outside of your skill set.”

“So Chronos will now hire mercenaries?” Elise asked.

“As you are well aware, the public face of Chronos is a security firm and the Institute already employs a division of ex-military personnel who will act as Special Agents during these missions. You will accompany them and act as a control center, and

their assignments will be streamed live to you. Detailed information about this will soon arrive in your inboxes.”

“So we remain Observers?” Ava asked.

“In a way, but I think the job title of Observers is no longer fitting. It will be changed to Agents. After all, you will be part of the driving force of all these missions, and hopefully we will be able to usher in positive change.” Helen smiled and dipped her head.



“A nightmare.” Elise stormed into Luca's apartment as soon as he opened the door.

“Hello to you too, Elise.” Luca turned to close the door and followed Elise back into the living room. “I didn't expect you to be back so soon.”

“Oh, hello Hanna,” Elise smiled at Luca's wife who was sitting on a sofa reading a battered copy of *Neverending Story*.

Looking up, Hanna nodded at Elise. “Hey Elise. How are you?”

“Fine, I guess, a bit annoyed with my new boss.”

“Yeah, Luca told me they fired Dr. Lake. I'm sorry, I know how much she means to you.” Hanna placed her book on the coffee table.

“Thanks. It sucks, but there's nothing to do,” Elise sighed, rocking on her heels.

“Hanna, do you mind if I kidnap your husband for a moment?”

“Go right ahead. Now I might have some peace and quiet to finish my book. You know Luca, once he starts talking, he never stops.”

“Ha, ha,” Luca chortled. He stood and kissed Hanna before grabbing his jacket and turning to leave. “Shouldn't take too long 'cause this one's only got small problems.”

Luca slapped Elise's shoulder and grinned when she heaved a loud sigh.

“Back to your place?” Luca asked, following Elise down the stairs.

“Yes, and you won't need a jacket.”

“Not like I got a clue where you take your kidnapping victims.”

Elise sniggered, opened the door to her apartment and strolled straight to the kitchen. “Our discussion is sensitive. I cannot have anybody overhear it.” Elise flipped on her water heater.

“You mean like, someone who isn't supposed to know about your top secret job?”

Luca grabbed a beer from the fridge and walked into the living room. “Someone like me?”

“Yes. Well, no. We've talked about this. You'll always know or I'll go insane without talking to you.”

“If that doesn't make me feel special.” Luca took a sip of his beer.

“Don't let it go to your head, it's because I don't have any other friends. Not sure what this says about you.” Elise sat down next to Luca, a steaming cup of raspberry tea warming her freezing hands.

“What about Penelope?” Luca said, taking off his shoes as he buried himself into the cushions of the couch.

“What, getting sick of being my secret keeper?”

Luca snorted.

“I don't want to bother her. No, that's not true. It's just, there's so much on her plate, and being aware what I do for a living would only worry her. She's had enough worries to last a lifetime.”

“Yeah, true. How's Adam doing?”

Leaning back against the couch, Elise sighed before taking a sip of her tea. “He's well, had his most recent check-up the other day. They found nothing, thank god. It's always nerve-wracking when the next appointment comes up.” Elise said. “Oh, and he's now a freshman at Iowa State, no idea what to choose as a major, naturally, but he's a varsity wrestler on the school's team. I swear, that's all this boy ever talks about.” A soft smile danced across Elise's lips, and she resolved to push the worries about her nephew's health out of her mind. *He will be fine.*

“That's great.” Luca and Elise sat for a few moments in the quiet of the apartment until Luca broke the silence. “Your boss giving you trouble?”

“An understatement. The ‘new directions for Chronos' they were talking about? Today, we had a little surprise meeting and she told us her plan.”

“Do tell.”

“First thing of the meeting, Miller makes fun of our regular work at Chronos.”

“That must have gone well.”

“Then she said we're thinking too small and aren't living up to the full potential of our resources. After this, she felt the need to show us a picture of Hitler.”

“Huh? Why Hitler?”

“She wants us to go back and prevent the Holocaust.” Elise blew air to cool the tea, not looking at Luca.

“Are you serious?” Luca’s eyebrows almost flew off his head.

“What I asked too, but apparently, Dr. Helen Miller isn't in the habit of joking.”

Running her hands over her jeans, Elise rose and ambled to the window overlooking a little park. She usually loved this view. The swaying trees had often calmed a raging storm inside her. “We tried to convince her that this is a terrible idea, and that we don't have the non-interference rule for nothing, but she wouldn't listen.”

“Well, did you ask her to, uh, maybe scale it down a bit?”

“Yes, Sam suggested we should first do a test run. We could try to change something little and then observe and evaluate the consequences.” Elise still didn't move from her spot in front of the window.

“And?”

“Miller talked about how selfish it is to just solve historical mysteries, and how we don't understand the bigger picture.”

“What's wrong with solving historical mysteries? You've cleared many names with your work.”

Waving him off, Elise sighed. “Miller thinks given the way we are using the TDA currently, we might as well quit going into the past altogether since we're wasting resources. Like, what benefit is there in offering the world strategically placed evidence to solve historical mysteries and wrongful convictions?”

“Did you explain that the past isn't in any hurry?”

“Yes, but then she shot daggers at me. She's a bit scary.” Scuffling back to the couch, Elise let her body drop into the seat next to Luca. “This is going to be a total

disaster. Oh, and get this, Chronos will now use ex-military personnel to do grunt work during our missions.”

“That makes sense, these changes sound dangerous. I’m glad you’ll have support.”

“I just don’t like the idea of having these assignments taken out of our hands.”

“You’ll still go there, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll do recon and all that, and then watch them via live feeds. Whatever. She’s supposed to send out more information.”

“Well, I think this is all pretty reasonable, and isn’t the idea that the Holocaust never happened wonderful?”

“Yes, it would be incredible if we could prevent the Holocaust, or any genocide, war or major disaster.” Elise twisted her fingers. “The thing is, I doubt our ability to do so, and if we succeed, we could be opening Pandora’s Box. All these people who died survived? They’ll marry, have kids and others will never marry because they never met or met too late. This would affect millions of people! How can we do this without causing more damage?”

“What could be more damaging than the systematic killing of millions of people?”

“There are always worse scenarios.”

“OK,” Luca stretched the word into several syllables. “Isn’t it worth a shot, though? It might work and I doubt Miller has ill intentions.”

“I’m not saying her intentions are wrong and her plan doesn’t look doable, but I’m worried about the execution. There are too many variables to consider. I mean, every little action could throw our plans off and we wouldn’t know until we returned.”

“So what? Then you can make another trip if things go downhill.”

“Yes, and what if we come back to a present where no time machine exists? What if, as the result of our actions, we create a future where Dr. Lake has never been born or we create a present where she is a bartender instead? That’s not the biggest problem in this scenario, because what if in the process of creating this new future more people have died, more people have suffered? With no time machine left, what do we do? What if our presence made the whole thing possible?”

Chapter IV

Entanglements

Arriving ten minutes late for work, due to last night's storm knocking out the power and therefore her alarm, Elise was surprised to find a young, curly haired blonde woman sitting on one of the chairs in front of her office.

"Hello, are you looking for me?" Elise tried to balance her keys, a cup of tea, and her purse while opening her office door with a keycard.

"Yes, I am. Here, let me help you."

"Thank you," Elise said, unlocking the door and gesturing for the blonde to enter. Elise placed her belongings on her desk and waved for her guest to sit down. "So, how can I help you?"

"Actually, I'm here to help *you*. My name is Charlotte Bayer and I'm your new partner." Charlotte smiled and offered her hand to Elise, who stood frozen for a moment before shaking Charlotte's hand.

"Excuse me, but did you say you're my new *partner*?"

"Yes, I thought Hel...uh, Dr. Miller had informed you of meeting me today?"

So it's Helen, huh? She wouldn't put it past the woman to send someone to keep an eye on her. "No, Dr. Miller didn't say anything about this."

"Oh, OK, well, you don't have a partner now, right? Won't you need one, for back-up at least?"

"Yes, I guess so, though I didn't realize someone new to Chronos would become my partner."

“Oh, I understand but maybe some fresh talent will be what you need. Besides, you need someone on your team who's got your back.” Charlotte smiled again, which made her look younger, more like a sorority sister than an Observer. *Agent. Whatever.*

“This was never an issue before...,” breaking off, Elise cleared her throat.

“Anyway, so you plan on having my back, Ms. Bayer?”

“Yes, I mean, that’s what partners are for, right? I didn’t mean to insinuate your former partner didn’t look out for you, and please call me Charlotte, or if you want, Charlie.”

“Alright, Charlotte. I guess we’ll have to see how this whole partner idea will pan out.” Elise forced a smile, feeling the tendrils of a headache forming behind her temples.

“Sure. So, Dr. Miller wanted us to meet and she asked you to update me on this time travel business.” Charlotte offered her a sweet smile once more, which Elise found almost insufferable.

“OK, then, what do you want to know?” Elise would prefer a root canal to this whole “meet your new partner” deal.

“How about everything?” There was the beam again.

Elise ground her jaw, hoping Charlotte wouldn’t be offended. It wasn’t her fault Dr. Miller was tap-dancing on Elise’s last nerve. “Right, so how about we start with a tour of the lab?” Elise suggested.

“Sounds awesome, thanks.”



“I’m sure you’re mostly interested in the Temporal Displacement Aggregator, so let’s start with it.” Elise activated the lab doors and walked over to a medium-sized platform.

“This is it,” Elise pointed toward the platform, connected to two towers that stood on top of it. The height of the towers allowed a person standing on the platform to comfortably lay their hands on top of them. The dais itself was charcoal and reflected light falling on it. There were cables on the floor which connected the surface to a wall of computers. At least, this is how it looked to Charlotte who was taking it all in with wide eyes.

Glancing at the other woman to make sure electrocution or a quick trip to the past wasn’t part of her near future, Charlotte trod to the platform and brushed her hand across one of the towers. She’d noticed how wary Elise was of her presence, but detected no malice directed at her. The tower was cool to her touch, but it also felt softer than she expected.

“So, how does it work? What’s it made of?”

“I’m not totally sure how it works. Dr. Lake, with the help of Dr. Watson, created it, and they could give you a rundown of every aspect of the machine.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Charlotte laughed. “I’m sure you comprehend enough to explain the basics.”

“Yes, well, besides the actual Temporal Displacement Aggregator you see in front of you, Dr. Lake also created a computer program which runs the TDA. The user-interface is pretty straightforward. All you have to do is type in the date and geographic

coordinates of your destination, then stand on the platform and place your hands on the towers.”

“That’s it?” Charlotte's eyes were lit with pure excitement.

“Well, no, the assignment is pre-set, so all you do is activate the countdown for the actual mission. There are also safeguards in place, which means, for instance, information is send out from the TDA computer to Dr. Lake and the OC after each trip to make sure nothing has changed.”

“Like, in case something goes wrong along the way and it alters the present, but people here no longer know it was different before?”

“Yes, that’s right.” A small smile tugged on the corner of Elise’s mouth. “You will also need to wear these here.” Elise opened a drawer of one of the desks standing against the back wall of the lab.

Taking the necklace with the metallic looking pendant from Elise’s hands, Charlotte scrunched up her eyebrows. “I’ll assume this is not a fashion statement.”

Elise snorted, which made Charlotte grin. “They go together with these.”

“Bracelets, sweet. What about all this?” Charlotte held up the arm bands.

“Those are our activation keys and conductors, or better, they're your way back. You have to wear both of them when you start the trip, which activates and charges the pendant and then, when you want to return to the present, you connect the activation key, which is the pendant, to the bracelet, which is the conductor. Once you do this, the TDA will transport you back home.”

“Sounds almost like a fantasy movie.”

“Yes, it sometimes feels like one, too. Or like a campy science fiction movie, depending on the assignment.”

Charlotte laughed, and Elise offered her what seemed to be the first real smile since they had met.

Looking at her watch, Charlotte turned to Elise. “Oh, look at this, it's almost ten. Don't you have a meeting with Dr. Miller at ten?”

“Not to my knowledge, but this seems to be a common occurrence lately.”

“I better go,” Elise turned and left Charlotte standing in the lab.



Any budding amiable feeling between Elise and Charlotte withered. *How come no one informs me of my own damned schedule?*

“You wanted to see me?” Elise asked, entering Dr. Miller's office. She'd calmed down a bit during her walk over.

“Yes, Ms. Benton, how are you doing?” Helen took off her glasses and looked up from her computer screen, her keen eyes zeroing in on Elise.

“I'm fine, thank you. How are you?” Elise tried to keep her expression neutral.

Helen nodded. “Let us begin, shall we? Please, sit down.” Helen pointed at the chair in front of her desk. “I assume you have met your new partner?”

“Yes, I've meet Charlotte. Why wasn't I informed about the conference yesterday morning, the appointment with Charlotte, nor this meeting right now?”

“If you would have checked your emails, you would have seen all this information.” Passing a hand through her snowy hair, Helen focused on Elise, who was holding her breath.

“I always check. Several times a day and I’ve received no such emails within the last two days.”

“Let me look. There might have been a technical glitch, and in the meantime, did you check your spam folder?” Helen’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

“Yes.”

Several minutes passed in uncomfortable silence before Helen smiled. “Yes, as I thought, your system needs a few updates. Regardless, this issue is resolved now, and I need you to sign these documents.” Helen pushed several pages in Elise’s direction.

“What is this about?”

“This concerns the acknowledgement of the Institute’s change in direction, along with an explanation of the job descriptions for our Agents, as well as more information regarding the role of the Special Agents during the missions.”

“I see.”

“It also details the implementation of video logs all Agents will have to record prior to each mission. These logs will act as an additional security line in case our missions alter the past in unexpected ways. Once they are transferred to the TDA interface, they should remain unchanged as long as the TDA exists. You all need to sign this, and you will also have to undergo a psychological evaluation and a physical examination, along with a fitness test.”

Elise scanned over the pages in her hands. “May I take this and bring it back signed later?”

“Yes, and please be sure to check your email since I have forwarded you more information about the scheduled evaluations, as well as several files for various

simulations regarding the Holocaust mission. I would like for you and Charlotte to review them and to follow up with a report on their probable success rates.”

“Yes, about Charlotte.”

“What about her?” Helen raised her eyebrows.

“Do you think she is necessary?”

“You would prefer to travel to Nazi Germany alone?”

“No, but I thought one of our present Observers would become my partner.

Charlotte has no experience with time travel.”

“I’m sure you’ll find Ms. Bayer to be a more than adequate new partner. Maybe this one will survive a bit longer by your side?” Helen gave Elise a hard stare.

Clearing her throat, Elise changed the topic. “Is the plan to go back in time when the Nazi party is already in control of Germany?”

“You will find all relevant data in the files I sent you, Ms. Benton. Was there anything else regarding Ms. Bayer?”

“Yes, I mean, isn’t she a bit young? What *are* her qualifications for this job?”

Elise glanced at her boss, trying to decipher any tells regarding her little spy.

“I was not aware I had to run the qualifications of newly hired employees by you, Ms. Benton.” Helen’s voice dropped a register.

Thankful that her complexion made blushing less obvious, Elise shifted in her seat. “I apologize, this isn’t what I meant. I expected to work with an experienced Observer and Ms. Bayer seems barely out of college.”

“I am not in the habit of giving out information on my employees, especially not to other employees. Let me repeat, I am confident Ms. Bayer will be an asset to both the

Institute and the mission, and for the rest, I suggest you take it up with her personally.”
Helen turned back to work on her computer.



After reading through the documents Dr. Miller had given her to sign, Elise acquiesced with the necessity of psychological and physical evaluations for all Agents. Their job objective had been modified altogether, and attempting to alter the past brought its own set of requirements. The video logs also eased some of Elise’s trepidation. Her unease about the ex-military Special Agents, however, remained.

Spending the rest of her day holed up in her office, reviewing the mission files Dr. Miller had sent her, Elise had to acknowledge their diligence and breadth, which made her consider that she had underestimated her boss’s grasp of time travel.

It made sense that the OC, faced with the research data and opinions of Helen’s experts, decided to change the non-interference policy, but Elise still broke out in a cold sweat when she contemplated the changes in her job description. She’d been there and tried to change the past. She still could see the horde of bodies engulfing her when she’d tried to reach Daniel. Around Dr. Miller, she had bit her lips and swallowed down her need to confess numerous times. *Damn that confidentiality agreement.*

Elise would have talked to Dr. Lake, but she no longer even worked at Chronos. She played with the idea of telling Luca, but something held her back. There had to be another way to figure this out. In the meantime, though, she pondered the files, determined to find a problem.

Losing track of time, Elise jolted at the sound of a knock on her office door. She stretched her back before calling for her visitor to enter.

Charlotte sat down in a chair in front of Elise's desk. "Hey, the light was still on. How was your meeting with Dr. Miller?"

Elise turned to look out of the window, the night had fallen. *When did this happen?* She hadn't taken a break to eat something, which her stomach pangs announced at that moment.

"Fine. I was going over the mission files and lost track of time." Elise shut down her computer, ready to leave.

"I take it you didn't have lunch or dinner?" Charlotte smiled, and Elise had to remind herself that while her partner might appear gregarious, it was wise to assume she was instructed to keep an eye on her.

"No, I've been too busy with the files."

"You wanna grab something to eat? I haven't eaten anything all day either."

Thinking it would be rude to reject Charlotte's offer and, not to mention, less than helpful for their working relationship to freeze her out due to her suspicions, Elise nodded in acquiescence. Maybe she could use this to her advantage.

"And you knew I haven't had any lunch *because?*" Elise asked, locking her office door.

"I'm observant."

Not to mention a potential spy. "I'm sure you are, kiddo," Elise grinned, deciding she might as well follow Dr. Miller's advice and try to figure out her new partner.

"Kiddo? Really? I'm 24." Shaking her head but keeping her smile, Charlotte walked with Elise to their cars. "So, where do you wanna go?"

"I'm not in the mood for a long wait. How about pizza?"

“Yeah, ever been to Soma's on Highland?”

“Sure, I'll meet you there.”

They found a table straightaway in the nearly empty Italian restaurant.

“So, what did you think of the files Dr. Miller sent us?” Charlotte asked before biting into her cheese pizza.

Elise, lifting up a slice of pepperoni pizza, paused. “Well, uh, sorry, I forgot you've been briefed and have studied the files, too.” Elise's gaze trailed over the empty tables around them before eyeing an elderly couple close to the window.

“No problem, I mean, Dr. Miller asked us to analyze the files and compose a report. As for the... uh, for the mission, I mean, that's the reason they hired me, right?”

Charlotte smiled.

“Yeah, because Dr. Miller is so forthcoming.”

“You asked her about me?” Charlotte chuckled.

Elise nodded, chewing.

“While you may not hear it in my accent, I was born and raised in Germany so I speak both English and German fluently. My dad is from here, and well, same old story, he worked in Germany, fell in love, got married, had kids.”

“That's your qualification? You're a native German speaker?”

Charlotte leaned back in her chair and examined Elise for a moment. “You think *this* is how the Institute operates? That it's enough to speak a certain language?”

“It's not how it *used* to operate.”

“You don't like Dr. Miller, do you?”

“Yes, well, no. I mean, that's not it. Sure, our personalities have clashed so far, but to be honest, I don't know her. I just don't like how she managed to convince the OC to retract our most important policy.”

“Well, I am sure you know better than the committee whose purpose is to create and evaluate the policies and choose the missions.”

Elise eyes widened, this was the first time Charlotte appeared without a smile, her easygoing demeanor gone. “I’m sorry. I come across like an obnoxious smart aleck, and believe it or not, I don’t wanna be this way. I... I love Rhoscon. I love the work we used to do, but to see now, after working here for almost eight years... to see our most cherished principle, which, by the way, didn’t come out of nowhere, cut, just like that! I, I don’t... I don’t know how to deal with this.” Elise rubbed her eyes. She loathed how exhaustion loosened her tongue.

“What are you afraid of?” Charlotte leaned across the table.

Eyeing the chitchatting couple, Elise turned back to Charlotte, whose blue eyes never faltered. “Not here,” Elise signaled the waiter to wrap up the rest of their food.



Back at Elise’s place, Charlotte tried to hide the perusing of her partner’s apartment. This woman was bewildering. First, Elise seemed puzzled and angry with Charlotte’s transfer and proceeded to ignore her for the rest of the day, only to join her for dinner, and now she had invited Charlotte over to her place. *Technically you invited her to dinner. Not to mention she insulted you during dinner.* Charlotte followed Elise into the living room and sat down on the couch across from her.

