

TIME TOURS

by

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The giant letters blared ‘WELCOME TO TIME TOURS!’, and in front of the great billboard stood Mitch Raleigh, along with five other celebrities.

An army of media photographers and reporters took photos of them and yelled questions.

‘God, I hate these things,’ Raleigh muttered.

‘Oh, come on, Mitch. Lighten up,’ the pretty blonde beside him whispered as she smiled for the cameras. ‘This is going to be *awesome*. And we’re going to be the first to experience it.’

Mitch Raleigh was a novelist from Australia, here in Texas on a book tour for his latest novel, *Seven Deadly Wonders*. The current success of that novel had got him an invitation to this, the much-hyped launch of Time Tours.

He turned to the girl beside him. An old family friend, Laura had done very well for herself. Not only was she a Calvin Klein model, she was also—

‘So, Humbert! How do you think you’ll review this!’ a reporter shouted from the crowd.

The hunch-backed, bespectacled man to Mitch's right cleared his throat. In his mid-fifties, Humbert Hughes was a much-feared book reviewer from the *New York Times*. It was a very brave move by the people at Time Tours to invite him.

Interestingly, Mitch Raleigh knew something about Humbert Hughes that few others did: a year ago, Hughes had submitted a manuscript for a novel to publishers in New York and London. It had been awful, unreadable, and had been rejected by everyone.

Today, however, the usually dour Hughes was in fine spirits. He'd even brought a bottle of vintage 1932 Dom Perignon to celebrate the occasion with his fellow travellers—Mitch, Laura and three sporting stars.

Suddenly, the lights dimmed, and a new figure stepped up onto the stage: Tad Ellis, the dashing CEO of Time Tours Inc. 'Ladies and gentlemen!' he proclaimed. 'Welcome...to Time Tours!'

He raised his hands, and the giant billboard on the stage divided into two halves, revealing the Travelling Room.

The Travelling Room

It looked like an ultra-modern laboratory.

In its centre was a ring of six silver recliner chairs, each of them bolted to the floor like dentist chairs and each fitted with a dome-shaped device on the headrest.

'This is where the magic happens!' Tad Ellis proclaimed. 'This is where our guests will commence their journeys to...'

A video screen sprang to life, a voiceover man intoning:

'...*The Ancient Empire!* Go to the world of Ancient Egypt, where you will live like a pharaoh. *Overlord:* experience the action of World War II first hand! Or *Dinosaurland:* for the naturalists, take a scenic tour of the Earth as it was 75 million years ago. Or, for the not-so-naturalist, how about going on a T-Rex hunt?'

There were three more worlds: including one called *Superstar* where you lived in a world where you were the most famous person alive.

Tad Ellis said, 'To create our worlds here at Time Tours, our expert programmers have joined forces with the world's foremost historians, scientists and satellite surveyors. Our proprietary engine program, Ultimate World v.2.0, uses their input to create realistic environments based on the actual terrain and cityscapes of our planet. So when you storm the beach at Normandy, you're storming a replica of *the actual beach*.'

The media wrote frantic notes, filmed the images.

During the pause, Mitch turned to Tad Ellis: 'Sounds a bit like *The Matrix*.'

'This is way better than the fucking *Matrix*,' Ellis whispered before moving away and continuing his presentation. 'Ladies and gentlemen! You can do all this and more at *Time Tours*! How? Well, it all takes place in your mind.'

All in Your Mind

Humbert Hughes popped the cork on his 1932 Dom Perignon and the six celebrity time tourists toasted each other and drank. Then they all stepped into the Travelling Room.

Mitch reclined in one of the dentist's chairs, while a technician lowered the chair's dome-like headpiece over his face.

Tad Ellis proclaimed, 'Our patented non-invasive headpieces beam microwave signals directly into the client's cerebellum, disrupting cortical activity and slowing the synaptic pulse-rate, inducing a quasi-coma. We then replace real-world sensory inputs with our own constructed ones: convincing the client that they are in another world.'

