

## THE SOLID MEN

A Rick Rambler/Time Patrol Mystery

By: C.J. Henderson

“Those wanting wit affect gravity, and go by the name of solid men.”

John Dryden

“Zing, it was one when you knew how to nerker. Binkel. There was no denying it. You could feel it, tan side down--sharp.

“Wait a minute. Fuad.

--klik--

“Didn’t realize what time I was set for. I apologize. These things happen when you’re part of the Time Patrol. Of course, you don’t actually know what that means, do you?”

I knew at least one thing I’d said had gotten through to young mister Quentin Peasley of the wilds of New Jersey, 2010 thru 2069, survived at finality date by his not-yet path-crossed wife Jenna, and his still unborn children, Cedric and Marshall. There was not, indeed, in any way, shape or form, any possibility that he knew what I meant. They never know. They can never, ever get their hands around it. I mean it.

You simply can’t noggle a guy and come right out and say, “yes, that’s right, I’m a time cop. I move through the one-after-another seconds in all directions, across all the lines, watching for unauthorized activity of any nature. That would be like saying

something like, hey, I'm here because I know what's supposed to happen and am duly authorized to make sure it does, using any and all means to make certain absolutely nothing interferes with upper case 'P,' upper case 'C,' Proven Time."

No, it's just more trouble than it's worth. I mean, the first thing they all want you to do is explain Proven Time, as if anyone could. The accident that set man's sight on the One True Timeline from which all others spring was no blessing. Up until then people had been a lot happier. A whole lot. Saner, too. A lot of folks--and I'm one of them, let me tell you--feel that ol' Doc Wezleski ignored time travel when he discovered it because he could see straight away the kind of trouble it meant for all of us.

Anyway, the answer is "No." In the end it's always best to just give them some kind of story. Something like the one I fed Quentin after I'd gotten my Local Wordage Formatter crinkled to the right year.

"Forget all that," I suggested, giving the poor sap 'Knowing, Sincere Look #6,' one of my personal favorites. "I need your help for a few hours, if you wouldn't mind."

"What?"

Of course, he was half in the noggle-bag already. I swear if Central could just calibrate one decent LWF, the force wouldn't have a third of the problems we do with insertion.

"Here's the story, Quentin."

My hands checked over the rest of my equipment while I spoke, monitoring to see if any of it was over-heating (always a possibility), smoking (sometimes a possibility), or vibrating at a rate that might indicate an eminent implosion (sadly, a 1 in 95,000 possibility). For once, however, everything seemed to have survived insertion. I had arrived, unwarmed, non-smoking, and able to expect to live through the next eighteen seconds with relative security in the year of someone's Lord 2028, with two hours to spare before the next series of souls were scheduled to be stolen from somewhere nearby--parties undetermined.

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I had those one hundred and twenty minutes to ascertain the means of spatial energy theft, the vehicle of transfer, and the identity of the perpetrators before the Proven Time cosmic alignment was battered downward to a subcategory of semi-known, and mankind once more became on the whole a tree-swinging tool of fate rather than an upright, self-determining species.

“My name is Rick Rambler. I’d like, if I might, to tag along behind you for the next several hours.” No time to waste. “In fact, I’ll give you one thousand dollars to be where you are for the next,” quick eye scan of the chronometer, “next one hundred and ... counting ... eighteen minutes.”

Young mister Peasley did not seem enthused.

“Is one thousand dollars of current currency not worth that much these days? Doesn’t that buy quite a stack of goods?”

“I dunno,” answered Quentin, giving his best shot at getting with the program. “In like Africa, or um, what’s that’s messed-up sink-hole down south ...”

“Orlando?” I ventured.

“Mexico,” Quentin corrected me.

“So,” I said, pointing toward the ground, “here--what would be outrageously great pay for me following where you go and what you do for the next, ah, less than two hours?”

“For what?” Quentin looked around, trying to nonchalantly scout for an exit, “I mean, is this a gay thing or a psycho-killer thing?”

