

The Mandela Defect

It was a Thursday night, and Dr. Evelyn Saunders, a renowned research physicist specializing in quantum mechanics, was deep into her nightly routine of reviewing data from the latest particle collider experiments. The lab, bathed in the soft glow of overhead incandescent lights and computer monitors, resonated with the gentle hum of machines at work. Evelyn, by nature an introvert, found solace in this subterranean sanctuary, deep in the bowels of CERN and far removed from the chaos of the day shift with its noise and bustling people. Here, amidst equations and data streams, she could retreat from the outside world. In the quiet, isolated environment illuminated by the warm incandescent light, Evelyn thrived, preferring this solitude to the company of others.

The Large Hadron Collider, or LHC for short, was a 17-mile tracked loop built deep under the borders of France and Switzerland. Here, they smashed particles together at the speed of light as they sought to discover the fabric of reality. Her job, as a chief researcher and engineer, was both to assist in the varied experiments, as well as ensuring that the maintenance system ran without issue.

The LHC utilized redundant and overlapping maintenance systems. The outer core (which was accessible by a larger group of engineers and researchers) was called SpectraNet. It was web based, that provided an impressive dashboard that connected to the closed loop intranet system accessible to everyone involved with the LHC, both above and below ground, as well as certain governments, namely the European Union and the United States.

The inner core was called Chronocore, which handled tracking all of the critical and sensitive operations of the LHC such as the critical control systems (i.e., the superconducting magnet calibrations, particle beam alignments, and power grid management). It also provided the only access to the Quantum system 'Mobius', which was used exclusively for running complex simulations so as to be fine tuned for the actual tests in the collider.

Two hours into her night's review, she rubbed her eyes and then looked back at the present data set on the screen. Something wasn't right. Puzzled and intrigued, Evelyn dug deeper, her fingers flying over the keyboard with precision typing in a command she hoped might provide an answer to her growing discomfort. A few moments later, she traced the irregularities to a concealed set of experiment logs that seemed to indicate a series of unauthorized tests being conducted in Chronocore under the guise of maintenance exercise. The data logs had some kind of encryption on them, so there was no way to indicate as to how many there were at

first glance, or who did it. But it was a clear indication that someone wanted to keep these tests hidden.

She looked at the data and could see why everyone else would have missed it. Whoever did this was very good at concealing it in the thousands of lines of code. Whoever did this probably weren't factoring this one variable into their very complicated equation; she had a photographic memory and as the lead data quality control engineer for CERN, she was exceptional at her job.

Evelyn's heart raced as she easily bypassed the encryption, her mind racing with possibilities. Was this some new groundbreaking experiment the top brass wanted to keep secret, or was it something more malevolent? The anomalies suggested more than mere maintenance to which she was intimately familiar with; they indicated intentional manipulation of very particular data sets. The Large Hadron Collider (LHC) was the largest man-made machine on earth, and conducting experiments weren't something that anyone could just do on a whim. The tests were scheduled years in advance, and they would have included hundreds of scientists and technicians from a variety of specialties all involved in ensuring everything went accordingly. Finding out who did this may be like looking for a needle in a stack of needles. Nevertheless, this appeared to be a system test using the same powerful computing network that managed the inner workings of the LHC. It appears, at least as far as she could tell now, that it wasn't actually activated during one of the collider events. So, somebody is piggy backing off the system to run calculations, and then taking those configurations to another program to execute it? She was confused as to the intent.

Several hours later, her mind was swimming with numbers and equations that would have turned the ordinary mind into a bowl of warm pudding. At last, she thought she figured out what was happening. If her assumption were correct, and they usually were, someone was attempting to tamper with the very fabric of time and space in the upcoming LHC test. It looked like it was an experiment set up to silently piggyback off the real experiment but releasing the results into a standalone system somewhere else. In other words, this would be a secondary test quietly running in the background, tapping into the vast amounts of energy being used, unbeknownst to those running the primary collider experiment. Judging by the data she has mined thus far; the implications were staggering. This wasn't mere theoretical physics; it appeared to be an active adjustment of the human timeline, altering both past and future as if to artificially induce changes to our present reality.

Time manipulation was, at the present, of course, impossible. But leaning back in her chair, a thought dawned on her. Over the years, she'd recalled with perfect precision all the varied conversations she'd had on the subject with her peers. The one thing that stood out to her now was that the word impossible seemed to be used less and less each subsequent year. Now, these were mostly off-hand conversations at office parties and other non-official events, so people, even scientists, tended to be a little more open about their own hypotheses on time manipulation. But no scientist in his or her right mind would ever go on the record and say it publicly for fear of losing all credibility.

But scientists used to reject the possibility of other dimensions. And yet as time wore on and technology continued to advance at an exponential rate, one of the core missions for the LHC was changing to do just that, discover other dimensions. So if other dimensions or realities were a possibility, so too was the manipulation of time.

Perhaps time manipulation was possible, she thought, and someone has either figured out how to do it or is very close to that breakthrough. Could it be she thought, could someone has actually cracked the code on how to do this? Returning her gaze back to the test sets, the data was filled with heavy, complex equations that even ten years ago, wouldn't have even been possible. But with the advancements in artificial intelligence and quantum computing, who knows. Maybe someone finally figured it out. She looked back at the computer screen and reviewed this latest batch. It read:

```
# Constants and parameters
c = 3e8 # Speed of light in m/s
G = 6.67430e-11 # Gravitational constant in m^3/kg/s^2
h_bar = 1.0545718e-34 # Reduced Planck's constant in J*
# Lorentz factor for velocity time dilation M.E.
lorentz_factor = 1 / np.sqrt(1 - (velocity**2 / c**2))
# Gravitational time dilation factor M.E.
gravitational_factor = np.sqrt(1 - (2 * G * gravity / c**2))
return lorentz_factor * gravitational_factor
def create_M.E. ctc(mass, radius, energy):
```

She read the coded calculations again, but paused at the M.E. What does that stand for, she thought. She looked back over the hundreds of lines of code and noticed that the letters “M.E.” were found together at least seven other times. M.E. What could that stand for? The initials of the individual doing this? Unlikely. If this test was unsanctioned, no one with half a brain would put their initials anywhere near this. Just then, a random thought popped into her head.

What if M.E. stood for what the conspiracy theorists called the Mandela Effect?

The Mandela Effect was a phenomenon where large groups of people remember events differently from how they occurred. As a fan of science fiction, this had always fascinated Evelyn, however, as a scientist, she knew how ridiculous it mostly was. So what if the Monopoly man didn't actually wear a monocle, or that the children's books were really called, the Berenstain Bears, and not Berenstain, these were just cultural misremembering's. A good science fiction will add just enough true science to make the show believable, but gratuitous amounts of silliness to make it enjoyable. As for the Mandela Effect goes, she had often wondered if it was evidence of parallel universes somehow getting mixed up or truly just a glitch in the matrix. As an atheist, she didn't believe in God or gods, but she did remain open to the possibility that there were other versions of reality.

But assuming this was what she thought it was, what would the ramifications be? Time travel like in 'Back to the Future'? Limited time travel where people couldn't go, but non-human things could be sent back, or brought back? Perhaps it was possible to go forward in time, but not backwards? What if the opposite was true? Her mind was now racing a mile a minute.

Evelyn combed through the data sets over the next few hours, she realized with a chill that the anomalies she had discovered were not unique to tonight. Driven both by curiosity and a renewed confidence of knowing what to look for, she began sifting through archived files from the past few months and found the same unambiguous data sets hidden stealthily in the background. That still didn't answer the question that was gnawing at the back of her mind. Why had she noticed them tonight but never before? Why now?

