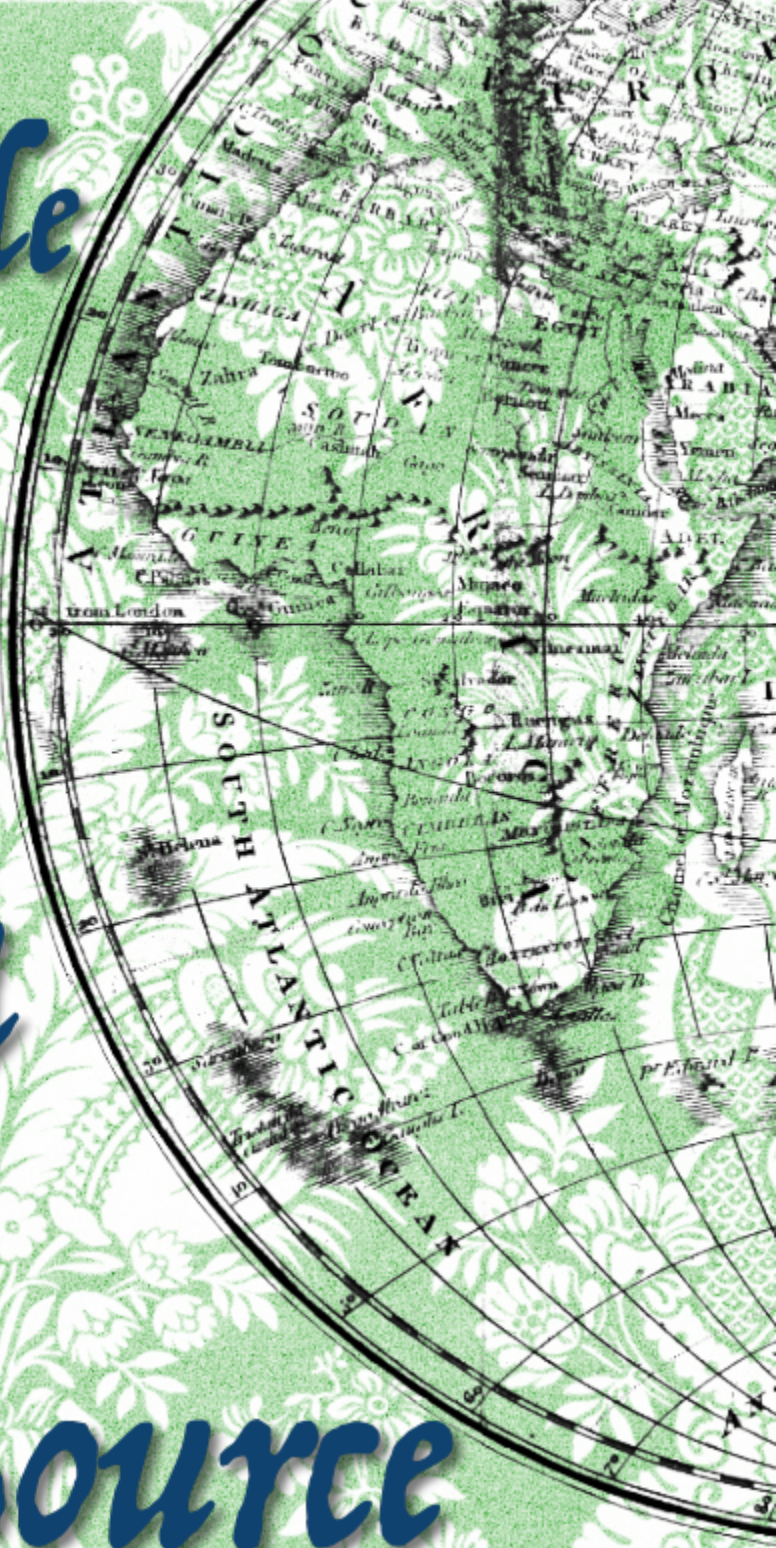
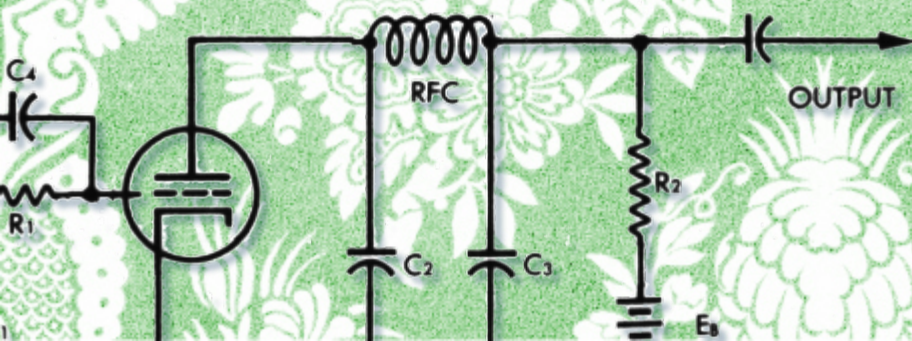


