



Living History

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Ben Essex

“Eripuit Coelo fulmen, mox Sceptra Tyrannis.”

(“He seized the lightning from Heaven and the sceptre from Tyrants.”)

-Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, regarding Benjamin Franklin. March 1778.

“So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.”

-Benjamin Franklin, 1817.

I’m flat on my back, and there’s a life flashing before my eyes.

Around me, windows rattle. The floor is shaking-the whole world’s falling to pieces. I’m on a broken train, and it’s kicking itself apart with stress and strain. It could go off the rails at any moment.

The stupid powder wig feels heavy on my head. My clothes are tight; britches and frills soggy with sweat. Behind me, the carriage doors are forced open and five men in body armour burst in. Their heads are helmeted, their eyes are unsympathetic and some of them are bleeding. They’ve just been through a battle.

The armoured men part, and someone else steps up. He’s not dressed like them, not at all. He has a great frilly beard and a tall top-hat. His clothes are immaculately tailored, coloured black. Unlike me, he doesn’t have a belly.

His face is stern and somewhat goat-like. One of his eyebrows seems permanently raised.

‘I’m sorry, Ben,’ says the man who looks exactly like Abraham Lincoln. ‘But honestly, how did you think this was going to end?’

The men advance, weapons lit with crackling blue fire. Some of them also have batons.

I tense.

So let's review. I'm here, in the body of Benjamin Franklin, about to get my brains beaten out. I could ask myself why_? but I know the answer._

Because I had a deadline.

I close my eyes.

And at that moment, dinosaurs attack.

My real name is Jacob White. I used to have a real body. It was tall and gangly and plain looking, but it was *mine*.

I used to have a real job, too. I worked for the Applied Fundamentals Division of The Salmon Corporation.

What does an Applied Fundamentals Division do? I don't really know-no one does. Applied Fundamentals is a warehouse department, a dumping ground for whatever projects the company can't fit elsewhere. Getting to work in Applied is actually quite a big deal. It means the company considers you smart enough, flexible enough and above all unscrupulous enough to turn your hand to whatever their latest vague and seedy project might be.

The Salmon Corporation is not the most above-board company in the world. Actually, it's run by the Mafia. I'm not sure precisely which Mafia, since they don't exactly give out business cards. Wait, that's a lie. They actually do give out business cards, but the cards don't go into specifics.

The day my deadline came, I got a business card.

It was a Tuesday. 09:23 A.M. I was late for work.

This was in no way unusual for me. My lovely little box-apartment was located on the other side of the city, behind the metro-lines. Getting to the office every morning was a bit of a hike, especially to a man like me-that is to say, a lazy man.

Usually, my tardiness wasn't a problem. I was high enough up in the department to be sure nobody was going to call me out... except for this particular Tuesday, when I got hauled into my manager's office and glared at by beady eyes behind little wireframe glasses.

I had a lot of managers. I'd never seen this one before. He was a fat man with sausage fingers.

The Fat Man sat behind his desk. It was nice desk in, and it was in a nice room. There were potted plants.

'Your attendance could use some work, Mr. White,' I was told.

'Yes sir,' I nodded. I didn't get promoted up to Applied without knowing how to work the system a little bit. Suck up to your superiors, bark at your inferiors. If necessary, grant sexual favours.

'I hope you're not having any kind of trouble at home, Mr. White?'

'No sir,' I shook my head. 'Everything is A-OK, sir.'

'Good,' the Fat Man grunted. 'Well, just in case, take my card. If anything is bothering you give me a call, it'll be dealt with. We at The Salmon Corp care about our employees, you know.'

'I know, sir.' He gave me the business card. It was laminated, and bore the Fat Man's name; Peter Greuze.

It'll be dealt with. I didn't want to ask for details, and I didn't want to take up that offer- *ever*, under any circumstances. The Corp does take care of its employees. Sometimes it flattens entire neighbourhoods to make life easier for them.

'Well,' Greuze coughed. 'Now that you are here, I want to give you your latest assignment in person. We have something rather special planned for Applied this year.'

'Oh yes, sir? That's exciting to hear.' I wasn't being flip. Special is exciting.

The Fat Man beamed. 'Indeed it is. You see, we've decided to expand the Corp's merchandising rights into hitherto unexplored areas. We want the rights to an American Presidents Action figure line.'

I nodded. Fair enough. Action figures seemed a little... small, though.

‘But we have certain concerns about image copyright. We want to make sure the Presidents’ images are all exclusively *ours*. For that, they’ll need to sign certain contracts.’

The Fat Man could see my blossoming disbelief. This was bigger, all right.

‘That’ll be your job, Mr. White. We want you to start resurrecting Presidents. All ninety three of them.’

Technically, there have been ninety-four Presidents. However, the ninety-fourth (President Huey Jackson II) was only in office for a grand total of forty-seven seconds before his office exploded, so people tend to ignore him. Since Jackson II, the institution has fallen sharply from grace. Nobody pays much attention to the Presidency anymore.

Greuze’s task was certainly something to dwell on.

Walking through a bad neighbourhood at a bad time of night, I lost myself in daydreams of Presidents past. I didn’t need to worry about being murdered or robbed or anything like that-the little salmon symbol on my jacket kept all the lowlifes at a distance.

On the horizon, there were fires. A police helicopter was tumbling through the sky, tracing a rapid path back down to earth. On its way, it clipped a shiny skyscraper; I had to wince. Even if the pilot survived that crash, he was going to be in trouble. The skyscrapers were supposed to stay shiny at all times-very rich people have paid some very big guns to *keep* them shiny at all times. In the city of America Little, you respect your janitors.

America Little doesn’t really live up to its name. It’s enormous; it spans two coasts and all the land in between. It’s not quite up to the scale of America Large below, but Large is mostly artificial oil fields.

I took the subway in the direction of home, spent the ride chatting to a couple of prostitutes. They wanted to know what working for the Corp was like. I exaggerated a little bit, because I like to impress people. What? We all like to impress people.

My apartment was horribly cramped, which was exactly how I wanted it. I could’ve afforded a much swankier, up-town place-or at least, a slightly

swankier, mid-town place-but all that space would just encourage me to clutter. I had what I needed: A few desks, a few drawers, and not enough floor to sprawl on.

That night, I slept to the soothing rattle of the metro-tracks outside. *Still* trying to wrap my brain around the Fat Man's order.

Resurrect all the Presidents.

For a *few* of them that would be easy enough. That is to say, all the ones recently buried. Their bones would provide just enough bio-matter to extract a halfway decent clone. The Corp performed such resurrections fairly regularly, usually in cases of criminal prosecution. Murder trials tend to collapse when the victim turns up alive again, even if only for a couple of hours.

But the Founding Fathers? Everyone pre-Millennium? They'd been dead for *ages*. What was I supposed to do, invent a Time Machine? Applied had already tried that. The dry-cleaning bills were ridiculous.

All right. Think about this. You're a smart man.

I just needed inspiration.

That was when dinosaurs attacked.

Nobody's quite sure where the dinosaurs came from. Even Applied can't say for certain that *we* invented them, although it's possible. The most convincing rumour says that they were manufactured by some Fast Food chain as part of an incredibly elaborate advertising campaign. Chinese whispers aside, the creatures now constitute the city's foremost pest control issue.

Most of them are harmless, not to mention cute. Little blue and green lizards sitting outside restaurants, begging for scraps. They're sort of like kittens.

The Raptors, on the other hand, are a pain. Apparently, real Velociraptors were small and fairly timid. Whoever engineered *these* monstrosities had no head for historical accuracy. In my life, Raptors are big. They're mean, they're fast, and they can pick locks.

Some of them fly.

‘Shit!’ I yelled constructively, as a small group of the buggers broke into my flat. Three forced open the door; one barged in through the window. The former were classical Raptors, long tails and gnashing jaws. The latter looked similar, except it had wings tacked onto its back. Genetic engineering can do crazy things.

The Raptors hunt in packs; stalking via shadows. They generally pick their prey at random, except... *did I have BBQ sauce with my lunch?* Yes, I did. *Stupid me.* For reasons unknown, the smell of BBQ sauce attracts them. They can sense it miles away.

The creatures surrounded me. Claws clicking, heads cocked. The flying Raptor was stumbling about, making a mess. Its wings were too small for the tiny apartment.

I backed up, toward the kitchen counter.

The reptiles hissed, flaring gigantic nostrils. Long necks extended, and I could see salivating tongues as they crept steadily closer. About to pounce...

I thrashed for the nearest drawer and yanked out my taser Gauntlet. A hail of spatulas clattered around me.

Gauntlets look flimsy, like gloves made from copper wire. Don’t let the fragile appearance fool you; they’re deadly weapons. Pointing at the dinosaurs, I clicked twin thumb triggers. Bursts of electricity flew out from my hands; arcs of lightning. Flashes of blue tore through the room-my own little thunderstorm.

I released the triggers, and the storm stopped. The dinosaurs fell, flesh sizzling. Quite dead.

Gauntlets are an Applied product. I didn’t invent them, but I did make them extra-dangerous. Nowadays every cop carries one and every criminal owns four.

‘Crap,’ I reflected, poking the nearest dinosaur with my foot. The last thing I wanted to do was lug five reptile corpses all the way across town to the dump, especially at this time of night.

I decided to go and get something to eat instead.

Derry's was about ten minutes walk from my front door. The food was generally worth it.

Nestled between street corner and curb, the restaurant was a fairly well-kept local secret. A dull exterior served up poor expectations.

The interior, on the other hand, was a thing of beauty. Serious money had been spent-it was definitely plush. Red lanterns hung over blue tables, fluorescent bars of every colour ribbing the walls. Every chair was a sculpture, every lamp a work of art. There were even water features.

Still, all that shine simply hid a different kind of dirt. I recognised a couple of patrons from 'Most Wanted' posters. There was generally at least one kidnap victim huddled at the corner table, being pressed into an uncomfortable meal.

A brilliant blue lizard flashed over my feet, chasing after a cockroach. The dinosaurs *here* had been repainted to match the decor, and trained to earn their keep. I watched them distrustfully.

Derry herself was behind the counter, yelling at chefs. Her face was round and kindly, which somehow made her temper all the more terrifying. She twirled her moustache with villainous abandon.

'Jasie!' The moment she saw me, Derry smiled. We'd known each other forever-we didn't grow up far apart. 'What can I get you?'

'The usual.' Broth.

'Coming up,' Derry grinned. 'You bring something for me?'

'Raptor meat,' I told her. 'Five big heaps. Think you can do something with it?'

'Fried or crisped?'

'Both.'

'Hmmm.' Derry bit her bottom lip. 'I could probably whip something together with that. I'm guessing you don't have it with you?'

'My apartment.' I tossed her the keys.

‘I’ll send a courier.’ She tossed the keys to one of her boys.

‘Tell them not to touch anything.’

‘Please,’ Derry said. ‘My kids know better than that. So, my man, what’ve you been up to?’ She leant on the counter, apparently oblivious to all the customers who weren’t me. ‘Haven’t seen you here in longer than usual.’

‘Busy busy,’ I shrugged. ‘You know me.’

‘Hardly ever.’

I smiled. ‘Say, Derry. You know much about history?’

‘Got a degree in it.’

I blinked. I didn’t recall Derry having an education. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ Derry nodded. ‘I mean, it’s not *my* degree. I downloaded it a couple of years ago for a laugh.’

‘For a laugh?’

‘On a bet.’

‘Oh.’

‘Why’d you ask?’

‘I’ve got this, uh, project,’ I waved my hands vaguely. ‘I think I might need to know some history.’

‘Well, five loads of Raptor probably does buy you more favours than a free meal.’ Derry clicked her tongue. ‘Tell you what, come by my place later. I’ll see if I can help you out.’

That night, I went to Derry’s apartment. We had a little bit of sex, mostly out of habit. It was quite nice.

Afterwards, she showed me her history degree.

Cybernetics had always been Derry's passion. Implants, body-shopping, augmentation, that sort of stuff. When she was little, she had a blue LED installed in her right eye for no particular reason. It's a phase some kids go through.

Thus, her apartment was filled with Neuro-interface clamps, Virtual Reality Headsets, Holographic Immersion pads; some of it quite high-end stuff, some of it quite nasty looking. Apparently, the restaurant business could fund some pretty serious hobbies.

Her history degree had been downloaded straight from the internet, through a jack cable and into her skull. Not being one for shoving relays into the brain myself, I asked her if she could get me a more tangible copy.

'Sure thing, Jasie,' she said. 'But you've really got to stop being such a prude.'

Derry plugged herself into the mesh of circuitry taking up most of her living room, and spent a long moment doing what I can only describe as writhe. Apparently, VR provides the ultimate high. Personally, I don't see the *point* of the ultimate high. Eventually, you're going to have to come back down to Earth.

After a while, Derry emerged from the web of wire clutching a small crystal disc. The wafer thin speck was pressed into my hands.

'Here,' she said, a little flushed. 'I think I got everything out of my head.'

'Thanks, Derry.'

'You know, it'd be easier to experience it for yourself than to read about it on a screen,' she said, pointedly. 'So I've left all the VR access tabs enabled.'

'That's nice, Derry, but I'm not going to-'

'Aw, come on, Jasie,' Derry grinned at me, moustache creasing upward. 'History's no fun on paper. Try living in the past for a couple of hours.'

Reading up on the nation's Founding Fathers, I couldn't help but feel that some of the stories might have been just a little bit exaggerated.

For instance, the tale of George Washington defeating the English Hordes at

Olde New York. Of course Washington was an excellent General, but it didn't seem realistic that he could've killed five hundred enemy men single-handedly. Also, the portrayal of foreign countries struck me as simplistic at best. Was Spain's sole contribution to history really the invention of cannibalism? Surely treachery was not universal amongst the Ancient French? And let's be honest-everyone knows the Swiss penchant for neutrality. But it didn't seem likely that they'd once banned every colour other than beige.

Click❖s are a modern problem. Since the Great Collapse, every country on Earth has had a particular national stereotype, and all the history books have been altered to make it seem forever-so. I suppose it's an attempt to make things less confusing for children.

Of all the stories, the most inflated was the biography of Benjamin Franklin. I refused to believe that any one individual could be responsible for inventions ranging from the light-bulb to electricity to the concept of yellow. There had to be some distortion in there somewhere.

But as I sat alone in my bed, reading over all those great stories of all those great men, I couldn't help wonder... what were they like? How did they live? How close were they to the legends they inspired? The Founders-they had a whole mountain carved out in their image. What must a man do to earn that kind of respect?

A few hours later, I was back on Derry's doorstep. It was four in the morning. Getting her to answer the door was a challenge.

'Jesus, Jasie.' Her yawn was a roar. 'What do you want?'

'You were right.' I pushed into her flat without thinking-I'm allowed to do that. I couldn't help noticing that all of her VR equipment was still up and running. Maybe she hadn't been asleep after all.

I held up the little data-crystal. 'I do want to see it for myself. Derry. I want to meet them.'

The virtual world is tingly.

Experiencing it involves sensory aphasia; an enforced departure of mind from body. It makes your nerves all fluttery, makes everything go loose and light. It's

a bit like being comfortably drunk-not hammered, but slightly more than tipsy. You get used to it.

I was standing in a room.

Derry wasn't with me. She went back to bed; told me to knock myself out with her equipment.

I felt queasy. The last stages of uploading are like a mental dry-heave. The tingling is briefly supplanted by internal retching-then equilibrium returns.

I was standing in a room.

It was a simple room. Nice furniture-all wooden and antique. Crimson drapes. A desk, with a window looking out onto nothing in particular. Literally, nothing in particular-a flood of blinding daylight was blotting out the view, overexposing it into nothingness. Probably so the server didn't have to worry about rendering too many extra details.

Sitting at the desk was a man-a big man, quite rotund. Head balding, remaining white hair grown long to compensate. Glasses balanced over a wide nose, jaw curved. He was wearing a frilly shirt and a ruffled waistcoat. The man had an aura of kindness about him; his glance instilled instant trust. There was a knowing sharpness behind his eyes; signs of a soul wise and a little bit mercurial.

The virtual Benjamin Franklin was writing-or rather sketching-with a quill pen. It looked like he was in the process of scribing some kind of blueprint for... what looked like a stove, or fireplace. *Okay, I thought, this is getting ridiculous. Is there anything this man did not invent?*

Franklin did nothing for a while, apparently ignorant of my presence. Then, quite suddenly, he looked up. His expression indicated he'd been aware of me the entire time.

'Yes?' He said pertly. 'Can I help you with anything?'

He wasn't surprised to see me, of course. The simulation would be programmed to absorb my presence. For some reason, I felt a little bit unnerved. *It's only a low-level Sim, I told myself. He's a very simple program, not even nearly alive.*

Still, nothing about the man-shaped thing before me seemed the slightest bit fake.

This is why I don't like VR.

I took a seat.

‘Mr Franklin-Ben. Can I call you Ben?’

‘At this early stage of our relationship, I would just as soon you did not.’

‘Fair enough,’ I smiled. *Oh my God, I'm actually intimidated by a Simulacra.*
‘Sir, in that case... I want you to tell me all about your life.’

‘Ah.’ Ben smiled. ‘A biographer. About time one arrived, I think. All right then, Mr-‘

‘Mr. White.’

‘Hmmm.’ Ben grunted. ‘All right then, Mr. White. Let's start at the beginning.’

‘He didn't even *graduate* from the school-he was supposed to go into the Church, but he was so smart that he managed to get out of that, he was married twice to women who, if I do say so myself, were *very* nice for their time... he travelled all over the place, I mean, he was practically-‘

‘All right,’ Derry snapped. ‘You're going to have to shut up about Benjamin Fucking Franklin right about *now*, or I'm going to kill you.’

‘Sorry,’ I said shyly. ‘Am I gushing?’

‘Like the cheapest whore I've ever met,’ Derry said.

We were having dinner-at my place, for a change. I cooked, as a thank you to Derry for installing some VR equipment in my room.

‘He's just... a remarkable man, Derry. They're *all* remarkable men. People like that aren't born anymore.’

‘Sure they are,’ Derry shrugged. ‘We just kill them off early.’

‘That’s even worse.’

‘I really don’t see why you’re so impressed,’ Derry said. ‘They were just a bunch of elderly, white, slave-owning men who happened to be both not stupid and not in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m just as good as them. *You’re* just as good as them.’

‘Neither of us,’ I pointed out, ‘invented *electricity*.’

‘He didn’t *invent* electricity...’

‘It’s amazing, Derry-to think I’m going to play a part in bringing these men back to life...’

I stopped, and dropped my fork. *Oh, crap.*

‘“Bringing these men back to life,” ‘ Derry echoed, gaping. ‘*That’s* your project.’

‘I don’t suppose you could forget I ever said that?’

‘My God, J, *why?*’

‘Merchandising.’

‘*Merchandising?*’

‘It’s that kind of world.’

Derry was taken aback. ‘Uh... I mean... wow. How are you going to do it?’

‘That’s Stage Three.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Stage Three is working out how to do it. Stage One is assimilating the enormity of what I have to do. I’m still at Stage One.’

‘What’s Stage Two?’

‘Inspiration magically striking me.’ I rubbed my teeth together-an anxious habit.

‘If only they hadn’t messed up that stupid time machine...’

‘Why don’t you just use the Simulacra?’

I stared at Derry. ‘What?’