As the night wore on, fatigue finally began to set in. Evelyn had gone through at least two pots of coffee and was now suffering from mental fatigue as well as an unnatural alertness. It wasn't until she saw some day shift began to make their way into the lab that she'd realized she spent her entire graveyard shift down this particular rabbit hole. She quickly began to exit it out of the various maintenance logs she'd had open on her computer desktop. Aside from her credentialed log in, she wasn't sure who would know what she had been looking at, but if anyone asked,

she'd just play dumb. After all, it was her job to review the system to make sure the day shift hadn't overlooked anything. She took a deep breath. No one else knew she had gifted memory and given the fact that very few people even knew what to look for, the chances of her discovery on this project were slim to none.

She closed up, gathered her things, and began heading out the door with a false sense of confidence but still unable to shake the chilling realization that someone was either manipulating time, or was on the verge of it. She needed to find out who and why quickly.

Chapter 2: The Discovery

Later that day after a solid six hours of restless sleep, Evelyn got up groggily and walked into her home office which was far too small for a woman of her stature. She chuckled at that thought and sat down and began rifling through the clutter of books, papers, and mementos from past experiments to find a post-it note with a phone number on it. She was restless because she knew she couldn't just sit on the knowledge she discovered the night before or risk going crazy. She only knew of one person she could trust with this information, and she began to dial him.

One of the perks of working for CERN was the quaint, rent-free apartments the scientists could use throughout the year when they were on assignment there. The apartments were in Saint-Genis-Pouilly, which was the town directly above the subterranean LHC. In the apartment, she had access to a private landline she was free to use to make secure phone calls with. She activated a secure line on the phone and decided to call her closest colleague and confidant, Dr. Marcus Reed.

"Hey Marcus, it's me," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "Do you think we can meet up for a coffee later tonight. I've found something in the collider data that is both troubling, and intriguing."

"Evelyn, what's going on?" Marcus replied, concern evident in his tone.

"Meet me 5PM at the café on the corner of Rue de la Liberté & Avenue du Jura and I'll explain.

Later that night...

“I think someone is using the collider to manipulate time,” she said pausing, expecting him to burst into laughter. But when he didn’t, she continued. “I know that sounds crazy, but the numerical and alphabetic anomalies I found suggest intentional tampering with time. I spent all last night digging through the data, and it seems, at least what I could tell, that someone was either on the brink of, or has already figured out how to manipulate to do it.”

Marcus began to open his mouth, but then there was a long pause that ended with a ‘your-pulling-my-leg-smile.’ “Are you messing with me? Because this sounds, well, impossible.”

“I know it does, and yes, I’m as serious as a heart attack. But look, you’ve known me for years, and no I’m not prone to flights of fancy. I also know what the data says. Regardless of our presuppositions, I think we need to investigate this further to see how legitimate it is.”

“How old is the data? Are we talking, recently, or something from years ago?”

“Both. Its been done very recently, like within the last week, but it appears to go back months. I ran out of time so I couldn’t see how far back exactly, but it’s been ongoing for a while now.”

“Alright. Look, tomorrow is my day off, but I can meet you in the lab later tonight when your shift starts. If what you’re saying is true, someone went to great lengths to hide it. Perhaps we need to exercise caution going forward. A safe bet would be to believe that they do not want us to find out and may go to great lengths to protect that knowledge. Besides me, who else knows?”

“Just you so far,” she replied.

“Good, let’s keep it that way. I’ll see you tonight,” he said as he drained his café latte and headed toward the door.

Even Marcus didn’t know she had a photographic memory. She had always felt a little self-conscious about it, because in a very real way, it was like cheating and while everyone else had to work tirelessly to remember facts and figures, it came to her very easily. Maybe I can tell him she thought if this all turns out to be true. Thus, she spent the rest of the early evening poring over the data in her head which she recalled with perfect clarity. Who could be behind this? What was their goal? The potential for both discovery and disaster loomed large in her mind.

That evening, Marcus arrived at the lab, his face drawn with worry. They didn’t waste any time and together, they began reviewing the data, cross-referencing logs,

and double-checking their findings. The more they uncovered, the clearer it became that access was had by a person(s) both from without, and within the facility. It was quite possible that they had already begun altering the timeline in ways they couldn't yet fully understand.

"We need to find out who's behind this," Marcus said, his voice grim. "And we need to stop them before they do any more damage."

"But we don't even know what damage they've done, if any?" she replied. "I keep seeing these initials of M.E. What do you think they stand for? Personally, I've started calling it the Mandela Effect.

"Mandela Effect? Have you been binge watching YouTube again?" he added with a chuckle.

"Maybe just a little," she replied with a smirk. "But I'm sure you have a theory on what the two initials stand for?"

"Actually, I don't. But for now, let's just call it Mike Echo so we don't trap ourselves into a conclusion that biases our investigation," he said cautiously looking around the lab as if eavesdroppers were dropping eaves.

With hundreds of employees and probably half that, with access to the SpectraNet maintenance system, finding who exactly was running these tests would be challenging.

"Why don't we shift our focus on access to Chronocore," Evelyn nodded, hoping her determination could match her growing paranoia. "Let's start by looking into the staff records and access logs. Whoever did this had to have a high enough clearance to access this particular section of the maintenance system in the first place to even run these tests. That should limit our candidate pool down to a dozen or so."

As they delved into the login records, they noticed that Dr. Alan Pierce, a relatively new addition to the team, had an unusually high level of access and had been logging extensive hours during the maintenance periods. He had been Dr. Hargrove's replacement, who also spent a lot of time logged into both SpectraNet and Chronocore, so it wasn't a sure bet, but Evelyn and Marcus decided he looked like a good candidate to start with.

"Look, I rotate back to day-shift next week. Let's find out where he hangs his hat, and we'll go have private visit with him then."

“This feels like a Scooby Doo Recap where we have the monster pinned down and pull the mask off only to find out it was Old Man Withers,” she said with a muted laugh.

“More like good cop/bad cop,” he added with a smile while standing up to stretch. “I don’t think it’s safe to tell him what we think we’ve found. Better to go in on offense and ask what he messed up in the maintenance files in the hopes he tells us.”

Early that next week, they met up and walked to the section of the subterranean compound where Alan’s office was located. They found him in his office, which was a cramped space filled with the smell of coffee and thick stacks of newspapers, huddled over his workstation busily crunching away on an excel spreadsheet. He looked up, startled, as they entered.

“Dr. Saunders, Dr. Reed, what can I do for you?” he asked, recognizing them only by their name tags on their lab coats, his voice tinged with the slightest air of unease.

“Dr. Pierce, we need to talk,” Evelyn said shutting his door. “May I call you Alan?”

“Sure,” he replied.

“Look we’ve discovered some irregularities in the collider maintenance data in the system. Irregularities that point to excessive and perhaps even unauthorized access. Your access logs suggest you’ve been involved in both. What exactly are your needs in that section of the maintenance system?”

Alan’s face paled ever so slightly. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m supposed to run my test on the SpectraNet system. Why wouldn’t I be logged in?”

“Don’t play coy, Alan,” Marcus interjected. “You have access to SpectraNet dashboard, but not to Chronocore. We have the data. We know someone’s been in the Chronocore maintenance logs, we just don’t know why. What were you doing in there?”

For a moment, Alan seemed ready to deny everything. But then, with a resigned sigh, he slumped in his chair. “Alright. You’re right. But it’s not what you think. I’m not messing with any of the maintenance files, nor am I doing this for personal gain. I’m actually trying to prevent catastrophes.”

Evelyn and Marcus exchanged glances. "Explain," Evelyn demanded.

Alan leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper as if the walls themselves had ears. "Let's talk somewhere more private."

Outside of the office and in one of the giant cavernous hallways that held the general access to the LHC, the three of them began walking one of the lengths along the 17-mile collider ring.

