

Sample PDF

This sample contains the front pages
and Chapter One of the Sci-Fi novel

Call Me Yesterday

by Tim Beresford

This novel is the first volume of
The Yesterday Trilogy

For more information on the trilogy, visit:

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The First Volume
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“Circumstances rule men; men do not rule circumstances.”

Herodotus.

Chapter One

The only sound in the small laboratory control room was the muted breathing of the two occupants. One of them, a balding middle-aged man, stared intently at the flat-panel screen of a powerful computer. The large display area showed several discrete windows. In the top left corner was the representation of a digital clock, steadily marking off the seconds as it approached two minutes past six. In the top right corner, a digital countdown was silently flipping its digits as it ticked down toward zero. In the centre of the screen was a large square window whose title bar read 'Incoming Message'. The data area of the window was devoid of content, save for a flashing cursor symbol in the top left corner.

The second occupant, a striking blonde female, half the age of her colleague, was switching her attention intermittently between the display screen and a small window set halfway up the whitewashed breeze block wall some ten feet in front of her. This small, oblong aperture offered a limited view of the adjoining room. All she could see through it at that moment was a dim, dark shadow, hidden in the grey gloom beyond.

The young woman once more switched her attention to the display screen. The countdown progressed inexorably on:

15... 14... 13...

She glanced back toward the window. A faint orange glow had begun to appear in the room beyond; a glow that brightened rapidly until it became a glare.

9... 8... 7...

The intensity of the light through the window continued to increase until it became almost too bright to look at; then suddenly there was an unearthly *ZING...* noise, and the orange glow disappeared. Once again, the little window revealed only vague grey shapes huddled in the gloom beyond. The young woman looked back at the screen. The Incoming Message window was no longer empty. It now displayed a line of text:

TEST 23 18:01 HRS MAY 21ST

She clapped her hands in delight. "Yes. Yes!" She turned to her companion with a radiant smile. "That's it. You've done it. We've done it." She looked back at the short message in the central window and stared hard at it, then reached out her hand to touch the screen, as if needing some sort of tactile confirmation that the words really were there. "We've actually done it..." Her voice softened to a whisper. "A message from the future..."

Mark Wright stood with his nose almost touching the floor-to-ceiling picture window spanning one side of his mezzanine office. He was watching the activity on the floor below him. Row upon row of trading desks filled the large space; stretching in parallel lines far enough into the distance to demonstrate amply the effect of perspective. At each of the desks, a financial market trader added his or her personal contribution to the bustling tableau. They gesticulated at colleagues; shouted into phone handsets; pointed at display screens; sat down; stood up; waved papers in the air; or engaged in spirited discourse with neighbours. In the London dealing room of BankAfrica, it was business as usual.

From the vantage point of his office, which jutted out over the trading floor, Mark could indulge in the fantasy of floating on air above the action, like a god surveying the chaotic bustle of the mortals below. The illusion of remoteness was reinforced by the fact that all the frantic activity going on just metres away seemed to be happening in total silence. The soundproofing of

the offices which overlooked the vast dealing room was as close to perfect as the investment bank's considerable assets could buy.

He had been watching the dumb show below for some time, with only the faint hum of the air-conditioning disturbing the silence, when suddenly his reverie was broken by the sharp trill of his door buzzer.

He frowned in irritation. He had no meetings booked. He had been about to settle into his afternoon routine. "Damn." He strode to his huge desk and pressed the button which opened his office door, simultaneously fixing a neutral expression on his face. Everyone who knew him knew he didn't like to be interrupted in the afternoons. He probably wasn't going to enjoy this intrusion, whatever it turned out to be.

His immediate superior, director of trading operations Geoffrey Ferguson, strode briskly into the room. He was accompanied by a well-dressed woman whom Mark didn't recognise.

"Mark, I'd like to introduce you to Mrs. Jean Proctor; Chief Accountant for the Allied European Engineering Union Pension Fund. Mrs. Procter, this is Mark Wright, our Chief Technical Analyst."

Mark shelved his irritation and briefly appraised the visitor. She was rather younger than he would have expected for a woman in her position; subtly attractive and very fashionably dressed. Meeting her in another setting, he would never have guessed her occupation. "How do you do, Mrs. Procter?" He moved around to the front of his desk and shook her hand briefly. "Please; let's have a seat." He indicated the mahogany meeting table near the far wall. They each settled into one of the generously padded leather chairs set around the highly polished circle of immaculate hardwood.

