

Prologue

FEW KNEW WHAT IT MIGHT FEEL LIKE to make a time jump. Those time explorers who possibly survived were either unable to return or simply chose not to report their location, preferring not to be found. They were simply labeled as WTR'S...waiting to return. However, there would be little incentive to return from an unsuccessful mission to a failing society on the brink of extinction.

The risk of traveling through time would have its rewards they were told, but secretly those time travelers also held onto the hope that they would escape to a more successful, advanced civilization.

At the beginning of the time travel experiments, there were few human volunteers since negative rumors had been spread regarding the many unsuccessful dog trials. However, there were a number of volunteers from a more expendable community.

“We’ve made all the necessary changes to the program. Experimentation is all part of an ongoing process.” So they were told.

Today would be different. The equipment and procedures first initiated in the dog trials were much improved, and scientists had experienced some successes. Most of the time, the test dogs had returned from other

dimensions, but then again, those results were often suspect, blurred within the haze of scientific reporting.

There was definitely an urgency to make this very critical journey. Gripland needed the volunteer explorers to bring back answers or any discoveries that might help save their civilization from premature aging.

When the first human trials began, scientists were not able to calculate the probability of success. They had naturally assumed that the volunteers who disappeared were alive somewhere in time but merely failed to return.

It was more likely that the explorers were lost in time. That would be the most hopeful conclusion. Of course, substantial rewards for success were promised to the *volunteers* if and when they ever returned and reported their findings.

The *Gripland Eye of Time Exploration Team* waited anxiously in the laboratory antechamber to enter the time capsule. The four female and six male team members quickly exchanged furtive glances, attempting to allay their fears by monitoring one another for any hopeful facial expressions.

"There is nothing to fear or worry about." They had been assured. "You will simply experience a smooth and seamless transition as if you are moving into a dream."

The exploratory team's training had been rigorous, but brief. Volunteers were hard to come by, especially those with the type of qualifications that could provide all the various scientific services needed at their destination.

Each team member had successfully passed a barrage of mental and physical tests and completed a thorough, basic course in survival tactics designed to increase their ability to

succeed. In reality, these tests were programmed by Gripp High Command to weed out all those who were prone to weakness or uncontrolled fear.

But there was extreme fear festering in the ten volunteers who were reflecting back on their lives as they entered the foreboding glass and steel time capsule, filled with a labyrinth of twisting wires wrapped around a multitude of the odd-shaped, metallic, and plastic components.

Six shadowy figures, dressed in white lab coats, silently motioned for them to sit with their backs against a blue transparent cylinder. The well-trained, expressionless attendants methodically strapped the ten team members into padded chairs and cross-checked their helmets and breathing gear. There would be no turning back now.

Adrenalin released by fear pulsed through them as they attempted to exchange reassuring glances with one another, but that was impossible since they were locked in place. Within moments, they would be experiencing another reality, so they were told.

Their minds were racing, reviewing all the various details of their training as if that knowledge alone could or would somehow enable them to survive the time jump.

A moment later, the door to the time capsule slammed shut, and a heavy concussion of air echoed and reverberated throughout the chamber.

Outside the capsule, lab technicians carefully observed the streaming data on their various instrument panels, monitoring for signs of excessive stress from the team members and for any possible abnormalities with the

functioning of the highly sensitive, magnetic core contained within the blue cylinder.

A robotic, female voice announced, "Prepare for departure. Breathe deeply. Prepare for departure! You must now control your breathing. Count to four on the in-breath and four again on the out-breath."

Team Captain, Grist #1, took a long deep breath as his mind drifted off to the possibility of his redemption by completing a successful mission. The probability of sudden death would not deter him from the opportunity of clearing his name and reputation as a successful Gripp General.

Unbridled fear coursed through the veins of each team member as extreme pressure built up within the cabin. A powerful vibrational force passed through them as the magnetic core was charged to its full capacity.

Within seconds, a high-pitched, whirring sound enveloped the entire chamber. A shock wave from the powerful magnetic field pulsed through their bodies.

And then...there was nothing!

PART ONE

Eye of Time Exploration Team

A COOL FOG DRIFTED SLOWLY between the stately, evergreen trees in the dense, forest glen that was filled to overflowing with a variety of herbs, flowers, and vines. A large flock of white birds flew effortlessly overhead, unaware of an unusual figure lying partially buried in the tall, wheat-colored grass.

His disheveled and torn gray uniform with black buttons on his jacket bordered a thin, dark gray stripe from collar to waist where a heavy, black, utility belt weighted him down. On his lapels, two gold emblems depicting interlocking G's sparkled when sunlight peaked through the clouds.

He struggled to sit up, removing his helmet emblazoned with the white lettering, G5, and wiped his forehead, trying to gather his thoughts. His hairline had receded over the many stress-filled years when he was calculating and planning complicated engineering projects.

Stare, the engineer, was tall, thin and agile with a long, angular face, tight lips and small, dark gray eyes that displayed little or no emotion, giving him the appearance of being extremely serious and austere.

