Time's Open Window

by B.W. Philpot

One more day and this job would be done. Jack Slater had to admit to himself, this Bigsby character was good…real good. He had never tracked anyone as elusive as Bigsby. Most of the time-travel abusers were perverts, going back in time maybe twenty or thirty years to sneak in an interlude with some sleeping female that had caught their fancy in youth. But Bigsby was different, he had gone back in time to ancient Greece for some illicit purpose and the Mainframe was going nuts over it. All the other Time Trackers put on this case before him had all disappeared into that netherworld of inter-dimensional time – lost forever. He was the last Tracker and the Mainframe was banking everything on him.

The reclining seat that supported his body while he slept was now in an upright position and he reflexively rubbed the two familiar knots on his index and middle fingers with his thumb. Knots on his fingertips, that's all he had to show for all his years of service. The knots had been there so long that he couldn't remember when they first appeared, but he knew they had developed because of the mandatory use of the chair's built-in alarm. Just

slip your fingertips into the slot, layback and sleep, and the chair will awaken you at the proper time with a tingling sensation in the fingertips.

"The Mainframe just downloaded Bigsby's projected time-warp. I've calculated the co-ordinates for our insertion to arrive two seconds ahead of and just behind Bigsby's calculated entry point. Take a look." It was the voice of U9, his android partner.

Jack studied the projected image in front of them. *It seems Bigsby is finally going to hit the same moment in time twice. This is the first time he's made a slip-up, Jack thought to himself.* He voiced his thoughts to U9, "If the Mainframe's right, it looks like Bigsby is finally going to make a mistake. We'll be there an instant before him and give him the juice when he pops out."

"Are you planning to destroy Bigsby's ship?" U9 asked the question because she would be adjusting the final co-ordinates according to Jack's wishes.

"No, I think we'll just give him a little nudge out the window. Bigsby likes time travel so much; I think we'll let him do it forever. He'll never know the difference. The co-ordinates are fine just as they are. Good job, U9." As far as Jack was concerned, it was a satisfactory solution. He didn't like killing people and it wouldn't make any difference to the Mainframe –

as long as Bigsby was stopped before he could change whatever it was he was planning to change.

"I guess after this you will retire and I'll be de-activated. The Mainframe says that Bigsby is the last possible offender, so there won't be any need for Trackers anymore." U9's voice was dispassionate, but even as she was speaking, she got up and walked flirtatiously in front of Jack – no doubt hoping to arouse some interest in him.

Jack studied U9. She was attractive and dressed to evoke desire. Her long dark hair, flawless porcelain skin, perfect figure, and flimsy short skirt were designed as if someone had the epitome of the female essence in mind when she was manufactured. The problem was, she was too perfect. No human female could match her features and that was the problem. *Maybe it was the tiny flaws in women's anatomy that made them desirable, he mused to himself.*

In a way, he felt sorry for her. The feelings she had for him were programmed into her software package, no doubt by some mischievous programmer. They had been together for years and she still tried to arouse his interest. Even though he ignored her, she never gave up.

"U9, you know the feelings you have for me aren't real. They're part of your programming." Jack had long ago given up on being delicate about her

feeling for him. This mission was too important for her to be dwelling on them, better to give it to her straight and get her programming to focus on the business at hand.

"You're right," she agreed. "I've been wondering. What do you think happened to all the other Trackers who went after Bigsby?"

"They're out there in the web of time, reliving the last hours of their existence in this timeline over and over again, exactly where Bigsby put them and that's where we're going to put Bigsby."

"You really think it's true then…the theory. If you get bumped out the window, you exist in time forever, only you don't know it." U9 was being inquisitive the way she always was when she found a few idle moments.

"It has to be true or else time travel itself wouldn't be possible. You know how it's described. It's as if we are a bird in a cage inside a house with many windows. If the door to the birdcage is opened, we can fly to any window of the house and see a different view, a different timeline if you will. As long as we don't fly out any window, we can make our way back to the cage, but if we go out the window, we'll find ourselves in a universe full of houses with many windows, all looking the same, so we'll never be able to find the one we left from. The only difference is, we won't know it." Jack

had been through this many times with U9, but the android never grew bored of hearing about it and so he repeated to her again.