The visitor, who had already pulled some papers from a small case and laid them on the table in front of her, turned and addressed Mark. "If you'll forgive me, Mr. Wright, I'd like to get straight down to business. I have spent several hours this morning in discussions with Mr. Ferguson."

Mark glanced briefly at Geoffrey who, out of view of their visitor, let a look of pantomime pain pass fleetingly across his features. This almost made Mark laugh aloud, but he did his best to maintain a neutral expression and hide his amusement behind a polite smile.

"As I'm sure you know, Mister Wright, it has been my responsibility over the last few weeks to test the performance of your bank's investment operations, as well as those of the three other institutions whose services we have been considering in our current re-evaluation."

"Naturally I knew of your fund's interest in our services, Mrs. Proctor, but I had had no indication that I would need to be personally involved in this process."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Wright. However, it is my responsibility to ensure not only that we maximise returns, but also that the funds of my union are not exposed to any, err... unwarranted risk. Of course, we now enjoy a far more stringent framework of regulations than we had in earlier years, but even these are not without their loopholes. It is not beyond possibility that new investment instruments, concocted by unscrupulous parties seeking quick profits, might pass the current tests of acceptability. I am determined to ensure that such items do not become a part of the asset holdings of my institution.

For this reason, I have insisted on having a full understanding of all contracts which are entered into on behalf of my union, and that newer, more exotic instruments do not form a part of our holdings, however briefly. It is this aspect of the recent tests on which Mr. Ferguson and I were concentrating before lunch. I am happy to say that he was able to demonstrate that no questionable items were part of our evaluation exercise, and therefore no high-risk instruments played their part in the returns which have been achieved. As I have already mentioned to Mr. Ferguson, your bank has outperformed your three competitors by a considerable margin." She paused, looking in turn at the two men.

Mark felt obliged to offer some acknowledgement of what seemed to be an implied compliment. "I'm happy to hear it."

The accountant's expression suggested that he had misunderstood her meaning. "Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, this raises a most important question. Moreover, this is the reason I requested this meeting with you now, Mr. Wright. It seems that the exceptional performance of

the trial funds placed with your bank is substantially due to the automated trading strategy of your organisation, and this strategy appears largely to be guided by your department's work. Your, err... Technical Analysis. Now, while I have an adequate working knowledge of your bank's accountancy and trading procedures, I have to admit to only a passing understanding of the mathematical work which you yourself carry out. In order for me to present to my board a credible summary of this element of your bank's processes, an element which seems to be the key to your bank's extraordinary performance, I need to understand how it works. I also need to be sure that it is sustainable, and not just a random occurrence which happens to have coincided with our test period. So, Mr. Wright, while I don't expect you to give away any, err... trade secrets, I do need to have some appreciation of how you achieve your remarkable results."

So, that was it. "I will do my best to explain." Mark moved back to his desk and worked his computer keyboard for a few moments. The graphic projection system he used to display large complex charts as part of his own analytical work should serve as a makeshift demonstration system. At least, he hoped so. He'd not had call to use it as a teaching aid before. A section of the wall facing the meeting table darkened and then displayed a large chart with graduated X and Y axes bordering a squared area on which was plotted a single glowing white line. The line zigzagged up and down in an apparently random way.

"I should first of all say that we have a team of statisticians working in our quants department who set up the algorithms for our automated trading operation. They have their own views of the markets. I take a slightly different approach to theirs, but the results of my own work also feed into the same algorithmic trading system.

My own more traditional approach, which we can call Technical Analysis, uses charts of time-series market data and statistical techniques represented graphically across those charts. The objective of this form of analysis is to establish what trends, if any, are currently under way and to try to anticipate when a current trend will reverse. These trends, as indicated by price movement, can be long term, over years, or very short term, causing swings which can oscillate within the trading day."

The accountant was nodding. "I think I understand these basics, Mr. Wright. This white line plots price on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal, does it not?"

Mark nodded silently. Her question was clearly rhetorical.

She continued with barely a pause. "This is actually the mathematical representation of supply and demand, as indicated by the variations in price as the market trades. But what I don't understand is, why don't all Technical Analysts see the same patterns, and come to the same conclusions? I mean, if they are all looking at the same underlying market data, how can there be differences in their interpretation, and hence, their performance?"