A journalist asked, 'What do you say, Mr Hughes? How's it feel to be going back to World War II?'

'I shall reserve my judgement.'

Another reporter called to Laura: ‘Hey Laura! What’s your uncle think about you participating in this?’

Laura turned. ‘My uncle has always supported American innovation. He’s thrilled. As for me, I’m ready to be a superstar.’

‘Okay, everyone!’ Ellis called. ‘It’s time for our celebrity guests to head off on their journeys!’

At that moment, the technician standing over Mitch switched on the headpiece—and for a fraction of a second, Mitch felt a strange buzzing in his head. He felt instantly tired, drowsy. Then darkness overcame him.

Land of the Dinosaurs

When he opened his eyes, he was in another place, another time.

He was standing on a modern helipad on a hilltop overlooking a verdant river valley. A hovercopter stood beside him, rotors turning.

A polite (computer-generated) pilot invited him aboard. ‘Hello, Mr Raleigh, I am PI-5A26X, and I shall be your guide and pilot program for today.’

‘Great. What was your name again? PI-5A2...’

‘PI-5A26X. My programmers have not yet given me a formal name yet.’

‘How about I just call you Pi.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Within moments they were zooming low over the treetops, scanning the plains and riverbeds. Plains and riverbeds that were filled with—

Dinosaurs. Lots of dinosaurs.

'Mother of God...' Mitch breathed.

Global Superstar

Laura stepped out of the limo onto the red carpet—and was instantly assaulted by a lightning storm of flashbulbs.

The red carpet led to the Odeon Theatre in Leicester Square in London, and her face was on every poster in the square. People everywhere were shouting her name.

Photographers: 'Laura! Laura! Over here!'

Journalists: 'Laura! How does it feel to have the number one movie *and* the number one album in America!'

Awesome, Laura thought. *Just awesome.*

Austin, We Have a Problem...

As the media watched the monitors in awe, a technician came alongside Tad Ellis and whispered, 'Sir, We might have a problem.'

'What is it?'

'We're getting some strange synaptic readings on Mr Hughes' monitor.'

They came to the computer monitoring Humbert Hughes, where they saw him in a command room, directing Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Europe in World War II.

The tech said, 'Have a look at his synaptic pulse-rate. It's slowed to sub-normal levels.'

'He's going into a deep-state coma...' Ellis said softly.

‘He’s going into a *very* deep-state coma, sir. Mr Hughes must have taken some kind of sedative before he went under, and a large amount of it.’

‘He drugged himself? Why?’

‘I have no idea. But with his synaptic pulse operating as such low levels, we can’t extract Mr Hughes from the program, not without causing serious brain damage. He’s essentially locked himself *inside* the program—’

Suddenly, insistent beeps began trilling all around the room.

‘Holy shit! Laura’s synaptics are dropping...’

‘So are Raleigh’s...’

‘Oh my God! Everyone’s pulse-rates are dropping! They’re all going into deep comas!’

Humbert Hughes’s Note

The police would find the note in Humbert Hughes’s apartment the next day.

It read:

Dear World,

You weary me. Nay, you have finally worn me down...with your astonishing adoration of the mediocre.

Great art is ignored. Great literature is overlooked. What is Beethoven when you have American Pie. Why appreciate the opera when you can have Jim Carrey doing fart jokes. The world has become a utopia for cretins.

And I have finally tired of it.

So, today, I go to a better place, where the world is mine, to shape as I please. I’d apologise to the

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President for stealing his niece, but the President is an ass.

Good-bye cruel world. Wallow in your own filth.

Humbert Hughes.

Several empty sleeping-pill bottles lay alongside the note...and a wine-bottle-opening device that had been used to open and then re-seal the cork on a bottle of 1932 Dom Perignon.

The Sleeping Guests

Ellis had the media removed from the display theatre, then he turned to his team of programmers and scientists: ‘Okay. Why would Hughes drug the *other* guests?’

No one knew.

‘*What the hell...*’ another technician said from his computer console.

‘What now?’ Ellis said.