The Inconceivable Adventure of Jake Calcutta and the Primary Source

Episode 1 of the Adventures of Jake Calcutta



As sweat streamed into his eyes, down his back, and anywhere else it could find, Jake Calcutta shifted the heavy pack on his shoulders, still hoping to find a comfortable position. Modern equipment would have allowed him to carry twice the weight far more efficiently but one made do with the tools available. If he hadn't been able to slip unnoticed into the group three days ago he'd have gone back and signed up from the beginning, but the least lead time possible was the most efficient. Efficiency wasn't always fastest, or tidiest, or easiest, but it was always, well, efficient.

He'd thought world explorers would be hardy robust types, all of them Teddy Roosevelt clones. John Speke was a bit of a whiner. Rumors made Burton out to be a blustering loudmouth, but at least one who could make a decision without waiting to see what he was against before choosing what to be for. Jake was quite sure Speke would search Antarctica for their goal if Burton insisted it must be in Africa. Fortunately for history (or perhaps immaterially) Speke himself publicly acknowledged a far more sensible target for their travels, sparing Jake a trip to the coldest place on earth.

Not that he loved this steaming bug-infested jungle much more. He'd heard that the two months since leaving Tanganyika had been one long hard slog through this miasma of bites and thorns and marrow-infesting damp. But tomorrow, it ended, at least for Jake. Tomorrow, on August 3rd, Speke would discover and name Lake Victoria, declare it the source of the Nile, and Jake could slip into the jungle and back to the civilized world.

Assuming, of course, Speke actually had found Victoria, and actually had any evidence whatsoever it was some kind of origin for the world's mightiest river.

That was Jake's assignment, pedestrian as it might seem: verify or debunk Speke's barely substantiated claim to have discovered the source of the Nile after his party's separation from that of the great explorer Richard Burton. Jake made a mental note to find out if the actor had intentionally muddied the waters by choosing a semi-famous name to completely eclipse.

It left him with nothing to think about as they made camp and settled in for the night of August 2nd, 1858.

Tomorrow was the day. Tomorrow night he could be done, and not long after, home and dry. Especially dry.

Now that was something to think about. He did, until he slept.

During phase one of breakdown in the morning he heard raised voices by the fire. His work involved tents and their paraphernalia, but he carried a loop of tent cord and looked busy nearer the cook fire. Jake's stomach rumbled. Speke's organization skills left something to be desired, packing half the camp, pausing to eat, then packing the rest. Jake made a mental note to reread Taylor's work on efficiency and devise the optimal plan for such contingencies in the future.

While Jake fiddled with his bit of cord, the cook also looked busy, but since he was making breakfast for a sizable group of hungry overworked men, that was natural.

"I'm telling you, Burton is heading northeast. He said if it's not Tanganyika, northeast is the logical choice."

The speaker was one of the guides Jake had decided was a complete waste of space. Nothing was quite to his liking, up to his standards, fast enough, big enough, enough, period. And he'd been sucking up to Speke from the instant the two explorers separated.

Speke's answer was interrupted by pots crashing to the ground as the cook rummaged for something. When the noise stopped their fearless leader spoke again.

"As I was saying, I'll not follow a fool and be an even greater fool. If Burton heads northeast, our goal surely lies southwest."

He stood and raised his voice. "Get this camp packed. We leave in 30 minutes."

Cook cleared his throat, made eye contact with Speke, and stirred whatever was in the pot furiously without saying a word.

Southwest. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Victoria lay northeast, just as Burton had said.

If, of course, Burton had said anything of the kind.

As they made haste, as far as that was possible, through the jungle, Jake spoke to one of the other bearers who didn't look and sound a complete piker and might be a useful if unconscious participant in Jake's plan, whatever that turned out to be.