“Uh, do you wanna finish the food, or you want anything to drink?” Elise slid her hands over her thighs.

“No, thanks, I’m full...but maybe something to drink?”

“Sure, what do you want?” Elise walked into the kitchen. “I got lots of different teas, some juice, beer, a few cans of soda maybe, and... uh, yeah, water.”

“What’s with all the tea, anyway?” Charlotte had followed Elise.

“Huh?”

Charlotte waved at Elise’s cupboard filled with assorted tea containers.

“Oh, yes, I like tea, obviously, but see... I don’t do caffeine, gets me all jittery. But I love hot beverages, and I don’t like hot chocolate, so tea it is.”

“You don’t like hot chocolate?”

“No, sure don’t. Hey, don’t look so offended.”

“Sorry, it’s just... hot chocolate??”

“Hmm...”

Looking through the tea selection, Charlotte picked up a pack of English Breakfast.

“My friend’s Luca’s batch. He doesn’t believe in consuming hot drinks that don’t contain caffeine.”

“May I have some?”

“Sure.”

Back on the couch, Charlotte raised her eyebrows at Elise.

“Yeah... well, about earlier. I’m not sure I’m necessarily afraid of anything, more like apprehensive? I think trying to change the past, trying something as big as preventing

the Holocaust, it's going to backfire. And we'll be armed, which is new, and those Special Agents?"

"There are risks, sure, but Dr. Miller's plan seems sound, from what I can tell. I'm sure we will talk strategy together and adjust things if necessary. It makes sense to be armed, and I'm glad we won't have to do some of the things these missions will require. I see them as support, really."

"You're right. I mean, what I've seen from the plan so far looks promising, but... Come on, how can you prepare for every little detail that could go wrong?"

"We could save millions of innocent lives, so how could we not try?"

"But who gets to decide, and why the Holocaust? There have been other genocides, other atrocities. Why not choose one of those? More importantly, what do we do if it works? Will we prevent all genocides? What about wars? This will change the fabric of our world, of every society. Who are we to force this on the world?"

"I'm not sure preventing slaughter is evil or something the majority would have an issue with, and we need to start somewhere."

"Why does everyone think I'm against saving lives?"

"Because you make it sound like you are, but I understand this isn't what you mean. I'm sure the OC considered these issues and they must have found an answer or they wouldn't have agreed to let us move forward. Why not give it a chance?"

Elise gave a wry chuckle. "Not like I can do anything else, Charlotte. Dr. Miller is more than determined to see this through."

"Yes, that she is."

"How do you know her?"

Charlotte held Elise's eyes for a moment, considering how to answer her question.
"Helen is my godmother."

"Your godmother?" Elise mouth fell open before she laughed. "OK, I didn't see *that* coming."

Charlotte couldn't help but join in.

"So, you're saying it wasn't your language skill landing you the job, but nepotism?" Elise's eyes were sparkling with mirth and held nothing of the cageyness from earlier at Soma's.

"Yeah, that's it. Seriously, I have some experience in martial arts and I speak German without an accent. Oh, and I see patterns."

"Your vision's messed up?" Elise said. "Wait, martial arts?"

"No, my vision is fine." Charlotte snickered "I see patterns in behavior, between ideas and motivations, like I understand why people do what they do and I, well, I can see the big picture. And yes, I'm quite skilled at Jujutsu."

"Oh, so you're the one who will help ensure we adjust to every overlooked contingency we encounter in the field?"

"I will try, yes."

"You don't look scary. Not even remotely intimidating."

Charlotte grinned. "It's always an advantage when an opponent underestimates you."

"If you say so." The doorbell rang. "Excuse me," Elise stood to open the door. A miserable looking Luca stood in front of her, blowing his nose into a tissue. "I'm dying

and I'm pretty sure this is your fault." Luca's voice sounded congested and a tad bit petulant.

"OK, but I don't see how," Elise scuttled back to let Luca enter her apartment.

"Oh, you got a visitor. Sorry," Luca paused before entering Elise's living room and sitting down in the chair next to Charlotte. "I'm Luca, Elise's guilty conscience. I'd shake your hand but I'm contagious."

"I'm Charlotte, Elise's partner."

"Partner? Elise, you didn't tell me you had a girlfriend."

Elise heaved a sigh. "Charlotte is my new partner at work." She turned toward Charlotte. "Don't mind him, he is insane in general, but when he is medicated it's... well, he doesn't only *think* he is funny, he's *sure* of it."

"I don't mind."

"Hey, I'm right here, not to mention, I'm dying." Luca coughed and blew his nose with emphasis.

"Sounds like you're coughing up a lung. Tell me, is there a reason why you felt the need to share your germs with us?"

"Nah, I want some pity and Hanna isn't offering any because she's too concerned I might infect her before her all-important conference at work. Can you make me some tea, please?" Luca looked at Elise and batted his eyelashes.

"Ugh, whatever. Charlotte, you want another cup?"

"No, thanks, I think I should go. It's been a long day and I still gotta drive back home."

“Oh, sure, and thanks for inviting me to dinner.” Elise accompanied Charlotte to the door. “I’m glad we had this conversation.”

“Me too, Elise, and believe me, I’m not here to make trouble for you. I wanna help.”

“I understand, Charlotte but I’ll need some time to adjust to all of this. See you tomorrow.”

“Sure, don’t worry about it. After all, we’re in the business of time anyway,” Charlotte gave Elise her biggest smile yet.

Finally, some momentum. Charlotte was relieved Elise knew her connection to Helen was a familial one. She had felt weird at first, accepting this position, but it hadn’t been Helen’s decision alone, and Charlotte was qualified for the job. Besides, how could she have turned down the opportunity to save lives? Now, once Elise let go of her suspicions, they’d make a great team.

Chapter V

Hindsight

During the following weeks, Elise and Charlotte finished evaluating the Holocaust mission files and prepared their official analysis. Elise was surprised she and Charlotte agreed on most issues and Charlotte's ability to see patterns was not only real, but also useful, especially when going over potential contingencies, recognizing pitfalls. Although, one significant disagreement remained.

"I'm not saying it'd be easy."

"It's not about that," Elise pinched the bridge of her nose. "I understand killing Hitler is tempting and it may seem right."

"But?"

"He... It's like Hydra."

"Greek mythology Hydra? The one with many heads?"

"Yes, and look, I'm not saying if you kill Hitler two new *Fuehrer* will rise. Hitler was a symptom, Charlotte, not the cause. Cutting off the head of this snake won't kill it."

"You don't know for sure, and we could run a simulation and see," Charlotte bit her lower lip.

"The computer already predicts a low chance of success, and I don't think I can kill anyone."

"You wouldn't have to."

"Or be part of such an act," Elise whispered.

"Maybe I'm too close to this, and believe me, this isn't about absolving Germany, there is no forgiveness for what my country did," Charlotte cleared her throat. "The

Holocaust is taught across several subjects in German schools, which means they cover the topic in religion, social studies, German and ethics.” Charlotte’s gaze turned vacant. “I still feel guilty, you know? I had nothing to do with it, considering my parents weren’t even born when all this happened. Yet, there is this collective guilt, and I think that’s how it should be.”

“I’m not sure I believe in collective guilt and you most certainly cannot be responsible for the deeds of your ancestors.”

“No, but what happened is indefensible. I may not be guilty personally, but my country benefitted from the Holocaust financially and economically. Corporations hauled in tons of stolen money, so I have to be aware of this. We all do. Being quiet and saying ‘oh, these things happened a long time ago and it has nothing to do with me’ is a form of sweeping the past under the rug.”

Elise nodded.

“I comprehend, rationally, killing Hitler will not help our mission, but emotionally, the thought is quite gratifying,” Charlotte offered a brittle smile.

Elise reached out, squeezing Charlotte’s arm. “I understand.”



Elise didn’t relish the idea of ruining Dr. Miller’s weekend by telling her about this on a Friday afternoon, but Dr. Miller needed to know about her unauthorized trip into the past, and giving her the weekend to contemplate the ramification of Elise’s confession meant she wasn’t steamrolling the woman out of nowhere. At least, there was hope Dr.

Miller would see it like this. *She might also bite your head off.* Elise raised her hand to knock, but stepped back when a rising tenor rang through the door of her boss's office.

Elise stuffed her hands into the pockets of her pants and was about to leave when the door to Dr. Miller's office opened. Dr. Ciane stormed out of the office, slamming the door. His cheeks were full of red blotches and his usually coiffed hair askew. Elise suppressed a smile and nodded at the flustered man.

She too had been on the receiving end of Dr. Miller's infuriating ability to push every single one of her buttons, while not once raising her voice.

"We'll talk about this later," William grunted in Helen's direction, glowered at Elise and marched off.

Shrugging her shoulders, Elise knocked.

"Come in," Helen's voice sounded even, almost bored. "How may I help you, Ms. Benton?"

"Dr. Miller."

Staring at the hands on her lap, Elise took a deep breath. "I think I might be able to help you, or not. I guess it depends on how you'll see it."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"Remember on your first day here, when you gave the speech with Hitler in the background?"

"Ms. Benton, if you're here to voice your concerns regarding this mission *again*, I'd suggest you wait until the meeting on Monday."

"No, I'm sorry, and I'm not here for this, specifically, at least. It's about the mission, but not, in a way."

“Ms. Benton, I do not have all day.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just...this is hard. I... have a...uh, a confession to make. You might already know it...and then it’s not truly a confession, or is it?”

“Elise!”

“When you said no one has ever tried to change the past, did you mean it?”

Yes, I meant it. The policy of Chronos has always been one of non-interference.”

Helen fiddled with the arm of her glasses. “This is not news to you, Ms. Benton.”

“Yes, I’m aware of the policy, but... it’s simply...” Elise was now surer than ever this would turn ugly. “I broke this rule. Once.” Elise moved her hands under her thighs, feeling like a schoolgirl at her principal’s office confessing to having smoked behind the bleachers.

“You what?”

“I assume you’re aware of the *Titanic* mission?”

“Yes, the one where Mr. Hahn perished.”

“What you do *not* know, or at least, I think you don’t, is what happened after the mission.” Elise folded her hands on her lap. “I... I used the TDA again. I returned and tried to save Daniel’s life.”

“You tried to save your partner’s life?”

“Yes. I... the TDA was right there and it had just happened and I needed to at least try...”

“That was idiotic, not to mention dangerous.”

“I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Obviously,” Helen sighed. “I take it you were not successful?”

“No...uh, I was waiting, trying to prevent Daniel from falling over the railing, but before I could reach him... there were so many people and I couldn't...”

“I see,” Helen’s jaw tightened. “How is it you remained employed at Chronos?”

“That’s...I have no idea, though I was put on probation and signed a confidentiality agreement. They said something like... nothing changed.”

“Indeed. Why are you telling me this now?”

“We’re about to start the simulations and I just thought... I thought you should know.”

Helen didn’t respond.

“I uh, I had to write a full report on everything for the OC, back then. I think I still have it on my computer at home, so I can send it to you tonight and then...then you can go over it and know...well, everything.” Elise ran out of steam.

Helen sat motionless, staring into nothing before her eyes shot back to Elise.

“Yes, Ms. Benton. See to it.”



Next morning, Elise stood in front of a wrought iron door, listening to the doorbell echoing through the Victorian house. She wanted to flee, but she needed to be here.

“What a pleasant surprise, Elise. Come in, please.”

“Dr. Lake, thank you.”

A moment later, Elise found herself sitting across her mentor at a table in her sunroom, a steaming cup of peppermint tea in front of her.

“How are you doing, ma’am?”

“Great, I’ve enjoyed taking things a bit slower, and I rediscovered my love for research. At the Institute I never had time to notice how much I’ve missed it.”

“That’s great, I’m glad. I imagine your husband might also enjoy the reality of your fewer hours.”

“Oh, yes, well, Jean hasn’t complained yet.”

“This is a beautiful painting,” Elise pointed at an elaborate drawing of two women sitting on a porch gazing at the sunset, overlooking a little girl playing on the grass in front of them.

“Thank you, Elise. It’s one of my earliest pieces. I had dreamed about this scene over and over again, and only after I painted this did the dreams end.” Vivienne’s eyes were drawn to the image.

“You’re an artist?”

“I always wanted to be an artist. Ironically, science never interested me. Yet, my father... he felt physics offered more security than the arts, and the rest... you know the rest. I rarely paint anymore. Anyway, how are things at Chronos?”

“All right, I think. Dr. Miller is competent, and she’s also not a fan of Ciane.”

“Always a plus. Is this purely a social visit?”

Elise stilled her toying with the teabag-tag. “Well, how much have you heard about the new direction of the Institute?”

“Nothing specific regarding any potential mission, but I’m assuming Ciane has finally convinced the OC to drop the non-interference policy?”

“That’s a reasonable assumption to make, ma’am.”

“I’m assuming this is bothering you, especially in light of your own experience?”

“Yes, I have my reservations, but it changes nothing. I’m... Did you know the OC made my... uh... indiscretion disappear? Until recently, Dr. Miller knew nothing of it.”

“How unusual. Why would they do this when it was not only the first attempt to change the past, *but* it was also unsuccessful? Dr. Miller should have been informed about it.”

“She agrees.”

“I’m mystified. Ciane has been pushing for years to use the TDA to attempt changing the past. Why would he do anything to endanger the success of such a mission?”

“I don’t understand it, either.” Elise was about to say something else when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, I do apologize, but I’m expecting Noah. I’ll be right back.”

“Dr. Watson.” Elise stood to shake Noah’s hand.

“Please, Elise. I think we’ve known each other long enough to drop the formalities. Besides, we haven’t worked together in a long time.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Noah. My parents have been asking about you.”

“Yes, I’ve got to give them a call.” Noah smiled before taking a sip of his soda.

“Did Vivienne tell you we’re back to our old inventor days?”

“Yes, she did, but she failed to mention you’re working together again. Do you think there’s another time machine in you?”

“Who knows,” Noah laughed, his dark brown eyes sparkling in the morning sun.



Elise spent the rest of the weekend avoiding spilling her guts to Luca. They had no secrets, but she was terrified of disappointing yet another person. All she could do was wait for Dr. Miller's reaction. She wasn't sure if she would keep her job this time. Elise contemplated calling Charlotte, since they'd grown cordial after long nights of skimming through extensive and detailed mission plans, but Charlotte's persistent cheerful nature was more than she could take right now.

Sunday morning, Elise grabbed the phone and called her sister.

"Hey, stranger."

"Hey, Penelope." Elise was delighted to hear her younger sister's voice. They hadn't talked since before the *Titanic* mission.

"How're you doing?"

"Fine, a bit distracted with work and all."

"New security detail?"

"Yes, we're still in evaluation. I think my boss is mad at me."

"What a shocker. Hey, I thought you liked your boss?"

"I did, the old one, at least. Rhoscon got a new leader."

"Oh, OK. So, what did you do?"

"Why would you assume it was me?"

"I haven't just met you."

"Whatever." Bitterness crept into Elise's tone.

"I'm messing with you."

“Yes, sorry. It’s . . . , during my last detail, my partner was killed.”

“Elise! Why didn’t you call me? Are you OK? What happened?”

“We were busy, and I was in hearings and all. Besides, you know”

“Yes, you’re not big on sharing. Unless it comes to Luca.”

“Penelope, please, don’t. I’m sorry, and that’s not it.”

Silence.

“Listen, yes, Luca is my best friend and he lives right here, so we talk, but it’s different. You got so much on your plate and I don’t wanna add to it.”

“OK, but please remember, I’m here for you. Like you were here for me when Adam got sick.”

“I know, I know. I understand, rationally, but I still feel dreadful for burdening you with my problems.”

“You are *not* a burden! You’re my sister, Elise.”

“I know.”

“You want to talk about what happened?”

Taking a deep breath, Elise sniffled, before wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Yeah, it was horrible”

After spending almost two hours talking to her sister, Elise mind was blank. Only sheer will kept her burning eyes open, while a dull ache pulsed through her body with every step. Elise picked up a glass of wine and dragged herself back to her bedroom.



Helen spent her Friday night poring over Elise's report. With each examination, her heart beat faster and her neck flushed red. It wasn't Elise's responsibility to inform her, considering William should have told her about this incident before they hired her. Changing the past was their goal. The implications of Elise's *adventure* were staggering. If Elise had always been there, how was changing the past possible? Maybe the key was that Elise had lacked both research and preparation?

Could time resist change? This didn't have to mean it was impossible to change the past, but it would make such attempts more difficult. The historians who sit on the OC must have discussed this further. William likely didn't care, which was odd, given he had been pushing for the new direction for years. As a longtime supporter of Dr. Fields, Elle Hillshire must have been intrigued. This new information gave credit to Dr. Fields' theory that proposed time resists change, and consequently time travel with the purpose of changing complex events may be impossible.

Helen rose to get a cup of coffee, her eyelids drooping.

The *Titanic* mission made her apprehensive regarding the safe use of the PDG. While they would not encounter a freezing ocean on their Holocaust mission, the successful and efficient functioning of their invisibility shields remained of utmost importance. Burning her tongue on her first sip of coffee, Helen bit back a curse. She put down the cup and rested her hands on her kitchen counter. *How did this happen? What made such a staunch supporter of the non-interference policy do something so risky and against every rule in which she supposedly believes? Does this make Elise a hypocrite?*

She had acted out in an extreme situation, and there hadn't been a rational plan behind her actions. Elise had been guided by her emotions, and if that made her a hypocrite, Helen needed to shake her hand. Jutting her jaw, she picked up her coffee and headed to the couch.

Helen had never met anyone who broke through her calm and balanced exterior with such ease as Elise Benton did. The pulsing behind Helen's temples picked up at the mere memory of Elise's inability to hold eye contact while dodging her questions before spitting out the truth. Her argument with William today, while tedious, had not rattled her half as much as Elise's visit did moments later. They'd argued a lot over the last week, and Helen had come to respect her competence. Yet, every one of their interactions had been chaotic.



Elise arrived to the meeting Monday morning with a throbbing headache rattling her skull. An empty conference room greeted her, and taking the seat furthest from Dr. Miller's usual spot, Elise glanced over her report again.

"Hey, you're here early," Charlotte said a few minutes later when she breathlessly fell into the chair next to Elise.

"Yeah, didn't sleep well." Elise shrugged her shoulders, watching the rest of the agents filter in.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Charlotte pulled out her tablet the moment Henry and Dr. Miller entered the room.

"Good morning, everyone. I hope you are ready for our first mission discussion."

Everyone mumbled their greeting, followed by vigorous nodding. “Well, then, let us begin. Mr. Root, if you could start us off, please.”

While Sam offered his thoughts regarding the mission files, Dr. Miller kept her eyes trained on him, her hands folded on her lap. Elise struggled to still her shuffling feet on the floor.

“Are there any diverging opinions regarding the scenarios which eliminate Adolf Hitler?” Helen’s eyes drifted over the faces of her Agents, though she avoided any eye contact with Elise.

“Elise and I agree with the suggestion, ending the life of Hitler would prove counterproductive to our general goal,” Charlotte cleared her throat, giving Elise a lopsided smile.

Helen nodded at Charlotte before turning to Ava. “Ms. Jones, yes?”

“I think we need to consider the potential global ramification of eliminating this historic event. The Nazis, to this day, are considered the ultimate evil. They show no redeeming quality and have influenced us all, and I’m not merely talking about their influence on the arts and culture, but because they were the ultimate foe. Nations rose up against them. Some late, of course, but still. Are we sure the world can afford never having fought this fight?”

“Go on, Ms. Jones.” Helen took off her glasses and leaned back in her chair.

“The Holocaust has defined who we are, to a degree. It has shown us, the worldwide community, who we do *not* want to be. Could there be more genocides occurring, in different places, if the Nazis never ascended to power?”

“There still were genocides after the Holocaust!” Elise intervened, her gaze flickering between Helen and Ava. “I understand what you’re saying, and I do think the events that led to the Second World War and the Holocaust left a deep imprint on the psyche of the world. However, it wasn’t enough to prevent further genocides. In fact, depending on the victims of the genocide, the world community often intervened too late, after countless lives were lost.”

“An interesting argument, Ms. Jones, but I tend to agree with your fellow Agent. The Holocaust did not prevent the incidence of further genocides. Anyone else?”

“There is one more thing. Hitler lost. Even if the price for this was exorbitant and the human toll staggering, is it wise to risk an overall positive outcome?” Charlotte noted. “What if we do this and Germany ends up winning?”

Elise took a deep breath, their roles having been reversed.

