

CHAPTER 1: HOLD THE LINE

The Washington Post
July 12th, 2013
Martin Luther King Jr., 84, dies

Arnold Beckman glanced over the headline and made an uninterested attempt to skim over the article. His eyes just concerned themselves with the relevant details; of King's recent heart troubles, how he died in his sleep when the organ eventually failed him. Then examining his past where he was a key figure of the civil rights movement, narrowly avoiding assassination, disappearing from public life when news of his affair came to light, and then re-emerging at the turn of the century to champion the rights of immigrants that earned him a second Nobel peace prize. His loose definition of reading was brought to an end when the article prompted him to continue reading on another part of the paper, Beckman not having enough interest to follow. So, he thumbed over to the sports page to see how the Dodgers did yesterday. Terribly, would be the optimal word.

Cursing his hometown team, only furthered his deliberations on if he was in the worst timeline. This itself was interrupted by a loud ringing. The sound echoed through the bar and into the back office where Beckman was admittedly being shiftless. Being in

hiding meant much of Beckman's life had to be analog, hence the news on actual paper and zero security cameras. Front door security was literally defined as a bell that chimed whenever someone entered.

It was the middle of the day, and the sound came as a slight surprise. He startled in his chair and put down the newspaper to look at his watch. He was expecting someone, but they were early. Not a problem, just unusual. His appointment wasn't the kind of person to be punctual, much less ahead of schedule. Beckman started to worry that this was a prelude to something sinister and was cautious as he proceeded towards the front.

The human mind fills in unknown gaps with preconceived notions and probable postulations. It's a fault, but people can't expunge their evolutionary leftovers. This caused Beckman to continue to assume that the bell was the delivery guy. Not a delivery of drink or food, but more of the illicit kind. The real reason his customers kept coming back. Regardless of legality, deliveries were handled in much the same way. It was just something Beckman had to do under the cover of mid-afternoon. Everything else was a simple exchange of currency for goods.

When Beckman emerged into the bar proper, there was no one standing there waiting for him. At least no one he saw. He glanced around, thinking his drug dealer might have gotten bored, and wandered off. Beckman sighed, wondering what was going on. He didn't have much time to ponder the situation though, because he felt cold steel brush up behind his ear. Freezing his stance and what was left of his life.

Beckman's breathing halted and his eyes went wide as the adrenaline-driven fear kicked in. He felt sweat instantly form on his brow and his mouth ran dry as time seemed to slow down, his brain flooding with activity. His mind, almost instantly, examined through the entirety of his life to figure out who was behind him, pointing a gun to his head. Beyond something completely random, like a common thief, he could only conclude one real answer.

"Snyder?" Beckman asked with a deep sense that his past had finally caught up with him.

There was no response. Not that Beckman expected one. Snyder, if it was him, didn't speak much. If anything, the silence only further confirmed Beckman's suspicions. The man most

likely Snyder simply tapped the gun against Beckman's head, directing him to a pair of bar stools.

While sitting down, it was then that Beckman finally turned around and faced the intruder. The man that towered over Beckman was indeed Jonathan Snyder. Even though it had been about five years since their last encounter, Snyder appeared to have not aged a day since. Beckman suspected five years might not have passed from Snyder's perspective, or maybe the assassin simply aged well. In either case, it wasn't a face Beckman would have forgotten any time soon. Someone with a base need to appear machismo would have been easier to omit from memory. Snyder, on the other hand, was too cold for defined expressions. A man not of pride, but of unyielding purpose. Beckman learned at a young age that those of an uncompromising nature was dangerous. What made Snyder stand out in Beckman's mind was that he somehow managed to use his focus and discipline to take that danger to a whole new level.

"Where is it?" Snyder asked without any further context. He kept the gun trained on Beckman, who sat just as still, knowing he couldn't run or fight his way out of this.

"Where's what?" Beckman asked, unable to help but to insert a cheeky tone to the question.

