

TIME PLAGUE

(Sample Chapters)

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunday, December 22nd, 2086 - 2:00 PM, Manassas Battlefield Park, Manassas, Virginia

Major Marc McKnight landed in the open field as planned. It was cold and looked like snow.

He stood and turned in a circle for his 360 scan. He hoped he would see signs of activity, any hint of human life.

As far as he could tell, there was no one left alive on the planet.

Except for his team. Lieutenant Hatcher stood ten feet from him. She was executing her 360 scan. When she finished, he glanced at her and their eyes met. In Hatcher's eyes he saw no fear, but he did see despair and disappointment.

"You were correct, sir," she said.

McKnight grunted.

God, I hate being right about stuff like this.

Hatcher was his best warrior, but there was no need for fighting here. So far, they saw no one. Not at Telegraph Road. And not here.

"Let's get out of the way, Lieutenant. Tyler and Wheeler will return any time now."

They gathered up the gear and samples they brought with them from Telegraph Road and moved twenty yards north of the landing position.

The mission was successful. They did their job. He remembered the familiar saying: "The operation was a success, but the patient died."

I don't think this is what the President had in mind.

He looked skyward and took a deep breath. Despite the threatening snow clouds, the sky never looked so clear and the air never smelled so fresh. He saw a few flakes and frowned.

I need to send a status message, but I need Tyler and Wheeler's reports.

"Major?"

"Yes, Hatcher?"

She looked around. "This looks like what I expected nuclear winter would look like."

"Yes, I thought of that. But it can't be, right? There should be radiation readings or something."

"Yes, sir. But it's eerie. Surreal."

Two time bubbles appeared, emitting brilliant light. McKnight almost hoped it wasn't his men. He wanted to find someone — anyone — alive in this year.

Two figures were jumping in, one in each bubble. After a moment, the glare from the bubbles subsided enough for him to be certain it was his team members.

At least they're safe.

The two bubbles bulged and disappeared, leaving the two men kneeling on the grass. They gathered their gear, some jars and boxes, and strode over to McKnight and Hatcher.

"I assume you found the same thing we did?" McKnight said to Tyler.

Captain Winston Churchill Tyler III was McKnight's executive officer. On this mission, Tyler's assignment was to hook up with people he met on a previous mission and learn from them how the history change in 1986 affected the year 2086.

"If you mean nobody alive, sir," he said. "You're correct. Not a soul."

"Report."

"Yes, sir. I found the farmhouse we stayed in, sir. Nobody's been there for a while. I didn't find anyone. I found this, though." He held up a bag.

"What is it?"

"Human remains, sir." Tyler left the words hanging.

McKnight waited for him to continue. In the silence, snow began to fall in big, heavy flakes.

“Not any of our people, sir. I found a bicycle and rode it into town. No moving cars, no stores open, and these remains. They’re all dried out — no telling how long ago they died. Years, maybe. I thought they might help us understand what happened.”

“Good, Captain. Lieutenant Hatcher and I collected some, too.”

McKnight turned to Wheeler.

Lieutenants Karen Hatcher and Mitch Wheeler were the time travel specialists. McKnight thought of the two as a unit. They were close friends from their days as cadets at the North Georgia Military Academy.

Despite his name, Wheeler was Hispanic, born and raised in Detroit. Hatcher was a city girl from Atlanta. Both were accomplished soldiers in their own right and accepted the assignment to McKnight’s team for the science and the adventure.

“Lieutenant, report.”

“Yes, sir. As planned, I jumped into D.C. to check out the international communications center and the government offices. I even went into the White House. Nobody, sir. No security, no guards, nothing. I found one body, but some animal got to it and ripped it to shreds.”

“Was that the cause of death?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so. Probably a scavenger searching for something edible. The body was mostly dust when the beast found it.”

“What about communications?”

“No wireless access anywhere I went. My phone didn’t pick up any carrier or signal at all. Everything appears to be down.”

“That’s what we discovered,” McKnight said. “And?”

“I found a comm port in one building. There was no signal on the line. I tried a couple of computers, but there was no power.”

“What about the comm center?”

“There was no electricity, but I found a gas generator with some fuel and cranked it up. I got one of the newest shortwave radios up and running and tried to get someone to respond.”

“And?”

Wheeler sighed. “If there’s anyone out there, sir, they aren’t listening to the radio. There was no one broadcasting anywhere that I could find. I heard transient noise I assumed was geological or seismic, but that was it.”

