

COSMIC CORKSCREW

by

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Stasis felt unreal.

Dr. Scheihagen had warned me about that when I volunteered for this mission. "Remember, we don't know what it'll be like for you inside," he said in his German accent. "We've never sent a human so far back before."

Scheihagen himself had been the volunteer for the first few experiments, but he had only gone back in time on the scale of hours, not years. So he was little equipped to prepare me for my experience.

Even now, I can't describe it. How does one describe the passage of imaginary time in a box of Stasis, of timelessness? I felt frozen in time, while events passed around me in a blur of color. Throughout, I worried that I might get trapped in Stasis, and never emerge into normal time again. But I had been willing to take the risk for this literary mission of the utmost importance.

Finally, after an eternity of nothing, the Chronobox and I materialized in a small, isolated alleyway. I jumped out of the Chronobox, gulped down a few breaths of air, and closed the door. The sunlight passed through the glass cubicle, rendering it almost invisible. Only once I felt safely back in normal time did I check my wrist chronometer.

Its digital display of the date read 06:20:38. Monday, June 20, 1938. Afternoon.

Perfect. I had managed to reprogram the Chronobox right under Scheihagen's nose.

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Scheihagen had warned me about it when he set up the controls.

"Remember our agreement," he had said to me. "I'm sending you back on June 23, when the story has already been rejected, so there's no chance of interference with the main event. You make one copy of the story, then get back into the Chronobox and come home. Do not interact with anyone, most of all, with him. *Ist das klar?*"

I nodded my agreement, not bothering to point out to Scheihagen that one of our subject's own short stories showed a timeline changing over just such a mission, even after the original work in question had been rejected. After all, the last thing I wanted to do was give Scheihagen a reason to suspect me.

Then, while his back was turned and he fiddled with the last few controls, I used the wrist chronometer -- which was much more than a simple watch -- to reprogram the date of arrival. I had to time this perfectly, making the change before Scheihagen sent me back, but not early enough in the launch sequence for him to notice.

Why did I do this? Because, despite Scheihagen's warnings, I wanted to make contact with the subject.

When he was alive, whenever I had met him, I had always been a fan; by the time I had made a name for myself in his field, he was long gone. I wanted to meet him right at the start of his career, and as far as I was concerned, that beginning was right after he finished writing his first story.

I looked back at the Chronobox, then checked my clothing and patted my pockets. I was dressed in a jacket, tie, and overcoat, perfect to blend in with the natives of this era. In my pockets I had my scanner and my disorienter. The scanner was vital to my mission; the disorienter was for repairing the past in case I made a mistake. Feeling confident, I turned around the corner and walked to my destination: the candy store at 174 Windsor Place in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn.

I had memorized the route in the future, and here in the past I found my way quite easily. The candy store stood in the middle of the block. A newspaper rack sat outside, with the day's papers and more popular magazines of the era prominently displayed. I pushed the door open and went in.

The details of this store were important to me, and I wanted to take in everything I saw as perfectly as possible, so I could remember it once I had left. The first thing I noticed was that the store was broader than it was deep. To the left, near the wall, I saw a cigar counter and a cash register. Behind the register were vertical slots against the walls, crammed with cigarette packets. At right angles to the cigar counter was a candy counter, with three rows of penny candies (penny!) and one row of nickel candies. The sweet smell of the cigars wafted through the store, permeating it with a pleasant, musty odor.

On the right side of the store was a soda fountain, and right along with it a refrigerator, containers of syrup, electric stirrers, faucets for carbonated water, and a sink. Four stools sat below it, currently empty. I was the only customer in the store.

On the right wall was a magazine stand. Next to it, a rotary telephone, and a table with four chairs. And then, coming around to the right side of the door, an ice container.

And back behind the cigarette counter stood a young man, only 18 years old, wearing glasses and showing an impossible grin. He looked at me, and with an unmistakable Brooklyn accent, said, "May I help you?"

I was in the right place, the right time. Standing behind the counter was the young Isaac Asimov.

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I told him I was just looking, which seemed to strike him as odd; I guess most people in this era came into a candy store intent on one or two particular items. But he seemed to relax when I headed to the magazine stand and began studying the titles.

I had to take a few deep breaths just to calm myself down. Part of me was worried that at any moment, Scheihagen might appear to drag me back to the future, or perhaps the universe might collapse around me for having already violated his protocols by slightly altering the timeline with my brief contact. But most of me was feeling simple awe at being in the presence of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

I considered my next move. I really wanted a chance to talk more with the young Asimov, and it seemed to me that I no longer had to worry about disrupting the timeline. After all, I had already made contact, and I was still here. I convinced myself that it meant that my actions were harmless.

But that still left one question: how could I get him to talk to me? What could I do to get him to want to strike up a conversation with just another anonymous customer?