Snyder gave no appearance of amusement, leaving Beckman to debate if he was even capable of the emotion. Snyder only lowered his brow. They both knew what Snyder was asking about. The glare was a reminder not to test him. It was the wisest advice Beckman could follow at the moment. However, there was a question that he refused to die not knowing the answer to.

"Tell me just one thing. How did you find me?" Beckman asked.

Snyder took the moment to survey the room, adding a look of disgust on his face. Even though Beckman was responsible for the bar, it was obvious why Snyder had such an expression. The bar Beckman was hiding in was poorly lit, badly stained, and reeked of things most people didn't want to know the origin of. The place was such a shithole that it was actually hurting the aesthetic by being empty. A crowd would have made the depressing nature of the establishment far less noticeable. Beckman had little pride in himself, and it showed in the lack of effort he put into simple

operating costs. Relying mostly on drugs and empty promises to attract the city's lost youths. Youths being the only thing Beckman currently found enticing.

"I just had to follow the putrid smell of your perversions," Snyder answered, his voice an octave higher than his usual coldness, betraying a hint of anger.

Beckman slammed his hand on the bar and let out a short but hefty laugh. The reality of his situation becoming more undeniable, giving him a strange peace of mind to know his fate. Like most people, he didn't want to die. And, just like those people, he didn't have a say in the matter. People think they fear death because of some evolutionary-driven instinct to survive, but that isn't entirely the case. People fear the unknown. Spending most of their days unaware of the time and manner of their death. Beckman's comfort came from the fact that his future wasn't unknown to him any longer.

"You know what you Variants all have in common?" Beckman asked rhetorically. He then paused for a moment. Not because he was waiting for an answer, but because he had to swipe a pint of sweat from his forehead. The rest of his body wasn't taking the news of impending death as well as his mind was.

"You're all pretentious pricks," he continued. "You think just because you're unique, and that you don't have a multiverse full of doppelgangers floating around, that it makes you special."

Snyder didn't react to the tirade, which frustrated Beckman. The good news was that Beckman knew Snyder only cared about the mission and he could say pretty much anything without regret. The bad news was that Beckman had seen the results of Snyder's impatience before. It wasn't going to be pleasant if it happened to run out.

"Two weeks from now, you get arrested," Snyder said, answering the initial question. "There were photos, fingerprints. It was only a matter of time before Nicholas found you. You should have hidden in your own time, maybe somewhere that had one of your doppelgangers. It would have been more difficult to track you that way."

Even though this conversation was taking place in 2013, Beckman was born in 2050. And he knew Snyder was born even later than that. Beckman wasn't sure when exactly, just far enough

in the future to consider even his time to be backward and primitive. Further adding to Beckman's assumptions about Variant's pretentious nature.

"Now, I answered your question," Snyder said, getting back on topic. "So, where is it?"

"It wasn't any good to me," Beckman said, avoiding direct eye contact. "I sold it to a tech firm—"

Snyder was considered a large man in any time period, regardless of how evolution shaped humans throughout the centuries. With the added physical demands of chasing people like Beckman to ground, he was even considered robust. The thing most didn't know was how fast Snyder was despite his size. Beckman didn't even notice the fist rising until he felt the impact against the bridge of his nose. He could hear the crack echo inside his head as bone broke. During the next few moments, Beckman wasn't sure what happened. The next thing he knew for sure was that he had slid backward off the stool and was tasting his own blood.

Snyder grabbed Beckman by the neck and held him against the nearby wall. Beckman was reminded of the gun as it pressed hard against one of his lower ribs. The hand on his throat squeezed, Snyder's thumb pressing down on his trachea. Air was no longer reaching his lungs. Beckman felt the membrane in his throat on the verge of tearing in two.

"I know you still have it," Snyder said. Despite the heated exchange, his voice hadn't increased in aggression and was still as dispassionate as it had always been. Which was worse, not better. "The police find it when they arrest you, but the report wasn't detailed enough to list where it was hidden. Else I would have just taken it and killed you. Now, where is it?"