“Nothing of either sort,” I assured him. Spreading my hands before him, palms outward, I said, “I just have this hunch that whatever it is you’ve planned for the next two hours is where I want to be.” He couldn’t possibly pick up a bad vibration from me. I was telling him the absolute truth.

“No freaky business?”

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“What happens, where we go, et cetera,” I used the Class-A interaction tone, the one designed specifically for believability, “it’s all up to you.”

“Man, the thousand would’ve been good.” Quentin smiled, liked he’d figured something out and was going to be just ever so impressed with himself. “But you want somethin’, so I’ll take five thousand.”

I nodded, peeling twenty-five, what-appeared-to-me, and apparently to Quentin as well, hundred dollar bills from my currency log. Yeah, sharp move, kid.

“Half now, half later,” I told him.

Quentin smiled and pocketed the I-guess-it-was money after all. Actually, the little squarehead hadn’t made such a bad deal. If he lived through the next two hours, he’d get to keep the money. Oh yes, I mean all of it. Hell, I’ll give him the rest. It’s the least the Patrol can do for staking him out.

Not that the patrol had picked him in particular or arranged what was going to happen in one hundred sixteen minutes.

No, Quentin Peasley was fading from the PT stats, the record charts of Proven Time--PT--the one real time line from which all the multitudinous others are spawned. Certainly the idea had to be familiar--a billion, billion yous living a billion, billion different lives, each one just a little further removed from your own, each a single step off to the left or right, each one step closer to riches and love and security as you, but each just as easily one step closer to ruin and pain and sorrow to break the heart as well.

What had been found the day Dr. Wendel Q. Wezleski made the connection between steam-power and inter-dimensional travel was the absolute center of everything. What was found the day after when the Pelgimbly Center for the Advanced Sciences announced he had discovered time travel years earlier as well was the beginning of a nightmare. Humanity found itself existing in the one perfect time at the core of all existence, the one which dreamt all the others. No other dimension had discovered the ability to move sideways through reality. Only us.

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As an abstract idea, it was an interesting puzzle. But, as a reality, it became a tangible thing. And all tangible things can be exploited by the human mind.

Including time travel.

Plenty of others had found their way to the time travel door after Wezleski proved the wall wasn't solid, and accidentally went so far as to point out the doorknob. Sadly, when that happened, it soon became apparent that some of those crowding around this new knowledge were using it for no good end. And, where as it was one thing if they fouled up their own lives, it was another if their skipping across the centuries sent reverberations across the lines that affected all of us--affected, in other words, Prime Time, the one true dimension.

The one which, once found, had to be protected at all costs.

"Okay-aye, Sky King," said a cheerful Quentin. "You're the boss. Where to?"

"Wherever you want, Quent." I sighed. "Remember?"

Quentin scrunched up his face. Suddenly an unusually bright light came on behind his dull eyes. Its excitement suggested that young master potatohead still did not understand exactly what I was driving to get across.

"Look," I told him, finger in his face, drawing his vision from my eyes so I could scan the area, "don't worry about me. Don't think about me. I'm just another guy who happens to be wherever you are for the next one hundred and fifteen minutes. Whatever you were on your way to do, just go do it."

Quentin rolled his tongue around his pressed-closed lips for a handful of seconds while his brain tried to struggle past the moment of overload the presence of twenty-five hundred dollars could make in his life. It was an Unguarded Instant--one of the moments all Time Patrollers love, fear and hate.

Here comes the big concept, okay? The thing newbies have the hardest time wrapping their nut around. We know everything? Understand? Get it--do you dig? We know everything. Or at least, we can know everything.

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Wezleski gave us access to proven time. With chronal motion we can move up and down the one true timeline with greater ease than geese winging their way home for the winter. We can go anywhere, anytime--see anyone doing anything. We know about the aliens that watched us from 1687 to 2089, waiting to allow us to mature sufficiently to join the universal federation and how wonderful everything became once their technologies were introduced into our lives. We know what really happened to Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain and Yippie the Back-Flipping Dog. We know the last time you masturbated and whose picture you had in your hand.