‘Why don’t you just use the Personality Simulations from the VR degree I gave you? Download a Sim, find something to use as a brain, stick them together in a cloned body, and bang. You’ve got a walking, talking historical figure. Or as good as.’

I considered this. But... ‘The Personality Simulations are very simple, though. They’re just designed to educate you about the subject’s life. Their responses are all pre-programmed.’

‘So?’ Derry shrugged. ‘You’re pretty smart. Can’t you make them a little more real?’

I thought for a moment.

Yes.

I could.

Stage Two.

‘What are you doing, young man?’

I was pottering around Virtual Ben Franklin’s virtual office, poking things. Occasionally, I’d stick my hand through a wall and come out with a string of numbers.

‘Oh, don’t mind me,’ I told him. ‘I’m just re-writing your program code.’

The virtual copy of Benjamin Franklin blinked, confused. ‘I see.’

‘I don’t actually need to be in here to do it,’ I added, knowing he wouldn’t understand me. ‘I just thought we could chat while I worked.’

A string of ones took flight with a string of zeroes, bouncing around the room and out the window.

‘I see,’ Franklin repeated carefully. ‘What about?’

I considered. ‘What’s the first thought that comes into your head?’

‘I was born on the date-‘

‘No, no, no,’ I cut him off. ‘Not part of your biography. That’s the problem I’m trying to fix-we’re going to see if we can’t get a new first thought in your head.’

‘I see.’

‘So, Mr. Franklin.’ The trick was getting exactly the right balance. I had to make the Franklin Program *seem* intelligent without actually *being* intelligent. I didn’t want him able to outsmart me, but people would have to believe that he might. ‘Why don’t you tell me how you feel about... creativity in invention?’

‘I think it should be celebrated. I think it should be embraced. I think invention should be the prerogative of all men and in priority or not. And...’

‘Go on.’

‘I think I like to invent things. I think it is... an enjoyable activity.’

Excellent, I grinned. A small demonstration of personhood. He had passed the first test.

There was a long road ahead, but still.

This was going to work.

That’s what I told my bosses.

And that’s what I told my colleagues.

And that’s what I told myself.

Turned out, I wasn’t *completely* wrong.

Unfortunately, at the time I was so sure of myself that I even self-imposed a deadline. To the Fat Man himself.

‘You’re sure you can be ready so quickly?’ Peter Greuze asked, from behind his gigantic desk.

‘Oh yes, sir. I can have your first model ready to go in two weeks. An actual, factual, walking-talking Ben Franklin.’

‘I see.’ The Fat Man wrinkled his brow. ‘And why would I want one of those?’

I was thrown by the question. ‘But-you assigned me-‘

‘I asked you to resurrect the *Presidents*. Ben Franklin was never President.’

‘Yes, he was!’

The Fat Man glared at me.

‘Trust me, Mr. White. I know my history.’

‘But... my sources...’

‘Let me guess. You were studying from one of those Download Degrees you get online? They’re always riddled with error. No, Mr. White. Ben Franklin was never, in my opinion, Presidential Material.’

I felt vaguely insulted. Of *course* that man was Presidential material. This feeling was quickly drowned out by the depression sinking through my stomach. *Damn you, Derry...*

‘However,’ Greuze abruptly added, ‘we were eventually planning to merchandise other historical figures anyway. So I suppose your mistake is not completely without virtue. Tell you what, White. You get us a working Franklin in two weeks, and we’ll pretend everything is happening exactly as it should. Deal?’

Oh, thank God. ‘Deal.’

‘But *two weeks*, White. One day more, and your head is on the line. Understand?’

Gulp.

‘Yes, sir.’

Did I mention that Applied has a very high staff turnover? That’s because the best and the brightest work best under pressure. Lots of pressure.

When Greuze says something like: “Your head is on the line,” he *really* means it. There’s a lot of room for demotion in my department. Some people have been demoted all the way down to Organ Donor.

You get one mistake.

This was my first.

Twelve days later, I made my second.

And once again Derry found me thumping on her door at a stupid hour of the morning.

She started to yell, then saw my expression.

‘Jasie. What’s wrong?’

I began to shake my head and gibber. This went on for some time. In the end, Derry pulled me inside and administered some coherence via an industrial strength cup of coffee.

‘Calm down, J, calm down. Talk straight.’

‘I can’t do it,’ I blurted. ‘It can’t be done. I lost everything. Oh God, get me a drink with some alcohol in it...’

‘What do you mean, you lost everything?’ Derry demanded. ‘And there’s bourbon in the coffee.’

‘I suppose I haven’t technically lost it yet,’ I babbled. ‘But give them a couple of days and oh yes, they’ll take it away from me. Starting with my legs, for tradition. Then probably my liver, or whatever else is valuable, working their way up-’

‘J, it’s late, I’m tired, and you’re talking nonsense. Will you please just calm

down and explain things to me properly, before I crack your head open and scoop out the information for myself?’

‘All right. All right.’

I took a couple of deep breaths.

‘I don’t know what happened, exactly.’ I said. ‘I was programming. I was programming just like normal-everything was going fine... everything was going great, actually. I was ahead of schedule, Derry. Way ahead. And then...’

‘And then what?’

‘I don’t know! It all crashed! All my data, all my backups. There was some kind of massive system failure. I must’ve... I don’t know what I must’ve done. I lost everything.’ My teeth chattered. ‘I lost *everything*.’

‘Can’t you redo it? Retrace your work?’

‘Not all of it! Not in two days!’

‘Surely you can get an extension.’ Derry bit her bottom lip. ‘I mean, your boss was pretty harsh to give you a two week deadline...’

‘I asked for it.’

‘You *asked* for a *two week* deadline?’

‘Forgive me for having a healthy ego,’ I snapped. ‘It seemed like it was going to turn into a pretty easy project.’

‘Okay.’ Derry began pacing. She was starting to get just as freaked out as me. ‘Okay, let’s be sensible. We’re smart. We can fix this.’

‘How?’

‘You’re not *helping*.’

‘This is all your fault, you know. Your idea.’

‘Fine then, *I’m* the smart one.’

‘It was going to be so simple,’ I twitched, digging my fingers into the sofa. ‘I’d have it all done by tomorrow. I’d upload the Ben Sim into his body a day earlier, spend the afternoon playing chess. You know he was the first chess player in America? Oh, God...’

Derry’s head snapped up. ‘Upload him into his body? What body?’

‘We’ve got a cloned shell waiting in the lab,’ I waved my hands. ‘Engineered to look as much like Ben Franklin as possible. Pointless now.’

Derry was twirling her moustache. She had a particular kind of look on her face, a *Stage Two* kind of look.

She was always better at ideas than me. I’m an execution man. If she didn’t like her restaurant so much, the woman’d be high-up in Applied by now.

‘This body,’ Derry said. ‘Can you show me?’

I took her across town, to see the lab. Why not?

The Salmon Corporation is a building, tall and plain as any other—a skyscraper with glass skirt-tails. Three miles below, there is a basement.

The basement is a square kilometre in size, and that’s the lab.

It’s all carved from chrome and polished glass; Perspex cages lining the walls, plastic screens and chemical cabinets everywhere. Room after antiseptic room, each one devoted to a more baffling design. Half-built robots and mysterious machines stand by lumps of bubbling flesh and vats of half-green liquid. All sorts of things for all sorts of reasons; details on a need to know basis. The whole place smells of carpet cleaner, despite the lack of carpet.

Getting Derry in was easy. My security clearance was only moderate, but a couple of well placed bribes served to jack it up a notch or two.

We walked together through the subterranean corridors.

‘So,’ Derry said, unimpressed. ‘*This* is where you work.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Funny. I always pictured something less... shiny.’

I wasn’t really in the mood for conversation.

Eventually, we reached my workden-my “office,” I suppose. As one of the larger Sub-Labs, it was positively cavernous. So big that it was always cold; every breath turned to fog, drifting off in little clouds.

Great tubes hung down from the ceiling, each one filled with liquid. A few also contained half-grown organs, suspended in goo. Spinal cords, skeletons and the occasional beating heart.

In the middle of it all was my baby. Shining in the stark light, covered by cables-a naked body, rather plump, instantly recognisable. The Flesh Sculptors weren’t perfect, of course-they hadn’t got the nose quite right, and there was no hair (for some reason, cloning decent hair is difficult). But other than that, the illusion was unimpeachable. Benjamin Franklin was in the room with us.

‘Not bad,’ Derry said, circling the Clone Tank. ‘Not bad at all.’

‘Useless now,’ I muttered.

‘Not... not necessarily,’ Derry said. ‘What are you using for a brain?’

‘Complex Computer Processor. Bio-augmented tech.’

‘Generation?’

‘Third and Seventh.’

Derry stood for a second. Then said; ‘Yeah. I can make that work.’

I stared blankly.

‘Third and Seventh series aren’t perfect,’ she continued, prodding the tank, ‘but they’ll just about hold a human mind. It’s been done before.’

There was a short pause.

‘Derry,’ I said. ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘You have two days to get this thing working like a person, right?’ Derry asked.
‘Well, I can get it working like a person.’

‘What you’re suggesting... it’s very, very, *very* illegal.’

‘Since when does your Company care?’

‘This is one of those crimes they actually give a damn about,’ I hissed. ‘For religious reasons.’

‘Pfft, *religion*...’

‘Derry,’ I shook my head. I shook my whole *body*. ‘I don’t even know where to start.’

‘Trust me, it’s easy,’ Derry said. ‘I’ve done it before. It’s just data transfer and storage-that’s all brains do, that’s all computers do, and bridging the gap is child’s play. I can put *your* mind in *that* body and have it back out again whenever need be. No sweat.’

‘Why does it have to be *my* mind?’

‘Because this is your responsibility.’

‘But they don’t just want a body!’ I insisted. ‘They don’t want a lookalike! They want the real thing!’

‘Why isn’t a lookalike good enough for them?’

‘Oh gee, I don’t know Derry. Maybe because they’re perfectionists or just fucking *insane*!? Why don’t we go *ask* them!?’

‘Calm down,’ Derry hissed. ‘I know they want more than a lookalike, and that’s the other reason it has to be you. You have to convince them, Jasie.’

‘Convince them,’ I echoed.

‘You have to make them think that your experiment worked. You have to make them think that you’re *really* Ben Franklin brought to life. That’s the only way to keep you from being punished.’

‘But if they catch me...’

‘But if they *don’t*.’ Derry grabbed my arms, looking into my eyes with her big, beautiful blues. ‘I’ll go over your data, find out what you did wrong. I’ll get a working Franklin Sim up and running in a couple of weeks, I promise. But until then, you’ll have to carry the con.’

‘No. This is insane.’ I stepped back. ‘It’ll never work, it’s too... I’ll just confess. I’ll go and I’ll confess. I’ll tell them I screwed up. And...’

‘And even if they don’t do something horrible to you, you’ll be fired,’ Derry said coldly. ‘Best case scenario.’

‘What about ... *me*?’ At that moment, a tiny switch in the back of my head went *click*, and I knew two things. One-I would have to do it. And two-the personal pronoun problems were going to get serious. ‘My body, I mean, *this* body. What happens to it?’

‘We’ll keep it in my apartment, we’ll pretend you’re sick. As long as you’ve got the job done, I doubt that they’ll care.’

‘No. They won’t.’

‘We can do this, Jasie.’ She gripped my face, and kissed me softly. ‘I wouldn’t suggest it if we couldn’t.’

I smiled, quite without meaning to. I definitely wasn’t the slightest bit happy.

‘All right. We can do this.’

‘First things first,’ Derry said, braiding my hair with wires. ‘We need to plug you in.’

I was sitting in Derry’s bath.

I didn’t like Derry’s bath.

For one thing, it was dirty. She assured me everything was perfectly sterile, but it didn’t *look* clean. The porcelain was cracked, the shower-head was crooked and the taps were covered in grime.

Also, there were the rats.

The rats helped Derry out, and in return she sheltered them from the reptilian predators outside. She had them all fitted with little neural clamps; flashing blue and green lights, stapled to each rodent cranium. With these she could control them, use them as little four-legged helpers. Rats don't have opposable thumbs, but their jaws are strong and surprisingly delicate.

The rats never failed to freak me out. Watching them scuttle back and forth, trailing cables and hairless tails... all right, so they had fluffy fur and smelt of apricot. Derry kept them soaped and scrubbed. I still didn't trust the little buggers.

'Listen,' Derry stood over me, looking concerned. 'It's possible you're going to want to close your eyes for this bit.'

Behind her was a huge pile of electronic equipment. Most of it, I couldn't even begin to identify. Wires, baubles and three-pronged plugs. Sparkly things. Sharp things. I gulped.

'Uh, I think maybe I'll get something to eat and we can do this later-' I started to babble, stepping out of the bath. Not a little bit gently, Derry pushed me back in.

'Right,' I mumbled. 'Sorry.'

'Just relax. It's all going to go according to plan.'

She started shovelling electronic equipment into the bath. Goosebumps struck me skin. I smelled something acrid.

'Just lay back,' she told me. 'And-seriously- close your eyes.'

She was holding what appeared to be a small lawnmower attached to a giant meat cleaver.

I shut my eyes.

'Derry,' the thought suddenly occurred. 'I... I want to say thank you. I'd be dead without you. You're always here for me. And I-'

‘I need to use your mouth for the next part,’ she interrupted.

‘Oh. Okay.’

‘Open wide.’

I did so, and felt something bitty and sticky shoved down my throat. My oesophagus began to spasm, and I fought the urge to vomit.

My spinal cord made a bid for freedom, and my liver tried to burst.

Everything went black.

Darkness, and the place under darkness.

Two trains, passing in the night.

Two windows, just for one moment standing side by side.

And my reflection...

...Is behind me.

I opened my eyes, gasping.

Water rushed down my throat, tasting of salt.

I was floating, breathless. Arms flailing, starting to drown. Brain in shock, something telling me... wrong, *this is wrong*... arms too big, legs too short, heart too slow... trapped... my hands hitting glass... trapped in a tiny space, drowning in a tube... drowning... drowning... *what’s happening?*

From somewhere below, there was a hiss and a slurp. I felt myself falling, falling...

...Something beeped. The water went away.

‘Brain activity detected,’ came the gentle voice of a computer. ‘Emergency vent in progress.’

I felt the glass walls around me falling away, and saw water spilling out onto a

shiny floor. I flopped to the ground, rolling onto my back. Naked and vulnerable, my body refusing to respond to commands. My brain refusing to command properly.

Don't feel right.

I remembered why.

I am in the lab.

I tried to say the words out loud, but my throat would only croak.

I am in the lab, and I have to get back to Derry.

But for the moment, I could not move. Not on muscle.

So I stayed flat on my back, breathing heavily with someone else's heart.

I stumbled.

And fell.

And crawled back up, onto unsteady feet.

Over by the lab-door, I found a pile of clothes. Underneath it was an ID card. Convenient that they were here, I thought, then remembered vaguely: *Derry and I planned this*. We planted this stuff. *So I wouldn't have to walk outside naked. That's nice.*

My mind was still quite jumbled.

Obviously, the picture on the ID card wouldn't match my face anymore, but it'd be enough to get me past the electronic security. With any luck, the human security wouldn't pay too much attention to somebody going *out*.

The clothes didn't fit. It took several deep breathes to squeeze into them. Trouser legs too long, shirt like wearing a corset. In the end, I had to leave everything unbuttoned. Not very professional looking.

There was a white lab coat hanging by the door. That would do for a little extra cover-it was almost my size. I caught my reflection in a particularly shiny wall.

Buttoned up, I looked almost respectable.

I also looked like Ben Franklin.

I touched my face. It was squidgy. I touched my knee. Ten years ago, I fell off a bike and permanently scarred my right leg, shin to thigh. Naturally, the mark was gone.

My head swam. Every limb provided resistance-I had to work twice as hard to make them move. It was like walking through syrup.

I got out of the lab, onto the street, and prayed for a quiet night. This would not be a good time to get mugged.

Somehow, I found a cab. The little yellow car stood anchored by the roadside, dirty engine spewing smoke. The driver gave me a funny look, as if trying to recognise my face.

I told him Derry's apartment number. I told him to drive. I ignored his attempts at conversation.

Peering out of the cab window, the whole world came across as an indistinct blur. Abruptly, I realised why I'd been stumbling. *Short-sighted. I need glasses.*

My body kept doing things I didn't expect. Hands twitching. Pulse different. You ever think about your pulse? You ever really notice it? You will if it starts changing pace, trust me.

The cab stopped. I reached Derry's home, found my way inside. Mostly pushed past her; just kept going straight for the bathroom.

I had to see him... I had to see *me*. My own body, my *real* body.

There it was, in the cracked porcelain tub; covered in tubes, being scurried over by creepy cybernetic rats.

It was like looking into a mirror, except infinitely more realistic. No. Not like a mirror. Like a madman's portrait, covered in rust.

I always thought my jaw was wider than that. I never realised I was so thin.

Irrationally, I reached a hand down-

-Derry grabbed it.

‘It’s very important,’ she said, ‘that you don’t touch anything.’

I nodded, clearing my throat. Still trying to get the hang of my voice. It came out in gasps and rasps.

‘I can go back at anytime?’ I managed to ask.

‘You need to give me a couple of hours notice,’ she replied.

I nodded.

‘Now for the hard part.’

Derry pulled a data-disc from her pocket.

‘This is all the reasonably reliable, reasonably legitimate data on Benny Boy that I could find.’

‘Reasonably?’

‘You didn’t give me long to work, J,’ She said, scratching her head. ‘Now. Let’s get down to learning your new life story. You’ve got a lot of people to convince.’

Apparently, Ben Franklin used to play the guitar.

I still can’t quite believe that.

The next day, I strode into work.

In full costume.

I don’t know where Derry found the clothes. She probably ordered them online-fast track delivery. Whatever she did, I couldn’t disapprove. I looked *good*. More importantly, I looked *accurate*.

Frilly shirt. Puffy collar. Little glasses. A white wig stuck firmly to my head. I kept a kind, knowing half-smile active at all times. It made me look smarter.

It was the middle of the day, and so the lobby of the Salmon Corp was crowded. Shiny boots trod the shiny floor as workers bustled back and forth, some descending down to the lab, donning white coats on the way-others in suits and ties, ascending up to middle-management.

‘Excuse me, sir.’ I was stopped by two security guards. Large heads bulged out of pastel-blue uniforms, looking me up and down.

‘Do you work here, sir?’ One guard asked.

‘I do.’ I remembered myself. ‘Not. I do not. But I am supposed to be here.’

The security men exchanged a look-then they started moving, ready to throw me out overarm. I raised my hands to stop them.

‘Wait!’ I proffered a square of laminated card and a data-disc. ‘Wait. I am authorised. I am here on behalf of Jacob White. He sent me with his ID card.’

I showed them.

‘And this disc... this disc has a message for Peter Greuze. I can wait here while you deliver it. When Greuze sees it, he’ll also want to see me.’

Look calm. Look commanding. You’re Ben Franklin. Ben Franklin (probably) wasn’t afraid of anything.

But I’m not Ben Franklin, and my heart is racing...

I kept my gaze steady.

Begrudgingly, one of the security men snatched the disc. I could tell what he was thinking: *Yes, this man in funny clothes could be some nut... or he could be something important.* You never knew with The Salmon Corporation.

‘Wait here,’ I was ordered. ‘Or else.’

I waited.

Heart racing, heart racing, heart racing...

It seemed to take an age for the security men to come back.