Beckman knew talking wouldn't save him. Then again, neither would staying quiet. He had an up-close view of Snyder's eyes, observing them in the back and forth motion of complex thought. Snyder was clearly going over his options. Interrogating Beckman was just the easiest method and had the highest probability of success. If that didn't work, Beckman figured Snyder would just kill him and search for the object. The only question reaching Beckman's mind was how much Snyder would make it hurt before he would try another way.

Beckman would have sighed in resignation if his windpipe wasn't currently being crushed. He lowered his eyes and made a hand gesture. He was pointing below his collar, at an object under his shirt. Snyder picked up on the hint and removed the hand from Beckman's throat. While Beckman was busy catching his last breaths, Snyder reached under Beckman's shirt and pulled at the object bound by a cheap necklace. The material easily snapped, and the holodisk was now in Snyder's hand. He then took a few steps back and attempted to turn the device on.

"It's dead," Snyder commented.

"Yeah," Beckman was able to spit out despite the pain in his throat. He coughed up a little blood before continuing to speak. "It ran dry about a year ago. This godforsaken time period doesn't even have the rudimentary technology to charge the fucking thing. Couldn't even get rid of it because it might have been used to track me down. Even had to keep it on me so no one would steal it."

The holodisk, when it worked, would display several zettabytes of information. Simple hand gestures guided its user through a holographic menu of world events, scientific advances, or whatever it was programmed to store. In this case, it was mostly financial data. Beckman needed a means to support himself in his new life while stuck in the distant past. The chief problem being that he was still hampered by the fact of being in hiding. He couldn't become too successful or the people hunting him would take notice. He obtained the holodisk back when he still had a potential, but risky, plan to finally find his retirement in the top level of a ziggurat. The futuristic home for the supremely wealthy that serviced every need both necessary and perverse. It wasn't Beckman's plan to end up like this. It's just how things happened.

The weapon Snyder was using was an old M1911 handgun. Beckman had seen him carry it on almost every encounter they ever had together. There was always the thought of the gun having a sentimental attachment to Snyder. And maybe it did. There was also the thought of the weapon simply being old technology. That was the reason why retrieving the holodisk was so important to Snyder, and to the people he worked for. It was because the device was too advanced to be in this time. Not only was leaving advanced technology in the past problematic, but it was also a major violation of the treaty the Variants had with their rivals.

Even when he was young, Beckman was an opportunist. It's why he was always on a neutral footing between the time-traveling factions that surrounded him. Selling arms between them always made more sense to him rather than taking a side. The problem was the compulsive nature of an opportunist dictates that he had to take a chance and betray one side for the promise of a substantial reward. The conclusion to Beckman's life was that he never received that reward. All that nonsense about 'rolling the dice' didn't change the fact his recklessness got him killed. Beckman died five years ago when all his schemes failed him. Every decision since then was nothing more than a delaying tactic.

"You got what you wanted," Beckman said, his tone just above the point of pleading. "Can't you just leave me to die in this shithole?"

Snyder's only response was pulling the trigger and putting a .45 caliber slug into Beckman's abdomen. Beckman ground his teeth and he gripped the wound with his left hand as the force of the bullet shoved him against the wall. Blood flooded profusely over his hand as he slid down the wall and landed on the ground. He didn't even have the energy to sit up, he just simply rolled over on the floor like any wounded animal. Beckman instinctively pressed down on the bullet hole, but the pressure his hand generated wasn't going to be nearly enough to keep him from bleeding out.

Beckman tried to glance at his killer one last time as Snyder casually slid the holodisk into his pocket and stepped closer. Even with every ounce of pain Beckman had ever felt in his life accumulating into one moment of fear and anxiety, he was still able to deduce what was coming next. Snyder wouldn't leave him to simply bleed out on the cold floor. Beckman would take some time to die even though he was already beyond help. Still, there was the smallest of chances he could survive. Snyder would have to stay until Beckman expired.