“We have to recognize it may be possible that we will be unable to change the past. Our simulations can only take us so far. What they *can* do however, is help lower the risks of creating the problems you have mentioned. This is why we need to run and survey all simulations.” Helen put her glasses back on and turned her attention to Henry.

“Mr. Pierre, are there any technical issues you can foresee?”

“No, Dr. Miller. The PDGs have seen several improvements and should operate adequately. In fact, you’re now able to charge them wherever you have access to electricity. The TDA is fully functional as well, so from a technological side, this mission won’t be a problem.”

“Great news,” Helen smiled. After explaining the next few steps for loading the simulations, she dismissed the team.

As the room cleared, Elise stood in front of Helen's seat while her boss continued to type on her tablet.

"Not now."

"I understand you are upset, but..."

"Upset? I am livid! I cannot even look at you. I feel like... I do not think I can have a civil conversation with you right now."

Elise dropped her head and turned to leave, maybe she should start looking for a new job. She was about to open the door when Helen spoke.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" Helen's voice was low and cold.

"Yes." Elise didn't turn around.

"I read your report, repeatedly. It baffles me why I had not been notified about this right away." Helen drummed her fingers. "You would think such information was pertinent to succeeding at our endeavor."

Elise turned. "I don't understand why no one told you. I'd assumed the OC informed you, but when you said no one had ever attempted to change the past before..."

"That was weeks ago!"

"I'm sorry."

Helen stilled, her hands akimbo, she observed Elise for the first time. "I know you are, and the loss of your partner must have been hard, especially since you had to experience it twice and were unable to save him. I am still amazed the OC did not let you go over this."

"Yes, it was painful, and regarding the OC, I'm as surprised as you are." Elise drew one foot along the bamboo floor. "Do I need to look for a new job?"

Helen's head snapped up. "No, no, you don't. I... I need some more time to assess what this means, and how it relates to our mission. I might also need to confer with Dr. Hillshire," Helen nodded at Elise, who offered a shaky smile.

"All right, I...uh...I will go back to work, then."

"Do that."

"What in the world is going on?" Charlotte accosted Elise the moment she stepped into her office.

"You're aware you have your own office?"

"Don't deflect. We've been working in your office this entire time."

Moving behind her desk, Elise released a heavy sigh. "Nothing. At least, nothing I can talk about because it relates to an old mission, before you ever joined Chronos." Elise raised her hands. "Look, I know Dr. Miller is your godmother, and I understand you wish we'd be friendlier, but it doesn't look like that's in the cards."

"If you say so."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"It's not important to me you two are in accord. Go ahead, have your *disagreements*. I'd only prefer to keep you as my partner, and constant bickering with our *boss* is not helpful."

"Ahh, is this your way of saying you like me?"

Charlotte moved closer and put her hands on top of the table. "I never said otherwise, unlike *some* people."

Elise's eyes locked on Charlotte's retreating form.

Chapter VI

Simulations

Poring over medical files confirmed it. She sat down, her hands shaking. This couldn't be. A lie, and what a lie! Why did they never say? Did they know? Or did they think there was nothing to tell? With a racing heart, she made the decision. There could be no other way. It was the only solution. If only different Observers were sent first. While that would make things easier, it changed nothing.



Elise yawned. The mission simulations were exhausting and Helen dismissed any scenario containing an above five percent chance of Germany winning the Second World War, which struck several promising scenarios off the list. The Special Agents had separate simulations, for they needed the results of the preliminary simulations to create their own scenarios.

Elise finished reading the new memo Dr. Miller had sent out earlier. Apparently, the simulations had yielded three potential mission objectives. Tomorrow, these final simulations would be converted into interactive 3D streams which would then play out in the Owl Eye, Chronos' interactive virtual reality platform. According to the memo, Charlotte and Elise were to start their first simulation the next day.



Charlotte, Henry and the other Agents were in the Owl Eye by the time Elise entered the room. She greeted her partner and they hastened to compare notes. A few minutes later, Helen joined them.

“Alright. Ms. Benton, Ms. Bayer. Are you ready to run scenario alpha?”

Charlotte and Elise nodded. Putting on their gear and headset, they stepped onto the Owl platform and activated the simulation. Immediately, their previous surroundings disappeared and they found themselves in a virtual recreation of Berlin, Germany. It was the 27th of February 1933.

“Do you really believe preventing the *Reichstag* fire will have such a huge impact?” Charlotte said, stepping closer to the back of the building.

“The Nazis blamed it on the Communists and used it to enact the *Reichstag Fire Decree*, which eliminated all civil liberties and was an important step in Hitler’s rise.”

“True, and it riled the crowds. Look at the support the Nazi party gained after this.”

“Hmm,” Elise opened the backdoor. “We could first do a mission as Observers to find out who *did* start the fire,” Elise said, treading lightly down an unlit corridor.

“We’ll find out either way. I’d rather not make two trips into this hell.”

“Agreed. Though Germany in 1933 wasn’t much of a hell yet.”

“Tell me why the PDG projects you as white again?”

“Touché.” Elise veered around the corner, looking down a darkened hallway of the *Reichstag*. “We’ll catch them and bring them to Louis Ullstein. He’ll run an exposé in the *Berliner Morgenpost*.”

“That easy, huh?” Charlotte followed Elise and noticed shadows fleeting across the walls of the staircase. “Down there.” Elise and Charlotte sneaked toward the staircase.

There were two of them. Following the dark figures into the basement of the *Reichstag*, Elise and Charlotte pulled out their weapons, creeping closer with each step. Elise felt the chill of the freezing German winter running down her back, and she scrunched up her nose at the musty and stagnant smell of their surroundings. Closing in on the two men unpacking their materials from their backpacks, Elise signaled Charlotte to take point.

“*Haende hoch!*” Charlotte bellowed. The sound of a shattering glass bottle filled the room, making the arsonists jump up and freeze. Turning slowly, raising their hands, the two men stared with wide eyes at the dark clothed figures before them.

With Charlotte’s gun steadily aimed at the duo, Elise dashed forward and handcuffed them before picking up their backpacks.

They had agreed to meet with Louis Ullstein, the current head of Ullstein Verlag, which was the publisher of the *Berliner Morgenpost*, in the middle of the night. The man had been both confused and suspicious of the idea of meeting so late, but he was intrigued by Charlotte’s promise to deliver one of the greatest scandals in recent German history.

Making it to their truck unseen, Elise drove through the eerily silent Berlin night, their two captives secured in the back of their truck.

“Don’t you feel this has been too easy?” Charlotte cleared her throat after a few minutes.

“Well, the computer creates the most likely scenario.”

“Sure, but people are unpredictable. The program analyzed a plethora of data on this, but who is to say we’re not missing something vital, something only reality will reveal.”

“I agree, but if this is your argument, then all simulations are worthless.”

“They might be.”

“Don’t tell Dr. Miller.”

“You’re aware she’s watching this, right?”

Elise chuckled and pulled the truck into the car lot of Ullstein’s apartment. Louis Ullstein opened the door after the first ring.

“*Guten Abened,*” Charlotte smiled.

Warily, Louis gestured for Elise and Charlotte to enter and led them to his sitting room. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it and closed his eyes, inhaling the fetid smoke.

Charlotte took over the conversation.

“Forgive this late intrusion, Mr. Ullstein.” Charlotte folded her hands on her lap.

Louis nodded, his dark eyes concentrated on his guests.

“Our superiors have information the NSDAP had made plans to set the *Reichstag* on fire, this very night.”

“Excuse me?” Extinguishing his cigarette, Louis leaned forward in his chair.

“This isn’t all, though. Hitler plans to blame the Communist Party for the arson.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Let’s say our superiors have their eyes and ears everywhere.”

Elise had to swallow a chuckle.

“Why... I mean, why would our Chancellor want to burn down the *Reichstag*?”

Louis ran a hand over his bald head. “You said he wants to blame the KPD for this?”

Louis’ gaze fell on the floor, his forehead furrowed. “Yes, I can see how this would strengthen Hitler and the party.” Louis stood.

Elise was impressed by Ullstein’s ability to grasp the advantages of this plan for the Nazis, though he failed to scratch the surface of the devastating consequences of the arson of the *Reichstag*.

“You see then why it is so important for you to publish the identity of the true arsonists?” Charlotte eyes flashed at the pacing man.

“Where are the arsonists?”

“In our van, outside. Tied up and shackled.”

“No, don’t misunderstand me, *please*. I would be delighted to help you, but what you are asking is impossible.”

“But Mr. Ullstein—”

Louis raised his hands. “No, I cannot help you. You said your superiors see everything? Then I am sure they must have heard the rumors.”

“What rumors?”

“During his campaign, Hitler did not hide his dislike of the Jewish community. There are rumors that Hitler plans to place sanctions on Jewish businesses, and our publishing house has decided to remain as unobtrusive as possible.”

Such rumors must have been jarring for the Jewish community, and Elise could empathize with Ullstein's publishing house's decision not to make any waves, but this turn of events destroyed their entire plan. Without exposure, the Nazis were free to try the arson of the *Reichstag* another day, and the consequences would remain.

"Mr. Ullstein, don't you think—"

"I am sorry, but my answer is final. Your suggestion has the potential of ruining our publishing house. I am not prepared to take such a risk."

They couldn't fault Ullstein for refusing to help. All he could see from his perspective was printing this story would endanger his business. No one could have foreseen the Holocaust as the final solution for Hitler's Jewish question.

"We understand, and we appreciate you taking the time to see us."

Louis nodded and led Charlotte and Elise out of his apartment.

"How about we go back in the simulation, and instead of talking to Ullstein, let's see if Theodor Wolff from the *Berliner Tageblatt* agrees to print our story. His newspaper reached fewer people, so I'm guessing this is why the computer chose Ullstein instead, but Wolff was critical of Hitler's version of the *Reichstag* fire."

"Yes, but the problem in this scenario might be Lachmann-Mosse. Wolff was the editor in chief while Lachmann-Moss was the actual head of the publishing house. He fired Wolff after he spoke out against the Nazis."

"Isn't it worth a shot? If we don't try another scenario, this simulation is all but done."

“Yes, let’s see.” Charlotte and Elise entered their truck and Charlotte activated their communication line. “Permission to re-start simulation alpha at point B-14 and attempt to achieve the mission goal by interacting with Theodor Wolff.”

“Permission granted.” Dr. Miller’s voice rang in the car. “Reset in three, two, one.”

Elise slammed her hands onto the hood of their truck. “He wanted to do it, and he was excited about it, but then Lachmann-Mosse...” Elise raked a shaky hand through her hair.

“That’s why the computer selected Ullstein as the sole viable scenario.”

“This is *so* frustrating, come on! How many people had phones in Germany back then, and what are the odds of both Wolff and Lachmann-Mosse owning telephones? Maybe without them, in all his eagerness, he would have gone ahead and printed it, without asking his boss first.” Elise kicked the tire.

“Maybe, and yes, this is maddening, but with any luck, the next simulations will be successful.” As soon as they entered their truck, a feminine voice rang in their ears.

“Probability change. Mission alpha no longer presents a significant likelihood of accomplishing the operation goal. Reset.”

Elise and Charlotte took off their goggles and turned toward a glowering Helen.

“I expect your mission reports tomorrow morning.” Helen turned and left the room.

Worrying her lower lip, Elise followed Charlotte putting away their gear before leaving the Owl Eye.



Two other simulations and three reports later, Elise had Charlotte over at her apartment.

“I still cannot believe you told von Hindenburg he’d lost his mind.” Elise handed Charlotte a steaming cup of tea.

“Yeah, the low point of the simulation. I understand why Ullstein refused to help us, or Lachmann-Mosse because they both had something to lose. Hindenburg? He didn’t even like Hitler, and he never wanted to appoint him Chancellor. It flies right past me.”

“He *is* described as a bit wary.” Elise drew her legs under her when she sat down across from Charlotte with her own mug of chamomile tea warming her hands.

“Paranoid, I think you meant to say paranoid.” Charlotte bit out.

“At least it was you who ruined your godmother’s mood.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure she’ll give me an earful. In private.”

“Maybe you should avoid working with family.”

“Now you tell me.”

“Look, by the time you said this to Hindenburg, it was over anyway. He’d already decided not to change his mind because he thought we were spies or whatever.”

“But we had all the right contacts and credentials!”

Elise raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, yeah. Paranoid.” Charlotte sighed.

“Maybe we would’ve ended up causing him to appoint Hitler, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Elise asked.

“It doesn’t matter, since we won’t attempt this scenario, but if we had, wouldn’t you wonder if your presence there, your words, was the actual reason why Hitler was named Chancellor? Like, if we hadn’t been there none of this would have happened?”

“I don’t think I could live with thinking we had caused this.” Charlotte never spotted Elise’s stony expression.

“Anyway, since both alpha and beta didn’t show any promise, looks like we’ll go for the rescue scenario.”

“Yeah, it sucks we can’t prevent Hitler’s rise to power.”

“Maybe the time was ripe for such a takeover. I was thinking... if Ullstein had printed the report of the true identity of the arsonists, Hitler was already in the process of suppressing the freedom of the press. His *Gleichschaltung* was quite efficient.”

“One way of putting it.”

“I mean, let’s say Ullstein had printed the piece, how many people would have read it? How many would have believed it? The Ullstein family was Jewish and at the time, the German climate was already anti-Semitic. You need a movement for change. There was no social media, nothing, so how would this information have spread, considering Hitler was restricting freedom of expression?”

“You’re right. The Nazis would have taken the publishing house from him, and in the worst case scenario, they might have killed him.” Charlotte put her cup down.

“Anyway, why are you so calm all of a sudden? You were pretty upset after the alpha simulation.”

“I like the rescue scenario, to be honest. It seems promising. Well, I still have my doubts about the entire operation, not to mention those damn commandos.”

“Special Agents.” Charlotte laughed.

“Whatever. Anyway, I’ve resigned myself to the fact it’s impossible to prevent Hitler’s rise to power.”

Charlotte was about to reply when the doorbell rang. Elise shrugged her shoulders before rising.

“Luca,” Elise turned and trailed back to the living room.

“You again,” Luca grinned at Charlotte before flinging himself next to Elise on the couch.

“Good to see you too, Luca.”

Luca waved her off and turned to Elise. “You ready to go?”

“What?”

“Seriously? You forgot?”

“Oh,” Charlotte’s hand rose, covering her eyes. “We’re supposed to go to dinner tonight, right?”

“Yes, at least *someone* remembers!”

“Sorry, slipped my mind. Where’s Hanna?”

“She should be here any moment. Said she needed a bit more time so I hurried down to see how far along you guys were. Glad I did. Now, do you need to do something before we go? A change of clothes, maybe?”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Nothing.”

“Well then, are you still up for dinner, Charlotte? It’s OK if you’d rather not.”

“No, it’s fine, let’s go.” They stood the moment Elise’s doorbell rang for a second time this evening.

Chapter VII

Divergence

The program was written. There had been doubt, the night before, but it didn't last. Some consequences were unfortunate, but this always seemed to be the case. Vigilant planning exposed the opportune time frame, and the trip to the TDA was accomplished in utter solitude. All corridors were empty, not even a maintenance worker roamed the halls. The upload took a few minutes and the parameters were set to accomplish the goal. Now all that was left to do was letting them know when and where to expect them. Treachery had never been the plan, but it had turned into a demand. Some things are better left unchanged. The TDA swirled to life, but there was no countdown. Equipped with a bracelet and pendant, an oppressive silence infiltrated the room when the TDA whirled the reluctant time traveler into the past.



“It is beyond me how you can justify keeping Ms. Benton’s attempt to change the past from me!” Helen hissed at a pallid William. She could feel a headache creeping up.

“It happened before you took over.”

“This is not an argument,” Helen took a step toward William. “All I was told was Dr. Lake had been let go due to misconduct concerning an agent. For crying out loud, William! You made it sound like she harassed someone.”

“Your assumption.”

“What is *wrong* with you? You were the one who wanted me to take over. In fact, you encouraged me to apply since, according you, ‘Vivienne Lake’s days are over.’”

“Well, I was right.”

“That is beside the point, William. Ms. Benton *failed* when she made the first attempt *ever* to change the past, and you didn’t think this was worth mentioning? Judging by her report, it appeared that Elise had *always* been there.”

“The OC reviewed the case and concluded that, to be successful, changing the past requires sufficient and careful analyzing, planning, and preparing. You are doing all of this, so there is no conflict. Not to mention this happened before we voted on a change of policy.”

Helen sighed, “Do you want us to fail, William?”

“Why would I want you to fail?”

“You tell me. Your behavior seems to suggest you do, and I have no other explanation as to why you would hide such vital information from me.”

“You are exaggerating and talking nonsense. I would think you’d remember I am responsible for your current position! Without me, you’d never be able to attempt your little pet project! The OC made a decision, and you do not supersede the *Oversight Committee*, so I’d advise you to *let this go*.” A little vein on William’s temple pulsated.

“No, William, I see you sadly fail to grasp my point at all. I think you should leave. I am busy.” Helen sat back down and focused her attention on her computer screen.

“Good day, Dr. Miller.” William slammed the door.

Helen was picking up a file when another knock interrupted her. “Come in.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Miller. I couldn’t help but overhear Dr. Ciane...”

“Yes, I imagine.”

“Again, I’m sorry I didn’t come to you sooner.”

“It’s fine, Ms. Benton. We will figure it out.”



Elise stood in front of her open fridge door, grimacing. “I don’t want to throw out all this food. You got a key, how about you take all this while I’m gone? The mission should last two weeks, but my vegetables won’t survive this long.” Elise scratched her head. “I thought the preparations would take longer.” Closing the fridge, she turned to sit down at the kitchen table.

“Don’t worry, your loss is my gain,” Luca said between bites of his banana.

“Yeah, right, if only you could cook.”

“Hey!”

“Grandma Cathy would be appalled by your lack of cooking skills.”

“Probably, but how quick you forget, my friend. Hanna’s an excellent cook.”

Luca grinned. “Fourteen days seems a bit short for such a mission.”

“Well, it’ll just be Charlotte and me first. We will scout the area, establish our contacts and connections, and set up base to make sure everything is prepared. It’s reconnaissance for the most part. When we get back, they’ll analyze our data and then we return to support the Special Agents. So, that will add more time.”

Luca nodded, “Speaking of Charlotte.”

“Yes?”

“Did you guys end up watching a movie together, after dinner the other night?”

“Yes, we did. We watched one of her favorite movies. It was fun.”

“Her car was out front when I left the next morning.”

“We fell asleep on the couch and when we woke it was already late, so she stayed over. There is a reason I have a guest room.” Elise sat down.

“Anyway, you’re so relaxed. No nerves going haywire? I mean, this is something...”

“Yeah, it is, but I’m not nervous. We’re well prepared, and while I’m still not convinced we’ll accomplish our goal, we’ll try, and Dr. Miller.... I think she’s trying. I...I uh...I’m not sure anymore....”

“So eloquent.” Luca flung the banana peel into the trash can. “You guys did all you can do. Dr. Miller, though, can’t say I’m following this particular text.”

“I still don’t like her methods, or her entire demeanor, but I think she is devoted to this project and that she wants it to succeed.”

“I know you’re not her biggest fan, but did you really think Dr. Miller wanted your mission to fail?”

“No, I... I meant she cares about the success, and not from a mere professional perspective. I don’t think she’s in it to make a name for herself.”

“Uh, yes, but Elise, what you’re doing is a secret, so if you succeed, no one will know. If the Holocaust never happened, no one knows *what* she did, and, even worse, no one will understand how horrifying all this was to start with.” Luca’s brows crinkled. “Time travel’s weird.”

Elise snorted, “Yes, you can say that again. Our mission is more of a rescue mission because it seems impossible to avert the Holocaust. I’m aware Dr. Miller won’t receive any public credit for this, but I’ve felt she had an ulterior motive. Maybe I was

blinded by my anger over what had happened to Dr. Lake and the policy change. I don't think I was ever fair to Dr. Miller."

"Well, duh!"



Helen was waiting in the TDA room for Elise and Charlotte to arrive after the last briefing with the OC.

"Were there any problems?" She stood next to Henry, who was keying in the final parameters for the mission.

"No, but Dr. Ciane was his usual charming self," Elise said before putting on her jacket, and adding the necklace and bracelet. She fastened her gun before snatching the PDG from her locker and putting it on. Activating it, she chuckled when she looked down at her now pale hands. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this."

"Yes, you're cute with your natural complexion, but *this* makes you look pasty," Charlotte flashed a smile and zipped up her jacket.

