

I stopped to catch my breath and looked around wildly into the night. Falkowitz was nowhere to be found. *I've lost him. Now what?*

“Psst! Ben!”

It was Brian Dressner. But how did he know my first name? First names didn't strike me as very detective-like, and I had never revealed mine to the residents of Hitchcock so that they would have no choice but to address me as they would an actual detective. Something wasn't right.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“I willed myself into the minutes. I...I thought it would be fun. But now everybody I know has been turned into a humanoid pig! I never thought it would be this bad.”

“Minutes? What are you talking about?”

“There isn't much time to explain,” said Brian. “Suffice it to say, I'm not actually the Brian Dressner you know. I'm the reincarnation of Brian Dressner from ten thousand years into the future. The reincarnation of you from ten thousand years into the future will rediscover the events of the apocalypse of ten thousand years in the past, that is, from his point of view, and write them down.”

“But—”

“I came here through a temporal rift,” Brian continued, cutting me off. “And thus contributed to the problem. The problem is that temporal rifts keep opening up linking your time to a bunch of other times, and each temporal rift that opens weakens the integrity of the space-time continuum and makes it easier for another rift to open, which will only further weaken the integrity of the space-time continuum! I came from the future to warn you! Well actually, I came because I thought the past would be fun. It isn't! Everybody has swine flu! But now that I'm here, I'm warning you! Protect the future! Prevent the collapse of the space-time continuum!”

“Just tell me which way Falkowitz went, and I'll save your goddamn future,” I said. I hadn't understood the slightest bit of what he just said, but I thought it was a pretty badass response.

“To the great wall! Mandy Stafford was with him! Quickly, run, before it's too late! Before it will be too late! Before it has been too late! We use too exclamation points too liberally in the future!”

I took off at a run. The Great Wall of Hitchcock-Anatomy, built in the thirteenth century to defend against Mongol raids. If only the Mansueto dynasty hadn't insisted on digging a Hole to China, Mongol raids would never have been a problem in the first place. All of that was irrelevant now. What was relevant was Falkowitz, standing on the rim of the Mansueto Hole, clutching a struggling Mandy Stafford by the wrist.

“You’re too late, Brubaker. The plan is in motion. HARC will be undone, and the world will be unmade!”

“Unmade?”

“What did you think this was all about? You see, HARC is an anagram of char. Which means that when HARC no longer exists, this world will burn!”

“What about arch?” I said.

“Arch?”

“HARC is also an anagram of arch. So what does that mean? Also, I thought the world was supposed to get flooded.”

Falkowitz’s eyes narrowed.

“Don’t bandy words with me. The people of Hitchcock have grown decadent. Look around you: they eat fruit that’s supposed to be decorative, they cavort with the likes of Rod Blagojevich, they play six hours of Starcraft every night. It all ends now. The master awaits!”

So saying, he leapt headfirst into the abyss, dragging Mandy down with him

“But I never even got any character development!” she wailed as she fell, and then all was silent.

So Bartlett had been behind it all along. Bolton, Mandy, and probably LaRue as well. But why had Falkowitz jumped to his death, or more precisely, to an eternity of simple harmonic oscillation around the center of the earth? And who was this master he spoke of? Then the realization descended on me like a reaver drop on an unguarded expansion. *Spiegel’s Prophecy, $y=t^2$. $y=tt$. That means—it can’t be!— Bartley and Bartlett are one and the same!*

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! So you finally figured it out. The king of Bartlett has come home!”

I spun around. Bartley had appeared inexplicably behind me, as had done so often in the past. But this time, things were different.

“You? Why? Vee? I mean, How?”

“At long last, my plans have come to fruition! HARC is no more, and the apocalypse will soon be upon us,” Bartley went on. “And it never could have happened without you. How does that feel?”

“But...you were the one who got me started trying to solve the murder of the HARC representatives in the first place. You were the one who convinced me that the Jorgonaut was up to no good!”

“And thus ensured that you never suspected that I was ultimately behind it, and that the Jorgonaut was really working for me! Pure brilliance!”

“The Jorgonaut’s wars, Fagin and Altman’s diseases, the famine engineered by Falkowitz, and the murder of the HARC representatives, all leading up to...what? What was it all for, Bartley?”

“To fulfill the ancient prophecies of the end of the world and weaken the fabric of the space-time continuum, of course. Listen, don’t beat yourself up over it. There’s nothing you could have done. According to the ancient prophecies of the end of the world, the only one capable of preventing the apocalypse was Levi Foster. Luckily for me, Levi turned out to be totally inept.”

“So it was all Levi’s fault!” I exclaimed. “I should have known.”

“Look behind you,” Bartley continued. “Even now, my minions are tearing down the Great Wall that has stood for centuries in the ground between Hitchcock and Anatomy. When the wall falls, the last remaining strand of the fabric of the space-time continuum will be broken, and temporal rifts will start appearing everywhere. In particular, one of the temporal rifts will be connected to a time when everything was under water, causing water to flood through the portal and drown Hitchcock!”

“There’s gotta be a simpler way to destroy the world,” I protested.

“But if my plan was less convoluted, there was no way I could have succeeded in stretching it out over a ten-week period. It was hard enough as it is.”

There was so much more I wanted to know. Was my interlocutor’s real name Nathan Bartley, Bartholomew Nath, Frank Dickinson Bartlett, or something else entirely? Why exactly was he so flawed? And why try to bring about the end of the world in the first place? This last question in particular struck me as quite important, and yet nobody had given me a satisfactory response.

But any questions I might have asked were cut off by the heavy thud of a wrecking ball colliding with the venerable great wall of Hitchcock-Anatomy. And then the world around me spiraled into temporal chaos. I took my chances and leapt headfirst into the nearest temporal rift. Where and when it would take me, I didn’t know. But just about anywhere was better than two seconds away from being crushed by a tidal wave. As I hurtled through an inter-dimensional vortex that would take me at least the duration of winter break to traverse, I knew one thing: somewhere, someday, I would live to see Bartley brought to justice.

MINUTES: THE SANDS OF TIME coming soon to a bathroom near you!