‘Mr. Greuze says you can come in,’ I was told.

The data-disc contained a pre-recorded message, made by me and Derry just before the body swap. It was essentially just me monologueing to a camera, explaining that I had, through sheer effort and hard work, managed to effectively resurrect Benjamin Franklin. Of course, the entire affair had been explained to the new Franklin, who seemed surprisingly agreeable. I had wanted to accompany him into the office myself but, unfortunately, I’d just been shot...

That last part was Derry’s idea; the only kind of sick-leave the Corporation would readily buy. A bullet hole in the leg. Not serious enough to be permanently debilitating, not mild enough to shrug off in a day or two

She did actually shoot me in the leg, by the way. So she could zoom the camera up on the freshly bandaged wound, to make things more “believable.” It hurt like hell, until she gave me some drugs to make the pain go away. ‘After all,’ she’d said, ‘I can have these legs all fixed up far before you actually need to *use* them again.’

She was sure that Peter Greuze would buy the story. I wasn’t.

He did.

And so I found myself in the Fat Man’s office, watching my own leg-wound on digital playback.

‘A remarkable man, that Mr. White,’ the Fat Man was mumbling. ‘Remarkable.’

‘Indeed he is.’

‘Always gets the job done. To be commended. I’m sure he’ll be back to work soon enough-it’s only a leg wound, barely broken flesh. It was very responsible of him to make sure you got here. He *did* make sure, I assume?’

‘Chaperones and cab-fare.’

‘Good. That man knows how to keep a deadline, which is *very* important around here. But enough about our inconsequential little worker drones.’

Something inside me tightened; I kept the indignation down. Greuze interlaced

his fingers. 'Let's talk about you.'

'What about me?'

Should I be speaking more old-fashioned? Should I use 'ye?' Did anybody actually use 'ye' ever?_ _

Stop thinking stupid thoughts.

'For one thing, Mr. Franklin, you appear to be taking your... re-actualisation... extremely well.'

Crap. I should act more freaked out.

'Ah,' I covered, 'I was unnerved at first, but your Mr. White calmed me down. Explained the situation.'

'And you were able to understand it?'

Be prissy. He's insulting your intellect.

'Of course.'

'Hmm.' The Fat Man looked at his hands. 'Truth be told, Mr. White was somewhat exceeding his bounds by taking you home. I suppose he values the personal touch. But regardless, I'm afraid we won't be able to allow you out of this facility again for a little while?'

'What?'

'You see, we're going to have to run some tests. The rule is that you must be psychologically and physiologically identical to our profiles of Benjamin Franklin, as close to indistinguishable as possible.'

'Fair enough.' I took a deep breath.

'Otherwise, you're just another expendable clone.'

Expendable. I tried not to catch the implied threat.

'And it seems to me,' the Fat Man smiled, 'that we might as well begin at once.'

‘Who was your travelling partner to Paris in September 1767?’

‘John Pringle. Sir John Pringle. My usual partner.’

What kind of name is “John Pringle,” anyway? It sounds like a snack-food.

‘What was your proposed motto for the declaration of independence?’

Something about tyrants. Something about God. Uh...

‘*“Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God”*’

‘By what ratio were you elected president of Pennsylvania?’

‘Unanimous.’

‘How did you feel about George Washington?’

I paused. They had me in a sparse room, hooked up to all manner of lie-detector machines. Polygraph hands wavered and heart-rate monitors beeped. Fooling these machines was not difficult; all one had to do was remain calm, and it’s surprisingly easy to keep the body tranquil when you’re still getting the hang of *using* it.

The factual questions were easy to answer. Derry and I had stayed up all night cross-checking autobiographies; we’d taken great care compiling a history that at least sounded accurate. But feelings? Emotions? Few of Franklin’s own words had survived free of gross misinterpretation. *Nobody* knew how he felt.

‘*In that case,*’ Derry had advised, ‘*answer however the hell you like. But try to make it sound authentic.*’

‘He was a good, even great man,’ I said, ‘an excellent leader and an inspiration to befriend. However, he did tend to drink a bit too much.’

The white-coated scientists looked up from their clipboards. From the corner of the room, Peter Greuze said:

‘Really?’

‘Very much so.’

The Fat Man shook his head, and lit a cigarette. The questioning resumed.

‘List your thirteen virtues.’

‘Temperance, Quiet, Order, Resolution, Fragility, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Chastity and Humility. And Tranquillity, of course.’

It took me *hours* to memorise those, in the correct order. Yes, there was a correct order.

‘And how well did you yourself embody these values?’

‘Well.’ I crinkled my face modestly. ‘I don’t try to work them all at once. One a week, every week, and getting a little better each time.’

‘Do you believe in God, Mr. Franklin?’

‘Of course. But I prefer to call him “the Infinite.” ‘

‘Okay,’ the Fat Man suddenly spoke up. ‘That’s enough. Everybody out of the room.’

Accordingly the scientists fled, leaving me alone with the rounded spectre of Peter Greuze. Still connected up to the polygraph machines, I couldn’t afford to let my heart spike. I concentrated on keeping myself calm. *Tranquillity. Tranquillity. Tranquillity.*

‘All right, Mr. Franklin,’ Greuze said. ‘I admit I’m still a little bit sceptical. More than a little bit, in fact. *But* you seem to have answered all our questions honestly and without flaw, and you certainly look the part.’

‘Thank you,’ I inclined my head slightly.

‘I really would like to know exactly *how* Mr. White managed to do it. He was so vague about his plan, about your exact nature. Why, you could be anything. You might even be the real thing.’

‘I like to think I am. And I do agree,’ I couldn’t resist, ‘Mr. White is very clever.’

‘Well, you can tell him so yourself.’

‘Quite.’

‘While we’re meeting with him.’

‘Excuse me?’

Beep. My heart rate skipped. Greuze pretended not to notice. Knowing I couldn’t afford another such mistake, I started slowly and subtly unplugging myself from the machines; gently pulling electrodes off my head.

‘We’re going to see Mr. White,’ said the Fat Man. ‘You and me. Now.’

‘But...’ *Keep. It. Together.* I smiled to cover my anxiety. ‘He was shot.’

‘Just a leg-wound. Caught in a gang crossfire. So obviously he can’t come into work, but doesn’t mean we can’t visit him. I have many questions, and I’m sure he’ll be only too happy to answer them. Mr. White always did have a horrible ego.’

‘I... did he?’

‘Come, Mr. Franklin.’ Greuze put his arm around me, pulling me out of my seat. ‘We’ll get you some more fitting clothes, and then it’s off to meet your maker.’

The Fat Man smiled.

And in my head, I started to swear.

We took a car across the east side, down to my apartment.

It was more of a limo, actually. Black with blacked out windows, the seal of the Salmon Corp shining on the doors. An effective shield against all the street skirmishes we drove directly through.

I sat slumped in padded leather, trying to keep my brooding subtle.

Greuze was opposite me, drinking from a bottle of Champaign. There was a bodyguard in the driver’s seat.

‘I do love this city,’ Greuze said. ‘It’s so clean and dirty, all at the same time. Makes you think.’

I made a nonspecific noise.

They're going to find I'm not in my house. Shot men don't move. And then they'll go looking for me and take, what, ten minutes to work everything out? They'll find Derry. They'll find my body. They'll shoot both of us properly_. Oh God._

'I will never understand why White enjoys this neighbourhood,' Greuze muttered. 'It's so... unabashedly cheap.'

'I assume your tastes are more refined?' I snapped, almost without thinking.

'Poverty,' Greuze shrugged, 'is no excuse for a lack of imagination. Being poor is no excuse for *looking* poor.'

The limo stopped. We got out, in the shadow of my apartment block. Suddenly, the building seemed to loom. A big grey cube, dark and ominous, hogging the street-side.

Mr. Greuze took a little piece of paper from his pocket and consulted it. 'Fourth floor. Apartment... twenty-one B, apparently. I think I used to live in a twenty-one B. This way.'

Greuze led on. His bodyguard-cum-chauffeur stayed with the car. Apparently, Greuze wasn't worried about needing protection.

We ascended up a broken staircase, and found my front door.

'You've been very quiet,' Greuze said.

'This week's virtue is Silence.'

'Ah.'

Greuze knocked on the door.

I could hit that Fat Man in the back of the head and run. I could go find Derry and get away.

In my head, I saw a little drama play out. A drama in which I clubbed out Greuze, hard as I could, and found somewhere quick to hide the body. A drama

in which I grabbed Derry by the hand and she swooned in my arms (what? It was a fantasy) and the two of us quickly fled the country, before the Corp could find us. Crossing the ocean and heading for freedom in... in... in...

Freedom where? Where else is there for you to go?

I had no options. But there was nothing to lose. I felt my fists clench—

The door opened.

And there was me. The *real* me, in my *real* body. Walking with a limp, and leaning on a cane.

I stood in the doorway with my jaw on the floor.

‘Ah,’ said the real me. ‘Mr. Franklin. I’ve been expecting you.’

I’ll call him Jacob White, even though that’s my name. Maybe just ‘Mr. White,’ would be better.

Mr. White didn’t move like me. That was weird to see. His stride was stately, elegant. He seemed too self-assured. Too confident.

He walked about my apartment like the king of a very small castle.

‘Tea?’ He offered. ‘I’m sure I must have some around here somewhere.’ He started rooting through my cupboards.

No, you don’t. You’re out.

‘Ah, here we go. I brought it just this morning.’ Mr. White smiled, proffering a packet of Camomile teabags. I hate Camomile.

‘I’d appreciate some tea,’ Greuze nodded, looking at me. ‘Would you like some tea?’

I just about managed to shake my head.

‘Only for me then. Two sugars, if you have them.’

Mr. White nodded politely, and went about brewing. It took him a couple of tries

to work the kettle, I noted.

Derry, I thought. It must be Derry. Controlling my body somehow to cover for me. Clever girl.

‘Here,’ I offered, rushing into the kitchen. ‘Let me help you pour that.’

I watched my own hands lift the overflowing kettle, spilling a little water in the process. Mr. White winced, and so did I.

‘Derry,’ I whispered, so quiet that I was sure Greuze couldn’t hear. ‘Derry, is that you?’

Mr. White ignored me, striding past.

‘Have either of you read the paper?’ White asked, handing Greuze his tea. ‘Terrible business this morning.’

‘Terrible business most mornings,’ Greuze replied. ‘But I take it you mean something in particular?’

‘A young woman, stabbed to death in her own apartment.’ White shook his head. ‘Senseless. Horrible crime. See for yourself.’

Mr. White picked a newspaper from the coffee table, and threw it to me. I stared at the front page, and wanted to cry.

‘I’m sure whoever did it is filled with remorse.’

Derry.

Derry was the young woman found dead. Only a handful of hours ago. The press print quickly, in this day and age; the newspaper was already updating itself with the latest details of her murder inquiry. Seemed that whoever the killer was, she’d let him into her home voluntarily. There were signs of struggle, but all the doors had been broken open from the inside. Some very expensive VR equipment had been found in her house, smashed almost beyond recognition.

I needed to lie down.

‘Are you all right, Mr. Franklin?’ Greuze noticed my expression.

‘Forgive him,’ White said. ‘He’s from a simpler time.’

‘Well, you would know,’ Greuze grinned. ‘After all, you are the man who made him.’

‘Yes.’ White looked me square in the eyes. Something made me shiver. ‘Yes, I am.’

White knew everything.

Everything.

He knew how the cloning process worked. He knew how the Simulacra was supposed to develop. He knew all the technical terms, all the jargon. He knew exactly what I had done, how I had done it, and how I was *supposed* to have done it.

He sat and sipped his tea, idly spouting off technical specs and humorous anecdotes about my life-anecdotes which never happened. Occasionally, he’d wince and apologise for any incoherence. ‘It’s the pain meds, see. They foggy up the brain.’

Grueze brought it all. Of course he did. There was no reason for him not to, no reason at all.

Eventually, I managed to scrape my jaw off the floor and make a show of nodding, agreeing, going along with... whatever was happening.

‘Well,’ White finally said, after an hour or so. ‘It’s getting late. And gentlemen, it’s been fun, but now I really need to get some rest.’

We let ourselves out. ‘Drop by anytime,’ said White, closing the door.

‘That all certainly seems to be in order,’ Greuze beamed, as we returned to the limo. ‘Irritatingly, that man is certainly worth his ego.’

‘I’m sure,’ I mumbled.

‘We can let him rest a bit, now that we have an understanding of the process. There’s no reason we can’t go ahead with the rest of the project ourselves.’

I nodded absently.

‘As for yourself, Mr. Franklin,’ Greuze climbed into the car. ‘I’m afraid we can’t offer you much time to adjust to your new situation, but don’t worry. We intend to treat you with the utmost veneration and respect.’

I nodded again.

‘Which is why we’ll be assigning you a specialist handler for your mission.’

‘Handler?’ I blinked. ‘Mission?’

‘Mission,’ Greuze considered, ‘might be too strong a term. Let me explain.’

The engine started.

Her name was Natalia Abranos Illnyova.

She was, unsurprisingly, Russian.

Short red hair. Sharp eyes. Appreciable curves. In other words, very attractive. Under ordinary circumstances I might have been attracted *to* her, but at the time the only woman on my mind was Derry.

She can’t be dead. It didn’t seem real. I hadn’t seen the body, hadn’t been back to her restaurant, hadn’t RSVP’d the funeral. I couldn’t do any of those things, because I was now living in the confined quarters of the Salmon Corporation. Being followed around by a stupidly sexy Russian and her atrociously over-exaggerated accent.

My cage was gilded. I had a slew of comfortable rooms with cushions everywhere, and a fridge forever stocked with fatty foods. I had all the books I could ever read, and any piece of equipment I cared to request. I think they were waiting for me to invent something.

Once or twice a day, Ms. Natalia would take me out for a walk. I was given some proper clothes. Simple garbs in black and grey, designed to echo my

previous outfit without appearing too antique-they at least kept all the frills. I had new shoes. Comfortable shoes, with Salmon labels on the heels. I had been tagged.

‘And over here, we have the Monument of Ages. Now I’m sure it looks to you like a big metal spike because frankly, that is what it is. But there we go.’

Natalia had a tendency to mistake herself for a tour guide. She rarely gave me time to get a word in edgeways. I was actually quite happy to hang around with someone who didn’t expect me to be... well, Ben Franklin. Natalia didn’t seem to expect me to be anything.

We were walking around a public park-Memorial Garden. It was a nice park; peaceful and green, possibly more so than anywhere else in the city. Baroque bridges hung over little ponds, swans circled fountains and tyres swung on tree branches. In the background, the sun was fighting to get up over the skyscraper skyline.

The Monument of Ages was square in the middle of the park. *It’s supposed to be a commemoration for the Labour Unions killed off by the ‘97 purge*, I thought testily. Natalia would often make mistakes, and of course I couldn’t correct her-that would be breaking character.

This was only supposed to last for two weeks.

Two and a half, and counting. No plan for a way out. Getting my body back was all I ever thought about. But without Derry’s equipment... equipment I couldn’t rebuild without tempting suspicion...

And there was the *other* me. Mr. White. Part of me still clung to the faint hope that, somehow, some way, it might be Derry. I knew this couldn’t be, but it would’ve made things so much easier if my friend was still out there somewhere.

After our walk, Natalia took me back to my cage. As always, we restricted ourselves to the barest pleasantries. I called her ‘dear lady,’ a couple of times, because I felt it sounded authentic.

A message from Greuze was waiting on my bedside table.

It said: *Time for your premiere.*

I'd been putting off my *premiere* ever since Greuze had first mentioned it.

My mission.

To sell. Basically, to sell *myself*.

I'd signed away the rights to the Benjamin Franklin Action Figure line, just like they'd wanted. The Corp had ten million tiny little versions of me, packaged and ready to sell-all they needed as an excuse to put them on the shelf.

I would be providing them with that excuse.

My job was to go from place to place, and wave at the crowds. Apparently, the Corp wanted to give me a grand unveiling, or rather, a succession of Grand Unveilings-one for every state. People would flock to see me. And after the amazing experience of seeing history come to life, people would obviously want a souvenir.

There was a reason the company had *really* wanted me to go on those walks with Natalia; those very public walks. They let the press could catch glimpses of a man who looked vaguely historical, drumming up that little bit of extra interest.

All *I* had to do was to stand on stage and be Ben Franklin. Or rather, as Greuze put it, "just be yourself."

The first time was the worst.

I was sent out in the middle of a rock-concert. The audience was dominated by punks and goths, the stage crowded with ugly faces. The main act had just finished playing, and they had left the stage a mess; broken wiring and mysterious fluid everywhere. Spotlights exploded across my eyeballs, coming from all directions. This was New Hampshire, the northernmost region of the America Little. Eight hundred square kilometres devoted to stadiums, sports centres and palladiums. In the distance, I could see other concerts; firework displays and limelight flares.

I'd been introduced already, in between acts. The audience had been primed and prepared for me. I could tell, because the moment I stepped on stage they exploded into rapturous applause.

I was nervous as a pimp in hell. My head thumped, my blood-pressure soared and I had to fight the constant urge to pee. Natalia was behind me, along with a few beefy bodyguards. Somebody handed me a microphone, and I stood on the edge of the stage; looking down over the precipice, staring at all of the scruffy young people below.

‘Um,’ I coughed. The microphone gave a slash of feedback.

Glancing over my shoulder for support, I found none. Natalia just shrugged. Helpful.

‘Greetings to your all!’ I fumbled vaguely. ‘Good citizens! It is I, Benjamin Franklin!’

“It is I, Benjamin Franklin”?!? My brain echoed incredulously. What the hell are you thinking?! I should’ve practiced my speech.

‘Now,’ I continued, ‘I know what you’re all thinking. This gentleman must be a clot in costume. He must be false, a fake, a ph-’ *Ben Franklin wouldn’t say phoney.* ‘A facsimile. Well, I can offer you little firm evidence at this juncture. My friends here,’ I gestured vaguely at Natalia, ‘my friends from the Salmon Corp will no doubt have some scientific evidence for those of you with inquiring minds. In the interests of not boring you, I shall confine myself to the only fact of the matter you need to know. I am the real and true Benjamin Franklin. From your history. And through the wonder of technology, I have returned to life!’

There was a long pause. Silence from the crowd. A few people scratched their heads; wondering if this might be a joke. A few others choked off laughter.

Somehow, I’d hoped for a bit more of a response.

‘I am history come to life?’ I tried again, uncertainly. Again, no response from the audience. I began to feel very small.

‘Okay,’ Natalia said quickly, stepping forward and snatching the microphone from me. ‘I think Mr. Franklin’s tired, and we’ve probably taken enough out of him. Off you go back stage, good sir.’

She gave me a pointed look, eyes flashing. I nodded glumly, feeling humiliation deep inside. I let the bodyguards lead me behind the curtain.

‘Now then,’ Natalia’s voice faded with the light of the stage. ‘That’s one spectacle down, let’s see if we can get another. How many people here are fans of Mentallic B?! How many people want them on for an encore?!’

Cheering from the audience.

Somewhere backstage, an argument was raging. A lead singer was complaining that he ‘*Didn’t ever do encores.*’ I wasn’t listening. The moment I was out of sight of the crowd, I flopped onto the floor.

The humiliation... being stared blankly at by half a million faces...

Well, chirped a little part of my brain. *They weren’t really staring at you.*

Yes they were.

No. They were staring at Ben Franklin.