"Look, I haven't been here long, but as you know, I inherited Dr. Hargrove's office. A few months ago, I stumbled upon some old research notes he left behind. Of course, I was curious as to what he was involved with because, as the previous lead researcher for the project, I was hoping to glean some insights which might help make my transition a little easier. But man, I was not prepared for what I found."

"What did you find?" Evelyn asked, playing dumb.

"Well, let's just say he had some unconventional theories about time manipulation. Anyway, he believed that if we could make small changes in our historical timeline for this reality, tweaks if you will, then we would be able to retroactively go back and prevent major disasters...even if it did cause some side effects.

"Side effects?" Evelyn asked curiously.

"According to his notes, He believed that fixing the 'temporal fractures,' might cause some type of glitches to our understanding of history...the Mandela Effect to use the common parlance."

At the mentioning of Mandela Effect, Evelyn shot a quick "I told you so" glance at Marcus whose brows furrowed into a chagrin.

"Honestly, I couldn't believe it. The freaking 'Mandela Effect,' he said using his hands to gesture something blowing his mind! Anyway, even if it did cause the Mandela Effect, Hargrove stated in his notes that he thought it was worth it. He left instructions on how to find his ongoing research—hidden in the maintenance logs which is how I accessed them. I've been running real tests based on his theories for a few months now, and they work." Hargrove had been obsessed with correcting what he called 'temporal fractures.'"

"Temporal fractures?" Marcus echoed. "What does that even mean?"

Alan ran a hand through his hair. "Imagine the timeline as a tapestry. Every event, every choice, is a thread. Sometimes, threads get frayed or broken, leading to

catastrophic outcomes. Dr. Hargrove believed that by making small adjustments to that thread before it frays or breaks, this would prevent it from breaking in the first place and steer history onto a better path.”

“Are you saying, you could go back and prevent something like Pearl Harbor or 9/11, or a natural disaster?” Evelyn asked frowning now.

“Theoretically yes. But to date, my tests have been far smaller in terms of scale. I’ve corrected five car accidents and a handful of murders,” he said with an overly confident glint in his eyes.

“You’re saying, you’ve prevented these from happening?” Marcus inquired cautiously.

“Yes, that is what I am saying Dr. Reed. Which is why I have all those newspapers in my office. I have to get the time, date, and specifics correct so I can adjust them accordingly in the system.”

“You’re making these repairs to the code in the maintenance log, but running the tests where?” Evelyn followed up.

“When the LHC is not being used in operational tests, such as when we did Higgs-Boson, the LHC maintains a 50 to 70 megawatts reserve in its steady-state mode (like standby mode). Now, this power is used to keep the superconducting magnets at or below 1.9 Kelvin (or -271.3 degrees Celsius). But we are using quantum systems that require only slightly warmer temperatures at absolute zero Celsius. This allows us to connect ‘Mobius,’ our quantum computing system, to the LHC, tapping into a fraction of that energy while maintaining the necessary ultra-cold environment.”

The reality of that truth hit Evelyn and Marcus so hard, they’d stopped walking and looked at each other.

Alan noticed the shared look of concern between Evelyn and Marcus.

“Look, this is all ‘wild-wild west’ territory we are in now,” Alan injected into the moment. “Even a few years ago, this wasn’t possible. But with the advancements in artificial intelligence, we were able to construct the necessary work arounds for bringing quantum online faster.”

“As mind-blowing as this news is, you’re playing with fire, Alan,” Evelyn said flatly. “If you mess with the past, it’s bound to change the future in ways we can’t even begin to fathom.”

“It’s already out of my hands,” Alan replied. “To be truthful, it was out of my hands before I even inherited it.”

“What does that mean?” Marcus asked.

“I’ve got a limited number of ‘tests’ that I run. But I’m not the only one who has access to this system.”

“Who else does?”

Before Alan could respond, the hall suddenly grew cold. A strange sensation washed over Evelyn, like the world was shifting beneath her feet. She glanced at Marcus, who looked equally unsettled.

“What’s happening?” she whispered.

Alan’s eyes widened in fear. “I think... I think someone else is using Mobius to alter the timeline.”

The three scientists rushed to the lab, where the collider was humming ominously. Data screens flashed with rapid, incomprehensible information. Someone was actively manipulating the machine from somewhere else.

“Who else has access to Mobius?” Marcus asked angrily.

“I can’t say who they are, only that their acronyms are CIA and MI6,” Alan said cryptically.

Evelyn’s heart pounded as she accessed the main console. “We need to shut it down, now! We can’t let unnamed and untrained intel agents hacking our system from the outside.”

Marcus and Alan joined her, their hands flying over the controls. As they worked, the anomalies on the screens grew more pronounced. Reality itself seemed to waver, as if caught in a temporal storm.

With a final, desperate push, they managed to power down the collider. The room fell silent, the air thick with tension. Evelyn slumped in her chair, exhausted but relieved.

“We need to secure this facility,” Marcus said, his voice steady. “Alan, we need to figure out who else specifically is behind this. If someone else has access to the collider, we’re all in danger.”

Evelyn nodded, her mind already racing with plans. "Agreed. But first, we need to understand the full extent of the changes. We need to know what timeline we're in now."

As they began to assess the damage, a new realization dawned on Evelyn. The anomalies weren't just theoretical anymore. They were real, tangible shifts in their reality. The Mandela Effect was no longer a mere cultural curiosity; it was a threat to the very fabric of existence.

They were going to need help if they wanted to regain control of this system. She thought of a man who hadn't crossed her mind in many years- Michael Trent.

Because somewhere out there, someone was pulling some very dangerous strings.

Chapter 3: The Rift

While they were able to get the system shut down (the Mobius, not the LHC) the three decided to split up and meet back on Friday to see what they'd uncovered. Evelyn hadn't mentioned her old friend Michael Trent, simply because she wasn't sure if she could still get in contact with him. It had been more than a few years and she had lost track of him. Last she heard he was freelancing between Reuters, AP News, the BBC, and the Washington Times. After contacting a few new agencies, she finally got hold of his phone number and decided to give him a ring. Being a senior research scientist with CERN still did have some perks.

"Hello," Michael answered his cell phone. He didn't recognize the number.

"Michael, it's Evelyn," she said. "Evelyn Saunders."

"Oh wow, talk about a blast from the past. How have you been? You still doing the science-thing?"

"I've been good, and yes, still the science nerd. You?"

"Can't complain, the journalism world continues to stay busy, especially as the world continues to get weirder and wilder."

"Well, it's about to get a lot weirder if you're interested," she said.

"I'm game. What's this all about now?"

“Are you in the States, or in Europe these days?”

“I’ve got a Flat in London and rent a room in NYC. Presently, I’m in Romania doing some stories on US Weapon shipments into Ukraine. How about you? Are you still with CERN?”

“I am, and still in Geneva. But the reason I reached out wasn’t just to catch up, but I have a hot story. Probably the hottest story since the Manhattan Project. How quickly could you get to Saint-Genis-Pouilly?”

“Probably in a day or two. But I’d need a very solid reason for dropping the story I’m currently on and heading there. Can you pitch me anything over the phone?”

“Well, I don’t feel comfortable explaining this over the phone, but trust me, you won’t regret it.”

“Can you at least give me a direction for this story?”

She paused for a moment, trying to think of something that would give him the gist without revealing too much. “Do you know who Marty McFly is?”

He thought about it for a split second before realizing she was talking about the main character of the Back to the Future movie franchise. “Oh. Oh wow. Well, yeah, let me close things out here, and get someone to cover my research thus far. But I can be on the next flight from Bucharest within the day. Can I reach you at this number?”

“Let me give you my cell # and just let me know when you arrive to Geneva, and I’ll come pick you up and explain everything.”