But, when a TeePee interacts with the past, they end up instituting Unguarded Instants, moments in time that were never--could never have been--previously catalogued, because this was their first appearance. We're not actually supposed to let them happen, but since they can't be helped, officially we're supposed to keep them to a minimum.

I wasn't, under any circumstances, supposed to offer young Quentin a hundred dollars, or a thousand or any other amount of currency. But I did; after all, I had to do something. What was going to happen to him somewhere in the near future was going to be an unguarded instant, too--a godsdamned insanely cold-blooded one--the one I'd come back to prevent.

The Time Patrol was created to guard Proven Time. Any threat from one time period to events in another are met with the harshest punishments. There was a movie once, back when they made them still, that had a line in it that kind of sums up what we do. A guy holds out a pocket watch and says something like, "it's just a cheap piece of junk, but bury it in the desert for a thousand years and it becomes priceless."

If that were the extent of timecrime, I'm not certain anyone would even care. That's not the kind of stuff the Patrol was formed to stop. No, at the point in time from where the TeePee operates, everyone pretty much lives in that kind of happy spandex

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wonderful peace, complete with the tall, gleaming buildings. But even with everything they could want, some people aren't happy.

The ones I was after were using a power source called a Gravity Well to skim through the past and steal the souls from helpless folks in the past. Gravity Wells are the bio-mech centers of the big space cruisers, massive theory engines that actually "suppose" their way through space by thinking they're heavy enough to do what they do. They're fabulously heady devices, and full of tricks, which is what made this case so impossible.

First off, they're infinitely expensive. Not that many of them exist. Most are in the hands of the planetary government. Industry controls some, but they're heavily regulated. Back home, when the first person died in the past from having their soul removed to whom this was not supposed to happen, alarm bells rang from the end of time back to the Mesozoic.

This was big.

And, for those who don't know what I mean exactly by the word "soul," I'm talking about that weight allotment of energy and human static that exits the body at the time of death. It contains all the memories, emotional ticks and everything else that makes one bag of flesh, skin, blood and flatulence different and unique from the next one. They're part of a delicate mix in this universe, and when they don't get to where they're suppose to go, well ... I mean, gink me, that's just asking for trouble.

So, the Patrol took it pretty serious when someone started fishing for souls. It didn't take long to determine that a) it was being done by someone in our own time, that b) they were using a gravity well to do it, and that c) they didn't look as if they had any intention of stopping. In fact, if psychiatry is anything like an exact science, it was pretty definite they were going to be spreading murder up and down the time stream like liver snacks at a kennel.

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Oh yeah, murder. These souls weren't just disappearing before they were meant to move on--these people were dying years, decades, before they were supposed to. People living perfectly normal lives in the next dimension over--people like confused little Quentin Peasley--were being slaughtered by someone for reasons unknown in our own dimension. Our dimension.

Perfect Time.

It simply could not be allowed.

If it was, chaos was just around the corner.

Anyway, in not much more time, the Patrol would have its answer. With the first murder the pattern had been established. If the death had been an accidental tearing of the timewall, it would have been reported. Reporting such things immediately clears those responsible of almost all liability. As long as it was an accident, of course. After twenty-nine hours (don't ask me who picked that time span), if nothing has been reported, then the Patrol takes over.

With the second soul theft, murder was established and the weapon was identified. Knowing we were looking for something, we were able to be on site fast enough to capture the gravity well signature. We knew what was causing the deaths. That made it simple to triangulate who the next victim would be. I realize it doesn't sound simple to you, but then you're not TeePee.

Thus, with Quentin spotted, marked, identified and confirmed, we had our murderer staked. We knew where every gravity well in operation was in the entire galaxy. Agents were ready for insertion at every one of them when crimetype came. I was on hand merely to make certain Quentin was where I could shield him from death. It was a simple plan, and someone was going to go down for it in little over an hour.

