

TIME VACATION

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Chapter 1

All of the staring was making Quest nervous. Every direction he turned, villagers quickly glanced down. Not quickly enough, though, to hide their curiosity in the two strangers that had appeared in their grassy, hillside hamlet. These people were not used to visitors, it seemed.

"We're drawing to much attention to ourselves," Quest muttered under his breath.

"Relax. Our outfits match the kingdom's colors perfectly." Ron attempted to calm his partner.

"They know," Quest responded. "They definitely know."

"Impossible."

His confidence came from an inner reservoir of past successes, but there were external reasons for the bravado as well. A few of Ron Hess' characteristics merited particular attention. His bald head, acting as something of a Medieval billboard, gleamed in the sun that had just peaked out of the heavy British clouds. His height was another thing. People were a bit shorter, on average, in those times. Ron, on the other hand, would not have looked unusual in the modern day of steroid-fueled athletes; amongst a crowd of barely-fed peasants, his girth marked him as a pale imitation of a giant. And, these villagers were from the past, not some mythical land of make-believe. To them, Ron was a sight to behold.

Ron's physical appearance was really nothing compared to the shiny things on Quest's nose. It was difficult for even these knowledgeable time travelers to remember and anticipate all of the details. Even the most experienced of historical advisors took things for granted, small things of modern times that could mark a visitor and ruin a trip. Though many of the older men and women hunched into walking sticks could certainly have used them, most of these villagers had never seen a pair of glasses. And, they wondered what

was happening with the skinnier fellow that seemed to have an extra set of eyes.

Ron was right. The colors were right on the money. But, these visitors might as well have been from Mars, so strange and unusual did they appear to those villagers. For goodness sake, Ron and Quest were the only people in eyesight that had anything close to all their teeth!

"Come on," Ron said to his nervous compatriot.

As they walked, they saw the kinds of things middle schoolers read dry descriptions of in musty textbooks. The thatched roofs made of yellowed grasses. The streets were more pathways of mud than cobblestone. The donkeys were muddied up to their knees, flecked with flies and active with their tails in the search for relief from those pests. The children snaggletoothed and in tattered clothes, were curious and fearless.

"Kids are the same whenever and wherever," Quest said with his first smile of this trip.

"Yep," Ron answered. "Nosy, noisy, and dirty."

"Humph." Quest grimaced just a bit; he'd meant something more positive. He'd been thinking of nieces and nephews with whom he loved to get down on the ground and play make believe.

They walked down those muddy streets and, around the corner of one of the dwellings, they looked out upon a vast field of grass. Goats and cattle roamed freely, amidst their feet strutted chickens, guineas, and even a turkey. But, Ron and Quest stared past those pastoral sights toward, what was in many ways for their company, a money shot.

"There it is!" Ron said excitedly. His tone adopted a mixture of nostalgia and greed, "Perfect."

In Ron's defense, it *was* easy to interpret the energy as the real thing. But, as they walked closer and closer, it became clear that he'd misinterpreted.

“Well...close to perfect,” Quest said.

Ron followed close behind, “Oh, you’re right. Close to perfect. They are just practicing.”

Ron and Quest walked to around 15 feet away from the action. Pausing before they got too close, they watched the two extravagantly clad knights as their swords flashed and clanged. Their undercoats were drenched around the neck and backs with sweat. The sounds these men were making undermined the glamour of the visual from further back. Up close, this struggle was all grunts and heavy breathing—not heroic so much as workmanlike. But, the swords were most certainly real. The sounds made as steel met steel were unmistakable. To Ron, they sounded almost exactly like money in the bank.

When the knights paused, breathless with their efforts, they looked over to look towards their audience. They were either less surprised by the sight of Ron and Quest than the villagers or better at hiding it. Quest imagined that it was the former. These knights had a wider range of experiences than their poorer and less well-traveled time counterparts. Unlike the impoverished peasants, they had probably seen other countries. In travels, they may even have encountered those exotic folk from the Far East, with their powerful spices and breathtaking silks. They would have seen followers of Muhammad with their extravagant prayer rugs and curved swords. At any rate, they did not look surprised to see a broad shouldered balding man. And, they gave no second glance to the spectacles on the lean and stringy haired fellow standing before them. Quest was remembering vaguely that glasses might just have been invented around this time in Italy. Maybe they’d seen a pair in an earlier journey.