Two days later and on the way back from the airport in Geneva, Michael sat in the passenger seat of Evelyn’s Volvo XC40 stunned into silence after Evelyn explained all that had been transpiring.

“That is insane,” he said after two minutes of silence. “Are you certain this is what is happening?”

“Yes. We went back and double checked all the micro-cases that Dr. Pierce claimed he intervened with. He showed us the original newspaper clippings of local deaths, and then we reached out to those people who should have been dead.”

“And you think the real issue is the unintended consequences that may, or may not correspond with time manipulation?”

“Yes. I think, or at least, this is our hypothesis at the moment, that one of the clearest and perhaps most obvious examples of time manipulation is déjà vu and the Mandela Effect.”

“And you think, or rather, you know outside agencies have access to this Mobius system?”

“Yes,” she said pulling into the street where her apartment was located. “We were all talking when the system turned on and someone was attempting to alter something. We still haven’t found out who it was, or what they were attempting to do.”

“You understand the ramifications of this?” Michael asked. “I mean, I’m sure you do, or you wouldn’t have called me. But they could go back and fundamentally change history.”

“Imagine if Lincoln had never been assassinated. Or JFK. Or MLK. What if time had been altered so that the German Third Reich developed the atomic bomb first? I guess what I’m getting to, is if messing with the past fundamentally alters the future, wouldn’t that put their own discovery of time manipulation in jeopardy?”

“We aren’t entirely sure and at present, we don’t have a lot of solid answers. There are, however, plenty of theories and potential issues that could arise from things like casual paradoxes, ripple effects, and existential consequences.”

“Most of those things are above my paygrade. So how can I help?”

“We need you, and your long list of contacts, to figure out who else would have access to a system like this.”

“And Dr. Pierce doesn’t know who else does? Or your leadership at CERN?”

“The only lead we were able to get from Alan, I mean, Dr. Pierce, is that he was able to trace an access point for Mobius at the American Embassy in Bern. Whoever that was, most likely the CIA, who has chosen to remain hidden.”

“Look, we’ve been able to keep the system down for the last two days under the guise of network maintenance, but the next test is tomorrow (Friday). If someone were so inclined, they could run Mobius while the collider is operational, and no one would be the wiser. Even if something significant was changed in the past, we would likely not even realize it was changed at first.”

“Because that would be all we ever knew, right,” Michael asked.

“Something like that.”

“Then who’s to say that Lincoln wasn’t supposed to have been assassinated, or JFK, or MLK? What if they were meant to live, and we are living, or have been living our lives in the shadow of this already altered timeline?”

“Well, truth be told, we can’t say we aren’t definitively.”

“You know what this really means,” Michael said, “whoever is doing this, could have far grander plans than even what we are imagining.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, a hint of dread in her voice.

“What if the goal isn’t to change one major event, but to make enough small alterations that we start doubting our entire understanding of history?”

“So that we can’t trust anything?” she asked.

“Something like that, yes,” he replied, his voice rising. “If this kind of information got out, it could potentially lead to the unraveling and ultimate collapse of Western Civilization.”

“The danger,” she continued, “was that whoever else has access to this must realize that if they went back and prevented something like Christianity or Islam from ever beginning, the ripple effects would create a world so different that even they might not exist now to manipulate it.”

“True. I think to solve this riddle,” he said, “we have to ask the fundamental question, to what end? A new world order? A global oligarchy where they are at the top and everyone else is at the bottom? It seems whoever they are, would have to have things lined up in such a way that they would be able to predict how the micro changes to our present history would impact the future before they made the bigger changes. Obviously, something big would create big waves in our timeline. What if, instead, they’re making subtle, micro-changes—just enough to cause anomalies like the Mandela Effect or déjà vu to happen, but not enough to disrupt the major timelines that keep them in power.”

“They would need routine access to some powerful quantum-based AI systems who could run millions, or billions of calculations and scenarios that give them the best outcome,” she added.

He sat for a minute thinking about who the 'whoever' could be. "Come to think about it, about ten years ago, maybe twelve, I did a story on the Department of Defense's "World Sentient Simulation Program. Maybe it's connected to that?"

"The World what?" she asked inquisitively.

"The World Sentient Simulation Program," he replied. "Imagine, a massive Sim City game, where every person on the planet in real life, has an avatar in this DoD network system. Your avatar in the program, is based on your digital footprint."

Noticing her puzzled look, he explained. "Look, everything you do online, from ATM withdrawals to what articles you read, videos you watch, travel plans you make, communications you generate, and things you buy online, all create a 'digital footprint' for your digital avatar."

"So, what I do in real life, this avatar mimics in the program? Why would they do this?" she asked.

"This is what the DoD at the time was using to wargame all manner of crisis situations. From natural disasters to terrorist attacks, to even more apocalyptic scenarios, they use predictive software to anticipate, based on your digital self, what you would do in real life."

"Somehow that is even more terrifying," she said, her eyes distant as she imagined a world where nothing—not even the past—could be trusted and where her next moves, were already predicted.

Michael paused for a second, his expression darkening. "Look, that was twelve years ago, at least. Chances are, they've been at this for a while now. This time manipulation must be a new twist to their wargaming, and it appears, it's already begun."

A tense silence hung between them, as the implications of their discussion began to sink in. Outside, the landscape seemed suddenly unfamiliar and hostile, as if even the present was slipping away into some new unknown reality.

Chapter 4: The Test

Friday's test came before they knew it and as expected, they noted that the Mobius program was discretely activated, not from within the confines of CERN's

subterranean workspace, but from elsewhere. What was interesting, at least to Evelyn, was the Schrödinger's Cat vibe to the rift in reality when Mobius was at work. It seemed, that if you were unaware of what Mobius was doing (i.e., manipulating time and space) you saw the effects of it, the jarring shift in reality, in real time. However, if you weren't aware of what Mobius was doing, i.e., which was everyone else apparently, the shift was scarcely noticeable.

Who knows what was changed this time.

Quickly scanning through the work calendars, phones, and contacts, Evelyn and Marcus took stock of any changes no matter how insignificant: minor discrepancies in their daily routines, fragments of conversations that seemed slightly off, and, most disturbingly, the growing sense of déjà vu that lingered after each "shift." Whoever was doing this didn't seem inclined to stop until they had achieved whatever end they hoped to achieve. They had a collective sense of dread as the world they knew, seemed to begin unraveling. Convinced that they were running out of time, Evelyn, Marcus, and Michael knew they had to act fast.

Working furiously on multiple angles, they did have a modicum of success in tracing the latest use of Mobius. The latest rift seemed to have created a small hiccup in the VPN protocol that delayed its coverage just enough to allow for a single internet ID to be found. Back tracing its origins, it seems to have been to an address in Saint-Genis-Pouilly just above them. Pulling out her phone, Evelyn quickly texted Michael, who didn't have clearance to come down to the underground CERN facility where she was, but was busy top side researching various leads.

Texting him an address, she typed: "Found an address. Can you verify who or what is at this location? Be careful."

Michael responded, "I'm on it. I'll check back with you in an hour."

Michael had been camping out at an Airbnb down the road from her apartment. He had his laptop and quickly did a Google Maps search and noticed that it was relatively close to where he was now. He noted that it looked very much like a non-descript, European style apartment. He quickly grabbed his iPhone 18X, which had the very best camera zoom available in the market. He pulled on his shoes, grabbed a bottle of water, some bread, and headed out the door. This would begin what became a weeklong stake-out for Michael. Luckily, there was a park across the street with benches, that allowed him to sit and watch the apartment while feigning feeding the pigeons.

During that entire time, he only ever saw one person come out of the apartment. He quickly and discreetly snapped a photo and texted it to Evelyn. "Do you recognize him?"