She was the last of her series still active and she knew it, Jack thought to himself. He wondered if there was somehow a yearning to continue to exist in U9. She was just an android, but she did possess intelligence. The series had been replaced by the Supplanter model of androids. Androids so lifelike that they themselves didn't even realize they were androids. He was just guessing, but he figured the reason they were called Supplanters is because they replaced the U9 series.

"Do you remember when we went to Bigsby's condo to get a feel for what kind of person we were tracking and we saw the statues?" U9's voice had an air of speculation to it, as if she were leading up to something.

"Sure do." Jack's interest was piqued. "That was kinda weird. The statue of Julius Ceasar was the strangest thing I've ever seen. Did you notice he was wearing the armor of a soldier…never saw that before. Ceasar and Cicero were the last of the great Roman diplomats and they were both ritually strangled on the floor of the Carthaginian Senate. After that Rome was finished and Carthage went on to conquer the world…I didn't know Ceasar had been a soldier too."

"That's my point. Ceasar wasn't a soldier and the statue wasn't from our timeline. Ceasar is only remembered by us because he and Cicero were the last of the great Roman diplomats. Do you suppose Bigsby went to another timeline and brought the statue back?" U9 asked the question while studying Jack's expressionless face.

"It's odd you should ask, because I've been wondering the same thing myself. I've been thinking about that ever since we left there. What if the present is not the real present, but maybe an alteration of what once was? I wonder, could it be possible that Bigsby traveled to another dimension and spoke with himself gaining information that might ultimately change all the dimensional timelines?" Jack was on to a line of thought that he hadn't previously considered and he continued his line of reasoning. "After Carthage conquered the world, it was an unwieldy empire and the Mainframe was developed to help the Emperor manage it. The Mainframe did such a good job that the Emperor turned over the day-to-day control to the Mainframe so he could live a life of idle luxury. After that, came the discovery of time travel, which is where we came in, by the way – to keep the miscreants from disrupting the timeline."

"I didn't think that was possible…you know, to go to another dimensional timeline and then come back again." U9's voice was doubtful, but she was smiling at Jack while she spoke.

"It's not. At least it's not supposed to be. But if Bigsby did do that, he may have discovered an alternative future or past, as it were." Jack studied the charts of Bigsby's time travels and then came up with another idea. "Look at these destinations. They seem to be tracking a genetic lineage. What if Bigsby intends to rubout the progenitor of the person who built the Mainframe? Maybe that's the reason he's worked his way so far back into the framework of the space-time web."

"If that's the reason, then why didn't Bigsby just go back and eliminate the Mainframe creator's parents?" U9 asked.

"That wouldn't work." Jack answered frankly. "Genetics and time are like a revolver with six bullets. You take out one bullet and the gun will still fire if you keep pulling the trigger. No…the only way the Mainframe could be eliminated with certainty is to knock-off the progenitor. That's the reason the Mainframe is in a tizzy over this. It knows what Bigsby's intentions are."

"You might be right." U9 answered. "Remember the other bust we found there. I had never seen that face before, but Bigsby's writing was

beneath it and identified him as Alexander the Great. Does that name ring any bells?"

"No it doesn't. And there were other busts there that I didn't recognize either. I think we're on to something here, U9. The sooner this Bigsby character is taken care of, the better."

"When we're finished with Bigsby, I guess I'll be taken off-line permanently. Do you think we'll ever be together again or that the Mainframe will one day re-activate me?" U9 asked the question with a hopeful sound in her voice.

"Not a chance of that U9. You know what happens to de-activated units. They're scrapped. What you think are your feelings are just part of your program. You don't have a soul, although I know you wish it were so. Don't worry, it's painless and you'll never know the difference."

"I know. I shouldn't be thinking about it. What about you. Do you plan to marry and have children? You'll have plenty of time for that, you know, since you'll be out of a job." U9 appeared to have accepted her fate by the tone of her answer.

"I don't know what I'll do. It seems like the only thing I've ever done is be a Time Tracker. My new life will certainly take some adjustment, that's for sure. As far as kids are concerned, I've never thought about it. Come to

think of it. I don't think I've ever seen a child. They're very rare these days. Let's not dwell on such things U9. I know it must be hard for you even though you know you're just an android. Getting back to the subject, what do you think made Bigsby go crazy enough to want to change the timeline?"

"I'm fairly certain it was the discovery of having an android for a mate. Bigsby wanted children and with an android partner, it would be impossible," U9 stated matter-of-factly.