It's good to enjoy your work.

For the next one hundred and ten minutes, my work was fairly okay. I tagged along while Quentin got himself a pizza, and then went "bowling." It was some sort of

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sporting event. I once had been told it was a kind of Zen thing, a competition organized around the idea of combining running, swinging and hurling the heaviest ball ever created for sports, all without breaking a sweat.

I've seen weirder.

The pizza was a thing manufactured far from the bowling stadium (well, whatever you call them). Made in incredible quantities all at one time, they were then frozen, stored, transported thousands of miles still frozen, stored again, and then finally reheated upon request with mind-singeingly powerful microwaves. The beauty of it made me wonder what my wife would have for dinner that night. The bowling was an interesting ballet, but not many of the participants that day seemed actual Zen masters. Perhaps I had been misinformed.

Whatever, as the time of Quentin's murder drew nearer, I readied my equipment. I had the shield projector which would protect him ready to go--had actually had it ready since the first moments we'd met, although I knew exactly when I would need it. The reflector could hold beam for up to five minutes. Far more time than would be needed. All in all, I was fairly relaxed. I knew as certainly as I knew the moon revolved around the Earth (at least until 2136) that one of our agents would have things under control in ten seconds or less.

And then it happened.

A curious white blur began to effect the reality there in the bowling stadium. To anyone uninformed, it would appear as a simple reflection. But I knew what it was, could smell the faint hint of ozone and boiled tar which meant gravity in play. I switched on my reflector and bathed Quentin in it.

"Hey," he shouted, feeling the light wrap around him protectively, clinging to his back, his neck and legs--everything. "What the ... hey!"

"Don't worry," I told him, watching the seconds tick off on my PTChronometer--four ... five ... six--"it'll all be over in a couple of seconds."

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"It, it," he groped for a moment, touching himself, touching the shielding, marveling without understanding, "... feels cool."

Yeah, I thought, just put up with it for a few more seconds, and then you can bowl your night away while I get home to see what's on the dinner table. I watched the PTC climb steadily--ten ... eleven ... twelve ...

"This is crazy, man."

I nodded, not taking my eyes off my chronometer, but having to agree with him nonetheless.

Nineteen ... twenty ... twenty-one ...

The light around Quentin was beginning to do more than simply reflect white.

Twenty-eight ... twenty-nine ... thirty ...

People were beginning to notice. Games were stopping. All about me, rented shoes were turning in our direction.

Forty-five ... forty-six ... forty-seven ...

"Hey, I feel, I, I dunno ... weird. Sick, kinda--"

He wasn't the only one. I had no instructions past keeping him alive with the reflector. I had been assured that absolutely nothing could go wrong.

Eighty-eight ... eighty-nine ... ninety ...

Not with a ten second job.

One hundred-five ... one hundred-six ...

Ten stinking seconds.

Quentin's face began to shrivel, sink in, its color dropping to ashen as if he were dying. As if the energy on his soul was beginning to be leached from his body.

One hundred-fifty-seven ... one hundred-fifty-eight ...

Tears began to form in his helpless eyes. He offered me my money back, clawing it from his pockets, bills spilling out across the polished wood of the stadium.

Two hundred nineteen ... two hundred twenty ...

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By this time people had gathered around to see what was happening. Their presence did not interrupt my beam's ability to defend Quentin, but they made it harder to concentrate, harder to keep the focus from beginning to dissipate.

Two hundred thirty-two ... Two hundred thirty-three ...

Instructions and questions rang in my earpiece. I did my best to both listen and answer. Watching Quentin's life slip away helplessly as the PTC continue to tick--

Three hundred fifteen ... Three hundred sixteen ...

"Gink-a-dink!" I cursed, not caring who heard. "You can't let this happen!"

