

Chapter 1

“Isn’t it a pain in the ass when people you murder come back?” Derek asked the lady who answered the door.

Confusion on her face gave way to mind-shattering terror.

“*I cremated you!*” she wailed, fleeing into the house as Derek ambled after her.

The place intrigued him.

Its exterior was nondescript weathered gray stone, its architectural style like that of an old church. One half-expected to see gargoyles squatting on downspouts.

Here, of course, the gargoyles lived *inside*, a middle-aged couple that had murdered dozens of street-people, students, their own son, and an unfortunate other version of Derek — all in their efforts to create a master-race.

They had succeeded.

Indeed, they had done so in ways they could never have imagined, ways that defied logic and the laws of physics.

Today, he would deliver a morsel of retribution.

Derek strolled down the long hallway past oil paintings of landscapes on the walls and entrances to the living room and

dining room, the parquet floor creaking under his feet — until he reached the study’s massive oak door.

He kicked it open.

Books in darkly stained walnut bookcases lined the room, and a walnut desk stood in front of the French doors that opened out to the garden.

Mrs. Pembroke cowered beneath it, sobbing.

He was *almost* tempted to give her an explanation of what was happening.

She didn’t deserve one.

“Where are the red pills? The ones you created from my brain.”

She howled.

Derek scanned her mind and learned the pills were stored in liquid nitrogen in the basement laboratory.

He teleported to the lab and spotted a cryogenic Dewar flask wrapped in mist on the workbench. He put on insulated gloves, grabbed it, and teleported home.



Derek Evans was a husky, pale, six-foot four twenty-five-year old with brown hair and brown contact lenses.

He teleported to a restroom on the second floor of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute and then joined Alessandra and Professor Andromeda Cole in her cluttered office.

Piles of papers and old books covered most of the floor-space. Massive wooden shelves behind the desk held stone tablets with Egyptian hieroglyphics, a human skull covered with arcane symbols, and decaying scrolls.

Derek’s wife, Alessandra — Allie — was a petite brunette with an olive complexion and a beautiful face marred by a scar on her right jaw-line — and brown contacts.

Get the pills? Allie wordlessly beamed to him as he sat in the other guest chair.

Yes.

“Where is this site?” Professor Cole said. She was a middle aged woman with a rugged face in jeans and a blue denim blouse. Her gray hair was gathered in a ponytail.

One could easily picture her living out of a tent in the Middle East with a coiled whip hanging from her belt.

“It’s in Southern Africa, sort of,” Derek said.

“Sort of? What does that mean?”

“To explain that, I have to flip a coin,” Allie said, throwing a quarter in the air.

She caught it and slapped it on the desk.

“What’s the outcome?” she asked.

“It came up heads, of course,” Professor Cole replied. “Why are we flipping coins? I thought you were going to explain. . .”

“Wrong,” Allie said. “It came up heads *and* tails and, to a slight extent, landed on its edge.”

“All in different universes,” Derek continued. “When an event has multiple outcomes, all possibilities occur in multiple copies of the universe. You split into several Andromeda Coles, each one seeing a different outcome.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Professor Cole muttered. “I have an urgent meeting on uh . . . Planet Earth.”

Archaeologists are catnip for crackpots, she thought.

Allie and Derek laughed.

“Huh?”

“It’s just that we have a cat named Norton,” Derek said. “And we should plant catnip in . . . at home.”

“We’re crackpots with money,” Allie chuckled, fanning out a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills. “Just humor us a few more minutes.”

Professor Cole stared at the money.

“Please join us in this corner of the room,” Derek said, standing. “We want to demonstrate something.”

Professor Cole eventually joined them, thinking, *The sooner they leave the better.*

A flash of . . . discontinuity and . . . ecstasy followed.

“What was that?” Professor Cole gasped. “It’s like something I experienced . . . long ago.”

“The spirit world,” Allie said. “We tunneled through it.”

They stood in a corner of Professor Cole’s office — and other versions of Derek and Allie sat in her guest chairs, while another Professor Cole sat at the desk.

The two Professor Coles stared at each other in shock.

“Tails,” the seated Allie said, pointing to the coin on the desk.

“We have to return you to your original timeline,” Derek said. “There are two of you here and *none* of you there.”

There was another flicker and the office now held three people, huddled in the corner.

“Who . . . *what the hell* are you two?” she muttered, shaking.

“You thought you need a drink,” Allie said. “So let’s get one, and we’ll answer your questions.”

Are they reading my mind? Professor Cole thought.

“Yes, we are telepaths,” Derek said.

They walked to the Wabash Pub on the corner of Woodlawn and East 59th street — bordering the Midway Plaisance Park, its trees blazing gold and yellow on this crisp fall day.