"At this rate we'll be in Rhodesia when Burton discovers the source of the Nile."

“Road E what?” The man grunted as he tightened a strap.

Felicity’s voice sputtered in Jake’s ear before he could respond.

“Rhodesia doesn’t exist yet, Calcutta. For heaven’s sake, will you please actually read the brief instead of skimming? I realize the word ‘brief’ carries connotations you find appealing, but if you keep making gaffes like that I’m not sure I can continue to act as your communications liaison.”

Jake made a mental note to put bleach in Felicity’s tea when he returned to the headquarters of the Temporo-Existential Agency (known to all its employees and agents by its three-letter acronym.) He didn’t respond aloud. His comm link was two-way, of course, which is how Felicity and the triplets monitored his missions, but it wouldn’t do to be overheard conversing with a tiny voice in his own ear. For the nine-hundredth time Jake Calcutta wondered if the invention of cross-temporal communication back in 2021 had been the boon all and sundry seemed to think it.

“Excuse me?” He pretended he hadn’t heard or understood what the other man had said.

“You said something about a road.”

“Eh? Whatever road you’re talking about, old man, I’ll take it over this blazed jungle path. And where’s this lake we’re taking our after-supper dip in?”

“You tell me, friend.”

As usual, bluffing worked a treat. The average person was simple and honest and assumed simple honesty from others.

They also assumed everything was their fault, they were the one who was confused, or wrong, or whatever.

It was one reason Jake barely skimmed the mission briefs he knew, with a flicker of guilt, Felicity Bruttenholm spent weeks preparing before each mission. No report could ever prepare him as well as his own wits, the skills he'd gained over half a lifetime of travel, making his way through everything a man can face with nothing but his own two hands, a clear mind, and primarily the patience and persistence to stick to the path he knew led to success.

Two things were necessary. Turning Speke around was the first. Since Jake had no idea how to accomplish that, the other necessity was slowing their progress in the wrong direction. If they made more than a half-day's journey by noon there'd be no way to reach Lake Victoria for its discovery before night fell on August 3rd.

Falling behind was no help; he'd simply be ignored and left. Slowing the line of porters would have to be done from the front. Head down, pretending to be oblivious, Jake used every wide spot in the fresh cut trail to nudge past another bearer. None were in such a hurry they'd resent another pushing ahead, and before long, Jake was near the front of the line.

It did no good. As he slowed, the machete-wielding leaders pulled away, keeping their pace. Wouldn't do to be obvious or he'd be moved back to the rear.

If falling back didn't work, perhaps pushing ahead would.

Tucking his hands as close to his body as he could, Jake stepped forward just as a machete swung around to slash the jungle growth on the right side of the path. Instead, it caught the rope holding Jake's pack together. Before the blade bit into the greenery, his load dumped to the ground.

"Stop. Back. Too close, too close." The chap who'd sliced the rope waved his free hand wildly.

"Sorry. Sorry." Jake managed to look sheepish about his mistake, then stood looking as helpless as possible amidst his scattered load.

The column halted one group at a time, like train cars rolling to a bumping stop as the engine brakes.

The caboose was already making its angry way forward: Speke and Fredericks, the mouthy assistant who'd sent them on this wild goose chase.

Fredericks was already shouting before he'd had a single moment to assess the situation. "See here, what's the delay? Merciful heavens, man, collect this gear and get moving."

The man with the machete was still overwrought after the close call. "No, no, too fast. Coming too fast, he was. Walked into the machete. Too dangerous. Slowly, slowly."

"Slowly? I should think not." Fredericks blustered past Speke, who put a hand out to stop him.

"I say, you're not injured are you?" His concern seemed genuine to Jake; the first sign of something other than self-absorption he'd seen in the man. Almost enough to

make him feel guilty. Wait; he was trying to help the man. Well, all the more reason to nudge him the right direction.

“No, I’m fine. My fault entirely.” He bent and picked up the sliced end of the rope. “This is useless.”

Fredericks pushed past Speke. “Get some rope and get your pack together. Move!”

Speke, again, put a hand out. “You, there, and you, find rope and help organize this. You,” pointing to Jake, “Take a moment. What a fright you must have had. Could have lost a hand or an arm. Goodness.”

“I’m fine, really I am. Here, let me help with that.” Jake and two others organized and bundled Jake’s load and got it balanced again on his back.