“Hello!” the taller knight greeted the visitors, “and welcome to the land of Lord Geoffrey.”

“Greetings!” Ron answered. “You all look like you are getting in some valuable practice.”

“Have to stay sharp,” the shorter and bearded knight replied. “Never know when the King will get the urge to take on those bloody neighbors again.”

“Ha!” Quest laughed at the joke, “We wondered if you all might be preparing for a tournament of some sort.”

“Word has not been spread of games good sir. No tourneys forth coming that I know of around these parts,” the taller knight answered. “We had one four months prior, but I don’t know that any of the nobles has an aim to put on another any time soon. Rather expensive extravagance in tight times like these. Harvest was bad around here last season.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that.” Ron answered. “Drought?”

“Unfortunately we were blessed with too much rain. Or, rain at the wrong times. The heavens opened right after planting season. Washed everything out.”

“Hmm, well, the fields look good now. Looks to be a promising harvest this year.”

“Hopefully,” said the shorter knight.

“Okay, well, we don’t want to disturb you anymore. Good day to you both!”

“Good day,” they replied.

As they walked away, Ron said to his counterpart, “Would sure be nice if we could find a tournament.”

“We already have a couple of those in the pipeline,” Quest answered.

“Yeah, but tournaments are like money. You can hardly have too much of it,” Ron said mischievously.

“That may be true...” said Quest reluctantly.

“You got it,” Ron laughed. “Hey,” he pointed, “See what I see?”

"Yeah, but our window is closing. Let's keep a low profile for the next five minutes, ensure a clean transition."

"Aww, Quest! Where is your sense of adventure? From a business perspective, where is your sense of efficiency? We are here. Might as well check on the most valuable possibilities. Let's go," he ordered as he set off towards a small castle.

"Geez!" Quest huffed as he followed. *What does he even think he'll find there? This is a middling castle in a boring place. Nothing stunning ever happens here.*

"Think they'll just let us come in to take a peak?" Ron asked behind him. "Let's ask them for the grand tour."

"Are you kidding? Of course not. They have those walls and guard turrets for a reason, Mr. Hess! There is no way they are going to let a couple strangers just stride in."

"Well, it's worth asking, right?"

"No, it isn't. Chances are we'll be shackled and staked and we won't be able to get to the doorway when it opens. You know what the rules say. Always leave a bit of room for error."

"Of course I know what they say!" Ron answered. "I had a hand in writing them. We'll be fine. I want to see inside those walls. Could be a gold mine!"

"Ahh," came the sound from the bespectacled man.

"Where is your sense of adventure, Quest?"

"I'm a science advisor, sir. We typically don't have much of that sense."

"Too true, Quest. Too true! But, the fact that it is true doesn't mean you shouldn't try to change it."

"I'll work on it, Mr. Hess."

They approached the walls and found a guard wearing plenty of armor and a stern look.

"Hello, good sir!" The guards standing in front of the great door responded to this greeting with silent glares.

"Hello!" repeated Ron.

Silence still.

"Mind if we come take a look around?" Ron asked casually as he continued walking through the door.

"Halt!" Ron and Quest both froze at the order.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ron of the Hess and this is my travel partner, Quest. We seek an audience with the Lord of this beautiful land."

"Well," the guard answered, "we have never heard of you; likely you are two of Henry's men."

"I assure you," Ron said, "that we do not know anyone named Henry, much less serve him."

"And what assurances can you give us?"

"My word as a Lord," Ron said. "Now step aside and let us pass!"

"No good," the second guard huffed. "To the dungeons!"

"Great," Quest muttered. "I told you that this was a bad idea."

Once they were chained to the walls, and the guards had slammed the door, Quest glared over at Ron, "Told you. If they'd decided to just run us through rather than arrest us, we'd have died in this straw covered hellhole. And, I'm not wild about hanging out down here. We may have rid our society of the plague, but it is alive and well during these times. No better place to catch it than from rat poop in a dungeon."