Everyone called him "Stare" since he often stared off into the distance or looked up at the sky or down at the ground, never engaging in direct eye-to-eye contact. Others did not comprehend that when they asked him questions, the words became catalysts for a variety of mental images.

He was always searching for ways to describe what he was visualizing, and as such, he usually talked in circles while seeking the elusive answers that were still floating through his mind.

Stare loved technology and problem-solving and found himself studying engineering in school. Grippland was always running low on energy since consumption far outpaced supply. Opportunities became available in the construction of power plants, and he grasped at the chance for personal recognition and advancement.

Everything was working well in his life until he was told to change the calculations on one of the largest facilities. He had considered refusing to make the changes and to report the unethical request, but that would be far too risky. He would lose his job; but more importantly, he was going to be paid tens of thousands of Grippars (dollars) to follow orders. Obviously, "Orders are Orders!" Wasn't that a Prime Directive for a successful Gripp World?

He thought it was well worth the risk. His bosses only wanted a small change, just a simple manipulation of a few numbers that would make the construction cheaper and

quicker. That's what they said. "Everything will work out just fine. Grippland needs the energy now, not later."

His prison sentence was longer and harsher than others who had committed similar crimes. How could he possibly have known that by changing a few minor calculations so much could go wrong? Rather...did go wrong!

At the moment, Stare couldn't remember much of the process that had brought him to be among those chosen for the *Eye of Time Exploration Team*. He did know that when time travel research had begun again in earnest, team participants were being selected not from any official research subjects or the scientific community. They came from a more expendable group—those who were considered dangerous to society and a menace to *Gripp Supreme Command*.

Among the members of this unique fraternity of renegades were prisoners who had been convicted of crimes, real or imagined. Since High Command had taken control, the criminal code was greatly expanded, and it was difficult to know what was not against the law.

It was true that there were some among them who had made mistakes and were true opportunists—those notorious for gaining power through exaggerating the truth or neglecting it all together. But Gripp law held to a simple premise: "Always obey or be imprisoned."

However, there were other options available to avoid a life in prison. Scientists were always requesting volunteers, most especially those who would work in the highly classified and experimental *Eye of Time Project*.

While many *non-adaptables* had escaped to the mountains, no one ever returned to tell the tale, since everything beyond

the steel and concrete borders of Gripland was reported to be radioactive for thousands of years. So they were told.

The most expedient way to escape prison was through the *Window of Time*. Those who were fortunate enough to return alive and were not mangled by the process of Time Travel were promised pardons as well as the opportunity to establish a new identity.

To be chosen with the slim possibility of survival was considered *The Prize*. Indeed, those volunteers numbered One through Ten were criminals, but as members of the Exploration Team, they were also potential heroes for a civilization desperately clinging to life.

No one knew why the Grippls were aging faster than usual, only that something dramatic had taken place. There seemed to be no apparent solution. The young had demanded answers amid their constant chanting of “Un-old-age! We want Un-old-age!” At first, the “Law Givers” chose to ignore the demonstrations, but soon they reacted with repression followed by intense and enforced suppression.

High Command then passed laws against forbidden thoughts, and a short while later, the first official *Word Museum* was established to lock away all personal expression.

Words such as *Wishes, Dreams, Aspirations, Beauty, and Joy* were all considered treasonous to the overall survival and “Greater Order of Gripland” (The *Greater Good* was now called the *Greater Order for Greater Control* by High Command). Most inspiring, hopeful words were labeled ephemeral—words that were without substance or order.

They became *Forbidden Words* to be placed within the *Word Museum*. After a while, no one knew why those forbidden

words were treasonous, only that they were. They were considered unacceptable concepts from another time. *Duty*, *Obedience*, *Obligation*, and *Sacrifice* now replaced words expressing personal desires.

Few citizens ever questioned the establishment of the *Word Museum*. To object would obviously mean going to trial, and a prosecution guaranteed that you would be declared guilty since everyone was considered to be guilty until proven un-guilty, which was nearly impossible.

Grippland's basic charter stated that everyone was guilty of something. It was only through the passing of time that their lack of innocence would ultimately be revealed.

Suddenly, Stare was gasping for breath. His oxygen tube was twisted, and he quickly turned on his side, surprised to feel his hands touching a lush, plant-covered ground. With some effort, he staggered to his feet.

According to landing procedures, he carefully unlocked his breathing apparatus and tested the air while holding the oxygen mask near his face so that he could quickly put it on again if necessary. He let out a sigh of relief. Luckily, the atmosphere was breathable.

"Where am I?" he wondered out loud. He took another deep breath and then gasped at the rush of so much oxygen filling his lungs. The air was fresh and clean, carrying with it the scent of herbs and fragrant flowers.

Images from the past flooded through his mind as he remembered seeing pictures and reading about plants and herbs. That was before the government confiscated those rare books and soon after most of the plant life had died off due to atmospheric pollution.

Stare pulled a small, synthetic, round block from his survival gear, and with a few clicks of a metal rod, a fire began to crackle. He warmed his hands while gazing into the fire and realized that he was finally free of Grippland. He had survived. He was alive, which was all that mattered. The glowing warmth of the fire was comforting, and in a few moments, he fell into a deep sleep.