I thought about this for a minute, and decided that it didn’t make me feel any better.

‘Okay,’ Natalia appeared, hands on hips. Onstage, another band had started playing. ‘Okay, I think I know what we did wrong here. This isn’t the right crowd, this isn’t the right gig.’

‘They applauded when I came on,’ I muttered.

‘That was just on general principles. We shouldn’t be marketing to a young audience, or at least, not *this* young audience. Will you get off the floor?’

‘Oh.’ I stood up. ‘Sorry.’

‘And another thing,’ she snapped. ‘You could try to be a little more *impressive*, you know. You’re not going to convince anyone with a display like that.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I rallied. ‘I’m having a bit of a rough month. I’m sure it’s playing hell with my charisma.’

‘Tough,’ Natalia said flatly. ‘These are modern times. People aren’t going to be impressed by a harmonica and a light-bulb anymore. Deal with it.’

‘You’re not helping.’

‘My job isn’t to help,’ she said. ‘My job is to organise.’

‘You’re a press officer.’

‘Of course,’ she shrugged. ‘What did you think I was? Your concubine?’

I was left in her wake; Natalia was already speaking on the phone, organising another round.

From the stage, there came the sound of a second encore.

‘We shouldn’t be targeting the North,’ Natalia told Greuze. ‘They have a rudimentary education system, a pop-obsessed culture and very little respect for history.’

We were in the Fat Man’s office. I couldn’t help noticing that Greuze seemed to be losing weight.

‘Our Pre-Publicity department picked that location for maximum press coverage,’ Greuze pointed out, from behind his desk.

‘I’m sure they did,’ Natalia said. ‘And if they had listened to *my* recommendations, they would have realised that we were *always* going to have maximum press coverage. We could have opened in a shed in the Nevada desert and gotten maximum press coverage-this is Ben Franklin we’re talking about. The point is how the Press sees the public *react*.’

‘Hmm,’ Greuze shifted. ‘Well, since this is now a job for Post-Publicity, Natalia, it’s going to be up to you to make sure this kind of mistake doesn’t happen again.’

‘Already on it sir,’ Natalia smiled smugly. ‘I’ve arranged a series of events constituting a tour of America Large.’

I gave her an incredulous look. Greuze raised an eyebrow. I remembered that Ben Franklin probably wouldn’t have a reason to look incredulous, and wound my expression down to merely ‘curious.’

‘America Large?’ I asked, trying to sound ignorant.

‘You would have called them the Southern states,’ Greuze explained. ‘Some of them, anyway. That area has considerably expanded since you were last around. Are you sure we should take him down there?’ Greuze asked Natalia. ‘We don’t have a lot of influence in Large.’

‘Nonsense,’ Natalia said. ‘No one in Large would ever try to harm us. They’re a timid, backwards lot, but their obsession with the past makes them *perfect*.’

Greuze bit his upper-lip, considering.

‘All right. We’ll try it your way, Natalia. Benjamin, pack a bag.’

‘Yes, sir.’ I said, a little bit stiffly. Going to Large. Great. One more thing crossed off the Things-I-Never-Wanted-To-Do list.

‘Oh, Ben,’ Greuze called, as we were leaving. ‘Stay behind a moment, would you? We need to talk.’

Somewhat nervously, I stayed behind.

‘Now, Mr. Franklin.’ Greuze gave a slow sigh. ‘I understand this has been a difficult transition for you.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the process we used to bring you here, I admit, was experimental. It might not have been perfect. Given your... behaviour... I thought I should ask if you feel at all... strange?’

‘Strange?’

‘Different. Not yourself. Mentally compromised.’ Greuze smiled. ‘If you should find yourself feeling any of these things, it is *important* that you let someone on staff know as soon as possible.

The meek little *Yes Sir*, trickled to the front of my mind-but something stopped me. *He’s calling you out*, I realised. *He’s testing you*. I admit, I didn’t have much reason to think that. I just had a lot of anger and frustration pent up, and it

sounded like this man was dangerously close to blowing my cover. I felt awful.

So I spoke up.

‘Are you questioning my integrity?’ I asked, coldly and with volume. My anger helped me stay in character-it made me feel strong and smart. For a second, I genuinely thought that I was right and he was wrong. ‘Are you suggesting that I am in some way blunted? Addled? Damaged? Less than a man? Is that what you mean to say, sir, because if it is then I appeal to you to come straight out and *say it*. I may have lost some of youth’s sharpness, and I may be stranded in an alien world, but I am no fool. I am myself, I am fully in possession of my faculties, and I do not appreciate the implication that I could be otherwise. Do I make myself clear?’

Greuze seemed taken aback. I’d never seen the Fat Man cowed. For a second I thought: *Oh, shit, I’m gonna get in trouble*. Then I remembered-I was the honoured guest here. And I puffed my chest out accordingly.

‘Of course,’ Greuze said quickly, ‘I wasn’t at all implying-‘

‘I should think not,’ I cut him off. I *cut him off*.

‘Well then. That, uh, that will be all.’ Greuze nodded briskly. ‘Mr. Franklin.’

‘Hmmpf.’

I strode out of the room, not giving the Fat Man time to regroup.

My brain was arush. Endorphins were flowing. I felt *good*.

I’ve never liked helicopters.

They hover and buzz, like bluebottles. They look unpleasant in the sky and I’m fairly sure they’re not a safe; they tend to shake.

I was sitting in a helicopter, on the edge of my seat. Natalia was opposite me, dropping pills into a glass.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘I despise flying,’ Natalia replied, pulling a flask from her pocket and filling the glass with whisky. ‘You want some?’

‘Thank you, no.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Natalia shrugged, downing the glass. ‘Wake me when we get there.’

Soon after, she was asleep. I was left alone but for the pilot, who wasn’t exactly talkative.

The side of the helicopter held a single window. I peered outside, squinting in the sunlight.

America Large. Only a few minutes after crossing the border, and the landscape was already undergoing a massive shift. Grey hills and canyons were subsiding, flattening into the ground. Grass became rock and rock became sand. Everything started to look beige.

We were drawing into the desert.

A few miles later, and we reached the Oil Fields.

For a thousand kilometres, the oil rigs stretched. Built under bright blue sky and over stone-baked sand, the great metal pumps looked like huge overturned hammers-rocking gently back and forth. Steel wells reached down into the Earth, oil barrels lined up beside them. Little figures, tiny as ants, crawled around gigantic drills. Workers, sweating out the day.

The helicopter chose to dip low, for some reason. Maybe the pilot wanted me to see it all up close; we flew right by the nearest pump, rotor blades practically kissing the rusted metal frame. I saw the size of it; the unfathomable scale that would make giants seem small and skyscrapers tiny. I saw the depth of the well, and I heard the miners’ call. Work harder. Work faster.

A man in an iron helmet was standing high up on the rig. He waved at my helicopter. One of his arms was a hook.

I waved back.

The pilot took us a little further up-so I could be reminded that this Field went on forever.

A burst of flame flew up on the horizon. A controlled venting, I hoped. This was no place for untamed fire.

We flew on.

Eventually, we reached the border town of Louisiana.

From the air it looked more than a little ramshackle. A wooden clock-tower comprised the shoddy town hall, surrounded on all sides by shanty huts trying to pass for houses. Rickety old cars and jeeps chugged along rocky roads.

We landed just outside of town, and the moment the rotor blades stopped I truly felt the overwhelming heat. Like a wave of shrapnel, digging into my skin-I had to take my jacket off. I suddenly felt very self-conscious of my pudginess.

‘No more frosting!’ Natalia yelled with a start, shaking herself awake. She looked around for a minute in obvious confusion, before remembering herself. ‘Ahem.’ She straightened her shirt, standing up. ‘I take it we’re here?’

I nodded.

‘Well then. Let us go.’

The two of us stepped out of the copter-the silent pilot chose to stay with his ship, which was presumably his only friend.

‘Exactly what was wrong with the frosting?’ I couldn’t help asking.

‘Excuse me?’ Natalia blinked.

‘You yelled it out, just before waking up,’ I told her.

‘I don’t know. It was just a dream.’

‘For some reason, I expected that you’d dream in Russian,’ I said

‘Why? I don’t speak Russian.’

I gave her an odd look. At that moment, we were interrupted.

‘Greetings!’

The man doing the interrupting was a fine and fearsome specimen. Tall, broad, handsome, dark skin and glittering eyes beneath the brim of a cowboy hat. His clothes were mostly coloured white; I wondered how he managed to keep them clean. He spoke with a strong southern drawl.

‘Good to see y’all. Right on time, too.’ The man made a show of checking his watch. ‘That’s somethin’ I approve of.’

‘Mr. Franklin, this is Colonel Parker Harland-Mayor and Military Viceroy of Louisian. Colonel Harland,’ Natalia’s tiny palm was consumed by the Colonel’s gigantic paw. ‘This is Benjamin Franklin.’

‘So I’ve heard!’ Harland bellowed. ‘It is an honour to meet you sir! A real honour! Should I-’ Harland looked to Natalia. ‘Should I bow? Am I supposed to bow or salute or-’

‘None of that will be necessary,’ I said firmly. ‘A handshake will suffice.’

My own hand was crushed by the Colonel’s.

‘Truly sir, this is one of God’s finest miracles.’ The way Harland was looking at me-the adoration-it was almost frightening. ‘One of his very finest.’

‘Um. Thank you.’

‘I understand you’ve arranged a suitable program of events for tonight?’ Natalia asked, as we strode into town.

‘Oh, yes,’ The Colonel nodded quickly. ‘We have a whole evening based around your arrival, sir and ma’am. The entire town should be turning out. It’ll be quite a party.’

I was already drawing attention. I could feel gazes on my back; people peering out from between curtains, stealing glimpses through letterboxes. The town was little more than a single main street, bordered by shops and houses. Few pedestrians were about, but all those who were chose to stare. We passed an

open bar, and a couple of patrons even came out to wave. I couldn't help waving back.

'I admit, we were all surprised that you chose to come *here*,' the Colonel said. 'We expected you'd want to appear in Boston or Philadelphia or the like.'

'We considered it,' Natalia answered before I could. 'But since Boston's still essentially underwater and Philadelphia is... well, Philadelphia... we thought we'd go somewhere calmer. Somewhere more appreciative.'

'We are that, ma'am.' Harland said briskly. 'Oh my, yes. We are certainly that.'

The Colonel took us to what he optimistically termed 'the finest hotel in town. It was a bit... rustic. Wooden floors, wooden walls, wooden chairs... it was like the whole place had been carved from pine, with only the occasional cushion to break things up. So strange in comparison to my city of metal.

The hotel lobby was small and low ceilinged, with a single reception desk dominating everything. A staircase rose up and around in the background, surrounded by landscape paintings that were probably supposed to look snazzily post-modern but were actually rather bad.

'I take it this place is more suited to your antique sensibilities,' Natalia said dryly.

Uh... maybe, I thought. 'Somewhat,' I said.

There was a bellboy to show us upstairs. The little brown kid never once looked me in the eye, nor spoke a word to my face. He handed us our door keys, then darted off.

Natalia and I stood in the plywood corridor, outside our respective rooms.

'They really do believe in history here,' I observed. 'It's... overwhelming.'

'The backwards are often obsessed with the past,' Natalia shrugged, opening her door.

'Natalia,' I had to ask. 'You really don't speak Russian?'

‘Why would you assume that I do?’

‘Well...’

‘My accent?’ She asked-and just like that, her voice changed. The low vowels dropped away, high tones slipped in. She became a city girl, just like any other.

I blinked. ‘How-‘

‘I am Russian,’ she said, simply. ‘But my parents did not like this. They would not teach me their language. Still, I do not like to hide what I am. The world has had enough of that.’

‘Right.’ I couldn’t think of a decent response. ‘Very... admirable.’

‘Perhaps.’ Her accent returned. Somehow, it seemed to suit her a lot more. ‘Or perhaps I am simply being stubborn.’

She disappeared into her room.

A few minutes later, I did the same.

The Colonel hadn’t been exaggerating. The whole town really did turn out to party.

I made my appearance on an improvised stage (made from plywood... where were they finding all these trees?) outside the town hall, at the stroke of midnight.

There were maybe three hundred people present. A far smaller crowd than the New Hampshire stadium, yet somehow far more intense. Some of them clearly weren’t locals. A lot of extra cars were parked around the town-cameras and notebooks were in evidence. The Press were showing in force. I felt the pressure.

Natalia was behind me, wearing a *Don’t screw this up* expression.

‘Listen,’ I hissed at her, ‘would you please leave me alone for five minutes?’

‘It’s my job to make sure things go smoothly,’ she replied.

‘Well, things’ll go a lot smoother if you’re not leaning over my shoulder. Go and

make sure from over there.’ I pointed vaguely off-stage. ‘Go on. Shoo.’

Natalia fixed me with an irate glare, then made a show of sauntering off. Left alone on stage, I fought off images of my last live performance. This would be different. I’d spent the entire afternoon practicing my speech.

Okay. Deep breath.

‘Hello.’ It wasn’t the strongest start in the world, but it was a classic. ‘It’s nice to see you all.’

Somewhere off-stage, Natalia was rolling her eyes.

‘No, really.’ I ran my gaze over the crowd. Psyching myself up, getting fully into character. ‘It is nice to see you all. It is nice to be reminded that people remember.

‘And I don’t mean that they remember *me*. I’m not the thing you should be remembering. I am merely a man, no more valuable than any other. But your remembrance of the history, the past, the events shepherding you all the way through yesterday toward today—that is important. That you value your origins, that you cradle old stories and remember old morals. *That* is important. I have looked around this strange new world, and it is full of wonderful things. Technology I had never dreamed of, miracles I can barely understand. But for every wonder, I see something else, something to... to repulse me. Decadence. Crime. Ill-virtue ruling the streets, apathetic young and violent old. People who have forgotten where they came from. People who have forgotten the values upon which this nation was built, the values we need to be worthy. I have *not* forgotten. I was there... it seems like yesterday. I was there, at the beginning of it all. I saw those who forged a nation from fire and blood and they birthed a beautiful dream. I walked with great men, and did what little I could to help. Perhaps you will say that there are no longer such men. I do not believe that. There are always giants, and each of you has the potential to become one. I was there at the beginning of it all, and I am here again. Those days were bright and full of promise, and they can come again.

‘I have not forgotten, and it is comforting to know that neither have you. My name is Benjamin Franklin. My return from the dead is nothing to get excited about. But if we can bring some of those old morals back, if some of us can be giants again...then perhaps I will have proved myself worthy of such small

resurrection.

‘Thank you all for your attention. Enjoy the party.’

Wow, I thought, stepping back. *Where did that come from?* Some of it was what I’d rehearsed, but a lot of it... just came from nowhere.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Someone was applauding.

Clap-Clap-Clap-Clap-

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Everyone was applauding.

Clappa-clappa-clappa-clappa-

The air was filled with cheers. Apparently, I’d done well this time.

Whisking me off-stage, Natalia whispered: ‘Looks like you have some of the old magic left after all.’

I could only nod.

Looks like.

*

Shortly after, the buzz began to spread.

I was a hit.

I travelled from town to town, Natalia in tow-streaking all across America Large, hitting one border community after another. Setting the Oil Belt on fire-metaphorically speaking.

The crowds got bigger. The cheers got cheerier. My speeches grew in length and verve, though I always tried to keep them reasonably brief. I was afraid that talking too long might break the spell, or blow my cover. I never answered

questions from the audience; too risky.

After dark, I had nightmares about Mr. White and my long lost body. Come morning, I tried not to dwell. The day would invariably bring exciting things.

One day in particular, Natalia barged into a quaint little hotel room to find me in underwear, splayed out on the floor.

She just stared, apparently not so much embarrassed as perplexed.

‘What are you doing?’ She demanded.

‘Stretching.’ I wasn’t sure whether or not *I* should be embarrassed. Any attempt at movement risked unwanted exposure, so I stayed very still.

‘Stretching?’

‘Trying to get into shape.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’

Natalia was apparently satisfied with this. She didn’t go away.

‘Uh... Natalia, this isn’t the best time for-‘

‘What do you think you are doing?’

There was a brief pause.

‘We just-‘

‘I mean your speeches,’ she said sharply. ‘They are incendiary.’

I blinked. ‘They are not.’

‘ “Forgotten morals,” “the lessons of the past,” “building tomorrow.” You sound like a revolutionary.’

‘I simply saying what comes to mind,’ I huffed.

‘The Corporation did not hire you to be inspirational.’

‘Actually,’ I took the risk of standing. ‘They did. They wanted me to inspire people in the direction of merchandise and that is exactly what I’m doing. I just happen to be doing it in my own way.’

Natalia stared me down. ‘Perhaps,’ she suggested, ‘you do not grasp the situation as completely as you think.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning these days no one is indispensable. My superiors are prone to shifting expectations, especially when what they perceived as an exercise in style starts to have substance.’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘I’m warning you, because despite myself, Mr. Franklin, I find myself beginning to like you. I wish you to take care.’

I was caught off-guard by the unexpected pleasantness. ‘Thank you, Natalia,’ I said. ‘Thank you very much.’

She answered with a terse nod, striding straight out. I assume the kindness was a terrible strain.

A few minutes later, I was back into my stretching.

The telephone rang.

I was surprised-I didn’t even know the room came with a phone. After a bit of pottering about, I found it on the bedside table. It was a ridiculously old-fashioned device; a circular dial plate with a corded speaker. For a moment I just stared at the thing, then a fresh burst of ringing convinced me to pick up.

‘Hello?’ I held the speaker to my lips.

There was a pause. Then Mr. White’s voice froze my heart.

‘Hello, Ben.’

All of a sudden, my new life melted away. The crowds, the charm, the success... I remembered my ultimate nature as a fraud. How convincing I'd been; for a brief time I'd even conned myself. Mr. White could strip that away with a word and make me remember all those nightmares.

'I hear you've been enjoying yourself.'

I didn't know what to say, so I let him talk.

'Listen, Ben, I don't have long. I imagine you'll hear why in a minute. I just wanted to tell you-no hard feelings.'

I breathed: 'Who are you?'

'Don't be coy. You worked that out ages ago.'

'Franklin.' *The Franklin Sim.*

'Benjamin Franklin has been dead for several hundred years. You're his close successor. And I... I am just a faulty echo. Jacob White. I like that name. It has a nice ring to it.'

'Listen.' I struggled to sound commanding. 'Listen, Mr. Franklin, you have to understand-'

'*Don't.*' The word was sharp. 'Don't call me that. That's *your name* now. *Yours.* I am Jacob White. We have swapped places. We're not going back.'

'You... you don't want your body?'

'In this world? What would I do with it? I let *you* have it. A donation for your hard work. I faked my death-my *crash*- and I moved in here, while you were busy packing.'

'I don't understand.'

'That's because I'm a lot smarter than you, Ben. You've got the right idea, but you're too slow. There are other ways.'

'Mr. Franklin-White- please-'

‘Goodbye.’

For a second, I could hear background noise from the other end of the line; a brief burst of ambient sound. I realised that White must be calling from the street. Then the phone went dead.

I was left in silence, holding the receiver. Breathing heavily.

That was when Natalia burst back into the room. This time, she looked solemn.

‘We have to return to the city,’ she said. ‘Now.’

Our helicopter tore through sky.

Outside, flying Raptors rattled the windows; an aerial assault from flustered dinosaurs. We were heading back to the city in a straight line-the route took us right over a bunch of Raptor nests. The helicopter was armed. Machine guns dealt with the overgrown birds.