"Hah!" Ron ignored Quest, "Can't believe they didn't accept *my word as a Lord* as currency or proof! Don't I look lordly!"

“Geez, Mr. Hess.”

“Quest, again with the worrying. If my watch still works here...the door will open in just a second.”

Almost on his word, a rectangle of light, complete with a doorknob, appeared between the two of them.

“Told ya!” Ron said cheerfully. “This place might be an option! On to stop number two.”

#

As they stepped through the door, it was almost like awakening from surgery in a brightly lit operating room; the light was so overpowering. This new room had its own sounds: jungle birds and screaming primates. The smell was different too. Whereas the dungeon had smelled musty and damp, this site smelled of honeysuckle and fresh rain.

“Ahh,” both travelers relished the change, and squinted at the change in light.

As he rubbed his eyes, Quest couldn’t help but be stunned as he looked out off the bluff upon which he and Ron had suddenly appeared. Their backs were to a cliff face, the walls of which were shrouded in honeysuckle. But, it was a type of honeysuckle a bit new to him. The blooms were less yellow than pinkish. Bees and butterflies hovered all around them.

They stood upon a broad rock platform, a convenient natural viewing place. In front of them, a hundred feet down the sheer rock wall, was a lush valley. In that valley, to their left, was a gentle slope with a trickling stream. It emptied out into a small pond that was at Ron and Quest’s 12 o’clock. And, around that pond was a sight that had left every test visitor so far slack jawed and breathless. Even though Quest knew what to expect, he still rubbed his eyes at the sight. A pair of triceratops were slowly backing up. After they’d created a distance of about 50 yards, they started lumbering towards each other almost simultaneously. After just a few stubby but quick

strides, they rammed each other with a brutality Quest had never seen on the movie screen, much less in life. Both creatures shook their heads, stunned with the force. The sound was like a grenade exploding underwater, but right next to you. It was muted, but fierce. The force was amazing.

As that sound echoed across the valley, they backed up again. They repeated the same actions as before, proving that the force with which they struck each other first was no fluke. On the fourth time, one of the three horns eluded the defensive plates of the triceratops on Quest's right. Blood immediately spewed out of the wound. Amazingly, he seemed unaffected by the carnage. He just backed up again and readied himself for another charge. His counterpart didn't display any outward excitement about momentum. They both seemed content with the reality that they'd ram each other most of the day, and that eventually one of them would win.

In the distance, even larger dinosaurs grazed. Brontosauri, with their elegant necks and massive bodies, almost like a combination cow and giraffe, but each was larger than a city bus. They seemed oblivious to the struggles of those two aggressive males beside the pond. They did not even deem to look in the direction of that fierce battle, focusing instead on the leaves of the massive trees around which they were gathered.

"Hah!" Ron said. "Still here. I told you this new site was perfect!"

"It is stunning," Quest agreed. "Last time I visited, when the exploratory committees were still perfecting the locale, we were down closer to the lake. But, we could hardly see those triceratops from the trees. And, we barely escaped before a little raptor-like creature charged us. We were lucky, in fact, that he didn't make it through the door as we squeezed through!"

"A fierce dinosaur, confused and alone, might not have worked out so well in the office," laughed Ron.

Quest nodded his agreement. "No, but this is perfect. The view from up here on this cliff is really stunning."

"This," Ron said, "is why they pay us the big bucks!"

"It is easy to see why people would want to see this," Quest responded. "My seventh grade self would have fainted with excitement to see real, live dinosaurs."

"That is a good point!" Ron said.

"What's that?" Quest responded quizzically.

"Your seventh grade self...we don't often think of children as customers. But, I want to make sure we arrange our business structures so we can be as efficient as possible. No customer should be too small. No money too little for our energy and attention. Everyone is a customer of Time Vacation. We have options that appeal to all ages!"

"Well," Quest said slowly, "I like the idea of making this stuff more affordable. But, with kids, you'd have to make sure to keep things safe. And, they can be so much more unpredictable. I can't imagine bringing school trips or anything."