"Mrs. Procter, that's a very good question. In fact, the key question. Technical Analysis is not an exact science. However, it is a complex one. It utilises a multitude of different techniques that can be applied in isolation, or in combination. It also relies, to a greater or lesser extent, on the judgement of each individual analyst as to which of the available techniques are likely to yield the best results in a particular market at any given time. The possible application of a wide variety of mathematical formulae, each with its own adjustable sensitivity values, results in a virtual infinity of analytical models which could be derived from any given set of data, such as this one. The white line you see on this particular chart, looking a bit like a mountain range, is a simple line plot of daily close prices. But the timeframe could be longer or shorter. A minute by minute plot would look similar."

He again worked his keyboard. "Now watch, I'm going to add some analysis." The simple white line became enmeshed with an array of other lines, plotted in a variety of colours. Some wound around the original price line in smooth, sinuous curves. Some were short straight lines joining two or more points of the original plot. Others seemed to start at a completely random position and zoom straight off the screen. The resulting display appeared to be totally chaotic.

"I have now added a sample set of analytical plots. These illustrate just a few of the hundreds of technical tools available. The individual analyst must make a choice as to which combination of tools is applied to the particular data set being analysed. I myself have actually devised a number of new statistical techniques which I employ in my analytical work. The results

of these standard and bespoke analyses then need to be interpreted. There is perhaps as much art as there is science in this form of Technical Analysis. Two analysts might look at the same data, with this same set of analyses, applied to exactly the same degree of sensitivity, and yet still derive two different interpretations.”

The visitor stared mutely at the projection on the wall. Mark returned to his seat at the table.

After a short while, the accountant nodded quietly, still gazing at the mass of lines. They imparted to her as much useful information as an infant’s multi-coloured crayon scribble, but she was not about to admit that. “I can see how this representation might be open to a variety of interpretations.” She turned back to Mark. “So each analyst must decide which techniques have the best probability for success, at any given time? They use different combinations of techniques on the same underlying data, and this is why they can yield different results?”

“That’s exactly it, Mrs. Procter.”

The guest stared steadily at Mark, and then frowned slightly. “And what if one analyst were to find a perfect combination of techniques? What if he, or she, were able to use this to predict every movement in every market?”

Mark smiled broadly. “That is not going to happen, Mrs. Procter. There are too many random factors. Too many traders, each making their own decisions. Too many buyers and sellers, each with their own motivations or gut feeling about their particular stock or commodity. Trying to anticipate the fluctuations in market data is somewhat like predicting the weather. A fairly reliable estimation of local weather conditions can be made in the short term, but it’s not possible to make specific predictions, such as what precise time the rain will start in a particular town. Chaos enters quickly into the data. The same thing applies to market traded items. We can look at overall trends, but to predict the actual close price of an individual item on a given day is beyond any of our techniques.”

Geoffrey cleared his throat. “Of course, we at BankAfrica will continue to improve our research capabilities as far as we are able, and will always apply any new techniques which become available to us.”

The visitor nodded briefly to the director and turned back to Mark. “Mr. Wright, thank you very much for your time today.” She stood, and offered him her hand. “I feel I have a better understanding of your unusual skills, and I think I can now present to my board a reasonable explanation of how your bank has achieved an advantage over your competitors. I intend to recommend to them next week that we place the bulk of our future investment business with BankAfrica, commencing from the beginning of our next financial year.”

Mark nodded and smiled at the visitor. “Well, that is very welcome news, Mrs. Procter.”

The Director stood and offered her his hand. “And regarding your previous concerns, may I reiterate that we at BankAfrica will continue to operate the highest of ethical standards, in keeping with all current regulations and best practice recommendations.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ferguson. Perhaps we can return to your office and discuss a provisional timetable for the handover of trading accounts?”

“Certainly.” The Director guided the visitor to the door; turning to give Mark a brief wink over his shoulder.

Mark sighed with relief as his door closed behind them. He returned to his desk and was able to settle back into his routine work without further disturbance until just before five o’clock, when a tall, well-built, fair-haired man swept unheralded into his office, wearing a slightly crumpled pinstriped suit and a broad grin.

“Hey chum! The word’s out on the trading floor. Apparently, you charmed the AEEU representative into giving us their business. You dark horse!”

“I assure you Simon, charm had nothing to do with it. Cold, hard logic and mathematics was all that was needed.”