Natalia wouldn’t tell me what was wrong. She said she didn’t know, exactly. Just that there had been an emergency.

All the way back, my heart wouldn’t stop pumping.

*

It didn’t take long to see the problem.

America Little stretched forever, home sweet home. In the distance, the factories and the cooling towers smoked hard and heavy, gushing up great clouds of grey beside the shinier skyscrapers. Metro-lines snaked back and forth beneath a billion glittering yellow street-lamps, and there were all sorts of other helicopters buzzing about-shining spotlights down on the concreted earth below.

The cooling towers were not the only sources of smoke.

Fire gushed up upon the horizon. Great billowing streaks of flame, snaking to heaven and coiling up the sky. Shifting velvety pyres of orange and red, crackling so loud as to be almost audible. Entire skyscrapers had been consumed by the blaze; it was like a forest fire, working its way through the city.

There stood the dark monolith of the Salmon Corporation skyscraper. All around it, buildings were burning.

‘Jacob White.’

His face was on the table; a spread of photographs. Family pictures, friendly photos, corporate ID badges...

‘As of this moment, he is the most wanted man in the city.’

Peter Greuze sat behind his desk, arms crossed. Natalia and I opposite.

‘He did this happen?’ Natalia asked, gesturing to a window. Flames were rising outside; the emergency services were desperately fighting them back. The disaster was under control, but only provisionally.

‘Apparently, when one has access to all the resources of Applied, building a series of highly destructive bombs becomes depressingly easy,’ Greuze deadpanned.

‘But... why?’ I asked weakly.

‘That’s where we were hoping you might have a thought or two,’ Greuze replied. ‘After all, the man created you.’

‘Not entirely,’ I snapped, harsher than intended.

‘Of course,’ said Greuze. ‘But still, you must have some insight...’

‘I’m afraid that I have absolutely no idea what might be going through Mr. White’s head.’

‘He must be apprehended,’ stated Natalia, blankly. Greuze stared at her.

‘Well...yes, that was the general gist of me calling him the most wanted man in the city.’ Greuze shook his head. ‘But if White has any designs at all on living, he’ll be as far from Little as he can possibly get by now.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Natalia said. ‘He may want to be close at hand for further attacks.’

‘We’re provisionally hoping that this’ll be an isolated incident.’

‘Unlikely. This kind of attack is a clear statement-an opening move, designed to get attention. A message.’

‘You’re very knowledgeable about terrorists this morning, Natalia.’

‘I am a publicist. I understand publicity stunts, and this is one.’

‘Maybe,’ Greuze seemed unconvinced. ‘But for now I think I’d prefer to view it as the single act of a madman. Optimism, eh Benjamin?’

I said nothing.

‘Hold on.’ Greuze held up a hand. He was staring at his desk, frowning. He pressed a couple of random spots on the shiny surface, and a holograph screen sprung to life before us. Modern computers can be disturbingly difficult to notice.

‘Look at this,’ Greuze said, as the screen started playing a video. ‘It was ripped off a network news broadcast three minutes ago.’

The picture was of White.

He was standing in front of a grey backdrop-somewhere that could be anywhere. Talking directly to the camera, White looked somewhat worse for wear. Like he’d just been through a storm of soot.

‘Citizens of America Little,’ he said. ‘By now, I’m sure you’ve seen the destruction outside. I am responsible. Let me assure you, this havoc was wreaked with only the greatest regret. I have done my best to target unpopulated areas at unpopulated times, but the guilt still weights heavy on my soul.’

‘Huh,’ Greuze muttered, looking my way. ‘The bastard sounds like you.’

‘It had to be done,’ White continued. ‘I’ve struck at the heart of the city, at the heart of the so-called Salmon Corporation-a holding of gangsters and criminals. Building after building filled with crook, strangling the city, breaking this great country. I have to tell you, I tried to understand it. I tried to tolerate it. I *tried*. But the truth is, I am sick of this world and its compromises, its lies, its immorality. This is not what our country deserves.’

Natalia also raised an eyebrow in my direction. I felt almost embarrassed.

‘This was a demonstration of power-to show you all that *they* are vulnerable, that one man can take them on and win. Imagine what a hundred could do. I know many of you must feel the same as me, so I’m asking you to join my struggle_._ Together, we can make the world the better place it was supposed to be.

‘A change is coming. Rest assured. This is not mere rhetoric. This is revolution.’

And then the image cut to black.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

‘You know,’ Greuze said, pointedly. ‘I really don’t feel comfortable around people who enjoy making speeches.’

‘What do we do?’ Natalia asked.

‘Nothing,’ Greuze shrugged. ‘Man’s a crackpot. Half the city’s chasing him. He’ll be dead in six hours, and so will his revolution. In the meantime, I suggest we all try getting some sleep.’

‘You’re not worried at all?’ I asked.

‘Allow me to be blunt, Mr. Franklin,’ said Greuze. ‘*You* get to be a preachy idealist because you have us behind you-paying bills and hiring bodyguards. Plus, your antiquity gives you a certain acceptability. People find you tolerably quaint. White has none of these things. He’s a corpse. The only concerning question is whether his death be a fitting end to the injustice he has caused.’

‘I see.’

‘Stay in the city for a while,’ Greuze ordered me. ‘I’d rather not have you out in the field during this crises.’

‘Thank you, but if it’s all the same to you, I would rather not be here.’ I glanced at the window. ‘Not with this outside.’

Not with my own house burning. I know it is, White. You bastard.

‘Fair enough,’ Greuze shrugged. ‘But you’ll have to at least stay here the day. Your room is ready.’

I nodded, and started to leave. So did my partner.

‘Oh, Natalia,’ Greuze called. ‘Stay a moment, will you?’

She did so. I didn’t get to hear that part of the conversation; the door closed in my face.

That was probably for the best. I already had too many things to think about.

I didn’t go straight to my room. There was something I had to see first.

I headed for the lab.

On the way down, I couldn’t help feeling the atmosphere. Inside the Salmon Corporation never felt relaxed-but rarely were things wound this tight. Every third person I past seemed to be shivering a little; suits clung to their portfolios, while scientists hugged clipboards. It felt as if the entire place was supercharged, choked full of some bizarre, intoxicating cross between anger, fear... and guilt. There was definitely a bit of guilt mixed in there, too.

Well. Guilt I could relate to.

I reached the lab.

My security clearance was shaky at best, but the guards knew who I was. They also knew whose office I’d just come from. A little bluster, a little charm... it can get you a long way.

Really, I only needed a quick peek.

The moment I entered the clone chamber, strange memories assailed me. Crawling out of that salt-water tank at an ungodly hour of the morning, stumbling to Derry’s...

The lab looked just the same as it had that night; tubes filled with fleshy bodies. This time, however, there were staff about; ladies and gentlemen in white coats, cradling test-tubes and flow charts. They saw me coming, and stopped to stare.

I found what I was looking for.

Apparently, White really had given Greuze all the data he needed. Every tube contained a body, and every body was a famous figure from history. Most of them were only just recognisable; a few were still mere chunks of meat. But one, one quite near to me... one was unmistakable.

Abraham Lincoln, perfectly recreated. His test tube bore a plaque reading: *Model Number Two*. I assumed *I* was Model Number One, so apparently they weren't doing things in any particular order.

A lab-tech approached, tentatively. 'Excuse me, sir. Can I help you?'

'How long until he's ready?' I asked, pointing at Lincoln.

'Our programmers are still working his personality Sim,' the lab-tech beamed. 'They'll be ready in a week or two.'

A week. 'There's been no sign of error?'

'No sir. Everything's going perfectly.'

What are they doing right that I did wrong? Maybe my mistake really was just a freak accident.

I looked at the next tube along. The creature inside barley had a face but somehow, instinctively, I recognised it.

I knew it was to be my twin.

Your speeches are inflammatory.

And no-one is indispensable.

And Natalia, could you stay a moment?

'It was all easy, when we got down to it,' the Lab-tech was gibbering. 'We'll have the whole line ready in a month. Sir? Is something wrong?'

'No. Nothing at all,' I lied.

On the way back to my room, I bumped into Natalia.

‘There you are,’ she said sharply. ‘I’ve been looking for you.’

We were alone in a corridor. I tried to pass Natalia, but she wouldn’t let me.

‘Listen,’ she hissed, ‘Franklin, I said like you-but that’s not enough to endanger myself, do you understand?’

Catching her glare, I nodded slowly.

‘Greuze is starting to worry. You sound too much like White. Given events, he’s beginning to think you might be a corrupt copy-and even if you’re not, you’re fast on the road to becoming a nuisance.’

My heart caught in my chest. ‘What does... what’s he going to do?’

‘Nothing, for now. Greuze still hopes this might blow over, and you were expensive.’

‘But...’

‘You have to lay low.’ She took a step toward me, for emphasis. ‘You have to be less... loud.’

I nodded, images of the lab still fresh in my mind. ‘Less loud. Less... I can do that.’

‘Good. *Good.*’ Natalia glared. ‘They really *didn’t* want you to be an inspiration, Ben. You were supposed to just stand there and be hopelessly authentic. Be under no illusions, if you trouble them, the Corporation will kill you. They’ll send someone to do it *quietly*.’

She started to walk away. ‘Natalia!’ I called. ‘If you think that’s going to happen, if you hear them give the order... will you warn me?’

Her eyes flashed. ‘If it happens, I’ll be the one they send.’

The next morning, I woke up quite early and went to see Greuze.

‘I want to help the investigation,’ I told him. ‘But I’m not sure how. Maybe if I

look around White's apartment... if there's anything left of White's apartment... I might get a hunch or two.'

A little reluctantly, Greuze gave me permission to go and poke around. I was to be accompanied by a full contingent of bodyguards, of course.

White hadn't just blown up my apartment on his way out; he reduced the entire neighbourhood to rubble. Dinosaurs poked around the remains; twitchy little scavengers, fighting over scraps. I spent a good hour combing the debris, keeping every appearance of a man searching for evidence. In actual fact, I was just trying to find something that might have survived. An ornament, a book, a scrap of tablecloth-anything of my home.

Only ash, and ruin, and rubble.

And that was officially it. The last echo of my old life, blown away. I might have gotten carried away with being Franklin... but still, in the back of my head, there had always been this house to return to. Some time, some place, in the distant future-when things were right and normal again-I could come back.

That pile of twisted wreckage told me, in no uncertain terms: There is no Normal Again.

There never will be.

The helicopter had been drafted into military service, so we took a train back down to Large. There's precisely one monorail line linking the city to its southern cousin-one length of track weaving a path through the entire country. Ancient and ill-maintained, it starts off shiny and gets rapidly creakier as it approaches the border.

Natalia and I shared a windowless cabin.

The whole journey took thirty-six hours. It was conducted in silence.

'Attention, ladies and gentlemen. This is an automated announcement. Passengers on the 01.30 train to *Orr, Large State* are reminded that we are entering a Dinosaur-Infested zone. Cautionary dining car procedures are to be followed for the remainder of the journey. Please throw away your meals and begin dental flossing immediately.'

*

We stopped again in Louisian, under the Oil Fields. The town had grown somewhat in my absence. For one, a ramshackle Benjamin Franklin Museum had sprung out of nowhere. I passed a shop selling postcards, and was only moderately surprised to find my face on several.

Natalia didn't comment, though her expression was even more dour than usual.

They asked if I would give another speech-my last had been so inspirational. I politely declined. They asked again, and again, and I declined with somewhat greater force. Laryngitis, I said.

So my duties were restricted to parading around in public and the occasional wave. Possibly an autograph. It should've been a breeze-easiest job in the world. Honestly, though, it didn't feel right at all. I felt like I was betraying something.

The memory of the man whose heart and body you literally stole? I asked myself, sardonically.

Most days were spent indoors, pretending to be reading a book. My last afternoon in Louisian was supposed to be no different-but the hotel room was small and claustrophobic, and I was utterly bored. There was a broken down old TV in the corner, showing the same news report on a loop, over and over again. Jacob White was still at large.

I decided to go for a walk-a harmless poke around town. I called upon the Benjamin Franklin Museum. If all else failed, I could always make myself an exhibit.

The museum was filled with inaccurate biographical details and poorly-shot photographs. Dioramas populated by waxwork dummies. There were history textbooks left lying around, like scattered treasure.

Apparently, certain local business had also decided to take advantage of my presence. The Ben Franklin Burger had been released by a local street vendor, who'd set up shop in the museum. The burger made me sick to the stomach, but for some reason I felt bizarrely proud of it.

I spent quite some time pottering around, allowing my head to swell. In

retrospect that was a mistake, because the moment I stepped outside a crowd was waiting.

‘Oh,’ I said, meekly. ‘Um. Hello.’

There were perhaps two dozen people, all clustered around the museum entrance. Some had microphones; some had notepads. They edged toward me. I backed into the doorway, unnerved. Cameras flashed. A barrage of questions shot forth.

‘Please,’ I tried raising my hands. ‘Please, if you’ll just let me pass... I’m very tired...’

‘Just a few words, Mr. Franklin-’

‘What’s it like to be back in Louisiana?’

‘What do you say about the North/South Divide?’

‘What is your opinion of the bombings?’

‘If you’ll just...’

‘What do you think of Jacob White?’

‘I really don’t think I can comment on-’

‘Some have said that you and Mr. White appear to have very similar opinions, would you agree with that?’

‘My opinions are my own.’

‘So you don’t endorse White’s actions?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You believe our society is in no need of change?’

‘I didn’t say that, I-’

‘Then what are you saying, Mr. Franklin?’

‘Pardon?’ Stressed and harangued, I found myself stopped short.

‘You claim to disagree with White, but your actual statements are almost identical. Precisely what are your views? Precisely what are you saying?’

I knew that that would be a bad question to answer. I knew that the reporter was baiting me. I knew I should say nothing; the back part of my brain told me this, again and again.

Unfortunately, it had been several months since I’d last listened to common sense.

I felt myself open my mouth. I heard myself starting to speak. I can’t recall the exact words, but I’m pretty sure they were along familiar lines. Old values versus new, old virtues and new injustices. In-character stuff. Several times, I told myself to stop... but I was carried away, and the words just kept spilling out.

I answered questions for half an hour or so. My senses returned to me on the way back to my room. I realised that I’d just said all the things Natalia had specifically told me not to.

My heart fluttered. I began to get the little queasy feeling that presages something unpleasant approaching from the immediate future.

Natalia was waiting outside my room.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

There was a warning in her eyes. She actually looked sad.

I didn’t pause, I didn’t stop, I didn’t speak. I didn’t need to see anymore.

I walked straight out of the hotel, and never look back.

Maybe I acted prematurely. Maybe if I hadn’t run off, I could’ve smoothed things over with Greuze. I could’ve explained myself. Perhaps the whole situation really would have blown over. Natalia could have been wrong.

But at that moment, I was far too carried away with my own feelings. Several months of fear pent up, always expecting myself to be one step away from exposure... it was actually a relief to run away. And after I ran, there was really only one way things could go.

Two weeks later, I came across a newspaper. It had my face on the front page, next to Jacob White's. *Wanted*, the headline screeched. *Terrorist Suspects*.

The article went on to detail just how many people I was apparently responsible for murdering.

Being a fugitive is a lot more glamorous when you're doing it on TV. It's not much fun to go through in real life. For one thing, the personal hygiene is appalling. There aren't many opportunities to shower. I'm sure you don't need me to go into any more detail than that.

The food situation is a little depressing, too. You have to beg, borrow and steal whatever scraps you can get hold of. So on the plus side, I was finally losing a little bit of weight. Just as well; I needed all the help I could get in making my profile less recognisable.

I kept my face hidden. I wore baggy clothes and coats closer to cloaks. I stayed in the shadows wherever I could, and made a point of moving only at night. I felt like a rat.

It was not a good time for my ego; I felt my sense of self getting smaller and smaller. But my reasoning kept me on track. *This is what you need to do if you want to stay alive. You made your own bed, now you have to sleep in it.*

Fortunately, the folks of Large were a generally kind and simple lot, well-disposed to beggars and not particularly observant. Small towns like Louisiana lay scattered all over the Oil Fields; the main train line branched between them. Generally the train carriages were rusty and in ill-repaired, easy enough to sneak a ride on. The conductors didn't seem to mind.

Complacency came easily after a couple of weeks without capture. People were so good at ignoring me that I began to think of myself as invisible.

I went out during the day.

It was to steal some food, if I recall correctly. I was in the town of Orr, and a festival was being held; a little county fair with epic designs. Home-made floats made their way through the main street, accompanied by ticker tape and thrown confetti. Bars and pubs were crammed full, people spilling out onto the street. There were stalls everywhere offering snacks both delicious and gross. Bees buzzed around in the summer heat, robbing children of sugar and ice-cream.

In the background, local bands were providing local music. A general air of glee permeated all. Orr was roughly twice as big as Louisian, and twice again as poor. The people here didn't have many nice clothes, nor much jewellery. Still, what little they owned was out in force today. Diamonds were polished, necklaces on show. Shiny shoes clattered against toe-tipped heels.

I'd been sleeping in an alley, between a dumpster and a bale of hay. Don't ask me why there was hay-these southern towns can be quaint like that. The festival sounds woke me up, and the smell of roasting meat lured me out. There were stands grilling legs of swine and oxen bellies over beds of charcoal. The smoke was intoxicating.

Now think about this, I scolded myself. *You've already eaten today, you don't need to go risking anything on another meal...*

By the time I completed that thought I was already in the street, hood pulled over my head, hunched and skulking toward a snack stand.

Great.

A bunch of people twirled past me, dancing. A float drifted by, bearing scantily clad mascots. Bucket-bearers hung alongside the parade, asking the audience for loose change. I immediately felt a sense of rivalry-demanding loose change from strangers was my lookout, damn it.

I should be moving on soon, I decided. The festival would be attracting all sorts of strangers and all sorts of attention-I needed to go somewhere quieter. Midnight would bring a late train that I could scramble aboard.

I managed to pick-pocket someone next to the snack-stand. Smart men make good thieves, as long as they're desperate. I grabbed a hot-dog, threw the vendor some change and vanished from sight in the space of two seconds. I had my eye set on a dark alley, where I could consume my prize in peace.

At that moment, I happened to look up. If I'd been ten seconds later, I might have missed them.

I saw a group of people who looked out of place. Expensive clothes: suits, ties and sunglasses all in black. Burly to a tee, these men had the look of *predators*. They were pushing the crowd aside; making room for someone else. Their commanding officer, I assumed. Quite a lot of attention was being thrown their way. Said crowd was evidently impressed...

Their commander stepped forward. A tall man in an even taller hat. His clothes fit perfectly, and he had a brilliant bushy beard that I knew to be a fake. We never got the hang of growing hair.

It was Abraham Lincoln. Or at least his perfect reproduction.

People were pointing-parents and children in equal awe. Here was *another* page from the history books.

Why would they send him?_

But there wasn't time to think. Lincoln's gaze was searching the crowd, and I knew who he was looking for. The Corporation had followed me this far.

I started to run, and was spotted at once.

I heard footsteps on my tail-I knew it was the men in black. For a second, I thought the crowd might provide me with some cover, or at least slow my pursuers down with its sheer density. Unfortunately the crowd parted eagerly, awed by Abraham Lincoln's hat. Stupid, easily impressed yokels...