"School trips!" Ron answered. "Now, you are talking. That is a great idea."

"I don't know, Mr. Hess. And," Quest continued, "with more numbers, I just think you run so much more risk of accidents. I don't know how you can prepare thousands of people for this kind of stuff effectively. The preparation process is so important, and I don't know that you can scale that kind of thing safely."

"Again with the negativity, Quest! You might use some business terms every now and then, but you have no spirit! I want more sites! I want to diversify our offerings so that we can appeal to people other than millionaires. We may be selling the past, but our future has no limit if we do this right."

"Hmm," Quest sighed to himself, not willing to argue any more than he already had. He didn't like how flippant and aggressive Ron could be, but he did like his job. He knew that he should keep his mouth shut if he wanted to keep it.

"Alright," Ron said as he looked at his watch, "Next stop is the last for the day. Ready?"

"Ready," Quest answered. A door flashed before them once again. They turned the knob, and stepped out of one scene and into another.

#

The new setting was one for which they were poorly dressed. Luckily, they appeared in a dark bar that had no patrons other than the man and woman they were supposed to be meeting.

"Quest," Ron said, "You know Eco and Zone?"

"Of course," Quest replied. "Good to see you both."

"And you," they answered.

"First of all, thanks for finding a quiet place for us to chat," Ron said. "Quest and I have been exploring, and we didn't really have time for a costume change."

"We should be good here. This place doesn't ever have customers. And, when they do, they are soon enough too drunk to cause any problems," Eco said.

"Well, what have you got for me?"

"Glad to see you, Ron," Eco started nervously. She was always a bit timid when giving pitches to the boss. "I think this setting has some opportunities, but..."

"But what?" Ron interrupted her. "Don't give me any of the old excuses."

"Well, this is a sort of stereotypical western town. Old west, you know," Zone spoke up.

“Eco, Zone,” Ron paused for effect, “the customers of Time Vacation do not pay for stereotypical. They pay for once in a lifetime. Better yet, they pay for once in the history of the world! They do not pay us for generic crap they can see on a movie screen.”

Eco and Zone sat quietly. Neither seemed willing to argue with their boss. Finally, Eco spoke up.

“We know. The problem is, we just haven’t found much here...yet.”

“Well, guys and gals, do your damn jobs. Have you asked around? Maybe inquired about famous shootouts?”

“Of course,” they both answered defensively.

“But,” Eco continued, “calendars aren’t real big here. And people really are bad with dates, much less times. We have been given some recommendations, which are hard to come by, by the way, when people are suspicious of you from the get-go. But, tracking down the substance of those recommendations has proven less than fruitful. People just don’t know when things happened. And, usually they’ve just heard about stuff second-hand. It isn’t like they have the news or anything. Most of them just spew rumors. They haven’t seen the stuff they claim to have seen.”

“Tall tales, huh?” Ron said. “Well, the good news about that problem is it’s one I’ve heard before. You are pros. You’ve found me gold before. Do it again. It is, after all, why I pay you. If you want that to keep happening, I’d suggest you find a solution that works. So many of our customers ask about visiting this time period. Every man wants to be either Wyatt Earp or John Wayne, and no one grows up without a game or ten of cowboys and Indians. We really need some extraordinary options from the Wild West.”

“We know, Ron,” Eco conceded.

“Failure, isn’t an option.”

“We understand.”

“I’m glad you do. Remember it every minute of your increasingly tenuous jobs.”

“We’ll find something. Promise.”

Chapter 2

The day was bright and new, the sun peaking over the high trees surrounding the little cove in which the lead ship sat. Out in the ocean, trolling with nets and moving in a methodical pattern back and forth, were numerous small ships. On each, a captain peered closely at the depth finder in front of him, searching not for fish, but for anything that looked out of the ordinary. The sands of the beaches on this particular island glistened as the sun rose; the grains together were not perfectly white so much as glasslike. They shone like crystals in a chandelier. If only they'd been noticed. The sailors on the ships were not here to take in the sights. They had no time to sun on the perfect shore. They were here for business. They were here for adventure. Neither of those causes left much room for gazing at the scenery.