My curse was wasted, because happen it did. Quentin shook, his arms trembling, teeth chattering. His life force was being torn away from him across decades, maybe centuries, there was no way to tell. His tears combined with the snot dripping from his nose to make his last words unintelligible. He fell across the gutter, his hands crumpling beneath his body. I stared at my useless equipment, burned out, searing the flesh of my hands. Then, I disappeared, recalled to TeePee Central.

\*   \*\*\*   \*

Of course, no one had any answers. Every single gravity well in existence had been monitored. Active or inactive, down to the ones that had been placed on courthouse lawns in little towns too new to have Civil War cannons, or Beverly Hills Holocaust souvenir kiosks, if they still had an outer shell and even half the parts necessary for operation, we had someone there. Just in case.

*Just in case--*

And it still hadn't been good enough.

Quentin Peasley, average, unformed, uncomprehending Quentin Peasley was dead. He would now never cross paths with Jenna. Their unborn Cedric and Marshall would remain that way. That meant pain and destruction smashing its way through Proven Time for decades forward from his death--coupled with the other murders, perhaps *centuries*.

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It had to be stopped. But, how did you stop something from happening that was impossible? That the murders were being committed with a gravity well was undeniable. It was proven fact. It had to be. But, as best anyone could tell, it was also a proven fact that every single gravity well ever built had been cleared of involvement.

And then a thought hit me. Perhaps my logic was faulty. Yes, unless there was a basic building block of science missing from our knowledge, Peasley and the others were murdered through the use of a gravity well. But ...

I radioed my thoughts to central while on my way to the garage. My request for extra rangers was met--ten TeePees were hauling weapons to vehicles when I arrived myself. Obviously my notion had been found to possess some merit. No one said anything about it to me and I didn't ask. I didn't care. All I wanted was to make certain no other Quentin Peasley's had to pay the price for our smugness.

On the way to our destination, I received Jehovah confirmation and my calibrator was unlocked all the way to 10. During the coming raid, I had been awarded supreme authority. I was acknowledged final judge, jury and executioner and no one could argue with me. I also couldn't be reprimanded later or penalized in any way for actions during the raid.

Of course, that didn't mean I could stop along the way and pay a hostile visit to the bully who made my life hellish in the seventh grade. But, those granting me my temporary powers knew that wasn't in the equation. I had been motivationally scanned before any decisions had been made. They knew my mental make-up of the moment. Those in power knew the only thing I cared about and gave me the means to obtain what I wanted.

When we reached the front gates of zVz, the guards denied us entry. I flashed my Jehovah badge. I did not bother to say anything. There was no need. Suddenly pale, their joints turning to the softest of putty, they waved us in as if welcoming the parents of

the bride to her wedding. One of our people stayed behind to make certain our arrival was not communicated to anyone inside.

Within two minutes we had reached the central meeting room of the board of directors for zVz. They were, arguably, among the most powerful human beings who had ever walked the face of the planet. Their fortunes were unthinkably large, their futures as vast and magnificently laid out before them as the stars of the heavens stretched out before any of the travelers using one of their gravity well-propelled ships to move out anywhere in the universe.

“And who are you people?”

Thomas Gadius Thorn, the single most powerful man who ever lived stared at from his perch arranged at the far end of a table so massive it struck one that there shouldn't be trees large enough for it to have been built. It would have to be a big and thick and powerful table, however, for in the center of it was the thing overlooked, the device not predicted.

“Rick Rambler, Time Patrol,” I said automatically. With hand gestures I moved my people around the room. Each of them moved behind a collection of board members and started to take readings. Letting my badge hang from around my neck, I kept my hands free as I told Thorn;

“You're under arrest.”

The thing in the center of the table, of course, was a gravity well. It had never dawned on anyone that a well would ever be built and then not registered. The only person capable of doing such a thing would be the head of zVz, and what could the reason be? To make illegal profits? Why would someone who would need to spend 18 trillion credital units a day for the next two centuries, just to go through what he had already stacked up in various vaults around the solar system need to steal any more?

