Chapter 1

The grease and grime of the machine coat my fingers and palms, streaking all the way down to my wrists, my maintenance gloves long forgotten. With parts as fine as the ones I work with, the gloves just get in the way sometimes. I adjust the gear in my right hand, maneuvering it back into its rightful place, sandwiched between two others. This machine in particular has always had an issue with this gear... Might be time to send it back to the manufacturer.

With the gear back in place, I withdraw my hand and pick up a rag to wipe it. The microfiber can only do so much. The oil stains my hands many shades darker still, but it will have to do. I straighten back up and close the machine's panel with my boot before walking over to the command console on the other side. I tap the screen to boot it up.

"Welcome to TempoTaxi" appears on the screen, followed by "Brought to you by Chrono Industries".

"Yeah, yeah, hurry up," I mutter . God, I wish they would make a way for maintenance to bypass these screens for our test boots. I've probably spent more than a full day's worth going through these screens in the past five years I've been working on these fucking things.

Finally, it boots up into the menu. I use muscle memory to navigate to the administrator login and type in my credentials, followed by a scan of my authorization card. I clip the card back onto my lanyard when it finishes the read. With a few more seconds, it brings up options for test runs. I set the machine to run through a set of times and places, the standard protocol. Then, I step in.

I've done this a thousand times by now. You'd think I consider myself lucky.

I don't.

I lean back into the padding, positioning my head comfortably. I place my hands in scanners as the door closes automatically, a soft whir and click that to me is simply white noise. The visor lowers over my eyes, the invisible lasers scanning and reading like they have many times before. The lights in the machine dim to a calm blue as a soft voice emanates through hidden speakers. "TempoTaxi administrator test commencing. Welcome, Technician Harrison Alcott. Your first destination is [Yorktown, New York, October 14th, 1781 at 1830 hours]. Is this correct?"

"Yes," I say to the disembodied voice. I wish Chrono had given her a name.

"Preparing destination. Your jump time is set for 10 minutes. Confirm when ready for jump."

I take a deep breath. I don't need to. It's just habit each and every time. "Confirm ready."

For the thousandth time in my life, my body feels like it's being pulled back like a rubber band about to snap, my mind slingshotting ahead. The closest theoretical thing I can compare it to is spaghettification due to a black hole's gravitational pull. This is what I imagine that feels like. The sheer inertia is incomprehensible. I feel like I'm moving faster than the speed of light and not moving at all at the same time. Even with closed eyes, I see every color that any human could ever comprehend and then some. I'm reminded of a species of shrimp that has more photo receptors than humans. Maybe this is what they see. A kaleidoscope of every possible permutation of photons.

And then it all stops. The colors rapidly fade away, and sounds slowly fade in. Yells, gunfire, and screams of pain and panic. It's all familiar. The Battle of Yorktown has been a go-to test destination for the past 2 years.

I open my eyes to the same sight I've grown to always expect. A true battlefield, and I'm in the middle of it. The men in red coats and blue fire shots and skewer foes on bayonets. They flow around me like they are the river and I am a stone. Their atoms adjust to the intrusion without even acknowledging a change. I don't pretend to know how it works. I tried listening to one of the physicists explain once. They lost me about five minutes in. All I know is three things:

1. The machines are expensive as hell to run.
2. Jumping for more than a few hours at a time is dangerous.
3. You can't alter any timelines.

And that's all I need to know.

I wander through the throng of soldiers, making twists and turns different from the ones I've made before just to spice things up. Not that anything really changes. All the faces blend together at the end of the day. Some of them seem to blur even now with my lack of concentration. I take my time like I'm taking a stroll in the park, not that anyone really does that nowadays. The oil lanterns hung around the battle glow softly, too softly for such a grisly scene. Some would say picking this jump spot is sadistic, with all the blood and gore. But hey, at least it's interesting.

I walk around the rest of the time, trying to pick out any of the well known soldiers in the battle. I hear someone call out the name "Lafayette," but that's as close as I get before my digital watch goes off and my consciousness is ripped back to the present. I catch my breath quickly, having been through that sensation many times before.

The machine speaks again. "`Welcome back, Harrison Alcott. Your next destination is [Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963 at 1500 hours]. Is this correct?`"

"Yes," I say again. Then I murmur to myself, "This is a new one, hopefully I got the time right..."

I confirm my jump the same way I did the first. 10 minutes. There and back. The machine whirs to life again and my body is spaghettified once more. This time, I hear chanting rather than shouts and screams. This is a battle field of an entirely different kind.

Next to me, a loud voice trumpets over all others, calling out, "Until we are equal, we are not free!"

I look at the source of the voice to find a young black woman, a scarf around her head and a sign held high with one hand, the other stretched down to hold the hand of a child, no more than 8 years old. All at once, the weight of the time I have jumped to weighs heavily on me. How can it not? I think back to my history classes, my Wikipedia deep dives, my internet searches to sate my curiosity. I know how dire the 1960s were. But it's a whole other thing to feel it.

I start my little walking tour through the throng of people, hearing one chant after another, calls for equality, calls for freedom, calls for *justice*. They echo so loud my eardrums ache. But as I make my way to the front of the crowd, the cheers quiet, and I can feel all eyes looking forward, waiting, expecting. And up to the podium walks a man I've seen in many photos. Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. steps up to the microphone right as my watch beeps once more. "Timing was off..." I muse to myself. And just as he opens his mouth to speak, my body is pulled away from the moment.

"Welcome back, Harrison Alcott. Your next destination—"

"Confirm," I say before she can even finish. I flex my hands, the knuckles cracking silently, releasing tension. I notice there's still grease stained in the swirls of my fingerprints. Then the fingerprints seem far away as my mind and body are stretched apart and away to the next jump point.

This time, I'm transported to New York on September 11th, 2001. Morbid, but historical. My next destination is Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Des Moines, Iowa on January 20th, 1982. With this one, I confirm that the bat Ozzy bit was in fact real. And lastly, the Progressive Field in Cleveland on November 2nd, 2016. Go Cubs!

"Welcome back, Harrison Alcott. Administrator test is complete. TempoTaxi fully calibrated."

I take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar air of the workshop. I stand up on my toes, swing my arms around, and crack my neck, working off the stress the machine puts on the body. After stretching out, I step off the machine's platform and check my watch once again. Heart rate is within my normal range. My O2 saturation is holding at 98%. I am truly the epitome of health.