Beckman never knew Snyder to be anything less than perfectly efficient. Probably because he was so extremely low on patience. The obvious conclusion being there was almost no chance Snyder would just stand there and wait. True to his nature, Snyder used his boot to roll Beckman over onto his back and pressed the heavy sole against Beckman's shoulder to keep him in place. Nothing of consequence occurred in the moment between this and the next.

No witless remarks or pleas for mercy. Just a soft inhale from Snyder as he aimed, and a rough exhale from Beckman as he writhed in pain. Another loud salvo echoed through the bar as Snyder fired a second shot right into Beckman's forehead.

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A vault is more than just a large fortified door. Its most important parts are the bits of broken stone that form a box and are reinforced by metal. Sometimes disguised, sometimes not, but always folded around all sides of whatever treasure is worthy enough to place into such an enclosure. Their protective nature is what all vaults have in common. That, and always having a firm lock. And locks, of course, need a key.

Michael Donovan was the only person with access to the lowest level of the Variant headquarters. Being director of intelligence for the Variant Army, it only seemed natural that he would be the only person with absolute security clearance, but the few others who knew about the vault always begged many questions. These mostly pertained to what was inside and to its purpose. Was it critical information? A weapon? The one thing Donovan was afraid of?

Strangely, it was all three. Many of the clues left behind in ominous conversations gave those trusted few a better understanding of the secret Donovan was keeping. Not enough to know everything, but enough to sympathize with his burdens, knowing it to be a task he refused to bear on anyone else. In part, this was for their safety. And, in a much larger part, he didn't trust anyone. Meaning only Donovan knew the whole truth.

His own security measures meant nothing that transmitted signals was allowed inside the vault. This portion of HQ was deep underground with the walls being thick, but any signal could get through to the surface if it were strong enough. He wasn't worried about casual means of communication like holowatches. The rule was more about Donovan not taking any chances. He did, however, install a small green indicator light on the vault's door. So, in the event that he let someone inside, they could tell him when they were ready to come out.

The light had never been used before, and Donovan's dwindling patience was causing him to stare at it, wondering if it might be broken. He dismissed the idea, knowing it to be ridiculous. He realized, deep down, that what was happening behind the door was

important and time-consuming. So much so that it was requested by both parties for him to remain outside the vault. He wasn't in a position to argue, so he complied. Donovan just wished he could be doing something else to pass the time. The situation left him stuck in place. He was the only key to the door after all.

Donovan's attention lit up along with the green light. His anticipation had become dull from its omnipresence but was suddenly alive again now that he could open the door. An action he wasted no time with. The lock was smart enough to know who was commanding it and there were various types of scanners to make sure of its accuracy. A simple gesture with his right hand was all it took to relay the order. There were, of course, backup means of opening the door in case of a systems failure, but that was another secret Donovan kept to himself.

The door echoed through the hallway as its gears moved and grated against each other. It was a solid slab of good old-fashioned concrete, behaving and sounding much like the entrance to some ancient god-king's tomb. An analogy not terribly far from the truth. When Donovan ordered the vault's construction, he wasn't sure if the design was deliberate or subconscious. He didn't think he had a taste, much less the stomach, for irony.

Donovan maintained a strong constitution to most things that made the average uneasy, he had to in order to successfully be director, but even he had trouble staying in the vault for long periods. There was a sense of dread he could never quite put his finger on. His Catholic upbringing garnered him the ability to visualize his emotions in the form of biblical stories. Being in the vault always reminded him of the story of Daniel and the lion's den, just with a different ending. So, he surmised that the person inside was eager to exit the vault, and probably the entire building as well.

Donovan watched as Emily Meyer stepped out of the vault. If she had any feelings of anxiety, Donovan didn't notice them. If anything, she seemed rather gleeful. Her cheeks were rosy and there was a smirk on her face. She seemed to be thinking outrageous and joyful thoughts at the same time. Donovan had been outside the vault for so long, he had forgotten that Meyer was a doctor and a scientist. Discovery, regardless of its extremes, was always going to be a pleasant experience for her.

“*Erstaunlich*,” Meyer said to herself as she exited the vault.