McKnight considered this.

“Conclusion?” he asked.

Wheeler smiled without mirth. “We’re the only people alive on the whole damned planet, sir.”

McKnight grunted and made eye contact with the three officers before him.

“Hatcher and I found the same thing at Telegraph Road. The time Engines are there, but they have about an inch of dust on them. We found the digital history backup disks and brought them with us. We also have human remains, soil samples, and air samples.”

Hatcher nodded and said, “No signs of life at all. No one has been in our office for at least ten years.”

“Okay,” McKnight said. “We have what we came for. It’s time to return home to 2036. Any recommendations?”

“Only one, sir,” Tyler said. “I think we should invoke Andromeda protocol.”

The others nodded.

“I agree,” McKnight said. “If a bug caused this, we can’t risk taking it back with us to Telegraph Road. I’ll send the message.”

He glanced around. The snow was sticking to the ground, and it was snowing harder now.

“In the meantime, let’s get out of the wind and the snow.” He pointed to a small grove of trees. “Let’s hunker down under those trees.”

They picked up their gear and samples and carried them to the trees. McKnight pulled out his phone, brought up the beacon comm app, and started typing.

<<< Kathy, we have completed the mission. No casualties or injuries. Request you invoke Andromeda Protocol. Please ACK. >>>

He clicked the Send key, and the message traveled to his time beacon, then across the years to the time Engine in the lab in 2036.

After thirty seconds, a message came back to him.

<<< Understood. ACK Andromeda Protocol. I will coord with CDC. Stand by. >>>

McKnight read the message to the team.

“Let’s get close together,” he said. “We don’t know how much room they have at the CDC landing room, but I don’t expect it to be as big as our lab. Pull all your samples and gear close to you so that nothing gets left here.”

McKnight didn’t need to say it. He knew all three officers had jumped dozens of times, but he felt he should say something. They needed to know he was in command, no matter what happened.

I hope they’re not as scared as I am.

He checked to ensure his own samples and gear were near enough for the time bubble to include them.

His phone pinged. He pulled it out and read the message aloud.

<<< You are go for Andromeda. Jump in 30 secs. GL. Kathy >>>

“Thirty seconds, team. Stand by,” McKnight said.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

McKnight knelt, and the others followed his lead.

He felt the hair rise on his arm.

Static electricity. The initial sign of a jump.

“Here we go.”

Four separate and discrete time bubbles formed around them, then they resolved into one bigger bubble. Inside, the windstorm began.

McKnight felt like he was inside a tornado. The furiously spinning white, sparkling light whipped his clothing about.

He glanced at Hatcher. Her raven ponytail was first spinning around, then flaring out. After two seconds, the spinning light inside the bubble grew so brilliant he had to close his eyes.

Then he felt his body lurch backward, and he was falling through a field of shooting stars.

After a moment, he felt concrete under his feet and fell backward.

Dammit! I wasn't leaning forward enough.

He jumped to his feet, hoping the others didn't notice.

Snowflakes caught in the time bubble spun and danced their way to the floor. McKnight looked at the others, noting that everyone survived the jump. Tyler was fumbling around in his satchel.

Looking for his nausea meds. He always gets sick from the jump.

"Everyone okay?" he asked.

Hatcher and Wheeler nodded, and busied themselves with confirming that all their gear and samples made the jump.

"I will be in a minute," Tyler said, and poured the anti-nausea medication into his mouth.

The room where they landed was about thirty feet by thirty feet, with a twelve-foot ceiling.

"Guess we didn't have to worry about the room," Hatcher said.

"No kidding," Wheeler said. "We could get up a game of flag football in here."

"Don't start just yet," McKnight said. "We're going to be busy for a while."

He found the comm station on the wall next to the door. Before he could push a button, the display lit up. It showed a black woman in surgical dress, her dreadlocks gathered into a single mass of hair down her back. Behind her glasses were two brown eyes that sparkled with intelligent excitement. Her image grew larger as she approached her camera.

Her voice blared through a loudspeaker. “Major McKnight, can you hear me?”

McKnight pressed the talk button. “Yes, I can.”

“I’m Doctor Pritchard. I’ll be your interface. You need anything, ask for me with the red call button. Are you and your team okay? Is anyone injured or anything? Has everyone we expected arrived?”

