

QuickRead

Doc's Time Patrol Mission A complete excerpt from: Nine Eleven



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The Time Patrol

There once was a place called Atlantis. Ten thousand years ago, it was attacked by a force known only as the Shadow, on the same day over the course of six years. The last attack led to Atlantis being obliterated to the point where it is just a legend.

There are many Earth timelines. The Shadow comes from one of those alternate timelines (or perhaps more than one). It is attacking our timeline by punching bubbles into our past that can last no more than twenty-four hours. In each bubble, the Shadow is trying to change our history and cause a time ripple.

By itself, a single time ripple can be dealt with, corrected, and absorbed. But a significant time ripple that is unchecked can become a Cascade. And six Cascades combine to become a Time Tsunami.

That would be the end of our timeline, and our existence .

To achieve its goal, the Shadow attacks six points in time simultaneously; the same date, in different years.

The Time Patrol's job is to keep our timeline intact.

The Time Patrol sends an agent back to each of those six dates to keep history the same.

*This is one of those dates: **11 September**.*

The Missions Phase I

"They met, they talked, they parted. And now nothing remains but to fight it out."

— British report after the Staten Island Peace Conference

Staten Island, Colony of New York, 11 September 1776 A.D.

DOC WASN'T THERE, and then he was there, but he'd always sort of been there. It was the best way to explain how he arrived, becoming part of his current time and place without fanfare or excitement among those around him, with one notable exception. He was in the bubble of this day, not before, and hopefully he wouldn't be here afterward, because the second-story room was hot, smelly, and littered with trash. The only light came from a single, sputtering candle, masked on one side from a window by a piece of wood.

The one exception was Thyia, sitting at a table in the corner.

"What took you so long?" she asked. Dressed in a dark cloak, she had her hood pulled back, revealing short, white hair and fair skin. Her skin was so smooth, she could have been anywhere from twenty-five to sixty.

"Frak me," Doc muttered. "Where's your bow?"

She tapped the cloak. "In here."

"Am I about to get killed?" Doc asked. "Is there a Legion about?"

"I don't know," Thyia said. "Always possible. Sometimes likely. You seem very nervous. And you don't look well."

Doc couldn't hear anything outside the room. The grimy, thick glass window was dark, indicating night. The room was twenty by ten, with only the one window facing west. There was a fireplace against the shorter, outside wall with cold ashes in it. On the other, interior short wall was a door, which the download confirmed led to the stairs to the main level below. Above was darkness, no ceiling, just empty space to the rafters holding up the roof of the house.

Doc needed a moment to collect himself. He'd met Thyia upon arrival at his last mission, this same year, but on the Fourth of July in Philadelphia. On that arrival, she'd shot an arrow just past him on a pretense that his life was in danger. At least this was a peaceful encounter. So far. She was Thyia, daughter of Pyrrha, granddaughter of Pandora according to myth and legend, if one believed in that sort of thing.

Doc believed. Everyone on the Time Patrol believed, because they'd run into enough myth and legend to make any other determination foolish. Myth and legend were often birthed from reality that was so ancient, the legends were the only "historical" record.

"Are we alone?" Doc asked.

Thyia indicated the room. "Soldiers were billeted here. They were ordered out yesterday. One room downstairs has been cleaned for the meeting later today. But it's empty for now."

"Have you been here all this time?"

Thyia cocked her head as if he'd asked a strange question. "All what time?"

"Since the Fourth of July. Earlier this year. 1776."

"Here? In this room? No."

"Funny. Not. Have you been here, in time, since July?"

"No."

Receiving no further explanation, Doc searched for something else to say. "I am sorry about your mother," he said as the info from the download reminded him of Scout's debrief from the Battle of Mantinea.

Thyia didn't react. "What do you mean?"

"We were told Pyrrha was killed by a Legion at the Battle of Mantinea."

"You were? Did one of your comrades see that?"

"No, but—"

"But you are assuming something," Thyia said. "My mother is fine. She was wounded, but did not suffer the forever death."

"What is the forever death?" Doc asked, curiosity winning out.

"Dead," Thyia said. "The forever death is the end of all. The spirit is gone."

"Is there another kind of death? Not forever?"

"Certainly," Thyia said. "If there weren't, why would we distinguish a forever death?"

She reminded Doc of the professor in the single philosophy course he'd been required to take in pursuit of one of his several Ph.Ds. Quick with words, not impressive with substance and facts. But Doc was also beginning to understand there was a reason physicists needed a philosophy course. There was more out there than numbers and equations could explain.

"So what is the death that isn't forever?" Doc asked.

"A death that isn't sanctioned by Atropos."

"Atropos is the third Fate, the cutter of the thread of life." Edith's download was dumping information. "The Romans called her Morta."

"Yes," Thyia said. "A daughter of the night, like her sisters."

"She's from the Shadow?" Doc asked.

"No." Thyia frowned, a crease on her perfectly smooth forehead. "We know little more about the Fates than you do. They seem to have always been."

"Always is a long time," Doc said. "There was a beginning to everything."

"Perhaps," Thyia said. "Are you sure of that? Perhaps what is, was always."

"Did you know a Fate was in Philadelphia? I saw her as I was leaving."

Thyia didn't seem surprised. "Which one?"

"She had a book."

"Clotho," Thyia said. "She spins the thread of life."

"Appears we have the same mythology," Doc said. "Even the same names. Clotho also has influence on decision-making. Is that why she was in Philadelphia? To see what decision the Committee of Five made?"

"I don't pretend to understand the Fates."

Doc sighed, frustrated.

"Do you come in peace once more?" Thyia asked with a smile, referring to his answer about why he was there when confronted on his last mission. "It appears this is the right place for that. Since they will be speaking of peace below us soon, will they not?"