"How in the world would you know that information U9, and why haven't you mentioned it before?" Jack asked, his interest aroused.

"I thought you knew. Bigsby was my programmer. Bigsby programmed all of the U9s." U9 stated plainly.

"I was under the impression that the Mainframe programmed all the androids. Do you think this will affect your actions on this mission?" Jack questioned, suddenly alarmed.

"It will not affect my performance in any way. The Mainframe didn't start programming new models until the Supplanters came on-line. You don't have to worry about me. I was created for the sole purpose of doing this job and besides, Bigsby programmed me before she went crazy and started this chase."

"Did you say 'she'? You mean Bigsby is a female. I was under the impression she was a 'he,' if you know what I mean. Why didn't you say something about this sooner?"

"You didn't ask and I didn't consider it to be important. What difference does it make?"

U9's answering a question with a question took Jack aback. It was something he hadn't expected. "Well…uh…I guess it not that important, but it's something you should have told me. In the future don't leave out any information. Understand?"

"Understood."

Jack found himself a little annoyed at U9 for leaving out such pertinent information about Bigsby. If there was anything else she knew and was keeping mum about, he knew he had better try to get it out of her fast. It could prove important to the mission. "You say that Bigsby programmed you and now we're on a mission to eliminate her, which I'm sure you understand, could make me wonder about your fidelity to your job in this case. Did she ever mention anything about time travel or anything at all that had to do with dimensional timelines?"

U9 responded with characteristic indifference. "Not really, but she did occasionally sing some verses to herself while she was working. She would often sing the words over and over.

To each mind

Locked in time

A thread has been wove

And to each memory

By some gimmickry

A river through it flows."

U9 looked at Jack introspectively and added, "She said she was going to have a son."

Suddenly thoughtful, Jack asked, "What? How is it possible for her to have a son if she was married to an android?"

U9 responded hesitantly, "I can't say. Perhaps she bred herself to one of the humans in one of the timelines she visited. She already had a name for it. She said she was going to name her child Alexander. Isn't that odd? I suppose it's just a co-incidence about the statue…"

Her words were interrupted by flashing lights and alarms brilliantly illuminating their control screens.

Jack shouted with a tone of alarm in his voice. "U9, I'm reading an energy pulse. Did we have an unscheduled firing?"

U9 answered in a quiet, but confident voice, "No, it's not coming from our ship." For an android, U9 had a very uncharacteristic smile on her face as she spoke.

A note from the author:

Bigsby's solution to eliminating the Mainframe was an indirect if not elegant one. By opening the timeline of Alexander the Great, she insured the ultimate destruction of Carthage (and prevented the Mainframe from being developed). I'm sure the history buffs out there have figured this out already, but I'll outline it as concisely and briefly as I can for anyone else who's curious.

After Alexander's death, his generals divided his empire amongst themselves and as a result, the eastern Mediterranean was more or less composed of Greek ruled city-states. All these states had armies based on the powerful Greek Phalanx including Egypt, which was ruled by the Greek general Ptolemy and his descendants. Meanwhile, the western Mediterranean was beginning to be dominated by Rome and Carthage. These two western powers were at a serious disadvantage against the powerful Greek military system and they formed an alliance against the Greek states. They were able to fend off various Greek invasion forces only because the Greeks, too busy fighting among themselves, never committed their full resources to defeating Rome or Carthage.

Because the Greeks were militarily dominate in the east, Rome and Carthage both began expanding to the west, which would eventually bring them into conflict with one another over hegemony of the western Mediterranean. In the end, despite having brilliant commanders, the mercenary armies of Carthage proved not to be a match for the citizen soldiers of the Roman Republic and Carthage was eventually razed to the ground. In relation to the story, this means: no Carthage, no Mainframe. It's that simple.

Ironically, the last defenders of Carthage were 900 Roman deserters who, knowing what their fate would be if taken by the Roman army, refused to surrender and instead committed suicide.

In its wars with Carthage, the Romans over time developed a military system based on the flexible Legionary maniple, which turned out to be a match for the more rigid Phalanx. Because the armies of eastern Mediterranean were all more or less based on the Greek system, Roman expansion to the east was fairly rapid once they possessed a military doctrine that was superior to the Phalanx.

As for the two androids, Jack and U9, perhaps they do exist in some past or future time – caught in a shadowy universe between dimensions and timelines.