McKnight pressed the talk button again. “Yes, ma’am. We are all A-okay. No injuries. We’re all here.”

“Very good,” she said. “We will process you in a few minutes. Doctor Wu is on the line and wants to talk to you.”

“Patch her through, Doctor. And thanks.”

Pritchard’s face disappeared, and Kathy Wu’s face replaced it. Kathy was the team’s civilian mission planner and sometimes operated the time Engine during a mission.

“Major, are — alright? — Anyone injured? What is your—?”

“Kathy, your transmission is breaking up. We are all okay, no injuries. We asked for the protocol to make sure we didn’t...”

He stopped. Kathy was looking at the controls for her display and shaking her head.

She can’t hear me.

Kathy’s image disappeared, and Pritchard’s face reappeared.

The loudspeaker boomed. “Can you hear me, Major?”

“Yes, I can.” McKnight fought the urge to yell and match Pritchard’s volume in the room. “We had a poor connection.”

“Yes, I know. I have another call for you. It’s from the White House.”

McKnight glanced at his teammates. Wheeler and Hatcher raised their eyebrows. Tyler shrugged.

He turned back to Pritchard. “Well, by all means, Doctor, put the call through.”

Pritchard’s face vanished and the brown face every American knew replaced it. Wanda Taylor, the President of the United States. Her familiar voice came in through the loudspeaker.

“Okay, thanks... Major McKnight, this is Wanda Taylor. Are you there? Can you hear me?”

McKnight drew in a deep breath. “Yes, Madam President. I can hear you.”

Taylor moved away from the camera and allowed McKnight to see the others in the room. He recognized General Drake, the executive sponsor for the team and its projects. He also recognized Wade Harrison, the President-elect of the United States. Taylor’s successor.

Taylor turned to Drake. “General? Want to take it from here?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Major McKnight, please report. What did you find and why are we on Andromeda Protocol?”

McKnight shook his head. “Things aren’t right, sir. We jumped to Manassas, Virginia, in 2086 and worked our way into downtown D.C.—”

“And?” Drake said.

“We gathered some air samples and some soil samples. We even brought back some plant samples.”

“What about the people? Who did you talk to? How did they act?”

“Sir, we didn’t find anyone. No one at all.”

“No one would talk to you? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, sir. I mean, there’s nobody there. We found some human bones, but we didn’t find anyone alive. Not one person. We didn’t detect any radio or TEV broadcasts. No drivers on the road, no vehicles of any kind. We’re afraid some biological agent got out of containment or maybe was released on purpose. That’s why I invoked Andromeda, sir. I didn’t want to bring something back with us. It might be dissipated by now, but we’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Drake frowned. “Thank you, Major,” he said. “Stand by for orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

Drake turned toward the President. Her face was as pale as her dark skin would allow.

“Something we did?” she said. “Did I cause this?”

McKnight saw Drake reach back toward the camera, and the call ended.

He turned to face his team.

“Wow,” Wheeler said. “I’m glad I’m not in *that* briefing.”

“We have enough problems of our own,” McKnight said. “Let’s get Doctor Pritchard back on the line and find out if we’re ever going to get out of this nice but boring room.”

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday, December 6, 2036 - HERO Team Lab, Alexandria, Virginia

SIXTEEN DAYS EARLIER

McKnight, Tyler, and Wheeler fell through the field of stars they always saw while time traveling.

The team accomplished their mission in 2086. They rescued McKnight's girlfriend, Megan McAllister, and as a bonus, they captured Oliver Stagne, the man who planned her kidnapping.

When they landed in the HERO Lab, McKnight felt the familiar tug. They fell backwards on the Engine platform.

Two MPs approached and hauled Stagne up and away from them and dragged him away from the time Engine. They pulled his hands behind his back and secured them with nylon restraints.

Stagne ordered at least ten murders in McKnight's time. He pulled the strings that orchestrated time travel missions from 2086 to change the course of history and allow a takeover of the United States government.

Not anymore.

McKnight rose and watched the MPs lead Stagne from the lab. His anger at the man drained away, replaced by relief when he saw Megan standing there, safe again.

He turned and helped Tyler to his feet.

Tyler was his roommate at West Point. They were unlikely friends because of their differences. McKnight was from Oregon and introverted, Tyler was from Georgia and outgoing. McKnight was dark

from his grandmother's American Indian blood in his veins, Tyler was fair-skinned from the Irish blood that permeated his family tree.

