

## EPILOGUE

**T**he crowd screamed, panicking. Police drew their guns, pointing them at the ground, ready to take down the shooter if they could spot him. The man stood back up from where he had fallen, looking around in wonder. Silence encapsulated him, a pinpoint beacon of sanity amidst the contagious fear of the crowd. Sensation was still tricky, confusing him. Had something hit him from behind and pushed him to the ground right before the gunshot? The other way, the other reality, was fading, but for half a heartbeat he traversed both.

Hidden like a viper, coiled and ready to strike, the knowledge of what might have been gnawed at him. Fighting to push it to the back of his mind, he took stock. He stood still amongst the whirlwind of motion surrounding him, frozen in place while people ran for cover.

“No man is an island.” He spoke it like a mantra, reminding himself that he was a part of all this, not just the eye of the storm. People around him pointed up and behind him, so he looked back. A window leapt out of the background for him the second his eyes lit on it. An empty tripod stood in the window, some type of clamp attached to the top of it, spinning in its joint. His gaze fell to the ground below. How could he see that far with such clarity? The thought lazily drifted across his mind.

He knew the defenestrated woman too well, from his trial if not his memories. The fall had broken her neck. On the ground next to her lay a Glock, with a shattered scope affixed to it. The gun pushed at his memories and a glimmer of understanding dawned on him. He squeezed his empty hand. The understanding did not come to him as

## *Second Paradigm*

an epiphany; it was not a cataclysmic opening of his mind to the truth. Rather, it was a thief in the dark of night sneaking into his mind and settled in: as though it had always been there.

And once it arrived, it *had* always been there. He smiled and calmly walked away from the crowd. What had been done was now undone. And the Origin ... was once again safe. And now he understood what that was, and that it existed. With a simple motion, just pushing another man down, he had determined exactly what the future was to be. Hard though the choice had been, there truly was no other choice. He left and went back to living his life, walking through the reflections of the Origin into his future.

**RELATIVITY  
SYNCHRONIZATION:**

**THE FIRST CAUSE**



## 2620: The Fine Line Bar, Tucson, Arizona.

Particles of hops floated through the beer, catching rays of the evening sun shining through the window, refracting the light through the dark amber liquid. Alexander Zarth watched the play of light with fascination. Subtleties of the environment, little details that so many people missed, never failed to amaze him. He took a sip of the bittersweet ale, enjoying the chill and the thick weight of it on his tongue. Putting the glass down, he stretched back in his seat and looked at the man across the table.

Leaning back in the booth till his shoulders hit the cushion, he got comfortable. Despite the man's apparent youth, an illusion cast by curly blond hair and boyish features, he had piercing eyes and clearly defined muscles visible beneath his shirt. Wiping away the ring of condensation, Alex lowered his beer. Someone watched them both from the kitchen. He extended his senses and felt a time traveler's signature there, one that he recognized all too well. Smiling to himself, he leaned forward again, ignoring the noise from the house music and other drinkers in the bar.

"So let me get this right. Twelve commandos from two C's up the line have all taken failed shots at me, and you," he paused to look into the eyes of the man across from him, "you manage to find me faster than any of them. On top of this, you have an out of time 'mission' you'd like to hire me for. A mission which puts me back in the crossfire, by the paradox standard of those commandos out to get me, and makes me killable. If I accept this I have to leave the safety of my own time, when they cannot kill me, and go somewhere else—which makes me a target. Do you think I'm stupid, friend? Or do you think greed motivates me past the point of caution?"

Alex locked gazes with the man. His eyes gave him away. Holding a surprising depth; their pure emerald caught Alex in an almost hypnotic spell. Alex had trouble reading him, itself a rare thing. But then again, his eyes gave him away. He was a stone cold killer, and lying through his teeth. Not that Zarth had a problem with lying. Everyone did it, and it was a useful tool.

The man nodded. "That is, looking at the smallest possible picture, correct, Mr. Zarth. It does make you 'killable' by their