Speke put a hand on Jake’s pack. “The Nile isn’t going anywhere. A measured pace would be prudent. Men, forward.”

The machetes began clearing a path again, but now with Speke right behind them, leading the way.

And Jake was right behind Speke, blocking Fredericks every time he tried to push past.

There was an opportunity here and Jake wasn’t going to let it slip.

“You’re an intimate of Burton’s, then, are you, Fredericks?”

Fredericks had tried more than once to move past him to trudge beside Speke, but Jake’s oversized pack allowed him to accidentally block the man each time. As they walked,

he'd asked leading questions, loudly, knowing not only that Speke would hear the question first and draw conclusions, but he'd have a hard time hearing the answers, giving Jake a psychological advantage.

"As I said before, man, I overheard, nothing more."

"Ah, must be grand."

"Eh? Nothing grand about accidentally overhearing something."

"Well said, well said. Couldn't agree more."

Jake had also noticed that as Fredericks became frustrated his voice became a quiet angry hiss which even Jake had a hard time making out. The more he prodded the man, the more Jake controlled what Speke heard.

By the end of the day, Speke's comments to Jake assured him he had the man's ear.

But it was, in fact, the end of the day, the end of August 3rd, 1858, and they were, even with Jake's delays and obfuscations, more than a half-day's march from Lake Victoria.

As they stopped to make camp, Jake was the one frustrated, and Fredericks the one at Speke's ear. The whole short evening Jake tried to get close, to cast aspersions on Fredericks, on Burton, on the entire Geographic Society, but Speke was all over the camp in a new-found concern for the men's welfare, with that nuisance Fredericks at his heels every moment.

As Jake turned in he was wallowing in the angry frustration of not only failing to observe his objective, but of the objective even failing consummation.

It didn't help that when he was annoyed, his thoughts took on Felicity Bruttenholm's manner.

"What was all that?"

He was already drifting off to sleep when Felicity once again couldn't leave something till the morning.

"All what?"

"I'm not one of your campmates, Jake. Don't pull that."

He sat up and listened. No sound from outside. He spoke quietly, not a whisper that might carry, but a barely audible mumble. His comm picked up enough from his jawbone for Felicity and the triplets to hear.

"He's going the wrong direction. He's supposed to have discovered Victoria today. Now it's too late. But maybe I can turn him around and get back there a day late. One day can't matter much."

"Stay out of it, Calcutta. You know better."

"Are zechrabrew on?"

"Stop calling them that. No, Featherstonhaugh and the team left hours ago. You're stuck with me. Me, and your one and only absolute rule."

He knew his comm picked up the rumbling growl he made when he was mad at her. He also knew she was the only one

who ever got under his skin like this, which made him growl more.

“I do, in fact, know the rules, Bruttonholm. I also know how history works, and something has changed. Unless your research is wrong—”

She cut in as he knew she would. “As if, Calcutta.”

“Then what happened?”

He also knew that the longer she took to answer, the less sure she was of that answer.

“When Taft founded TEA as part of NASA, time travel was pulp fiction, but even the pulp authors knew better than to muck with time. Every scenario ends with, well, the end. Capitalized: The End.”

The hair stood up on the back of Jake’s neck.

“President Taft was 30 years dead by then.”

Felicity’s sputtering made his earpiece buzz. “Not doubleyou aitch, moron; Cincinnati Christmas Taft.”

Now he felt the hair standing up on his entire head, maybe his whole body.

“Was this in the brief?” Stall, Jake, stall.

The shriek in his ear was painful. “Were you hired for your looks, Calcutta? Sweet merciful heavens do you know one single thing about history? Oh my word. Are you sitting comfortably? Once upon a time, my dear ignorant child, Charles Phelps Taft founded a science agency after

becoming the second member of his family to become President of the United States of America. That would be after his father, William Howard Taft. Note the repetition of the last name, hinting, even to you, a relationship. Already nicknamed 'Mr. Cincinnati' as mayor of that city, he was rechristened, so to speak, Cincinnati Christmas, within NASA and therefore TEA because he went to great lengths to found said agency on December 25th of 1959."

Apparently even Felicity Bruttenholm had to take a breath once in a while. She did, and continued.

"Is there anything else of value I can impart, Mr. Calcutta, or can I assume that you remember your own name and why the government spent millions creating this agency and sending you, the least competent human being extant, back in time? Eh?"