The place was almost empty.

It was a dark wood-paneled bar with tables opposite the bar and pool tables in the back. On one wall, a large poster

announced a Halloween party and dance at the University of Chicago student union.

A jukebox blared *American Pie*.

Looking at the poster, Derek felt a twinge of nostalgia.

Longing for the days when we were young and foolish and full of hope? Allie beamed at him.

“Aren’t we full of hope now, *me amuri*?” he said, his eyes tearing up.

“Oh *maniac*, I love it when you talk Sicilian to me,” Allie sighed, tapping Derek on the shoulder. “You’re right of course. Our time has come.”

Get a room, guys! Professor Cole thought.

“We don’t need a room,” Allie whispered. “We have the Sea of Desire in the land of Oz.”

“Believe it or not, that’s a place,” Derek said.

When their eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting, they took a table.

“God, I *hate* these things,” Allie muttered, removing her brown contact lenses. “I can’t imagine how people wear them all the time.”

Professor Cole gasped when she saw Allie’s Indigo eyes, with irises sparkling like diamonds.

Derek removed his contacts too.

“That’s one of the most visible outward signs of Indigos like us,” Derek said. “Besides having no fingernails or toenails.”

“Indigos?”

“That’s what we call our species,” Allie said. “*Homo Indicus*.”

“Your *species*?”

“We are the result of genetic experiments,” Derek said.

“In another timeline we call Origin,” Allie said.

“Hi doc,” the bartender said, waiting on them. “Balvenie neat?”

“You know me too well, Nick.”

Derek and Allie ordered coffee, and Nick left.

“Three keys to happiness,” Andy said. “True love, a good career, and a well-trained bartender.”

“I can’t wait to be able to drink again,” Allie said, pointing to her pregnant belly.

“When are you due?”

“No idea,” Allie said. “I don’t know what our gestation period is. The funny part is I can see her being born.”

Andromeda smiled.

“In most futures, she’s born in the daytime and some, at night. Different times, different places.”

“In *most futures*?” Andy said. “You literally *see* this?”

“All I know is it’ll be *amazing* . . . and *soon*. Somewhere between a day and a month from now. Most important, she’ll be *healthy*.”

“Our precognition doesn’t sync with calendars or clocks,” Derek said.

“Vittoria will be our first natural-born,” Allie said. “Ever.”

“You two weren’t natural-born?”

“Doctor Pembroke gave me a DNA-altering virus,” Derek said. “Part of a bogus drug-study.”

“Pembroke?” Professor Cole said. “The name sounds familiar.”

“In our timeline, he was nominated for a Nobel prize in biology,” Derek said.

“I remember! My ex was a biologist and she was always going on about what a genius Pembroke was.”

“He was a *monster*,” Allie muttered.

“He knew physics? I mean physics must be involved with going into timelines.”

“No,” Derek said. “All he knew for sure was that we’d be telepaths. His lab animals became agitated whenever he *thought* of torturing them, and calmed down when he changed his mind.”

“That’s horrible!”

Nick served their drinks.

“He got what he deserved in the end,” Allie muttered. “In our world, he got it *after* infecting Derek. In yours, he got it before.”

“How *do* you travel to different timelines?” Professor Cole said. “I mean, if Pembroke didn’t know physics.”

“We go to a place we call the spirit-world,” Derek said. “The crossroads of existence. Every corner of every timeline is accessible from there.”

“It’s a place where thoughts are sounds,” Allie said. “That’s the basis of telepathy and ... everything else. Pembroke screwed with the human brain and got a *lot* more than he bargained for.”

Professor Cole sipped her drink.

“What is your timeline like? What did you call it? Origin?”

“It looks a lot like yours,” Derek said. “Except it’s five years out of sync.”

“And President Eakins is trying to turn America into a police state,” Allie said.

“That lunatic is *president*?” she said. “*That’s not possible!*”

“His two opponents despised each other,” Derek said. “Each had supporters who hated the other. They stayed home on election day.”

“A woman told me she couldn’t vote for either of them in good conscience,” Allie said. “She asked me whom she should

write in: Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. That was Eakins's opposition."

"Jesus!" Professor Cole muttered, gulping her drink.

She ordered another.

"What do you call *this* timeline?" Professor Cole said, rapping on the table.

"The *Culinary* timeline," Derek said. "For personal reasons."

"So why did you guys pick me? You're not the typical loonies who want me to investigate ancient astronauts."

"It's your book *The Future of the Past*," Allie said. "At the top of page 203, you said 'given advances in space travel, especially Eldon Trask's manned Mars missions, archaeologists must prepare to study alien cultures and artifacts.' As far as we know, you're the only archaeologist to say anything like that."