"They will," Doc said.

"And will there be peace?"

Doc spread his hands. "That's not up to me. That history has already been written."

"Then why are you here?"

"Why are *you* here?" Doc demanded. He grabbed a chair then sat across the table from her. "Why were you in Philadelphia? You did nothing there."

"I did something," Thyia said. "I shot an arrow near you."

"You lied to me."

"Just so I could have the pleasure of your company," Thyia said, her voice betraying no sarcasm.

"Right."

Thyia leaned forward. "I did lie to you. When I told you I lied to you. There *was* a Legion present when you arrived in Philadelphia. I didn't miss. I killed him before he could kill you. He was dust before you were even aware what was happening."

"Why'd you lie to me *then*?" Doc asked.

"So you would be afraid he was still around, and I could stay by you under the pretense of protecting you, and thus see what you were going to do."

"Why?"

"I'm curious."

"Why should I believe you now?" Doc shook his head. "You're asking me to believe you lied about lying. I'm really tired of these games. Who are you? Your grandmother, Pandora, speaks of Gaia. Is that your timeline?"

"Do you have a label for your timeline?" she asked in turn. "Isn't your timeline 'home' and all other timelines, 'not home?' So, my timeline is home."

"We're in my 'home,'" Doc said, "so maybe you should answer my questions. When I come to your timeline, I'll answer yours."

"An arbitrary set of parameters for a discussion," Thyia said, "but yes, my timeline is Gaia."

Finally, a slight concession. Doc looked out the window. He saw water, then a few dim lights on a not-too-distant shoreline. The download oriented him. That was Perth Amboy across the Arthur Kill, separating Staten Island, controlled by the Crown, from New Jersey, controlled by the Colonists.

This was Billop House, home to an infamous colonel who commanded a Tory unit, loyal to Britain. Over 900 acres around the house, almost all of the southwestern tip of Staten Island, was his estate, granted by the King. It would eventually become the southern- and westernmost point of New York City.

Someday.

Maybe.

"We've run into other women with bows like yours," Doc said, "but we don't think they're from Gaia. They work with Spartan mercenaries who come from what we think is *another* timeline where Sparta became the predominant power, but now pays tribute to the Shadow."

"Those women were from Gaia, but are not of it anymore," Thyia said. "They're rogue."

Two pieces of information. The inquiring scientist in Doc was excited, but the time traveler was leery. "Was one of them named Diana?"

"Yes."

"She took a shot at one of my teammates."

"Is your teammate still alive?"

"Yes," Doc said.

"He's fortunate. She rarely misses."

Doc brought the conversation full circle. "What are you doing here?"

It is 1776 A.D. The British evacuate Boston; Richard Henry Lee tells the Second Continental Congress that the Colonies ought to be free states; The Declaration of Independence is signed (by most); the Invasion of the Cherokee Nation by Patriots results in the burning of thirty-six Cherokee villages; Manhattan is taken by the Hessians (not long after this meeting—not so good for New York); Phi Beta Kappa Society is formed at the College of William and Mary; Marquis de Lafayette joins the Patriot army; North Carolina reorganizes from a colony to a state.

"Sitting here. Chatting with you." Thyia smiled. "And you? You didn't know I'd be here, so you didn't come here to meet me."

"How did you know *I'd* be here?"

"I didn't know it would be you. I knew it would be someone from your Patrol. We know when the Shadow opens bubbles in a timeline. It's an opportunity."

Some things change; some don't.

"It's an opportunity for our timeline to be destroyed," Doc said. "That is what the Shadow is trying to do, correct?"

"Appears to be so," Thyia said. "Its methods here are rather indirect compared to what it has done to other timelines."

"Like the Grendels and Aglaeca it sent to the Jagers' world?"

"Yes. And other worlds besides that one."

"Why are you here?" Doc asked for the third time. "You—"

Thyia held up a hand, silencing him. She stood, pulling a short bow out from under her cloak, a hand swiftly darting over her shoulder, and before Doc could follow, an arrow was notched. He was about to protest that she could fool him once, but not twice, then the hair on the back of his neck tingled, and he swore the temperature in the room dropped a couple of degrees.

Thyia focused on the door at the top of the staircase, her bow at the ready.

There was no noise, no indication of anyone moving, nothing other than vague feelings to indicate there was someone else in the house.

There *was* someone else in the house. Doc was certain of it. He drew his dagger, feeling useless. He understood the bow as a weapon of choice: from all descriptions, going blade to blade with a Legion was akin to suicide. Thyia had standoff range with the bow.

All was still for long seconds, then Thyia slowly released her draw.

Doc was silent, not sure what was happening, but the feeling was gone.

Thyia slid the arrow back into the quiver inside her cloak, then the bow disappeared.

Feeling it was finally safe, Doc asked, "What was that?"

"A young girl," Thyia murmured. She sat back down.

"Where'd she go?" Doc was confused.

"Nowhere," Thyia said. "She'll be here until he comes, and then they will both be forever dead."

"Who?"

Thyia sighed. "The girl who was killed here."

The Missions Phase II

Staten Island, Colony of New York, 11 September 1776 A.D.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Doc demanded.

"The girl is who we just sensed in the house," Thyia said.

"You're talking about a ghost," Doc said.

"A spirit," Thyia said. "Still alive, in essence. The owner of the house was kidnapped by the colonists from his bedroom down the hall. He spent some time in considerable discomfort as a prisoner before he was ransomed. He firmly believed he'd been betrayed by one of his servant girls." She indicated the window. "He suspected she signaled the raiding party by showing a lantern here. He believed it was seen by colonists from the steeple of a church on the other side of the water. The colonists rowed over then took him while he slept. He was treated poorly in captivity, chained to the floor and fed only bread and water."