All anyone had to do to tell Meyer was German was to stay quiet long enough for her to speak. She had the typical blonde hair and blue eyes, but her skin was olive, reflecting the altered demographics of her homeland and timeline. The language, and subsequent accent, however, hadn’t altered in any corner of spacetime. She spoke fluent English during most of her waking hours, but those who are multilingual still think in their native tongue. Burdened with always having to translate themselves before speaking. Donovan noticed she tended to speak in German when she was upset, or when the context was obvious.

Donovan glanced inside the vault, the various types of equipment inside, and then back at the doctor. “Report,” he said, getting straight to business.

“Do you want the short version, or do you want all the intricate medical details?” Meyer asked, being a little catty at Donovan for his constant directness.

“You already know the answer to that,” Donovan answered in his usual fashion.

“She’s dying,” Dr. Meyer said candidly. “She’s dying very very slowly. She has been for a while now.”

Donovan started to rub his temple before speaking again, “How long do we have? Months? Weeks?”

“Days.”

“Crap,” Donovan said, half dropping the ‘r’ and his short-a pronunciation was so loud it echoed. Normally, he was careful enough to avoid the non-rhotic dialect of his youth, but his current frustration let some of his Boston accent slip. For reasons that make sense to all who’ve ever had to conform to a society with better pay, Donovan had worked hard to hide his less than humble upbringing. It took him a year of practice just to pronounce Worcester correctly.

Donovan had worked with Meyer for a long time and was content showing his uneasiness in front of her. She was perhaps the one person in his life for whom openness wasn’t categorized as a weakness. Their relationship wasn’t romantic, neither had time for it, but there were those of high enough rank that teased the dynamic of their potential coupling. Even if Meyer were open to something more, Donovan would never approve. One part because

of the nature of their jobs. Also, because he had been the one who recruited her to begin with.

Donovan viewed his army, such as it was, like a toolbox. Recruiting people based on need. He had plenty of hammers, like Snyder, but he also needed a medic to bandage up a bad situation that became worse. The thing is, given the nature of their conflict, Donovan could only recruit other Variants. Finding Meyer wasn't easy, nor was convincing her to join their cause. It would have made an interesting story if Donovan had ever been one to tell stories. He wasn't the self-imposed mute Snyder was, but he never gave information unless he had to.

Even before temporal physics became a commonplace subject, everyone wanted to know what would happen if someone went back in time and killed Hitler. When the Graviton was discovered, time travel soon followed, and the ultimate form of premeditated murder was realized. It turned out, however, that the past couldn't be changed. At least, not in the sense people were hoping for. When someone bends time to the point that it has no choice but to alter billions of subsequent events, spacetime creates a paradox. A different past means a different future, and thus, there is no reason to travel back in time to kill Hitler if he dies before being given power by native aristocrats. And, that is where Michael met Emily, in an alternate timeline where Hitler never became a part of the history for others to repeat.

"Do you think the Archetypes know?" Meyer asked.

"I don't see how," Donovan replied, but then paused. Meyer was already in as deep as someone could go. Both literally and figuratively. It would be unfair to keep things from her now. "They have been making unusual moves as of late. It might be related, but they might just be trying to provoke us into a standup fight."

"Do you think they'll launch a preemptive strike?" Dr. Meyer asked, wincing as if concerned for her safety.

"—*I would if I were them,*" Donovan thought but didn't dare say it aloud. He left Dr. Meyer's question hanging in mid-conversation. He felt his face betray an expression of doubt, revealing to her a great deal of uncertainty.

"Scheiße," Dr. Meyer cursed.

When alternate universes became a manmade creation, Variants soon became a consequence. Tethers of cause and effect gradually

moved away from their fates and formed new pathways. The interactions that bound people together would sometimes avoid each other, creating the rarest of opportunities for a new life to form. A life that didn't exist in the way history intended. An entirely new breed of human was created in these alternate timelines, an alternate person from an alternate timeline, who was born out of the simple fact that someone thought it was a good idea to change history.