“Whatever you used, it seems to have done the trick. That deserves a drink, I think, and I’m buying.” He checked his watch. “Buck up, I’m meeting Laura at the wine bar.”

The two friends left the cool marble lobby of the bank's headquarters building and emerged into the street-noise, dusty breezes and late May humidity of the Isle of Dogs. They walked at a brisk pace through Canada Square, whose concrete towers thrust dark fingers to dizzying heights, blotting out great swathes of sky. They continued through the heart of London's financial trading district, their zigzag progress taking them into streets which became ever narrower and quieter. The faint tang of salt water grew gradually more evident on the gentle breeze as they left behind the lofty steel-frame structures of international commerce and moved into an area populated by squat brick buildings; survivors from an earlier age, over whose roofs the hazy blue of the late afternoon sky could once again be seen.

Close to the north bank of the Thames, in what was more an alley than a street, they turned into a wide doorway above which a large reproduction carriage-lamp hung from an elaborate wrought-iron arm bolted to the wall. The doorway gave onto a steep, broad stairway and they clattered down a long flight of linoleum-topped wooden stairs to the cool of the basement wine bar.

It took a few moments for their eyes to adjust from the bright sunlight outside to the subtle artificial lighting. They made their way to the bar and ordered pints of real ale. These arrived rapidly, served in pot-bellied pewter tankards. They took their beers and made their way to a small table, slumping heavily into two of the plain but comfortable wooden chairs.

"Cheers, Mark"

"Cheers, Simon"

The bar was already about two-thirds full, which was not unusual for 5 p.m. on a Friday. The volume of conversations around them was still at a reasonably restrained level, so they could talk comfortably without having to raise their voices.

"So, I hear she was a fair looker, that woman," said Simon.

"What woman?"

"The accountant."

"I didn't notice."

"Oh, come on. This is me you're talking to. Simon, your friend, remember?"

"Alright, I noticed. She was O.K."

"O.K? That's it?"

"It was my mind she was after, not my body."

"You dog."

"Really. She just wanted me to demystify my black arts a bit. That's all."

"Well, whatever you did, here's to it. You've earned us all an extra bonus, for sure." Simon raised his tankard.

Mark did the same. "I'll drink to that." He took a long swallow of his beer, and glanced across the room toward the entrance. Simon's partner, a petite, bubbly brunette with a ready and infectious smile, was just descending the lower stairs, blinking in the dim light of the basement as she looked around the room.

"Here's Laura. I'll get a round in." Mark headed to the bar, and returned a few minutes later with two fresh pints and a gin and tonic. He placed the tall clear drink on the table in front of Laura. "I assumed you haven't changed the habit of a lifetime."

She feigned astonishment. "Good heavens, you mean you've noticed I have an occasional gin?"

"After two years, I'd have to be blind not to have noticed." He placed a brimming tankard before Simon and resumed his chair opposite the pair. "So what are you two up to this weekend?"

"Nothing." Simon looked eminently pleased at the anticipation of an empty schedule.

"Actually, that's not quite true." Laura turned her mischievous grin to Simon. "I have a nice surprise for you."

Simon looked genuinely disappointed. "I was looking forward to slacking out this weekend. I thought you were away on a business jolly of some sort?"

"That's not until tomorrow. I have a surprise for you tonight."

Simon's look of disappointment turned rapidly to one of salacious anticipation. "Oh yes?"

"Not that sort of surprise, you animal. I took a phone call at home just before I left. From your long lost sister, Jane."

Mark had been in the process of sipping his beer. He placed the tankard slowly and carefully on the table and leaned back in his chair.

Simon glanced fleetingly at him, then turned back to Laura. "She called from the States?"

"No, silly, from here. She's back. She's in London right now. She's coming here to meet us. Any time now, in fact. So now, I'll finally get the chance to meet her. I suggested we could have a few drinks here, and then take her out to dinner." She stopped and smiled broadly at Simon. His expression was indecipherable. "Mark could come too." She turned her smile on Mark.

"I don't think that would be a good idea." Mark raised his eyebrows at Simon. "In fact, I think I'd better leave before she gets here." He stood and lifted his tankard for a final swig. As he did so, a tall, slim, striking blonde-haired woman descended the last of the stairs and stepped into the room. The volume level of the male voices in that part of the room dropped noticeably.