The download brought Doc up to date on the story. "So he killed her after he was ransomed and came back."

"He did," Thyia said.

"A fifteen-year-old girl."

Thyia indicated the door. "He threw her down the stairs. Broke her neck. There was no trial, no investigation. She was an indentured servant. Just a girl who meant nothing to anyone. And she was innocent." Thyia looked at the wall as if she could see outside the house. "She's buried in an unmarked grave; she rarely comes to the house. She must have sensed we were here."

"How do you know this?" Doc asked. His download had some vague material about a ghost haunting the Billop House, but not much detail, particularly the part about the girl being innocent.

"She just told me," Thyia said.

"I didn't hear or see anything."

"The Sight."

Doc considered that. "So she hasn't suffered the forever death?"

"No. It wasn't her time."

"She's here forever?" Doc asked. "What is a spirit? Is it the soul? How does it exist?"

"Your scientific mind is trying to understand," Thyia said. "That's admirable. Maybe the spirit of a human is more than science?"

Doc reeled in his imagination. He was here on a mission. Thyia had done nothing to help or hinder him on his last mission, unless, of course, there *had* been a Legion waiting to kill him.

"She's not here forever," Thyia said. "She's trapped here until the man who killed her dies. She wasn't guilty of signaling. She was just doing her evening duties, lighting the lantern. It was an unjust death. Like many."

Doc looked out the window at the first indication of dawn. *Mission first.* "Do you know what the Shadow has planned for today? How it's going to try to change my timeline?"

"I don't."

"Why are you protecting me?" Doc asked. "You claim to have killed a Legion in Philadelphia, and you seem pretty edgy here. Why?"

Thyia looked at him. "You're sick."

"What?"

"You're ill," Thyia said. "I sensed it last time we met. I'm sure of it now."

"It will pass," Doc said.

"Will it?" Thyia got up, then walked to the door leading to the stairs and peered down. "You're not very grateful." She opened the door. "Someone else is coming to join us. She knows more."

Doc gripped his dagger. Footsteps on the stairs. A tall, willowy figure, cloaked in black like Thyia and carrying a Naga staff in one hand, entered the room. The staff had a sharp blade on one end, made from a metal that had stymied Doc's attempts at analysis. At the other end was a seven-headed snake, the Naga of Hindu and Buddhist legend.

The figure threw her hood back as Thyia shut the door behind her. Doc recognized her immediately from Scout's description: thick, black hair with a streak of white flowing from above her left eye, over the top of her head, to the end behind her left shoulder. Smooth skin like Thyia, but it appeared aged.

Pandora seemed surprised at seeing Doc. "You're ill."

"She just told me that," Doc said, irritated with the medical analysis from women of myth. "You're Pandora."

"I thought Scout would come," Pandora murmured, more to herself than Doc. "But it makes sense they would send you. You visited this same year before. When is Scout?"

"Why are you here?" Doc asked.

"To help," Pandora said. She walked to the table, leaned the Naga against the wall, then sat. She appeared tired. She turned to Thyia. "There is one about. I sensed him."

"I thought I felt the presence," Thyia said. She took out her bow then nocked an arrow, although she didn't draw.

"Legion?" Doc asked.

Pandora nodded. "Yes."

"Why is he here?" Doc was getting tired of asking the same question, but it occurred to him he didn't know why *he* was here, other than to make sure all went as history recorded. "Is he going to attack the attendees?" Killing John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Admiral Howe would definitely change history.

"Not unless he has to," Pandora said.

"Do you know what he's going to do?"

"He's going to do nothing," Pandora said.

Doc frowned. "What do you mean, 'nothing?' He has to do something to change the event. To change the timeline."

"No," Pandora said. "He doesn't. The initiating event for the change already happened over a year ago."

The Missions Phase III

Staten Island, Colony of New York, 11 September 1776 A.D.

"That can't be," Doc protested. "This is the time bubble. The Shadow made it. Our timeline is still intact."

"I said the initiating event for the change already happened," Pandora corrected. "I didn't say it had taken effect yet. That's why the Legion is here. He's here to protect what is, right now, inevitable."

"Nothing is inevitable," Doc said.

Pandora gave a weary smile. "Some things are inevitable, but you are correct. This isn't one of them. Note I said '*right now*.'"

"You're here for a reason," Doc said. "And the bubble is still open, so this isn't done yet."

Pandora nodded. "Not yet."

"What happened a year ago?" Doc asked.

Pandora glanced at Thyia, who was standing ten feet from the door, all her focus on it, her bow in hand, arrow nocked. Light was beginning to seep through the window as dawn crept in from the east.

"You know the history that you know," Pandora said. "The history that was recorded. However, there is always a great deal that isn't recorded. That is lost in the dust of time. Hidden in the darkness of neglect. There is also the history that is kept secret."

Doc thought of Eagle's Entebbe mission with a group of Israeli commandos who had simply disappeared that day, and their loss never made public. "Yes. Of course."

Pandora nodded. "Let me supplement what you may know about this event. To do so, we must go back slightly in time. The Congress of these rebelling colonies sent a petition to the King of England last year."

"The Olive Branch Petition," Doc said. "I know about it." In excruciating detail, from Edith's download, if he so desired.

"Yes," Pandora said. "I'm just giving you the framework. A worthless document for a number of reasons, but still, an attempt. Much like today is supposed to be. Worthless, but a gesture. Except it's not going to be worthless, as things stand now."

Doc shook his head. "How? Neither side has the power for real negotiation."