Jake put the brakes on his racing mind long enough to lie to her.

"Look, I'm tired. Marching all day carrying an awkward heavy pack and dealing with that fool Fredericks. And I was already asleep when your dulcet tones shattered my ear drum. So if you're done badgering me, I don't need no stinking badgers and I'd like to get some sleep before marching another 12 hours in the wrong direction through a godforsaken jungle."

The tiny beep indicating a closed connection was her only response.

Wide awake, wildly wide awake, Jake paced in knee-length grass behind his tent. Eventually he paced out to the fire and helped himself to some of the coffee kept warm for the

watch. The two on watch nodded, then ignored him; Jake wasn't the first to join them on a sleepless night.

When he saw a light in Speke's tent a bold plan kicked him to action. After refilling the tin cup with hot coffee, he marched to Speke's tent.

"Excuse me." He waited for an answer.

The flap opened, and Speke stepped out. Jake envied the tent big enough to stand up in, big enough for a small table for his charts and notebooks.

"Yes, erm, yes?" Clearly the man had forgotten his name, except Jake had made sure he never knew it. Misdirection to the rescue once again.

"Saw your light and brought fresh coffee. In case . . ." He trailed off, wanting Speke to think he led the conversation.

The man looked at the cup as if some foreign object, then took it and looked inside, still apparently confused about its purpose.

"Thank you. Yes. Much appreciated."

He stepped out and let the tent flap drop. Sipping the coffee, he seemed to wake up and notice Jake again.

"Frustrating day, eh? Maddening, wandering around guided more by guesses and wits than those blasted maps, half blank and half wrong."

"We do our best, sir." Let him lead, Jake, let him lead.

Speke sighed. "I wonder, I really do."

He sipped the coffee again. “Is it possible Burton was right? Blast the man personally, but he’s not precisely a rank amateur at this game.”

Jake cleared his throat.

“Go ahead, man. No formalities here. Speak your mind. Can’t be more foggy than my own.”

Seeing the opening he’d crafted, Jake stepped into it.

“If Burton ever said anything of the kind.”

“Eh?” Speke’s arm dropped, spilling coffee on his leg and the ground. He dropped the cup and batted at the steaming liquid on his leg.

Jake bent to pick up the tin mug.

“Leave it, man. What do you mean, if Burton said it?”

In his most reluctant voice, Jake slipped the metaphorical knife between Fredericks’ ribs.

“It feels to me, sir, as if Fredericks is, well, quite taken with Burton, as a leader, I mean, and wondered if, perhaps, between them, or perhaps Fredericks, all on his own . . . “

Trailing off was one of his favorite tricks for getting others to complete his sentence, and then believe they’d come up with the thought on their own.

“It was a falsehood. Burton never intended to travel northeast. A ruse to put me off the trail.”

Let him run with it, Jake. A nudge, perhaps.

“Now that you’ve seen through his perfidy, is there still a chance . . . ?”

Speke’s eyes were on the fire beyond Jake. He stooped to pick up the cup.

“If we march double quick tomorrow, leave anything nonessential behind, we could make up the time by noon and nearly another day’s distance by late evening.”

“An early start, then?” Now the man had decided, Jake felt free to push harder.

“Indeed.” Speke pushed past him and strode to the fire.

“I want this camp awake and ready to move by the earliest light. I’m turning in. Make sure the second watch knows our plan for the morning.”

“Yessir.”

While Speke commanded the watchmen, Jake had crept toward his own tent, hoping Speke would forget him, as important men were wont to do.

The man went straight to his tent, and seconds later the light went out.

And Jake was in his own tent and out like a light himself five minutes later.

Transformed to the core, Speke drove the men hard. Half were left behind to gather everything they could carry and move at any pace possible; the other half carried barely enough for two days rapid travel.

When Fredericks found himself charged with organizing and leading those left behind he gave Jake a venomous look—and got a pleasant smile in return. All the man’s sputtering might have been a passing breeze for the notice Speke took.

The jungle’s resentment was evident. Though returning by the path they’d cut the day before, it was already difficult to find it in some places. Even Jake’s brilliant sense of direction occasionally proved inadequate. More than once he’d have sworn he’d never set foot on this path before. But the sun doesn’t lie, and he and Speke were both certain they were on the right path, invisible though it might sometimes be.