“On what charges?”

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But such thinking had been painfully short sighted. And Quentin Peasley was just the most recent poor bastard who had paid the price of its limitations.

“Tampering with Proven Time.”

“Not murder?” Thorn’s voice was rasping, but giddy. The only emotion he seemed capable of showing then at the moment of his judgment was amusement.

“Murder was the means of your tampering. Perpetrated through means of an illegal device, an unregistered gravity well. Built, it can only be concluded, for the purpose of murder--”

“Oh no,” answered Thorn, his voice snickeringly self-assured. “Not built for murder. No profit in murder.”

All around the room, the men and women of the zVz board joined in with their lord and master, their sniggering noises making the great hall sound as if it were filled with rats. Rising from his place, Thorn made to walk the great length from his spot to mine. I motioned those agents under me to allow him passage.

“Solid Men do not need to stoop to such dull pastimes.”

“Solid men,” I asked.

“Indeed,” responded Thorn cheerfully. “My companions and I, we are The Solid Men of Society. We are the doers, the builders, the obtainers of fortunes, the makers of dreams. We are the backbone of progress. We are humanity’s most righteous citizens.”

Pointing to the gravity well in the center of the table, he paused to stare at it as he said;

“I know even a lesser individual such as yourself can recognize the breakthrough this device represents. The model G-9, 149 times, lighter, more compact, than the smallest well in production. That much smaller, and yet capable of doing at least half as much work as a full size model. Think of it, Mr. ahhh ... Mister ...”

“Rambler,” I reinforced him, adding, “so you admit that this is a functioning, unregistered gravity well?”

“Of course, and so much more. When Cardinelli reported what she hoped for it, that it could power vehicles beyond space, further than time, but sideways as well--we were, obviously, excited here.”

“Why was that, Mr. Thorn?”

“Please, Ranger Rambler. To no longer be dependent on Wezleski’s infernal love boats. No more need for undying romance between pilot and navigator ... to simply be able to hoist one’s anchor and power to whatever, wherever, whenever, however ... even you can grasp the enormity of that.”

He was right, of course. I could. As easily as anyone alive. It would have meant an unbelievable surge in the fortunes of zVz. So ...

“So,” he answered my unthought question, “why didn’t we? Register it? Release it? Turn it over to the profiteers of the world? Because, first we had to test it. And that was when we discovered it enormous side benefit.”

I simply stared, waiting for an explanation. Thorn shrugged, smiled at me, and then returned to explaining.

“Normal gravity wells are heavily shielded, of course, because of the mind-bogglingly dangerous amounts of lethal things going on within them. That shielding had been reasonably, we thought, reduced for this newer model. But, what no one realized is that those extra layers of shielding, as well as keeping so much from escaping the wells, was keeping something else from entering them.”

Thorn danced in a circle for a moment, laughing as he did so. Then suddenly he skidded to a halt, his face aimed in my direction, and saluted me. I waited a few seconds, after which he began laughing again, talking as he did so.

“The new wells are soul-collectors. They reach out and simply suck them free from people. Cardinelli turned it on, and instantly his life essence was drained from his body. The well was shut down by remote backup, but the damage had been done. And

then, the most wonderful thing was discovered. Those of us present, we became the beneficiaries of this tragedy.”

As he drew nearer, Thorn stared at me, something in his eyes letting me know he really cared if I understood.

“His soul, removed from his body before its time, not ready for rebirth, fled to the nearest flesh for safety. Our flesh. Can you imagine it, Mister ... Rambler, is it? Can you?”

Thorn had almost reached me at that point. I rested my hand on my side arm. He did not seem to notice. Perhaps he no longer understood the gesture. Feeling safe for one reason or another, the CEO continued on toward me, still jabbering.