Pandora held up a hand. "Patience. Congress sent the Olive Branch Petition on the 5th of July, 1775, yet declared rebellion before there was a chance to get a reply from England. Thomas Jefferson, whom you've had the pleasure of meeting, drew up the first draft of the Olive Branch. It was deemed by the moderates to be too inflammatory, so another member of Congress rewrote it. Made it more conciliatory, suggesting the colonies did not want independence, but simply the ability to negotiate trade and tax regulations with Great Britain."

"As you said," Doc interjected, "a worthless document. The King refused to meet the bearers of it or even read it."

"True," Pandora said, "but others did read it, and thought it could hold the key to peace, based on something they already had in hand."

Doc searched through the download, trying to find the thread. The facts were there, but he couldn't tell where she was going with this.

"Another gentleman you met, a Mister Franklin, who will be downstairs shortly, is the next piece in the puzzle," Pandora said. "He traveled to London two years ago; that is two years in this time. Near the end of 1774. He became acquaintances with Miss Caroline Howe, sister to a certain Admiral Howe, who will also be here this morning, and General

Howe, who will not be here this morning." Pandora shook her head. "Do you know why General Howe will not be attending?"

Doc tried to search through the download, but Pandora didn't wait before answering her own question. "Ostensibly, because he is having what your timeline calls an affair. Apparently, that is causing notoriety," Pandora said. "Isn't it odd, that as life and death is to be discussed, there are some so concerned with matters of the body, that it takes precedence?"

Doc didn't think she expected an answer.

"However, while that is the rumor, it is not the true reason General Howe is not attending."

"He's the less even-tempered of the brothers," Doc said as a piece of information from the download came to the forefront. "He—"

"He is," Pandora said, "and General Howe possesses great anger toward Mister Franklin. The Admiral is not sure he can contain his brother, which is ironic, because the matter of the General's affair, and his hatred of Mister Franklin, comes to bear because of what isn't written in the history books, although it's hinted at: Mister Franklin's libido."

"He was—" Doc began, but she cut him off.

"He had relations with Miss Howe. The brothers, Admiral and General, were outraged when they found out. Mister Franklin went to great pains to make amends. Unfortunately, as a result of his actions, and hers too, to be fair, there developed the reason General Howe isn't here today, and Admiral Howe *is*. Miss Howe became pregnant with Mister Franklin's child. A boy was born six months ago. Thus, Franklin and the Howes are now linked by blood."

There was nothing in the download about that; history recorded that Caroline Howe had learned of Franklin's prowess at chess, and had invited him to a match at her home, which even to Doc sounded kind of thin. History did recall Franklin having an illegitimate son in 1731, most likely with a maid. He took that child as his own, but history said nothing about a more recent bastard.

"What does that have to do with a peace conference?" Doc asked.

"Miss Howe is thus personally involved," Pandora said. "She became very keen on there being peace between the Colonies and the Crown. Between her country and the land of the father of her son. Mister Franklin joined her in that. He wrote something titled *Hints for Conversation upon the Subject of Terms that Might Probably Produce a Durable Union between Great Britain and the Colonies*. It listed seventeen terms the Colonies required for peace. He, and Miss Howe, presented it to Lord Howe on Christmas Day, 1774."

"I know about it," Doc said.

"Did you know about the child?" Pandora asked.

"No," Doc admitted.

Pandora snuffed out the candle by pressing two fingers together on the flame. There was enough daylight to see the room without it. According to the download, Franklin, Adams, and Rutledge were across Arthur Kill in New Jersey, being met by Admiral Howe's personal barge. A British officer had been sent along to be held by the colonists as a hostage, standard fare for a parley in these times.

"Mister Franklin and the Admiral went back and forth on the *Hints* for several months," Pandora said. "They—" She paused. Boots thudded on wood below them, then came muffled voices.

Thyia came to the table beside Pandora. "Hessians," she whispered.

Pandora nodded. She spoke in a low voice. "They are setting up the meal for the meeting. We have about two hours before it starts."

Doc leaned toward Pandora. "Enough with the history. What's going to be different about today?"

Pandora seemed disappointed that she wasn't able to spin out the entire story. "Admiral Howe is bringing a document with him. There is only the original, signed by King George and protected by his royal seal. Only the Admiral and the King know of it: a version of Franklin's *Hints*. It is an actual proposal for peace between the Colonies and Great Britain. It is a document that will adequately address all the major issues that caused the rebellion. In short, it is an acceptable treaty that will bring peace to the Colonies without Independence."

The Missions Phase IV

Staten Island, Colony of New York, 11 September 1776 A.D.

"You're lying," Doc hissed. "No such document existed."

"It didn't," Pandora agreed, "until Howe and Franklin were each visited by a Valkyrie and given a vision of how peace could be reached, and wrote it. King George was visited by one also, making him amenable to some provisions he would never have agreed to before. The King was given a vision of what would happen if he didn't make peace. Defeat. He saw Cornwallis surrendering at Yorktown. The sun beginning to set on the British Empire. He didn't want that to be his legacy. You know how realistic those visions are. One was enough to get Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson to write the Declaration of Emancipation. You dodged that on your last mission."

Doc sat back in the chair, hearing indistinct German voices resonating through the thick wood floor. He looked at Pandora, then at Thyia as he pondered the scenario. He could accept the *what*, but was having problems with *why*.

"Why do you care?" he asked Pandora. "This is our timeline. Scout said you were concerned about Alexander the Great's ancestors when she met you at Thermopylae, then Pythia and finally Mantinea."

"Did she go back to Greece?" Pandora asked.

Doc didn't respond.

"Alexander was not the One," Pandora said. "We had hopes, but I finally met him. A great man, but not the One. A shame. I believe sometimes the Fates play games with us."