She didn't think so, but that didn't stop him. He forwarded the picture to a friend he had at Interpol. Friend might be an overstatement, but this contact had proven valuable in the past, providing access to Interpol's vast database of criminals, and most wanted. It was a rogue's gallery, a who's who of Europe's growing criminal underground. Back in the day, this would have been done manually, and could have taken months. As it were, the AI biometrics program Interpol uses now could complete a search in a matter of minutes. The program found a match that provided the missing link to the troubling question of Mobius.

The man's name was Detrick Hafner, a German engineer who had apparently, gotten in trouble some time back for computer hacking. While there wasn't too much on his present occupation, it did state that he was supposed to be living in Mannheim, Germany, not near Geneva, Switzerland. Further digging did offer up one curious clue. Deep inside a file, there was a name handwritten on one of his files that said the word "Nexus."

Intrigued, Michael pursued the rest of this research in the Darknet, hoping there was more honest information than what he could find in conventional web research. Eventually, he found some conspiracies on what the "Nexus" was claimed to be...a shadow government mirroring that of the European Union and United States. According to the online chatter, it was really a shadowy organization whose focus was in pushing the boundaries of science and whose very existence was like that of the "Illuminati," in that, it was widely accepted that it existed, however, no one could prove it.

He'd heard of the Illuminati before, but not Nexus. Regarding the former, he'd heard whispers of its existence when he traveled in certain circles, always spoken of in hushed tones by those who knew someone that knew someone. The Illuminati was the powers behind the world's throne who took their orders directly from Satan himself.

While Nexus may have embraced the Illuminati's shadowy business model, its true purpose was more akin to that of DARPA. Reportedly, they ventured into the outer reaches of quantum theory, artificial intelligence, and temporal mechanics. The Nexus, as it were, positioned themselves as the 'guardians of temporal integrity,' wielding the power to shape and preserve the timeline, guiding history in the direction they believed most advantageous to their cause. Had he never heard of Mobius, he would have just chalked their mission statement to 'delusions of

grandeur'. But now, he wondered just how much they did have a hand in rewriting history.

Twenty stories below ground and a few days after Michael's discovery of Nexus, Evelyn and Michael suspected something more sinister was afoot. All of the time manipulations thus far, have been miniscule and targeting times where nothing of seeming significance occurred. And while yes, it did result in the Mandela Effect making minor changes to things like whether or not it was Looney Tunes, and not Toons, or that the Fruit of the Loom logo never contained a cornucopia, what was the point? These things were inconsequential to things like national security or global geopolitics. Their consensus was, that whoever this Nexus group was, didn't seem interested in trying to change history for the sake of changing history. They were changing history so no one could ever trust history. So far, it was enough to cause the minor Mandela Effect to blossom into a full-blown conspiracy theory that was growing by the tens of thousands every single week. Moreover, there was something else just below the surface that was bothering Evelyn and she hadn't been able to put her finger on it until just now; Why does time itself seem to be fracturing? Why would reality feel so... mutable?

By her own rights, Evelyn, was a brilliant physicist that routinely danced on the edge between genius and madness. She sat back and dug through her memory banks for anything related to time travel. She then recalled a memory she'd had years earlier. It was at a 2015 holiday party CERN put on for its employees, and she'd met a researcher whose genius appeared to mirror her own. He said he'd been working on a device he called the "Chrono-Anchor." It was crude, cobbled together from parts salvaged from old CERN projects and theoretical blueprints he'd found buried in classified archives. The Chrono-Anchor wasn't just a detector—he had said "it was a lifeline, designed to tether its users to a single point in time, allowing them to traverse the currents of reality without being swept away by them."

At the time, it didn't make any sense to her. Being an attractive blonde female in a world full of nerdy scientists, she was used to ogles and unwarranted attention she got, especially at holiday functions like this. She didn't give it much thought since he appeared more than a little tipsy from the egg-nogg he was drinking. At the end of it, she just remembered thinking this was his own nerdy way of trying to impress her.

But now, given all they've witnessed and experienced, she wondered if this Chrono-Anchor was related somehow. She also knew they would eventually have to set out and find the Nexus and put an end to the manipulation. She glanced back at

the picture on her phone, and with a dawning horror, realized, this Detrick fellow, was that guy from the holiday function so many years ago.

She remembered him having less hair back then, and no glasses. But the facial structure was the same. She stared at the picture some more. Maybe he's wearing a toupee, or joined a hair club for men, but he definitely had thinning hairline back then.

Marcus leaned over and said in a hushed tone, "old flame, is he?"

"Hardly. But we have met before. I was just taking note of the physical changes he's made. The hair, the glasses, I didn't recognize him at first."

"We've got to figure out a way to pull him aside and question him, without involving any law enforcement or CERN leadership. If this Nexus is an organization, they probably have top-down support. Furthermore, a shadowy organization is shadowy for a reason. We not only know who is in it, but we don't really know who can trust at this point."

"Give me a few hours to finish here. I'll come topside, change, and come to you," she said. "Keep an eye on him till I get there."

Chapter 5: The Dream

Detrick didn't normally take afternoon naps, but he'd been working 48 hours straight and he was beyond exhausted. He laid down on the couch and thought about the current state of affairs. He couldn't imagine how he'd lucked into working for Nexus. His device, the Chrono-Anchor had been just the device they were looking for. He would be one of the precious few who would survive what was coming. Nevertheless, the tenets of the Nexus Initiative were compelling enough to accrue a large, semi anonymous cadre of incredibly wealthy benefactors. Between that and a select number of corporate and government intelligence agencies, Nexus had nearly unlimited resources and unlimited technological access.

On the surface, Nexus' mission was simple: they sought to save the world by creating a new world order. The plan was to manipulate events in the past so that

technological advancement slowed down...way down, and if possible, return to an earlier age when the human population was only 300 million. They would have to target specific moments in time to fundamentally alter man's technological progression. At that population, the optimal target was somewhere between the fourth and fifth century AD. Their plan was to completely rewrite human history so things would be continually, un-invented. Thus, their ideal world would be one free from communism, capitalism, NATO, Russia, the United States, wars, pandemics, social media, and all the other complexities that modernity had introduced in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Unlike the hyperbolic dystopian movies Hollywood often portrayed, Nexus wanted the anticlimax ending. Rather, they wanted to postpone the apocalypse altogether. The inner circle of Nexus, however, had much more ambitious plans. They intended to go back in time, around the year 2,000 BC. By combining four thousand years of hindsight and with all the technology and knowledge they would ever need, the inner circle would quickly rise up and dominate the planet. Being made up some of the most powerful and wealthy people alive today, they not only intended to live and rule for centuries; they intended to rule as gods.

According to the Nexus Initiatives, should their plan with Mobius and the Chrono-Anchor fail, Plan B was the blunt hammer to Plan A's samurai sword. Plan B was the World Economic Forum's (WEF) "Great Reset" currently scheduled for 2030. The Great Reset wasn't just about reorienting the world's orbit away from an American world order, but an apocalyptic cyber-attack that would force-reset the world the hard way.

This is why his Plan A had to work. He knew the WEF's plan to reset civilization wasn't enough to simply go back to the Dark Ages. They needed a new reality where things like the Crusades, the Plague, World War 2, the atomic bomb, the Internet weren't part of the human equation as well so as to avoid throwing shade on their future. They needed a world where these things had never happened to prevent mankind from quickly rebuilding on this previous knowledge.

Detrick closed his eyes and drifted into a dream.

In his dream, he imagined a world stripped of technology—a world he longed for despite having built his life around the digital realm. Technology, once his passion, had become a chain, tightening evermore as humanity's dependence on it grew. Detrick, once one of the world's top hackers by the early 2000s, had mastered the art of coding and hacking. But after his public conviction in 2016, followed by a surprisingly lenient sentence that reduced his charges to a misdemeanor, everything

changed. Nexus had approached him with an offer—one he later discovered came with strings attached, as they had been the ones to secure his reduced sentence.