And then my eyes, wandering over the titles of the magazines, fell upon the current issue -- that is, June 1938 -- of *Astounding Science-Fiction*. It was perfect; the obvious way to hit it off with the young Isaac Asimov. I studied it for a moment as I gathered my resolve. The cover illustration was a painting of Mars as if seen from Deimos. Quite good, given the fact that no one in 1938 had set foot on the Moon, much less on Mars. Of course, even in my time, the three human figures standing on the Martian moon's surface and their silver cigar-shaped spacecraft were still the province of science fiction, not of science fact.

I grabbed a copy and brought it over to the counter. Asimov had been staring into space; now he came out of his reverie and prepared to take money from me.

He looked down at the magazine, then gave me a quizzical glance. "Pardon my asking," he said, "but you read science fiction?"

I nodded; I felt a lump in my throat and it took me a moment to find my voice. My ploy had worked. "Yes. Why?"

He looked around for a moment; we were still the only two in the store. "I do too. And I haven't met too many other readers of science fiction."

I thought for a moment; at this point in his life, Asimov was writing letters to the magazines, but he hadn't yet hooked up with the Futurians.

"Well," I replied with a smile, "I've been reading *Analog* -- oops -- I mean *Astounding* -- for a while now."

"Really? What's your name? What do you do?"

"Um --" I didn't want to give him my real name. "Schwartz," I said after a moment of thought. "Joseph Schwartz. I'm a -- a teacher."

"I'm Isaac Asimov. My family owns this store, but I'm a chemist." We shook hands.

"Dr. Asimov --" I began.

He laughed. "Doctor? Call me Isaac! I'm nowhere near to a Ph.D. yet."

I felt sheepish; I had just addressed him as I always had, whenever I had met him in his later life.

"Sorry. Isaac," I said, which felt strange. "Tell me, um, have you read this issue yet?"

"Have I!" He turned the issue around so the cover was right side up for him. "I finished this one a few days ago." His fingers traced the banner at the top of the cover which proudly boasted "THE LEGION OF TIME by Jack Williamson." His eyes were filled with enthusiasm. "I've been enjoying the Williamson serial. How do you suppose he's going to end it?"

"Um," I said. I had never read it. "I'm really not sure."

"Well, I think..." Asimov began, and he launched into a detailed plot, based on his own extrapolation of what he felt would come next.

When he finished, I said, "You know, that sounds pretty good. Have you ever thought of writing the stuff yourself?"

He looked away for a moment, then said, "Actually, I have."

I knew that, of course. "Really?"

He hesitated. "Yes. I just finished a story yesterday. My first."

"What's the title?" I asked.

"Cosmic Corkscrew."

This was the pivotal moment. "May I see it?"

He got a wary look on his face. "What do you teach?"

"Physics," I said.

His look changed to one of relief. "As long as it's not writing."

Isaac reached under the counter, and pulled out a sheaf of papers. With a slight tremble in his hand, he handed the manuscript over to me. I flipped through it eagerly. Years later, in his autobiography, Isaac himself had admitted that the story must have been utterly impossible.

And yet, as far as I and many others were concerned, it was the most valuable thing in the world.

"It's a time travel story," Isaac said as I flipped through it. "You see, I call it 'Cosmic Corkscrew' because --"

"-- time is a helix," I murmured to myself, but a little too loudly.

"Oh, you saw that part already? I decided to use the neutrino as the explanation for time travel, since they haven't been discovered yet, only theorized."

I nodded my head, remembering comments he had made about this story in his autobiography. And then I made a blunder, but I couldn't help myself. "You know, you got it wrong," I said.

"What?"

"That isn't how time travel really works," I said, and then I clamped my mouth shut.

"What are you talking about?"

In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. I had already started to tell him the truth; I might as well finish it. "Isaac, if there's anyone in 1938 who can believe my story, you can."

"What story?"

"I'm a time traveler. I've come back from the future for this." I lifted the manuscript.

Isaac looked around for a moment, then looked back at me. "This is a joke, right? Someone put you up to this?"

I sighed, and put the manuscript onto the counter. "It's not a joke. You've been thinking about how to deliver this story to *Astounding*, and you're planning to talk with your father about it."

"How --"

"Tomorrow you're going to take the subway to the offices of *Astounding*, and meet with John W. Campbell, Jr. for the first time. He's going to take your manuscript, read it, and reject it. But you'll begin

a working relationship with him that will change the face of science fiction."

"But I'm from the future, and we know, Isaac. We want the story."

I gave him a moment to assimilate everything I had said. Then he shook his head. "I don't believe this."

"It's true. How could I know so much about your story, or what you're planning to do with it?"

"It's no secret that I read science fiction, or that I might want to write it. You could have guessed some of what you said, and made up the rest. I'm a scientist. You'll have to offer better proof if you want me to believe your story."

"Fair enough." I pulled back my left sleeve and showed him my wrist chronometer.