‘Sir, it’s Mr Hughes. He’s, er, done a deal with the Germans. He’s ended the war in Europe and united all forces under him.’

‘He *what*?’

‘The program allows it. As the commander of Operation Overlord, he just called up his opposite number and did a deal: decided to share France with the Germans and they agreed. But that’s not the biggest problem.’

‘What is?’

‘He’s just brought his combined invasion force to London, to Trafalgar Square.’

‘Trafalgar Square, but that’s one of the—’ the chief tech froze. ‘Good God. He knows about the portals. He’s going to take his invasion force into another world.’

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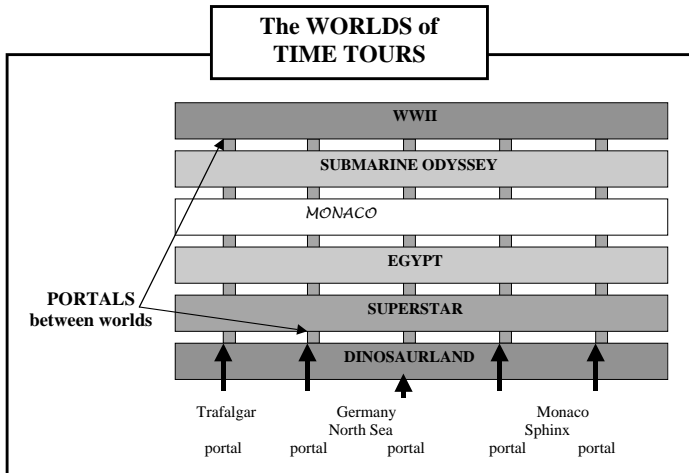
The Portals

‘Remind me about the portal structure,’ Ellis said.

The chief tech explained, ‘The six virtual worlds of Time Tours are all actually connected—rather like a six-storey car park with ladders linking each floor.

‘In effect, the master program lays six identical “Europes” on top of each other and connects them with these virtual ladders, which we call portals. The portals are located in the same spots in each world: Trafalgar Square, inside the Sphinx—’

He pulled up a screen on a nearby computer:



Ellis said, ‘So they’re all in the same spot in each world?’

‘Yes. They’re like ladders between floors—you could conceivably climb right down from World War II to Dinosaurland if you wanted to. It was inserted into the program as a stabilising feature.’

‘What are we going to do?’ someone asked.

Ellis bit his lip. ‘Get Mr Black.’

Mr Black

Mr Black was Nathan Black, formerly a Marine, now head of ‘Rescue and Recovery’ at Time Tours.

In the early stages of Time Tours, the company had experienced some unexpected problems with their virtual worlds.

The worst was known as ‘Lock-In’ and it had first arisen when a staff member had come to work stoned and subsequently experienced a psychotic episode while inside *Superstar*.

He had refused to come out.

And due to his psychosis, they couldn’t extract him without inflicting serious brain damage on him. It was soon discovered that the same thing happened when a guest went into a deep-state coma: they became psychologically ‘locked’ in the world.

So Mr Black had been sent in to get the man. To reason with him, inside the world, and get him to come out *by his own will*. That, in the end, was what mattered. To avoid brain damage in such a situation, exit had to be voluntary.

In that case, Black had successfully guided the man out via an ‘Emergency Exit Portal’ (an EEP was located in a central place in every world, usually a major landmark: in *Superstar*, for example, it was atop the belltower of Westminster Abbey in London).

While Black came, Humbert Hughes’s progress was monitored.

‘He’s taken his entire army through the Trafalgar Square portal,’ a young tech reported. ‘He’s bypassing *Submarine Odyssey, Monaco and Egypt...wait! He’s stopping. His army is moving out of the portal...into Superstar.*’

‘Oh shit,’ Ellis said, realising. ‘He’s going after Laura.’

Superstar

Modern London had never seen anything like it.

Hordes of 1940s-era German and Allied troops stormed out of Trafalgar Square, guns blazing, shooting anyone in their path. In their midst, their Supreme Commander: Humbert Hughes.