Helen coughed, her eyes narrowed at Charlotte. "I assume you have both uploaded your video logs?"

Elise and Charlotte nodded.

"Are there any final questions?"

"No, all good," Elise replied, while Charlotte shook her head.

"You will materialize in a forest at the edge of Berlin, so there won't be any need to go invisible. I know Mr. Pierre has made advancements and you should be able to charge the devices in Germany, but since Elise will have to rely on it most of the time, I'd

rather be on the side of caution. From your materialization point you will head to the first contact.”

“Understood.” Elise nodded and gestured at Charlotte to follow her onto the TDA platform.

“You have fourteen days to complete your reconnaissance. When you get back, you’ll need to rest before returning with the support of the Special Agents.”

“Yes, Dr. Miller.” Charlotte grinned at her godmother.

“Alright then. Mr. Pierre, are we ready to start the rescue mission?”

Henry’s fingers flew over the console in front of him, before he looked up with a frown. “I think so.”

“Is there a problem, Mr. Pierre?”

“No. I... uh... I don’t believe so. I’m a bit under the weather and, uh, the program is a bit sluggish, but I’ve double-checked everything. The mission parameters are set, all systems are a go.”

Elise and Charlotte placed their hands on the activation pillars.

“Very well then. Good luck, Charlotte, Elise.” Helen observed the two women standing on the TDA platform while the computer announced the activation countdown.

She watched the energy engulf them, tugging them away.



The sensation of the transport felt off. Elise's stomach fell and her eyes blurred. She'd never been disoriented after a time jump before. Her eyelashes fluttered and she looked around, tensing once she noticed the lack of trees. Smoke rose from shattered ruins while sirens echoed all around them. Elise shook her head and spun around to warn Charlotte when gunfire rang out. Ducking, she jumped behind a pile of rubble. Her movement had been quick and uncoordinated and she crashed onto her right side with her wrist stuck between her body and the hard, cold concrete. Pulling her arm out, Elise stared wide-eyed at the shattered TDA bracelet falling off her wrist. All air fled her lungs. She lifted herself up, looking around for Charlotte, seeing her hiding behind a bombed out building.

The gunfire kept ringing. Creasing her brows, Elise dropped her head; there was no way to reach Charlotte without being shot. Maybe... Elise keyed in the invisibility function when she noticed her skin was its normal golden-brown. The PDG must have been damaged too. She was outnumbered and outgunned, which left one option. Charlotte could escape, and she could then tell Helen what happened. Taking off the PDG bracelet, Elise stepped on it, hearing it crunch under her shoe. Looking up, she inched closer to the edge of the rubble protecting her from the gunfire.

“They're broken, go home. Tell Helen. Only Helen.” Elise shouted.



Once Elise's words registered, Charlotte's mouth fell open. Elise couldn't transport back because the conductor or key must've gotten damaged. *The PDG too?* Charlotte bit her lip, contemplating if she could make it to Elise, but the gunfire rang persistently.

"Go!" Elise's voice resonated in Charlotte's ears. *No! There has to be another way, how can you leave her here?* Charlotte's hand went to the gun on her hips as she crept closer to overlook the area around the ruins offering shelter. Soldiers were slinking closer to their positions; there were too many of them. Charlotte's heart sped up and her nails scraped against the cold, rough structure of the building. *If they catch us both...*, she had to leave because help was not to be found in the past.

Looking back at Elise, Charlotte's vision blurred. This might be the last time she'd ever see her. Gritting her jaw, Charlotte connected her bracelet to the activation key of her necklace. Elise raised her hands and surrendered to the soldiers closing in on her when the familiar tug and pull of the TDA yanked Charlotte through time and space.



"*Haende hoch!*" The soldiers surrounding her shouted. Elise, having *already* raised her hands, ground her teeth. All five men wore Nazi uniforms. Elise's eyes flickered to Charlotte's position and relief flooded her upon seeing soldiers hounding for her partner in vain. She'd escaped. Elise felt a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth before a soldier rammed the end of his gun into her back. Falling to her knees, she

held back a groan when another soldier pulled her arms behind her back to handcuff her. He seized her gun before dragging her up and shoved her to march in front of him.

They walked for a short moment and Elise took in the bombed city block. This *wasn't* 1936, it looked closer to the end of the war. Elise willed herself to remain calm after the Nazi soldiers had thrust her into the rear of a foul smelling truck, hands cuffed behind her back. No way back. *Calm down, Charlotte will come back. Maybe even bring along those commandos.* Elise tried to reason with herself, sizing up the two Nazi soldiers who sat down next to her.

Their original plan saw them arriving in Germany in spring of 1936, after the *Nuremberg Laws* had been enacted, and when the overall climate in Germany had begun to convince the Jewish population of the menace the German Reich was for their community. People needed to believe they were in danger if the mission to send as many Jews as possible out of Germany was to succeed. Yet, seconds after their arrival, it had become apparent *this wasn't* 1936. Worse, the Nazis had been expecting them.

She tried to understand how this had happened. The TDA had never malfunctioned before. Her mind jumped to sabotage, but the 'who and why' behind all this escaped her. Helen couldn't be compromised, which is why she'd told Charlotte to place her trust into her godmother alone.

Taking a deep breath, Elise coughed to avoid gagging when the putrid smell of foul eggs and urine assaulted her senses. Leaning back, Elise closed her eyes. She might be in for a long drive. They had planned their arrival to be in Berlin, and Elise assumed their general location had been correct. Captured by a bunch of Nazi soldiers who were in

the process of transporting her lord knew where made remaining calm difficult. *God*, Elise scoffed. Not a topic she wanted to ponder.

Elise estimated her chances of escape to be near zero. She considered jumping out of the back of the truck since there was a mere flap separating her from the outside. The soldiers didn't talk to her, but they were paying attention and would grab her before she could jump. Then they'd beat her. Or shoot her, if she managed to escape. *No, better wait and see.*

After what seemed like hours, the truck came to a sudden halt. Elise stared at her lap, unsure if she should hope for a longer ride. The smell of burned rubber permeated the car when the engine roared up again, shuddering, when the tires dug deeper into the ground. After a few minutes, the engine clogged, a truck door opened and slammed shut. Elise clasped her sweaty hands.

"*Steh auf,*" a soldier opened the flap and looked into the truck. *Glad I understand German.* Elise stood. The soldiers on either side rose while ducking their heads. The one in front of her left the truck, followed by Elise, whose stiff knees almost didn't cooperate in climbing out of the vehicle. The soldier who'd told her to exit the truck grabbed her arm and pushed her toward a gray stone building.

Waddling through the soggy soil, Elise took note of the setting sun and the barbed wire fence in the back. Turning her head to the side, she froze. She recognized these buildings from their preparations for the mission, when they had pored over everything relating to the rise of the Nazi party, and the Holocaust. An elbow crashed into her back, forcing her forward.

“*Marsch!*” Dropping her head, Elise resumed walking. She was in Buchenwald. Judging by her surroundings, the concentration camp had been in use for some time. The scene in front of her was a frightful duplicate of the pictures racing through her mind. She recalled Buchenwald was constructed in 1937 and operated until 1945, so she must have arrived in Germany before August 1944, since Elise didn’t see the destruction from the American air raid taking place on August 24, 1944.

Before Elise could further analyze the scenery, she was jostled into the gray stone building she had first noticed. The inside was dark and gelid; Elise wanted to draw her arms around her chest, but she was still handcuffed. The soldier behind her pushed her down a hallway and into a small room with a table and two chairs. There were no windows, but visible light crept in from the hallway.

“*Sitz,*” the soldier nudged her toward the chair, before he spoke low and fast to another soldier who had followed them into the room. Elise couldn’t make out his words, and after he left the room, the other soldier stayed and proceeded to ignore her. *Fine, so far this isn’t too awful,* Elise stifled a groan. *Go ahead and invite fate to mess with you.*

By now the sun would have gone down, and Elise’s throat was parched and her stomach rumbled. She had decided she wasn’t going to talk to anyone, because while they had an inkling she wasn’t German, talking risked compromising the time line.

Bending her head, Elise choked down a bitter laugh. Of all the possible scenarios, and out of all the reasons why she’d argued this mission would prove to be a disaster, *this* situation had never entered her mind. Still, she felt she deserved to send an “I told you so” in Helen’s direction. *If I ever see her again,* her stomach plummeted. *Dying in the past before you are born.* Elise pushed away memories of Daniel.

What if she was the cause of all kinds of horrible events? Without her here, these things might never have happened. Elise tried to derail the gloom train her mind insisted on riding, but she supposed it was to be expected this place would unearth all sort of despair. Lost in her thoughts, Elise didn't notice the newcomer enter.

“*Und wen haben wir hier?*” a melodic voice asked. Looking up, Elise was stunned to see a woman who, at first glance, bore a striking resemblance to Charlotte. For a millisecond, Elise felt a stirring of hope, thinking her partner had found a way to rescue her. She jutted her chin, remaining quiet.

“*Wegtreten!*” the woman turned toward the soldier who nodded and left the room. She sat down on the chair at the table across from Elise. “I am Katharina von Berg, and I shall persuade you to divulge all of your secrets.”

Elise, surprised at the woman's flawless English, remained motionless, holding eye contact.

“I am sure you do not believe me, but I can be *most* persuasive, as you shall see.” Katharina stood and walked over to a cabinet, seizing a couple of glasses and a bottle. “Thirsty?” She filled both glasses and slid one in Elise's direction.

Staring at the water in front of her, Elise licked her lips.

After emptying her glass, Katharina canted her head to the side. Unflinching, Elise stared at her.

“Oh, how inconsiderate of me. You are handcuffed.” Katharina strolled next to Elise and bent down to open the restraints. Straightening, she froze and her hands tightened into fists. Katharina's jaw clenched before she spun around and an impassive

mask once more settled on her face. Rubbing her wrists, Elise placed her hands on the tabletop, refusing to go for the water. Katharina nodded at Elise, “Drink.”

Relenting, she picked up the glass and emptied it in one large gulp. Watching this woman remained disconcerting, but upon looking closer Elise noticed distinct differences between Charlotte and von Berg’s facial features. The face of the woman in front of her was sharper and her stunning clear blue of her eyes sent a chill through Elise. Her nose was a bit longer and her cheekbones higher. The hair was the same, though her blond curls were wrapped in a tight, coiled bun. Von Berg looked taller and more muscular than Charlotte. It was strange, looking at the face of this stranger, the person in charge of her captivity, and for a second to be reminded of her partner.

“What is your name?”

Elise looked at her hands.

“I hope you are aware this is a game you cannot win.” Katharina said in an even tone.

Elise didn’t move.

“As you wish. We shall continue this tomorrow, but let me be clear: your experience here depends upon your willingness to cooperate. Therefore, I would suggest you find your voice, or I will find it *for* you.” Katharina rose and without a backward glance left the room. The soldier she’d sent out earlier returned.

“*Steh auf,*” he demanded. Elise rose. He put her handcuffs back on and led her to a small, dark, and clammy cell with no windows. In the corner stood a stone bench that Elise suspected would serve as her bed. There was a small toilet in the corner. Sighing, Elise sat down. *I should have jumped out of the damn truck.* Her chances of escaping a

concentration camp were non-existent. While she'd memorized the layout of Buchenwald to a degree, she hadn't paid enough attention to the concentration camps' floor plans. The memory remained useless as long as she was locked up and guarded anyway.

Fear reared its head but Elise refused to heed it. She would not speak, even if her silence was met with force. Shuffling back and forth on the stone bench, Elise settled for an uneasy night.



“What’s all that talk about this new prisoner? She important?”

Katharina glowered at Martin Frank, one of her soldiers who overestimated his overall popularity. “Listening to idle gossip is not a particular appealing trait, Gefreiter Frank.” Katharina drawled, gripping the counter while she waited for the coffee to finish brewing. These machines took forever, and Katharina had trouble keeping her eyes open. The previous night had been... challenging.

“I thought—”

“You thought?” Katharina snorted. “That’s charming, though I’d advise you to leave thinking to your superiors.” Katharina relished the hot liquid warming and rousing her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Get the prisoner to the interrogation room, but first bring these files to Obersturmbannführer Adler. I want to be in the room before she arrives.”

“*Sofort*, Obersturmführer von Berg.” Martin saluted and left.

Katharina finished her coffee and refrained from smashing the cup against the wall. *Appearances, dear.*

Chapter VIII

Drowning

Running down the corridor, Charlotte was surprised but glad she didn't encounter anyone besides a few maintenance workers. She had no desire to deal with any of her colleagues, or worse, run into one of the OC members. When she reached Helen's office, she didn't pause to knock. Yanking the door open, Charlotte tried to catch her breath.

"What happened? Are you okay? Why are you here?" Helen rose with wide eyes and rushed toward Charlotte.

"They got her, Helen. They were waiting for us... and I think her bracelet broke when she jumped to avoid the gunfire. She... they arrested her, and... I... I couldn't do anything. She told me to find you, to only trust you. I..., I don't understand it." Charlotte shook, her trembling hands reaching out to Helen.

"Slow down, dear. Come on, let's sit down. You are talking about Elise?" At her weak nod, Helen continued. "Who captured her, and who was shooting at you?"

"Several Nazi soldiers, it was almost like they were waiting for us, and believe me, we *so* didn't arrive in 1936, Helen! It was at least six to eight years later... Berlin looked horrifying." Her voice graveled when pictures of shattered ruins and the acrid smell of billowing smoke flooded her senses again. "There were bomb craters and so many destroyed buildings all around us."

"Are you serious?"

Charlotte glared at her godmother.

"I'm sorry, but it is so... do you think the TDA malfunctioned?"

“I doubt it, but I don’t know enough to say for sure. We’d need one of the techs to go over it, but Elise was adamant about only telling *you*, so I guess she thought it wasn't a mere malfunction.”

“Her bracelet? The PDG?”

“They opened fire right away. We both ducked and... Elise... she jumped behind a pile of rubble. I jumped in the other direction and I landed behind a...uh...a bombed out building. I guess she fell and the conductor, or, I dunno, the activation key shattered? I’m not sure what happened to her PDG. The soldiers... they were closing in on us. There was no way to reach her.” Charlotte paced. Her chest was heaving with hastening breaths and her cheeks flushed crimson. “She must have realized this, too, since she told me to return to Chronos right away, and I did... I left her there.” Tendrils of pain spread across the planes of Charlotte’s face, distorting it into a mask of unyielding, frail sorrow.

“If you didn’t leave, both of you would have been lost, probably forever. Elise made the right call in sending you back, Charlotte.”

“Yeah,” Charlotte wiped her eyes. “By now she might be dead. They might have killed her already.”

“I doubt it, but we should research this right away. We have access to all confidential documents and materials which survived from then. Maybe they mention her.



“*Steh auf.*” A soldier shook Elise awake. Disoriented, she lurched backward before straightening. For a second, elation had spread through her before she knitted her brows and waited for further instructions.

“*Sie haetten dich erschiessen sollen.*” The soldier jeered, but she remained motionless. Elise was glad he wasn’t in charge of her fate or she’d be dead already. “*Vorwärts,*” he instructed and she trudged ahead, surprised he’d left her wrists unbound after the soldier from the previous night had removed her handcuffs. “*Links,*” he bellowed a moment later, so Elise turned left. She was led back to the room she’d been in the night before. Entering, Elise wasn’t surprised to see Katharina sitting in one of the chairs.

“Good morning.” Katharina smiled and pointed toward the chair across from her. “Please eat.” Katharina pointed at the food. When Elise remained still, she took a piece of bread and bit into it. “It is not poisoned.”

Elise held Katharina’s gaze before taking hold of a slice of bread. This might not happen again.

After finishing half of her bread, Katharina leaned back in her chair. “I see you have not decided to talk to me after all.”

Elise kept chewing.

“We know you are a spy.” Katharina’s eyes darted to the two soldiers standing guard. “Yet, we are unable to identify your allegiance, so you will need to disclose all information you have gathered and sent to your superiors.” Katharina took a sip of water.

Elise remained motionless.

“I see,” Katharina folded her hands on top of the table. “You appear to be a reasonable person, so I shall give you one more opportunity to alter your stance.”

Katharina rose and handcuffed Elise before turning off the lights and leaving, the soldiers following right behind her. When the door closed and darkness encompassed the room, Elise released an unsteady breath. This was how it began.



Charlotte’s eyes were blurry, having spent hours with Helen going over all the available confidential Nazi files. A stillness had befallen the room, that at times saw them rising to refill their cups with more coffee. Rubbing her eyes, Charlotte reclined in her chair.

“There's nothing here.”

“Keep looking, we have not gone through everything yet,” Helen answered without looking up.

“I knew they were vile, but it's chilling how efficient they were. You’d think they were proposing a business model, instead of the systematic murder of millions of people because they disliked their religion.”

“There was a little more to it than that, Charlotte, but yes, I believe this is part of the reason why the Holocaust stands out among other genocides. It was not a heat of the moment slaughter. It was planned, contemplated, and handled with an unheard efficiency compared to other cases of genocide.” Taking off her glasses, Helen took another sip of her coffee, grimacing at both the taste and temperature.

“Helen, I’ve been meaning to ask, how come we have access to all this information? Chronos isn’t part of the government and has nothing to do with the military.” Charlotte gestured at all the data spread out in front of them.

“This Institute was created by rich and influential people, and it draws its talents from all over the world. There are also sections that... shall we say, have no qualms about where or *how* they obtain any necessary information.”

“Oh, OK. Did you have the TDA evaluated?”

“Yes, I had Mr. Pierre perform a routine maintenance of the system. He was somewhat confused, but he didn't ask any questions.”

“Henry is a great choice. He knows what he's doing.”

“I would hope this were the case for all of our employees! He is close to Elise, yes?”

Charlotte nodded.

“I thought, well, we will need a technician for our rescue mission, and... it seems appropriate to choose someone who is close to Elise.”

“Yes, sounds reasonable.” Charlotte hid her smirk by taking a sip from her cup. She'd never understood how someone as brilliant as her godmother could be so socially inept.

Silence once more filled the room while they continued to read through document after document.

Charlotte slammed her hands on the table, startling Helen. “Look at this, do you think this is....” She made room for Helen who wordlessly gazed at the screen.

Helen's face turned ashen and she ran a hand across her face. "Yes, I think you're right, Charlotte."



After spending what seemed like half a day handcuffed in a dark room, Elise's shoulders throbbed, but as long as all she had to endure was discomfort, she was fine. She ran through potential escape plans, nixing them all. She didn't trust the soldiers not to shoot and kill her should she attempt to flee. Elise opened her eyes at the door creaking before they fluttered shut when light flooded the room.

"Are you prepared to talk?" Katharina asked.

Elise glowered.

"I see. It has not been my intention to harm you."

Elise went rigid when Katharina stepped closer and cupped her cheek.

"Your silence is pointless because I will make you talk, in time. All you will endure until then is pain. Is this worth it?"

Elise remained silent.

"As you wish." Katharina removed her hand and after glancing over her shoulders at the empty doorway, her posture relaxed. "Don't lose hope," she whispered before leaving the room again.

Elise released a shaky breath. *What was that? Don't lose hope?* Elise tensed when two soldiers entered the room.

"*Steh auf,*" one of the soldiers pulled Elise out of her seat. They dragged her out of the room and led her into the corridor. Instead of returning Elise to her cell, they

jostled her down a narrow path before shoving her into another room. Elise had retained a flickered awareness of the path leading from the interrogation room to her new cell when her body hit the wall and the door fell shut. The room was tiny. Elise wasn't sure she could sit down. Her eyes tried to adjust to the dark, but the blackness didn't fade. She touched the cold, hard surface behind her; Elise crept along the wall until she ran into the next barrier. She wished they'd taken off her cuffs. The ceiling was so low the top of her head brushed it when she straightened. If her hands were free, she'd reach both walls before stretching her arms. The space between door and wall was so tight there was almost no room for movement. This wasn't a room, it was a closet. A dark and cold closet.

Elise yearned to wrap her arms around her torso when goosebumps spread over her body. She was still wearing the same clothing from when she'd arrived, minus all the provisions and tools from her pockets, courtesy of a Nazi strip search. They took her necklace with the activation key, not like it was of any use without the bracelet.

The walls within Elise's cell were icy. It was still winter in Germany and the nights would grow even colder. She hoped Charlotte would find her soon, because there was no chance she would be able to hold out forever.