Fit as he was, Jake was at his limit when they stopped for a short break at midday. They weren’t moving at a run, but close enough. All the men fell to the ground, dumped their packs, and gulped water from canteens. They’d have to eat something, but first and foremost they needed rest and rehydration.

After he’d sat a moment and swallowed a bit of tepid water, something flickered in the back of Jake’s mind. Crossing between the prostrate wheezing porters, he pushed down a narrow trail someone had cut recently—very recently.

“Here!” Speke was the only one who came to his call.

They had stopped 50 feet short of their August 2nd encampment. In half a day, they’d made up the entire day of travelling the wrong direction.

Speke was beside himself. “By nightfall, man, I can feel it!”

He turned and made to shout to the men but Jake put a hand on his arm.

“Though I’m the fittest of the bunch, I’m thrashed, sir. Perhaps a short rest. Finding a vast lake an hour after sunset is no worse than finding it an hour before.”

Despite Felicity’s chiding he had, indeed, read enough of the brief to know they were hours from the southern shores of Lake Victoria. At even a more reasonable pace, they’d reach it long before sunset.

After ten minutes of begrudging patience, Speke urged the men to their feet, promising an easier pace. True to his word they moved quickly, but not driving urgently as they had all morning. Still, Jake could tell the man was fairly twitching in eagerness. He seemed more the world explorer on a mission than at any point in the short time Jake had known him.

The path was more overgrown here; the jungle had had two full days to heal her scars. Three men with machetes hacked and sliced in turn, top, left side, right side, step forward, repeat. It was slow going, but it was the speed they’d made since entering the jungle on the shores of Tanganyika so Jake knew they were on target.

Four hours later, they burst from the jungle, sun slanting across the scene before them, glistening on a body of water more vast than Tanganyika.

Speke fell to his knees, face in his hands, then after a moment stood and shook Jake’s hand.

“Well done, man.” Turning to the rest who were staring goggle-eyed at the huge body of water, he thanked them all.

“A proud day, men. This is the reward for your courage and strength. This vista, and my eternal gratitude.”

Without looking back, he strode toward what would soon be named Lake Victoria, called by many the source of the world’s mightiest waterway, the Nile.

Sitting by the fire after a most satisfying meal, Jake had ruminated on Felicity’s comments. She’d been in his ear as they made camp, confirming that Speke had discovered Lake Victoria on August 3rd, 1858. Since today was the 4th, he’d counted and recounted, Jake had been mulling the paradox for nearly an hour before making a decision.

A decision he’d been ruminating on since sitting down at the fire. Mulling, then ruminating. Not his usual *modus operandi*, this man of strength and action, but this was one of what the triplets called ‘the fiddly bits’ and he wanted to see his way clearly before acting.

He saw it, and he acted. Or spoke. “If only others had your ethical perspective on adding to the world’s self-knowledge.”

Speke didn’t respond, but the weight of recorded history was nudge aplenty for Jake Calcutta. History said August 3rd. There was a reason for it, and going back in time to discover Lake Victoria a day earlier wasn’t the solution.

He’d settled on this course of action when he pondered the precise wording of the historical record: that Speke reported discovering Lake Victoria on August 3rd.

Reported.

That was easy enough to arrange, Jake thought.

“If only Burton hadn’t planted a spy to drive you off course. Had you followed your instincts rather than being misled by treachery . . . “

“What’s done is done.”

The joy of the discovery, the monumental goal achieved, Speke still appeared troubled by what Jake assumed would feel like a personal affront. He felt his way carefully, laying a verbal and mental path for Speke to follow to Jake’s intended outcome.

“True, sir. True.

“True.” Speke was musing to himself. “Truth. I’ll not take Pilate’s stand, asking ‘What is truth?’ and believing there is none.”

Jake remained silent, knowing Speke was slipping down a quiet path to the destination Jake was convinced lay ahead, especially when he heard the man’s next words.

“But truth must also reflect perceptions and the words and actions of men accurately.”

Jake felt safe with a small nudge. “Truth is what men are, not the words they or anyone else might use.”

“If that treacherous man hadn’t—blast it! We could have, would have, should have arrived on the 3rd.”

Speke stared into the fire, his words spent.

So Jake drove the nail home.

“It would almost be more truthful to say that, by Providence, we did reach this place on the 3rd.”

The man was silent, but Jake knew the date of their discovery would be reported as Speke felt Providentially guided to as ‘truth’: August 3rd, not 4th, 1858.