"I became a laughingstock. I've always been interested in the idea of first contact. My parents were astronomers."

"Hence your name Andromeda?" Allie chuckled.

"Call me Andy," she laughed. "Everyone does. I have a brother named Sirius and a sister named Ceres. And I don't believe for a minute that you know the exact page number in my book."

"We have good memories," Derek said.

"We'll see," Andromeda said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Investigate ancient astronauts," Allie laughed.

"We don't know that they're astronauts," Derek said. "They are ancient — and not human. In a timeline we call Oz."

"How ancient?"

"A hundred thousand years," Allie said. "Maybe more."

"Most artifacts on the surface will be severely degraded,"

Andromeda said. “Even the Egyptian pyramids would be unrecognizable in that length of time.”

“The surface has been scoured,” Derek said. “Southern Africa in Oz has huge plains of fused black glass and a melted mountain. We think someone detonated a large number of atomic weapons.”

“Is it radioactive?”

“Not at all,” Derek said. “That’s why we think it happened at least a hundred thousand years ago.”

“Whatever happened there killed off these aliens *and* early humans,” Allie said. “So the human race never evolved on Oz.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“I can’t believe it,” Andy Cole said. “I split into *two people?*”

“More than two,” Derek muttered, beaming *Should we burden her with the truth?*

No, Allie beamed.

Professor Cole sighed and looked around.

“This has been fascinating,” she finally said, standing. “But I’ve got . . . papers to grade.”

She left.

“Back to square one,” Derek muttered.

“Maybe not.”



Back at her office, Professor Cole pulled out a copy of her book, *The Future of the Past*, and turned to page 203. Sure enough, Allie had quoted it verbatim.

She left the institute and strolled to the elegant Gothic cathedral-style building containing the Mathematics Department. Her partner, Llewellyn Masters, had her office on the second floor.

She chuckled at the poster hanging over the open door: “Infinity bottles of beer on the wall, infinity bottles of beer. If one of the bottles should happen to fall, infinity bottles of beer on the wall. . .”

“My goodness, Andy!” Professor Masters said. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Llewellyn Masters was a petite brunette in her mid thirties wearing a white blouse, black skirt featuring a picture of R2D2, a colorful beaded necklace, and thick glasses on a red silk eyeglass-necklace.

Her office was a stark contrast to Professor Cole’s: spotless with everything in its perfect place. Pens and pencils lined up on her shiny desk — parallel and equally-spaced.

A framed photo of her and Andromeda standing in front of Egypt’s Great Pyramid hung on the wall.

“I just spent the most bizarre half-hour of my long . . . absurd life. On this ordinary fall day, an ordinary-looking couple came to my office and *showed* me . . . portals to alternate worlds.”

She related her encounter with Derek and Allie.

“Did you actually see *another version* of you?”

“Yes!”

“The Many-Worlds form of quantum mechanics postulates the existence of other timelines.”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice. . .”

“As far as I know, you can’t visit them,” Llewellyn said.

“Well, we did. Even the . . . trip to this other . . . timeline was strange. It was like that hermit’s cave in Ethiopia.”

“When you were looking for the Ark of the Covenant?”

“Yes, that uncanny feeling . . . of . . . of ecstasy or infinity. They said it was the *spirit world*. I’ve seen weird in my day, but aliens who can alter space and time is a whole different flavor of weird.”

“*Aliens?* What did they want from you?”

She explained.

“*Your absurd life?*” Llewellyn smiled, hugging her. “You’re my fearless Lara Croft.”

“I’m not a cartoon character, honey. And I’m not feeling very fearless today.”

“You’ve traveled the Middle East, Africa, Tibet,” Llewellyn murmured. “Lived among Tuareg tribesmen in Mali and monks in the Himalayas. This could be the greatest adventure of your life. Of *our* lives.”

“*Our* lives? Your idea of roughing it is slow room-service.”

“Our sabbaticals are beginning soon. I want to go along and . . . and see what you do, be *part* of it. If it means living in a tent and sleeping on the ground, so be it. I’ll be your assistant. And I could work on *p*-adic Hilbert schemes without distractions.”

“I’ll never see those two . . . people again,” Andromeda sighed. “If I do, I’ll say yes to them. We sure as *hell* could use the ten million dollars.”

“They gave you ten thousand dollars just to *listen* to their pitch?” Llewellyn said.

“Yes. I say we go to the most obscenely expensive restaurant in town. A place with heel-clicking, French-speaking waiters in monkey suits.”

“I have nothing to wear.”

“We’ll go as we are. Our money’s as good as anyone’s.”