RIPPLES IN TIME

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Aftermath

She understood why she had to leave David up there alone. Alex wanted to steal the time-machine and it had to be a successful outcome. Without it, Alex, Dianah and Brendon would never arrive on Yarnik; Delta would never happen; she would never happen, David would never happen.

The rogue flyer trying to land on the SciCorps landing pad was a mistake, but the theft couldn't look too easy. Failing to respond with the correct identity codes, the SciCorps lasers took it out.

"My way's quieter," Leonie muttered into the comm, she then flew a couple hundred metres away from the tower base to avoid the falling fuselage. She returned to her concealed position after putting out the spot fires from the wreckage, and waited in anticipation.

When she heard the shots over the link, she looked up fearing the worse. As soon as he came into view, she activated the timer. *Frack, I hope that's David and he's okay!*

"Let me know when you're at five hundred," Leonie called into her link, raising her voice over the wind she heard through the earbuds. "Frack it!" she cursed after several repeated calls elicited no response, concerned about the static and sudden silence.

Allowing them to steal the *Skydancer* needed to be done, but there was no guarantee what would happen after that point. After seeing David – or his clone – die with the assassination of Nicholai Zodaich, it was obvious to Alex his life was forfeit. *No loose ends.*

She kept a close eye on the body as it fell. He wasn't moving like a conscious faller would, there was no attempt to levelling out or trying to become stable. The body fell like a rag-doll.

Leonie didn't like it, but David had strongly suggested to let him fall for as long as possible before slowing him in case someone was watching from above. She wasn't supposed to approach him for a few minutes.

Finally, she saw enough detail to confirm it was David. The body was two-hundred metres up before Leonie gauged she could still safely slow him down. She released her stored power and focused on reducing his speed.

David's body 'fell' to the ground. He lay there unmoving.

She quickly scanned him. He was alive but unconscious, and after detecting an injury, completely disregarded is earlier strategy for her to wait. Breaking cover, Leonie raced to where he lay unmoving before seeing the head wound. His right temple was slick with blood, with streaks of it down his shoulder and sleeve. Looking closely, she saw a gouge on his scalp, and noted a bit of the 'mesh' implant.

"Was that the shot she heard?" she muttered as she rolled him over. "It's going to hurt." There were no other wounds – no bullet holes at least – and she was certain his landing wasn't hard enough to do more than a bit of light bruising.

After a few gentle shakes, he opened his eyes. "Some things I would rather forget. I don't want to have to do that again."

"Me neither. Who shot you?"

"Alex. He wanted me to jump – which I would have obliged with after the appropriate dramatic pause – but there was a disturbance in the corridor." David sat up with assistance. "Al panicked. It was a near thing. I realised time was running out and as he raised the gun, I ducked and rolled over the edge." He checked his wristcom. "And I believe I damaged the link. My actions weren't fast enough." He then tentatively touched his head.

"You're breathing, that's the main thing. Your medicomp will deal with what's left once I get you back up there."

"True, but we should wait a few minutes for whatever is happening to sort itself out. Remember, we actually want them to succeed."

"Fair enough. Have a drink at least." Leonie passed him her flask.

"It must take a lot of courage to knowingly fly at great heights," he said to her after he took a swig. "I was petrified just thinking about jumping off. Bravado aside, if it wasn't for the fact Alex was about to shoot, I may not have willingly jumped at all."

"It isn't as if I learnt to fly immediately from a few thousand metres. I started at ground level. Nothing courageous about it. One step at a time. I guess one just has to trust the magic as much as you trust the technology; like putting something weighing several tonnes in the air."

David took a breath.

She put her paws up. "And no. I don't need to hear the technobabble on aerodynamics – the point is, you trust the science as much as I trust the magic. You get used to it." Leonie

collected the flask, had a drink herself and clipped it back on her utility belt. "Ready to go? I'll rise slowly." Leonie lifted David towards the dock.

Just before rising above the pad, she slowed and moved to the side of the tower, scanning the interior. "There are still people inside. But not Alex, or anyone I recognise."

"I guess there's another way inside," David asked. "From your experiences, I mean?"

"None that either of us would care to try. Can you hang on to this?" She pointed to the lip around the edge of the dock. It was barely wide enough to balance oneself, as long as they had a good hand-hold.

"If you can turn around, we'll see," he suggested, sounding dubious.

Leonie pivoted so David could squirm his backside onto it, reaching up, but the angle was very awkward to maintain a good hold. "No," he said simply. "Pretty sure when you move away, I'll slip off." He closed his eyes for a moment after he looked down at the long drop below his feet.

"Ok." She repositioned herself, taking his full weight again. "Give me a moment." She scanned the minds of the people inside SciCorps for more details. "You might be in luck. Nicholai Zodaich is up there now."

"Is he? That's a surprise."