On the lead ship, out of the surf and in the protective calm of the cove, a swarm of researchers plotted points on maps, readied the exploratory one-man submarine to be sent out again, and generally hurried back and forth with the caffeinated energy of that morning's scalded coffee. In the captain's tower, which was elevated about 10 feet from the main deck, sat three men. They each pored over the map in front of them, quizzically and quietly searching for something that would not reveal itself despite their energy and efforts. They did not speak for minutes. Finally, Dale Brooks mussed his full head of rusty hair and shrugged his broad shoulders,

"I don't know, guys. But, dammit! It has to be around here somewhere. Dennis, what do you think?"

"Well, we've searched every cove and every natural harbor. Is it possible we missed it? I hate to say it, as what I'm suggesting entails weeks of backtracking, but, should we retrace those steps?" Dennis answered.

Dennis's words were not offered lightly. He was younger than the other two, but his gray hair and bushy beard gave him an air of authority he otherwise might have lacked at this table. His quiet

demeanor meant that every word he did offer carried additional gravity. And, he'd just uttered what they'd all been reluctantly thinking. It was not a pleasant or welcomed suggestion.

Brad Hammer had a habit of smoothing his mustache as he talked, perhaps checking to see that his facial hair hadn't abandoned him like his now shaved head. The tic gave the impression of deep thought.

"With the amount of ships those documents talk about, I doubt it could have been missed. And, I'm not just saying that because I want to avoid retracing our steps. I just don't think we could possibly have missed a wreck that size," Brad said.

"I think you are right," Dale agreed. "I'm starting to wonder if it hasn't already been found, years earlier and quietly. Maybe some pirates of sorts made off with it, and wrecked themselves. With the amount of money to be made here, I'm surprised that no one else has ever looked for it."

"It was secret, Dale. No one was supposed to know about it, save the royal family," Dennis reminded the table.

"I know. I know the story by heart. But, secrets in royal families are usually a bit less effectively guarded than their bloodlines. I find it hard to believe that this information didn't get used for some sort of political machination or personal vendetta. Not even a royal family can lose that sort of treasure quietly. They would have been livid. It would have been a well-publicized disaster. Taxes may have been raised to accommodate for the loss. Presuming that we are actually the first to search, the story tells us that the ships took shelter in a natural harbor, but that the storm was too great and all of them sank."

"Right," Dennis continued, "and some of the men were able to swim to shore before the ocean took them, and they reported back once they made their way back to the Kingdom. If only they'd reported a bit more clearly where they'd sank."

“Hard to blame them,” Dale said, “a lot of these Caribbean islands look the same to me. What do you think, Brad?”

“Lots of area to cover is what I think. Lots of uncharted waters out here. These islands are pristine for the same reason they haven’t been fully explored—it just takes too much energy to get out here. And, it all depends upon what those original witnesses meant by ‘natural harbor.’ That phrase could mean any number of things from a sailing perspective.”

“It is a massive island chain,” Dale agreed. “I for one just hope we are in the right set of landmasses.”

“I don’t know what choice we have except to keep exploring,” Dennis muttered with the air of someone about to undergo a root canal.

“Agreed,” Dale and Brad said simultaneously. At that, a phone rang.

“It’s mine,” Dale said as he reached into his pocket and stepped away from the table.

Brad leaned in to Dennis, “Still think this is doable?”

“I know it is,” he replied. “When I found all that stuff in Dad’s attic—the journal, logs, and shipping registry from one of the ships, it took me a while to track down the loose ends. But, I’d always heard about a distant ancestor who was a ‘brave admiral’ and who’d survived a terrible storm when others died. These were the logs from that storm.” He gestured to the table in front of them both. “And, they left little doubt as to the priceless value of what went under!”

“List it for me again,” Brad said, “just to keep me motivated.”

“Two billion dollars worth—in today’s money—of gold, silver, and jewels. And that is just the market value of those things. No telling what they’d fetch in a NYC auction house.” Dennis paused and smiled greedily, “That is just the things listed. There were priceless artifacts taken, or stolen, from the natives as well.”