

Alone together, they had wandered downstream from the village. Tapique stared wordlessly at Nat, who still thought about Carson, and what kind of danger he presented now—now that he had been rebuffed in his efforts to take Ali and her sister. He glanced over to where the woman sat, one arm propping her up. “What?”

She flicked him a smile. “You seem lost in your thoughts. Might you share them?”

“Oh, it’s just the same thing I’m always worried about—this Carson guy, and what he’ll do next. I’ll try to stop obsessing about it, okay?”

“You’ve told me you are from our future—don’t you already know what happens next?”

He snorted and shook his head at the ground. “If that were only true, it would make stuff a lot simpler. The thing is, there’s a big gap between where, or when I’m from, and now. A gap where I haven’t been yet, including the next few minutes and days...”

His gaze lingered on Tapique’s face, her dark, unevenly chopped bangs cascading to her eyebrows. Then her torso caught his attention, an impressionistic rendering of light and shadow beneath the leaves in the low morning sunlight. “Thing is, I have no idea what’s coming—with us, or anything else. All I have are hopes. I’m hoping we can continue this,” he gestured back and forth, “whatever we have together, for a long time into the future—but it’s not a certainty.”

“I’m beginning to see how complex it is—nothing is for certain, except that you are here, even though you have not been born yet. And it is very difficult for me to believe you will not just disappear at any moment in clap of thunder. So...” She scooted closer and curled her arms around his shoulders. “I will do all I can to enjoy your presence, while I can.” She nuzzled his ear.

Later, as they relaxed shoulder to shoulder, eyes idling over the flowing waters, Tapique tossed questions. “Does time flow like this river? It is true that your people exist far upstream from tomorrow, which we cannot yet even see from here? And somehow you were cast out of the stream to outpace the current flowing into yesterday to pass into many yesterdays, which is our today? I mean, I believe what you tell me, but can you make me understand it?”

“Sounds like you understand it better than I do. But let me put it a different way. Our reality, everything we experience, can be described in just four simple dimensions. First, we have...”

“Wait. That is too simple. Existence is only four things? In my people’s view, there are six realms or directions, controlling our experiences. We have the directions of the sunrise and sunset, then the two in-between, representing the cold of the dead and the warmth of the living. Also, there is downward to the underground, and upwards to the heavens, or what was and what is to be.”

Nat cocked his head. “Okay, maybe we are describing the same things, just using different reference points. In our view, it’s dimensions. Four of them. We have length, width, and depth.” He waved his arms about and held a finger an inch from his thumb to illustrate. “And there is time. All those physical criteria we can measure exist in time, which we also measure—before, during, and after.”

“I understand—the ‘during’ part is now. So, actually, your fourth dimension is composed of three parts, dividing your reality into six realms to coincide with ours.”

“That’s excellent.” He nodded slowly, enjoying the back and forth. “Time is comprised of three distinct measurements. But we can only see the three dimensions, not the fourth. What we do see, time makes possible. Time is the matrix in which the other dimensions function.”

“Yes. And one cannot see the past, but we are aware of it because of the trail it leaves. And the future...” She stroked his cheek. “You are proof it is there.”

Nat felt his heart start to thump. “You’re beginning to distract me again. Let me get on with my grand theory before I forget it completely.”

He tried concentrating on the texture of the cottonwood bark against his back. “So, just as it would be possible for the length, breadth and depth of the stuff of our reality to continue on farther than we could ever see, we suspect time has to have similar qualities. Time is not something physical, so it cannot move, but everything we know exists in it, flowing backward to forward through the now. But if time itself is not moveable, then all of it—before, during and after—must exist at once. Time doesn’t just exist in the now—it is, and always has been and will be. Therefore, our sense of time is an illusion. What we experience as now, coincides with and is identical to the before and after. We just can’t, like you said, just can’t see it!”

Topeka frowned. “So the future, where you were born, has already happened? Or has already been going to happen? Does that mean we can do nothing to change or influence the future? I’m not sure I like or agree with what you are saying.”

Nat nodded. “I wouldn’t agree with that either, because I am living proof that there are an infinite number of futures, all different at any given instant, with all possibilities existing at once, just like time itself. These infinite futures all lead to an infinite number of differing pasts, giving rise to the notion there is nothing simple about the fact of existence itself. We can talk about it, but there is no way we’ll ever come to understand the why or how of it.”