"What One?"

Pandora didn't answer.

The noises were diminishing below, indicating most of the work setting up for the meal and conference was done. Doc glanced out the window and saw Admiral Howe's ornate barge heading their way, the delegates on board.

"Why do you care about our timeline anymore, then?" Doc asked. "I can't believe you if I don't understand why."

"A scientist." Pandora leaned close to Doc and spoke urgently. "Isn't the issue greater than why I care? Admiral Howe has the treaty. He will give it to the Colonists some time during the meeting. Your timeline will be irrevocably changed if they take it back to Philadelphia. This isn't what you call a Ripple turning into a Cascade. This is a significant event that breaks a timeline in a new direction, which means the history from this moment forward changes. All of the timeline you know from here forward is gone, replaced by a new one. Perhaps it flourishes. Perhaps it's destroyed. Who knows? All you know is the history that was, not what might be. Isn't that at the core of the Time Patrol? Your mission? To prevent that?"

"I have to know why you care," Doc insisted, though he agreed with her reasoning.

"Suffice it to say your timeline is significant," Pandora said.

Doc made a leap of logic. "Because it will produce the One?"

"No one knows where the One will come from," Pandora said.

Outside, a platoon of Hessian mercenaries was marching to the waterfront. They were masters of close-order drill, breaking apart without stopping, forming two lines from the beach toward the house.

"I am Pandora," she said. "I am giving you a gift, a good gift. A gift to save your timeline."

"Are you giving me hope?" Doc asked. "Elpis? Our mythology is that you never let it out of your box."

"I just gave you the reality of this bubble in time," Pandora said. "You must decide what action to take."

Doc saw Franklin, Adams, and Rutledge step ashore, Franklin assisted by two soldiers. An officer in a redcoat was with them, the man who should have remained on the other side as hostage.

Slowed by Franklin, the party made its way to the house.

Doc opened his mouth to reply to Pandora, but she put a finger to her lips. She carefully opened a large square panel in the wall that Doc hadn't noticed, a dumbwaiter shaft, going down to the kitchen in the basement.

"Welcome, esteemed gentlemen!" An English voice came out of the opening, only partly muted by the panel in the room below being shut.

"Admiral," Franklin responded. There were more pleasantries exchanged, introductions made. Doc could tell by their tones neither Adams nor Rutledge were happy to be there.

Small talk continued as they got down to the meal laid out for them, giving Doc time to try to come up with a plan. It bothered him that Pandora was here and telling him what the anomaly would be. Could he trust her? Perhaps she and Thyia were working for the Shadow, or in service of the Shadow, like the Spartan timeline. What if they had a plan for some other outcome? The download confirmed Franklin had worked hard on the *Hints*, but Edith's information was adamant that by the time of this Peace Conference, Franklin was resigned to war. If the Shadow had *already* affected the timeline, outside of the bubble, then wouldn't history indicate differently? Then again, Pandora said that only two men knew of the treaty at this moment: Admiral Howe and the King.

Doc rubbed his temples, fighting through a headache, trying to assay the data, weigh it, factor it into some sort of solution as he'd been taught in systems engineering.

There was the clink of silverware on crystal, and Admiral Howe's voice was clear. "Gentlemen, as Mister Franklin has known, I have had a long-standing hope for peaceful reconciliation between the Colonies and the Crown. We have so much more in common than we have differences. We have bled together in battles on this continent against the French. Indeed, my elder brother gave his life at Ticonderoga, arm-in-arm with you. Thus, I feel for America very strongly, and if America should fall, I should lament once more, as deeply as I did at the loss of my brother."

"My lord," Franklin responded, "we will use our utmost endeavor to save Your Lordship that mortification."

"I am gratified to hear that," Howe said. "I have kept my younger brother from joining us to ensure that these proceedings be above reproach. I consider the Olive Branch Petition of last year to be a clear indicator of a desire to reconcile."

"Do you, sir," Adams cut in, "have the power to consider the Colonies in terms of an independent state?"

"I regret that is not possible," Howe said, "nor should it be our goal."

"What, then, is the goal, sir?" Adams demanded.

"Peace, my dear sir, peace." Howe continued. "Isn't peace desirable over further bloodshed?"

Rutledge spoke for the first time since the meal. "We took Boston. Now you want peace?"

"But my younger brother is encamped on Long Island," Admiral Howe replied, "along with thirty thousand troops."

"Including mercenaries," Adams commented, his distaste clear.

"They are soldiers," Howe said. "They fight for the King."

"How," Adams asked, "does Your Lordship envision us? As emissaries of a foreign government? Or wayward children who need to be chided and scolded?"

"I have done no scolding," Howe returned. "You are gentlemen of great ability and influence in this land."

"This country," Rutledge said.

Franklin responded. "Your Lordship may consider us in any view you think proper. We on our part are at liberty to consider ourselves in our real character and our true role in the government of the Colonies."

"Indeed," John Adams said, "I will consider myself in any character that would be acceptable to Your Lordship, except that of a British subject."

"You are most certainly a decided character, Mister Adams," Howe said, an edge to his voice.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Franklin pleaded. "Let us forget about what rank or character we possess, but proceed as if we might be friends, if only for a few brief minutes. May we?"

There were grudging assents from Adams and Rutledge, and a more enthusiastic one from Howe.

"My goal is to restore peace," Howe said. "There is much we can give each other, much that is of advantage to each side. Honorable and economic advantage. We can supply each other much aid."

"That sounds promising," Franklin said.

Doc glanced at Pandora. She simply raised an eyebrow as if to say, *See?* Thyia watched the door, bow in hand, arrow still notched.

"Your King's demand of our aid is part of our grievances," Adams said.