The new arrival gazed about, her eyes adjusting to the gloom, and then she caught sight of Simon. She waved and started toward their table.

Mark watched her progress through the crowded room. She was looking at Simon as she weaved between the tables. Then her pace slowed. She'd obviously caught sight of Mark. She hesitated briefly, then continued onward until she reached Simon and threw her arms around him.

Laura had noticed the body language and looked askance at Mark. "So you two know each other already?"

"It's a long story."

After a robust embrace, Simon and Jane disengaged and he introduced Laura.

Jane's voice was clear and steady. "Good to meet you, Laura." Her accent showed no hint of her years in the States. She retained the gently-rounded vowels of the Home Counties. After some pleasantries with Laura, Jane finally turned and looked across the table at Mark.

"I didn't know you were going to be here." Her tone was neutral.

"Ditto."

There was a brief silence, which Simon ended by taking a drink order from Jane and then heading to the bar. Jane took a seat next to Laura. Mark considered leaving right away, but then decided against it and sat down again.

Jane's sharp blue eyes gazed levelly at him. "So; how have you been?"

"Fine, thank you; and you? How is America?"

"I'm O.K. The States was... good."

They stared mutely at each other for a few moments.

Laura felt the ice in the air and intervened. "What have you been up to over there, Jane? I mean, Simon has told me some bits and pieces, but you know how vague he is..."

Jane turned a warm smile on Laura. "I went there initially about five years ago, to do some post-graduate studies at M.I.T."

"M.I.T. That's err..."

"Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I was studying astrophysics."

"Oh, right." Laura suddenly frowned and glanced at Mark. "Didn't you used to study...?"

At that moment, Simon arrived with a tray of drinks, which he set noisily onto the table. He placed cocktails in front of the ladies and then sat down, taking a tankard from the tray for himself and pushing the remaining one toward Mark.

"Oh. I didn't want..."

"Get it down your neck," said Simon. He turned to Jane. "So sis, what've you been up to lately? Still at NASA?"

"I was just giving Laura a potted history, but I hadn't got as far as NASA. I was still at M.I.T."

"Oh. Carry on."

Jane turned back to Laura. "Well, after M.I.T., I went to NASA."

"You don't say?" Laura chuckled.

Jane's laugh was music. "I do say."

"Sounds very high-powered." Laura adopted a look of mock solemnity.

"It wasn't all serious. But it was a great opportunity. I was offered a job at J.P.L., working on the calculation of spacecraft trajectories for a variety of unmanned missions."

"You seem to be referring to this as though it were all in the past," interjected Simon. "Have you left NASA?"

Jane nodded. "Yes. Something unexpected came up a few months ago. A former Professor of mine at M.I.T., Mason Tyler, contacted me at J.P.L., and asked me if I would join him in a research project here in Oxford."

"What sort of project?"

"I'm sorry Simon, but I can't discuss any details at this point. The work is still confidential. But I can tell you it's right at the forefront of particle physics. That's Mason's special interest. It'll be big news when it's released."

"So what are you doing on his team?"

"I am his team. It's just the two of us. As to what I'm doing, well, as I've said, I can't really discuss that. Not until he's ready to publish; and there's more work to be done yet. But it's exciting stuff."

"Obviously so. It must be important to have tempted you away from NASA."

"It is."

There was another short silence.

"So, little sis;" Simon said with a note of finality, suggesting he wished to wind up the present proceedings, "where would you like to eat tonight?"

"If I'm staying at your flat, which Laura offered when we spoke earlier, then first I'd like to call by there and freshen up. Then, I'll leave it up to you where we trough."

"I'll find somewhere I can elbow us into without a booking I guess. If you're ready, let's go home and get into the glad rags. See you next week, Mark."

"Yes. Cheerio. Enjoy your meal."

Laura leaned across the table and kissed Mark goodbye. He caught Jane's eyes. She gave him the briefest of thin-lipped smiles, before turning and walking toward the stairs.

Simon shrugged at him and raised his eyebrows, then gave him a silent salute and followed the girls across the room.

At eleven-thirty the following morning, Mark phoned Simon's apartment. His call was answered almost immediately. "Hello?"

"Simon, its Mark."

"*Hiya chum. How are you on this glorious day?*"

"You sound very chipper."