He studied the digital display intently, and lightly touched the molded metal and plastic of the device. I knew what he was thinking: could this device be a product of 1938 technology?

And the answer had to be no.

Finally, he looked up at me, his face slightly pale. "My word," he said. "You're telling the truth. You really are from the future."

I nodded. "Yes, I am."

"And I -- I become a famous writer?"

"Yes, you do."

"And you've come back for -- for me?"

I shook my head. "Not for you. For your manuscript." I pointed to where it lay on the counter "The future wants it."

He shook his head. "I don't believe it. I mean, I do, but I don't."

I nodded. "I understand. But it is true. I'm here, and I need your manuscript." I pointed at it.

He picked it up quickly. "I can't let you have it. It's my only copy."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm not going to take that particular copy. I've come prepared." From under my coat I pulled out my scanner, a thin rod just about nine inches long.

"What is that?"

"It's --" I paused. They didn't have photocopy machines in 1938, did they? Or xerography? "It's like carbon paper. Watch."

As I ran the scanner over each sheet of manuscript, it spit out an identical copy. I suppose I didn't have to bother with the hard copy, as the scanner stored a copy of anything it scanned in its memory, but I wanted to feel the manuscript in my own hands as I brought it to the future. When I was done, I had a pile of papers that matched Isaac's manuscript almost perfectly.

He whistled. "A device like that could change the world."

"It will. And it's because of people like you that such devices will be made."

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I couldn't help myself. I really couldn't. I told Isaac all about how he would go to meet John W. Campbell, the editor of *Astounding*, at the offices of Street & Smith tomorrow. I told him how his friendship with Campbell would lead to a career as a full-time writer. I told him that his first published story, "Marooned Off Vesta," would appear in *Amazing* next March, and that his first sale to Campbell, a story he would call "Ad Astra" but which Campbell would change to "Trends," would appear in the July 1939 *Astounding*.

We talked, of space, and galaxies, and tesseract, and time travel, and rockets to the Moon, and of all the dreams that were yet to be. I wanted to stay forever, but every millisecond I stayed increased the possibility of disrupting the timeline. Isaac noticed me glancing at my watch every so often, and after a while he got the idea.

"You need to leave, don't you?"

I nodded. "This is it, Isaac. I have to go now."

Isaac smiled at me. Then he got a worried look on his face. "What happens now? Do you erase my memory?"

"No," I lied. "Just -- do me a favor. When you write your autobiography --"

"I'll leave you out of it, I promise."

"Good."

But he got a twinkle in his eye. "Although -- you know, that gives me an idea for a story. What if I put something in print here in the past that can only be recognized in the future?"

I thought for moment. "It does sound like a good idea for a story, but don't start it until late 1953."

A second later, Isaac laughed. "I guess I do use the idea, then."

"Yes, but don't do it before then. Otherwise it'll be the end of -- of everything."

He nodded, letting me know that he was aware of the dangers of disrupting the timeline. "Thanks for telling me about my future. It's nice to know that I'll succeed."

"You're welcome," I said sadly. "Farewell."

As I walked to the door to leave, I turned back to look at him one last time. He was already looking away, staring into space. I wanted both of us to be able to treasure this conversation forever, but I knew that I couldn't let that happen, despite his assurances. So I pulled the disorienter out of my pocket and fired it at him. It made no noise, displayed no light, but I knew it had worked. His face took on an air of bewilderment and confusion, and then readjusted to normal. I dashed out before he could notice me, and left him to dream the daydreams of the idle shopkeeper.

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I headed back to the alleyway where I had left the Chronobox, clutching the manuscript in my hands as I walked. I shook with fear over the possibility that I might have disrupted the timeline; but no, I was still here, meaning that my interference had been negligible.

The Chronobox was undisturbed, and the alleyway was as empty as before. All that I needed to do was

enter the Chronobox, set the date for the present, and return home.

But I hesitated.

I wanted to stay here, in 1938. I knew what was about to happen: the golden age of science fiction. I could hang around, watch the greatest writers of the genre come of age. I could attend the first Worldcon, read the stories and novels as they first appeared, and own a collection of works to rival that of anyone. Living in the United States through World War II would be a small price to pay, as far as I was concerned.

I could be a part of it all. I would just have to make sure that I remained a small, insignificant member of science fiction fandom, so as not to disturb the future in which I would eventually be born.

I looked at the copy of "Cosmic Corkscrew" I held in my hand, and I looked at the Chronobox. I owed something to the future, I knew that, but I wanted something that was only available to me here in the past.

I knew what I had to do.

I gently placed the manuscript inside the Chronobox, closed the door, hit the button on my chronometer and punctured Stasis. Immediately, the manuscript disappeared and the Chronobox appeared empty. A moment later, the Chronobox itself vanished.

I turned on my heel and left the alleyway, readier than any other man in 1938 to face the future.

Except, perhaps, for Isaac Asimov.

-- for my father Joel David Burstein(1929-1990)

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