And since there was no armed force of any kind in this world, nothing and no-one could stop them.

They headed directly for the Odeon Cinema.

The Rescue Begins

Mr Black arrived in Lab Two, a working lab.

He strode casually into the lab, tall and fit, and slid into the lone dentist's chair. 'All right. Who's the target?'

He was informed of the situation.

'I don't give a shit about Humbert Hughes,' Tad Ellis said. 'It's Laura Bush I care about.'

Indeed, it was the danger to Laura Bush that terrified them all.

For if Humbert Hughes captured and killed *Laura* inside Time Tours, it would cause a paradox in *her* heavily-sedated brain. Hughes hadn't been trying to drug *all* the celebrity guests—just her. He just needed her in a deep-state coma. The others were collateral damage.

At which point, like an overloaded computer, her brain would freeze up and go into meltdown. Brain death. She would become a vegetable, or worse, suffer a cerebral aneurism.

And *that* was Time Tours's worst nightmare.

Black was set to go.

He said, 'Send me into *Dinosaurland*. I don't want to go directly into *Superstar* and bump into a division of Mr Hughes's Nazi troops. The EEP in *Dinoland* is identical to *Superstar's*—plus I can also pick up some heavy-duty weaponry from the hunters' armoury. I'll sneak into *Superstar* from there.'

And with that, the domed headset was lowered over Black's head and within moments his eyes closed...

Dinosaurland

...and he found himself standing on the low hilltop overlooking *Dinosaurland*. The River Thames lay before him snaking through the primordial forest.

On his hilltop sat a concrete structure, with a helipad and a shed on it. In the shed were racks of superweapons used by tourist-hunters to bring down dinosaurs: Remington mega-shotguns, plasma-based RPGs, Steyr pulse rifles. Black took one of each, plus boxes of ammo and a few sulfuric acid grenades.

A noise disturbed him.

He spun—shotgun up—to see the *Dinosaurland* hovercopter landing on the helipad outside.

It was the author, Mitchell Raleigh, with his computer-generated pilot, returning from their scenic tour of *Dinosaurland*.

Raleigh got out of the hover-chopper, saw Black.

'Hey there! Geez, this is awesome—'

'I'm sorry, Mr Raleigh,' Black said quickly, 'but a situation has come up. I need you to come with me and exit Time Tours right now.'

'What's happened?'

Black told him as they walked.

'He drugged us all...' Mitch said. 'Is there any way I can help?'

'The best way you can help me is just by going home.'

'Oh.'

Mitch, Black and Pi made their way to the meadow that would one day house Westminster Abbey. There they found a small steel cabin the size of a telephone booth: the Emergency Exit Portal. Near it was another weapons shed.

Mitch said to Black, 'Go. Go and save Laura. She's a friend of mine. I can get back from here. You need to hurry.'

Black nodded, then he stepped into the steel booth, pressed a button and—ZAP!—the booth blazed with white light and he was gone.

Mitch shrugged, turned to Pi. 'Thank you for the tour, Pi. You were great.'

'It was my pleasure, Mr Raleigh. I shall endeavour to have one of your books downloaded into my program files, so that next time we may converse about it.'

'Cool.' Mitch stepped into the booth, saw a wall-panel with a button for each world plus a large red button marked 'EMERGENCY EXIT'.

But then he paused.

He was worried about Laura, and he wondered if one man, Black, was enough to save her from Humbert Hughes's super-army.

Surely it couldn't hurt to take a look...

He pursed his lips, and made the call.

And stepped out of the booth. 'Hey, Pi. Got any more of those big-ass dino-guns nearby? I think we should visit *Superstar*.'

Entering Superstar

Blinding light. Then normal vision returned...

...and Mitch Raleigh found himself standing in a silver booth positioned in the uppermost chamber of the belltower of Westminster Abbey, not far from the Abbey's ten-foot-high bell.

He peered out the doorway of his booth—
—just in time to see a joint of Nazi paratroopers emerge from the stairwell and shoot about a million bullets into Nathan Black.