People like Donovan, Snyder, and Meyer quickly turned to an object of study. Exploration became classification. Classification became segregation. Segregation became condemnation. People from the original timeline started comparing Variants to weeds, viruses, or other unflattering terms, but, once the influence of mass consensus had its say, the label Variant became the norm in the divisive time travel community. Not that normalcy would help the harshness of the designation.

To add to the conflict, the increasing number of timelines became hazardous to the spacetime continuum. It seemed to have plenty of room for a handful of alternate realities, but space wasn't as infinite as some scientists had predicted. The more time breaks, the easier it is to break it. Soon after that first fracture, alternate timelines had their own separating paths, making the progress of time look like a poorly pruned shrub.

People from the original universe, often known as the base timeline, started organizing to stop the collapse of the newly formed multiverse. Since everything needs to be named, these originals were classified as Archetypes. This newly assembled force could go back and stop the break in time, causing the Variant timeline to cease to exist. Variants took issue with these actions because that would prevent them from ever being born. Hence the creation of the conflict. Hence the need for people like Donovan.

Dr. Meyer tapped Donovan on the shoulder, whose mind had drifted off for a moment. It was a habit of his, to lose focus on the now and think of dangerous futures. He was well aware of it but couldn't do much to stop it. Meyer just smiled at him, thinking the habit was endearing, but her face quickly became more serious. Donovan then knew their moment together had passed and it was time to get back to work. Meyer nodded her head towards the door, reminding him of his duty to go inside the vault.

Meyer then left, taking her charm with her.

Donovan signed as he entered the vault. It was not a wide room by any standard but was rather tall, about seven meters from floor to ceiling. Temperature control was a priority, so there was plenty of space for heat to rise. The room's only opening, besides the door, was the venting system in the ceiling. It was connected to a larger system that led to the surface, but Donovan had made sure the narrow passageway was not traversable by person nor drone.

Donovan sighed again as the system hadn't activated to his presence.

Despite all things Variant being under his field of command, the casket-looking device in front of him was the one thing not under his control. Sure, he thought about turning it off or destroying it, no matter that doing so would kill the person inside. The contraption he had kept secret was designed to maintain someone's life long after their time was up. The brain was still fully functioning, kept in a waking state while the body remained in preservation. A holographic display kept communications and sanity possible. The display was currently turned off by the patient. Donovan was accustomed to the delayed response, but that didn't mean it prevented the buildup of animosity. A lingering thought told him that she didn't want to speak to him either.

Among the few who knew about her, "she" has been called many things. Snyder called her "Little Briar Rose", which was some kind of fairy tale reference Donovan didn't get. Something to do with her intense hibernation. The other names, usually attempts at humor, came and went as the years passed, but Donovan didn't bother to remember any of them. After one-hundred-fifty years of her being on this Earth, the jokes about her weren't the only thing getting old.

Regardless of what people called her, no one really knew her true name. "Tuesday" had been her only official designation for as long as anyone alive could remember. Naming her after a day of the week might have started as a time travel joke, but no one ever seemed to laugh about it. Donovan had tried to get Nicholas to find out more, but all inquiries into the subject had failed. Still, it was probably for the best that no one had been able to find out her true identity. If her allies couldn't figure out who she was, then neither could her enemies.

The holographic display finally came to life as several small trails of light sprouted from its output. Millions of tiny particles weaved together to form a digital representation of a woman's face. It lacked enough detail to give a complete picture, but the pale white skin and soft auburn hair were easy to make out. The faded image was obviously too young to be the actual woman inside the hibernation chamber but was most likely constructed by Tuesday's mind to appear as she did in her prime.

"Donovan," Tuesday spoke with a voice as clear and young as the image she generated, the mouth of the hologram moving as it would on a human face. "I take it you have something to report."

"Yes, ma'am. Nicholas has no doubt told you about the recent Archetype movements—"

"Old business first," Tuesday interrupted. "What of Beckman?"