Would it be so dangerous to speak? They were assuming she was part of the Allied forces, but what *could* she tell them? She knew how things ended so as soon as she opened her mouth, she could give away too much. *It's not worth the risk.* Elise was sure Charlotte and Helen would find a way to free her. Besides, why did von Berg tell her not to lose hope? This had to be some kind of game.

The night was hard. Elise was convinced if there was any light, she'd see condensations with every exhale. Her muscles ached, and her thoughts kept spinning, intent on opening old wounds long forgotten. Elise bobbed, wishing she could lie down. *Add sleep deprivation to exposure to extreme temperatures.*

This place unearthed the kind of memories Elise had buried for a reason. She was parched, and starved. As the hours dripped by in complete solitude, Elise counted sheep, recited the alphabet back and forth, all to avoid drowning in the swamp of slights and injuries of her mind.

After what seemed like an eternity locked up in this wretched, freezing closet, Elise shifted, her eyes tearing at the pressure on her bladder. Her throat resembled a desert and her stomach sounded like it was digesting itself. The cold never ebbed. Elise couldn't sit or stretch her arms. A stabbing pain settled between her shoulder blades while her head pounded. She wanted out, but there was only stillness and ice.

The door swung open and Elise dropped her head, the sudden light streaming into her cell blinding her. A soldier clutched her arm, pulled her out of the cell and forced her down the corridor. They took a new route, and once the next door opened, Elise found herself in a much bigger room with what appeared to be a swimming pool in the middle.

The soldier removed her cuffs. Bracing herself, Elise held her breath when the soldier threw her into the water. Her body stiffened upon impact with the icy water and images of Daniel flooded her mind while her heart rumbled in her chest. Her drenched clothes clung to her shivering body and the frigid water transformed into tiny needles pricking at her skin. Elise spat out water after breaking through the surface. *Undrinkable.*

“Are you willing to talk now?” Katharina was standing at the edge of the water pool, holding a towel in her hand.

Elise scowled at her, which would have been more effective if her entire body wasn't shaking from the cold.

“Get out,” Katharina said, handing Elise the towel. “You might want to take those clothes off. Here.” Katharina pointed toward a pair of black pants and a dark gray sweater hanging over the backrest of a rickety chair which stood in the corner of the otherwise barren room.

Elise dragged herself from the water pool on unsteady legs, the towel clutched in her hand. She nodded at Katharina and shifted to change her outfit. Tears pricked at her eyes when the clothes warmed her quivering body. Looking at Katharina, she held back the ‘thank you’ wanting to spill from her lips.

“You are aware things will not improve?” Katharina stepped closer. “How long do you think you will be able to endure this? There is no one here to save you, and I doubt your friends will be able to rescue you.”

Elise flinched.

Katharina heaved a sigh. “Yes, I thought we might agree on this outlook. To demonstrate my benevolence, I will allow you to spend this night in your old cell. I ordered my soldiers to bring you bread and water. Be assured, if you remain silent tomorrow, the cold cell will seem like a pleasant retreat to what shall befall you next.” Katharina left. The soldiers returned Elise to her cell and a tiny smile formed on her face at the sight of the stone bench and toilet.



Katharina strolled through the canteen, and loaded up a lunch tray. She sat down under one of the windows, wondering why she even bothered, the gray sky and curtain of rain had drowned out any potential sunshine hoping to enter the dreary room. Not as if there were many sunny days in March.

The bland mush they called food stuck to her gums and her stomach quivered. She took a sip of water before she resumed pushing the food around on her plate. *Where is Max? He's never late.* Katharina needed to get back to her prisoner. That infernal woman who refused to talk and who would make her....

There he is. She worried her lips and put down her utensils. Max lumbered closer, a cloth in his hand as he bent down to clean the table in front of her.

“May I take your tray, Obersturmführer?” Max asked.

“Yes, thank you.” She pushed the tray in his direction. He picked it up and Katharina scanned the barren room before her eyes drifted back to Max as he stuffed a folded piece of paper into the pocket of his jacket.



“Does this mean... is she dead?” Charlotte choked out, nausea rolling through her in waves.

Helen scanned the annotations on the screen with wide eyes. “No, this is excellent.”

“Excellent? Did you see her face?” Charlotte whispered.

“Yes, they wrote Elise was a prisoner and interrogated upon suspicion of spying for Allied forces. This means they did not kill her as soon as they captured her, which gives us time to go back and rescue her. The past is not going anywhere, after all.”

“She’s hurt, and who knows what they did after this, or how much time we have. Her face is swollen. Did you see her eyes?” Charlotte’s voice shook.

“Yes, Elise appears to be in considerable pain, but Charlotte, you cannot be so naïve to think she would not suffer any injuries while imprisoned by Nazis.”

“No, it’s... it’s difficult to see her like this. I... I want her out of there.”

“So do I, Charlotte, and we will. According to the legend, this file originated either from Buchenwald or Dachau, which means we have narrowed down *where* to look. Now we need to establish the time frame.”



Elise sat across Katharina the next day, still refusing to talk.

“It is beyond my understanding what you hope to accomplish with your silence.”

Katharina rested her chin on her palm.

Elise didn’t falter.

When Elise once more failed to acknowledge her, Katharina sighed and leaned closer. “So be it. This is your decision. Tell me, have you ever heard of strappado?”

Elise winced.

Katharina’s eyes tightened. “I thought you might have.” Katharina left the room and the soldier standing guard led Elise to another new location. This time she was in a

bathroom, and she noticed several metal poles hanging between two tiled walls in the back.

When Elise hesitated to walk forward, the soldier bashed an elbow to the side of her face. Startled, Elise bent over and groaned. He seized her arm and pulled her to stand under one of the metal poles. After retrieving the rope, the soldier removed Elise's handcuffs and tied the rope around her wrists. Her arms were held behind her back and snapped up once he turned and hoisted the rope over one of the poles. He pulled at the rope until Elise's feet dangled above the ground. The soldier left without a word.

Her arms felt like they were wrenched out of their sockets. Tears filled Elise's eyes and trailed down her cheeks. She groaned, whimpered, hoping they wouldn't leave her like this for the entire day. Time crawled, each second an infinity filled with agony at her side, muttering in her ears.



“You think she'll piss her pants?” Martin slapped Paul Bauer on his shoulders.

“The last one did, though she hasn't hung anyone up in a while.”

“Yeah, she's more moody than usual. Don't know why this one gets under her skin. She's not a Jew, but she's a brown one so pretty much an animal. Let her hang all day. She'll talk.”

“Gefreiten Frank and Bauer, I recall you have orders to fulfill elsewhere?”

Katharina hissed, stepping out of the shadows to stand behind the soldiers.

“Yes, Obersturmführer von Berg.” Both men exclaimed at the same time before rushing out of the mirror room.

Katharina stepped closer to the two-way mirror. Her head throbbed and her skin flushed. She had wanted to hear what her soldiers had to say behind her back, but that had not made remaining quiet any easier.

Her prisoner's head hung low and the tension the rope and position forced on her body made the woman shudder. Bile rose in Katharina's stomach and she felt the urge to steady herself against the wall. An hour would not do.



“I thought you would have a pleasant voice, though I would have preferred to hear it in a different setting.” Katharina's soft tone made Elise raise her head and grimace.

“I have orders to let you hang for an hour. It has been half an hour, and I wonder, did you manage to find your tongue?”

Elise narrowed her eyes.

“Hmmm.” Katharina stepped closer to her.

With a squealing sound, Elise was lowered to the floor. Her knees gave out and she sank onto the ground, and averted her face smashing into the grimy tile floor.

Katharina bent down to untie the ropes. Elise shifted her arms to the front of her body and exhaled relief in a gust of air that morphed into a sob spilling from her throat.

“Do not be too elated, we are not finished yet,” Katharina said when a soldier entered the room.

Elise laughed, the shrill sound echoing foreign in her ears.



Katharina and the soldier escorted Elise back to the room with the pool of freezing water.

This time, Elise screamed.

Katharina resisted the impulse to close her eyes and turn away. *Why did this woman not start talking after strappado?* Katharina gnashed her jaw when Elise struggled to break through the surface of the water only to be pushed back down by the soldier. She allowed one repeat of the scene before barking, “*Genug. Verschwinde.*”

The soldier shot her a quick glare before he nodded and left.

Katharina hurried to the side of the pool when Elise gasped and spluttered, trying to keep her head above water. Grasping her wrist, Katharina pulled her closer to the edge before gripping Elise under her arms and heaved her out of the pool.

“Come on now,” Katharina said under her breath.

Hauling Elise to the dry floor next to the pool of water, Katharina rolled her to the side and kept thumping Elise’s back until she coughed up water. Flipping her, Katharina started undressing Elise, whose hands slapped at Katharina’s, trying to halt their progress.

“Stop it or you will become sick if you remain stuck in these wet and cold clothes.”

Elise snorted but ceased struggling.

After Katharina had toweled her dry and dressed her in new clothes, she sat down next to Elise. “Was it worth it?”

Elise never opened her eyes.

“At least tell me your name, then I will be able to acknowledge progress and can let you go to your regular cell, along with food and water.” Katharina’s voice hitched.

Tears leaked through Elise’s eyelashes.

Katharina took the continued silence as refusal and leaned over Elise’s body, cupping her cheek. “Please?” Katharina said, watching Elise’s dark eyes flutter open at her touch.

Worrying the side of her lower lip, Elise heaved a sigh. “Elise Benton,” she breathed before closing her eyes.

“Elise,” Katharina repeated. “The name suits you. Stand up so we can return to your cell.” Katharina rose and pulled Elise to her feet.



Back in her cell, Elise took a few sips of water and forced a couple of bites of bread down her aching throat. Pain still drummed through her body, and her churning stomach left her too nauseous to eat any more. She knew this could have been so much worse, but the water pool had been agony. Soft water had turned into thousands tiny knives, shredding the skin off her body. Head pounding, Elise had been close to throwing up. The soldier had held her under until Katharina interfered.

Elise marveled she had hung in strappado for a mere half an hour. What state would she have been in if Katharina had left her up there for an entire hour? Elise didn’t understand Katharina. Her behavior made no sense. She was erratic and there were moments of hesitation and acts of kindness mixed in with anger and scorn. Elise had read about this approach to interrogation, and she planned on resisting it. Katharina was

playing her, trying to confuse her and make her believe she was an ally. She would not fall for it.



Katharina barreled toward her office and leaned against the door she had managed to shut quietly. Her nails were digging into the palms of her curled hands and her chest heaved. Katharina wetted her lips, dropping her head while she listened to the shuffling sounds of soldiers passing her office on their security rounds. *Where is Max? She needed the book.*

The ringing phone pulled her out of her thoughts. “Obersturmführer von Berg speaking.”

“What is the status of the captured enemy?” Adler’s voice caused a shiver to run down Katharina’s back.

“She told us her name after the latest session,” Katharina replied, tightening her grip on the phone.

“Were you able to confirm this? Is she on any security list?”

“Sir, I am in the process of instigating my research.”

“I believe it is necessary to send a message to her associates.”

“Sir, would it not be an advantage to keep this hidden? At the very least for a little while longer? Also, with the use of too much force, we may risk the prisoner remaining silent.”

“Nonsense! We need to let them know we are not to be trifled with. And Katharina, violence is all these animals understand, and you better remember this. I expect the film on my desk by noon tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Heil Hitler!”

“Heil Hitler!” Katharina hung up, her hand holding her weight on the table turning pallid.



“What are the findings of the maintenance check?” Helen folded her hands in her lap to keep them from trembling.

“Uh, well, the system seems to function normally.” Henry said. “There is a glitch in the time setting. It's confusing. All tests show it has no effect on an efficient functioning of the TDA. Smooth sailing and all, but... I... there is something not right but I can't prove it, empirically.” Henry's eyes bounced between Charlotte and Helen.

“Mr. Pierre, are you to be trusted?”

“Yes, of course. But wouldn't an untrustworthy person answer the same way? How will this tell you anything?”

Helen smiled at Henry, while Charlotte cleared her throat. “I'm sure you are aware that Charlotte is supposed to be in Germany on the Holocaust mission?”

Henry nodded.

“There has been an incident, and we will need your help, along with your silence, to rectify this. What I am about to tell you, Mr. Pierre, cannot leave this room. Charlotte, you and I know about this, and it is imperative it stays this way.”

“Okay.”

“The TDA either malfunctioned or has been tampered with. It sent our agents to a different time, but we are not sure *when* they arrived. You will have to look into this, although we are estimating Elise and Charlotte arrived sometime between 1942 and 1944 in Germany. Nazi soldiers were waiting for them and opened fire, and while Charlotte escaped, Elise was taken into custody.”

“What? Wait, you're saying Elise is a prisoner of the Nazis?”

“Please sit down, Mr. Pierre, and yes, this is what I am saying. During preliminary research we discovered a high likelihood of locating Elise in either the Dachau or Buchenwald concentration camp. We need to narrow down the timeframe, and then look for Elise in both locations.”

“We're going on a mission to rescue Elise?” Henry's voice raised a pitch.

“Yes, Mr. Pierre, so please set to establishing the time frame of Elise's current stay in Germany.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Henry nodded before leaving the office in a hurry.

“Are you sure we can trust him?”

“Yes, Helen, he is Elise's friend and he won't say a word to anyone.”

Chapter IX

Suffocating

The same soldier who was always starrng daggers at her shoved Elise into the seat across from Katharina before joining the other soldier standing guard.

“Your refusal to talk leaves me with a predicament. We know you are an Allied spy, so there is no need to deny this. Yet we are unaware of anything regarding your missions and contacts.” Katharina rose. “If you continue to refuse to cooperate, the very least we can do is send your comrades and superiors a message so they can see what happens to those who dare rise against the Third Reich.”

Katharina leaned against one of the walls, her hands folded behind her back. The two soldiers drew closer and pushed Elise's chair to the middle of the room. One opened her handcuffs and pulled her arms behind the backrest of the chair before putting the cuffs back on. Her shoulders tensed, increasing the pain in her back. Before Elise could concentrate on anything other than her aching back, one of the soldiers punched her in the face. Elise's breath expelled in a rush and her head snapped to the right. She let her head hang until it snapped to the left following another blow, this time to the other side.

Elise looked up at the soldiers, and for the first time noticed how young they were. Two more blows followed and Elise's eyes swelled, while blood trickled from her nose into her mouth. The blood from her split lip dripped down her chin onto her shirt. Turning her head, Elise glanced at Katharina. She stood rooted to the floor with her head bent and her hands clenched into fists at her side.

“*Genug*,” Katharina ordered. The soldiers grunted and took a step back. Licking her lips, Katharina took a few steps closer, her eyes trained on Elise who returned her

stare, forgetting the other soldiers in the room. Katharina's face was impassive, but her eyes shone with an out of place emotion. Or maybe it wasn't? Maybe the disgust and loathing Elise read was directed at her.

“Ich habe die Kamera dabei. Wollen Sie den Film jetzt aufnehmen?” one of the soldiers asked Katharina.

“Ja, ich denke das ist ein guter Zeitpunkt.” Katharina's throat clenched.

He took out a camera and barked at Elise to look up. He recorded a short video.

“We shall send this to your Allied comrades, who perhaps will be willing to negotiate.” Katharina sounded livid.

“Wegtreten,” Katharina dismissed the soldiers. Retreating to the back of the room, she turned after a moment and approached Elise with a wet washcloth in her hand. Katharina proceeded to gently wipe the blood off Elise's face.

Elise gazed at Katharina and shifted in her seat. The torrent of jumbled emotions flickering through her during almost every interaction with Katharina drove her to distraction. These random acts of kindness left her with a strange mixture of elation and dread.

“You can spend this night in your old cell again. I will have my soldiers add a pillow and blanket, in addition to food and water. Tomorrow, we might have a better session. It would benefit you to give us the requested information.”

“And then what? You'll kill me?”

Elise closed her eyes when Katharina flinched. *No, she's playing you.*

“I will not.”

“No, you wouldn't want to get your hands dirty.”

Katharina shook her head and left. The two soldiers returned and walked her back to her cell. By now, Elise had memorized the pathways to all the different rooms she had been taken to, and she was *sure* she could find the way out.

Elise stumbled into her cell and sank onto the bench, the idea of eating and drinking far from her thoughts.

∞

“Excellent job, my dear Katharina. Your father would be proud.” Adler patted Katharina’s arm. Tension racked her body and she prevented herself from recoiling when this vile, paunchy man touched her.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you think she will talk tomorrow?”

“I doubt she will be able to hold back much longer. Our methods are tried and true. We will see results, sooner or later.”

“I like your attitude, my girl.” An unctuous smile spread over Adler’s red face, while a drop of sweat ran down the side of his face.

Katharina tried smiling.

“Are the soldiers giving you any trouble? Many are not used to answering to a woman, no matter how beautiful she may be.”

“No, they are no trouble. A bit wild at times, but nothing I cannot handle.”

“Boys, eh?” Adler guffawed and slapped the table.

“Yes, sir. Boys.” Katharina’s fingernails dug into the palms of her hands.

“I’ll let you go. It’s late, and you should head home. Convey my greetings to your father.”

“I shall, thank you, sir.” Katharina saluted and stalked out of the room.



“Are you sure she is in Dachau?”

“Dachau seems to be a better fit than Buchenwald. Look, here, the symbols we see on the bottom of the recording? They are depicted numerous times on documentation from Dachau, though I wish they had dated the video.” Dread crawled up Helen’s spine.

Sighing, Charlotte rolled her chair back from her table, grabbing some paper off the shelf behind her. “Did Henry manage to extrapolate the time frame?”

“Yes, to a degree. He thinks you both arrived in 1944, before August, but this is all he could determine so far. I told him to keep looking.”

“If we found the exact date, we could intercept them right after I left, you know, before they transported her to the concentration camp.”

Charlotte’s voice contained a tint of hope Helen felt terrible for crushing. “I doubt we will be able to narrow the date down to such an extent. I will settle for knowing the month in which she was taken.” Helen’s eyes softened, taking in the crestfallen expression of her goddaughter.

Charlotte gave a small nod and Helen returned to study the original specs of Dachau.

“We should prepare for extraction from either camp. There is no guarantee she will be at Dachau.”



It was Katharina who woke her. Elise jolted, releasing a shaky breath.

“Good morning, Elise. Are you ready to talk to me?”

Elise sat up, nodding.

“Splendid. Let us go to the interrogation room. I ordered the soldiers to bring food.”

Elise dipped her head and followed Katharina. Now that she was talking, she had to be careful not to compromise the time line.

“How old are you, Elise?” Katharina poured water before cutting a few slices of bread and cheese and pushing a full plate in Elise’s direction.

“Thirty-five.” Elise gulped down most of the water and picked up a piece of bread.

“Interesting, I thought you were younger. You are eleven years older than me.”

No, you’re over sixty years older.

“I cannot quite place your accent. You are not British, are you?”

“No.”

Katharina was quiet for a moment and picked up her cup. “What are you doing here, in the middle of the war?”

“Work.”

Katharina raised her eyebrows. “Where were you before we captured you in Berlin?”

“Home.” Elise rotated her aching left shoulder.

“What made you leave America?”

“Work.”

“What work?” Katharina tapped her pen on her notepad.

“Work you wouldn’t approve of.”

“Yes, I am sure.” Katharina stood and folded her arms in front of her chest. “You know the German people will win this righteous war?”

Elise had to restrain herself not to snap at her. Taking in the somber faces of the two soldiers standing guard at the door, Elise returned her focus to Katharina.

“Our cause is just, and our *Führer* has assured us victory.”

“Who are you trying to convince?”

“Nobody. I am stating facts. Consider it a courteous reminder of your precarious situation.”

“I need no reminder, believe me.” Elise touched her left shoulder.

For a quick second, a flicker of pain crossed Katharina’s eyes and she looked at the floor.

“What is today’s date?” Elise had a sudden idea.

Startled, Katharina looked up. “If I answer you, will you answer one of my questions?”

“I’ve answered several of your questions.”

“Evasively. What do you say?”

Elise nodded.

“Today is the second of April.”

Elise had to hold back asking her about the year.

“Now it’s my turn. Did you travel to Germany with the intent to enact a plan devised to prevent a German victory?”

“No.”

Katharina studied Elise for a moment. “You are not lying.”

“No, and I’m assuming lies have the same consequences as silence?”

“Yes.” Katharina shrugged her shoulders. Rising, she treaded confidently to a shelf in the back of the room before returning with a few sheets of paper and a pencil.

“Write down the names of your contacts and affiliates. Add any mission plans.”