Their passion for excellence and patriotism drew them together. The two men found a perfect vehicle for their passion - the US Army Rangers. They worked together on several missions, and Tyler was his first choice for his executive officer on this, the HERO Team.

"Nice work, X.O.," McKnight said.

Tyler grinned. "All in a day's work, sir."

McKnight and Tyler pulled Lieutenant Wheeler to his feet.

Despite his name, Wheeler was Hispanic, but born and raised in Detroit. He and Hatcher received their officer training at the Ranger School at the University of North Georgia. McKnight brought the two onto the team for their expertise in physics and exemplary combat records.

Wheeler pointed over McKnight's shoulder.

"Sir, I think your girlfriend would like to talk to you."

McKnight turned as Megan rushed into his arms. Tyler and Wheeler fist-bumped and walked away as he embraced her.

I got her back. She's safe. I took her for granted and almost lost her.

He smiled at Megan through tears that threatened to flow.

"I'm so sorry, Marc," she said. "How could I have been so stupid? They met me at the hospital and told me you were back, but you were injured. When we got to the car, they threw a sack over my head."

"Don't be sorry," he said, and pulled her closer. "It wasn't your fault. If I had shared more with you, you'd have known better. My fault, my responsibility. I'm sorry. I promise to keep you in the loop as much as I can, from now on."

She stood on her tiptoes and pulled his face down to hers. "I knew you would come for me, no matter what."

"I'm just glad you're okay. I couldn't forgive myself if they'd hurt you because of me."

She buried her face in his chest and he closed his eyes, thankful for the moment.

After a few seconds, he opened his eyes. *What about Hatcher and Rachel?*

Hatcher had returned from the future moments before he did, bringing Megan and Rachel Patterson with her. He wanted to reassure himself that Hatcher was okay and Rachel didn't escape.

He needn't have worried. They were nearby in the lab's break area. Rachel was still unconscious from a single blow to the face, dealt by Hatcher.

I need to wrap up the mission.

He pulled away from Megan. "Honey, I've got to tie up some loose ends..."

She nodded and touched his cheek with her hand. "I'll go wait in your office. I really don't want to know what happens next."

"Right," he said. "I'll probably finish the work in a half hour, and then we can go home."

"Okay." She kissed his cheek, turned, and left the lab.

He shifted his attention back to Hatcher and Rachel.

Rachel Patterson was an Army Ranger major in 2086 and ran Stagne's time travel operations. Rachel was dangerous and unpredictable. McKnight spent the last six months of his life trying to stop her, and he was glad she was finally in custody.

Rachel held him prisoner for a short time in 2086, and her instability showed through when she interviewed him.

Stagne drew her into his coup plans early in her military career. At the same time, she became infatuated with the Ranger 'legend' that was Marc McKnight. Rachel's interest in McKnight was diametrically opposed to Stagne's ambitions for her, which created conflicting emotions and goals in her mind.

McKnight was confused by Rachel's obsession with him. She put him up on a pedestal for a service record he hadn't lived through yet. When he was around her, she alternately begged him to run away with her, and threatened to kill him. McKnight was certain she needed psychiatric care.

Hatcher made eye contact with him.

He pointed at Rachel. “Make sure Kathy deactivates her time beacon so she can’t jump out.”

Hatcher nodded, gave him a thumbs-up, then turned back to Rachel.

Some people referred to Lieutenants Hatcher and Wheeler as “the twins”, because of how they interacted. Sometimes McKnight was sure they could read each other’s thoughts.

While Wheeler was from Detroit, Hatcher grew up in Atlanta. He was a prankster and clown, and she was serious and introverted. She was tall with jet black, shoulder length hair pulled back in a ponytail. The freckles on her nose and her light complexion completed the impression she was the girl next door.

That image faded as McKnight got to know her.

Hatcher was the best hand-to-hand fighter McKnight knew. He was the only person in the regiment who beat her in a Physical Training match. But he only did it once.

Relieved that Rachel was under control, he focused on the third prize — two 2086 vintage time Engines. The devices were in Rachel’s lab when they arrived to rescue Megan. Getting two advanced technology time Engines was a bonus, and would allow the HERO Team to skip decades of technology research. The next step would be to reverse-engineer the technology and incorporate it into their own Engines.