"Your money is," Howe said, "let me assure you, the smallest consideration. The Colonies possess so much more that they can confer upon Great Britain: commerce, strength, and her men."

"We have many men," Adams said, "and strength. As your brother will find out. Can you grant us Independence?"

"That, I cannot," Howe said, "but—"

"It matters not," Adams said. "We've done the deed ourselves. We do not need permission like a wayward schoolchild."

"You may have declared Independence," Howe argued, "but you have not won it. Have you seen my fleet, anchored off these shores? Your General Washington has seen my brother's army, and he has retreated before it."

"As your brother retreated before General Washington and evacuated Boston," Adams threw back.

"Gentlemen," Franklin said. "We are all up to snuff on current events. We are here to determine the future."

"I believe," Rutledge said, "that perhaps it might be conducive for the King to consider the Colonies independent, as they currently are, and for us to then negotiate peace and form a mutually beneficial alliance. England might still enjoy the lion's share of our American commerce, most particularly the raw materials your industries so desire. On our part, we can protect this side of the ocean much more easily than your country."

"Independence is not possible," Howe said.

"I'm afraid then, my Lord," Adams said, "that if you are here to demand nothing other than unconditional surrender, we are—"

Howe cut him off. "That is not it at all, Mister Adams. Not at all. Doctor Franklin and I have conversed on this difficult subject in the past. Britain does not require unconditional surrender. I have met with the King, and he is most distressed that events have come this far."

"To know we have had such effect on the King is most encouraging," Adams said with great sarcasm.

"If you gentlemen would indulge me," Howe said, "I have a document I would like Doctor Franklin to read in private, and then report back to all of us. I believe its contents would best be presented by him, rather than myself."

There was a short silence.

"I have no objection," Adams said.

"Nor I," Rutledge agreed.

"Thank you," Franklin said, although it was unclear who he was thanking.

"Please note, gentlemen," Howe said, "that this is the King's seal. It is from his hand to your eyes."

"I see it," Franklin said. "Is there a spare room I might use?"

"I regret my staff is occupying the other two rooms on this floor," Howe said. "You may go upstairs. There is no one up there."

Franklin sighed. "Stairs are an old man's bane, but if it must be, it must."

Doc looked at Pandora, then at the door, then back at her. She closed the cover to the dumbwaiter. Pandora tapped Thyia on the shoulder then pointed at the rafters.

The younger woman moved swiftly, stowing the bow, then stepping from a chair, to the table, then grabbing one of the beams. She swung up then hid in the dimness, behind one of the large roof supports. Pandora stood to follow her. Doc got up also, but Pandora put a hand on his chest and shook her head.

He heard Franklin's heavy, slow footfalls on the stairs.

"You stay," Pandora whispered. "This your time." She stepped onto the table then joined Thyia in the rafters.

Great, Doc thought. *Now* it was his time. He walked toward the door, stepping just to the side of it. Franklin's climb was getting closer. The door swung open, and Franklin came in, breathing hard. As soon as he cleared the doorway, Doc gently closed it behind him.

"You!" Franklin was startled. "I sent men looking for you on the Fourth. You—"

"Shh," Doc said. He indicated the floor below. "They can't know I'm here."

"What do you want?" Franklin asked in a low voice. He had a thin leather case in his hands.

"We both need to see that." Doc indicated the case.

"I need to sit down," Franklin said. He hobbled to the table then collapsed on a chair, the floorboards creaking in protest under his prodigious weight. He was heavier than Doc remembered. Franklin placed the case on the table, then pulled out a kerchief and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Doc sat next to him.

"I don't even know your name," Franklin said. "The events of that early morning on the Fourth sometimes seem to me as much a dream as the one that prompted us to write that document which Mister Jefferson took with him."

"It was real," Doc said. "I'm real." He tapped the case. "This is real, but it's not supposed to be. Just like the Declaration of Emancipation."

Franklin frowned. He fumbled in a pocket then produced a pair of fragile spectacles which had seen better days. He unfolded them then perched them on his bulbous nose. "Before we spin further afield, let us see what this is about." He opened the case then slid out a letter, sealed with an ornate stamp. "From the King himself. Such an honor." Franklin patted his pockets, looking for something. Finally, he turned to Doc. "Sir, do you have a device with which I might open this letter?"

Doc produced his dagger.

"A bit much for just a letter," Franklin muttered as he slid the blade under the lip of the envelope and through the seal. He handed the dagger back. "Let us see what wise words are descended upon us from on high."

Franklin began reading. Doc edged closer so he could read over Franklin's shoulder. The old man gave him a dirty look over his spectacles, but didn't say anything. Muffled voices echoed from the room below.

When he finished reading, Franklin took a deep breath then let it out. He took off the spectacles, holding them in one hand, then used them to tap the document. "I made seventeen points in my original *Hints*. Admiral Howe and I went back and forth several times. We got it down to fourteen." He hit the glasses on the parchment a bit too hard. "This grants all fourteen. Signed by the King. I never thought..." Franklin faded into silence, deep in thought.

Doc waited, because Franklin's response was the key. Perhaps the old man would reject the treaty and—

"It is more than we could have dreamed for," Franklin said. "A step short of true Independence, but it gives us everything else we've requested."

"It must be Independence," Doc said.

Franklin put the glasses down and turned to Doc. "Sir, you appeared on the early morn of the Fourth. Talked us into shelving an important document. I agreed at the time, and I agree in retrospect, that it was the correct move. Nevertheless, I have not the slightest clue who you are or where you come from."

"As I told you then," Doc said, "and must repeat now: who I am is of no consequence. I have only the benefit of the United States, indeed all mankind, at heart and in my mind and in all my actions."