My chest began to tighten. *Out of shape, fat boy. Didn't lose that much weight after all.*

I ducked between floats. Streamers flew in my face, dancers diving all around me. I let my cloak fall away; it was only slowing me down. The important people had already noticed me.

'Hey! Hey! Stop him!' I rushed past the hot-dog stall, and took a moment to kick it over. Sizzling meat spilled onto the street, charcoal mingling with tinsel.irate yells came from the vendor himself, followed by a loud crash.

I glanced over my shoulder. Three of the burly bodyguards were still right behind me. Abraham Lincoln was walking at a steady pace, as if he had all the time in the world. Something told me that this man was probably a bastard.

I bolted around a corner, almost ploughing into a small family.

‘Mommy, is that Benjamin Franklin?’

‘No!’ I yelled.

I passed a bar. The saloon-like doors were swinging, half open.

‘*Psst, this way.*’

I ignored the mysterious whisperings.

‘I said *Pssst!*’

Rough hands reached out to grab me. I was pulled into the bar.

The doors clicked shut.

The bar was a dump.

The walls were mouldy, the furniture cheap. A few people sat around a slime green table playing poker. Aside from them, the place was empty.

‘Um. Hello.’ I said vaguely.

The hands that had grabbed me belonged to a little man. By little I do not mean *small*. This man was not small, he was *dense*. Like a pebble with a boulder’s mass; there wasn’t a lot of him, but what there was came made from pure muscle. His *fingers* had sinews.

‘This way, Mr. Franklin,’ the dense man said. ‘Hurry!’

I was dragged bodily down a long flight of stairs. The dark maw of a basement consumed me. More stairs followed-a narrow stone path, reaching forever underground.

‘Quickly!’ I was constantly told. ‘Faster!’ Finally, I had enough of being yanked

along.

‘Young man,’ I said sternly. ‘I assure you I am quite capable of getting to whatever pace is appropriate for the moment under my own power. Now will you please let go of me.’

‘Oh. Right. Sorry, sir,’ the dense man mumbled, letting go.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

‘Daniel.’

From upstairs, there came a loud thump. It was the sound of a door being kicked down, followed by angry voices. Clearly my pursuers were right above.

‘Well Daniel,’ I said, ‘I think we should get wherever we’re going as fast as possible.’

Daniel led me on. ‘Don’t worry,’ he whispered. ‘The basement door is hidden. They’ll never find it.’

‘Hey-what’s behind this door?’ Came a voice from above, followed by the sound of splintering wood.

Daniel winced. ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry,’ he repeated insistently. ‘This door is also hidden.’

What door? I started to ask, as Daniel took a perfectly ordinary looking chunk of brick wall and wrenched it aside to reveal a dark corridor beyond. *Oh.*

‘This way, this way!’ Daniel slammed the secret door shut behind us. A minute later, I heard heavy footsteps on the other side of the wall.

‘*Shhh,*’ Daniel said for good measure.

Eventually, the sounds of searching died down. ‘There’s nothing here!’irate voices called. ‘Just an empty basement.’

Footsteps going *up* the stairs.

‘Come, come.’ Daniel ushered. I followed.

The corridor seemed to get progressively narrower as we went along. I fought the claustrophobia, and tried not to feel trapped.

I had to breathe in to fit.

Finally, we came to the end-a room that looked like a monk's secret sanctum. Candles everywhere, pools of orange flickering around my shadow.

There were lots of people.

The people all had a certain look around them; a kind of shell-shocked reverence. Something about them said *cultists*. I was immediately unnerved.

And yet... they looked at *me* with awe. Disciples before their messiah. All eyes wide... it only took a second for me to realise why. My picture was everywhere; all over the walls. Posters, portraits, easel-sketches. Books about my life-

(*_Books about_ Ben Franklin's life*).

-Texts and tombs of ancient history. There was also a pool-table in the middle of the room, which sort of spoiled the ambience. I suppose that's what this place had been used for before.

'Oh my,' someone muttered.

'Is that really him?' Somebody else asked.

The crowd started moving towards me-instinctively, I backed off. The crowd froze, like startled deer.

'It's all right,' Daniel whispered. 'It's all right, Mr. Franklin. You can trust these people. We're your friends, Mr. Franklin. We're your followers.'

They sat me down. They brought me food-meat and potatoes. After the second course I began to feel slightly at ease, although I couldn't help being disturbed by the way they just *stared* at me. I tried not to judge. They were being kind.

Daniel took it upon himself to explain a few things.

Firstly, that cloak of mine had fooled absolutely no one. My profile was far too

recognisable; everyone in Large had known precisely which homeless person I was, but the people were too reverent to turn me in, so they pretended not to notice.

Those few throwing me pennies were trying to be polite. And the reason Lincoln and his goons had shown up? Well, not everybody was full of respect.

But there were some who went further than simply turning a blind eye to me.

Large and Little were not great friends; few in the south harboured love for the north. They were slaved to each other only by economic necessity. Blowing up a few city buildings, not many Southerners saw that as any great crime. Given the thoroughly earned reputation of the Salmon Corp, many quietly viewed it as a triumph.

Natalia had been right. History did hold great sway over the south. They were far more willing to back heroes from the past than the dirty pragmatists of the present.

These people saw me not as a terrorist, but as a freedom fighter.

I didn't entirely agree with that assessment.

'You and Mr. White,' Daniel was saying. 'The two of you showed us the way. You showed us that we don't have to get trodden on. That we can change things-'

'That,' I interrupted quickly, 'is all very well and good, but I don't think you should go around equating White's opinions to my own.'

'What do you mean?' Daniel blinked.

'I mean, I am not on that man's side,' I said firmly. 'Just because we agree on some minor particulars of philosophy does not make me his accomplice.'

'But... the two of you...' Daniel shook his head. 'You're the ones that'll lead us.'

I smiled tolerantly. 'Says who?'

‘Says me.’

I turned around.

Jacob White was standing behind me.

‘Hello, Ben.’

I sat in stock silence while White had a word with his flock. He told Daniel that he and I wanted to be alone, to discuss leaderly things. The followers dispersed one by one, each stopping for a reverent look back.

In the end it was just White and me, alone in the candle-lit room.

‘Well,’ said White. ‘This is certainly cosy.’

‘What have you been telling these people about me?’ I demanded bluntly.

‘Many grand things. None of them true, all of them prudent.’ White sat down. ‘I do hope you will come around to seeing things my way.’

‘We’re not on the same side.’

‘We ought to be.’

I looked White carefully up and down, and found him totally unreadable. He didn’t *seem* like a madman.

He *did* look like he might have put on a little bit of weight-bulking up around the arms and shoulders. Part of me felt an instant stab of annoyance. I didn’t like him taking liberties with my former shell.

‘What is it you want to do, exactly?’ I demanded. ‘This isn’t 1775 anymore. Revolutions don’t change the world and one man can’t make a difference.’

‘Funny.’ White tilted his head to one side. ‘That’s what they said back then.’

‘You’re going to get people killed.’

‘I already have.’

When he admitted that, he did it with clear melancholy. At least I could be sure that this man understood his crimes.

‘Think about what you’re doing,’ I implored. ‘I may be wearing this skin, but you’re the *real* Benjamin Franklin. Don’t you remember all those wise old words you wrote? Tranquillity, peace and enlightenment? Be worthy of the man history remembers.’

White looked up at me, quite slowly. And he smiled, quite thinly.

‘The *real* Benjamin Franklin,’ he said, ‘died. Those wise old words were the product of a different time. And the man history remembers is not the man who really lived.’

White stood. I’d touched a nerve. ‘Your story books aren’t right. They’re a cleaner history than what was real, and you’re a cleaner portrayal than what ever was. Did you think you were imitating a great man?’ He sneered at me. ‘Is that what lent your impression credence? You’re merely playing up to a fantasy. Not a very convincing one, at that.’

I tried to interrupt, but White wouldn’t have it.

‘I’m not interested in who we were,’ the man snapped. ‘I’m not interested in the past-that’s a wallowing ground for decadent minds. I’m interested in fixing today’s world, and there is nobody else here willing to do it. So yes, I’m going to get my hands dirty and I will consider myself properly damned for it. I’ve lived through such damning times before, and I know that they are sometimes necessary.’

‘Doesn’t sound like you need my help,’ I snorted, also standing up. ‘You already have your sheep.’

‘And I’ll have more, but you could carry greater sway down here. Your face is that of an icon. Besides, deep down I really do think you agree with me.’

‘I think otherwise.’

‘Hmph.’ White ground his teeth. ‘I doubt it. This world has betrayed you just as utterly as it has me.’

I began backing toward the door.

‘My band grows every day,’ White intoned. ‘Soon enough, you’ll be swallowed up by us whether you like it or not.’

‘No.’

‘Go on then. Run for that door.’ White gestured dismissively. ‘See if you enjoy spending more time as a fugitive, sorting through garbage. I am offering you the chance to *earn* a place in history.’

I admit, I was tempted by his offer. White had a scary, magnetic conviction.

Then I remembered something.

‘You killed Derry.’

‘Excuse me?’ White stared blankly.

‘You killed my friend. Might have been the first thing you did.’

‘The girl with the moustache?’ White looked at the floor. ‘Dressed as a harlot? That was an accident. I was confused, and she wanted to put me back in my box.’

‘You stole the body you’re wearing.’

‘You first.’

‘You burned down my house.’

‘Once again, this is dwelling on the past,’ White waved. ‘It doesn’t interest me.’

‘You killed Derry.’ I repeated it, because I felt a terrible shame for almost forgetting her.

‘I tire of this conversation,’ White said. ‘You can go now. Come back when you change your mind.’

I yanked the door open, and ran upstairs as fast as I could.

In the bar, Daniel and his crew were waiting for me. ‘Mr. Franklin?’ They asked. ‘How was it, Mr. Franklin? Did you make decisions? Is something wrong?’

‘Get away from me,’ I muttered, pushing them aside. The crowd came closer, and I bellowed: ‘*Get away from me!*’

I needed some air. I stumbled out onto the streets-festival still whirling all around. Suddenly, every third person I saw seemed to look like Jacob White.

I had to get space.

Blindly I fled, right into the arms of Abraham Lincoln.

Bad luck.

It was just bad luck-and bad, bad timing.

I’d been out of the bar for six minutes. I hadn’t seen a single enemy soul; I thought I’d lost them. I’d started to breathe out again. I’d started to calm down.

I saw a top-hat.

It was bobbing along, above the crowd I was lost in. Coming towards me, quite inexorably. I immediately turned tail and ran, heading fast as I could in the opposite direction. To my surprise, the hat didn’t seem to be following me...

...The hat was in front of me.

I turned.

The hat was behind me.

And there were hats all around me... I was encircled, the crowd was parting again. I stood helplessly as several dozen of the great bobbing boilers moved toward me. What could I do?

There was Abraham Lincoln.

And there was another Abraham Lincoln.

And there was—

Hold on.

These Lincolns didn't look the same as the one I'd seen earlier. They were younger, thinner, the beards looked far faker. In fact, these all had a home-spun, improvisational air about their costumes. Almost as if-The pack of Lincolns swept past me, and converged little way away. They spent a couple of minutes chatting, before heading off toward the town's main road. On the way, I could just about see them meeting up with a similarly sized band of Thomas Jeffersons.

A party-streamer landed on my nose. I felt quite stupid.

It had just been part of the parade. Of course it had. Thank God. Me and my overreactions. In the background, a tuba started playing. Overwhelmed with relief, I turned to disappear. The train station was near-

-The *proper* Lincoln was standing behind me. I knew it was him, because his arms were crossed and he had a *Wasn't that funny?* expression firmly on his face.

I ran, too slow. He was close behind, and there was nowhere to go. Lincoln backed me into a corner. The street was narrow and my spine was soon pressed against a brick wall. Behind the distant ticker-tape parade, the sun was setting.

Just me and him. No guards. They must have been off searching somewhere else.

I considered charging, trying to wrestle my way free-then I noticed the bulge in the other man's sleeve. He was wearing a Gauntlet. I wouldn't get ten paces.

Reluctantly, I raised my hands. Surrender-the ugly option.

'They'll want me alive,' I told my captor tersely. *At least as first.*

Lincoln smiled. 'They don't want you at all, except in pieces,' he said. 'But I have other ideas.'

I blinked. Quite shocked.

I'll be the one they send.

Shocked, because Abraham Lincoln was speaking with the strongest Russian accent I'd ever heard.

At Gauntlet-point, Lincoln marched me to a nearby cafe. He walked the whole way with a smile.

The cafe boasted wire tables and chequered clothes. Narrow windows offered a good view of the street festivities. The moment we stepped inside every customer looked up, and every customer gaped.

'If you would all excuse us for a moment,' said Abraham politely, in a perfectly American accent. 'My friend and I require some privacy.'

Even the *manager* rushed outside to give us room to talk.

Lincoln and I sat down.

'Natalia?' I finally asked. 'Is that you?'

Lincoln glared. 'Of course it's me, you fool,' came the Russian accent once again. 'I told you it would be.'

'But... how?' I goggled. 'I mean, why? I mean... explain...'

Natalia/Lincoln crossed his/her arms. 'Publicity.'

'Publicity?'

'Publicity.' Lincoln removed his great hat, making a small show of dusting it off. 'My idea. Fire with fire. The only way to beat one historical icon is with another.'

Understanding dawned. 'You want to create a pre-emptive counter revolution.'

'No.' Lincoln's eyes narrowed. 'I just want to steal all of your fans.'

'So you're not just here to bring me in?'

'Well,' Lincoln shrugged, 'I am supposed to kill you on sight. But that's a secondary objective compared to fixing the damage you've done.'

I fidgeted slightly. 'I can't help noticing that you haven't... killed me on sight.'

'Yet.'

I fidgeted slightly more.

'Greuze wanted to send this body complete with historical mind-his obsession with authenticity borders on a fetish. Fortunately, I was able to persuade him otherwise.' Natalia/Lincoln offered a wry smile. 'After all, White was the one responsible for programming the Sims. No matter how perfect his creations seem, it's probably not a good idea to trust them.'

'Probably,' I echoed dryly.

'So instead we decided to transfer my consciousness into this body and use it as a puppet. Greuze didn't like the idea, but he accepted it as practical.'

'Desperate times?'

'Exactly.' Lincoln said. 'I have to say, it has been a very bizarre experience.'

'I'm sure.'

'I am not enjoying having a penis.'

'Um...'

'Among other things. This body is so different to mine... it sends different signals. The senses work in different ways. Subtle, but...' Lincoln's head shook. 'My skin is too thick. It makes everything altogether foreign. The sooner I get this experience over with, the better.'

'Perhaps you should give up and go home?' I suggested hopefully.

'Well, then I wouldn't be paid my vast sums of money.'

'Natalia.' I frowned. 'Or...Abraham or... *whatever*... Are you actually going to be killing me or arresting me or something? Because if not, this conversation is beginning to get a little existentialist for my taste.'

'Nonsense. Ben Franklin was a natural existentialist.'

‘Ben Franklin disagrees,’ I said.

‘And no, I’m not going to kill you. Possibly.’

‘That’s very generous of you.’

Outside, a particularly large float drifted by. It depicted George Washington wrestling a lion.

‘I have a better view of things than Greuze,’ said Natalia. ‘I know you and White aren’t working together.’

‘You can be sure of that?’ *Stop hurting your own defence!*

‘No. But since you have proven exponentially easier to track and catch than White, I severely doubt you’re using the same underground network. Besides, I don’t find you... impossible to trust.’

‘I’m flattered.’

‘Even so, I have to assume White has at least *tried* to recruit you.’

‘Assume away.’

‘We can’t find him, Benjamin,’ Lincoln/Natalia said. It was clearly a difficult admission. ‘He’s too well hidden, he has too many supporters, and short of actually *invading* Large...’

‘You want me to flush him out of hiding.’

Lincoln shrugged. ‘You’re the closest thing we have to bait.’

‘And am I to assume that you have something to offer me in return, besides the simple courtesy of *not killing me*.’

‘No, that’s more or less all I’m going to offer you in return.’

‘Ah.’

‘This is not an easy olive branch for me to extend,’ Lincoln said pointedly. ‘And trust me when I say, it’s the absolute best you’re going to get.’

‘Oh, I believe you.’

‘Now obviously you’re about to reject me outright.’

‘Excuse me?’ I blinked. I’d been exactly one heartbeat away from agreeing to the deal then and there.

‘I’ve studied you, Mr. Franklin. Your psyche-profile’s pretty transparent. It makes you very predictable.’

‘I’m... sure it does.’

‘You are not a man happy to betray even his enemies. And I’m sure you don’t enjoy the thought of deceit on *our* behalf.’

Belatedly, I realised what my problem with the scheme ought to be. ‘And you’re going to kill White. That’ll make me an accessory to murder.’

‘Exactly,’ Lincoln nodded. ‘But think of it this way, Ben-White’s already sponsored more minor attacks. When he’s ready for a major strike, how many innocents do you suppose are going to suffer? To quote one of your contemporaries; “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” ‘

‘Your argument is... compelling. Do I have time to think about it?’

‘Of course,’ Lincoln said.

‘Thank you.’

‘You have eleven seconds.’

I sighed. ‘Fair enough.’

Just for the sake of appearance, I let eight seconds pass. Lincoln actually counted then down. Bitch.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘You’ve got a deal.’

I didn’t go straight back to Daniel’s bar.

Instead I spent the rest of the night wandering around, lost in both thought and in

reality. Orr's roads were rather windy.

The festivities had died down; the streets were emptying out. Rubbish lay everywhere-discarded debris and detritus, a carpet of party streamers. I kicked my way along the dirt.

You have to earn your place in history.

The worst part was... I could see White's point. I could kind of agree with it. And I could see *Lincoln's* point, and I could agree with that. And on some fundamental level, I didn't like either of them.

Stuck in the middle. An undignified place to be.

I tried to get into character. I tried to ask myself what the real Franklin would do... but the truth was, I didn't have a clue. Perhaps I never had.

Maybe he'd do something wise and epic and principled. Or maybe he'd be stupid and get himself killed. Somehow, living up to his standards didn't seem so important anymore. I suppose that was probably White's influence, his words still chipping away in the back of my head. *He was just a man, like any other.*

Of course he was. But possibly the reality of the man didn't matter, when I had such better fantasies to imitate.

I tried asking myself what *I* would do. Still no answers.

Your psyche profile makes you easy to predict...

Maybe I didn't know exactly what Ben Franklin would do, but I had a good idea of what he *wouldn't*.

'Why do you follow White?'

I was asking Daniel-we were alone in his bar. The little man had let me in at the crack of dawn. Outside, gold rings were ribbing the sky.

Daniel shrugged. 'Because I think he's smarter than me.'

'Can I get a drink?'

Daniel nodded, fetching me a glass of tonic water.

‘A drink with alcohol in it.’

Daniel nodded, fetching me a glass of beer.

‘Thank you.’ The liquid tasted... awful. I sipped again. ‘Is that the only reason?’

‘It’s the best reason,’ Daniel said. ‘That’s what we want from our leaders, isn’t it? For them to be smarter than us.’

I considered. ‘Do you think I’d make a good leader?’

‘Is that a trick question, sir?’ Daniel smiled wryly.

I decided to take that as a yes.

‘Because I can assure you I am very much smarter than you. And to be honest, I don’t have a clue.’ I locked gazes with my drink. ‘I’ve spent my whole life inventing things for other people’s reasons. I’ve never had to deal with the consequences before. I’ve been a tool. Tools don’t have to take responsibility.’