"*I am. The sun is shining and I have a pink ticket for the weekend. Jane left early for the station and Laura went with her. She's off to a conference; not back 'til tomorrow evening, so I can slack out and generally slob around. You know how I love that. What are you up to?*"

"I need to talk to you. Urgently."

"*O.K, chum. Fire away.*"

"I'd rather not do it on the phone, Simon. Can we meet somewhere?"

"*OK. Why don't we have a hair of the dog on the Tattershall Castle; blow the cobwebs away, eh?*"

"Fine. I'll see you there."

"*What time?*"

"As soon as possible!"

The Tattershall Castle was a paddle steamer which, at some time in the past, had plied the Humber estuary. Now she was permanently moored to the Victoria Embankment, close to the Houses of Parliament. She was a popular pub ship with several bars, a restaurant and a nightclub. A large expanse of open deck, equipped with copious seating, made the ship a fine *alfresco* meeting place, with views across the river to the Festival Hall, and the big wheel of the London Eye.

Mark arrived just before midday; bought a pint of beer from the below-deck bar and went back into the sunshine of the upper deck. The large area was dotted with small, light wooden units which were tables with bench seats permanently attached down either side of them. Most were empty, but a few were occupied by tourists enjoying a little early refreshment, while taking in some of London's famous sights. Mark chose a table as far from the other visitors as possible. The gentle breeze of the previous evening had subsided, and an unusually pungent aroma of salt-water pervaded the still air. From where Mark sat, he could hear the faint but continuous hum of vehicles on the North Embankment, and the intermittent noises of river traffic on the Thames.

He sat and sipped at the pint mug in front of him. The quarter chimes sounded clearly from the Westminster clock tower, announcing twelve fifteen. The sounds and smells were familiar, yet Mark felt somehow remote from the here and now on this particular Saturday morning. Everything seemed to him to have taken on an unreal quality.

He was jogged back to the present as the table unit rocked a little. Simon had arrived, setting two fresh pints on the tabletop and sitting heavily on the bench seat opposite.

"Hello, chum. Saw you here as I came on board and correctly calculated you'd be ready for a refill by the time I'd been served. Well, I was almost right. Drink up."

"Thanks Simon."

"So, what's on your mind?"

Mark stared at his glass for some moments, then downed the remainder of his first beer in one swallow. "Did you have a nice meal last night?"

"You didn't drag me over here to discuss dinner, did you?"

"No. I just wondered if Jane had said any more about her new project."

"Not a lot. In fact, most of the evening was spent discussing you, actually."

"Really?"

"Don't sound so surprised. You obviously picked up last night on the fact that I've never mentioned your relationship with Jane to Laura."

"Yes, I did. Why not, by the way?"

"Need to know principle." Simon took a long draw at his pint and then grinned. "Never tell a woman more than she actually needs to know. Not all at once, anyway. They'll wheedle everything out of you eventually anyway... and they love a bit of intrigue. They enjoy the process of discovering what they perceive to be secrets, so why deny them the pleasure?"

"You sly devil."

"Anyway, it hadn't come up before. That was the first time they'd met. Jane's not been back for a visit in the last two years, since Laura's been living with me. So last night, between mouthfuls, Jane told Laura all about your having met at college and being together. Until..."

"Yeah. I know the story. Sorry you had to endure a rerun."

"Me? I wasn't listening. I switched off while they did their review of ancient history. I was focused on a particularly succulent boeuf stroganoff and a pleasant claret. So I didn't really notice if there was any more mention of what Jane's up to with this... er..."

"Mason Tyler"

"That's the fellow. Well remembered."

"I could hardly forget him. I've been researching the guy most of the night."

"Oh yes? Why?"

"Simon, do you trust me?"

"Of course, chum." He smiled. "How much do you need?"

Mark shook his head. "No, no, that's not what I mean. I mean, do you trust my judgement?"

"About what?"

"In general. Do you think I'm, well... rational?"

Simon appeared genuinely surprised. "I suppose so. Hell, of course you are. You're one of the top analysts in the City. You're a computer whizz kid, which means you're as logical as it gets. What's got you into this frame of mind?"

"I'm worried about what Jane might have got herself into."

"Oh dear. Look chum, I thought you were over all that. She's a big girl, and she made a choice."

"This is not about us. I mean; me and her. Or should I say she and I? Anyway, it's not to do with me at all. It's to do with this Mason. I think she may be mixed up in something dangerous."

"How do you mean?" Simon's almost permanent smile had disappeared.