In his dream, Detrick saw cities abandoned, overtaken by nature. The absence of the digital age was striking. Skyscrapers still stood tall, but they were now silent megaliths, relics of a forgotten era. In this new world, information was scarce, communication was slow, and societies evolved in strange yet predictable ways. Tribalism was the new norm, where anyone who didn't resemble the local tribe was deemed an outsider.

He stood there looking out over the now rewilded city. The cool air felt refreshing, but the silence was unsettling, requiring time to adjust. It was hard to imagine a city like Geneva or Paris, becoming overgrown and mostly deserted, but that was the plan.

Detrick envisioned himself finding a stunningly beautiful and intelligent woman, gathering his stash of weapons, gold, supplies, and setting sail on a yacht to a picturesque island in the Mediterranean. There, he would savor this new world he had helped create.

That was the plan, at least. His Plan C.

But the knocking at the door caused him to wake prematurely. He sat up, groggy.

He had not been expecting any guests, so the guest had come unannounced.

Checking his door camera through a phone app, he saw the attractive blonde at the door and found his curiosity piqued.

He got up and checked his other cameras and took note that he didn't see any other people, or strange vehicles in the parking around his apartment.

Opening the door but leaving the chain still attached, he peeked out and said "Kann ich Ihnen helfen?"

"Oh hello," she responded with a British accent. "I'm looking for a Detrick Hafner. Are you he?"

Chapter 6: The Reunion

Detrick hesitated for a moment; his instincts sharpened by years of paranoia. His eyes scanned the hallway behind her, searching for any hidden threats. She looked harmless enough, but appearances could be deceiving. Finally, he unlatched the chain and opened the door slightly wider.

“I am,” he replied cautiously. “And who might you be?”

The woman offered a warm smile, but there was a glint of something sharp in her eyes—intelligence, perhaps, or maybe something more dangerous.

“My name is Evelyn,” she said smoothly. “I’m a physicist with CERN. I believe we’ve met before, although it was some years ago. I’ve come to talk about an old project of yours, something you called the ‘Chrono-Anchor.’ May I come in?”

Detrick’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the Chrono-Anchor. How did she know about that? He had been so careful, so meticulous in covering his tracks. But the fact that she was here, standing at his door, meant she had uncovered more than he anticipated. He had no choice but to hear her out.

He opened the door fully and stepped aside, gesturing for her to enter. “Kommen Sie bitte herein,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “We have much to discuss.”

Evelyn stepped inside, her eyes quickly taking in her surroundings. The apartment was sparsely furnished, with just the essentials—a small table, a couch, and several computer monitors lined up against the far wall, displaying complex streams of data that she couldn’t make sense of. The room had the feel of a place occupied more by machinery than by a person.

Detrick led her to the small table and gestured for her to sit. “What exactly do you want to know about the Chrono-Anchor?” he asked, sitting down across from her, his fingers drumming nervously on the tabletop.

Evelyn leaned forward; her expression serious. “I want to know everything. I want to know how it works, why you built it, and most importantly, what Nexus plans to do with it.”

Detrick’s eyes narrowed. “Nexus?” he repeated. “So, what do you think you know about them?”

She nodded. “We’ve been tracing their activities for some time now. The time shifts, the alterations in reality—they all seem to be connected to what you’ve built. If what I suspect is true, then Nexus is using the Chrono-Anchor to manipulate time itself, to rewrite history even. And from what I’ve uncovered thus far, which includes your IP Address, their plans are far more dangerous than anyone could have imagined.”

Detrick leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. He had known that the Nexus Initiative was ambitious, but even he hadn’t fully grasped the scope of their intentions at first. Now, since he’s gotten wise to what their real plans were, he seemed to be expressing buyer’s remorse. He wanted his plans of the yacht, the island, and the woman to come through, but he wasn’t on board with all of what they wanted to do. The future of the entire world now seemed to hang in the balance of what he does next.

“Alright,” he said slowly. “I’ll tell you everything I know. But you have to understand, this isn’t just about changing a few details in history. What Nexus is planning will alter the course of humanity forever.”

Chapter 7: The Forgotten

Evelyn’s impromptu meeting with Detrick several days earlier was mind boggling. She still wasn’t sure what to think about the information Detrick offered her. On one hand, it seemed like delusions of grandeur, that a group like Nexus could actually think they could rewrite history and fundamentally transform the future. On the other hand, there was Mobius and what it already can do. She leaned back on her worn leather chair, scrolling absentmindedly through the news feed on her tablet while she was trying to process all of it. All of a sudden, the world felt loud, chaotic, filled with half-baked theories and conspiracy chatter. Ever since her discovery of Mobius, she had begun diving into the more obscure corners of the web, where stories that most people ignored seemed to brew quietly, only noticed by those paying attention. That’s where she first saw it—the article that seemed too bizarre to ignore.

“Soviet Cosmonauts Awakened from Cryo Sleep in 2024—No Memory of 9/11, Bush Presidency, or Putin.”

Evelyn’s heart skipped. She clicked on the headline, her fingers moving faster than her thought. The story unraveled before her eyes, accompanied by grainy

photos of two middle-aged men in Soviet-era spacesuits, their expressions a strange mix of confusion and bewilderment. The article's first line was enough to anchor her in place:

"In a scientific experiment thought long abandoned, two Russian cosmonauts, Alexei Voronin and Mikhail Kuznetsov, who entered cryogenic sleep in November 2001, have been awakened in 2024. But something is wrong—the men claim not to remember the world we remember!"

Evelyn's fingers trembled slightly as she continued reading. Voronin and Kuznetsov had been part of an ambitious Russian cryogenics project—a program kept secret even from many of their superiors—that aimed to assess long-term cryo sleep in preparation for deep space exploration. The Cold War had ended, but old dreams of comic greatness lingered. The experiment began on a remote research base, the kind of place that vanished from official records when the Soviet Union collapsed. The project, abandoned amid political turmoil, was forgotten until a group of researchers stumbled upon the cryo pods during a clean-up operation.

She scrolled down further. The men had been successfully revived but were in a state of shock. More unsettling than their physical recovery was their mental disorientation. When questioned about what major events they remembered before going under, the men listed off major world events, but did not mention the attacks on the USA on September 11, 2001. When probed about 9/11, the cosmonauts stared blankly. The World Trade Center attacks? No recollection. George W. Bush? Never heard of him. Vladimir Putin? The name meant nothing to them.

Evelyn paused. This was more than just cryogenic memory loss—this was a gaping void where history should have been. The article went on to explain that while the cosmonauts recognized the world of the late 1990s, their memories seemed to diverge from reality starting in early 2001. It was as if they had stepped into a timeline that no longer existed, one in which those global milestones never took place. They claimed that when they went into cryo sleep, the geopolitical landscape was entirely different—no signs of a George W. Bush presidency, no war on terror, no looming figure named Putin rising in the Russian political sphere.

Her breath hitched as she re-read the section on their memories. The two cosmonauts talked about a world on the edge of breakthrough peace talks between the U.S. and Russia in early 2001, led by a different set of leaders. The article closed with a comment from a bewildered Russian government official who noted the "impossibility" of their claims.

Evelyn leaned back in her chair, her mind spinning. What if this wasn't a simple case of cryo-induced amnesia? She could not shake the feeling that there was something deeper at play, something that rang with the disorienting familiarity of the stories she had been uncovering in her research—the so-called "Mandela Effect."

Had Voronin and Kuznetsov been victims of a reality shift? The possibility seemed too wild to believe, yet here it was, staring her in the face. If their memories were somehow tied to an alternate timeline, it raised terrifying questions about the nature of time, memory, and reality itself.