Black shuddered and convulsed under the hailstorm of bullets before he fell, dead.

Mitch stared, horrified.

Back in Austin

Nathan Black instantly awoke. Since he had only been in a light coma, his death inside Time Tours had simply woken him up.

'Shit!' he growled. 'They got me. They're guarding the portal. There's no way in.'

Tad Ellis went white. 'What are we gonna do now?'

‘Wait a second...!’ the tech at a viewing console called. ‘There’s someone else in there. In *Superstar*. At the EEP. But it’s not a computer entity. It’s...it’s a *guest* signature. It’s Mitchell Raleigh.’

Mission: Superstar

Mitch peered out from his booth, eyeing the body of Nathan Black, dead at the top of the stairwell.

Suddenly, a fat figure stepped into view, and all the WWII troops immediately stood to attention.

It was Humbert Hughes. And with him was—
Laura.

Her face was tear-stained, her eyes red. She was still dressed in her glittery opening-night dress.

Hughes growled at her: ‘This was the man they sent to rescue you and to abduct me. Not to be.’

He threw her to one of his men. ‘Take her the Tower. 24-hour guard.’

Laura was hustled away.

Then Hughes said to his paratrooper captain: ‘Keep two squads stationed in this chamber. Cover the portal. Kill anyone who comes out of it.’

Hughes swept out of the belltower.

Those paratroopers who remained there never noticed the two tiny figures dangling by their fingertips from the parapet of the belltower, three hundred feet above the ground.

Mitch Raleigh and Pi.

The Rescue Part I

'They're taking her to the Tower of London,' Mitch whispered, still hanging from the belltower. 'Once she's there, we're screwed. We'll have to snatch her en route.'

'But how?' Pi asked.

Mitch peered down the side of the belltower. After a few minutes, he saw the tiny figure of Laura emerge and get shoved into an open-topped Army jeep. Hughes followed shortly after, climbed into a limousine. Both cars were surrounded by a motorcade of several tanks and a few turret-mounted Allied and Nazi jeeps.

'You got a parachute?' Mitch asked.

'I am required to wear one at all times.'

'Directional?'

'Of course.'

'Room for two?'

'Of course.'

'Then let's do some rescuing,' Mitch said, swinging over and grasping Pi around the waist. 'Bombs away.'

And with that, Pi let go of the parapet.

In the Control Room

'Oh, Christ! Raleigh just fell from the top of the belltower...'

Everyone in the control room froze in horror.

The Rescue Part II

Mitch and Pi plummeted down the side of the belltower, the building's vertical wall rushing by them in a blur of speed, before—*WHACK!*—a square-shaped parachute blossomed above them, issuing from Pi's backpack.

And suddenly they were gliding downwards at a steep angle heading for—

Hughes's now-moving military motorcade.

The gun-turrets on two of the escort jeeps opened fire, but Pi fired back with his (far more powerful) pulse rifle, and with one shot, blew one of the jeeps to kingdom come. A second shot sent the other jeep careering off the road and into a shop window.

Then a Nazi Panzer tank swivelled its canon turret, readying to fire, but this time it was Raleigh who responded, awkwardly shouldering his rocket launcher and firing it at the beast.

The rocket lanced through the air before it slammed into the tank, incinerating it.

Pi then zeroed in on the jeep carrying Laura, guiding the directional parachute toward the fleeing car.

The parachute came over the speeding jeep and while Pi took out the two men guarding Laura with two brilliant headshots, Mitch then leaned down and kicked the driver clear out of the jeep. Then he dropped into

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the passenger seat while Pi released the chute and landed in the driver's seat and took the wheel.

Pi spun them around, and headed back for Westminster Abbey, the rest of the motorcade in hot pursuit.

They skidded round a corner, shot past Parliament. Big Ben towering above them.

Mitch turned to Laura, 'Hey there—'

He cut himself off, disturbed by a shocking sight in the distance.

An entire *army* of Allied and Nazi troops was crossing the Parliament Bridge, coming right for them!

It was at least 40,000 men: on foot, on jeeps, in tanks and on motorbikes.