"We..." Donovan paused for a moment as he debated lying. Beckman seemed too low of a priority for her to take such an interest in, and it bothered him enough to extrapolate falsehoods until she revealed why this was so damn important. The crazy thing being that she always seemed to know when he did lie, so Donovan decided against it. "We found him this morning. I sent Snyder to finish things."

"Good," Tuesday stated. The face on the hologram seemed to look away over Donovan's shoulder, as if in deep thought. "Then I'll consider the matter closed. But while we're on the subject of Snyder, I have a task for him." The hologram now was gazing in a completely different direction and continued to drift upwards as she spoke, as if this conversation was the most mundane thing she could be doing right now. "Tell Nicholas you want to retrieve item 3-1-3-4-6. That will give you the information about a safety deposit box."

"An item pickup?" Donovan questioned the order, somewhat surprised. "Ma'am I have several newer agents who could use the experience on such a mission."

The head suddenly snapped around like a vicious snake, quickly approaching Donovan with aggressive intent. "The item is in the base timeline. Archetype territory," she explained, her voice getting louder. "I need someone who has proven he can handle himself if things get hmmm... upended."

The order was a violation of their tentative treaty with the Archetypes, but Donovan didn't bother reminding her of that. Meyer's diagnosis was clearly playing a role in her actions. It left Donovan with the sense the order might be an act of desperation. Then again, it might be the first step in a plan she had long kept in reserve. Donovan could only imagine how long death had been on her mind. He figured for at least as long as she had relied on a machine to pump life into her failing shell, which had been the case for the past few decades.

Tuesday leaned in slowly towards Donovan. The aggressiveness he could handle without complaint, the sharp changes in emotions being something he was used to. It might have been a result of her being boxed in alive at such an old age, or it might be how she's been all her life. If her knowledge and resources remained intact, Donovan could easily live with it regardless of the reason. But dismissing it didn't help Donovan from making his blood run cold.

Tuesday made one final comment before the light of the hologram abruptly vanished, "Follow your orders. Hold the line."

Donovan turned to leave the vault. Without hesitation, he gave the order to close and lock the heavy door. As it sealed shut, he was reminded of how valuable Tuesday was to the cause. She found the first Variants and brought them together. Taught them how to travel in time and between alternate universes. His predecessor had described her as prophetic, a woman of endless talent. There was always a subtle warning about her though, but nothing that could be expressed in words. Just the feeling that something was wrong, just not knowing what.

Donovan took a moment for himself before leaving, thinking about the nature of the vault. About how it kept this woman, and her knowledge, safe behind thick walls and dark secrets. Then he thought about how dangerous Tuesday would be out in the world. If she could have her youth back for just a moment, what kind of fate would fall upon Variants and Archetypes alike. Donovan would let the haunting thought die, but not before it produced a question he had no answer to.

When does a vault become a cage?

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Being around the military since a small child, Private Lamar was accustomed to checkpoints. He just hadn't expected them at

the entrance to Central Park. It kind of made sense given that the park was now a nature refuge covered in the most advanced dome this side of Mars, the local government banning anything that could hurt the rare plant life that existed within. Hindsight revealed it to be such a logical thing that Lamar lambasted himself for not thinking of it as he rushed over. Since being assigned to New York, he kept telling himself to take a day or two of leave and explore the city. Maybe then it would stop surprising him.

While standing in line, the man in front of him was pulled to the side. Lamar overheard something about a smoking apparatus. The man in question loudly countered it was harmless vapor, the guard saying it was banned no matter how many “conclusive studies” said otherwise. The guard physically using air quotes as she said it. Lamar was amused but lost interest as he was waved through the gate was no issue. The only bannable item that was on him was his sidearm. It was sealed inside a military-issued stealth pouch and couldn’t be detected by civilian scanners. He smiled a little as he entered the park, like a kid that just got away with a lie.

The only aspect of him that got a second glance was his clothes. His assignment was more than a little classified, so he wasn’t allowed to disclose he was military outside the mission’s headquarters. It wasn’t so much the civilian clothes that garnered the look, but rather the fact he was draped in jogging apparel. It was still early in the day and Lamar had been signaled during his morning exercise routine. The thing is, almost everyone in the city that exercised used an in-home system. A type of virtual reality technology that combines a health routine with all the comforts of home. Lamar had in fact been using one before duty called. Jogging in the park was by no means illegal, just odd.