Elise ground her jaw. There was nothing she could write down which wouldn’t blow up in her face. She should have thought of something she could divulge. “I can’t do this.”

“Non-cooperation rates similar to lies and silence.”

“I know, but there are no contacts, no affiliates, and there is no mission to interfere with the war.”

“I do not believe you.” Frown lines formed on Katharina’s forehead.

“I am *not* an Allied spy.”

“I think you persuaded yourself of this, or perchance it is true. However, I am convinced you are here on a mission.”

“Even if this were the case, why does it mean I’m working against you?”

Katharina laughed. “You want to persuade me you are a Nazi sympathizer?”

Elise didn’t react.

“You do not look like one.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

“Then enlighten me about your mission for us.”

“I never said there was a mission.”

“We are at an impasse, again, and I am at a loss what to do with you. Perhaps you shall remember your assignment tomorrow.” Katharina’s eyes glinted when she rose and left Elise alone with the two soldiers standing guard.

Unsure of the proper way to act, Elise remained seated, waiting for one of the soldiers to lead her back to her cell. She was taken to the closet cell instead.

Nights were the worst. There were no distractions, no observations left to make. There was nothing to distract Elise’s mind, so nights always attracted misery. *Maybe this is why people sleep at night.* Grunting, Elise pressed her cold hands against the frozen wall of her closet cell. At some point the cold became almost immaterial. Insomnia ate at her. No rest for and from her thoughts. *If you don’t get out of here, you’re going to die in this god forsaken concentration camp, almost half a century before you were born. No, don’t think about it.*

The next morning, she was flung into the water pool again. One of the soldiers submerged Elise repeatedly before Katharina’s voice echoed in her ear, demanding the man to stop. Later, in the interview room, they discussed the same topics. More soldiers were present, and Katharina grew more frustrated by the minute.

After a moment of quiet, Elise turned toward Katharina. “May I ask you a question?”

Katharina waved at her.

“You’re a woman.”

“*This* is your question?” Katharina drummed her fingers on top of the table.

“No, I mean, I... uh... the Nazi’s attitude toward women, *Heim, Kueche und Kinder* and so on. How come you run this place?”

“I do not run this camp, and yes, your description of the German attitude toward women is accurate. I am in charge of a Gestapo section for special interrogation. My family name and my aptitude for this specific job opened doors otherwise closed.”

“I’m sure looking like the perfect Aryan prototype was helpful as well.”

“Touché.”

Elise was surprised at the scorn and bitterness in Katharina’s voice. “What did you do before this?”

“Before the war? I was nineteen when the war began.”

Bingo, Elise had to hold back a smile. *April third, nineteen forty-four.*

“I was enrolled at university, about two years away from finishing my degree.”

“What did you study?”

“History and psychology. I am aware this combination is not a typical choice, considering these are not professions fit for a woman. However, I do not have to work. My studies were more an effort to fulfill my curiosity. My father allowed it, since he felt it would distract me.”

“Because critical thinking has never led to any problems,” Elise mumbled.

“We all follow someone’s footsteps. What about you?”

“Following in someone’s footsteps?”

“No, did you attend university?”

“Yes, I studied law.” *Easier than saying I became a cop and then a time traveler.*

“I will give you this,” Katharina laughed. “Your task here in Germany?”

“What task?” Elise replied.

Katharina shook her head. “You will not learn. I cannot discern what you expect will transpire here.”

“You could let me go.”

“Yes, well... I am not in a disposition to argue, so as another gesture of generosity, you shall return to your old cell. I need answers, Elise. I do not desire to use any more force.” Katharina whispered before marching to talk to the soldiers.

Elise’s eyes widened. Katharina had left the knife on the plate next to the food. She snatched the knife and hid it in the sleeve of her sweater. A moment later, Katharina left and one of the soldiers brought her back to her cell. Once there, Elise strode through her cell. She had a knife now, and Katharina would need more answers. Answers she couldn’t give. Maybe she could send Charlotte and Helen a message? Would they look at pictures from the cells of Buchenwald? She’d seen pictures of inscriptions prisoners had left behind. It was worth a shot. Choosing a spot near the floor of one of the walls, Elise carved what she hoped would be recognized as a clue.



“We’re ready to go?” Charlotte’s brows lifted.

“Yes, Mr. Pierre has managed to calculate the correct date as close as possible. He estimates you arrived within the second week of April 1944. I suggest we make the trip to

arrive on the fifth of April, which was a Wednesday. We will have a few days to adjust our schedule if needed, and we will start our search in Dachau.” Helen said.

“Sounds like a plan, but Helen, and while I haven’t minded hiding in your office during work hours for the last six days, how will you explain your absence to the OC? I mean, phase one of the Holocaust mission is scheduled to last another week before the start of the next phase, so I am home free. Henry, I’m assuming will take time off, but you?”

“So little faith,” Helen smiled. “I shall be gone due to a family emergency.”

“What about the trip itself? Isn’t there a record of all time jumps?”

“Of course, but this will not be a problem once you combine the resources of the person in charge, me, with our resident technical genius, Mr. Pierre.”

“When will we leave?”

“Tomorrow, 0600 hours sharp, so I suggest you act like a proper German and be punctual for once.”

“Don’t worry about it. Regular equipment?”

“Yes, but we also need our tablets, loaded with all data regarding the Holocaust, and the blueprints for the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. We will have enough funds to secure lodging, but it is still war time. It is important to include any data regarding bombings too. Oh, and be sure to add the encryption files on all electronic devices. We do not want to risk our technology falling into the wrong hands.”

“Yes, Helen. It’ll be fine, don’t worry. We’ll find her.”

Helen cocked her head, confused by her goddaughter's sudden optimism. After Charlotte left her office for the night, Helen closed the lid of her laptop. "Yes, but what state will she be in?" Helen breathed, her eyes fluttering shut.



Elise had hid the knife in a hole she'd dug behind the toilet. She was sure Katharina would send her to the closet cell for the night since she still couldn't come up with any information. She could make something up, but the consequences of such lies once Katharina's boss or colleagues checked her story might be worse than those of her continued refusal to cooperate.

In the interrogation room, Katharina kept pacing, and at times, held onto her elbow as if in pain.

"I need answers, Elise."

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Why did you journey to Germany?"

"Do you want me to lie to you? I'm not a spy, there's nothing to tell. Nothing your boss wouldn't figure out as a lie once he checks it."

"This is impossible, Elise, we had received detailed information..." Katharina broke off.

Elise's hands tightened and she forced herself to release them. She had been right; someone did tamper with the TDA, maybe going as far as telling the Nazis of their arrival. She wanted to punch something, scream. Her throat constricted and the vein in her temple pulsed.

“You *must* have some information. I would assume you prefer your regular cell to the locker?” Katharina covered her eyes. “This is all just... You do not remember me?”

Elise tilted her head.

“Forget it... I may very well be imagining things. They are returning. Stay strong.” Katharina reached out, squeezing Elise’s hand. She stood, and the moment the soldiers entered the room, Katharina slammed the chair back into the table and left. As expected, the soldier led her to the freezing little closet cell.

After another sleepless night, Elise found herself once more flung into the icy pool of water. Coughing up water and gasping for air, Elise strained not to shout in frustration. *How long do I have to deal with this? Where is Charlotte?* Maybe she should plan her own escape, after all, now that she had a knife.

This session in the water pool dragged on, though the soldier hadn’t hauled her underwater more than a few times. She trembled and goosebumps spread over her body. Her breathing quickened and her muscles screamed at her. Elise couldn’t fight the soldier’s final push and her legs stilled when Katharina barked at the soldier to desist and leave.

“This needs to end,” Katharina said, helping Elise out of the water.

Elise wanted to laugh but groaned instead.

“Dress and join me in the interrogation room.”

“What, no goons?”

“I trust you.” Katharina held Elise’s eyes with an unfathomable expression before leaving.

“Right,” Elise uttered into the empty room, shivering. Dressing turned out to be quite the challenge. Plodding to the interrogation room, Elise’s shoulders sagged at seeing Katharina as the sole other presence in the room.

“What are we going to do, Elise?” Katharina said, once more cradling her elbow.

“Are you injured?”

“What? Oh, no. This is... nothing.”

Elise raised an eyebrow, but decided not to push further. “Are you here all the time?”

“No, I do have a home.”

“I meant for work. Are you always here or do you also go to different places, for your... uh, duties?”

“I am stationed at this camp for the rest of the year. Why?”

Elise pulled one side of her lower lip into her mouth. “You should take a vacation, a break. In August. You should not be here on the twenty-fourth of August.” Elise’s hands trembled. She didn’t understand why, but the idea of Katharina dying troubled her.

Katharina’s eyes widened. “Are you aware of what you are implying?”

“Suggesting you should take a break?”

Katharina’s jaw was hard and there was a muscle ticking high up on her cheek. “I understand your reluctance to fill me in on your plans, but withholding information makes your situation more difficult.” Katharina ran a hand over her face. “This means...” Standing, Katharina still had the tips of her fingers on the table. “I... I have to... I have to go.” Katharina threw one last glance at Elise before leaving.



Slamming her office door shut, Katharina shook off her uniform jacket and threw it over the desk. Pacing, her hands shot up and cradled her head. *This is not happening.* She needed answers. A knock on her door startled her.

“*Herein!*”

“Obersturmführer von Berg. You have a delivery.” Max handed Katharina a package, nodded and left.

Finally. Katharina tore the package open. She suppressed a laugh when she beheld a copy of “...*Und Gott Schweigt?*” by Edwin Erich Dwinger. Of course Roberts would use something like this. A piece of paper fell out, “the date it all started, then when we did.” The day she joined? The day of the bombing? Katharina drummed her fingers on her desk. Grabbing a pen, she decided to try the date of the bombing as the cipher...26840, no, not enough numbers, or too many. So, the day she joined, 281241, 2-8-1 and 2-4-1, and now the birthdates. After completing the list, Katharina ran the cipher.

Blinking, Katharina was unsure how often she had re-read the words in front of her. “Not one of us no one knows her.” How could this be when Katharina remembered... or perhaps her memory was faulty? She looked the same...but it had been a while. Elise did not remember her, but she had no reason to trust her. She had tried... but there was only so much Katharina could do.

She sighed when she lit the papers, and watched the crackling flames eat away the pale sheets; black ink disintegrating. Before the flames could reach her fingers, she threw the rest into the trash can. She’d have to get rid of the ash.



Elise needed to flee. She couldn't count on anyone aiding her escape, and god knew where Charlotte was. Maybe they thought she was dead.

The next morning, she would stab the soldier who came to pick her up to bring her to the interrogation room. All the times the soldiers had hauled her back and forth through the building had given her a decent picture of the layout, and combined with her memories of the floor plan, she should find her way out of this hell.

Gazing at the knife she'd managed to sneak away, she smiled. She might have a chance. Elise hurried to hide the knife when the door creaked open. It must have been past midnight, and no one had ever entered her cell this late.

Katharina entered and leaned against the cell door. Neither said a word until the other woman cleared her throat. "I wanted to thank you." Katharina's voice sounded hoarse.

"Thank me?"

"Yes, your warning regarding the twenty-fourth of August."

Elise nodded, her stomach turned at the prospect of Katharina dying, which made her wonder what was wrong with her. The last thing she needed was feeling compassion for her captor.

"Your words confirm you are an enemy. I appreciate you finally telling me the truth, and I... I wanted to thank you."

Again, Elise nodded. *What was there to say?* Staring at her hands, and expecting Katharina to leave her cell, she was startled when the other woman sat down next to her on the stone bench.

“Elise, I...” Katharina raised a hand to her hair. “Were you in Berlin in August four years ago?”

“What? I don’t—”

Katharina raised her hands. “I understand you have no reason to trust me, so I shall open up first. Not everything is as it appears here. I... uh... I tried to help you, to encourage you to hold on because I thought you were part of the Allied forces, and I assumed they would try to get you out. But you’re not with them, are you?”

Elise eyes widened before she shook her head. *Open up? Help me?*

“This is what I cannot comprehend. What are you doing here? Why did we receive information pertaining to the location of Allied spies where you were captured? It makes no sense. You are not one of us but, perhaps someone attempted to deceive you? For what reason, though?”

Elise stared at Katharina. *Could it be? She... she’s a double agent?*

“None of our operatives were even near the location you were captured.”

Holy shit! She is a double agent!

“I apologize for all you had to endure here, and for my role in it. Strappado, as appalling as it may be, remains the least painful and damaging type of torture we employ. I never meant... given our past... Can’t you just...?”

“What if I said I was in Berlin in August 1940?” Her stomach flipped when a smile spread over Katharina’s face, lighting up her eyes.

“Then I’d say thank you for saving me.”

Elise swallowed and nodded.

“I do not know how you could get away from here without belonging to the Allied forces.”

“I understand.”

“You do not.” Katharina squeezed Elise’s hand. “I wish I could...” Katharina’s gaze found her boots.

“It’s fine, I’m still hoping for friends to... uh... find me.”

“I did not hear what you just said, but if I did, I’d hope they succeed.”

“Thank you.”

“I have to go.”

Chapter X

A Rock and a Hard Place

Waking up in her cell, Elise groaned, afraid she might have fallen victim to a special kind of cruelty. What if Katharina had lied last night and acted as if she was working for the Allied forces to gain her trust and hear of her plans? *And you fool, starving for kindness and hope, ate that story right up.* Elise had increased the risk that her captors killed her or transferred her to a different location. *All because you hope Katharina is....*

She'd have to try to escape today. Elise jumped up and hid the knife once more in the sleeve of her sweater. Sitting down, she waited for the soldier to enter. She would stab him in her cell, lowering the risk of getting caught. Elise's palms sweated while waves of nausea danced in her stomach.

She hoped it'd be the soldier who delighted in shoving her under water. The same one who had told her the first morning they should have shot her. *God, they were all so young,* Elise clenched her jaw. She didn't want to kill anyone, but what choice did she have? It had been two days since she wrote the inscription on her cell wall, which meant her team was powerless to rescue her from here. If she managed to escape, she could send them a new message, and they could pick her up on the outside. *All you gotta do is kill someone,* Elise trembled. Maybe he wouldn't die? Maybe they would find him in time? But then he could raise alarm, which meant they might apprehend her.

Elise wanted to pace, but couldn't. She coughed to prevent herself from gagging and covered her eyes with her hand. *Why is this happening?* Elise's vision blurred. *Wasn't it self-defense in the end?*

The door opened. She was lucky, the soldier she had hoped for entered her cell.

“*Steh auf.*” He waited for her. They’d ceased putting handcuffs on her the day after the strappado incident. Elise hesitated for a second before stepping closer. The moment he turned, Elise grasped the knife handle and held her breath as she plunged the blade into his side.

He groaned and turned, his eyes growing wide when his gaze traveled from Elise to the knife protruding from his midsection. Before he could react, Elise punched him in the face and crashed her fist near the puncture wound. Moaning, the soldier held on to his side, dazed, unable to block Elise’s knee from ramming into his groin. She smashed her elbow against his temple before drawing back and watched in horrid fascination as the soldier collapsed to the floor. Elise bent down, reaching for the knife before drawing back. *No, he’ll die.* Cursing, she slid out of her cell.

The corridor was empty when she followed the path to the outside. The rapid drumming of her heart echoed in her ears. The next two corridors were empty, too. Speeding up, she had to hide before rounding the next corner. A soldier was trudging her way, but he turned before spotting her. A shrill alarm erupted through the building, startling Elise. *They found him.* Shaking, she turned another corner. One more and she’d be outside. There it was. The door. Reaching for the handle, a crash to her side toppled her to the ground.

This is bad, Elise groaned when a punch hit her stomach. She blocked the next blow and managed to push the soldier off to gain enough space to ram her knee between his legs. The man howled and she slammed her elbow against his nose. The sickening

crunch of bone made Elise recoil before lifting herself up, the soldier now lying motionless on the floor.

Her muscles tensed, Elise leaned forward to reach the door when she froze and raised her hands. Three more soldiers surrounded her. They slapped handcuffs on her wrists, and jerked her back to the interrogation room.

Inside, a livid Katharina paced with her arms flinging at her side. She froze the moment the soldiers elbowed Elise inside. Glaring at Elise, Katharina dismissed the soldiers to wait outside.

“For goodness sake, Elise! Were you trying to get yourself killed?” Katharina dashed toward Elise.

“Why did you do this? They could have shot you! You do comprehend this?”

Elise nodded.

“Sit down.” Katharina pointed at the chairs in the middle of the room.

Elise placed her cuffed hands on the table. “Is he OK?”

“What?”

“The soldier I stabbed? Is he going to be OK?”

“He was alive when they wheeled him off.” Katharina ran her hands over her face. “Why did you do this? I understand your situation is precarious but *this* just made everything worse.”

“I know.”

“I... I know you are not a Nazi or an Ally agent, and you have helped me in the past, but I still don't understand who you are, Elise? Why would you do this after what I'd told you last night?”

“Katharina, I’m sorry but...”

“*You* are sorry? I do not...” Covering her mouth, Katharina stepped back. “I need to...” Katharina spun around and left the room.

Elise’s eyes drifted around the empty room when the door flung open again. Expecting to see Katharina, she opened her mouth to apologize again, but froze, digging her fingers into her thighs when two soldiers paraded into the room.

Without uttering a single word, the soldiers rushed at her. The taller one grabbed Elise by the collar of her shirt before toppling the chair and slammed her on the floor. Elise stilled, clamping down her defensive reflexes. There was no way out. Fury bled off the soldiers and Elise feared fighting back would escalate this.

The smaller soldier lifted her out of her chair and threw her against the wall. Elise cried out as her shoulder, strained and injured from the strappado, hit the wall. The other soldier hoisted her by the arms and bashed her into the wall again. Elise screamed and tears leaked from her eyes to the sickening sound of her shoulder blade cracking.

“*Wo ist von Berg?*” The taller one asked his fellow soldier.

“*Ich weiss es nicht. Sie ist weg und wir besser nutzen diese Gelegenheit.*”

Nodding, the tall soldier rammed his elbow into Elise’s face.

She groaned.

“Some say we all have the same blood.” The soldier swiped his thumb over Elise’s bleeding lower lip. His English was broken, but it was intelligible enough to send a chill down her spine. “Do you believe that?”

Wrenching her head back, Elise stomach dropped. She closed her eyes, and before she could gather herself, the soldier slammed his fist into her stomach. Doubling over, Elise exhaled hard, her vision blurred and liquid pain spreading through her.



Katharina's chest was heaving; she reached out and pressed a trembling hand against the cool office wall, trying to quell the bubbling acid in her stomach. Blood rushed to her ears and her heart galloped in her chest. Her vision blurred and cold sweat spread over her body, dripping down her face. Katharina loosened the collar of her shirt before sinking to the floor.

Who was Elise and why did she decline to reveal her identity? Was she after Katharina? Was Adler attempting to trap her, to make her reveal her true allegiance? No, Elise was not SS, but without understanding her true loyalty, this could expose Katharina fast. The timing, last night she revealed her cover... and today Elise tried to flee.

Katharina wanted to trust Elise, given the woman had once saved her life. How could this have been orchestrated? To what end? Katharina did not start questioning her life before the bombing. Taking a calming breath, Katharina froze. Was that a scream?



A low squeak breached Elise's fog, followed by the sound of a door slamming against the wall. More soldiers? She groaned.

“Was soll das? Diese Gefangene hat wichtige Informationen fuer das Reich. Ich werde Obersturmbannführer Adler hiervon berichten. Wegtreten.”

Katharina? Did she dismiss the soldiers? Elise whimpered when she sagged to the floor. Her breathing rang shallow as every inhalation became a knife twisting in her chest. Elise blinked, trying to open her swollen eyes, when a soft hand cupped her cheek.

“Oh god, I am so sorry.”

It was Katharina. Elise coughed, trembling at the throbbing pain spreading through her body.

“I needed to think... and I can't with you around. I was in my office... when I... when I... you screamed. Oh god, Elise.” Katharina's hands shook. “I will fix this.”

Elise tried to sit up.

“No, it is OK. Do not... don't move, please? I'll be right back.”

After a moment, Elise felt arms raising her off the ground, and then there was pain, and eyelids refusing to budge. *Where am I?* Trying to sit up, a soft hand urged her back down right before the ache in her shoulder made her collapse.

“Do not move, Elise.”

There were steps, shuffling, and then something bitter pressed against Elise's lips.

“Here, take this. It is a penicillin pill, and will take care of an infection.”

Elise swallowed the pill with a few sips of water.