Evelyn's hands hovered over the keyboard. She had to find out more and share with Michael and Marcus upon their meeting later that night.

Chapter 8: The Details

The next day, Evelyn met up with Detrick again to continue their conversation. The two of them talked for hours going over the details of Nexus's plans. Detrick explained how the Chrono-Anchor, in conjunction with Mobius, was designed to tether its user to a specific point in time, allowing them to traverse through alternate realities without losing their grip on the original timeline. But Nexus had pushed the device far beyond its original intent, using it to subtly rewrite history, making small changes that would ripple out and affect the entire world.

"Their public goal," Detrick reiterated, "is to erase the advancements of the modern age, to force humanity back into a simpler time—one without technology, without the complexities of modern society. They believe that by doing so, they can prevent future catastrophes, wars, pandemics, even the eventual collapse of civilization. But their secret plan—they do not just want to reset the world. They mean to rule it."

Evelyn listened intently, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. Nexus's true objective was not just to manipulate time; it was to shape it to their will, to create a world where they could reign supreme, free from the constraints of the past or the future.

She showed him the article on the Russian cosmonauts and asked if Nexus had any involvement. Detrick wasn't sure, but it seemed like their work. But it would be next to impossible to prove that 9/11 was not supposed to happen in their original timeline.

“We have to stop them,” she said, her voice resolute. “Whatever it takes, we can’t let them succeed.”

Detrick nodded, but his expression was grim. “It won’t be easy,” he warned. “Nexus has resources beyond anything you can imagine. And they will not hesitate to eliminate anyone who stands in their way.”

Evelyn met his gaze, determination burning in her eyes. “Then we’ll need to outthink them,” she said. “We will need to be one step ahead at every turn. Because if we fail, there won’t be any reality left to save.”

Dr. Marcus Reed had been pursuing a much different path. While Evelyn was working out what Detrick’s connection to all this was, and Michael, Evelyn’s journalist buddy, turned his attention to creating the necessary ‘whistleblower’ channels once they did blow this story wide open, he focused on all the potential outcomes.

According to Detrick, preserving this present world was not their goal. Each time they activated the Chrono-Anchor, the fabric of the universe tore a little more each time weakening the overall cohesiveness of our known reality.

The second certainty they encountered was far darker. If Nexus could create an alternate timeline, their goal of setting themselves up as gods, would most certainly doom humanity. Without a doubt, they would establish some version of global governance, always being one step ahead of their contemporaries by ‘cheating’ as it were. They would not be limited to the technology of their day if they brought back to the fifth century things like drones or satellites. They could know everything that was going on in the world, thus, dominating it and not allowing the natural course of events to unfold. So it wasn’t that they didn’t want to de-modernize the world for everyone, just for everyone but themselves.

Imagining that they had developed some sort of anti-aging technologies, they could theoretically live for 150-250 years. Best case scenario, by the eighth century, the original Nexus leaders would have all died out (if they didn’t manipulate time again). It could be assumed that at some point, this technological advantage they possessed would fall apart as they would not have the logistical infrastructure to keep it going indefinitely. Even still, they would have to either pass on the use of said technology to the next generation, or figure out a way to replenish the fuel, parts, and service to ensure their reign remained unimpeded.

But in the fifth century, the largest populations were not those in civilized areas, but uncivilized areas. The barbarians, the Vikings, the natives in the far reaches of the map...these would be the uncontrolled populations they would have to contend with. However, if they had consolidated all the world populations under a single authoritarian system, then parsed out to regional kingships, they could stretch it out a little more perhaps.

He looked around his office. The world of today was quickly heading toward a dystopian nightmare of surveillance, where every action was monitored and controlled. That is with only a century of advanced technology under their belt. Imagine, a millennium with advanced technologies? Imagine a world where Genghis Khan had machine guns. Where Napoleon Bonaparte had satellite feeds and Google maps. Adolph Hitler had access to nuclear tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. If mankind had managed to get us to this dystopian state from 1945 to present, imagine if we introduced those technologies in the fifth century?

Chapter 9: The Breakthrough

Michael paced the dimly lit room, papers spread across the table, each one bearing names, locations, and coded references that had taken all his contacts weeks to unearth. Evelyn sat across from him, her eyes flickering with a mix of anxiety and determination. Detrick leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, silently absorbing every word Michael said.

"I've got it," Michael said, his voice breaking the tense silence. "Nexus meets at an underground facility in Brussels. It is not far from the EU Parliament building. I traced a series of security clearances and found a pattern—each time Nexus used the Chrono-Anchor and Mobius, high-level officials in the area would take sudden, unannounced 'vacations.' Some of them reappeared weeks later with no record of where they had been."

Evelyn leaned forward. "Brussels? That close to the EU Parliament?"

Michael nodded. "It's the perfect cover. They are right under the nose of one of the most powerful governmental bodies in the world. I found names—leaders, scientists, even military contractors tied to this. They have been quietly pulling strings, making subtle shifts in global policy for years. All under the guise of 'progress.'"

Detrick stepped forward; his voice measured. "If Nexus is there, then we know where to hit them. But it will not be easy. This is not just some basement lab. They have built a fortress underground, with layers of security designed to keep anyone—governments, hackers, whistleblowers—from ever getting in."

Evelyn's mind raced. "So, what's our way in?"

Michael hesitated, then pulled up a map on his tablet. "There is a maintenance tunnel that runs beneath the parliament building. It is old, barely used, but it connects directly to the Nexus facility. We will need someone on the inside to give us access."

"And who would that be?" Detrick asked, his tone skeptical.

Michael's fingers hovered over the screen as he revealed the last piece of his discovery. "I managed to make contact with someone. A security contractor—someone who is worked for Nexus but, like you, has grown increasingly disillusioned with their methods. They know what Nexus is really trying to do, and they are willing to help us get in."

Evelyn's eyes widened. "They're willing to betray Nexus?"

"More like they've seen the writing on the wall," Michael said. "They know that if Nexus succeeds in their plan to rewrite history, they won't be part of the new world order. It's self-preservation."

Detrick nodded slowly, weighing the risks. "And this person, we can trust them?"

"We trusted you, didn't we?" Evelyn asked.

Michael hesitated briefly. "Trust? I don't know if that's the right word. But they want out, and we're their best shot at survival."

Evelyn looked at the map, tracing the lines of the tunnel system. "Then that's our way in. We find this tunnel, get in, and shut Nexus down from the inside. We stop them from using the Chrono-Anchor again."

Detrick leaned in closer. "It's risky. Once we're inside, there's no turning back. If they catch us, there's no telling what they'll do."

Evelyn met his gaze, her voice steady. "We have no choice. If we don't act, there won't be a reality left to save."

Chapter 10: The Conclusion

Evelyn's heart pounded as she moved silently through the darkened tunnel beneath Brussels. The air was damp, cold, and the sound of their footsteps echoed through the narrow passage. Michael led the way, his flashlight beam cutting through the darkness, while Detrick brought up the rear, scanning the shadows for any signs of danger. Their contact, the disillusioned security contractor, had provided the codes they needed to bypass the initial checkpoints, but they knew the deeper they went, the more perilous it would become.

They reached the final door. Beyond it lay Nexus's core facility—the place where the Chrono-Anchor was supposed to be housed and where reality itself could be rewritten with the push of a button. Evelyn's palms were sweaty as she entered the access code, her breath held until the lock clicked open.

Inside, the room was starkly modern, in contrast to the ancient tunnels they had just traversed. The walls were lined with screens displaying timelines—fractured moments in history that had been altered or were on the brink of being rewritten. At the center of the room stood the Chrono-Anchor, its sleek, metallic form glowing faintly with an eerie blue light.