‘Well sir. I don’t think that’s quite true.’

I smiled vaguely. ‘If it was, would you think of me differently Daniel? If I turned out not to be the man you thought, if it had all been a fraud, I’m pretty sure that would constitute an unforgivable lie.’

‘Inasmuch as I understand what you’re saying,’ Daniel said cautiously, ‘I suppose I’d agree.’

Somehow, that wasn’t the answer I’d hoped for.

‘But that’s what’s so good about you and Mr. White, sir.’ Daniel grinned. ‘You’re honest. You’re a bit of a dream.’

‘Oh?’ My glass was drained. I tipped it upside down.

‘Until you came along, everyone had pretty much accepted that the people in charge were always going to be liars and frauds and dirty politicians, cause it’s been that way forever,’ Daniel grinned. ‘But then you showed us ideals weren’t

just for fairy tales and like. People would stand up for the truth. Be heroic.'

'You think I'm heroic?' I scoffed.

'The government's trying to kill you,' Daniel reasoned. 'So either you're a hero or a monster. And since I agree with you, I go for the former.'

'Hmph.' I sat in silence for a long moment. 'Is White still here?'

'He's reachable.'

'Get him for me, Daniel,' I said. 'Tell him the real Ben Franklin is ready to talk.'

White and I met down in the basement, over a game of chess.

I wasn't playing. White was beating himself.

'I just met with representatives of the Salmon Corp,' I told him. 'In exchange for my life, they want me to draw you out into a trap.'

'And you agreed?'

'They were heavily armed.'

'I see,' White was excessively calm, apparently focused solely on the game board. 'And yet you're telling me because...'

'I don't trust them to hold up their end of the deal. I think as soon as they get you, they'll come for me. My only chance is to turn this around on them.'

'A reasonable supposition,' White mused. 'But what makes you think I won't prove just as untrustworthy?'

'You at least have a gentleman's honour,' I hoped.

White chuckled. 'Unfortunately, you may be correct,' he said. 'I can't really trust you, you know. I was aware of your meeting-Ben Franklin and Abraham Lincoln walk into a bar, somebody notices. And I'd like to put faith in you, but...who knows? Maybe they told you to tell me all this.'

'Maybe. All I can do is promise you they didn't.'

‘Hmmm.’ White stroked his chin-a little half-stubble had developed there. Absently, I realised that the man was trying to grow a beard.

‘Lincoln is a real problem,’ White finally said. ‘His sheer prestige carries enough influence to threaten me. It’s the only real weapon the Corp has.’

‘I suppose you sabotaged all of the other personality Sims?’

White smiled thinly. ‘Let’s just say I have some Easter Eggs waiting in the Corporation, but this one is apparently walking free of my influence, so it will have to be dealt with the old fashioned way. I suppose that’s where you come in.’

‘Just remember, I’m not doing this because I want to join you.’ I said. ‘I’m doing it because it’s necessary.’

‘Good old fashioned pragmatism,’ White nodded. ‘Very well. Trust or not, I suppose we will have to rely on each other all the same.’

‘On Gentlemen’s honour?’

‘Exactly,’ he nodded. ‘On Gentlemen’s honour.’

As far as White was aware, the plan was this:

At eleven-fifteen every night, a train departs Louisian. It travels all the way up to the centre of Little, deposits its passengers on the doorstep of the Salmon Corporation, then winds all the way back down.

There are seven stops. Each stop lasts for a total of three minutes. The train itself is relatively old, and only just in service. Very few people travel on it; its principal purpose is as an artefact of tradition.

I would lure Lincoln onto this train with the promise of capturing White. Lincoln would come with back-up, of course-but I’d warn him not to bring too many people, for fear of giving the game away. At most, half-a-dozen soldiers would suffice.

White would be waiting for Lincoln with twice as many of his own men, and then some.

The trap was elegant.

As far as White was aware.

‘I can give you White.’

This I told to Lincoln/Natalia, sitting in a quiet corner of another empty cafe.

‘He trusts you?’

‘Sort of,’ I said. ‘He wants “Abraham Lincoln” dead, and he’s willing to rely on me to do it.’

Lincoln nodded. ‘Best we could hope for.’

‘I should warn you,’ I said. ‘He’ll be prepared for the possibility I’m double-crossing him.’

‘Of course he will. He’s not a moron.’

‘If he’s expecting a trap, he might just decide not to show up. He wants you dead, but that doesn’t need him-it only needs some henchmen and a bomb.’

‘No. He’s got to do it himself,’ Lincoln said fiercely. ‘It’s all about symbolism... If White is seen to kill me in person, righteously and with witnesses, that puts him up as a legend by default. If he does it by proxy it’s cowardly.’

I raised a brow. ‘You know, sometimes I wonder-what the hell kind of publicist are you?’

Lincoln gave a demure shrug. ‘A dangerous one.’

As far as Lincoln was aware, the plan was this:

At eleven-fifteen every night, a train departs Louisian. It travels all the way up to the centre of Little, deposits its passengers on the doorstep of the Salmon Corporation, then winds all the way back down.

There are seven stops. Each stop lasts for a total of three minutes. The train itself is relatively old, and only just in service. Very few people travel on it; its principal purpose is as an artefact of tradition.

Lincoln was to board the train at the third stop, on the border of Large and Little. White would already be on the train, lured by the promise of ambushing Lincoln. He would have only a few men-I'd warned him not to bring too many in the interests of stealth. Lincoln would arrive with a few dozen more. And that would be that.

And the actual plan?

Thanks to my (mis)information, both groups would have the exact same number of soldiers. At the third stop they would clash. Both sides trapped in a narrow space on a fast moving train, with no choice but to fight. Hopefully, they'd kill each other.

At some point, I'd get off the train and continue on my way.

Betraying everybody equally-the one thing Benjamin Franklin certainly wouldn't have done.

It was a simple plan.

As far as I was aware.

White and I waited together at Louisian Saint Train Station. I don't know where the "Saint," part comes from. It's just there.

I checked my watch. Eleven O'clock.

It was dark and cold. The moon was heavy, pouring silver down on the wooden platform and its little snake of rusty tracks. There were a couple of other passengers nearby, cradling luggage-they weren't with us. White's people were already aboard, waiting. White himself was carrying a suitcase, presumably to help him blend in.

I checked my watch again. The time was still the same.

White cleared his throat. 'You know,' he said, 'I really do find this whole business distasteful.'

'I'm sure.'

A thunderous roar grew in the night; metal screeching and scratching. Twin lights in the distance, getting rapidly closer. A great steel snake pulling into view, all black and blue and green. It was made up to look as much like an old-fashioned steam train as possible.

The engine hissed, the train stopped. Doors cracked open, and conductors waited patiently to be shown tickets.

White looked at me. 'All aboard,' he said.

The train's interior was rickety. The walls rattled, and the windows let cold air in. Everything did its best to give the impression of being made from mahogany and padded leather. The train tried for baroque, and ended up looking antique.

Carriage after carriage split into isle after isle of uncomfortable, shell-like seat. The back half of the train was filled with private cabins-theoretically for the richer crowd. Since the train was mostly empty, White and I helped ourselves to one such cabin.

We slid the door shut and sat. The train lurched on.

'I didn't see many of your people about,' I said to White.

'They're mostly hidden in the front and back carriages,' he replied.

'And the driver's seat?'

White nodded. Reaching into his pockets, he extracted what seemed to be a small sandwich. I watched with mild disgust as he greedily (not to mention messily) tucked in.

'It's going to be a long journey.' White said defensively, off my expression. 'Would you like some?' He offered a morsel.

'...No. Thank you.' I stood. 'I think I'm going to try and find the bathroom.'

'Suit yourself,' White shrugged.

I made my way to the front of the train, occasionally stumbling as the whole thing juddered. Landscape raced by the windows, shrouded in darkness.

I wasn't looking for a bathroom. I headed straight for the front of the train, the cockpit-the driver's den. On the way, I did pass an increasing number of individuals I recognised from Daniel's hideout.

Every door on the train was unlocked-locks out of service, I guess-and there in the driver's seat, I found Daniel himself.

The cockpit was small and cramped with consoles. There were levers, knobs and blinking lights everywhere. Daniel sat buried by the lights, occasionally pressing things. An unconscious man lay beside him, tied up half-naked on the floor. Daniel was wearing an ill-fitting train-conductor's uniform.

'Hello, Mr. Franklin,' he greeted me cheerfully.

'Daniel,' I raised a brow. 'I didn't know you could drive a train.'

'I can't, but the computer can.' Daniel said. 'Mr. White said he'd feel better with one of us in the pilot's chair. I can always shake the driver awake in a real emergency.'

Unless that emergency is coming towards you at several hundred miles an hour and you don't notice until there's nothing to be done about it...

'Yes, well,' I smiled thinly. 'Carry on.'

With a grinding din, the train slowed to a temporary halt. *Stop one*, I supposed. That was fast.

'Don't worry, Mr. Franklin,' Daniel said. 'I can handle things up here.'

I took that as a polite dismissal, and worked my way out of the cockpit just as the train began to move again.

Abraham Lincoln was sitting in a seat.

He was surrounded by ordinary-looking people with ordinary-looking expressions wearing ordinary-looking clothes. In fact these people seemed so ordinary that I knew they just had to be cops.

Lincoln was reading a book, apparently engrossed. He didn't see me. I darted

past as quickly as possible, keeping my head firmly down. A couple of those ordinary folks tossed me glances, but they didn't say anything. Presumably they wanted to maintain the pretext of disguise.

'Lincoln's here,' I said to White, as soon as I found our cabin. 'Now.'

'Hmm?' White looked up.

'*Lincoln's here.*'

'Oh.' White checked his watch. 'That is rather ahead of schedule.'

'Aren't you going to do something?' I demanded. White was altogether too calm.

'No.'

'No?!'

White's expression became one of strained tolerance. 'If they came aboard ahead of schedule, it implies a change to their plan-a change you weren't told about.' White crossed his arms. 'Apparently their trust in you isn't complete.'

'Something unforeseen must've happened.'

'*Or* they are simply being prudent. There's really no way for me to know, and I certainly don't want to act without a better idea of the situation.' White bit his lip, thinking. 'They haven't come for me yet, so they're being just as cautious as I.'

'We should try to take them *now*,' I said, firmly. White just stared.

'Go and talk to them,' he said. 'Find out what you can and report back here.'

I bristled. 'You're giving me *orders* now?'

'I have been for some time. You've only just noticed that they weren't suggestions.'

I couldn't think of any witty retorts. 'I'll find out what the problem is,' I mumbled instead, leaving the cabin.

A sonic boom struck through the train as it hit a tunnel. Darkness followed greater darkness, and emerged on the other side as moonlight.

I reached Lincoln's seat. A dozen undercover cops fixed me with their collective gaze.

Lincoln looked up. 'Hello, Ben.'

'You're early,' I said, trying to sound more surprised than accusational.

Lincoln shrugged. 'Didn't see the point in waiting.'

'Apparently you do,' I countered. 'Since you're just sitting here.'

A spark of annoyance lit Lincoln's eyes; the smallest hint of Natalia's Russian fire. I couldn't help noticing the way he sat cross legged in his chair... just a tad feminine.

'Maybe I wouldn't be,' he said. 'If you hadn't misinformed me.'

I looked as blank as possible. 'What are you talking about?'

'You said White would bring only a handful of men.'

'I said *roughly* a handful.'

'You failed to mention,' Lincoln twitched, 'the four or five *dozen* of his followers hidden at the front and back of this train.'

I adopted a dumbfounded expression. 'That's impossible,' I said. 'I saw him get aboard myself. He had only his private guards-I told you, he wants to make this quiet.'

'Clearly he changed his mind,' Lincoln said flatly. 'And I don't want to risk a fire fight with what appear to be horribly equal numbers.'

'So what're you going to do?' I demanded. 'Sit here and wait for him to die of natural causes?'

'Obviously not,' Lincoln snapped. 'I have reinforcements waiting on the other side of the border. All I have to do is let this train reach its third stop.'

‘White knows you’re aboard. What if he strikes first?’

Natalia/Lincoln began fiddling with his/her top-hat. ‘Blood spills.’

‘All right,’ I nodded, starting to walk away. Absently, Lincoln gestured to one of the policemen. Burly hands restrained me.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘Back to White,’ I protested. ‘To try and make sure blood *isn’t* spilled.’

‘You know, Ben,’ Lincoln said, ‘I’m really not sure why I should continue trusting you.’

‘Nata-‘ I caught my tongue. ‘I mean, *please*. I didn’t know about this, I swear. If I’m missing for too long, White’s going to realise something is up.’

‘All right.’ Lincoln reluctantly released me. I started to slink away.

‘That isn’t the way you came,’ one of the policemen observed.

‘I need to use the bathroom first,’ I shot back, quickly darting out of sight.

Once again, I chose the cockpit over the toilet.

‘Daniel!’ I hissed, slamming the door shut behind me. ‘Daniel!’

Daniel looked around, surprised by my urgency. ‘Yes sir, Mr. Franklin?’

‘Wake that driver up. You’re going to need to ask for his help. And by ask, I mean demand.’

*

I returned to White via Lincoln’s cold gaze.

‘Well?’ White asked.

‘They’re scared to move,’ I replied. ‘They see your extra forces.’

‘I thought so,’ White bit a lip. ‘Stalemate.’

‘I think you should attack now,’ I pressed. ‘It’s the best chance you’re going to get.’

White considered. ‘Maybe you’re right,’ he said. ‘But-‘

Suddenly, the entire train jerked. A metallic clang exploded in the air-the sound of snapping metal. The floor jumped, and for an instant everything felt lighter.

‘What the hell was that?’ I demanded.

White cocked his ears. ‘It came from the back of the train.’

We both bolted from the cabin, to the end of the carriage. There we found an open door, flapping in the breeze. And far, far away-lying still on the tracks-was the back of the train.

‘The rear carriages,’ White said, unnecessarily. ‘Somebody’s cut the rear carriages.’

In the distance we could see a handful of shadows slipping out onto the tracks, angrily gesturing at the train to come back.

‘Over half my men...’ White muttered.

I looked down, at what was now the *end* of our train. Scorch marks were strewn all over the hull-particularly at the joints which had once held the two carriages together.

‘These are Gauntlet marks,’ I said grimly. ‘Lincoln’s people did this.’

‘Then they’ll be heading for the front of the train,’ White said. ‘To get rid of the rest of my men.’

He started to rush off, presumably with mind to intercept. I held him back.

‘Can’t go that way.’

‘Why not?’

‘Lincoln’s people will be all over the inside of the train. Now they’ve got us flanked, they’re probably moving to find you.’

White paused. I could see the cogs turning as he calculated strategies... I got there first.

‘We can go around the outside,’ I said.

White raised a brow. ‘Wouldn’t that be extremely dangerous?’

‘So’s staying here.’

White took the point.

We pushed aside the flapping door.

Wind immediately lashed against us; the unstoppably hands of nature, slapping us around. Against the gale-level buffeting we crawled out onto the train’s exterior.

Fortunately, the hull was relatively climber friendly. Ribs, fins and flanges lined the hips of the beast-it was just about possible to clamber along. I gave a silent prayer of thanks to whoever decided that this thing ought to look like a steam-train.

My fingers felt in danger of freezing off. Everything was cold, in the most biting way possible. The dark made it hard to see more than centimetres ahead, and but for the streaks of starlight we would have been blind.

‘We need to go faster!’ White yelled. *Easy for you to say*, I thought. *Your body’s flat_.* My belly was doing its best to overbalance me. I fought to hold on.

Don’t look down. Don’t look down. I could feel the thumping of the tracks.

The side of the train was getting smoother and smoother-soon there’d be no place left to hold on. The only way to go was-

‘Up!’ I yelled, wind stealing away half of my volume. Desperately clambering toward the top of the train, I came close to a window. Peering into the passenger compartment, I noticed about ten of Lincoln’s cops sweeping their way through the train’s interior. I was right. They were locking the place down.

I scrambled up with greater speed. The train’s narrow roof beckoned me,

boasting of safety...

The roof lied. The moment I reached it, I felt in a far more precarious position than before. I couldn't stand up; to stand would be to fall. Instead I hugged the surface and clawed my way along, using my whole body for propulsion.

White came along a few seconds later, progressing a little bit faster. He was up to his hands and knees, and almost managing a walking pace.

We reached the front end of the train-the tapered cockpit only a little way ahead. Down below, there was the carriage containing White's men...

...And there were two others on the outside with us, attacking the carriage at its joints. A pair of plain-clothed police, tied to the train's exterior by some kind of utility harness. They had their Gauntlets out and pumping with electricity. They were quietly cutting through the ties binding the front of the train. Bursts of warmth came up from their work. They'd be done in no time.

We had no choice but to attack. Both policemen seemed utterly engrossed in their task, but those bright blue lances could be deadly at a dozen paces.

I saw White reach into his pocket, taking something out... a gun. A silver revolver. How very quaint. He spun the barrel, and gestured as if aiming. Hitting anything at this range would be difficult-let alone hitting *two* things. I motioned for him to wait, then moved forward all the faster myself. *God, I hope these guys saw me talking to Lincoln*, I thought.

The moment I could be sure I was in ear-shot, I yelled out; 'Hey there! Hello! Hey there!'

The two policemen turned to me, and started to bring their Gauntlets up.

'No, wait!' I raised my hands, started to fall off the train and immediately grabbed on again. 'Wait! It's me! Ben Franklin! I, uh surrender?'

The troops didn't fire. They lowered their Gauntlets and fixed me with suspicious expressions.

'What do you want?' They demanded.

‘Pardon?!’ I called.

‘What! Do you! Want!?’

‘To warn you!’

‘About what?!’

Two perfectly aimed shots sounded off in rapid succession. Both cops slumped over. The safety lines kept their lifeless bodies from slipping away; instead, they lolled listlessly against the side of the carriage. Waving in the wind.

‘Nice work,’ White said begrudgingly, lowering his revolver.

‘Good shooting,’ I supposed. We came to the dead bodies, and White stripped away their weapons. With mild distaste, I took the Gauntlet he handed me.

‘That looks dangerous.’ I pointed at the joint between carriages-the two cops had melted it half away. The remaining part was creaking in a most unsettling manner.

‘Unfortunately, these weapons weren’t designed for cutting *or* welding,’ White said, strapping on his Gauntlet. ‘So we’re just going to have to hope it holds.’

White and I let ourselves back into the train, breathing little sighs of relief. It was good to be warm again.

We were surrounded by White’s men.

‘All right!’ White called out. ‘Listen! Things are not going exactly as planned!’

‘Uh oh.’ I tapped White on the shoulder. He turned, irate. ‘What is it?’

I pointed. From the depths of the train, a wave of policemen was approaching.

‘Apparently they had a Plan B,’ White muttered dryly.

‘Do we?’ I asked.

‘Men! Form up!’ White bellowed. There were a hundred clicking sounds as bullets popped into chambers. Apparently Southerners were big on projectiles.

‘Charge,’ White said softly.

‘Wait,’ I started to protest, ‘Maybe you shouldn’t just-‘

Too late. The men were charging.

‘The only way to break a stalemate,’ White said, ‘is with a bold move.’

Flashes of light and sound tore through the train-spears of lightning bouncing off the walls and striking flesh. Gun-barrels roared, sounding out each shot. Men dove for cover behind seats, merrily blasting away.