"When Jane first mentioned the name Mason Tyler last night, it rang a vague bell with me. So, I went right home and checked up on him. I was right about having heard something about him. Around four years ago, he created quite a stir in the physics community when he claimed to have discovered proof of the existence of tachyons."

Simon raised his eyebrows and passed a flattened hand backward over the top of his head. "Over my head, chum. You're the one who studied physics, not me, remember?"

Mark nodded briefly. "Tachyons are theoretical faster-than-light particles. They were first mooted by Einstein. A sort of side effect of general relativity. Some physicists don't believe they actually exist, but some think they might. Anyway, there was a big splash in the scientific press four years ago. This Professor Mason Tyler claimed to have detected them, but when he couldn't reproduce the experiment a few days later, under controlled conditions, he was labelled a crank by the scientific establishment. He lost, or gave up, his professorship at M.I.T., and he seems to have dropped off the scientific community radar at that point. I couldn't find any subsequent mention of him in official journals, or anywhere else on the web. He just seems to have gone to ground. Now he's suddenly turned up in Oxfordshire, and your sister is working with him. But I can't find any mention of his project anywhere. It's not funded by any of the universities. It doesn't appear to have any official backing anywhere. It looks like a piece of private research. And that would square with the unusual comment of Jane's last night that she was the only one working with him on the project."

"Do you think he's actually a crank? I would have thought Jane was smart enough to spot it if he was some sort of nutter."

"I agree. She's nobody's fool, and she evidently trusts him. It's not the man himself I think is dangerous. It's what they're working on."

"But we don't know what they're working on."

"Ah... I think I do. I've been considering this most of the night."

"No wonder you look like hell."

"Thanks. But bear with me; I need to develop a line of thought here, and I don't have it totally clear in my own mind, so I may waffle a bit."

"Give it your best shot."

"Alright. First a speculation about this Professor Tyler's motivations. I reckon any scientist who'd been disgraced before his peers would have it as his number one priority to prove himself right, and the rest of them wrong. Yes?"

"Seems reasonable."

"O.K. So let's suppose that this Tyler chap, thus motivated, has never given up his search for tachyons, and is still working in the same field, underground, as it were. Let us further suppose that he has actually been able to reproduce his earlier experiment, so he can successfully detect tachyons." He paused and stared at Simon to see if he would raise an objection.

"O.K.," said Simon, "suppose he has. Look, you just continue speculating until you get to the point. I'll stop you if I need to."

"Right. Postulate one; he's constructed some apparatus which can detect tachyons, or something like them. A particle which travels faster than light, anyway, whatever you want to call

it. Postulate two, this apparatus can not only detect these particles but can actually create them. Postulate three, he has found a way not only to control the creation of these particles, but also their direction of travel.” He looked at Simon but saw no indication of an imminent interruption. “Postulate, er...,” Mark counted silently on his fingers, “four, he is far enough along with his experiments that he needs Jane’s particular type of help.”

“O.K., that’s far enough,” said Simon. “You’re assuming rather a lot. He’s got a machine to create and direct these tiny particles. O.K. So, are you saying this is some sort of weapon? Are you saying he’s going to hold the world to ransom; threatening to reduce the United Nations building to a smoking pile of rubble? And that Jane has unwittingly fallen into his clutches as the moll of the mad scientist?”

“No, no. That’s not what this is about. A beam of tachyons couldn’t harm anything. But they have an unusual property. They travel faster than light.”

Simon smiled and nodded. “I see. He’s going to use them to power a starship. He’s going to kidnap Jane and take her off to Alpha Centauri for a dirty weekend.”

“They can’t do that either,” said Mark, chuckling. “Tachyons have no mass, so they couldn’t push a butterfly off course. But they do have one amazing property; since they travel faster than light, they also travel backwards in time.”

Simon was nodding slowly; then he stopped. “Nope, I don’t get it.”

Mark looked around to ensure that there were still no people in earshot. “The problem, in a nutshell, is that he may have actually perfected a way of sending messages backwards in time.” He paused for a sip of his drink, and to let the significance of this last observation sink in.

“That’s pretty fancy supposin’, pardner,” said Simon, in an appalling mock-cowboy accent.

Mark frowned at him.

Simon shrugged, but adopted a more serious tone. “Alright, even if this is so, I don’t see why you’re so worried.”