Detrick's eyes widened with familiarity. "This is it."

Michael quickly moved to the control console, his fingers flying across the keys as he searched for a way to disable the machine. "There has to be a kill switch," he muttered, frustration growing as he scrolled through layer after layer of encrypted code.

"We don't have time," Evelyn whispered urgently. "You said Nexus could activate this remotely correct? If that's the case, Nexus could activate it at any moment."

Suddenly, the room filled with the sound of footsteps—heavy, deliberate. Evelyn spun around just as a door opened on the far side of the room. Three figures entered, each wearing dark, tactical gear. At their center stood a tall man with piercing eyes, his presence commanding the room.

"Dr. Marcus Reed," the man said calmly. "I expected you might come, but I didn't think you'd be foolish enough to bring friends."

Detrick stepped forward, recognizing the man instantly. "Vasili..."

Vasili smirked. "Ah, the traitor returns. I should have known you would side with them. You never had the stomach for the future we're building."

Evelyn's mind raced. She could not let them take control of the situation. "You're destroying reality," she said, her voice steady but firm. "You're playing God, rewriting history for your own gain."

Vasili's expression hardened. "We are reshaping it for the greater good. Humanity's future is in our hands now, and with the Chrono-Anchor, we can eliminate every mistake, every war, every catastrophe before it ever happens."

"You mean create a world where you rule," Michael shot back, his fingers still working at the console.

Vasili took a step closer, his voice cold. "The world needs order. The chaos of democracy, free will—it is all led to ruin. With us in control, history will be perfected. You seek to stop us. But you cannot comprehend the necessity of our work. Without us, the apocalypse would come and the end of humanity, all that he has achieved, would be for nothing."

"So, this isn't about ruling as gods? You do not want the end to come, is that it? Is that why you've been destabilizing our timeline?" Evelyn demanded; her voice strong despite the fear gnawing at her. "You're playing with our lives, with our memories, with everything we know!"

"We are not playing," Vasili responded. "We are ensuring survival. Every shift, every alteration, is a correction—a necessary adjustment to prevent catastrophe."

Before anyone could react, Vasili did two things. He clicked something discretely on his watch, and then he showily reached for a remote on his belt. Evelyn lunged forward in an unexpected flash, knocking the remote from his hand. Just as she did, she was tackled by one of his guards who brought her to the ground. Vasili picked it up and held the device forward to activate something, but again had it knocked out of his hands by an iPad Marcus threw like a disc at him. It shattered this time as it hit the floor. Detrick and Michael scrambled to pull the guards off Evelyn, but a fight ensued. Scientist versus guards, as it turns out, was not a fair fight.

Evelyn's heart pounded as she crawled toward the fallen remote. Her fingers closed around it, just as Vasili's hand clamped down on her wrist.

"Don't," he growled.

But Evelyn's eyes were filled with fire. "You don't get to decide the future."

With one last effort, she smashed the remote against the floor. A sharp crack echoed through the room as the lights on the Chrono-Anchor began to flicker and die. The machine whirred to a stop.

Vasili's face twisted with fury, as if his control over time was slipping from his grasp. With the Chrono-Anchor's remote destroyed, he could do nothing now.

Michael had taken one of the pistols that had fallen from the guard's holster and held it up shakily at the three. "All of you, need to back up. Toss that other pistol over here, butt first." The other guard complied, albeit, not entirely sure that Michael the journalist had the stones to actually pull the trigger. Just as he was contemplating it, Michael cocked the hammer back.

Evelyn stood, breathing heavily, as the weight of what they had done settled over her. They had stopped Nexus—for now. But the future still held many uncertainties for her liking as she walked over and shoved the Chrono-Anchor off its mantel and watched as it too smashed into the stone floor.

Detrick placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's over."

Evelyn nodded; her gaze still fixed on the dormant Chrono-Anchor. "For now."

"We need to call the police," she said, still heaving.

"Yes, call them. We will have you arrested for trespassing," Vasili added with a smirk. "What evidence do you have? Time slips? The Mandela Effect? I do not think those will hold up in any court."

"No, but I have your own words," she said revealing a small voice recorder. "We will let that speak for itself."

"What about Mobius?" Michael asked.

"I took care of that myself before we came here," Marcus added. "Good luck trying to repair that thing."

"Have we saved the world then?" Detrick asked with a half-smile.

"For now," Evelyn replied. "For now."

Déjà vu washed over Evelyn in a tidal wave leaving her in a mild form of shock.

After a minute, Evelyn blinked, staring blankly at her computer screen. The office around her buzzed with the low hum of productivity—phones ringing, keys clacking, muted conversations. She glanced at the logo on her monitor: "Grayson & Stein LLP." A law firm.

Her firm.

She shook her head, a strange emptiness settling in. This didn't feel right. She couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't supposed to be here even though it felt so utterly familiar. She paused and closed her eyes trying her best to draw on her powerful photographic memory to find the truth of her puzzlement. After a few minutes, and despite her best efforts to plumb the depths of her iron-clad vaulted memory, she found nothing. She thought for a moment she could catch the glimpse of something, but it was like a polaroid picture that was caught in a powerful wind gust flying away from her.

She needed answers, if only to validate or dispel the gnawing perplexity that clung to her like a splinter in the brain.

She wasn't entirely certain, but there was something about that fleeting image—a vague impression of herself in a white lab coat. The picture was so brief, like a snapshot glimpsed through a closing door, vanishing into the abyss of empty thought before she could hold onto it.

Was she supposed to be—what? A scientist? The notion hovered at the edge of her consciousness, flickering like a distant memory, tantalizing yet unreachable. Evelyn closed her eyes, willing herself to remember, but her mind was a haze, the answers slipping further out of reach.

"You okay, Evelyn?" a voice asked. She turned to see a coworker peering at her from the next cubicle.

"Yeah," she murmured, forcing a smile. "Just... zoning out."

The coworker chuckled and returned to their work. Evelyn stared at her screen, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. A single thought whispered in her mind, faint but persistent: *This isn't who I'm supposed to be.*

Far away, in the crystal-clear waters of the Mediterranean, Vasili stirred from unconsciousness and found himself reclined on the deck of a luxury yacht, basking in the serenity of what had to have been a mid-afternoon nap. Before he even

opened his eyes to drink in the view, the gentle sway of the yacht, the warmth of the sun on his face, and the tang of salt in the air brought a satisfied smile to his lips.

He opened his eyes to the bluish-tinted reality whose colors and clarity was so clear; he immediately shaded his view and allowed his vision to adjust. As he did, he noticed the sun dancing on the waves as the vessel carved a path toward a destination precious few even knew existed; a secluded and private island off the coast of the island of Gavdos, Greece—Nexus's carefully prepared sanctuary.

A chilled bottle of champagne sat beside him, its condensation pooling on the deck. He poured himself a glass, savoring the crisp taste as he gazed out over the endless blue horizon.

The world they left behind was crumbling—fractured timelines, destabilized realities, meddling scientists. The last part had been an unexpected inconvenience, but it hadn't mattered in the end. Fate, it seemed, had smiled upon their cause.

As the horizon stretched before him, Vasili reflected on what lay ahead. Civilization, burdened by its own chaos, had collapsed in the far distant future. He was now in the year 586 Anno Domini and would meet the other members of Nexus who had coordinated their arrivals to meet here first to assess their new world just about to enter into what had been in the old timeline, the Dark Ages.

With the pre-staged technology, and their impregnable fortress that would keep either the invader or the accidental tourist at bay for another 1,500 years, Nexus would rise—a new order born of precision and power. Armed with centuries of foresight, they would shape humanity's destiny as they lived like gods among men.

He raised his glass to the horizon, his smile sharp and unyielding. The future was his.