Once completely through the gate, Lamar played his role and started running through the park at a medium pace. The sergeant on the other side of his commlink couldn’t give him a precise location on the target, given the nature of the dome, but was told about the general area. Once he came across a sizable group of old people playing chess, he knew he was on the right track.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lamar spotted the particular man he was looking for. He then slowed to a walk and approached the elderly chess player. Lamar wasn’t in a hurry to speak to the man,

but his assignment told him otherwise. Nothing was dangerous about this encounter; Lamar was just nervous.

The elderly man, who seemed to be minding his own business playing chess, was General Joseph Ellison. Government records say he is retired, but he still wielded a lot of power over Lamar's secretive assignment. It wasn't just the rank that intimidated Lamar, but also the fact Ellison was a veteran of the Unification War. The war hero status aside, Lamar had grown up on stories of augmented super-soldiers fighting to bring the world under one flag. Once the conflict was won, such augmentations were outlawed, but little could be done about those who were already changed. Over the years, many of those soldiers died of various means. Either through old age, illness that may or may not have been related to their augmentations, or just good old-fashioned suicide. General Ellison was not only a legend through those war stories, but he was also among the last of his kind.

Lamar stammered for a moment when he finally stepped beside the General. Ellison seemed to be in deep thought as he contemplated his next move, so it was unlikely Lamar would be noticed until he attracted attention. He opened his mouth to speak, but little was coming out.

"Something wrong Private Lamar?" Ellison asked, not even looking up from the chessboard.

"Sir?" Lamar asked, not sure how Ellison recognized him. They hadn't personally met. And, even if he had seen Lamar's file, Ellison wasn't even bothering to look up.

"Your location chip," Ellison said, referring to the transponder that is implanted in all members of the military. "I picked up your signal the moment you entered the dome. It's why I come here, the shielding blocks out most of the noise of the city. Though I should be impressed with how quickly you found me. I was hoping to win this game by the time you showed up."

The man Ellison was playing with chuckled. Lamar glanced down at the chessboard Ellison was so focused on. Even the most casual observer of chess could see that Ellison wasn't even close to winning, much less would have won by the time Lamar had arrived. Lamar surmised it was probably why Ellison was taking so long to make a move.

“Sir, I was sent by—,” Lamar started to say, but then looked at the casual observers and then wondered how much he could reveal. “Well, I was sent.”

“That much is obvious Private,” Ellison said, still not looking up. “What you should start with is why you were sent.”

“Something’s happened and headquarters couldn’t reach you.”

“Still with the obvious Private. Something is always happening. Be specific.”

Lamar swallowed before continuing, feeling like he wasn’t making a great first impression. There was also a feeling that he was being tooled with, the old having fun taunting the young. “Sir, there’s a Red Flag with your name on it.”

Red Flags were their way of keeping track of problems within the timelines, as a black book of people and events that were monitored through the use of a complex database. If the fate of something being tracked changed, then the system would alert them. If by chance Ellison’s name was attached to the flag, it meant the event or person in question was something he wanted to be personally notified about.

“Go ahead and say what you came here to say,” Ellison commented, more or less giving Lamar the okay to speak publicly of their affairs. “Whatever it is, saying it aloud isn’t going to destroy the world.”

“I don’t have any details,” Lamar continued, “but the incident refers to the death of someone named Arnold Beckman.”

Ellison finally looked up from the game and stared straight at Lamar, there was a shocked look on his face complete with wide eyes. After the news set in, he breathed out a heavy sigh as if regretting his previous choice of words and then stepped away from the chessboard. Not because he was finished with his move, but because the apparent chaos Lamar brought had made the game itself moot. Ellison turned over his king in surrender before walking away.

“Shit,” Ellison calmly said as he left the table. “It’s started.”