"Looks like you weren't the only clone. How about this? I'll help lift you over the ledge, but all they will see from their angle is you clambering over the edge."

"And I can tell them I was injured and managed to hide on this ledge?" He shrugged. "May as well. How could they doubt it? It isn't as if I can fly or anything."

"Exactly. And I'll wait underneath and come out when the coast is clear."

He nodded.

It was awkward getting him into position, but within a few minutes and her assistance, he slowly and carefully clambered over the lip.

"I'm so glad to see you!" he gasped as he knelt on the ground, feigning shock and exhaustion.

Stunned, the group inside the docking area turned as one.

"Where the crud have you been?" Nicholai stepped forward, stopping warily a few metres from the edge.

David slowly stood and retold his version of the attack and how he managed to crawl onto the ledge in the confusion. "I believe Alexander was too rushed to check, hence why I'm still alive. I was an easy target otherwise." As expected, no one was willing to peer over the sheer drop to confirm the validity of his story.

"Well, that's amazing. And extremely fortunate for all," Nicholai said.

"Desperate times; desperate measures. Did you apprehend Alex?" David asked, looking around as he walked inside, noting any damage or items missing.

"No. The sergeant here tells me he left in a spaceyacht which was docked *inside* SciCorps. Can you shed any light on this?"

"Ah, yes. I can, but may I strongly suggest it is for *your* ears only? We can talk securely in here." David indicated the lab.

"After you," the Prime invited.

As the two men walked to the lab Nicholai motioned for TowerPol officer to stand by the door. "Prime," the sergeant said. "Considering the recent attempts on your life by this man ... I advise against going in unaccompanied."

"Sergeant, that was a clone, but I understand your concern." Nicholai nodded. "This *man* obviously had little to do with that unfortunate incident."

"Very good, sir." The sergeant nodded, not risking going against the tower's highest ranking member.

"So then, Osbourne," Nick asked once inside. "What's the story?"

David closed the door and stepped further in. "Prime, sir–"

"David, since we 'died' together, Nick is fine." He followed the scientist.

"Thank you. This room held one of my special projects with the *jotnarium* I was tasked to research."

"I heard about your request for a larger quantity. This is the material that has enabled the stealth ability?"

"Yes and no – but that's still undergoing thorough research, which is what led to yet another discovery."

"One which you were going to reveal ... when?"

"As soon as I knew exactly what I was dealing with, how to make sure it was safe, and couldn't be exploited." *Though I am guilty of it myself.*

"And what is it that you were dealing with?"

"With in-depth experimentation and examination, the material produced a surprising and unforeseen temporal anomalies the likes of which we've not encountered before—"

"Osbourne, there's an old phrase my father used to say; 'Don't bullshit a bullshitter'. Spill it out."

"Time-travel."

Nick stared for a moment. "David, I know you're a very accomplished genius, and have gone through a traumatic experience – and I see you have a head injury. Maybe we should continue this debrief after you've been medically examined?" the Prime suggested.

"Believe me, Nick. All my faculties are intact. I know this is hard to believe—"

"Even to this old bullshitter that's an understatement." Nick shook his head in bemusement.

Expecting disbelief, David walked over to a locked drawer. "I have this as evidence of one of my recent experimental trips." A retinal scan gave access to the secured drawer. He brought out one of two flat metal cases, unlocking it with a thumb-scan. David showed the contents to Nick.

The Prime's eyes went wide in surprise. "Is that ... real paper?"

"A newspaper, yes. One of the last remaining tabloid newspapers in Sydney."

"This is amazing! It must be over 300 years old!"

"This one is the evening edition of 21 August, 2031.

"Surely it's too fragile to handle?" Nick said as David withdrew it from the case.

"If found after all this time, most assuredly, however, the paper is less than a month old. You will note there is no mention of the meteor. I looked through three of them. Not a word."

"How long have you had this?" Nick caressed the paper.

"I've had this newspaper for two-weeks, but I've been testing the ship for thirty-four days."

Nicholai perused the paper, fascinated by the contents. "And this is all you brought back?"

"Of course," David replied quickly. "Bringing objects from the past to the future could be catastrophic."

"How so?"

"What was the function of the hypothetical item? Removing something that may have previously been insignificant could potentially stop a past event from occurring, thereby creating a new outcome. A different timeline. This is why, until it can be somehow policed, no one must ever be in a position to exploit it for their own advantage."

"Yet someone has just done that! Three murderous criminals," Nicholai stated. "I think this is something we should have known about earlier. I'm sure there's some clause in your contract regarding shared information."

"Forgive me, Nick. It's *time-travel!* If word got out too soon, what safeguards would there be? Everyone would be wanting to use it, try it. Even *steal* it. I needed to ensure what its true capabilities were."

"Then how on earth did Alex find out?"