"Rather magnanimous of you," Franklin said.

Doc accessed the download. "*It is impossible we should think of submission to a government that has with the most wanton barbarity and cruelty burnt our defenseless towns, excited the savages to massacre our peaceful farmers and our slaves to murder their masters and is even now bringing foreign mercenaries to deluge our settlements with blood.*"

"Words I myself might utter, if the need be," Franklin said.

"You will. When you destroy that document, Admiral Howe reverts to his other plan, which is to offer pardons if you repudiate Independence."

Franklin didn't blink at that. "Interesting. You know the future?"

First Rule, Doc thought. "Some of it. A man can see the future if he is aware enough of the present."

"Perhaps," Franklin allowed. He tapped the treaty. "But this offers peace, excellent terms, and will save lives. War is such a terrible business, and there is no guarantee the correct side, which is always 'ours,' will prevail. Being right does not equal being the superior martial force. And I did see Admiral Howe's fleet, despite my eyes not being what they were. Impressive, indeed. What if we lose this war? We will never get terms like this in defeat. Indeed, the burdens imposed will be worse than before."

"You won't lose," Doc said.

"Are you some mystic from the Far East?" Franklin asked. "I have seen people from that part of the world, and they resemble you in skin tone and hair."

Doc considered answering in the affirmative, but Franklin was a scientist, and Doc sensed a trap. "No, sir, I am not a mystic. I believe in the power of observation and empirical deduction. Upon reflection, you agree that my recommendation about the Declaration of Emancipation was proper and correct, do you not?"

"I do. Our—Jefferson, Adams and my own—brains were muddled from our similar dreams. Yours was the voice of reason when we could not think clearly."

"Did you not have a similar dream about the *Hints*?" Doc asked.

Franklin gave a slight nod. "Do you know what these dreams are? Where they come from?"

"I do," Doc said, "and it is not a benign power."

"Are you speaking of the Devil?"

"Close," Doc said, "except it is real and means mankind ill."

"Hmm," Franklin murmured. "Perhaps. It is all very strange."

Doc indicated the treaty. "The United States must have independence from Great Britain, not be its vassal. The Declaration of Independence, so eloquently written, will serve as a beacon to many others in the world. Drive many people to seek their own independence."

Franklin wiped the sweat off his forehead once more. "This document has a heavy weight. The King signed it. He knows of it. There will be—"

"It is the original, and there are no copies," Doc said. "If you destroy it, it will be done as if it never existed."

"A very heavy weight," Franklin murmured. "The souls of all those who will die in this war will rest on my shoulders."

"As will the souls of many more who will know freedom for generations to come," Doc said.

"Ahhh." Franklin groaned as he got to his feet, using the table as support. He picked up the treaty.

Franklin shuffled toward the fireplace, Doc at his side. They stopped a couple of feet from it.

Franklin shivered. "Has it suddenly grown chilly in here? More the reason for a fire." He pulled a match from inside his vest then held up the document.

Before he could strike the match, the room exploded with action: Thyia dropped out of the rafters in front them, landing lightly, rolling onto her back then launching an arrow. The shaft angled upward, into the fireplace's flue.

As Thyia loosed the arrow, Pandora landed next to her, shoving Franklin and Doc back, her Naga staff at the ready in her other hand.

A Legion, stained head to toe with soot, dropped down into the fireplace from the flue, a dagger in each hand and an arrow in one side. He attacked, slashing at Thyia, who was nocking another arrow, neatly slicing her bow a third of the way from the top. It collapsed in her hands, pulled inward by the taut string.

He used Thyia's body on the floor as a platform to leap at Doc and Franklin, both daggers leading.

The Missions Phase V

Staten Island, Colony of New York, 11 September 1776 A.D.

The tip of Legion's dagger stopped an inch from Benjamin Franklin's chest, and several inches from Doc's less copious one. Pandora continued the thrust that had spitted Legion on her Naga, driving hard across the wood floor, pinning him to the wall, the blade through his body from side to side.

Yet he was still alive, dropping both daggers, pushing the hand closest to the wall against it, the other trying to pry the Naga out of his body. Doc slit his throat.

Legion slumped down, feet not touching the floor, held by the Naga. Then the body crumbled to dust, leaving just the weapon.

"Doctor Franklin?" John Adams's voice came up the stairwell. "Are you well, sir? Do you need assistance?"

Franklin cleared his throat. He tried to speak, cleared his throat once more, then called out, "I am well, sir! I will be down in but a moment." Without another word, he went back to the table and sat down, badly shaken. "What happened? Who was that? Who are you?"

Doc picked up the treaty and match, both of which Franklin had dropped in his surprise. He went to the table. "Sir, there is not much time. They will grow suspicious below. We are your friends. We must burn this. All else that happened here is of no consequence. That man was here to kill you. Kill both of us. They"—He indicated Pandora and Thyia—"are here to protect us."

"But his body," Franklin said. "I've never seen the like."

"He's gone," Doc said. "He didn't belong here."

Pandora stood next to Doc. "We must hurry."

Doc held the treaty and the match in front of Franklin. "Sir? May I?"

Franklin waved a hand in dismissal. "Of course, of course."

Doc scraped the match along the front of the mantel then used it to ignite the treaty. Satisfied it was burning, he dropped it in the fireplace.

"Doctor Franklin!" Admiral's Howe's voice, trained to give orders on board ship in the midst of battle, boomed up the stairwell. "Are you well, sir?" Doc heard his boots start up the stairs.

Franklin stood then made for the door. "I am fine, sir!" he called out, but judging by the sound, Admiral Howe was still coming.