Mark glanced around again. The deck area was gradually filling with newcomers, but they were still well out of earshot of other visitors. He stared steadily at his friend. “Just think about it for a moment. Suppose you could send yourself a message back in time. Suppose you could send yourself a message this evening, which you’ve already received earlier this morning. What could you tell yourself that might be of advantage?”

Simon considered for a couple of minutes, then favoured Mark with a totally straight face. “I could warn myself that I was going to have a cryptic lunchtime conversation with a maniac.” His face broke into a broad grin.

“What else?” said Mark, smiling and nodding, indulgently.

Simon thought for a few moments. “I could make a packet at the races! I could... ye gods!”

“Yes, chum. The markets. What would the possibility of sending messages backwards in time do to the world’s financial markets? What would just the rumour of such a possibility do?”

A small tug passing slowly on the river gave an unusually loud triple-hoot which seemed to silence all other background noises as it echoed slowly to and fro across the broad expanse of water.

Simon reached for his pint and took a long pull. His face had clouded into a rare expression of deep concern. “It would be the finish for the markets. Confidence would evaporate. The idea that someone, anyone, could know the closing price before the market had even opened? The markets would cease to function. The financial system would collapse overnight.”

“Indeed, my friend. A worldwide financial meltdown of biblical proportions. First the markets, then the banks. Then all commerce. Ultimately, society itself would break down.”

“Hell, Mark, the world would be reduced to the stone age in ... what? A few days?”

“A week or two, at most, I would think.”

“But, suppose you’re wrong, Mark? Suppose they haven’t done what you say they’ve done? Suppose they’re working on something else?”

“That’s possible, I grant you, but I’m fairly convinced that this Mason, with Jane’s help, has done what I’m suggesting. I can’t imagine any other reason for this character to require Jane’s special talents; the ones she developed at NASA. And I’m pretty sure I remember her saying last

night, 'It'll be big news when it's released.' Note there's no hint of the conditional there. That suggests to me they've already succeeded."

Simon was nodding slowly. He said nothing.

"If I'm wrong, well then it doesn't matter. But, suppose I'm right? Either way, we have to find out. And if I'm right, we have to prevent them from going public."

"Alright, I'll believe you know what you're talking about. But if this Professor has been working on this gizmo for as long as you say, then he must have thought about the consequences of what it would mean to the world, surely?"

"Perhaps he has, but he's hardly likely to appreciate the implication of what he's doing to the financial markets, is he? Only a financial professional would understand the danger. We'll have to explain it to him. And we have to stop him from announcing this discovery."

"So how could we convince him that this wonderful breakthrough will destroy the economic framework of the world? If he's not realised it himself, what could we say that might persuade him?"

"I've done a little thinking about that, but I don't have an answer, yet. It depends to an extent on what kind of man he is. What his expectations are. But it's vital we present a united front if we're going to convince him. Simon, are you with me?"

"There doesn't seem to be much alternative, chum. If all of what you say is real, and this chap might be about to make an imminent announcement, then we have to do something about it right away. What do you suggest?"

"We should engineer a meeting with him as soon as possible, and that'll best be arranged by you, via Jane. Obviously, I can't drive this. You know how Jane would react if she thought I was interfering."

"Right. But you'll have to confront him with this. You can't expect me to argue this case with him, when I barely understand it myself. You're the scientist. Well, graduate scientist, anyway. I'm just a trader. He wouldn't take me seriously, would he?"

"No, he wouldn't. But we need to get this organised right away. How about a trip to Oxfordshire next weekend?"

"Do you think that'll be soon enough?"

"I doubt they're planning to make an announcement in the next few days. If they were, Jane would probably have been a bit more forthcoming last night. In fact, didn't she actually say that he's not ready to publish yet? I think she did. That means we have a little while, at least. But we should still move rapidly."

"O.K. then," said Simon. "I'll book us hotel rooms for next weekend. Then invite Jane and Mason to join us at the hotel for dinner."

"Better choose a place with a private dining room; something self-contained that we can book exclusively for the whole evening. Somewhere we can have a conversation in private. We can't be too careful from now on. If I'm right about this, then the slightest leak to anyone could be disastrous."

"I'll call Jane later today and extend the invitation."

"O.K. But you'd better make it your initiative; you and Laura. Leave my name out of the official party at this stage. I'll be a last minute surprise."

"You certainly will."

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