“Human energy, Mr. Rambler, is but the building material of the soul. Not all people grow them. Children, animals, they do not possess them--they can't. For you see, the soul is created at that incredible, powerful moment which is the awakening of the thinking mind. Not the instinctive mind, the knee-jerk response levers which keep the knuckle-draggers moving forward, but the moment where the lizard brain actually stops worrying so much about what it will be chewing next, and finally, for a moment, begins to ponder.”

All around the table, the others were nodding, their eyes as filled with stars as Thorn's.

“The sharper the brain, the more incisive the thoughts, of course. Cardinelli's vast gray matter had charged his soul with a texture and taste beyond compare. He was ... delicious.”

I rocked a touch, my body staggered by what I had just heard. Yes, it had been an accident. They had been flooded with their companion's life force before they could react, but after the deed had been done, it had not been long, Thorn delighted in telling me, that they had decided to relive the moment.

“Have you ever had a creative thought, Mr. Rambler,” the CEO challenged me. “Have you? A truly creative thought? If you have, you know the thrill of that moment, the power you feel coursing through your every fiber. Think on that for a moment, and then, try if you can to comprehend what it feels like, to suddenly have every ounce of a person’s creative life flash through your system. Even a pimple like Peasley learned to tie his shoes, count to ten, tell green from yellow--it’s all creativity--”

The horror in the room finally hit me. The board of directors of zVz, the richest, most powerful group of people in the known universe, were drug addicts, and the drug they craved were human souls. Techno-vampires, they had thrown away all of society to perch above it.

I looked at the indicators on my Jehovah. If Thorn wanted me to have a creative thought, he was getting his wish. I suddenly pieced together that he had to know we were coming, or at least that we would come. He and his fellow ghouls had been waiting for us, determined to have it out with us then and there. Take us down while we were still blind to what was happening.

The CEO had already been intelligent. Now he was flooded with the best energies of five other people. Abruptly, I knew the power of the Jehovah calibrator would not be enough to contain that which was surging through Thorn’s body. He had crippled my resolve with knowledge, sneaking ever closer in through the defensive wall of distance to where he could nearly lay hands on me. Knowing I had only seconds, I kicked outward, catching the CEO off-guard, sending him crashing into the table as well as two of his fellows. As they spilled out of their chairs and went down in a tangle with their leader, I shouted;

“Slaughter! Keep them busy--I’ll be right back!”

As my people unlimbered their sidearms and blasted away at the surprisingly resilient directors, I thought orders for an emergency transfer and, thanks to my temporary calibration, was instantly granted my travel request. In the same instant I

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finished saying the word “back,” I reappeared within the wilds of New Jersey, specifically within the walls of the bowling stadium in which I had watched Peasley die.

Throwing a wall of cancellation over my former self and the crowd, I approached Peasley and screamed at him;

“You know you’re dying--right?” When he nodded, I shouted, “I can’t stop it, it’s already happened, but I can tell you why. If you don’t want anyone else to die this way--listen to me!”

And, as Peasley began to crumple, I gave him what I hoped would be an awakening moment. As quickly as I could, as simply, I revealed to him the secrets of time travel--that it existed, that it was real, and what it meant for all humanity.

As I disappeared once more, I watch the dying face of Quentin Peasley experience epiphany.

Then, just as fast as I had left, in the instant I disappeared, I reappeared as well. I actually felt myself leaving the spot in which I arrived, almost knocking myself over. My people were just pulling their blasters, were just pulling on the triggers I had watched them pull a moment earlier when I signalled them again to stand down. There was no longer any need. Thomas Thorn had told me how to stop them.

I had extrapolated, it true, but I’d been correct. After the rich taste of their scientist’s soul, they had turned their machine on hungering for more wonderful rushes like him. I don’t think they had found any. Thorn’s begrudging admission that even Peasley had had something to offer made me think--

What if his mind had held wonder?

What if he had been experiencing that rarest of human moments, an explosive instant of epiphany when they gobbled down his soul? I had hoped for something like the reaction any other kind of drug addict experiences when after many highly cut doses they were suddenly gifted with the pure stuff. Sure enough, Thorn and his fellows were all helpless with fascination, overwhelmed with their stolen moment of self-satisfaction.