Bolts of blue and tips of steel. Windows shattering, glass melted away.

‘Come on,’ White growled, racing toward the battle.

‘Wait!’ I protested. ‘We can’t go through that.’

‘A general doesn’t hide behind his troops,’ White snapped. ‘We stand ahead.’

With that, White was into the fray-in one hand his revolver, in the other his Gauntlet. He didn’t even bother taking cover. He was quite unstoppable.

Reluctantly I joined the back of the battle, trying to get off the occasional shot without being killed in the process. It was hard to see straight. Neon ribbons danced over my eyes.

White’s people pressed on, through the chaos and narrow carriageways. There was little room to duck, little room to dodge. The winner was whoever fired first.

I began to see the basic flaw in my plan. Yes, the two sides were killing each other-but there was no way for me to get *out of the way*.

‘We’ll never make it through all of this!’ I shouted.

‘Optimism is a virtue,’ White snapped. ‘We don’t have to make it all the way.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve got a plan. Trust me.’

Of course he had a plan.

‘Here!’ White hollered. ‘Everybody, move in here!’

We had reached the exact centre of the train-the Dining Cart. White and his men pulled in, securing the doors from either end. Outside, cops scurried. Occasionally, they’d make an attempt to charge us. A few choice shell-shots would send them into quick retreat. Only trouble was, they had infinite ammunition... we only had so many bullets.

The dining cart looked exactly like any other cabin-that is, a hollowed out tube. But instead of chairs, a large bar took up most of the available space. It was stacked high with drinks, snacks and steaming pots of coffee.

White disappeared behind the bar.

‘Pardon me for saying so, but I really don’t think this is the time for an entree,’ I said.

‘I disagree,’ White muttered, popping back into view. He was holding a large suitcase, the same suitcase he’d been carrying on the platform... I wondered what’d happened to that.

‘What is that? What’s in there?’

‘A bomb.’

White flipped open the case; there was indeed a bomb inside. It looked fairly well-improvised. Plastic explosives and a chemical timer, cobbled together from home-made parts.

I stepped back. ‘A bomb.’

‘No offense, Benjamin,’ White wore an unnerving grin. ‘But I wasn’t entirely happy with your meta-ambush plan. Too many ways it could go wrong.’

‘I can’t imagine what you mean,’ I deadpanned. Behind me, one of White’s followers fell in a halo of electricity.

‘This way, if all else fails,’ White clicked a few buttons on the case, ‘at least we

achieve the mission objective.'

'Killing Lincoln?'

'And every other Salmon Corp lackey within half a mile.'

I looked at the bomb's timer. It was set for sixty minutes and counting.

'What about doing it in person?' I protested. 'The symbolism, and... symbolism.'

'Symbolism's good,' White shrugged. 'But victory's more important. With any luck,' he clicked the briefcase shut. 'We'll be able to get to Lincoln well before my little contingency plan goes off.'

'And without any luck?'

'Optimism is a virtue,' White repeated.

A burst of blue reached over his head and slammed into the wall mere metres behind. White threw a gunshot shot absent-mindedly over his shoulder, where it hit somebody's face.

'The situation is pretty bad, sirs,' one of his men reported. 'They've got us bottled in.'

'Can't retreat. Nowhere to go,' White mused. His gaze roved, looking for options.

So did mine, but I saw nothing helpful. Just a bunch of microwave ready-meals and a few dozen bottles of BBQ sauce.

'Hold on.' White looked at me. 'They still think you're on *their* side, don't they?'

'Yes...' *And so do you.* 'Why do you-'

'I've got a hostage!'

White stepped out of the dining car with a gun to my head.

I did not particularly approve of this strategy.

‘All of you, back off!’ White bellowed. ‘Or Mr. Franklin loses another life.’

My hands were tied behind my back, hiding my own weapon. White frogmarched me forward, pistol jammed into my cheek. He was being unnecessarily rough.

But his bluff (*I hoped* it was a bluff) was working. The police backed down.

That’s a relief.

White’s men followed him, fanning out. The cops moved to compensate. Both sides formed twisted mirror images of each other.

‘Wherever your leader is,’ White said. ‘Make him come out.’

Lincoln stepped into view, looking tall and haughty and quite magnificent.

‘I’m right here,’ Lincoln said, donning the top-hat.

‘You’re going to let us get off at the next stop, or I’m going to shoot this man in the head,’ White said crisply.

‘Go ahead.’

Oh, fantastic.

‘Excuse me?’ White squinted.

‘I said go ahead,’ Lincoln repeated. ‘Shoot him. Save us the trouble later.’

I gave Lincoln a death-glare. He/she didn’t seem to notice.

‘And for the record,’ Lincoln added, ‘the next stop is the border, where I predict roughly five hundred Corporate sponsored soldiers will be waiting to drag your ass in. So it’d really be a good idea to surrender before we kill you.’

‘Stop at the border,’ it was my turn to speak up. ‘Exactly when were you expecting to do that?’

‘About no-‘

A signpost flashed by the train window. A platform came into view, then shot into the distance.

The signpost had read: *Welcome to America Little*.

Lincoln stared out the window, and looked quite irate. On the rapidly receding platform, a veritable army of policemen could be seen.

Silently, I praised Daniel’s skill.

‘I had a word with the driver. It’s possible that this train’s been programmed not to stop,’ I said.

‘We’re still going to the city,’ Natalia/Lincoln insisted. ‘The terminus is right outside our headquarters-people *will* be waiting.’

‘I think perhaps you’re misunderstanding the meaning of *not stop*,’ I replied calmly. This moved even White to incredulity.

‘What exactly is your plan for getting *off*?’ He demanded quietly.

‘Still in the process of formulation.’

‘Suicide isn’t in your nature, Ben,’ Lincoln spoke up. ‘It’s not in the Psyche Profile.’

‘Really,’ I said. ‘What does your profile say about my skill in thinking outside the box?’

Lincoln glared with Natalia’s eyes, and finally said:

‘Truce. You stop this train, everyone lives.’

‘Seems fair enough,’ I effortlessly broke free of White’s grip. ‘Jacob, I’ll need to see you in the cockpit.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Lincoln said flatly.

‘I don’t see why-‘

‘Because I no longer trust you *at all* when it comes to making deals.’

‘For the record, I’m a little shaky on that too,’ White put in.

‘All right. Just the three of us.’ I was already running for the front of the train.

‘No one else. Let’s go.’

The pawns were left behind to point guns at one another and look tense.

As we headed for the fore, White asked me:

‘What exactly did you do?’

‘I told Daniel to make sure the train kept going no matter what,’ I explained. ‘So I assume he hacked into the autopilot and reprogrammed it to-’

We came to the cockpit, which was on fire.

‘Oh.’

Daniel had smashed pretty much every control panel to pieces. Everything that wasn’t dented was torn, circuitry hanging loose from all angles. Things were sparking, little flames licked at the walls; Daniel was going at them with a fire extinguisher. In a corner, the semi-conscious train conductor was huddled in fear.

‘Uh, hi guys,’ Daniel said meekly. ‘How’re you doing?’

‘I think he may have adopted a simpler approach,’ Lincoln said dryly.

‘Turns out it’s much easier to break something outright than to change it a little bit,’ Daniel grinned. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve got everything under control. Nothing to see here.’

‘Daniel-’

‘I think I can fix this with a simple-’

‘*Daniel*,’ I snapped. ‘Go sit in the back, keep everyone else company. We’ll handle this.’

Daniel looked up. ‘Right,’ he muttered. ‘I suppose you two are the genius

inventors.'

Daniel excused himself. White and I immediately leapt for the broken consoles.

'Okay,' I muttered to White. 'You're the genius inventor. How do we fix this?'

'I don't know. I don't know the first thing about trains,' White poked aimlessly at the wires, holding random twists of circuitry together. 'Especially *modern* trains.'

'Oh, great,' I rubbed my temple. 'All right. I think I can work the basic details of this out.'

'Heh.'

'What?'

'Nothing,' White's expression was of grim amusement. 'I just told you we'd work well together.'

'Feel free the chat away, you two,' Lincoln said, behind us. 'We have all day.'

'Oh yes,' White said suddenly, clicking his fingers. 'I almost forgot.'

White took his revolver and shot Lincoln in the stomach.

Lincoln went down.

I stared at White in shock. 'What was that for?'

White shrugged. 'It's never a good idea to ignore a perfect opportunity.'

'There was a truce!'

'He would have done the same to us the moment we fixed this train,' White replied. 'Now let's get to work.'

'Sir! Sir!' Daniel came rushing in. 'I thought I heard a gunshot.'

'It was nothing,' White dismissed, holding two circuit breakers together. 'Just Lincoln taking a bad fall.'

‘Oh. Of course.’ Daniel looked around. ‘What did you do with his body?’

‘It’s right over-‘

White and I saw it at the same time. Lincoln was gone. The words *Body Amour* suddenly exploded in my head in massive letters.

We didn’t see blood.

‘Oh, shit.’

We both bolted for the door, just in time to hear the lightning strike. Lincoln had taken the opportunity to backtrack and outflank our men. He/she could strike them broadly from behind, and the moment they turned around to retaliate...

It was a slaughter. Lincoln was losing a lot of people, but White was losing more.

White had another good shot at Lincoln, though-and this time he was aiming for the head. He bought his revolver to bear—

It clicked out, empty. Lincoln saw us, and ducked behind a chair.

‘Hell,’ White said, and started zapping with his Gauntlet. The whole interior of the train was crackling; the walls were heating up. Wooden panelling snapped and the smell of burning leather hurt my nostrils.

‘You’re really not supposed to use these indoors,’ I muttered, of the Gauntlets.

‘There’s no way out,’ White breathed, as the two of us retreated through the dining cart. The enemy was right behind.

‘Doesn’t seem to be.’

‘Just a question,’ White said. ‘You really *were* planning to betray me in the end, weren’t you?’

Didn’t seem much point in lying. ‘Yeah. And them.’

‘Playing both sides against the middle?’ White shook his head. ‘Intelligent, if despicable.’

‘Coming from you, that means a lot.’

The police started surging into the dining car. My fingers twitched out arcs of lightning in their general direction. Bottles of BBQ sauce exploded, coating my pursuers in sticky stuff. They were not particularly hindered.

‘Good shot,’ White said flatly.

‘Shut up.’

Above my head, some luggage exploded.

‘Listen,’ White briefly met my gaze. ‘I’ll hold them off. You find a way to stop this train.’

‘They’ll kill you,’ I warned him.

‘So will that bomb if we’re not off this thing in thirty minutes,’ White shrugged.

Oh, right. The bomb. It was still in the dining cart, hidden behind the counter.

‘You’re smarter than me,’ I pointed out. ‘You should do the fixing.’

‘Yes, I am, but this *isn’t my time*,’ White bit. ‘I don’t know trains any better than you and besides, you couldn’t hit an elephant with cannonball. No *hurry up*, man.’

Reluctantly, I got ready to run. White put down a little cover fire.

‘You know,’ said White. ‘I am sorry for your friend with the moustache. This has been a difficult few months for me.’

‘Yeah,’ I muttered. ‘I know the feeling.’

And then I was off, the world exploding behind me. I didn’t want to look back, in case I saw something unpleasant.

I ran for the cockpit, slamming the door shut in my wake. The sound of battle outside faded.

Fix this. I examined the wreckage. *How the hell am I supposed to fix this?*

Scrambling and scrabbling around, I found an instruction manual buried under one of the consoles. It was covered in dust and several thousand pages long, but the *Computer Interface* section had some fairly extensive diagrams.

Remember when you used to invent things?

I went to work, cobbling and tying-forcing wires and errant strands of circuitry back into place. Primary microchip-boards had been destroyed, but there were plenty of secondary systems to rewire. *Be inventive. You're a genius too. Sort of.*

'C-C-C-..C...Computer O-O-Online,' came a croaking voice from one of the consoles. *Yes!* I breathed. Maybe Daniel hadn't smashed things too badly after all.

'Computer, how do I fix this damage?' I demanded.

'Running diagnostic,' the computer chirped. 'Diagnostic complete. Fixing current levels of damage would be impossible. Probability of failure: 100%. Thank you for your time.'

Oh, brilliant.

'Computer, how fast is this train going?'

'Two hundred miles an hour.'

I did math in my head. 'Can I survive jumping off that?'

'In protective gear, possibly.'

I looked down at my clothes. Frills. Waistcoat. No protective gear. 'No.'

'Point of information: When approaching city limits, the train will automatically slow to around ninety-seven miles an hour. You may survive exit at that speed.'

'The autopilot's damaged-will the train still slow down?'

Long pause.

'No.'

Then there was nothing to be done. I left the cockpit, venturing outside. The corridor was silent. No sign of battle. No sign of White. That couldn't be good-

-A baton struck my temple. I brought my Gauntlet to bear; electricity leaping out. My opponent fell back... and stood up again, unhurt.

It was a cop, a woman of intermediate age. She was wearing full body armour; the plain-clothes had disappeared. Apparently, somebody had been smart enough to break out the heavy padding.

I jabbed her with my Gauntlet again, retreating toward the cockpit. The train lurched. I burst through a set of cabin doors, and fell to the ground—

The policewoman followed. She had friends.

Five enemy Gauntlets flared to life. Batons struck palms menacingly.

Natalia/Lincoln stepped into view, standing over me.

'I'm sorry, Ben,' Lincoln said. 'But honestly, how did you *think* this was going to end?'

The men advanced.

And that that moment-

-_Dinosaurs attack._

'Attention, ladies and gentlemen. This is an automated announcement. Passengers on the 11.15 train to *Little Stop, Salmon Square* are reminded that we are entering a Dinosaur-Infested zone. Cautionary dining car procedures are to be followed for the remainder of the journey. Please throw away your meals and begin dental flossing immediately.'

The dinosaurs were flying raptors, fresh from circling the trash heaps on the edge of the city. Like all modern dinosaurs, raptors are inexplicably attracted to the scent of BBQ sauce.

Their nostrils are *very* powerful.

They began dive-bombing the train in groups of three or four; smashing into windows, cracking through the glass. Most of them were swept away by the train's sheer velocity, but a few found purchase on the hull. They forced their way inside, then realised they had nowhere to go. The stupid beasts twirled around the train's tiny interior, screeching as they bounced off the walls. Claws struck out from beneath leathery wings, cutting everything in sight-I caught a nasty slash across my cheek. Off-balance and off guard, the cops fought back with Gauntlet fire.

In the confusion I slipped away, offering silent thanks to Gods and lizards alike.

I saw White.

He was curled up in a ball, lying between carriages, and about as badly hurt as a living thing can be. His face was covered in burn marks, barely recognisable-no wonder I'd hadn't noticed him earlier. His clothes were totally shredded.

I touched my palm to his mutilated cheek, and tried to stem my instinctive revulsion. He was breathing-

'Step back.'

Lincoln/Natalia was behind me, pointing a weapon at my head.

Very, very slowly, I stood up.

'Put your Gauntlet down.'

I did so.

Lincoln looked pissed.

'I'm sorry, Ben, but these are my orders. You can't be let go. You could *never* be let go.'

'I thought you trusted me,' I muttered.

'You've double-crossed me about four times in one afternoon. I don't think you get to lecture on trust.'

My feet shifted. 'You haven't shot me yet, Natalia,' I pointed out. 'Not getting cold feet, are you?'

'I'm a publicist, you bastard,' he/she spat. 'Killing's not my first skill.'

'Shame you work for the mafia, then,' I replied. 'Listen, Natalia. You don't have to do this. You can-'

She shot me in the leg. Electricity crackled over my shin, and I fell. Just a light dose, but enough to hurt like hell.

'Natalia! Please-'

'These are business hours,' said Lincoln, humourlessly. 'I don't get to be Natalia again until you're dead.'

Her hands crackled-

-And Natalia fell down, as a burst of blue struck Abraham Lincoln in the face. His hat rolled off.

Jacob White was on his feet, swaying. Holding my Gauntlet in both hands. He was almost dead, and still fighting on.

'Go,' White croaked. 'Go *now*.'

I didn't have to be told twice. I fled.

-Looking over my shoulder just once-

-To see the titans clashing. The real Benjamin Franklin and the fake Abraham Lincoln, faces broken beyond recognition, enveloped by a cascade of lightning. Wrestling each other into a deadly, burning embrace.

The train was collapsing around them-metal warping and burning.

I slammed the carriage door shut.

The bomb had less than ten minutes left.

By chance I tripped over Daniel's body. Unlike White he didn't seem badly hurt,

just very unconscious. With great effort, I hauled him up onto my back. My heart was straining in its chest. I felt like I might keel over at any second.

I dragged Daniel back to the cockpit, and dumped him there.

Probably about six minutes, I thought. Assuming the train didn't break itself apart before then.

At two hundred miles an hour, you may survive... with protective gear.

I had an idea.

Rushing out of the cockpit for a final time, I found the nearest site of battle. Corpses were everywhere, rebel and cop. The walls were burnt, and the air smelt of pork. I wasn't interested in any of the humanity right now. I just needed equipment.

Maybe four minutes?

I saw two armoured officers, ripe for the plucking. There were holes burned in their heads-marks of terminal damage-but their armour was intact. Hurriedly, I tore off their outfits.

I grabbed a dropped Gauntlet.

Two minutes or so.

On the brink of the cockpit, I found the link between carriage and train; the vulnerable joint that Lincoln's men had already half burned through. Throwing my stolen goods down, I stood well back and closed my eyes. Aiming the Gauntlet on faith and memory.

Lightning exploded from my hand, and struck the joint. The carriage creaked and groaned in protest; the whole thing wavering with stress.

One inch at a time, the metal link started to melt away-

-Until it snapped. I fell onto my backside, knocked down by sheer momentum.

The front of the train broke free of its burden-cockpit speeding off with me

inside. I could only hope that we had enough time to clear the blast radius.

Maybe a minute, counting down...

The rest of the train ground to a halt. The dinosaurs were still going at it-circling around, tearing at the flanks. Through the mid-section burst flares of blinding light. The giants clashing.

I am sorry. Both of you.

Maybe thirty sec-

The train exploded.

A plume of orange, a blast of white. Red and yellow flames.

And nothing left.

I blinked back blindness. Watched the embers for a while.

In the end, the giants always fall.

I hauled Daniel to the cockpit door, and dressed him up in armour. I did the same to myself. We both looked ridiculous.

What will I tell him, when he wakes up? The truth. For a given value of *truth*.

History reserves the right to be edited.

And I'll keep his little group going... but I'll point them in a better direction. White was probably right-the world does need a revolution-but he was in too much of a hurry. He wanted to bring an old age back. I think I'll settle for something new.

I'm an engineer. I like to invent things.

The real Benjamin Franklin earned his place in history. So did Jacob White. Now it's my turn, and even if I'm walking in a dead man's shoes, I can make my way afresh. No man called "Franklin" has ever been elected President. Given the name's track record, I think that's a terrible shame.

I threw Daniel out first, hoping he'd be all right. The terrible, terrifying darkness beyond consumed him. I heard a thump.

My turn.

This was the life of Jacob White, flashing before my eyes. It's over now; we're coming clear of memory.

I'm done with living history.

I stuck my head out into the black, breathing in the night. It was so dark out there... you could fool yourself into thinking there was no ground at all. I might fall forever. I might fly.

I jumped, coat tails flapping.

All of that was then.

And this is now.

I hit the ground.