McKnight looked for the two time Engines. He found them on the western side of the lab. Doctor Astalos, their chief scientist and the inventor of time travel, hovered over them.

McKnight chuckled to himself. *The man is 107 years old, and he’s grinning and jumping around like a kid on Christmas morning. I’ll bet he can’t wait to dive into those Engines.*

But the real benefit for taking the machines was that Stagne’s people couldn’t launch a rescue mission. Or at least, not right away.

A familiar bass voice interrupted his thoughts.

General Drake!

Drake was a war hero from the Mideast wars in the early 21st century. He was a legend in the Rangers, and the entire regiment called him “The Dragon” for his performance in Afghanistan as a young officer. He came out of retirement at the President’s request to be the liaison between the HERO Team and the Executive Branch.

McKnight took the assignment on this team because of his interview with Drake. He remembered thinking he would follow General Drake anywhere, and he still felt that way.

Drake was talking to a conference call display and looked very unhappy. McKnight saw President Taylor on the display.

What’s that about?

McKnight felt a presence at his side.

“What’s going on, sir?” Tyler said. “The General looks pissed.”

“Yes, Captain, I believe you’re right.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Beats me. Based on his expression, I doubt we’ll like the outcome.” McKnight turned to his long-time friend and smiled. “Forget it for now. Let’s go home and let the politicians and generals worry about what’s next.”

“No problem here, sir. I haven’t seen my wife in a week. But one more question for you.”

“Sure.”

Tyler pointed at Rachel. “What do you think they’ll do with her and Stagne?”

“They’ll take them out of circulation.”

“Kill them, sir?”

McKnight shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Not that our government isn’t capable of it, but they may need them later. These two understand the 2086 revolution better than anyone. We dealt them a massive blow today, but it’s not over yet.”

“So, they’ll put them on ice somewhere?”

“Yes. Even the President won’t know where they are. Plausible deniability, you know. But someone will, so we don’t lose what they know.”

“Gitmo, maybe?”

“Maybe,” McKnight said, “but certainly out of sight. They’ve just become ex-people.”

General Drake continued to talk with the President through the conference display. To McKnight, Drake appeared agitated and angry.

Tyler gestured at Drake. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that discussion.”

Drake stopped talking and listened to the President, but he still frowned and folded his arms across his chest.

“Me, too,” McKnight said. “But not tonight.” He slapped his friend on the back. “C’mon, Winnie, let’s get out of here. Tell your much-better-half wife I said hello.”

“Ditto,” Tyler said. “Oh, wait. I forgot. *I* have a beautiful wife... and *you* don’t. *You*, my friend, just have a beautiful girlfriend that needs a ring on her finger.”

“What?”

“Jeez, Marc, come on. What are you waiting for? Do I need to hit you between the eyes with a two-by-four? I think I have one at the apartment. Wait here, I’ll go get it.”

Tyler didn’t move. He stood there, grinning at his friend.

McKnight stood in silence for a moment, then he spoke. “I’ve been coming around to that idea. I’m just not sure I’m there yet.”

“Are you kidding me? I’ve seen the way she looks at you and, more importantly, I’ve seen the way you look at her. Remember how it felt when Stagne kidnapped her? You were ready to move Heaven and Earth to get her back.”

McKnight stood still. *Are my feelings that obvious to everyone around me?*

“It’s time, man,” Tyler said. “Ask my cousin to marry you. You know in your heart it’s the right thing to do. *And* it’s the right time.”

“You know I’m not good at making important decisions quickly.”

Tyler laughed out loud. “You make important decisions all the time. This isn’t deliberation. It’s fear. What are you afraid of?”

McKnight paused, then said, “Nobody knows me as well as you, Winnie.”

“That’s what friends are for, Marc. To tell us the truth, when we need to hear it.”

He’s right. It’s time.

Drake ended his call and approached them. “Am I interrupting anything, Gentlemen?”

“No, sir,” McKnight said.

“No, sir,” Tyler said. “I was just advising the Major on how he’s procrastinating about marrying the best woman he ever met, with the possible exception of my grandmother.”

Drake looked at McKnight. “Well, I can’t speak to that, but I don’t see any downside if you love her. And it looks to me like you do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Drake’s expression softened. “Do what you have to do, Marc. Don’t let me influence you.”

He glanced at Tyler and then back at McKnight. “Okay, get out of here, you two. Get here early Monday. We have work to do.”

END OF SAMPLE