“We need to have a conversation, but not now. You need rest, and I cannot be here too long. They cannot know. The soldiers are livid at my intervention, saying I have ruined their revenge. I reported them, though my supervisor did not share my concern.” Katharina rambled, her hands waving through the air. “I have put several blankets under you, and I added more pillows. I do not think you can eat now but I shall be back later,

with food, and more medicine. I must check when it is time for your next pill. I... uh, *liberated* them from the medic.”

A cool hand touched her cheek, startling Elise.

“I am so sorry.”

The next time Elise regained consciousness, Katharina was back again, urging her to swallow a pill. Stiff and with an aching throat, she opened her mouth.

“I apologize for having forgotten this one earlier. It is for the pain. There is also bread for you to eat, so perhaps you can try it later, after the pain medicine takes effect.” Katharina touched Elise’s forehead. “You are cool, excellent.” Katharina tore her hand away.

Shuffling filled the room before Katharina’s voice rang out again.

“It is already past 2100 hours, and I am afraid I have to leave. It has been almost ten hours since...since the beating. You should eat something, and I... I will be back tomorrow morning. I repeated the order that no one is permitted to enter your cell. I proposed to give you time to contemplate you behavior.” Katharina squeezed Elise’s hand and left.

Elise woke up later, more alert than before. She ate a piece of bread and drank a few sips of water. The pain killers had been a blessing, but by now they no longer worked. Elise hoped it was close to morning, instead of the middle of the night. Sighing, she closed her eyes. Today was the sixth of April. Three days ago she’d left the message for Chronos. *They aren’t coming.*

She dozed off again, and when she woke, Katharina was back with more medication and food.

“Here, take your pills. Good, you ate something. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been almost beaten to death.”

“I am so sorry, Elise.” Katharina’s feet shuffled on the floor and her head fell.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Elise took a shuddering breath. “They wanted revenge and knew they’d receive no punishment.”

“I should never have left.”

“You needed a moment and I understand you freaked out because your friends don’t know me.”

“I knew how angry they were, and about Martin’s regard. I should have brought you back to your cell right away, but I never thought they would... they’d do this.”

Katharina turned her back to Elise. “I was afraid you were sent for me. That my superior suspected that I’m... and you... but I do not believe this. How could they have engineered the bombing or you saving me?” Clearing her throat, Katharina spun around again. “I... I was scared, and now look at you.” Tears filled her eyes.

“I understand.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that.” Katharina sat down at the foot end of Elise’s bed.

“Do you recall my elbow? A few days ago, you asked if I were wounded.”

“Yes.”

“It is an old injury and has healed, for the most part. However, there are days when the pain returns. My elbow had been fractured.” Katharina’s hand reached for her

arm. “One year ago. My father... I... he is one of Hitler’s biggest supporters.” Katharina’s hands twisted together. “I had struck up a friendship that irritated my father.”

Elise’s eyes never left Katharina.

“Let us say he did not appreciate disobedience and expressed his displeasure....”

“Are you still in contact with him?”

“Yes, there are certain... appearances to uphold.”

“Why did you tell me this?”

“I am not sure, to be honest. I... I wanted you to know.”

“Katharina, I’m no threat to you, I swear.”

“I believe you.” A small smile flickered over Katharina’s face. “You need to focus on becoming well again.”

“We’ll see.” Elise coughed, shuddering in pain.

“Is the analgesic not helping?” Katharina touched Elise’s forehead.

“It’s working, all right. I couldn’t talk to you if it weren’t... doesn’t mean the pain’s gone. I think they bruised... or broke some of my ribs. Coughing is, uh...an experience.”

“Yes, I remember. It will subside.” Katharina stood. “I should leave. I have been here too long, though I will be back tonight with more medicine.”

Elise nodded and watched Katharina leave. The woman’s story about her father was like a gust knocking down her precarious house of cards. *Nothing is as it seems.*

Elise worried herself to sleep and missed Katharina’s return to her cell later that night.



Securing lodging for their first night in Dachau turned out to be easier than expected. Well-forged papers and money proved helpful, especially when they were also offering food supplies at a time where it was almost easier to obtain money than food.

Inside their rooms, Henry, Charlotte, and Helen were once more going over their strategy to free Elise. They brought three PDGs in order to minimize affecting the time line, as well as their chances of being arrested. Henry also needed his to make him look Caucasian whenever they left their room.

They walked through town, scouting the area. When they approached the location of the camp, they activated the invisibility settings. At first, the structure and routines appeared as expected. Drawing closer, Helen stood on a hill overlooking the camp when her world spun. There it was, right before her. Barbed wire, chimneys, the sickening smell of acidic smoke in the air. Even the orange-yellow hue of the cloud cover over the camp was the same. Her nightmares, the dreams plaguing her all her life. Swallowing, she took a step back. Now was not the time to process this.

On their second day of scouting, Henry became restless. “I want to look at our materials again. There’s something important I think... We’re done for the day, right? I... I gotta look.” Henry opened his laptop.

Helen and Charlotte waved at him to go ahead.

“Since Elise and I didn’t arrive until the tenth, which is when? In four days? I was thinking, shouldn’t we lay low until then? We’re ready, and to be honest, this town, everything, it’s creeping me out.”

“Maybe, though the PDGs running out of power is no longer an issue. We were able to charge them last night.”

“True, but we’ve gathered a lot of information already.”

“Yes, it might be better to stay inside and analyze the data we have collected.”

Helen put on her glasses, ready to turn back to work on her laptop when a choked cry made her jump in her chair.

“What is it, Henry?”

“This is horrible. Like, *really, really* awful. We suck. I mean, I suck, and I was wrong. Oh god, look at this.” He placed his open laptop in front of Helen, while Charlotte rose to stand behind her.

“What is this?” Helen stepped closer to the screen. “No, please.” Helen covered her mouth with one of her hands and fell back in her chair.

“What’s going on?” Charlotte leaned over Helen’s shoulder and glanced at the screen. Gasping, Charlotte turned toward Henry. “Where was this picture taken?”

“At the Buchenwald concentration camp, in the early 1950s, and I thought I’d seen it before, but it wasn’t this one. There are so many cell pictures, still, it... It’s beyond me how we missed this.” Henry ran a hand over his short cropped curls.

“We looked at hundreds of prison cell pictures, Henry. No one is to blame for not noticing the inscription right away. What’s done is done. It is essential to secure transportation, and we’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

“She might be dead by now. Today is the sixth of bloody April, and this picture says ‘Chronos 4-3-44.’ She’s been there for three days, and worse, she’s in Buchenwald,

hundreds of miles away from here.” Charlotte’s face fell and the knuckles of her hands, gripping the backrest of the chair turned ashen.

“Panic will accomplish nothing, Charlotte. Let us assume Elise is alive. We will reach Buchenwald tomorrow, and we should be able to free her that night, or at the latest, the day after.” Helen shook her head, trying to move the stubborn lock of silver hair drooping in front of her eyes.

“And leave her with those sickos for another two days? Why don’t we just go back?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I don’t know if I can cover up another trip.” Henry replied.

“Who cares if they catch us? Are we really worried about a reprimand in our file? Or losing this job? We’re talking about Elise’s life here!”

“Calm down, Charlotte. Your accusations are quite unfounded.” Helen grabbed Charlotte’s hand. “Elise had been worried that this incident was the result of sabotage. Who could we trust if we go back? What if we go back and the OC informs us that Elise is an acceptable loss, and that it is too risky to try to save her? We are here now!”

Charlotte squeezed Helen’s hand. “Helen.”

“I know, Charlie. I know.”

“We also have to consider that it might not be possible to get her out earlier.”

“What do you mean?” Helen caught Henry’s eyes.

“We have seen the video of Elise’s... the result of the beating. This has already happened, and there is a record of that. It might be impossible to change this event, at

least, that's a risk we'd be taking. Besides, I am not sure we can take on a group of soldiers to free Elise. We need the inactivity of night, and stealth."

"I don't like it. But you're right." Charlotte said.

"Let me talk to Peter, he might be able to organize our transportation for tomorrow." Helen stood and left the room, on the lookout for their local contact.



Elise drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the day. Katharina had been in her cell once more, giving her more medicine. They didn't talk, though during one of her more lucid moments amid her cloud of haziness, Elise could tell Katharina was on the verge of releasing another swell of words which would only complicate their situation further. Elise turned her head toward the door when a scraping noise startled her. Katharina never opened the door with this much hesitance. Blurry eyes and a gloomy cell left her in the dark. Elise covered her eyes with her right arm while resting the left one on her lower stomach. Every bone of her body ached and she was too weak to sit up. Tensing, she held on to the hope that Katharina may prove her wrong.



Helen, convinced Elise would be in there, traipsed into the cell ahead of the others. Their PDGs were working and they remained invisible. The cell was dark. She could make out the shape of a body lying on top of a stone bench. Sneaking closer toward the motionless figure, Helen turned off the PDG once her eyes landed on Elise. She drew closer and reached out to cup Elise's arm covering her eyes, her name spilling low from her lips.

Elise recoiled at the touch, a groan leaving her lips. She struggled to breathe and her eyelids fluttered, shaking her head when her eyes fell on Helen.

“What are you... how did you get in here?”

“I’ll tell you later, but we need to bring you home.”

“My bracelet broke. The PDG... it didn’t work either.”

“Yes, Charlotte told me. You will have to travel with one of us.”

There was a sudden noise. Charlotte hurried to Elise’s side while Henry moved into view behind Helen. No one said a word.

“We have to hurry,” Charlotte muttered.

“You go ahead and I’ll transport Elise with me.”

“No way! I left her once, not gonna happen again.”

Helen pursed her lips.

Charlotte glared back.

“All right, then. I’m heading back now. Hang in there,” Henry smiled at Elise before he activated the transport.

“Charlotte—“

“Save it, Helen. I’m not going. Let’s leave this hellhole, and you can yell at me later.”

Sighing, Helen turned to Elise and brushed her fingers along her arm. “I’m so sorry, Elise. I never... this was not supposed to happen.”

Elise nodded and her eyes flickered before she leaned into Helen's hand.

Helen pulled Elise into a sitting position. “I’m sorry this hurts, but someone needs to hold you when we activate the transport.”

Elise dipped her head.

“Do you think you can hold on to me?” Helen asked.

“No, uh, my shoulder’s broken. Can’t move my arm.”

Glancing around the room for a moment, Helen caught Charlotte’s eye. “You might as well be useful. Prepare to hold Elise during the transport.”

Charlotte climbed behind Elise and put her arms around her.

Helen grasped the activation key. “On three.”

They activated the transport sequence at once, and after the familiar tug and pull, Charlotte and Elise collapsed on the TDA platform at the Institute.

Henry and Helen rushed toward the pair, helping them stand while steadying Elise.

“How will we be able to hide this?” Henry’s eyes wavered between the TDA platform and the doors.

Exhaling in a rush, Helen kept her arm wrapped around Elise’s swaying form. “I am afraid we cannot. The mission has to be restarted, and there will be an incident report.”

“Will we put everything in the report?” Charlotte asked.

“I...I had planned to do so.”

“They might fire both of you. What if we tell them Elise was captured and I managed to find her, and then we escaped? This way, neither Henry nor you will have been involved. We’re still in the time frame of the regular recon mission. No one else knows about this. And besides, with the risk that someone tampered with the TDA?”

“I agree,” Elise slurred, her eyes drooping shut.

“Either way, Elise needs to go to the hospital.” Helen gestured for Henry to bring forth the stretcher. Charlotte and Helen lifted Elise onto the stretcher before Charlotte grasped Helen’s hand as she was reaching for the medical alert button.

“No, you and Henry leave first. I’ll wait two more minutes and then hit the alarm.”

“The cameras will have recorded all of this anyway.” Helen tried to move Charlotte’s hand out of the way.

“Uh, no. I disabled them, along with any other alarms, well, besides, the medical alert. It’ll look like a malfunction, though, don’t worry.” Henry scratched the back of his head.

“OK, fine, but this still might not work and by lying we worsen our situation.”

“Maybe, but I think it can work, and it’s worth a try. No one needs to find out.” Charlotte caught Helen’s gaze.

At the intensity of her goddaughter’s stare, Helen tightened her lips and turned to Henry. “Let’s go, Henry. Charlotte, you better inform me of Elise’s whereabouts and condition right away.”

“Yes,” Charlotte released a shaky breath and watched the retreating backs of Helen and Henry.

Helen entered her office to the sound of the medical alarm swelling up. *Right on time.*

Chapter XI

Suspension

Drip, drip, drip.

The continuous and sheer endless noise of Elise's IV infusion grated on Charlotte's nerves. It'd been four days since they'd brought Elise back home. The physicians had diagnosed her with a swollen spleen and were unsure if they'd have to remove it. So far, she remained 'under observation,' Charlotte had heard a surgeon tell Luca. Two ribs on Elise's right side were broken and her left shoulder blade was fractured. They'd added pins to stabilize the bones of her shoulder. Elise had lost twenty pounds and she'd been severely dehydrated. She was still running a low grade fever and hadn't regained consciousness since blacking out on the stretcher next to the TDA.

Helen had been here twice, but she never seemed to be able to stay long. Luca stayed glued to Elise's bedside, and Charlotte had learned Elise's sister was supposed to fly in tomorrow. She'd been on vacation until Luca had gotten a hold of her earlier.

"Are you OK?" Charlotte said to Luca, who had been sitting in the same decrepit chair for hours.

Luca nodded. "Yeah, I wish these were more comfortable, though."

"How's Hanna?"

"She's fine, worried, too. I feel terrible for spending so much time here, but Hanna said I need to quit it with the guilt. She gets why I need to be here."

"I'm glad."

"This sound," Luca gestured at the beeping heart monitor. "It haunts me, even in my sleep. I keep seeing her there. Hurt. Lost. Alone."

“Me too.” Charlotte looked down. She hated lying to Luca. She wished they could talk about what had happened.

Luca moved forward, planting his elbows on his knees while his face rested on his hands. “You don’t smile anymore.”

Clearing her throat, Charlotte looked up. “Yeah, well... not much to smile about.”

“Yeah.” Luca eyes found Elise’s still form.

“Helen might be back, later tonight.”

Luca grunted.

“I know you don’t like her, and I don’t blame you. We did what we could, Luca. We rescued her as soon as possible.”

Luca moved his hands over his face. “These things didn’t happen when Dr. Lake was in charge of *Rhoscon*. It’s hard to...”

“Our mission was important.”

“Don’t make it easier seeing my best friend battered and bruised, and unconscious in a bloody hospital!”

“I never said it did.” Charlotte wrapped her arms tighter around her torso.

“I’m sorry,” Luca sighed. “I didn’t mean to snap at you, it’s not your fault, ‘k? Seeing Elise like this and feeling so helpless... I don’t deal well.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Charlotte bit back all the appeals for forgiveness threatening to spill from her lips.

Between work, which consisted of a series of mind-numbing debriefings, and reassuring her parents she was fine, Charlotte spent all of her time in Elise’s hospital room. With Luca. Waiting for Elise to wake up.

Everything had to be fine, otherwise the tears and nightmares would start to drown Charlotte while the sun was up; mocking her with light and warmth while fighting a coldness threatening to swallow her whole.



Elise's eyes fluttered open and she took a deep breath. Her brows furrowed when there was no pain. She tried to lift herself up but collapsed right away. Heaving a sigh, she noticed someone was holding her hand. She looked down, and once her vision became less blurry, Elise recognized the black ponytail of her sister's head. Penelope had fallen asleep waiting for her to wake up. Wetting her chapped lips, Elise took in the rest of her room and noticed the sleeping form of Adam bundled up on the couch in the corner. Tears filled her eyes. She was alive, and back home at last. Back with the people she never expected to see again.

“Pen?” Elise croaked, squeezing her sister’s hand.

Penelope’s head snapped up. “Elise? Oh my god, you’re awake!” Penelope’s hand flew up to cover her mouth.

“Is Adam OK?”

“What?” Penelope looked over at the sleeping form of her son. “Why... yes. Elise! You wake up from a coma and the first thing you ask is if your sleeping nephew is OK?”

“Habit.”

“We left the moment we heard. Luca had called me and we’ve been here ever since. Much like Luca. He pretty much spent all of his time here.”

“Don’t cry, Pen. I’m fine.” Elise tightened her hold on her sister’s hand when Penelope cleared her throat and lifted her free arm to wipe her tears.

“You’re alive, but that’s not what fine looks like, Elise.”

“Mom and Dad?”

“They were here twice, and they’ll be back tomorrow.”

Elise nodded when the door opened and Luca entered. He halted upon seeing Elise awake, his hand clenching around the doorknob. “I’m not hallucinating, right? You are awake?” Luca’s voice hitched.

“I’m awake.”

Luca’s hands flew to his face and he turned around, taking a deep breath.

“Luca, please. It’s all right.”

Luca spun around, his eyes bloodshot and his hands hung balled into fists by his side. “This is as far from all right as things can go without you being *dead*.”

Elise winced.

“I’m sorry, Elise. I’m so sorry.” Luca hurried to Elise’s bed and ran a shaking hand over Elise’s head. “I was so scared.”

“Luca, what else...”

Luca raised his hands in front of him. “No, I...uh, I didn’t mean to lash out. You know, you’re lucky Grandma Cathy isn’t still alive or you’d be in so much trouble.” He offered a weak grin.

Elise smiled, imagining how Luca’s grandma would have fussed over her injuries. A knock sounded through the room and Elise’s doctor entered.

“I see our patient’s awake.” He nodded at both Luca and Penelope, who turned to wake Adam so they could all leave the room.

“No, it’s fine, let him sleep,” Elise smiled at her sister, who followed Luca out of the room.



“Auntie Elise, where do you want me to put this stuff?” Adam held up Elise’s black duffle bag he had swung over his shoulder along with the two paper bags in his hand.

“Put them in my bedroom. Thanks Adam.” Elise closed her eyes when her sister helped her sit down on her couch.

“When does therapy start?” Penelope strode to the fridge, handing Elise a bottle of water on her way back.

“Monday, and I will see the shrink on Wednesday for the first time.”

Penelope cleared her throat. “Will you go back to work?”

“Well, I gotta be cleared first, from both my therapists, so...”

“No, I meant will you keep working at Rhoscon?”

Elise coughed, covering her mouth. “What? Why would I quit my job?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Will you quit pacing and sit down?” Elise played with the cap of her water bottle.

“Fine,” Penelope huffed. “Why would you go back to a job that almost killed you?”

“Every job has risks, Pen.”

“There are different levels of risk.”

“Mom, Auntie Elise, is everything OK?” Adam treaded into the room, one hand on the door frame.

“Yes, sweetie,” Elise said, earning an eye roll from her nephew. “Come and tell me all about your first semester at Iowa State. Your mom told me you made JV wrestling?”

Adam plopped down next to Elise and words poured out of him like a waterfall. Elise smiled at him, ignoring her sister’s warning glare.



It was raining, or at least Elise thought it had to be...or wait... No. The room shifted, turned, and all went dark. Footsteps echoed through the room. It was cold. Rising, Elise tried to make out her surroundings. The walls were icy and... no. How? *I can't be back! Was it all a dream? Which part?* Elise groped along damp walls, searching for an exit. Her heart jumped in her throat and her stomach twisted when the door flew open. *No, no, I stabbed you!* Elise drew back, but the soldier grabbed her arm, pulling her into the hallway.

Her vision blurred, or had the walls always been this washed out? Elise didn't recognize the route the soldier was dragging her along. Her gaze dropped, even the floor wasn't right. It had never been this muddy. Hadn't she already been back? Elise tried to gather her bearings but nothing seemed familiar, except the soldier clutching her arm with an iron grip. After what felt like forever, the soldier shoved Elise into a room that made even less sense than the hallways. There never was a water pool in the interrogation room. *Why are the walls dark red? Are those shackles in the back?*

“There you are.” A fat man with no neck, clothed in a uniform preparing to burst, tittered. “We thought you should see this. After all, you are responsible.”

“Who are you? What is this place?”

Elise stared into the tiny, protruding eyes of the neckless man before a loud scraping noise drew her eyes to the door. She didn't make a sound, but Elise was sure she'd never been confronted with a more surprising and agonizing sight. Gritting her jaw, she refused to show any emotion, but her heart, which had been racing this entire time, ambled to a slow trot and Elise could have sworn it halted when swollen, clear blue eyes found hers.

“We have had our suspicions, but before your imprisonment we had no proof of the treachery and shame this woman has brought upon our *Vaterland* and her family. She has been charged with high-treason, and has been rightfully disowned by her family.”