Knowing it would not do to waste my hard-won advantage, I stepped to where Thorn still lie tangled with the others. Placing my foot upon his neck, I looked into his eyes, and said;

“I sentence you, Thomas Gadius Thorn, to death by disbursement. Your atoms will be scattered. Your fortunes will be forfeit. You are ended.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he mumbled. His drool-leaking mouth smiled at me, his eyes promising he was still filled with surprises too ample for me to overcome. Gesturing for me to come closer, his weak voice croaked past my heel to tell me;

“Oh, Mr. Rambler, you weren’t paying attention. I told you the G-9 worked across dimensions. When it gathered unto us Mr. Peasley, don’t you know, it gathered unto us, all the Mr. Peasleys there are. Just as it gave us all the Cardinellis, and all of all the others, plucked from every dimension, across all the expanses ...”

“Meaning ...”

“Meaning, Mr. Rambler, that you’re too late. So you eliminate me. What does it matter? Across every dimension, a billion, billion other Thomas Thorns know what I know now. They all understand time travel now. They all want to taste what I have tasted. They shall flood here to stop you. You and your Proven Time are doomed! We win, Mr. Rambler--”

His laughter became a thing unbearable to hear. Shifting my foot just a bit, I brought my calibrator to bear on his forehead. As I did so, the rest of my force picked a target and did the same. Looking into his eyes one last time, I said;

“Same thing, Thorn,” I told him. “When I said you were ended, I meant it. Say ‘goodbye,’ Tommy.”

And then, I acknowledged calibration and thought Thomas Gadius Thorn out of existence. All the Thomas Gadius Thorns. All billion billion of them. Every one of them. The Jehovah badge glowed a deeper purple second after second as around the room the directors of zVz were winked out of existence everywhere and when they existed.

The next day, across all the dimensions where there had been a Thomas Thorn, where the gravity well had been invented and a corporation to administer its existence had come into being, those who were not in charge of the company would discover they had no idea who was. They would have a product no one would have ever claimed to have invented. Hopefully they would use it to better ends.

Stumbling to the nearest chair, I fell into it, too numb to feel. My second-in-command came to me, holding open a containment box. I nodded, giving her the go-ahead to remove my Jehovah circuits. She understood I was simply too tired to do it myself. As I sank into the cushioning of the chair, I suddenly wondered if the Luddites weren't right after all. Maybe we'd all have been a lot better off not knowing half of what we know.

Wezleski thought so. No one ever knew why. I think maybe I understand what he was thinking when he would just smile at certain questions, making his joking apologies to humanity for all the harm he had caused by inventing time travel.

Whatever the case, we do know what we know, and it's too damn late to go home again. We're human beings. As a race we've always been on one edge or another. I guess this is just the latest one. Well, that's what comes from getting the race to where it was--too damn smart for its own good.

Working at keeping my body from spilling onto the floor, I pulled myself erect in my chair as best I could. I had, of course, absorbed Thorn's soul the way he had Peasley's. The CEO had been right; it was a rush, all right. One my people and I have all been through in the past when eliminating other would-be conquerors.

Even through my rage, I almost chuckled at Thorn's questions to me--if I had ever had a truly creative thought, if I had ever known the thrill of having every ounce of a person's creative life flash through my system?

Yes, Mr. Thorn, I have. But like any truly mature person, I learned long ago that pleasure always comes with an ever-escalating price tag.

## SOLID MEN/Henderson

“You know, chief,” my second said, taking a brief look down into Thorn’s uncomprehending eyes, “whichever ‘they’ said it first, ‘they’ were right. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

I just groaned and threw a mock punch at her head. She laughed. Hoping that somewhere Quentin Peasley was having his own richly deserved last laugh, I dragged myself out of zVz’s chair and headed for the door and back to work.

I was sure there was something to do somewhen.