Pandora sprinted across the room to the opening for the dumbwaiter. She pulled the panel away, then climbed in and slid out of sight, feet first, holding the Naga tight to her side. Thyia followed.

Howe was halfway up the stairs. Doc checked the fireplace; the treaty was ashes.

"Perhaps we'll meet again, sir," Doc said to Franklin, then he ran for the dumbwaiter. He snatched Franklin's spectacles off the table as he went by, then dove in headfirst, realizing as he did so that it might not have been the smartest move.

He plummeted down and landed on top of Thyia, who was standing at the bottom. They ended up in a jumble, and Pandora reached in to help them out.

There were two slaves in the kitchen, staring at the sudden appearance of three people out of the dumbwaiter with no apparent reaction. They'd seen worse, and stranger, things in their time.

"This way," Pandora said.

She went to the west side of the kitchen then opened a trapdoor. A dark tunnel beckoned. The download confirmed a tunnel from the house to the woods, just short of the beach. An easy way to smuggle contraband, human and otherwise, in and out of the house without being observed.

"Go," Pandora ordered. Thyia went in, then Doc followed. He stumbled as Pandora shut the trapdoor behind them, plunging the tunnel into absolute darkness. "Keep moving," Pandora ordered when she bumped into Doc.

He put his hands out to either side. Fortunately, the tunnel was barely three feet wide. Doc staggered forward, Pandora pushing from behind.

Thyia cursed, some term Doc couldn't make out, but the tone was obvious, then he bumped into her, and Pandora into him.

"Steps," Thyia said, a voice in the darkness.

Daylight flooded in as Thyia opened a trapdoor. Doc scrambled out after her then fell to the ground in a small clearing in the woods.

Pandora walked to the edge of the trees, looking back at the house. Several Hessian guards were spaced around the building, but there didn't seem to be any state of alarm. She returned.

"It is done."

Doc sat up, wondering why he was still here and not sliding back to his own time. "How did you know the Legion was in the chimney?"

"I didn't," Thyia said, "until the last second. Then *she* told me."

"The spirit," Doc said.

Thyia nodded. "Yes. She came back."

Pandora knelt in front of Doc. "Do you know why hope is a bad thing?"

Doc shook his head.

"Most hope is selfish. It is hope based on the way each person who is hoping envisions the future. Not the way the future should be for everyone, but for himself or herself. It is the cornerstone of many religions where people hope there is a heaven, thus focusing on the future. Hope is not grounded in the here and now. All we have is the here and now."

Edith had this detail in a footnote about Pandora, which she'd included in the overall mission download, given that Pandora had mentioned this specific thing to Scout just before she came back from her last mission.

Doc looked Pandora in the eyes. "There are two ways of looking at hope. Yours is one: that it's a prison, keeping us from achieving what we are capable of. But it also can be a stimulus to rouse us to more than we think we are capable of. It can be a good thing." He looked past Pandora at the house. "Maybe that's why her spirit is still here."

And then he was gone.

The Return

DOC saw her. She was standing on the beach opposite the Billop House. She was young, beautiful, not yet grown into womanhood. And she never would. She had died at fifteen, but her spirit lived on. She was waiting. Waiting for the man who'd killed her.

Doc wondered what she would do when she met him, met his spirit. Would she seek vengeance, or would there be forgiveness?

She looked up, and Doc knew she could see him. She lifted a hand, a wave, an acknowledgement of another spirit. She smiled sadly, and Doc knew she would forgive. That was why her spirit still haunted the house. She would have to forgive to be free.

And then he was moving forward, and there were other possible timelines all about. Several where a treaty had been signed, and the United States remained a part of Great Britain. Those diverged at sharp angles to his own timeline. He saw some disappear in red, some in black, but most kept going, a different kind of world, one without the United States as he knew it.

He wondered what kind of worlds they were, but then he was back.

The End

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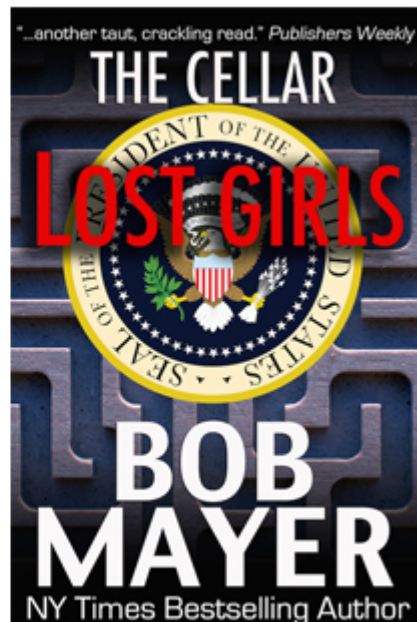
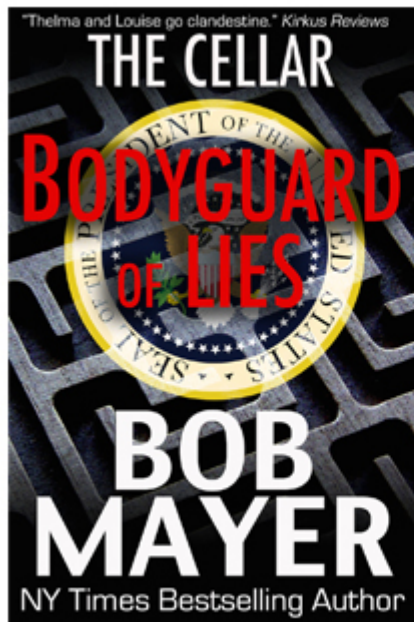
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About Bob Mayer



Bob Mayer is a NY Times Bestselling author, graduate of West Point, former Green Beret (including commanding an A-Team) and the feeder of two Yellow Labs, most famously Cool

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