And that evening after all were in the sleep of the righteously exhausted, Jake slipped into the jungle, buried his kit, and signaled the triplets for his return.

“Featherstonhaugh. Worcester. Cholmondeley.”

The triplets nodded at Jake’s greeting.

“Welcome back to TEA.” “Congratulations.” “Stout fellow.”

They had a habit of speaking simultaneously, but in a way that allowed the listener to catch most of what each said. It reminded Jake of a display he’d seen once where you could dial red, green, and blue lights up or down to create different colors; often, he heard the color of what they said more than any one detail.

“Thank you, gentleman. Thank you. I assume Miss Bruttenholm awaits my verbal report.”

They parted like the waters of the Red Sea, Worcester waving a ceremonial hand toward the other end of the sky blue hallway. Jake Calcutta followed the pale green berber carpet to the last, or rather first, office, counting from the secret front entrance of TEA rather than the temporal landing pad.

He reached her door and entered, as he always did.

Her eyes were the deep blue green of the sea, her hair the color of a field of wheat in the sun, her skin the ivory of the sun's corona.

Jake tripped over a nonexistent obstacle on her threshold, caught himself on the door jamb, almost sat in the chair in front of her luxurious mahogany desk, righted himself just before tipping onto the floor, scooted to the middle of the butter soft leather armless, crossed his right leg over his left, then when it slipped, crossed his left over his right, which also slipped but he slapped his hands around it, meshed his fingers, and hung onto that knee for dear life.

“Good afternoon?” He certainly hadn't meant it as a question. Why had it come out as a question? He knew full well it was afternoon. And were that fact in question, ‘good afternoon’ hardly qualified as a way to verify its veracity.

Rather than complicate things further, Jake Calcutta clenched his teeth to prevent further stupid utterances from leaking out.

The full crimson crescents of Felicity Bruttenholm's lips parted slightly, allowing a daring glimpse of her porcelain teeth. When the corners of her eyes crinkled, the crests of tiny waves flashed within, consuming the universe and Jake Calcutta with it.

He shook his head, dispersing the lightning that struck his brain every time he crossed her threshold.

“And good afternoon to you as well, Jake. A successful mission. Well done.”

She smiled again. He wished she wouldn't smile. But there it was. The slight curve reminded him of a painting by Botticelli—

Oh, shut up, Calcutta. You had a question about the mission. Perhaps some words, expressed aloud?

“Erm, what about Cincinnati Christmas?”

The glorious gleam of her smile twitched. “Perhaps a bit chilly that time of year, but if you're asking me to go away with you—”

“What?” Someone used his mouth and shouted far too loudly, though Felicity pretended not to notice.

“No? Alright then, what does that mean, Cincinnati Christmas?”

“Mr. Cincinnati. Mayor of that city.”

She turned to her computer. Her fingers danced across the input pad, a samba, he thought, or perhaps a rhumba.

“Ah, yes. Interesting. Charles Phelps Taft the second, son of President Taft, named after an uncle.”

Hands still on the pad, she turned to Jake, the soft seas of her eyes—

“Founder. He founded, um, we are, that is to say, uh, uh, NASA.”

She giggled. “That rhymed! Uh uh nass uh! Yes, we're part of NASA, not that anyone knows outside of TEA. Is this in some way related to Taft's son being mayor of Cincinnati?”

“NASA was founded in 1958.”

“Yes, Jake, it was. October. I’m so glad we can have this tête-à-tête regarding our agency’s history. And if it is in some way related to your mission’s successful conclusion, all the better.”

She seemed to have her history correct, with no recollection of her earlier references to Mr. Cincinnati Christmas founding NASA in ‘59 rather than Ike doing it in ‘58.

Which suggested, to his horror, that for a few hours, he had been the only living person who knew history’s true course.

Had his efforts to redirect Speke failed, had Speke been a bit less creative in reporting his adventures, had Jake not taken the course of events into his own care, he might well be living in a very different world.

What if that world didn’t include TEA?

What if, worse, a thought he found disturbingly disturbing, that world didn’t include the Assistant Director of TEA?

And in that moment, Jake Calcutta, temporal journalist, swore to guide the fate and future of the one true timeline at any expense, physical, emotional, political, or moral.

“Why Jake, are you feeling quite well?”

Jake Calcutta stopped trying to smile at Felicity Bruttenholm and left her office.