'We need to buy some time,' Mitch said, thinking fast. 'Pi, what's the most powerful RPG you've got?'

Pi pulled a rocket-propelled grenade from his belt. It had a glowing purple light on it. 'Liquid plasma. Blows big.'

Mitch took the plasma grenade and loaded it into his rocket launcher. Then, from the passenger seat of the speeding jeep, he aimed it at Big Ben. 'I can't believe I'm going to do this...'

He pulled the trigger.

The plasma grenade shoomed out from the launcher and *slammed* into the exact middle of Big Ben just as the jeep zoomed past the historic tower.

Impact. Explosion. A starburst of bricks and glass blasted outwards from the historic clocktower.

Then, like a slow-falling tree, Big Ben began to fall.

Fatally wounded in its middle, the great two-hundred-foot-tall tower toppled across the roadway, hitting the ground with a momentous crash. The famous clock at the summit of the tower shattered into a million pieces as it hit the bitumen.

And now the tower lay across the roadway, like a giant fallen tree, blocking all of Mitch's pursuers, exactly as Mitch had planned.

Laura looked sideways at Mitch. 'You totally enjoyed doing that.'

They headed for Westminster Abbey.

The Abbey

They hit the Abbey at a sprint, clambered up the stairs, came to the chamber at the top of the belltower...

...only to find Humbert Hughes and his team of Nazi SS assassins waiting for them.

'I knew you'd come back here,' Hughes sneered. 'It's the only way out. You've fought gamely, Mr Raleigh, but while I need Miss Bush, I have no need for you.' He turned to one of the Nazi men. 'Sturmbannfuhrer. Kill him, please.'

The Nazi raised his Luger and fired.

Mitch had no time to react.

The gun went off, just as a blur of colour swept in front of Mitch and he suddenly

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realised that Pi had thrown himself in front of him, and taken the bullet!

The Nazi captain was stunned. So was Hughes.

Mitch, however, seized the opportunity and snatched an acid grenade from Pi's belt, pulled the pin, threw it. Then he yanked Laura down through the stairway hatch.

Bam—splat!

The grenade went off, sending a powerful splatter of stinging sulfuric acid spraying throughout the confined space of the belltower.

Screams followed.

Mitch burst up through the hatch, Remington shotgun booming, taking out the acid-scarred Nazis on every side.

Humbert Hughes had also been hit by the acid grenade. He lay crouched in a corner of the chamber, hands clawing at his eyes.

'My eyes!' he screamed. 'My eyes!'

Mitch leaned close and spoke...in German: 'Herr Hughes, come with me. The author is dead and we have the girl. But we must get you to a field hospital. Come, let me guide you.'

Blinded, Hughes took Mitch's hand and allowed himself to be led...willingly...into the Emergency Exit Portal in the corner of the chamber.

With Laura beside him, Mitch closed the booth's door and hit the big red button marked: EMERGENCY EXIT.

The chamber flashed white.

Back in the Real World

Mitch Raleigh's eyes sprang open and he sat up from his dentist's chair with a lurch.

Then he vomited.

A Time Tours technician helped him stand. 'Welcome back, Mr Raleigh. You're a goddamn hero.'

Indeed he was. The drama of Time Tours's launch, and Mitch's role in saving the President's niece, featured in news bulletins around the world. His delighted publisher could not have asked for more publicity.

Humbert Hughes would end up in a psychiatric facility.

Time Tours would go back into research and development.

Mitch ended up watching the news broadcasts with Laura and her family in Dallas. There he saw himself on the TV being asked: 'So, Mr Raleigh! Mr Raleigh! Will you be taking another trip on Time Tours again?'

'Not for a while,' he'd replied.

As it happened, Mitch would indeed return to Time Tours—several times, in fact—to meet up with his new friend, Pi, the man who had thrown himself in front of a bullet for Mitch.

Of course, by then Pi had been fully regenerated in the computer world of Time Tours. He had even had Mitch's latest book installed in his programming so they could discuss it.

THE END