"I did not knowingly divulge any information. I believe Dianah's new partner has telepathic abilities."

"Telepathy?" The Prime screw up his face like it was a dirty word. "Are you talking about her new partner, Brendon? Is he a mutant? Is that how they managed to enter this otherwise highly-secure area?"

"It's the only way. I believe he must have become privy to the passwords, and since they are involved with cloning, it's a natural assumption they had an ability to bypass the hand and retinal scans."

Nicholai nodded. "We found an eye and a hand by the door. I assume it's *yours*."

"From the clone of me. Yes, it would have to be identical to get through the scanners." He chose not to reveal the previous vid he'd seen of them using the full-fledged David-clone to enter several days earlier – the clone just used in an assassination attempt. His foreknowledge of the breach and *not* preventing it would raise too many questions.

Nick perused the paper for a few minutes. "Fascinating," he muttered. "If I ask how time-travel is possible, would I understand it?"

"The easiest way to explain what has to be done would be time and space must both be considered. The time axis alone will not move you through space. For example, if I wanted to go forward without considering the location in space, I would simply reappear at the prescribed time, but not moved physically. The ground – the planet – would have moved on. I'd be in the void."

"And when you travelled back to Sydney in 2031, you had plotted where the Earth would be in space, at that time."

"Correct."

"And if you made a mistake?"

"It's why I adapted the spaceyacht. The initial jump had a safety margin of ten-thousand kilometres."

"And the potential of arriving inside a planet?"

"Problematic, at best, but I don't believe it would occur. Two solid masses cannot merge within one another, unless by pure chance it was in a large empty area like a cavern. The phasing into real-time wouldn't happen. As said, the initial jumps are calculated to be

thousands of kilometres away. I then move in closer, recalibrate the device and repeat. The next jump is exactly on target."

"Where could they have gone to?" Nicholai strolled around the large room, curious about the variety of equipment.

"*When* would they have gone? They are on the run for several heinous crimes – all of which would result in immediate ReCyc." Following him around the room, David continued. "You'd know your son's mind better than me. Would he go to the past or the future?"

"It's apparent I may not know his mind as well as you think. Maybe back in time – is that possible – to stop or warn himself from his mistakes?"

"Part of my testing has shown I can't phase in within my own timeline – I can't meet myself," David explained. "Or, more accurately, to occupy the time-space where I already exist, the energy requirements goes off the scale the closer I get to phasing."

Nicholai considered. "Possibly the future then, but not too far for fear of technology advancing too far for him to catch up – assuming we're still around. Either way, I'm guessing."

"And, ironically, *this* is precisely my dilemma, and why I haven't released any of this information. I feel it best to know how time-travel can be managed before others start trying to manipulate history, or possibly affect the future."

"Like a time police?"

"How about 'Galactic Authority Temporal Enforcement'?" David suggested with a grin.

"A bit pretentious, don't you think?"

"Possibly," the scientist sighed. "I'm considering AI controlled sensors to remove the human element; this will greatly increase speed, efficiency, and reduce inaccuracies. I'd need to determine parameters – what time they be looking for; how it could be detected; and at what range? How many sensors are to cover the solar system, or even the galaxy?"

"I'll leave that up to geniuses like you. This is a remarkable achievement, but now that I know about it, I expect to be kept informed of any progress."

"You have my word. In fact, even my earlier research indicated the prototype, the *Skydancer,* was not the ideal design. I've already arranged one of our facilities on the L5 orbital to lay the hull of a new design. This a newer version, far removed from adverse gravitational influences, is tailor-made to the *nth* degree specifically for time-travel."

"Do you need anything from me?"

"Financially, no, only the approval of the extra *jotnarium* shipment. Perhaps security and papers, cutting through red-tape if and when the need arises."

"Always tricky dealing with those orbitals, but not insurmountable."

"You have my thanks."

Nicholai nodded. "I'd prefer regular updates."

"Progress reports will be securely sent, you can be sure on that. Please accept the paper as a paltry apology for my lapse. I have another one."

Nicholai returned the precious item to the metal case and David reset the security to the Nicholai's thumb print. Once he and his TowerPol detail left, David secured cabinet and donned a replacement comlink.

"All clear," he called as he headed to the medicomp.

"I thought they'd never leave." Leonie floated inside. "What would happen if I flew very fast through that?" She hooked her thumb over her shoulder, indicating the kinetic-field.

"You'd be spending more time on the medicomp. The moment you enter the field at speed, it will slow you very drastically. Assuming a head-first trajectory, you'd more than likely incur spinal damage as the rest of your body came to a very sudden stop. Compressed discs would be the least injury."

"Best to not do that then. What news with his lordship?"

"He wants to be kept abreast of progress."

"That's all? His thoughts were saying differently."

"I'm sure more will be asked later." David set the comp controls and relaxed.

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