Elise swallowed hard, hoping to suppress the bile crawling up her esophagus.

“She had you tortured and beaten, even though she never belonged with us. Don't you want revenge? Here.”

No-neck handed Elise a baton and the soldier pushed her closer to Katharina.

“Feel free to return the favor.”

Elise cringed at the cloy sound of the man's voice.

Katharina's face was ashen but she remained impassive. Her hands were tied behind her back, her posture rigid, but Elise saw tendrils of pain shimmering her eyes. Her stomach flipped when her eyes roved over bruised lips and a black eye. Had she caused this? How did they find out and what would happen....

The soldier thrust Elise further until she stumbled to a stop right in front of Katharina, whose glacial gaze never wavered. Elise wished she could do something, anything...

“I’m sorry,” she muttered before spinning around and ramming the baton into the face of the soldier. Groaning, he sank to the floor while Elise rushed toward no-neck before two soldiers jerked her back.

“I see,” No-neck chuckled and strolled closer to Elise, prying the baton from her shaking hands. “I suspected as much.” He sauntered closer to Katharina.

Elise thrashed against the soldiers’ relentless hold when he stroked the baton over Katharina’s cheek.

“Well, it matters not. You will die. Get this waste out of my sight. Your time runs out in a few hours, and I have always preferred executions at dusk.”

“No, you can’t,” Elise voice broke. She lurched forward, straining against the soldiers’ grasps, and wriggled before smashing her left shoulder into the side of one of the soldiers. Elise crashed her elbow into the stomach of the other soldier and reached out. “Don’t take her,” she shouted when her vision blurred again.

The soldiers hauled Katharina out of the room and Elise kept twisting and turning in her restrains, unintelligible nonsense tumbling from her lips. She groaned and flipped, and smacked her elbow once more against one of the soldiers before she crashed to the floor.

Yelping, Elise jumped up. Her heart galloped beneath her ribs, while sweat pooled at her lower back and tears streamed down her face. The chill of the hardwood floor seeping into her overheated body aided in bringing her back, in shaping an

awareness of her bedroom, her apartment, her time. Frowning at the rumpled bed-sheets hanging halfway on the floor, Elise marched into the kitchen to open her stash of wine.



Physical therapy was a pain, but Elise supposed that was the point of it. Preston, her physical therapist, was pleased with her progress over the last several weeks. She saw him every day, except for the weekends and he was optimistic, saying if her progress continued in the manner, she'd be fit to return to work in about four weeks. Now Elise had to convince her psychiatrist to agree to this timetable. Dr. Rush had proved to be a challenge, at first. Cooperation was the key, though, and it needn't be true or complete, giving the impression was enough.

Dr. Miller had based her return on Dr. Rush's approval, and while that was a reasonable precaution, certain aspects of Elise's ordeal remained buried for a reason. The idea of talking about her feelings to anyone, much less a stranger, spread unadulterated dread through her.

Elise had written her report for the OC, in the exact way Dr. Miller, Charlotte, Henry and she had agreed upon. She had left out certain events of her captivity, since the idea of the OC, and thereby Ciane, reading about this turned her stomach. This also meant she could not reveal the true events to Dr. Rush, rendering the whole therapy useless, without the ability to talk about the true source of her distress. However, Elise wanted to go back to work.

Elise had told Luca most of what had happened. Penelope was another story. She didn't understand why Elise wouldn't resign. They had a huge fight a week earlier and

Elise refused to talk to her sister until she received an apology. She understood Penelope's fear, but it was her life to live.

Henry had been around several times, but they didn't talk about what had happened. He never asked Elise about her feelings or how she was dealing. They would sit together and Henry would ramble on about the newest gadgets he was working on, or he'd go on about the improvements he wanted to implement to his network for the ongoing cyberwar between him and his hacker neighbor, which had both men attempting to infiltrate each other's secure wireless network.



"How are your dreams?" Dr. Rush clicked her pencil and wrote something onto the notepad in her hand.

"Fine, I've had one or two bad ones last week. The rest is regular stuff or I don't remember," Elise lied.

"Do you sleep enough?"

"Yeah, it's not as restful as it used to be, but I still sleep around six hours a night." Elise was fortunate if she slept for three hours a night, and these fretful hours were often interrupted by nightmares which had her scrambling out of her bed, drenched in sweat, with her heart ready to jump out of her chest. Such nights, more often than not, found her passed out drunk on her couch, the TV blaring in the background. The luckiest but rare nights saw her waking up with no memories of any dreams.

Yet the truth wouldn't send her back to work. Dr. Miller had assured her they would wait to reset the Holocaust mission until she was fit to return. But how long could her team postpone their return?

“How is your alcohol consumption?”

“Regular. I don’t drink more than before, mostly in social situations.” Elise had been able to increase the times she was able to ignore her stash of alcohol. There were also some early mornings, like her most recent dream where they took Katharina, which found her clinging to the toilet, retching bile while tears streamed down her face.

“Have you confided in anyone else about your ordeal?”

“Yes. I’ve talked to my best friend Luca, as much as I can, but considering he cannot know the truth, our conversations are somewhat limited.” Elise rubbed her clammy hands over her blue jeans. The truth, at last, well almost. Luca didn’t know every detail.

She’d read up on PTSD and recovery from torture and tried to offer Dr. Rush a medium strong approach to healing. Elise allowed herself to have “setbacks” and followed an average-to-slightly-above-average trajectory of recovery. Deceit wasn’t her forte, but her situation called for it.

“Are you practicing the meditation and relaxation techniques we’ve been talking about?”

“Yes, and they’ve been helpful, though they were hard at first. My mind would wander off and it’s still sometimes hard to concentrate, but I think it helps.” Another truth, Elise smiled. This might work out after all.

“I’m pleased with your progress, Elise. I recognize how far you’ve come since our initial difficulties.” Dr. Rush jotted down some more notes. “I will see you again next Monday.”

“Thank you.” Elise forced a smile. Dr. Rush didn’t mention anything about her return to work. Again. Maybe Elise wasn’t as adequate a liar as she’d thought.



“How was your session?”

“Which one? The one who tries to fix my body or the one working on my mind?”

Elise pulled a tray of kimbap out of the fridge.

“Thanks.” Luca put two plates on the table and sat down. “You can tell me about both if you wanna, but I was talking about Dr. Rush.”

Finishing chewing, Elise chased the food down with a sip of Lager. “Preston is happy with me, I think. Some exercises still hurt, scar tissue and all. Dr. Rush, on the other hand...”

“You like her, right? You feel like talking to her is helping?” Luca grabbed his own beer bottle, playing with the label.

“I don’t care, like, she’s all right, but it’s not like I *need* to like her. We’re not gonna be friends. All I need is for her to tell Chronos I’m fit to return to work.”

“What an attitude.”

“What? You know me. Do you think I’ll spill my guts in front of a complete stranger?”

“She is a professional who can help you, not a stranger.”

“I *don’t* need help.” Elise jumped up and dropped their plates into the sink before marching into the living room. “You comin’?”

“Mmm.” Luca drank some more of his beer before grabbing a couple more bottles out of the fridge and joining Elise.

“Thanks,” Elise took the offered bottle and watched Luca flop down next to her.

“I don't... I don't know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Pull through this. I gotta finish the mission, though.”

“Why are you so fixated on going back to Germany?”

“It's not....” Elise took a large sip of her beer. “Part of me never wants to see that godforsaken country again, no matter the time period. But I need to go back and see it through.”

“What ever happened to her?”

“There's no trace after 1948, so I'm assuming she left Germany. Most did, and she had the money to do so. Changed her name, and I'm sure her Allied friends helped her.”

“Maybe she died.”

Elise balked. “Maybe she relocated to Australia and lived happily ever after with a husband and 2.5 kids.”

“That'd be worse.”

“Both suck.”

“Do you think she should've done more to help you?”

“What could she have done? I received a light version of torture, at least according to her. Besides, she didn't know if she could trust me and if she'd been exposed...”

“She still—”

Elise raised her hands. “I'm well aware of what happened, Luca. Katharina wasn't the problem.”

“Got a little Stockholm syndrome going on there?”

“Excuse me?” Elise’s cheeks heated.

“I’m sorry, but I get this vibe from you, and I know you...”

“This is a real pain sometimes.”

“Who you telling?”

“I’m not drunk enough for this conversation,” Elise mumbled.

“OK. We’re staying with Lager or do you want wine? Jack, Jose?”

“No need to bring out the big guns. Let’s continue with what we’ve started.”

Two hours later, Elise's world was spinning. She should have eaten more, maybe then she would have lasted longer. She would have caved and told Luca more about what had happened between Katharina and her, anyway, but she'd expected to have worked out her feelings by then.

Lying on the couch, one of Elise's arms dangled over the edge while she ran her fingers through the fibers of the white, plush carpet. She gnashed her teeth when her vision turned fuzzy. Luca was leaning against the armrest of the couch, eyes closed, and one hand on Elise's shin.

“You'd think holding on to your leg would make my world not twirl so much.” Luca opened his eyes and blinked before focusing on the reclined form of Elise. “Does your shoulder still bother you?”

Elise worried her lower lip. “It's better, the exercises help. Those are not the injuries that are still hurting me.”

“I know,” Luca squeezed Elise's leg.

“Katharina was convinced we'd known each other, from before.”

“Before what? Your captivity?”

“Yeah. She insinuated I’d saved her life, at some point. She talked about August 1940 in Berlin, I... I acted like I knew what she meant and she thanked me.”

“But... wait, did you maybe do that during one of your Observer missions?”

“What would we have done in Berlin in 1940 as Observers? Watched the bombs fall?”

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I... I’m just so frustrated. The fact that she saw me in 1940, that I saved her life... I—”

“Oh my god, it’s your future.” Luca covered his mouth. “So you gotta go back, right?” Luca said.

“I don’t know, I guess? I mean, no one knows for sure how time travel to alter stuff operates, and whether or not you even have a choice.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. Which only makes it worse.”

“How come?”

“I... I can't... I’m so torn. I doubted Katharina at first because I thought she was playing me, but she could have stopped helping me once she realized I wasn’t with the Allied forces. I didn’t have to try to escape. I could have avoided the beating... it was all for nothing. I guess over time, I did grow a bit attached to her. Even before I knew... there were moments when she was kind, and it seemed like she was troubled over what she had to do. I don’t know. I’m crazy. My feelings... they’re hardly normal. I mean, the situation caused this, right?”

“Normal is overrated,” Luca waved his hand.

“Be serious, Luca.” Elise's hand coiled around the carpet strings.

“I *am* serious, and I have no idea. Your experience was extreme, and you did what you had to. Whatever felt right at the time? As for your feelings, who knows? Katharina *did* help you, and it's understandable that in your situation, you'd feel drawn to someone who shows you kindness.” Luca touched Elise's hand. “I don't think anyone would think worse of you for feeling this way. At least, not anyone you should be concerned about.”

“What about me?”

“Huh?”

“What if I judge myself?”

“Stop it. Come on, Elise, I understand. You've always been much harder on yourself than on others. Which works out for our friendship with me being all, well, me, but *this* will torture you, and accomplish nothing else.” Luca grimaced at hearing Elise's humorless chuckle. “I'm sorry, wrong word choice.”

“No, it's fine. I understand, at least my head does, but I still feel awful. Like, I shouldn't feel the way I do.”

“You feel how you feel, and we don't influence our feelings. Besides, I don't think feelings are good or bad. They just are. You feel them, so they're there. There's a reason for our feelings. Basically, the gist of these drunken ramblings, your feelings are fine. They're valid.”

“What if your feelings are all mixed up? A lot of my feelings contradict one another.”

Luca laughed, “I'd be shocked if they didn't. Look, as clichéd as this is, you've gotta give it time. Things will become clearer, and you'll find a way to work through this so it will be less... well, less painful, at least.”

“You promise?” Elise cold hand grabbed Luca's and she felt soothed by the warmth seeping into her.

“Always,” Luca clutched Elise's hand, neither one acknowledged the tears spilling over her cheeks.

Chapter XII

Jack

Dreadful was the appropriate word Elise to describe Luca's idea. Dr. Rush had finally cleared her for work, after Preston had done so a week earlier. Luca couldn't tell anybody the real reason behind her injuries, but he still insisted on throwing her a 'Glad You're Alive' party. It'd been ten weeks since her return from Germany, and she'd spent the first two in the hospital recovering.

Now, Luca wanted to celebrate the fact she was still alive, but he also felt it was his obligation to congratulate her on the insanity of returning to work. At least this was how he'd put it the previous night. He'd invited too many people. Luca insisted on including Henry and Charlotte, as well as Dr. Miller.

Elise was trying to manage the headache-inducing situation where everyone tried to convince the other they didn't know the truth behind Elise's trauma. Sighing at hearing Luca talk to Helen about her security mission going south, Elise hoped none of them would slip up and reveal tidbits of information they weren't supposed to be privy to in the first place.

Ambling to the table, Elise poured red wine into a glass and was about to take her first sip when Charlotte appeared next to her.

"Hey, nice party," Charlotte grinned but the smile failed to reach her eyes.

"Yeah, Luca knows how to throw them."

Charlotte popped a few hors d'oeuvre into her mouth.

Elise felt awful for avoiding Charlotte these last few weeks. Being around most of her colleagues or her boss, still felt almost unbearable at times. Elise had lied about this,

to everyone, including Dr. Rush. Her psychiatrist had been so pleased with her progress in working through her 'intense trauma.' Elise never told her about her real nightmares. She also never mentioned to Dr. Rush how she still avoided eye contact with Charlotte. How there were moments when she'd glance at Charlotte and saw all the guilt and self-recrimination bleeding off her partner. She couldn't bear seeing Charlotte like this. Yet every time she'd open her mouth to offer comfort, the words remained lodged in her throat.

“What've you been up to?” Elise nursed her drink, her eyes darting across the room.

“Reports, hearings, reassuring my parents I'm fine. We also made a few changes on the mission, uh, there've been some additions, and, well, I'm sure you'll be briefed in time. Henry analyzed the TDA with a fine tooth comb.” Charlotte rocked on her feet.

“Did they add security for the first leg?”

“Yeah, they did. We should be safe next time.” Another grape found its way into Charlotte's mouth, followed by a cube of cheese, leaving her to fiddle with the toothpick in her fingers. “Look, I don't wanna... this is not the time.” Her eyebrows furrowed. “Forget it, we'll talk another time, OK? Let's enjoy the party, cheers!” She picked up a glass, nodded at Elise and scuttled off.

Charlotte's figure disappeared among the crowd, leaving Elise restless. She could rush after her, and she might have, if relief at avoiding this particular conversation hadn't surged through her. Taking another sip of her *Dornfelder*, Elise plodded toward the hallway, seeking a moment of quiet, or better, a moment when she could let her mask drop for a second.

She smiled when she found herself in front of Luca and Hanna's picture wall. Many pictures chronicled her friends' relationship over the years, but intermixed were also old family pictures. Elise was in a few, too. She smiled and warmth spread through her when she discovered an old picture of Luca, herself, and Luca's grandma Cathy which had been taken over twenty years ago.

Elise's eyes glided from one picture to the next until she encountered one she couldn't remember ever seeing before. The picture was old. It had the faded, sepia coloration of photographs from the mid-twentieth century. In it was a young woman, standing next to the front door of a house. Her long, light hair braided, she was smiling into the camera while holding a little girl in her arms. Elise's hands twitched. This couldn't be real. Her imagination was playing tricks on her. She wasn't getting enough sleep, so no....

Elise's eyes flashed to two different pictures showing the same woman, older in both than in the first. She compared the shape of her eyes, her nose and her jaw. Shaking her head, she inched closer to the picture of the woman with the child.

Bile rose from her stomach. Elise exhaled heavily, disbelief turning into a sob, seizing her throat. The glass of red wine slipped from her fingers, shattering with a loud clang on the tile floor. Red liquid splashed over Elise's legs and onto her shoes. Hurried footsteps drew near, voices growing from confusion to concern upon facing their inability to draw Elise out of her stupor.

"Elise! What happened? Are you OK?" Luca grabbed her shoulders. Elise's face was pallid, her mouth open and her eyes widened. Her gaze was locked on the picture wall.

“Elise!” Luca asked, darting in front of Elise, blocking her view of the pictures.

“Luca?” The question left Elise's lips in a ragged whisper, doing nothing to wipe away the fear and worry off her friends' and boss's faces.

“I uh, I have a headache, so I think I should go home. Tell... uh, please tell everyone I'm sorry?”

Luca nodded, releasing his grip on Elise. Giving a tight smile and a nod to Helen and Charlotte, Elise turned and sped out of the apartment.

Stomping to the front door, Elise intended to give her best friend a piece of her mind, since it became apparent Luca wouldn't end his persistent knocking. *He knows better!*

Instead of Luca, the determined figure of her boss stood in her doorway and stormed into her apartment uninvited. Elise's shoulders slumped and her head dropped after she closed the door and followed the woman who was now pacing in her living room.

“What is going on? According to Dr. Rush, you're doing splendidly. When she declared you fit for duty I had the feeling this was all too fast, and now, it appears my concerns were justified.”

Elise sighed and plumped down on the couch, gesturing for Helen to follow suit.

“I am much better. Dr. Rush's assessment is correct”

“You could have fooled me.”

“Look, I'm not in the mood for this conversation, but I'm assuming you won't leave without an explanation?”

Helen just stared at her.

“I need a drink for this. You want something?” Elise trudged to the kitchen.

“No, thank you.”

Sitting back down, Elise grimaced after taking a big gulp of Jack Daniel’s.

“I... Luca is my best friend. We..., uh, we grew up together.”

Helen nodded.

“He was raised by his mother and grandmother, since his father left when he was a baby.” Elise took another sip; the whisky was turning the tension running through her body into a low, dull ache. “Anyway, I spent a lot of time at Lucas's growing up, and they were like family to me. Grandma Cathy was the grandmother I’ve never had.”

She rolled her eyes, trying hard to banish the sudden current of nausea; quick, shallow gulps to ease the dryness gripping at her throat. “She died when we were in our early twenties. I’d attended her funeral. I cried. I stood there, flooded with grief, bawling my eyes out.” Elise emptied her glass, stood and refilled it. On her way back she stilled in the doorway, taking another sip, the alcohol buzzing through her head, loosening her tongue.

Helen still hadn’t said a word but she kept her eyes trained on Elise’s trembling and fidgeting form.

“The picture wall. I'd seen it a million times before, but there was a new picture of a woman and a little girl. Luca must have found it on one of his rummaging sessions. He has the tendency to sometimes go through his stuff and...” Elise cleared her throat.

“Sorry, I’m rambling. At first, I couldn't place her, but she was familiar, in a strange way. I... I uh... was *sure* I was imagining things. I had to be. Then I looked closer and... I

compared the pictures. The old one with the two more recent ones, and there's no doubt.” Elise took another gulp from the tumbler in her hands. The burn of the whiskey refused to ease the oppressing feeling of having to say the next few words out loud. “Luca's grandma Cathy and my Katharina are the same person.” Elise slumped onto the couch and covered her face with her trembling right hand. She emptied the rest of her drink, hoping the alcohol would knock her unconscious.

The couch dipped, adjusting to the additional weight of Helen sitting down next to Elise.

“What will you do?”

Elise wiped the back of her hands over her eyes, drying moisture it its wake. “Hope Jacky here knocks me out, and when I wake up, I’ll realize this has all been a nightmare. That the woman I loved growing up is not the same women who interrogated and tortured me almost three months ago? The same woman who tried to help me and still ended up inflicting pain? How am I supposed to separate Grandma Cathy and Katharina? Did she realize who I was, growing up? Did she recognize me? Is that why she was so sweet and cared about me?” Elise wiped her eyes.

Helen nodded, at a loss for words.

“This is so fucked up, Helen.” Elise dropped her head in her lap.

“I’m so sorry, Elise.” Helen reached out and gently squeezed Elise's shoulder. “This complicates your issues. Regarding Katharina, it seemed she did all she could, given her situation. She did not have to continue aiding you, and I doubt that your friend’s grandmother affection sprang from remorse over what happened in Buchenwald. You said Luca and you grew up together?”

Elise nodded.

“So she knew you as a child. I doubt she recognized you until you were in your teens. She must have thought she was losing her mind, considering she was not cognizant of time travel as a reality.”

“That’s true.” Elise rasped.

“Perhaps there is a way to separate the pain and agony of your experience from the kind woman who did all she could. This way, your Katharina and Luca’s Grandma Cathy are not so different after all.”

End of Part I